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The Role of Learning Resulting from Students' Experiences in Shaping Their Identity and Perception of the Significance of Smart Tourism Destination

Silvia-Maria CHIREAC[1], Vicent GARCÍA PERIS[2]

Abstract

This research presents an analysis of the participation and interaction of 129 students from the Faculty of Teacher Training Education (University of Valencia) with tourist places cultural heritage from the Valencia city. The analysis of our students' affective evaluation and interpretation of a touristic place through smart tourism was a major factor that impacted their perception of the cultural heritage significance of a certain place. Therefore, our findings suggest that there is a strong correlation between students' cultural experiences, awareness and perception of a touristic place and their interpretation of the economic, social and cultural significance of the touristic places. Tourism experiences of our students contributed to transformative learning acquired by immersion in a new knowledge as a result of travelling and living in one of the most visited regions in Spain.

Keywords: smart city, Valencia, innovation, smart tourist destination, identity, students.

Introduction

The global population and especially the urban population is increasing rapidly and cities are facing different problems with the existing infrastructures, pollution, traffic congestion, and other critical infrastructural issues caused by this rapid increase. Consequently, those complex problems regarding the economy of the countries around the world and the environmental sustainability of urban areas must be solved by finding smart and effective solutions extremely quickly. Fortunately,

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today technology, especially information and communication technologies (ICTs) could help our societies to deliver many opportunities to manage these issues and to optimize urban management. Contemporary smart technologies which also include artificial intelligence, robotics, data management, etc. are using to improve the population quality of life by developing and offering many city services (Washburn *et al.*, 2010) and also to find solutions associated with urbanization. Thanks to new resources, novel technologies, innovative ideas and concentration of citizens, many cities offer different strategies and projects created to improve the well-being of their population, including Valencia.

'Smart cities' also are spaces characterised by concentrations of people having completed a higher education in which citizens are actively engaged in tackling different issues via ICT-based solutions and sparking creative solutions. The construct of the idea of a 'smart city' implies the development in information technologies and communication (Ayaz and Akay, 2020). Related to 'smart city', the new concept of 'smart tourism destination' has been created and actually is used in smart cities through technologies such internet, cloud services, mobile communication, etc., as a real necessity for many tourism destinations to provide destination safety and also tourist safe environment (Koçoğlu and Acar, 2019). The smart tourism destination links the tourism industry integrated with the use of ICT (Hunter *et al.*, 2015; Lee, 2017) with different stakeholders, entertainment, energy, cultural institutions, etc., and offer to all people new experiences (Katsoni and Segarra-Oña, 2019). Visitors are able to discover with new technologies each destination from a modern perspective by searching data and analysing reviews from each field: culture, restaurants, accommodation and transportation. Therefore, it is clear that the term 'smart tourism destination', as a social phenomenon, is definitely linked to ICT (Viñan-Ludeña, 2019).

Smart tourism represents the transition from product orientation to service orientation (Gretzel *et al.*, 2015) and nowadays, smart tourism in close collaboration with smart cities widely uses information technologies for increasing the quality of life of all tourists. According to Romão and Neuts (2017), smart tourism focuses also on economic development in public and private sectors (smart shopping or online payment), environmental initiatives and the quality of social life. Many authors highlight the importance of the integration of ICT in tourism sector as an emerging phenomenon which enables the fundamental role of tourists in co-creating their experiences in social aspects of cultural tourism (Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2014; Gretzel *et al.* 2015a; Lamsfus, 2014; Parra and Santana, 2014; Sigala, 2015).

In this research, we attempt to analyse:
– the relationship between students' cultural experiences, awareness and perception of a touristic place and their interpretation of the economic, social and cultural significance of the smart touristic places

– the students' experiences in one smart touristic place in Valencia city and its cultural heritage related to their customs, language and identity

Therefore, through this study, we will identify students' affective evaluation and interpretation of a touristic place in Valencia. In addition, we will find out if tourism experiences of the students contribute to transformative learning acquired by immersion in a new knowledge as a result of travelling and living in one of the most visited regions in Spain.

Literature review

Different researchers associate 'smart' with technology (Gretzel *et al.*, 2015a; Zhang *et al.* 2018, among others). The concept of smart cities has a multidimensional and interdisciplinary purpose (Yigitcanlar *et al.*, 2018) and is a new form of the cities of the future (Angelidou, 2016) through a digital transformation used in all societies. Smartphones, the Internet and computers are all a vital part of daily life. Smart technologies can be used to directly affect the experience of city residents. Living in a smart city provide citizens with accessibility to green energy sources, efficient law enforcement, connectivity, and healthy living programs that improve their quality of life. Shafiee *et al.* (2019) concluded that smart cities are using information and communication technology in order to develop strategies and new policies for sustainable purposes. According to Bakıcı *et al.* (2013), smart cities use the ICTs in order to enhance residents' quality of life and provide sustainable development. Bakıcı at al. (2013, p. 139) note that a smart city, in the case of Barcelona, "… implies a high-tech intensive and an advanced city that connects people, information and city elements using new technologies in order to create a sustainable, greener city, competitive and innovative commerce and a recuperating life".

Smart cities refer to destinations accessible to all people which include sustainable development, quality of a unique tourist experience, benefits of other tourism stakeholders and organizations, an innovative tourism surrounding space, integration and interaction. The smart destination must be an innovative destination built in advanced technological infrastructure, capable of promoting the sustainability of tourism development. Shafiee *et al.* (2019) argue that sustainable tourism must use environmental resources, protect the biodiversity, respect the heritage and traditional values and costumes of the host communities and promote the tolerance and mutual understanding among all the people. Consequently, the use of resources should improve the quality of life of tourists through a sustainable point of view. At the same time, we must consider the role of technology and innovations in technology in facilitating tourism (Gretzel *et al.*, 2015b) and accessibility to different tourism products by presenting new opportunities to improve a better understanding of travel behavior. Therefore, new attitudes of tourists toward smart tourism experiences are required. Generally, tourists believe

that smart technology is easy to use and useful and enhances their satisfaction (Lee and Jan, 2022). The most important issues for them in terms of using smart technologies are privacy and security when they access information or use smart devices for online payment. Smart tourism should be based on trust experience and usefulness for all tourists. Some authors (Zhang *et al.* 2018) suggest that tourists' attitudes using different webs depend also on the aesthetic experience. A beautiful social media, a magnificent mobile interpretation may provide an aesthetic experience to all tourists. According to Verleye, (2015), smart technology offers tourists with opportunities for learning about new technology (Verleye, 2015) and for acquiring new knowledge about different tourism contexts. Additionally, through smart tourism experiences the students improve their attitudes, values and environmental behavior (Lee & Jan 2018).

Methodology

The total number of participants within this research was 129 students from the Faculty of Teacher Training Education (University of Valencia) and were aged between 19 and 22 years. The research data was gathered from the students among 1st and 3rd courses in the second semester of the academic year, between January and May, 2022 by the authors. The sample was divided in 3 groups from 3 courses: two groups 1B and 1F from the course *Catalan language for teachers* (1st year of study) with teaching classes in Valencian and the group 3A from the course *Development of communicative skills in multilingual settings* (3rd year of study) with teaching classes in English.

A total of 129 responses were collected through Padlet format, a space for collaboration to develop the ability of writing, while developing the digital skills of the students.

Digital writing has made it possible for students to collaborate as editors and authors of the content of the smart tourism destinations. At the same time, this innovative tool has facilitated the purpose of communication since the students have stopped writing to be corrected as in a traditionally classroom, and this has given rise to multiple didactic activities that can be done with Padlet. Traditional learning, based on face-to-face interaction, is more appropriate for certain tasks, while online communication opens endless possibilities for many other activities (Sweeny, 2010). The online writings of the students were focused on a set of items:
  – the city of Valencia as smart destination
  – social and cultural representations on tourism
  – tourism strategies and policies
    Padlet is an online platform who was used to support learning in academic context by writing different texts on smart tourism destination, by sharing suggestions, images and information about smart tourism in Valencia. The use of Padlet, a free virtual wall was the best way for the students to create content, and

edit their own posts. It was a supportive and active tool for learning, exchanging, constructing and reconstructing their ideas.

The participation of our students in this writing task was not compulsory. All the students involved in this activity obtained a small amount of "extra credit", 0,5% point to the final grade of the course.

Every student from 1st grade submitted the writing in Valencian and the students from 3rd grade, with English specialization, elaborated their writings in English. The writings were uploaded to Padlet platform and shared the link in one forum created on Moodle platform (a privacy web of the University of Valencia).

Due to their knowledge, the participants were all directly involved in the development of this study and they provided first-hand information about Valencia, as a smart city model. The aim of using the analysis of the online writings is a quantitative and qualitative study in which the participants expressed their perceptions, interpretations and tourist experiences.

Results

Quantitative analysis

Our results show that generally, students have analyzed smart tourism from a linguistic and cultural perspective. The economic aspect of tourism has also been an important factor when analysing this concept. Lastly, gastronomic tourism has been mentioned (Table 1). It is evident that the students prefer to relate smart tourism to the linguistic perspective if we take into account that in class they are studying the Valencian language subject for teachers and issues related to bilingualism. The students in their writings defend the use of Valencian as a minority language, commenting on aspects related to the position in which it is in comparison with Spanish, since they are two languages that share bilingual territory.

Table 1. Students' choice of topics on smart tourism

Topics	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
linguistic tourism	42	32,6	32,6	32,6
cultural tourism	45	34,9	34,9	67,4
economic tourism	35	27,1	27,1	94,6
gastronomy tourism	7	5,4	5,4	100,0
Total	129	100,0	100,0	

We analyzed smart tourism of Valencia in relation with five dimensions, a model proposed by Giffinger and Gudrun (2010): population, mobility, environment, economy and quality of life. We have eliminated the dimension 'governance' because the students have not made reference to this aspect.

In the first place, it is worth mentioning that from the point of view of the frequencies of the dimensions, the students have opted for economy, followed by population, quality of life, environment and mobility. We can say that the size of the economy and the population are closely related by the percentages of frequency (Table 2). On the other hand, the environment dimension has almost the same percentage as the quality of life dimension, which are closely linked. However, students have opted for the mobility dimension, only in a small proportion.

Table 2. Students' choice of the five dimensions on ST (smart tourism)

| ST_dimensions	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Population	43	33,3	33,3	33,3
Mobility	4	3,1	3,1	36,4
Environment	15	11,6	11,6	48,1
Economy	47	36,4	36,4	84,5
quality of life	20	15,5	15,5	100,0
Total	129	100,0	100,0	

Table 3. Correlation between the five dimensions on ST and the three groups of students

ANOVA

ST_dimensions	Sum of squares	gl	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	68,596	2	34,298	18,442	<,001
Within groups	234,334	126	1,860		
Total	302,930	128			

There was a statistically significant difference between groups as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA ($F(2,126) = 18.442$, $p < .001$). A Tukey post hoc test showed that the 3rd year group was able to analyse a variety of dimensions of smart tourism comparing to the 2 groups of 1st year and the results were statistically significantly ($p < .001$). There was also a statistically significant difference between the two groups of 1st year ($p = .017$). In Figure 1 we can observe the differences between all three groups. The first group considered most important the dimensions of

population and economy and the 2nd group preferred to describe the dimensions of population and quality of life. As for the 3rd group, the students have mentioned all the dimensions, but especially economy and quality of life.
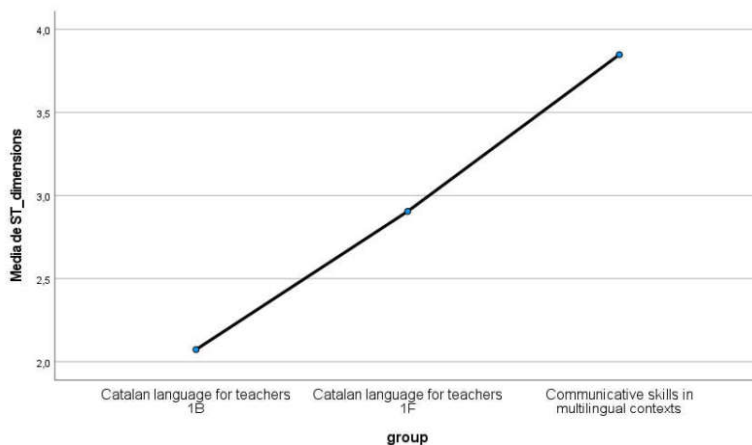
Source: authors' representation

Figure 1. Differences between the three groups and the choice of the dimensions on smart tourism (ST)

Qualitative analysis

We present the results of a qualitative analysis based on the analytical reflections, comments and perceptions made by the students regarding the five dimensions.

Population dimension: 43 students highlighted the importance of the citizen's situation in the Valencia city especially, regarding the use of the Valencian language, as a minority language. They noted that the real problems must be solved with the participation of all Valencian citizens including immigrants, the population from different multicultural backgrounds. The technologies are necessary but not more important in a smart city than the involvement of citizens and stakeholders to promote the use of the Valencian language. They also emphasize the importance of cultural visits that are the tourist attractions of Valencia city, especially the City of Arts and Sciences, designed by the architect Calatrava and finished in 2005. Regarding the objectives of tourist interest, students point out also the following monuments and tourist attractions: Serrano Towers, Quart Towers, Miguelete Bell Tower, Silk Market - a masterpiece of Valencian Gothic art declared by UNESCO as part of Humanity's Heritage, etc.

We present a selection of comments and arguments of our students regarding the population dimension:

" 'We must ensure that the language is like a monument that everyone wants to visit, that it is something that tourists want to know". (student 4, group 1B)

"With our language we show symbols, different forms of communication to other people. Then, when a tourist comes into contact with our language, he learns more about our land. On the other hand, we must be careful with how we treat our dialects or co-official languages with respect to foreigners because many times, in public services, Spanish is used instead of Valencian. This could lead, little by little, to the disappearance or to our language, Valencian. We must begin to change our perspective, and not hide our language. All languages are different and all languages show culture and why should we hide what allows communication between so many people and which is slowly disappearing?". (student 10 group 1B)

"The Valencian language is our sign of identity and as citizens of the Valencian Community we have the right and the obligation to preserve it, take care of it and use it in all areas of communication. Technology is a positive resource, but it is not so necessary to get people to use this language". (student 22 1F)

Students in our study supported the learning of both Valencian and Spanish, but strongly encouraged the use of Valencian language for the tourists too. They feel motivated to learn this minority language, which represents their identity. According to our students, tourists did not invest their time in learning Valencian. They believe that this aspect has a negative impact on our society, a community where the Valencian language must be valued and respected by the tourists of other countries.

Mobility dimension: refers to student's mobility with Erasmus program, and not to infrastructure, sustainability, accessibility or efficiency of local transport systems in Valencia city. For students, going on Erasmus is a fundamental experience for their personal and professional growth and the students who have indicated this aspect are some of those who have had the opportunity to visit other countries thanks to the Erasmus scholarships. Consequently, for them, the term 'mobility' outside of Spain is more important than within their country and more related to learning a new language abroad.

"The Erasmus program is the experience of your life, as you go to a city in Europe to study your career for a year and, in addition, you can meet people all over the world, it's the easiest way to be in contact with new languages". (student 14, group 1B)

"Tourism is based on my experience with Erasmus program which was wonderful because I met new people, I visited new places and I learnt a different language". (student 9, group 1B)

"Traveling to other country it gives you the opportunity to talk to native people, to learn the language of the new country or city you visit". (student 5, group 1B)

In their writings, when they present other dimensions, the students briefly mention this term of 'mobility'. Even if they use public transport, they do not mention it as preferred means of daily life. The only means of transport they describe in their writings is the bicycle:

"The City of Arts and Sciences is located in my neighbourhood, a 5-minute walk from where I lived throughout my childhood and adolescence. That's why I have so many memories in this place: walking around or cycling with my family, taking pictures, celebrating birthdays or simply having a good time with my friends. The City of Arts and Sciences has always been present in my life, so I think it has taken me a while to understand how impressive it must be to see it for the first time". (student 14, group 3A)

They prefer walking on the beach, in the mountains or in the parks. It is worth mentioning that public transport in Valencia is a highly developed means of transport, works efficiently and is linked to other municipalities in the same region as well as in other parts of Spain (Vercher and Sigalat, 2017).

Environmental dimension: In Valencia there are hotels, attractions, adapted to tourists with special needs. The infrastructure and spaces are created to citizens in order to be accessible to all people, to move freely regardless of their disabilities, age or physical limitations. Accessibility of tourism represents a fundamental quality factor and also a way to attract new tourists.

Regarding the accessibility to beaches of the Valencian Community, the students highlighted the benefits of the entrances for people with disabilities equipped with wooden ramps and provided with pictograms Braille directions for the blind people. Another interesting aspect is the showers for children and adults with mobility impairments and for people with disabilities and also the playgrounds created with special equipment for children with disabilities. There are lifeguards who have acquired techniques and methods for attending, assisting and communicating with people with hearing, sight or multiple disabilities. The students pointed out that Valencia offers the best spaces to accommodate all people by delivering an accessible and sustainable experience on its beaches.

"La Malvarrosa is one of my favorite places because it reminds me a lot of my childhood and adolescence as I used to go there with my friends after school andalso with my parents very often. Nowadays, this wide, open beach has a very lively appearance, both on the beach itself, due to the number of services it offers, and on the promenade that borders it, whose construction began in 1990, and which houses restaurants and cafés. It has lifeguard posts and an area adapted for bathing for people with reduced mobility. Its official name is Playa del Cabanyal, although it is also popularly known as Playa de las Arenas due to the old 'Balneario de las Arenas', a characteristic building that imitates a Greek temple, now converted into a

hotel, which was a meeting place for the Valencian bourgeoisie in the late 19th and early 20th centuries". (student 8, group 3A)

"I have always enjoyed playing on the beach. It is almost uncrowded in summer and almost deserted in all other seasons. It is perfect for spending time alone or with your friends, for walks, and even picnics". (student 17, group 3A)

"On Sundays I go to the beach with my family to eat paella and then, we stay to watch the sun go down". (student 23, group 3A)

Economic dimension: Regarding the economic dimension, our students highlight the economic impact of each tourist attraction in Valencia along with the attraction of investments in economic and social areas. They recognize outstanding achievements in Valencia as a smart city in economic field.

"Tourists consider that the City of Arts and Sciences has a strong influence on their decision to choose Valencia as a destination, being "very important" for 37% and "quite important" for 26% of them. On the other hand, the City of Arts and Sciences generates 3,500full-time jobs a year, so it has a great economic impact on the city in this aspect as well". (student 11, group 3A)

"Central Market generates an economic impact of around 100 million euros per year for the city of Valencia, with an annual turnover of between 56 and 70 million euros. These amounts support between 1,000 and 1,200 jobs. In addition, due to the location of the market, an area of cultural heritage, it receives 3.15 million visits per year, of which 1.12 million are tourists". (student 23, group 3A)

"Although it is very difficult to know the exact number of tourists that visit the Albufera Park, in 2018 it was estimated at about two million visitors. There is also evidence of growth, since the number of tourist and recreational boat licenses are increasing, new businesses are opening around the park". (student 6, group 1F)

Quality of life dimension: As for the quality of life dimension with regard to the information about Valencia city and all touristic services such accessibility of museums, monuments, restaurants, hotels, the students of 3rd year of study mentioned a guide called the 'Valencia Accesible Guide'. This guide provides important information for potential tourists by offering them an accessible way to visit Valencia. The tourists who are planning a trip or are interested to visit this city can download this guide available online and for free.

Regarding the quality of life of tourists with hearing loss, the students presented in their writings the innovative Visualfy system which transmit visual information and relevant notifications through sound to the tourist's mobile phone, smartwatch or smartband. The students believe that implementing smart technologies in

Valencia, such this modern smart device, can help and offer to people with hearing loss the same level of accommodation to all services by doing the information about Valencia city more accessible.

Generally, all students noted that Valencia is an area with high natural heritage, with excellent weather conditions and an appreciable quality of life.

"Turia Garden unify the city, and its eight kilometers allow you to cross it walking, running or cycling. In this way, it is ideal to use it to go from one side of the city to the other without having to hear the noise of cars and with the possibility of feeling that you are surrounded by nature. All gardens in Valencia provide opportunities for social connection, and safe places for recreation. This is from my point of view quality of life". (student 19, group 3A)

"Our monuments are part of community life, are part of our identity and attract tourists". (student 14, group 1B)

"Valencia city offers all people a high quality of life. Having access to places for physical activities such walking to parks has a positive impact on environmental and personal health". (student 17, group 3A)

In this sense, from the students' writings we note that the quality of life is in close relationship with the tourism impacts (Almeida-García et al, 2016; Ko and Stewart, 2002) and the attitudes of people towards tourism (Woo, 2018). According to Felce and Perry (1995) the quality of life takes into account "personal values" and is a combination between satisfaction and life conditions for all people.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to present an analytical analysis based of the students' perceptions to better understand the reality of Valencia, as a smart city. Valencia must be considered a smart tourist destination if we take into account the characteristic features analyzed by the students of all groups. Although all students mentioned the 5 dimensions, they avoid to consider the 6th dimension, *governance*.

We conclude that Valencia has adopting different technological strategies and from a global perspective it can be considered a smart tourist destination even if students did not present the dimension of 'governance'. For them, it is more important the *population dimension* and its participation in creating a smart city destination. Students believe that the Valencian language as a minority language must be preserved in all areas. According to their writings, technologies are necessary but not more important in a smart city than the involvement of citizens and stakeholders to promote the use of the Valencian language. Each language is an integral part of people identity (Norton, 2014) and we found out that students

have a strong sense of identity towards Valencian language. The language is part of their ethnic identity and it plays a key role in Valencian Community in the selfidentification (Kovacs Rac & Halupka-Rešetar, 2018) with their ethnic group.

The students emphasize the importance of cultural visits that are the tourist attractions of Valencia city, especially the City of Arts and Sciences. Valencia held the title of European Capital of Smart Tourism in 2022 being a smart tourist destination. In addition to promoting a sustainable tourism, to facilitating eco-friendly means of transport in all city, protecting ecosystems as a Albufera Natural Park, it also involves innovative technologies accessible to all people.

As for the *mobility dimension*, students prefer to explain their positive experiences with the Erasmus program in other countries, but in Valencia city, they mention only the bike as Valencia has a huge network of bike lanes. At the same time, they recommend exploring the city on foot, enjoying the Valencia culture and lifestyle.

Students highlight the *environmental dimension* with regards to different attractions, activities on the beaches, especially for local people and tourists with physical disabilities.

Regarding the *economic dimension*, the students highlight the economic impact of all tourist destinations in Valencia along with the attraction of investments in economic and social areas. They portrait Valencia in a positive light by promoting the city as well as its buildings, local products, services, entrepreneurs,

Finally, the quality of life is see in terms of innovation. Tourists can access to guides, brochures or maps by using a QR code or by downloading them in digital format. Students recommend to use 'Valencia Accesible Guide' with helpful information for potential tourists by offering them an accessible way to visit Valencia.

According to all students, by implementing innovative and intelligent solutions, through smart technologies, Valencia is a smart tourist destination which guarantees the sustainable development of tourist areas and increases the quality of the lives of the all citizens.

Valencia, as a dynamic, welcoming and open city has been chosen to host in 2026 the Gay Games XII in 2026, an international cultural and sporting event whose principles are diversity, inclusion and participation. It will have a positive impact on this diverse and tolerant city by attracting many tourists.

The analysis of our students' affective evaluation and interpretation of a touristic place from Valencia city through smart tourism was a major factor that impacted their perception of the cultural heritage significance of a certain place. Therefore, our findings suggest that there is a strong correlation between students' cultural experiences, awareness and perception of a touristic place and their interpretation of the economic, social and cultural significance of the touristic places. Tourism experiences of our students contributed to transformative learning acquired by

immersion in a new knowledge as a result of travelling and living in one of the most visited regions in Spain.

This paper provides interesting evidence from the students' writings about Valencia as a smart city which integrate ICT in tourism sector for increasing the quality of life of all tourists. Students presented their smart tourism experiences and improved their attitudes, values and environmental behavior (Lee and Jan 2018).

Based on the data of this study, we consider that teachers should be aware of these results by inviting their students to reflect on this important issue and also by designing and implementing in the classrooms contents related to smart tourism model.

Acknowledgments

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