




Interview

TechTalk with Professor Dimitrios Buhalis: The Former President of IFITT and Most Influential Researcher at the Tourism Academy

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“Smartness creates a platform. We need to identify the roles of the many actors participating in this platform and figure out who will benefit our destination the most and who will provide the best solution.”

Professor Buhalis is an Established Chair and Director of the eTourism Lab at Bournemouth University. He is currently Visiting Professor at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Professor Buhalis is one of the most-cited researchers and researches Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Smart Tourism and Strategic Management and Marketing.

Vision and future direction for IT & Tourism community

Professor Buhalis has been exploring how ICT and the tourism and hospitality industry can contribute to society for more than 30 years. He designed useful and effective ICT solutions for identifying and solving tourism problems and opportunities. He works closely with industry globally to ensure that his research is cutting edge and has relevance and impact. In his paper Technology in tourism-from information communication

technologies to eTourism and smart tourism towards ambient intelligence tourism: a perspective article, published in *Tourism Review* in 2020, he explained that smart tourism emerged to provide the infrastructure for value co-creation by taking advantage of interconnectivity and interoperability of integrated technologies to reengineer processes and data in order to produce innovative services, products and procedures ensuring stakeholder value maximization. Professor Buhalis suggested that interoperability and ubiquitous computing ensure that everybody is interconnected and processes are integrated towards generating value through dynamic co-creation, personalization, and adaptation to context for the entire network (Buhalis, 2020).

According to Professor Buhalis, we are going through drastic changes due to COVID-19. Smart tourism will change tourism ecosystems radically, as people have started to adapt to technology more quickly to manage a range of functions in the rapidly changing environment. As a result, technology is expanding and activating more and more. In this context, we need to know how to identify and solve problems closely related to the tourism and hospitality industries in real-time (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). He asserted that smart tourism could transform each sector of traveler, industry, government, and society. Therefore, we must constantly identify challenges and think about the positive role and contribution of ICT to society. Professor Buhalis explained: “Our vision is to constantly think about how to use the various technologies that are being applied to the industry and how to bring the maximum benefit to the industry and all stakeholders. The most important factor at this time is to discover young scholars, foster innovation, create collective intelligence with them, and grow the industry together.”

The most important points for future service providers in the smart tourism industry and policymakers

Professor Buhalis argued that for smart tourism to develop, service providers and policymakers must consider two factors: Technological issues and value co-creation. In terms of technical issues, he pointed out that service providers and policymakers must have a clear understanding of network technology to take appropriate action. More specifically, it requires a clear problem perception of what technology can do for our industry or our society as an ecosystem. Based on this clear awareness of the problem, policymakers should create the framework and think about the value our industry, society, or region can create through technology and develop specific utilization strategies.

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Professor Buhalis pointed out that smartness is moving very quickly, but policymakers and decision-makers lag behind in response. This is mainly due to a lack of understanding of technology, policy, and legal issues that fall behind the trend. Therefore, he suggested that our role is to support policymakers and decision-makers in increasing their understanding of technology and preparing a system for smart tourism to grow at a pace. Professor Buhalis stated that it requires careful coordination with all involved in legal issues. It is not an issue that can be pursued piecemeal only for the development of the industry because all stakeholders are closely involved. When someone's growth and gains can have negative consequences for someone else, policymakers should prioritize strengthening individual entrepreneurs, small businesses, and privacy. Since a few specific technology companies dominate society globally, legal frameworks need to be put in place not to become too dependent on specific companies while considering how to spread the benefits of technology throughout the ecosystem.

How to be competitive as a smart destination now and in the future

For smart destinations to be competitive, all resources surrounding society must be blended in to create value. Dr. Buhalis explained, "Smartness creates a platform. We need to identify the roles of the many actors participating in this platform and figure out who will benefit our destination the most and who will provide the best solution." Value co-creation starts with customer citizenship behavior (Assiouras et al., 2019). Destination online platforms (Zhang et al., 2018) and destination technology benchmarking (Buhalis & Wagner, 2013) are critical to ensure that destinations remain competitive and also all stakeholders' benefit. The usability of destination management organization websites and all systems will determine the competitiveness of destinations (Qi et al., 2008). Professor Buhalis addressed that at this point, we need to have an advanced information delivery system based on a significant dynamic data mining process using adaptive databases (Stylos et al., 2021). Smart technologies can support intelligent information as consumers can easily find personalized and contextualized information using the platform they prefer (Fan et al., 2019).

Professor Buhalis asserted, "The most basic role of smart technology is to understand consumer needs and communicate them effectively to tourism suppliers. Smart destinations need to provide optimal solutions even when consumers are not aware of the exact solution they need. For example, if a consumer wants to play tennis and scuba dive, we need to have a system that matches the requirements with the offerings and provide the best solution that connects them dynamically, rather than provide piecemeal information about each part."

The meaning of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for tourism marketers

Professor Buhalis described that Artificial Intelligence (AI) provides a technology that allows the system to think like a human, process massive amounts of data much faster than a human and provide the optimal solution based on big data (Buhalis et al., 2019). AI can solve enormous tourism problems and provide opportunities for multiple stakeholders. However, if it goes in the wrong direction, it can also have substantial ripple effects, especially if AI applied to robots goes wrong; it can be a disaster, so it should be handled with expertise and caution.


Nevertheless, AI provides the best continuously evolving solutions based on a vast amount of data, including data collected in the past and data collected from various locations. It is a wonderful tool that can maximize the parties' interests through various rules. Smart tourism provides a range of tools that enable tourism destinations and ecosystems to take advantage of

technological developments and support value co-creation for all stakeholders.

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