

Digital privacy intrusions in travel: The *what*, *how*, and *so what*?

Kasty J. Lin (University of Macau, Macao)

Rob Law (University of Macau, Macao)

INTRODUCTION

Tourism and hospitality have long been at the forefront of deploying disruptive technologies, driven by various smart governance and tourism initiatives, such as personalized recommenders (Yang, Zhang, & Feng, 2024), voice-based travel assistants (Jiménez-Barreto, Rubio, Mura, Sthapit, & Campo, 2023), and AI-driven service robots (McCartney & McCartney, 2020). These technological integrations necessitate customer participation in service processes, requiring them to input both demographic and behavioral data into databases and algorithms. The rapid pace of digital transformation has inevitably raised concerns among customers regarding their digital footprints and the use of personal data by service providers and destination governments.

Current research on digital privacy in tourism and hospitality predominantly adopts a marketing or information systems (IS) perspective, focusing on consumers' responses to technology usage and information disclosure in everyday contexts (Law, Lin, & Li., 2025). However, it remains unclear whether and how tourists encounter digital privacy intrusions while traveling. When crossing borders and arriving at unfamiliar destinations, tourists may enter digital service environments that differ significantly from those in their home countries (Tussyadiah, Li, & Miller, 2019). For instance, tourists may encounter different sociocultural norms and regulations regarding digital privacy in Europe, the U.S., and Asia. That means, tourists may experience different forms of digital privacy intrusions compared to their daily lives, leading to distinct processes of risk construction, cognitive assessment, and coping responses that have been documented in previous marketing and IS literature. To understand this underexplored phenomenon, this study seeks to explore the nature, dynamics, and consequences of digital privacy intrusions experienced by tourists in a travel context through a qualitative approach. Specifically, this research aims to answer the following questions:

What digital privacy intrusions do tourists experience while traveling?

How do tourists make sense of digital privacy intrusions during travel?

What are the consequences of digital privacy intrusions in a traveling context?

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach to establish understandings about tourists' subjective experience of digital privacy intrusions in a traveling context. This is because tourists' experience of digital privacy intrusions is different from individual to individual and closely dependent on their personal characteristics and appraisal as well as their situated traveling context. Given that digital privacy awareness is a key premise in understanding tourists' experiences of digital privacy intrusions, any tourists who have been residing in Europe and have been to any smart destinations are chosen to be the sample of this study. This sample choice is because Europeans are often considered to be more aware of their freedoms and rights in protecting digital privacy compared with their Asian counterparts (Capurro, 2005). To answer the research questions, this study collected 144 responses via an open-ended qualitative survey to gather rich and descriptive data through Prolific, a UK-based survey platform. By using NVivo 11, thematic analysis was conducted to understand respondents' experiences of digital privacy intrusions while travelling.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 illustrates how tourists experience digital privacy intrusions while traveling, which involves three sequential processes of the a) encounters, b) risk construction, and c) consequences. Respondents' narratives of their digital privacy intrusions while traveling are mainly in four forms: 1) excessive and forced information collection by service providers, 2) unwanted advertisements related to their travel

trajectories, 3) personal accounts (e.g., bank applications, social media, and credit cards) being hacked or illegally accessed, and 4) facial features being captured without their consent.

After experiencing these intrusions, tourists often engage in a psychological process of risk construction, seeking potential causes for these occurrences and conducting cognitive appraisals. Participants frequently compared their personal digital footprints with privacy breach narratives (i.e., marketplace myths, Thompson, Arnould, & Veresiu, 2023) they had previously encountered or heard. Many expressed feelings of self-blame, helplessness, and passive emotions such as guilt, confusion, anxiety, and vulnerability, attributing the responsibility for these intrusions to their own lapses in privacy protection, such as connecting to public Wi-Fi and without using VPNs. This perception aligns with what Giesler and Verresiu (2014) describe as “consumer responsabilization,” whereby neoliberal discourses shift the risk and responsibility of societal issues, such as climate change and poverty, onto individual consumers. Concurrently, some respondents expressed distrust toward service providers and destination governments, perceiving these experiences as contrary to “what things should be,” which evoked feelings of anger and resentment.

The findings of this study revealed that respondents typically remained alert to potential digital risks throughout their remaining travel journey, expressing a diminished passion for exploring the destination. This heightened awareness led to their coping strategies of digital disconnection and physical disengagement as they sought to protect themselves from possible harm during the rest of their travel experience. These findings are consistent with Jones and Arnould’s (2025) argument that consumers tend to prioritize self-protective defenses rather than mobilizing collective efforts to resolve systemic risks because of their internalization of responsibility.

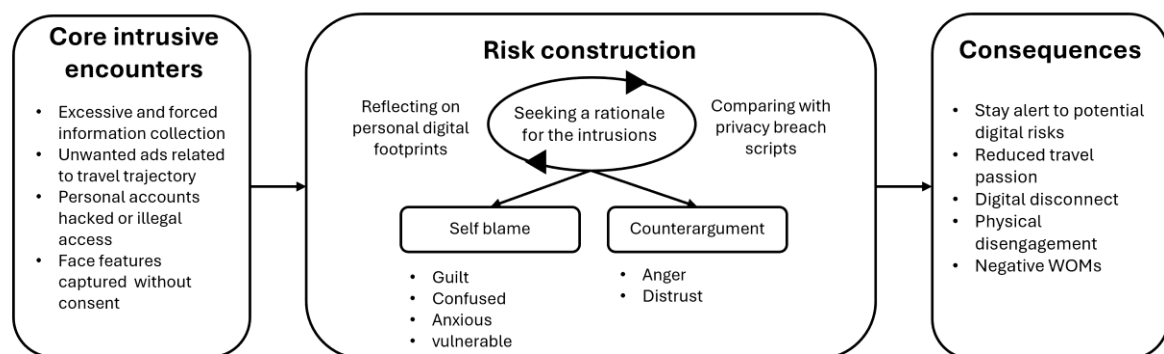


Figure 1. Tourists’ experience of digital privacy intrusions while traveling

CONCLUSIONS

This study makes three key contributions to tourism research. First, it provides empirical evidence of tourists’ experiences of digital privacy intrusions within a travel context, illuminating the characteristics of these encounters and unpacking the antecedents of tourists’ privacy concerns and risks while traveling. Second, it advances the digital privacy literature in tourism by deconstructing the process through which privacy risks are constructed and evaluated from tourists’ perspectives. Finally, by exploring tourists’ risk construction and cognitive appraisal, this study sheds light on their unique emotional responses and coping behaviors regarding such negative experiences in a travel context.

REFERENCES

- Capurro, R. (2005). Privacy. An intercultural perspective. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 7, 37-47.
- Giesler, M., & Veresiu, E. (2014). Creating the responsible consumer: Moralistic governance regimes and consumer subjectivity. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(3), 840-857.
- Jiménez-Barreto, J., Rubio, N., Mura, P., Sthapit, E., & Campo, S. (2023). “Ask google assistant where to travel” tourists’ interactive experiences with smart speakers: An assemblage theory approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, 62(4), 734-752.

- Jones, H., & Arnould, E. J. (2025). Mythologized counter-futures and self-protective consumption: A netnography of doomsday preppers. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 52(4), 759-778.
- Law, R., Lin, K. J., & Li, K. Q. (2025). Information privacy in tourism and hospitality: technology-specific issues, theoretical fundamentals and future research avenues. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 1-18.
- Thompson, C. J., Arnould, E. J., & Veresiu, E. (2023). Market mythmaking and consumer culture. in C. J. Thompson, E. J. Arnould, D. Crockett., & M. Weinberger (Ed.). *Consumer Culture Theory* (p.273-306). London: Sage.
- Tussyadiah, I., Li, S., & Miller, G. (2019). Privacy protection in tourism: Where we are and where we should be heading for. Paper presented at the Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2019: *Proceedings of the International Conference in Nicosia, Cyprus*, January 30–February 1, 2019.
- Yang, X., Zhang, L., & Feng, Z. (2024). Personalized tourism recommendations and the E-tourism user experience. *Journal of Travel Research*, 63(5), 1183-1200.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is supported by the Research Grant SP2025-00006-DRTM at the University of Macau.