

The myth of business tourist idiosyncrasy

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THE MYTH OF BUSINESS TOURIST IDIOSYNCRASY

Highlights

- Our discipline encourages the view that business tourism is different from other forms of tourism.
- We aim to explode the notion that business tourists are fundamentally different from leisure tourists.
- We highlight that the over-simplifying myth that business tourists are idiosyncratic and peculiar.
- Business travelers routinely undertake leisure activities and often undertake travel for non-work reasons.
- Business travelers often choose their means and mode of travel and are not always budget focused.
- We encourage researchers to explore the similarities between business and leisure travel.

Business Travelers: The Same but Different?

UNWTO, the World Tourist Organization, defines business tourism as *'tourist activity in which visitors travel for a specific professional and/or business purpose to a place outside of their workplace and residence with the aim of attending a meeting, an activity or an event'* (see www.e-unwto.org). As such, their definition reflects the prevailing assumption in many textbooks and scholarly works that business tourists are simply different to leisure tourists (Unger *et al.* 2016). Indeed, a well-known travel site simply states that *'leisure travel is generally seen as the opposite of business travel'* (www.traveltips.usatoday.com). This research note contests some flawed assumptions surrounding business travel, and provides suggestions for future research.

Practitioner and academic-focused calls for conference papers frequently list suggestions for discussions, sessions, or scholarly treatises separately when calling for insights into leisure travel and business tourism. Similarly, internationally-renowned journals as well as more applied, practice-focused journals tend to list topics of interest to authors that list business tourist studies independently to studies of leisure, environmental, religious, cultural (etc.) tourism. Equally, a review of university degrees and executive courses finds discrete modules that expound the quirks and distinctive nature of business tourism. This, in turn, is reflected in textbooks that abound with detailed lists of how business tourists differ from leisure tourists (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2001). As such, as a discipline, we propagate, proliferate, and fortify the view that business tourism is 'special', 'different', and 'distinct' from other forms of tourism – most commonly leisure tourism. Indeed, this criticism equally applies to other 'types' of tourism research that tends to assume that tourists travel solely for a singular motive (e.g. food, heritage, music, pilgrimage). This tendency, however, is particularly acute and evident in the case of business tourism where studies overwhelmingly focus on the work aspects of business travel.

Despite early scholarly views that tourism is not work (Ogilvie, 1934, Graburn, 1989), business travelers have long been recognized as 'partial-tourists' (Cohen, 1974, Pape, 1964), while recent discourse on mobilities and postmodern thinking on tourism have recognized hybrid tourism and some blurring between tourism for pleasure and travel for work, where work can be combined with tourism (Unger *et al.*, 2016). Hence, viewing business travelers as a distinct sub-group who have entirely different experiences to leisure travelers is problematic (Willis *et al.* 2017; Unger *et al.* 2016; Graburn, 1989). Viewed through the lens of hybrid mobilities business travelers can be more accurately positioned as hybrid tourists with mixed experiences (see Boztug *et al.* 2015), while differences espoused between business and leisure travelers may be less than was previously thought (Dresner, 2006). Consequently, understanding hybrid forms of travel would seem valuable.

Therefore, our aim is to critically evaluate the notion that business tourists are fundamentally different from leisure tourists. Our aim is not to criticize individual authors who (like ourselves) have treated business tourists as different or special cases but rather to highlight that the myth of the idiosyncrasy of business tourists is an over-simplification of the complexities of our field that is restricting our breadth and avenues of research. As such our objective is to encourage a richer, more complete, but potentially, more complex, appreciation of the nuanced, hybrid motivations and practices of travel. Without such an approach, researchers may continue to focus myopically on narrow, descriptive, idiosyncrasies to the detriment of more critical evaluations (such as hybrid mobilities).

Some Dangerous Assumptions Concerning Business Travel?

Our critical reflection on the nature of business tourism and the tendency of commentators to treat business tourists as idiosyncratically different (especially to leisure tourists) concentrates on four insights. These are based on a critical review of the literature combined with insights gained via interviews of business travelers, and collectively provide an agenda for future

research. We interviewed 57 regular business travelers about their experiences, practices, interpretations, and evaluations of their business-related travelling. To provide a broad picture of issues, interviewed informants who all traveled for work regularly and were drawn from a wide range of industries, hierarchical levels, work experience, and demographic characteristics.

First, one key reason that may explain why business and leisure tourism are viewed as distinct, centers on our focus on defining (thus limiting) our field of analysis and study. Many definitions of business tourism assume that business tourists' activities are exclusively for business or professional purposes (see UNWTO, 2019; Holloway and Humphrey, 2020). Tourism scholarship is replete with such doctrine – often supplemented by the main acronymic 'MICE' purposes of business tourism (**M**eetings, **I**ncentives, **C**onferences, **E**xhibitions). However, concordant with literature on 'bleisure' tourism (e.g. Lichy and McLeay 2018) our research finds that such business tourists regularly, and even habitually, deviate from such single-minded business-focused activities and commonly piggy-back leisure activities with business. Nonetheless, notwithstanding studies focusing on 'bleisure' or 'bizcation' (e.g. Ianeva and Georgieva 2020), wider studies of business tourists tend either, exclusively to study business tourism separately or, subdivide their sample into subgroups which include such distinctively-different business travelers as well as such categories as leisure, health, or environmental tourism on the grounds that such forms of tourism are discrete (e.g. Nenem *et al.*, 2020; Bi *et al.*, 2020). These artificially constraining definitions assume that tourism by business travelers occurs largely within work time (e.g. Horner and Swarbrooke, 2016). Our research finds this to be more complicated than is often presumed in textbook treatments with two aspects commonly overlooked. First, overwhelmingly our informants claimed that they spent more time *not* doing work than working when traveling. Second, our interviews indicate that as most roles involving business travel specify that travel is expected, over 90% of the time, travelling time is not rewarded (or even recognized) by employers. This leads us to suggest that most travel activities for business tourists is actually outside of normal business hours.

Second, building on data that suggests an overlap between business and leisure tourism, is an argument that chimes with recent theoretical contributions regarding tourist hybrid mobilities (e.g. Boztug *et al.* 2015). This perspective highlights that tourists may (or may not) have multiple motivations driving their rationale for, and activities during, travel. As such, the statement that 'business tourism is for business' is seemingly, inherently an axiomatic truism. However, notwithstanding the Janusque nature of business/leisure tourists, our research finds that a significant amount of travel by business tourists is far from exclusively business-oriented. Similarly, for the business tourists we interviewed, around two-thirds altered their work-related travel plans to suit their own, personal and social needs and a similar proportion agreed that their work-related travel was inflated for non-work reasons (ranging from leisure activities to social reasons to acquiring travel-related loyalty points). The conceptualization of business tourists is also constrained (rather puritanically) by the presumption that business tourism is exclusively non-pleasurable (e.g. UNWTO, 2019). Definitions of business tourism emphasize that such travel is 'in work time, rather than in pleasure' (Horner and Swarbrooke, 2016). Our interviews found that for many business travelers, aspects of travel were not pleasurable, however, we also found that many business travelers (over 75%) had adapted their work-related travel to their own purposes and enjoyed this aspect of their work; even fitting in hedonic activities (e.g. drug-taking, clubbing, golfing).

Third, commentators frequently assume that while leisure tourists have complete control of their activities, business travelers have little control and flexibility and are thus distinct (Carlsson, 2003). Most evaluations of business tourism assume that participants are powerless pawns of their employers and as such have little choice over their travel arrangements (e.g. Horner and Swarbrooke, 2016). Comparisons to leisure tourists frequently contrast the liberty of leisure tourists to select their destinations to the subjugation of business

travelers obliged only to visit business-driven destinations. Our studies find this to be a partial case only. While most (but not all) business travelers cannot select their destinations, informants commonly argued that they have varying levels of freedom to arrange their own schedule, over modes of transportation, their place of stay, and their out-of-work destination activities. Our interviews supported this view with over 90% suggesting that their employers permitted them significant latitude in their travel arrangements.

Finally, extant literature abounds with contrasts of business tourists who are less budget-conscious than self-funded leisure tourists (Carlsson, 2003). While many studies have found that when travelling for work people spend more than when they are travelling exclusively for leisure (e.g. Lock, 2018), there are two flaws in the view that business tourists are less price/budget conscious. First, our studies demonstrate that many business travelers operate on a budget – many have spending limits imposed by their employers while others have an allowance with which they may elect to be frugal (and frequently keep the difference). In either case, for this reason, business travelers are predominately (over 85%) budget-focused. Second, our research finds that astute or instrumental travelers may elect to play their expenses systems to their advantage. In this regard, some business travelers we interviewed claimed that up to twenty percent of their income was derived from perspicacious or inflated travelling expense claims.

Instead of Conclusions...

In keeping with the recent debates on hybrid mobilities and postmodern thinking in tourism, we contend that business tourism is often a mixed experience with blurred lines between leisure and work. Some of our tenets or axioms concerning business travel may be outdated and ill-conceived, such as viewing business travelers as a privileged elite with different travel experiences to leisure travelers.

We find that the artificially-constructed distinctions between business and other forms of travel (especially leisure travel) may be attributed to overly constrained definitions, research, and conceptualizations. Through debunking the myth of artificially-created and reinforced distinctions between business and leisure tourists, we highlight the benefit of critical analyses of core tenets of our theories and assumptions. In this way, a more reflexive evaluation of traveler motivations could lead to a more complex but more insightful categorizations of tourists with hybrid or overlapping motives for travel.

Instead of drawing conclusions we encourage researchers critically to explore the nuanced motivations and practices of business travelers and travelers more broadly.

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