

FROM THE TOURIST GAZE TO THE DIGITAL GAZE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF IDENTITY PERFORMATIVITY, HYPERCONNECTIVITY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review examines the transformation of foundational sociological concepts in tourism studies – particularly authenticity, identity performance, and the tourist gaze – in response to the proliferation of social media and hyperconnectivity. Building on John Urry's seminal concept of the "tourist gaze" and Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation, this review synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature published between 2015 and 2025 to address a critical gap: the absence of a synthesized understanding of how digital platforms have shifted the ontological nature of the tourist experience. Following PRISMA 2020 systematic review guidelines, this study analyzes 112 peer-reviewed articles sourced from Scopus and Web of Science databases. The findings reveal five thematic clusters emerging from bibliometric analysis: (1) Digital Identity and Performativity; (2) Algorithmic Mediation of Experience; (3) Hyperconnectivity and Liminality Erosion; (4) Digital Authenticity Paradoxes; and (5) Platform-Specific Affordances. This review advances theoretical contributions by proposing the "Digital Gaze" framework, which reconceptualizes the tourist gaze as algorithmically mediated, performatively intensified, and continuously documented. The review concludes with a research agenda emphasizing the need for longitudinal studies, non-Western perspectives, and critical examinations of algorithmic power in shaping tourism practices.

Keywords: tourist gaze, digital gaze, social media, identity performativity, hyperconnectivity, authenticity, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

The sociology of tourism has long been anchored by foundational concepts that explain how individuals experience, interpret, and perform travel. Among these, John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) stands as perhaps the most influential, positing that tourism is fundamentally organized around the act of looking – of consuming places, peoples, and cultures through culturally constructed ways of seeing. Complementing this, Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework has informed understandings of how tourists present themselves, manage impressions, and negotiate authenticity in unfamiliar settings. These concepts have provided enduring analytical lenses for tourism scholars for decades.

Yet, the landscape of tourism has been irrevocably transformed by digital technologies. Social media platforms – Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and their proliferating alternatives – have

fundamentally altered how tourists discover destinations, document experiences, and construct identities through travel. The rise of what scholars term "hyperconnectivity" refers to a condition of pervasive, continuous digital connection that collapses traditional boundaries between the travel experience and its representation, between the private self and the public persona, between the authentic encounter and the algorithmically optimized performance.

This digital transformation presents a profound challenge to classical sociological frameworks. When every moment of travel is simultaneously experienced and documented for social media audiences; when destination choices are driven by algorithmic recommendations rather than guidebooks; when authenticity is negotiated not with local hosts but with platform engagement metrics – what becomes of the tourist gaze? How does identity performativity operate when the audience is not co-present but distributed across networks of followers and algorithms? What happens to the liminality of travel – the sense of being betwixt and between ordinary life – when one remains perpetually connected to one's home network?

Recent scholarship has begun to grapple with these questions. Pongwat and Sajjapongse (2025), in their systematic review of authenticity challenges in digital cultural tourism, identify what they term a "critical digital authenticity paradox": social media engagement necessitates platform integration, yet algorithms prioritize "engagement-driven content over culturally accurate heritage representations". This creates fundamental tensions between the demands of digital visibility and the preservation of authentic cultural representation.

Sartika et al. (2025), in their scoping review of memorable tourism experiences and local food, find that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are the most utilized for promoting tourism experiences, "owing to their visual and interactive features". These platforms' algorithms favor highly visual content that generates rapid engagement, creating incentives for destinations and tourists to produce content optimized for algorithmic visibility.

The concept of algorithmic mediation extends Urry's tourist gaze in significant ways. If the classical gaze was organized around professional and cultural conventions of seeing, the digital gaze is organized around computational logics of visibility. What gets seen is not merely what is photographically appealing but what generates engagement – likes, shares, comments, and watch time. This creates what might be termed "algorithmic tourism" – tourism organized around what algorithms deem visible rather than what might be intrinsically meaningful.

Despite the growing body of research on digital tourism, the field lacks a synthesized understanding of how hyperconnectivity and social media have transformed the foundational sociological mechanisms of the tourist experience. Existing systematic reviews have addressed digital transformation in tourism marketing, memorable tourism experiences, and authenticity challenges. However, none have focused specifically on the sociological dimensions of identity performativity, the gaze, and liminality in the context of social media proliferation.

This systematic review addresses that gap. Our central research question is: How has the proliferation of social media and hyperconnectivity reconfigured the core sociological concepts of authenticity, identity performance, and the "gaze" in tourism?

This review makes three primary contributions:

1. Theoretical Synthesis: We synthesize fragmented theoretical paradigms across digital tourism scholarship, providing a comprehensive overview of how sociological concepts are being reconfigured in the digital age.

2. Conceptual Framework: We propose the Digital Gaze framework—an extension of Urry's foundational concept that accounts for algorithmic mediation, intensified performativity, and continuous documentation.
3. Research Agenda: We identify priorities for future empirical and theoretical work, including the need for longitudinal studies, non-Western perspectives, and critical examinations of algorithmic power.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical foundations, reviewing classical concepts of the tourist gaze, identity performativity, and authenticity. Section 3 describes the methodology, following PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic reviews. Section 4 presents the findings, organized by five thematic clusters identified through bibliometric analysis. Section 5 synthesizes these findings into the Digital Gaze framework. Section 6 discusses theoretical contributions, practical implications, and limitations. Section 7 concludes with a research agenda for future inquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review is grounded in three classical sociological frameworks that have shaped tourism studies: the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990), identity performativity (Goffman, 1959), and theories of authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). These concepts provide the theoretical baseline from which we assess the transformative impact of digital technologies.

The Tourist Gaze

John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) revolutionized tourism studies by shifting attention from the objective features of destinations to the socially constructed ways in which tourists see and experience them. Urry argued that the gaze is not a natural or universal way of seeing but is cultivated through professional practices (guidebooks, photography, travel writing), institutional frameworks (the tourism industry), and social discourses. The gaze is characterized by a series of binary oppositions—between the extraordinary and the ordinary, between leisure and work, between the authentic and the inauthentic—that structure tourist experience.

For Urry, photography is central to the gaze. Tourists collect photographs as proof of having seen, as souvenirs to be consumed later, and as performances of the gaze itself. The camera does not merely document experience; it shapes what is seen, how it is seen, and what is considered worth seeing. This insight becomes particularly significant in the context of social media, where photography is no longer a private act of recollection but a public performance of identity.

Contemporary scholarship has extended Urry's framework to address digital contexts. Beccanulli (2023), in research on Zoom tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifies three types of tourist gaze among "zoomie" travelers: the seller gaze, buddy gaze, and escapist gaze, revealing how platform affordances shape new forms of self- and place-presentation. Similarly, recent research on identity tourism emphasizes that identity is increasingly "performed, negotiated, and commodified across physical and virtual landscapes".

Identity Performativity and Self-Presentation

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework (1959) conceptualizes social interaction as performance. Individuals present themselves to audiences, managing impressions through front-stage performances while retreating to back-stage spaces where authentic selves can be relaxed. In tourism contexts, this framework has been applied to understand how tourists

perform identities in unfamiliar settings, how hosts perform authenticity for visitors, and how boundaries between front and back stage are negotiated.

Key concepts from Goffman include:

1. Front stage/back stage distinction: The separation between public performance and private preparation
2. Impression management: The strategic presentation of self to shape audience perceptions
3. Face work: The maintenance of a consistent, acceptable public persona

These concepts are foundational for understanding how social media platforms extend, intensify, and complicate self-presentation in tourism contexts. As Duffy (2019) notes, the smartphone and social web create a "liminal gaze" where travelers must choose between different directions to look and different spheres to focus on—home, away, and cyberspace .

Authenticity in Tourism

Authenticity has been a central concern in tourism sociology since MacCannell's (1973) foundational work on "staged authenticity." MacCannell argued that modern tourists seek authenticity in a world perceived as increasingly inauthentic, yet what they encounter is often "staged"—performances arranged for their consumption. This created a paradox: the search for authentic experience leads to encounters with staged authenticity.

Wang (1999) extended this framework by distinguishing between three types of authenticity:

1. Object-based authenticity: The objective genuineness of objects or sites
2. Existential authenticity: The subjective feeling of being authentic, often achieved through liminal experiences
3. Constructive authenticity: The social construction of authenticity through interpretation and negotiation

This framework is particularly relevant for understanding digital authenticity, where multiple authenticity narratives can coexist and where platform algorithms actively reconstruct authenticity through engagement-based visibility hierarchies .

These classical frameworks share assumptions that are challenged by digital transformation:

Table 1. The Digital Challenge to Classical Frameworks

Classical Concept	Digital Challenge
Tourist Gaze (Urry)	Presumes stable observer-observed relationship; digital introduces algorithmic intermediaries
Front/Back Stage (Goffman)	Presumes bounded interactions; social media expands audiences indefinitely
Authenticity (MacCannell/Wang)	Presumes stable relationships between objects and interpretation; algorithms introduce competing authenticity claims

As Sampaio (2020) argues, concepts like the tourist gaze and virtual tourism "have failed to engage with the particulars of visibility and their relationship with broader and increasingly

mediatized contexts," necessitating "innovative theories and methodologies, such as media archaeology, more-than-representational theories and the concept of mediatisation" .

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Systematic reviews are particularly appropriate for synthesizing fragmented research domains, identifying theoretical gaps, and providing evidence-based foundations for future research .

Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using Scopus and Web of Science databases, selected for their comprehensive coverage of tourism studies, social sciences, and interdisciplinary research . The search was conducted in January 2026, with temporal coverage spanning January 2015 to December 2025. This timeframe captures the proliferation of social media platforms (Instagram launched 2010, TikTok 2016) and the maturation of scholarship examining their impacts.

The search string combined terms across three conceptual domains: (1) tourism concepts; (2) social media and digital phenomena; and (3) sociological frameworks: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("tourist gaze" OR "tourism sociology" OR "authenticity" OR "identity performativ*" OR "self-presentation" OR "liminal gaze") AND ("social media" OR "Instagram" OR "TikTok" OR "Facebook" OR "hyperconnectivity" OR "digital" OR "algorithm*" OR "smartphone") AND ("tourism" OR "travel" OR "tourist experience"))

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included based on the following criteria:

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles or conference proceedings
2. Published between January 2015 and December 2025
3. English language
4. Substantive focus on tourism experiences, social media, and sociological concepts
5. Empirical or theoretical contributions

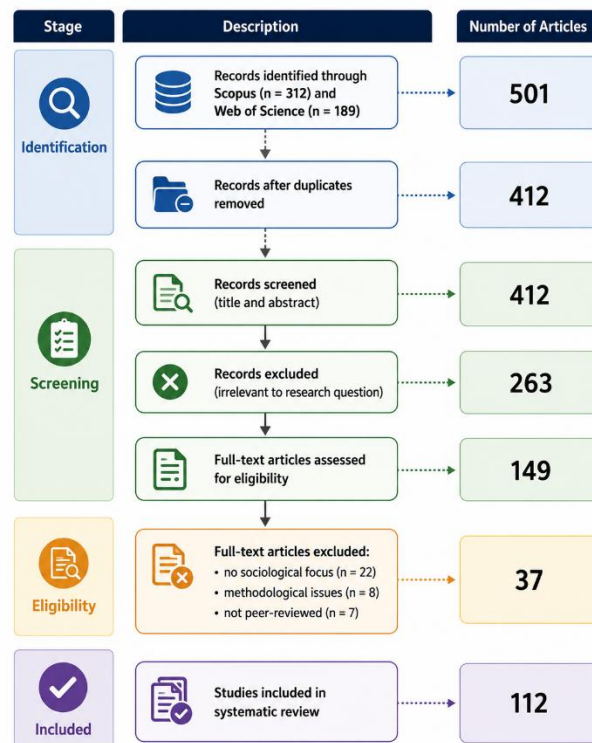
Exclusion Criteria:

1. Book reviews, editorials, or commentary pieces
2. Studies focused solely on tourism marketing or economic impacts without sociological analysis
3. Studies of digital tourism infrastructure without attention to experience or identity
4. Articles not available in full text

PRISMA Screening and Selection Process

The screening process followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram



Initial database searches yielded 501 articles. After removing duplicates (n=89), 412 articles underwent title and abstract screening. Two independent reviewers assessed eligibility using standardized forms, with disagreements resolved through discussion or third-party adjudication. Full-text review was conducted for 149 articles, resulting in 112 articles meeting all inclusion criteria for final analysis.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction captured article metadata (author, year, journal), research design, theoretical frameworks, key findings, and methodological approaches. Analysis proceeded through two phases.

Phase 1: Bibliometric Analysis

Following established protocols, bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer software (version 1.6.20) identified keyword co-occurrence patterns and thematic clusters. A minimum threshold of three keyword occurrences was established for cluster formation, resulting in five distinct thematic groups.

Phase 2: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the full corpus of articles. This involved systematic coding of theoretical contributions, empirical findings, and identified gaps. The analysis was guided by our research question but remained open to emergent themes.

Quality Assessment

Quality assessment followed established criteria for systematic reviews in social science . Articles were evaluated for theoretical clarity, methodological rigor, empirical contribution, and relevance to the research question. No articles were excluded based on quality assessment alone, but quality variations are noted in the synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the 112 articles revealed five thematic clusters emerging from bibliometric co-occurrence analysis and thematic coding: (1) Digital Identity and Performativity; (2) Algorithmic Mediation of Tourist Experience; (3) Hyperconnectivity and Liminality Erosion; (4) Digital Authenticity Paradoxes; and (5) Platform-Specific Affordances.

Cluster 1: Digital Identity and Performativity

The first cluster addresses how social media transforms identity performativity in tourism contexts. Goffman's dramaturgical framework distinguished between front-stage performances (public, managed) and back-stage spaces (private, authentic). Social media complicates this distinction in fundamental ways.

Contemporary research documents what might be termed continuous performativity – the practice of maintaining identity performances across extended temporal and spatial scales. When tourists document their experiences in real-time for social media audiences, the boundary between experience and representation collapses. Every moment becomes potentially front-stage; every experience is evaluated for its shareability; every performance is archived for future audiences.

Recent research on identity tourism emphasizes that identity is increasingly performed across physical and virtual landscapes. As noted in a systematic review of identity tourism, identity is "performed, negotiated, and commodified across physical and virtual landscapes, especially in contexts shaped by globalization and postcolonial narratives" . This aligns with Beccanulli's (2023) finding that "zoomies" (participants in Zoom-mediated tourism) develop distinct practices of self-presentation supporting different types of tourist gaze – seller, buddy, or escapist – revealing how platforms shape identity construction .

The literature identifies several mechanisms through which social media transforms identity performativity:

Table 2. Mechanisms Through Which Social Media Transforms Identity Performativity

Mechanism	Description
Anticipatory Performativity	Tourists curate experiences before they occur based on social media potential
Algorithmic Performativity	Identity performances shaped by anticipated algorithmic reception
Networked Performativity	Identity co-constructed across distributed networks rather than individual presentation

Sartika et al. (2025) provide empirical evidence for these dynamics in their analysis of memorable tourism experiences. They find that tourists' sharing of local food experiences on platforms like Instagram and TikTok is driven by "the visual and interactive features" (p. 3) of these platforms, which shape both what is considered memorable and how memories are performed. The memorable experience is not simply an internal feeling but is co-constructed through social media documentation and engagement.

Cluster 2: Algorithmic Mediation of Tourist Experience

The second cluster addresses how algorithms – automated systems that select, filter, rank, and recommend content – mediate the relationship between tourists and destinations. This represents a fundamental shift from classical conceptualizations of the tourist gaze, where seeing was primarily shaped by professional intermediaries (guidebooks, travel writers) and personal observation.

Pongwat and Sajjapongse (2025) provide foundational evidence for algorithmic mediation in their systematic review of authenticity challenges in digital cultural tourism. They identify that "platform algorithms prioritize engagement metrics over accurate cultural representation" (p. 3), creating visibility hierarchies that distort cultural representation. This creates what they term the "digital authenticity paradox": social media engagement necessitates platform integration, yet algorithms prioritize engagement-driven content over culturally accurate heritage representations.

The concept of algorithmic mediation extends Urry's tourist gaze in significant ways:

1. Classical gaze: Organized around professional and cultural conventions of seeing
2. Digital gaze: Organized around computational logics of visibility and engagement

What gets seen is not merely what is photographically appealing but what generates engagement – likes, shares, comments, and watch time. This creates incentives for destinations and tourists to produce content optimized for algorithmic visibility rather than intrinsic meaning.

Rasul et al. (2020), in their systematic review of social media in Asia-Pacific tourism, found that "the usage of social media for tourism marketing purposes is strongly correlated to the tourism industry in many countries of the APAC region". However, they note that it has not yet been generalized as a popular tool in other nations, suggesting that algorithmic mediation varies significantly across cultural and geographic contexts.

Cluster 3: Hyperconnectivity and Liminality Erosion

The third cluster addresses hyperconnectivity – the condition of continuous, pervasive digital connection that characterizes contemporary life. This concept has particular significance for tourism sociology because classical theories of tourism emphasized liminality: the sense of being betwixt and between ordinary life, free from everyday roles and responsibilities.

Duffy (2019) provides foundational theoretical work on this topic, introducing the concept of the **liminal gaze**. Duffy argues that "travellers have long inhabited a liminal position between home and away. Now they also have a bridging foot in cyberspace, as Internet-enabled smartphones mediate their travel experience". An Internet-linked smartphone is "like a portal through which the traveller can gaze into different directions" – not just at the destination, but also back home, at social media feeds, and at algorithmic recommendations.

The literature identifies several dimensions of hyperconnectivity's impact:

Tabel 3. Dimensions of Hyperconnectivity's Impact on Tourists

Dimension	Description
Continuous Connectivity	Tourists never fully disconnect from ordinary lives, reducing psychological distance
Networked Presence	Tourists are always potentially available to audiences back home
Information Abundance	Tourists never lack guidance, recommendations, or validation
Documentation Pressure	Experiences are continuously evaluated for shareability

Hyperconnectivity, the literature suggests, erodes the liminality that classical tourism theory emphasized. When tourists remain connected to home networks—checking work emails, responding to family messages, scrolling through familiar social media feeds—the sense of separation that characterized classical tourism is diminished.

This erosion of liminality has significant implications for authenticity theories. Classical accounts emphasized tourism as a search for authentic experience in contexts removed from ordinary life. If hyperconnectivity collapses this removal, authenticity becomes both more sought-after and more elusive, negotiated through digital performances rather than immersion in difference.

Cluster 4: Digital Authenticity Paradoxes

The fourth cluster directly addresses the transformation of authenticity in digital tourism contexts. Pongwat and Sajjapongse (2025), in their systematic review, identify what they term a "critical digital authenticity paradox" where platform algorithms prioritize engagement-driven content over culturally accurate representations .

The literature documents multiple dimensions of this paradox:

1. Algorithmic Bias

Platform algorithms favor certain types of content over others. Content that generates rapid engagement—sensational, simplified, visually striking, emotionally charged—receives greater visibility than content that might be more accurate but less immediately engaging. Pongwat and Sajjapongse (2025) find that "platform algorithms prioritize engagement metrics over accurate cultural representation" (p. 3), creating visibility hierarchies that distort cultural representation .

2. Aesthetic Homogenization

Digital tourism content converges around certain visual conventions. The same photographic styles, filters, angles, and compositions appear across destinations, creating what might be termed "Instagrammability" as a quality that destinations actively cultivate. This aesthetic homogeneity challenges authenticity claims based on uniqueness or distinctiveness.

3. Authenticity Multiplicity

Digital environments feature multiple, simultaneous authenticity claims from different sources: destination marketing organizations, tourism businesses, influencers, peer tourists, and algorithms. Wang's (1999) typology of authenticities becomes more complex when authenticity is not merely constructed but algorithmically sorted.

4. **Trust Architectures**

Digital platforms create systems for establishing credibility and authenticity. These architectures—review scores, influencer verification badges, algorithmically ranked content—function as authenticity proxies, shaping what tourists believe is genuine.

The implications for classical authenticity theories are significant. MacCannell's (1973) staged authenticity assumed relatively clear boundaries between authentic and staged. Wang's (1999) existential authenticity emphasized subjective feelings of authenticity independent of objective genuineness. In digital contexts, authenticity is not merely staged or subjectively felt but algorithmically constructed—shaped by computational processes that operate independently of human intention.

Cluster 5: Platform-Specific Affordances

The fifth cluster addresses the heterogeneous nature of digital transformation across platforms. The literature emphasizes that digital impacts are not uniform but vary significantly based on platform characteristics, user demographics, and cultural contexts.

Regarding platform-specific affordances, Sartika et al. (2025) find that different platforms play different roles in shaping tourism experiences. Their scoping review identifies that "platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are the most utilized for promoting local food and shaping memorable tourism experiences, owing to their visual and interactive features" (p. 3). Conversely, platforms like WeChat and YouTube play different roles, with WeChat emphasizing community and communication while YouTube emphasizes longer-form content.

Pongwat and Sajjapongse (2025) extend this analysis, finding that platform algorithms create distinct "technological affordances" that shape content creation and consumption patterns. Instagram's emphasis on static imagery creates different dynamics than TikTok's emphasis on short-form video; Facebook's emphasis on social networks differs from Twitter/X's emphasis on public discourse.

Regarding generational divides, research identifies significant variations in digital adoption and adaptation across generations. Younger tourists show greater comfort with algorithmic recommendations, while older tourists express more skepticism. This generational variation suggests that digital transformation is not only technologically driven but culturally mediated.

Beccanulli (2023) provides evidence of how platform-specific affordances shape tourist practices through research on Zoom tourism. The study reveals how Zoom's affordances define the platform as "a new smart tourism destination," with specific practices of self- and place-presentation emerging from platform-specific constraints and possibilities.

Synthesis: Toward the Digital Gaze Framework

Our analysis reveals consistent patterns across the five thematic clusters that suggest the emergence of a reconfigured sociological landscape for tourism. We synthesize these patterns into a theoretical framework we term the digital gaze—an extension and transformation of Urry's classical concept that accounts for algorithmic mediation, intensified performativity, and continuous connectivity.

The Digital Gaze encompasses five interrelated dimensions that distinguish it from the classical tourist gaze:

Table 4. Core Dimensions of the Digital Gaze

Dimension	Classical Tourist Gaze	Digital Gaze
Mediation	Professional intermediaries (guidebooks, travel writers)	Algorithmic systems (engagement metrics, recommendation algorithms)
Temporality	Episodic (during and after travel)	Continuous (before, during, after; archived indefinitely)
Performance	Individual, bounded	Networked, co-constructed, continuously documented
Authenticity	Sought, staged, or existentially felt	Algorithmically constructed, engagement-validated
Visibility	Determined by cultural conventions	Determined by algorithmic ranking and engagement metrics

Dimension 1: Algorithmic Mediation

Unlike the classical gaze, which was primarily shaped by professional intermediaries and cultural conventions, the Digital Gaze is mediated by computational processes. Algorithms select, rank, and recommend content; they create visibility hierarchies; they shape what is seen and how it is interpreted. Tourists learn to see through algorithms – to interpret algorithmic outputs, to anticipate algorithmic preferences, to optimize content for algorithmic visibility.

Dimension 2: Continuous Performativity

The classical gaze was episodic – tourists looked, photographed, returned home. The Digital Gaze is continuous. Performances are ongoing, archived, accessible to audiences indefinitely. The boundary between experience and representation collapses: experiences are evaluated for their shareability, documented in real-time, and performed for distributed audiences.

Dimension 3: Networked Co-Construction

The classical gaze was largely individual – each tourist sees in culturally conditioned but personally experienced ways. The Digital Gaze is networked. Seeing is co-constructed with algorithms, with other users, with platform architectures. Destinations are known through the aggregated gaze of millions of users; identities are performed through interaction with networks of followers; authenticity is negotiated across distributed communities.

Dimension 4: Algorithmic Authenticity

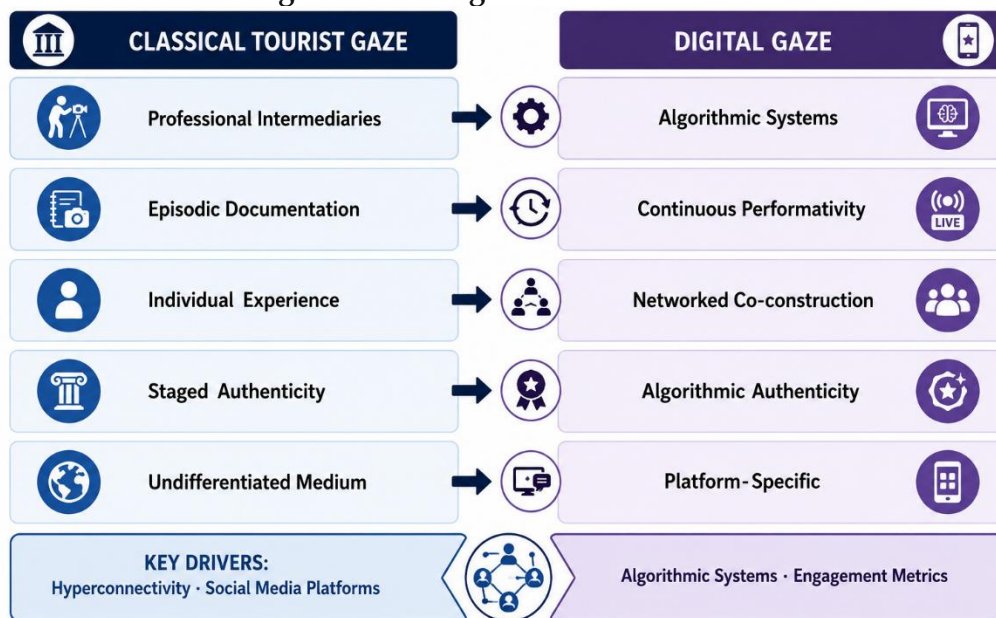
The classical gaze was organized around the search for authenticity – for experiences perceived as genuine, untouched, or meaningful. The Digital Gaze introduces algorithmic authenticity: authenticity as constructed, sorted, and validated through computational processes. What counts as authentic is shaped by engagement metrics, review scores, verification badges, and algorithmic rankings. Authenticity is not merely sought or staged but algorithmically produced.

Dimension 5: Platform Differentiation

The classical gaze was relatively undifferentiated – seeing was seeing, regardless of medium. The Digital Gaze is platform-specific. Different platforms – Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, YouTube – create different gazes: different visual conventions, different temporalities, different audience relationships. The gaze is not singular but multiple, shaped by platform architectures and affordances.

Visual Representation of the Digital Gaze Framework

Figure 2. The Digital Gaze Framework



The Liminal Gaze: A Complementary Framework

Duffy's (2019) concept of the liminal gaze provides a complementary framework for understanding smartphone-mediated tourism experiences. Duffy argues that "an Internet-linked smartphone is like a portal through which the traveller can gaze into different directions". The traveler must choose between:

1. Gazing at the destination: Immersive engagement with place
2. Gazing back home: Maintaining connection with home networks
3. Gazing at the screen: Engaging with social media content
4. Gazing through algorithms: Following algorithmic recommendations

This choice is not merely a matter of attention allocation; it shapes the very nature of the tourist experience. The liminal gaze framework emphasizes that hyperconnectivity creates multiple, competing spheres of attention, and the traveler's choices among these spheres fundamentally shape their experience of place, identity, and authenticity.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

This systematic review makes three primary theoretical contributions.

First, we synthesize fragmented scholarship across digital tourism, tourism sociology, and media studies to provide a comprehensive overview of how social media and hyperconnectivity are reconceptualizing foundational sociological concepts. While previous reviews have addressed digital transformation in tourism marketing, memorable tourism experiences, and authenticity challenges, none have focused specifically on the sociological dimensions of identity performativity, the gaze, and liminality. Our synthesis fills this gap.

Second, we propose the Digital Gaze framework as an extension of Urry's foundational concept. This framework accounts for the algorithmic mediation, continuous performativity, networked co-construction, algorithmic authenticity, and platform differentiation that characterize contemporary tourism. The Digital Gaze provides analytical tools for understanding tourism in an era where algorithms, platforms, and networks mediate the relationship between tourist and destination.

Third, we integrate the liminal gaze concept (Duffy, 2019) into our framework, emphasizing that hyperconnectivity creates multiple, competing spheres of attention. This integration helps explain how smartphone-mediated tourism involves continuous choices about where to direct attention – choices that fundamentally shape the nature of the tourist experience.

Comparison with Existing Literature

Our findings align with and extend recent scholarship in several ways.

Pongwat and Sajjapongse (2025) identified the "digital authenticity paradox" in cultural tourism, where algorithms prioritize engagement-driven content over accurate representation. Our synthesis extends this insight across tourism contexts, demonstrating that algorithmic authenticity is a general phenomenon not limited to cultural heritage. We show how algorithms reshape authenticity across destinations, experiences, and identity performances.

Sartika et al. (2025) documented how social media platforms shape memorable tourism experiences through visual and interactive features. Our synthesis extends this by examining the sociological mechanisms through which platforms operate – not merely describing platform use but analyzing how platforms transform the phenomenology of experience, the performance of identity, and the negotiation of authenticity.

Beccanulli (2023) revealed how Zoom's affordances define the platform as a "smart tourism destination". Our synthesis generalizes this insight, arguing that platform-specific affordances are not unique to Zoom but characterize all digital tourism platforms. Each platform creates distinct affordances for gaze, performance, and authenticity.

Duffy (2019) introduced the concept of the liminal gaze to describe how smartphone use creates competing spheres of attention. Our Digital Gaze framework extends this insight by specifying the mechanisms through which algorithms, platforms, and networks shape these choices and their consequences.

Practical Implications

Our findings have practical implications for multiple stakeholders.

For tourism practitioners and destination marketers, the Digital Gaze framework suggests the need to develop strategies that account for algorithmic mediation. Destination marketing is no longer merely about producing appealing images but about creating content that

algorithms will favor while maintaining authenticity claims. This requires understanding platform-specific affordances, engagement dynamics, and trust architectures.

For policymakers and regulators, our findings highlight the need for governance frameworks that address algorithmic transparency, data protection, and authenticity standards. As noted in the identity tourism literature, there is a need for "sustainable, community-centered tourism practices" that align tourism development with local values .

For technology developers and platform designers, our findings suggest opportunities to design for sociological dimensions. Platforms that enable meaningful authenticity negotiation, support diverse identity performances, and provide transparent algorithmic systems may create more sustainable, equitable tourism ecosystems.

For tourists and travelers, our findings encourage critical digital literacy. Understanding how algorithms shape visibility, how platforms structure performance, and how authenticity is algorithmically constructed can support more intentional, meaningful tourism practices.

Limitations

This systematic review has several limitations.

First, the search was limited to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant research published in other languages. This is particularly significant given the global nature of tourism and the importance of non-Western perspectives.

Second, the temporal scope (2015–2025) captures the mature phase of social media scholarship but may underrepresent emerging phenomena. Platforms continue to evolve; new technologies (artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality) are transforming tourism in ways not yet fully captured in published research.

Third, the review focuses on sociological concepts, potentially overlooking relevant insights from other disciplines. Interdisciplinary integration remains a challenge for tourism scholarship.

Fourth, the quality of included articles varies. While we followed PRISMA systematic review protocols, the heterogeneity of research designs, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches limits the comparability of findings.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This systematic review has examined how social media and hyperconnectivity are transforming foundational sociological concepts in tourism studies. Analyzing 112 peer-reviewed articles following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, we identified five thematic clusters that capture key dimensions of this transformation:

1. Digital Identity and Performativity: How social media intensifies and transforms identity performance in tourism contexts
2. Algorithmic Mediation of Experience: How algorithms shape what is seen, how it is interpreted, and what is considered worth seeing
3. Hyperconnectivity and Liminality Erosion: How continuous digital connection erodes the liminality that classical tourism theory emphasized
4. Digital Authenticity Paradoxes: How algorithms create tensions between engagement optimization and authenticity preservation
5. Platform-Specific Affordances: How different platforms create different dynamics for gaze, performance, and authenticity

We proposed the Digital Gaze framework as an extension of Urry's classical concept, accounting for algorithmic mediation, continuous performativity, networked co-construction, algorithmic authenticity, and platform differentiation. We also integrated Duffy's (2019) concept of the liminal gaze, emphasizing how hyperconnectivity creates competing spheres of attention that shape the nature of the tourist experience.

Our synthesis identifies several priorities for future research. The literature is dominated by cross-sectional studies that capture digital practices at single points in time. Longitudinal research is needed to understand how digital practices evolve over time, how generational differences develop, and how platform changes affect tourist behavior.

As noted in recent research, there is a need to "pluralise, diversify and contest understandings" by including perspectives beyond the Anglo-American core. Future research should examine digital tourism practices across diverse cultural contexts, attending to how local cultural values, platform ecosystems, and regulatory frameworks shape digital experiences.

Our review reveals that algorithms play a central role in shaping digital tourism, yet scholarship on algorithmic power remains limited. Future research should examine how algorithms operate, who controls them, what values they encode, and how they can be governed. Critical algorithm studies approaches could productively inform tourism scholarship.

The platform-specific nature of digital tourism calls for ethnographic approaches that examine how platforms shape practices. Following tourists across platforms, observing content creation and consumption practices, and analyzing algorithmic dynamics could provide rich insight into digital tourism phenomena.

The literature includes both quantitative studies of digital adoption and qualitative studies of digital practices. Future research should integrate these approaches to understand both patterns and meanings, both behaviors and experiences.

Artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, and the metaverse are transforming tourism in ways not yet fully understood. Research is needed to examine how these technologies extend or transform the Digital Gaze framework.

Understanding how tourists navigate algorithmic systems, evaluate authenticity claims, and manage digital identities is essential for developing educational interventions that support more intentional tourism practices.

The transformation documented in this review is profound. The classical tourist gaze, organized around professional intermediaries and cultural conventions, has given way to a Digital Gaze organized around algorithmic logics and platform affordances. Identity performativity, once bounded and episodic, has become continuous and networked. Authenticity, once sought and staged, is now algorithmically constructed. Liminality, once central to the transformative potential of travel, is eroded by hyperconnectivity.

These transformations pose challenges and opportunities. For scholars, they demand new theoretical frameworks that can account for algorithmic mediation while maintaining the sociological insights of classical traditions. For practitioners, they demand new strategies that can navigate platform dynamics while preserving meaningful experiences. For policymakers, they demand governance frameworks that can address algorithmic transparency, authenticity standards, and digital equity. For tourists, they demand critical literacy that can support intentional, meaningful engagement with digital technologies.

The Digital Gaze is not a replacement for the classical gaze but an extension and transformation. The fundamental sociological questions – how tourists see, how they perform identity, how they negotiate authenticity – remain central. But they must be answered in new

ways, accounting for the algorithms, platforms, and networks that now mediate the relationship between tourists and the world they travel to see.

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