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Rethinking post-tourism in the age of social media

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ABSTRACT

The article explores how the culture of spreadable social media affects post-tourism, and, by extension, the boundaries of tourism. Post-tourism is understood as a generalized social condition that entails de-differentiation between tourism and other social realms as well as a complex set of reactions against this predominant trend. Through a case study of urban explorers the article demonstrates how spreadable media impose new layers of reflexivity and hesitation as to whether and how to share tourist representations. While spreadable media provide resources for personalized communication they also make it more difficult to uphold cultural boundaries and distinctions. Differences in handling spreadability testify to the extended role of post-tourism as a site of symbolic struggle among the aspirational middle classes.

Introduction

During the 1980s and 1990s several influential thinkers pointed to the social transformation of tourism. If industrial capitalism had been signified by mass tourism and especially the packaged tour, then, what Lash and Urry (1987, 1994) called "disorganized capitalism", or "reflexive accumulation", brought along the expansion of various niche markets and the blurring of boundaries between tourism and other areas of social life (including both work and leisure oriented practices) (see also Urry, 1988, 1990/2002). Besides growing access to travel and accommodation among "ordinary people", which made tourism *per se* less distinctive, a key aspect of this development was the intensified circulation of tourism related media content through domestic technologies (such as satellite television, video, and, eventually, the Internet). In 1985, Feifer coined the term "post-tourism" to highlight a new and symbolically playful mode of travelling; one in which the traveller (typically a middle-class Western consumer) was reflexively aware of the staged nature of mass tourism and deliberately performed tourism according to media imageries rather than searching for authentic places. This idea of ironic travellers was echoed in Eco's (1986) writings on postmodern society as a world of hyperreal, themed environments and simulated travel. Similarly, in 1994, Lash and Urry discussed the "end of tourism", proclaiming that the notion of tourism was getting fuzzy due to people's everyday involvement in virtual travel through media and visual consumption.

Much has happened since the late 20th century. The volumes of international tourists are continuously growing. Mainstream tourists travel longer distances and niche tourists explore a broadened range of alternative places and activities (see, e.g., Novelli, 2005). In the realm of media and mediatization we have seen the expansion of the Internet as an indispensable source of travel-related information and phantasmagoria, as well as a formidable explosion of social media platforms and mobile applications for navigation, accommodation (finding, rating and sharing), and the creation and circulation of images and other types of content. Yet, there has not been any systematic attempt to study and clarify how the new conditions of connected lives and social media influence post-tourism as a realm of symbolic struggle and thus also the boundaries of mainstream tourism.

This article is an attempt to revisit the post-tourism debate and connect it to recent media transformations in general and the normalization of *spreadable media* in particular. Post-tourism is here interpreted in a broad sense, including not just postmodern forms

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of touristic sign-play but also the broader trend towards growing fragmentation of tourism practices and *de-differentiation* between tourism and other social realms. Spreadability, a term introduced by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), is taken as a key manifestation of the new commercial logics sustained by social media industries (see also Van Dijck, 2013). It points to the social normalization of the "popularity principle" (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), meaning that visual material and, more indirectly, sights are constructed in order to generate maximum attention.

The main reason to revisit, and to *rethink*, post-tourism is thus that some of its fundamental preconditions, especially media infrastructures, have changed. Tourists, like people in general, are to an increasing extent (co-)producers of media texts that can be spread and discussed far beyond the close circles of traditional family albums. Instagram images, for example, can be geo-tagged and immediately commented upon, which in turn contributes to the cultural (re)coding of tourism places and practices. Relations between the authentic and the simulated are continuously challenged (e.g., Jansson, 2007; Tribe & Mkono, 2017). Another, secondary, reason to revisit post-tourism is that it constitutes an interesting site of *symbolic struggle*. Post-tourism is an area where the boundaries of tourism are negotiated and challenged and where cultural capital, following Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theorization, is at stake. As argued in the original formulation of the post-tourism thesis, the desire to move beyond and distinguish oneself from (mass) tourism can above all be associated with the aspirational middle classes (Feifer, 1985; Munt, 1994), whose economic resources are not sufficient to dismiss mass tourism altogether but who can use their symbolic skills, that is, cultural capital, to transform pre-existing forms of tourism and establish new genres of "non-touristic tourism". Studies of post-tourism thus open up to a broader discussion of middle-class ways of life and how social media play into dynamics of social distinction.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to examine how current forces of media technological change, especially the logic of spreadability, affect post-tourist practices of spatial consumption and the boundary work vis-à-vis mainstream tourism. Empirically, the study looks into the alternative culture of *urban exploration* (sometimes called urbex, or just UE). The UE movement gained popularity in the 1990s – let alone that it has deep historical roots in for example subterranean explorations (dating back to the 19th century) – and has gained further visibility since the expansion of the Internet and social media. Urban explorers identify, visit and document, especially through photography, derelict and off-limit man-made structures of modern society, such as abandoned mines, factories and residential buildings. Due to its reliance on media technologies and its cultural affinities with various forms of niche tourism (notably ruin tourism, heritage tourism and dark tourism) urban exploration constitutes a valid site for grasping the cultural mechanisms of contemporary post-tourism. Urban exploration can be seen as a symptom of a society where post-tourism, understood in terms of both specialization and de-differentiation (Lash & Urry, 1994; Urry, 1995, Chap. 9), has turned into a normalized social condition, especially among the mobile middle classes (Jansson, 2018). As we will see, urban exploration is a manifestation of a post-tourist society, while at the same time a critical reaction to it.

Three research questions guide the analysis of this article: (1) How is the appropriation, recording and representation of UE sites affected by spreadable media? (2) To what extent and in what ways do urban explorers negotiate the force of spreadable media? (3) What are the implications of spreadable media for the social structuration of urban exploration and its boundaries to mainstream genres of tourism? The empirical study is based mainly on interviews with urban explorers in Sweden. The findings identify three *registers of reflexive hesitation*, which characterize the post-tourist handling of spreadable media: the *place-political* register, the *aesthetic* register and the *ethical* register. These registers highlight an ambiguous condition where the distinctions of post-tourism (in this case urban exploration) are increasingly difficult to sustain. It is thus suggested that spreadable media extend and deepen the theoretical relevance of post-tourism as a cultural diagnosis of middle-class life under post-industrial capitalism while *at the same time* providing an arena for challenging and moving beyond post-tourism.

Post-tourism as a generalized social condition

The term post-tourism originally appeared in Maxine Feifer's (1985) book *Going Places*. Her analysis addresses the growing awareness among tourists, especially within the middle classes, that there cannot be any "authentic" tourist experience since tourism by definition constitutes an organized and largely staged practice (see also MacCannell, 1976). The simulated nature and growing popularity of tourism also makes it increasingly difficult to employ it as a means of distinction. As a consequence, according to Feifer (1985), certain middle-class subjects engage themselves in a playful and hyper-mediated form of spatial consumption. She characterizes the post-tourist as a traveller that to a great extent pursues the travelling in front of the TV screen and though travel magazines, consuming and *gazing* at spectacular sites without being physically mobile. Post-tourism thus highlights that most forms of leisure travel starts "at home", and the post-tourist is somebody who reflexively takes part of this mediated phantasmagoria and becomes an expert in playing with the codes and genres of tourism. The post-tourist approaches tourism as a game, where the world becomes a stage – from the local shopping mall to theme parks and exotic destinations (see also Ritzer & Liska, 1997). This means that the post-tourist is actually *playing the role* of a tourist, gazing at other tourists and anticipating their gazes, rather than identifying with the typical practices of tourism.

As pointed out also in subsequent elaborations of the term, the post-tourist represents the middle-class ambition to escape what tourism mobilities are generally associated with: the mass movement of people following standardized taste patterns. The post-tourist takes joy in mixing, and moving between, sophisticated genres of high culture and popular forms of touristic hedonism (Lash & Urry, 1994, p. 275). As Munt (1994, p. 119) argues, the individualistic, emancipatory drive of post-tourism "signals a cultural and social *re*action of the new middle classes to the crassness which they perceive as tourism, and their craving for social and spatial distinction from the 'golden hordes'". This means that tourism at large, involving all kinds of practices, manners (especially the "tourist gaze"), destinations, material cultures (clothes, souvenirs, etc.) and aesthetic formats (notably photography), are used as the raw material for making more or less subtle cultural distinctions, and, by extension, subverting dominant schemes of cultural classification. Post-

tourism thus resembles other forms of postmodern consumption spearheaded by the new middle classes and so-called cultural intermediaries, which were much debated during the 1980s and 1990s (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1979/184; Eco, 1986; Featherstone, 1991, 1995; Gottdiener, 1995; Jameson, 1984; Lash & Urry, 1987, 1994; Slater, 1997).

Not surprisingly, then, post-tourism has gradually disappeared from the academic radar since the turn of the millennium along with the postmodern trend in social and cultural theory. The term has figured sporadically in tourism research, for example in analyses of how tourism practices correspond with different media preferences and are even built around popular media concepts or brands (Campbell, 2005; Jansson, 2002; Powrie, 2005); in analyses of site-specific, reflexive tourist performances (Edensor, 2000, 2005; Johnston, 2001; Wood, 2005); in studies of the construction of postmodern tourist destinations (Light, 2001; Terkenli, 2002), and in studies of niche tourism, such as the diverse expectations of Westerners visiting indigenous populations in Third World countries (e.g., Bruner, 2001; Mason, 2004; Wijngaarden, 2016). What these articles have in common, with a few exceptions (notably Campbell, 2005; Jansson, 2002), is that they do not problematize the term "post-tourism" *per se* but rather treat it as an established empirical category in line with Feifer's (1985) original characterization of the phenomenon.

For the current analysis post-tourism will be deployed in a more inclusive manner, in line with Lash and Urry's (1994) discussion of "the end of tourism" (see also Urry, 1995, Chap. 9) and Munt's (1994) consideration of "*other* postmodern tourisms". According to Lash and Urry (1994), the transition from Fordist modes of mass production to a more flexible, post-Fordist regime of accumulation, which began to take shape during the 1970s, was also reflected in tourism. The preferences of tourists were more diversified and the market increasingly segmented; new niche markets and alternative forms of tourism were introduced; the circulation of tourism related media multiplied and contributed to greater aesthetic reflexivity on behalf of consumers; tourism oriented strategies of place production expanded into associated domains of consumer society (sport, culture, retailing, and so forth). Ultimately, according to this thesis, tourism was increasingly to be found "nowhere and yet everywhere" (Urry, 1995, p. 150):

> Postmodernism involves de-differentiation. There is a breakdown of the distinctiveness of each sphere and of the criteria governing each. There is an implosion via the pervasive effects of the media and the aestheticisation of everyday life.
>
> (Urry, 1995, p. 149)

From this perspective, post-tourism is not just a matter of sign-play and deliberate hyper-adaptation to (mass) touristic simulations. As Munt (1994) argues, there are *other* types of postmodern tourists than the ironic traveller who sees the simulacra of consumer culture as the essence of tourism. These "other post-tourists" counter the dilemma of distinction raised through de-differentiation through a turn to new areas of the "real". It has thus emerged a range of new forms of specialized and "truthful" tourism among the middle classes. For example, Munt points to the accentuation of environmental and social concerns related to Third World tourism as well as the inclusion of various alternative and/or intellectual forms of activity, such as nature oriented challenges and anthropological or archaeological excursions, which set these travellers apart from ordinary tourists and sometimes involve an explicit critique of mass tourism (even though the activities themselves may be commercially organized). Post-tourism thus illuminates how the search for alternative lifestyles among aspirational middle class fractions forms part of hegemonic classificatory struggles (see Bourdieu, 1979/1984, Chap. 6).

In short, we should rethink post-tourism as a generalized social condition (see also Tesfahuney & Shough, 2016); a condition that includes *both de-differentiation and a complex set of reactions against this predominant trend towards de-differentiation*. While these reactions are driven by the individualistic desire to escape the mainstreaming of tourist practices, they, paradoxically, tend to spur further de-differentiation. Urban exploration, as discussed below, constitutes an interesting case of this extended form of post-tourism. Urban explorers cannot avoid the double bind that haunts tourism; the quest for the extraordinary, pristine and genuine leads ironically enough to the erosion of what is unique (places, experiences and identities). As previous research suggests (see Jansson, 2007; Tribe & Mkono, 2017), the expansion of mobile, digital media reinforce these dynamics.

There is also an important empirical reason to why we need a broadened view of post-tourism. The idea of a clear category of "post-tourists" who build their identities around simulated travel is difficult to substantiate simply because people's lifestyles and identities are much more complex than that. There are very few individuals who continuously act as post-tourists in the hyperreal sense of the term (see, e.g., Mason, 2004; Wijngaarden, 2016). Tourists may indulge themselves in consumer phantasmagoria one day, and go off the beaten track another day, and, as Cohen (2003) shows in a study of backpacking, these orientations are often interwoven. At the same time, in a media saturated world there are few tourists whose behaviours and attitudes in no way, or never, overlap with the originally hypothesized post-tourist character. Campbell (2005) makes an important point when he argues, in an attempt to redefine post-tourism as a form of "conjunctural" tourism (p. 210) occurring in-between dwelling and travelling, that travel destinations are increasingly experienced as collages that post-tourists assemble and construct through a variety of mediated and non-mediated sources. However, it is difficult to see how this "post-touristic" condition would be qualitatively different from "ordinary" tourism, or travelling in general.

In sum, analyses of post-tourism should target the deeper habitus behind alternative forms of spatial appropriation and mediation rather than scattered expressions of mediatized subjectivity. This is especially true in a culture where any and all tourists have become agents in the circulation of popular imageries of space and place.

The cultural force of spreadable media

Facebook was founded in 2004. After less than a decade it had more than one billion users. The first iPhone was introduced in 2007. It paved the way for a worldwide explosion of the smartphone market. These developments, combined with the preceding expansion of Internet-based communication, gave shape to a *cultural shift* that largely occurred *after* the heydays of postmodernism

and post-tourism. It is a shift from stand-alone mass media technologies (television, radio and computers) to mobile media technologies and platforms that function as access points to an immense space of online circulation and the provision of services that affect most realms of everyday life (from online banking and geographical navigation to exercising and dating).

It is also a shift that has refashioned tourism throughout its different stages; from the scripting of tourist activities, via the navigation of tourist destinations, to the circulation of spatial representations (Jansson, 2007). Through social media (including mainstream platforms like Facebook, Flickr and Instagram as well as tourism related communities and travel-blogs focusing on particular places or sub-genres of tourism) people can instantly follow, share, rate and discuss various types of content (ranging from mainstream media reports and publicity material to private photos and videos). Social media platforms thus have a growing influence on how sites are perceived, appropriated *and* constructed (see, e.g., Frith, 2017; Månsson, 2011; Tribe & Mkono, 2017; van der Hoeven, 2017). They are also symbiotically connected to commercial services like booking systems, hotels, tour operators, and sharing sites for accommodation, transportation and other hospitality services, whose operations are increasingly dependent on user-generated content and ratings. The ultimate example is probably TripAdvisor, which sits somewhere in-between social media and the tourism industry.

Altogether, this means that the cultural shift associated with social media is intertwined with a commercial logic; a logic that fosters people to invest their time and creativity online. This logic is based on a bundle of mechanisms, means and strategies that together shape the ways in which social media platforms, and by extension the whole "sharing" and "attention economy" operates. Van Dijck and Poell (2013) provide a list of four principles that define the industrial logic of social media: *programmability*, *popularity*, *connectivity*, and *datafication*. These principles, they argue, explain how social media turn everyday social interaction into the raw material of automated marketing (see also Striphas, 2015). More importantly, however, as they merge with the older "mass media logic" (see also Chadwick, 2013) they also come to "invade all areas of public life" (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 2). Accordingly, these principles are interesting not just from a political-economic perspective. They are also crucial to our understanding of the new social and cultural conditions of (post-)tourism. As Van Dijck (2013, p. 174) argues, media users indirectly adapt their norms and behaviours to these principles: "The ecosystem of connective media does not *reflect* social norms; interconnected platforms *engineer* sociality, using real-life processes of normative behaviour (peer pressure) as a model for and an object of manipulation (popularity ranking)."

This argument – the relationship between social expectations (peer pressure) and popularity rankings – specifies the epicentre of the current investigation. Previous studies have shown that the uses of social media in tourism tend to follow rather traditional circuits of representation, where only certain sights and experiences qualify as "sharable". The circulation of user-generated material thus replicates dominant tourism discourses (see, e.g., Albrechtslund & Albrechtslund, 2014; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Critical researchers have also argued that tourists in the digital era may experience a new form of alienation, so-called "e-lienation" (Tribe & Mkono, 2017). But how do post-tourists, who by definition try to avoid anything that can be seen as mainstream, cope with the commercially and technologically engineered forces to share, like and comment on media content through mobile media?

In order to address this question the current analysis concentrates on the concept of *spreadability*, which is closely acquainted with Van Dijck's popularity principle. According to Jenkins et al. (2013, p. 4), "spreadability refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes". The overarching argument is that the shift from mass media distribution to a more open-ended state of *circulation* has led to more egalitarian and negotiable power-geometries between media producers and consumers, or, rather, between various groups of users. As texts spread through different platforms and devices they are also reinterpreted, remixed, recontextualized and thus culturally reconfigured, which means that the practice of "sharing" should be seen as a key indicator of user engagement. While this is a more positive account than Van Dijck's critical view of commercial logics invading social and public realms, it shares the basic understanding of spreadbility (popularity) as a complex and negotiable cultural force. Spreadability is thus bound to have different implications in different social settings.

In the context of post-tourism, we may hypothesize at least two alternative ways of handling spreadability. On the one hand, the expansion of spreadable media makes it possible to create and circulate alternative imageries of place, as well as to rework in a playful, post-tourist manner the typical signs of tourism. Spreadability will thus sustain efforts to subvert mainstream tourism. On the other hand, the (over) exposure of "the other" may lead to cultural inflation, which makes post-tourist forms of travel less unique. This means, in turn, that certain groups and individuals will be inclined to seek out the raw, unmediated and direct experiences of non-staged places as a means of excitement and distinction – as a reaction to de-differentiation. The accumulation of symbolic and cultural capital requires ever more subtle distinctions in relation to spreadability.

To share or not to share…? Urban explorers as post-tourists

As argued above, through post-tourism we may grasp the socio-cultural mechanisms through which the boundaries of tourism are challenged and re-negotiated. To achieve this, we need to study mobile cultures that operate on the fringes of tourist institutions and places. Various forms of niche tourism could be of interest, as well as cultural forms that border tourism and whose agents refuse to see themselves as tourists. An example of the latter is *urban exploration* – the empirical case of this article.

Urban exploration entails a form of spatial consumption and circuits of representation that in key respects resemble tourism. According to Wikipedia (information retrieved in August 2017), urban exploration is "the exploration of man-made structures, usually abandoned ruins or not usually seen components of the man-made environment. Photography and historical interest/documentation are heavily featured in the hobby." The term itself was allegedly coined in 1996 by the Canadian urban exploration

pioneer Jeff Chapman, also known by his alias Ninjalicious. In his book *Access all Areas: A User's Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration* Chapman defines urban exploration as "an interior tourism that allows the curious minded to discover a world of behind the scenes sights" (Ninjalicious, 2005, p. 3). The sites and sights of urban exploration are thus located *beyond* the radar of commercial tourism. In addition to abandoned places (e.g., industries, hospitals, residential buildings and sites of leisure and tourism), urban explorers are searching out places that are hidden or difficult to access (e.g., urban rooftops, subterranean spaces and military complexes). There are today hundreds of UE communities and groups around the world that converse and circulate photos online via websites and various forms of social media.

Urban exploration thus involves tensions that correspond with the broad understanding of post-tourism outlined above, and can be traced to the socio-cultural ambiguity of middle-class identity (Lash & Urry, 1994; Munt, 1994). Urban explorers can be seen as place-political activists. Their resistance typically concerns commercialized or otherwise enclosed urban spaces, as seen for example in anti-establishment acts of "place-hacking" and "recreational trespassing" (Garrett, 2014a, 2014b; see also Dodge & Kitchin, 2006). The counter-hegemonic ethos of urban exploration is also reflected in its antagonistic relation to mass tourism; its insistence on recognizing *other* time-spaces, such as abandoned industries, hospitals and work places. At the same time, however, the desire to be different is tied to the social aspirations among middle-class subjects to distance themselves from class-fractions below them. The middle-class bias, and male dominance, of urban exploration has been pointed out in several studies (e.g., Bennett, 2011; Mott & Roberts, 2014). There are also clear overlaps between urban exploration and several distinctive types of niche tourism, notably ruin tourism, heritage tourism (the interest in historical sites and ruins), dark tourism (the interest in medical spaces of life and death) and eco-tourism (the willingness to uphold a strong ethical stance in relation to the sites visited). In sum, as Robinson (2015, p. 149) argues, urban exploration can be viewed as "a form of touristic activity, and, paradoxically, anti-tourist resisting all the formal tourism practices of signage, information, instruction and control".

Study methods

The following analysis is based on eight qualitative interviews conducted in 2015 and 2016 with persons associated with the Swedish UE community. The material includes "go-alongs" (interviews conducted while exploring) as well as interviews conducted in person or via Skype. The first informants were recruited through UE communities online, which was followed by snowball sampling. The latter sampling technique proved useful since it was difficult (and time consuming) to get answers when contacting individuals via online platforms or email. Still, in spite of the snowball sampling, just a few informants are personally acquainted with each other, and the interviews are spread out over different regions in Sweden. The informants are between 22 and 55 years old, occupying jobs that can be seen as typical for the broad middle-class strata of society; such as public administrator, engineer, business administrator, artist and photographer. There is only one industrial worker in the sample. While the exact social position of these individuals cannot be taken as evidence of a particular "post-tourist habitus", it is worth noticing that the general middle-class bias of the sample fits with previous research on post-tourism.

Most of the interviewees are interested in abandoned places such as industrial buildings, residential buildings and hospitals. There are also a few respondents specialized in secret and/or left-behind spaces related to the military, but no examples of so-called roof-and-tunnel hacking. Besides the variations in thematic interest, the respondents share a strong interest in photography and attain various forms of artistic and/or historical expertise, associated with for example economic geography, popular culture and cold war nostalgia. They are also actively trying to discover new places to explore and willing to sometimes travel longer distances to achieve the right experiences. Even though the sample is relatively small the interviews provide a rich source of information and represent a varied view of the UE community. The material enables us to generate in-depth knowledge about the uses and experiences of spreadable media *and* to discuss the boundaries of this form of post-tourism.

Three registers of reflexive hesitation

The first thing we should notice is that new media technology has changed the preconditions of urban exploration. Experienced explorers describe how their hobby is getting increasingly media saturated. Sven, who is in his 50 s and interested in old factories, states that before the Internet and the digital camera he used to take "some transparencies, one role perhaps, not more, as a matter of documentation" during one excursion. Today he can take hundreds of pictures and keep his own website for a very small amount of money. This general transition also means that UE images are exposed to a growing number of people. There is also evidence of how the growing access to digital, and spreadable, media opens up the community to new participants. Sally, who is in her 50 s and mainly takes photos of abandoned houses, describes how she became interested in urban exploration:

> It all started when I bought a new mobile with a very good camera. […] Then there was a friend of mine who recommended me to post my pictures in an UE group on Facebook, so I joined that group. And it's really good because one gets very good feedback on one's pictures. […] It becomes like a poison, to post a picture and see how it goes, if it will do well. I never post pictures that I don't like. But I may think that "this one they will like", and then it's kind of fun to see what happens to that picture.
>
> (Sally, 50s)

Sally's story illustrates the force of spreadability. First, it points to the fact that the possibility to share images and get feedback from others is often key to the interest in urban exploration itself. Other urban explorers tell that the hobby did not make much sense before they bought a good camera and started sharing their pictures with others. Second, the interview extract shows that spreadability may affect how pictures are taken and inspire to individual strategies for how to gain positive attention. Among the

interviewees there is also a couple who actively strives for spreadability, trying to maintain their website in a way that "generate maximum traffic". Similar cases have been discussed in previous studies, involving groups that have even developed their own brands (Jansson & Klausen, in press; Klausen, 2012, 2017).

Still, it would be wrong to say that spreadability is embraced without any problematization or negotiated in the same way by all urban explorers. Rather, in spite of the mediatized nature of urban exploration the current study reveals that there is a widespread scepticism towards social media in general and the tendencies to cultural mainstreaming in particular. As Sven puts it, "there is today some kind of Facebook sickness and of course people only tell the good things"; a cultural malaise that spills over onto the UE community and affects its underlying purpose to show "unique" places in alternative ways. Ultimately, the resistance to social media (especially the most popular platforms) boils down to a fear of losing control over the very meaning of urban exploration, finding it intoxicated by mainstream tourism. One way of countering the force of spreadability, according to the study, is to maintain one's own website instead of using commercial platforms like Facebook or Instagram. Another way is to keep up restrictions as to how much material one shares, and in what ways.

The interviews thus suggest that spreadability operates as a force of reflexivity, leading to continuous moments of *reflexive hesitation* among urban explorers. The question of "whether to share or not to share" appears to be fundamental to urban exploration and is handled in different ways by different individuals and groups. This means, in turn, that spreadability contributes to further *differentiation* among urban explorers *and* a potential *de-differentiation* in relation to adjacent forms of (post-)tourism. In the following sections, the notion of reflexive hesitation will be further unpacked in order to understand what kinds of concerns spreadability gives rise to. The findings from the study suggest that reflexive hesitation is articulated through three main registers: (1) the *place-political* register, (2) the *aesthetic* register, and (3) the *ethical* register. These registers are often intertwined. Yet, taken as analytical categories they inform our understanding of how post-tourist identities are formed in a culture of spreadable media.

The place-political register

A key element of urban exploration, which has also been propagated by its main champions (see, e.g., Garrett, 2014a, 2014b), is the counter-hegemonic contestation of spatial power, ultimately the questioning of who has the right to access different parts of the built environment and define what is heritage. One could say that urban explorers are guided by a place-political agenda that is articulated both through the public exposure of previously (to most people) unseen places (e.g., subterranean or industrial spaces), which is a way of democratizing spatial knowledge, and the documentation of abandoned places that are threatened by demolition or commercial regeneration (depending on the socio-economic circumstances). The circulation of photographs and written accounts are essential to such place-political practices. Yet, as the interviewees explain, spreadable media are not all good. Greater exposure involves the risk that sites are affected in the wrong way. The most obvious risk is that the "wrong persons" find out about a place and go there to vandalize.

> There are many different people hunting these houses. There are the photographers, whom I think are the nicest. We most often leave the place in the shape we found it. But then there are others who don't have the same intentions. That is the paradox about posting a site; there might be other eyes watching and… If one doesn't take the pictures the house may be left untouched, or maybe it just continue falling apart. It may go in both directions…
>
> (Milton, 30s)

Milton, who is specialized in photographing abandoned houses and institutional places (such as hospitals), points to a key dilemma in urban exploration. Those who seek maximum attention to their pictures will have to post them on popular social media platforms and thus inevitably increase the risk that places are identified and visited by "other", not as "nice" people as urban explorers and photographers. For this reason it is common practice among urban explorers not to reveal the exact locations or coordinates of places they have visited and shared pictures from. Such information, if sensitive, is normally provided only to those they find trustworthy.

> Those who have been doing this for several years and who are well-known and have been active in urban exploration they don't want to disclose their coordinates because they are afraid that people will go there and destroy. And it's always kind of nice to know more than others know, to be in charge of information.
>
> (Zac, 20s)

Another risk that comes with spreadability is that further exposure of a place may gradually spur the attention among tourism entrepreneurs, real estate developers, and others who may sense commercial potential. It has been a common trend during the last decades to regenerate deteriorating post-industrial areas and turn them into commercially attractive places for housing, offices and retailing. London Docklands is a famous example, and similar large scale transformations can be seen in cities like Detroit, where anything from guided "ruin tours" to the gentrification of entire neighbourhoods are part of the picture (see, e.g., Millington, 2013; Slager, 2013; Tegtmeyer, 2016). While urban explorers are generally critical of such transformations they are also important agents in the processes whereby deteriorating areas are gradually aestheticized and recoded as nodes of creativity and commerce. This means, in turn, that individual explorers need to reflect upon their own aestheticizing practices. While gentrification and commercialization may represent the problematic long-term consequences of visual circulation and display there is also a lingering worry that certain places may ultimately disappear if they are not acknowledged and restored and/or preserved. Greta, who also works as an artist, is among those who at the end of the day would prefer restoration before complete ruination:

> Well, this is an area of conflict, because it is very nice to photograph the decayed. But only up to a certain point, because then

there will just be ruins. So I must also admit that I would prefer to see that these places were preserved and fixed and made available to others. There are two sides to this, so it becomes a conflict…

(Greta, 40 s)

In sum, the place-political register of reflexive hesitation concerns the future of the site itself and how different futures might correspond with the place-political ambitions of the UE community. This is not to say that all urban explorers share the same counter-hegemonic ethos. Still, the future of a site remains crucial to the prospects of keeping together the UE community and not mixing it up with destructive forces, on the one hand, or mainstream tourism, on the other.

The aesthetic register

The post-tourist drive towards cultural distinction and alternative representations of space is also apparent in the aesthetic practices of urban explorers. The UE aesthetic is retro as well as artistic. It is not only important what kinds of places are photographed but also *how* the photos are taken. Most interviewees state that besides their interest in particular sites (or genres) of urban exploration they hold a strong interest in photography and an ambition to develop their skills further. Taking quality photos is not just a way of gaining status within the field. It is also associated with the commonplace endeavours of mobile middle-class subjects to acquire distinctive markers of taste.

The notion of "quality" and "taste" here points to a process of cultivation whereby the meaning of photography alters from being a means of documentation to becoming an end in itself, that is, *a form of art* (see Bourdieu, 1965/1990). This attitude has two important implications in relation to post-tourism. Firstly, it means that "urbex photography", as a genre, has to be different from anything that can be judged as "too touristic". As Milton describes, spreadable media foster a process of de-differentiation that makes it difficult to do something unique:

Is it important to be the first one at a site? No, it's not. It's fun to be the first one, but often… Last Monday there was a new place in Belgium, really an awesome place. But then I know that there were more than 50 people there already on Tuesday and then the charm totally disappears. It becomes almost like a tourist destination. […] If there have been 50 people there already it becomes difficult to do one's own thing. One gets influenced by the other pictures and may take the very same picture in the same way, and then it's not very exciting anymore.

(Milton, 30s)

Milton's statement highlights that urban explorers largely follow a modernist view of aesthetic originality and authenticity, aiming to create images that are not intoxicated by the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990/2002). Along these lines, there are also interviewees complaining that "some people rearrange the sites", for example, "placing out tables and chairs, making it look like things were just left behind" in order to "make the pictures look more aesthetic" (Greta, 40s). However, such interventions are against the codes of conduct and demarcate the boundaries of the community. The aesthetic orientation of urban explorers thus problematizes Feifer's (1985) original notion of post-tourism as an instance of postmodern sign-play and stresses why we need to take a broader sociological view of the phenomenon.

Secondly, the artistic attitude of urbex photography implies that it is important to get affirmation from the right people rather than to spread one's images as widely as possible. The "right people" here refers to agents with a certain aesthetic or intellectual reputation, that is, in possession of sufficient amounts of cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1979/1984, 1983). Again, Milton gives a good illustration of these classificatory mechanisms:

How important is it to share the pictures, showing them to others? Of course it's fun to get feedback on a picture, but I don't know… I think it's more rewarding with things like this, the fact that you get in touch and show your interest. And I have given a few talks at photo clubs that have invited me to come and talk. I think that is more… And they are not very active when it comes to liking or sharing a picture. But I feel that their curiosity means more than whether they push the like-button or not. The best thing is when there are discussions around a picture.

(Milton, mid 30s)

Ultimately, the aesthetic register of reflexive hesitation concerns much more than how to accomplish the best "quality pictures". It concerns the relationship between the individual self and the broader socio-cultural environment, *and* the boundaries between urban exploration and mainstream tourism. Milton's perspective underscores that it is risky to uncritically follow the logic of spreadability if one wants to gain a more artistic reputation and maintain a sense of middle-class identity. Rather, one has to resist spreadability, or, at least, take good care as to whether and how things are shared to a broader audience. These findings underscore how spreadability accentuates the post-tourist dilemma of negotiating the boundaries between distinction and banalization.

The ethical register

The question of whether to share or not to share is also related to the consequences spreadability may have in relation to "others" related to the site. As discussed above, post-tourist ways of appropriating place are in general marked by a desire to represent alternative histories and alternative sights. This desire involves an orientation towards places that are not necessarily "beautiful" or "picturesque" in the classical sense, but can offer other kinds of excitement. Urban exploration can be seen as an extrapolation of this orientation. What is special about urban exploration, though, is that most participants actively try to find places that have not yet been documented, staged or publically exposed. This element of uncertainty regarding the history of a site is essential to the exhilaration:

> You never know what you'll find, it can be a little dangerous, but hopefully it's safe. Perhaps you're not allowed to be there, that's quite exciting too.
>
> (Olle, 20s)

However, this uncertainty also raises questions as to whether one should take pictures or not, and whether it is a good or bad idea to share pictures online. In the interview material there are several testimonies of how important it is to show respect to the site and those who have once occupied it. This ethical standpoint seems to resonate with more fundamental values concerning the right of others to be left alone and unexposed, even if they are no longer alive. Sven, who works as a business administrator, describes the strong feeling of historical empathy he felt when he for the first time explored an old limestone quarry in the area where he grew up:

> This Cementa place, the limestone quarry, it has been the life support of several of my old classmates' fathers. The prosperity we have today was built at places like this. And today we sit and look at one another in these small cameras in a computer instead… It's almost unbelievable in comparison to the previous generation. All that heavy work, people probably got killed at these places and hurt themselves, lost a hand and all kinds of things. I often think about that when I visit these places, about the people who worked there. Could they even imagine that in 20–30 years there would be some grown-up kid travelling around taking photos like it was the pyramids of Egypt or something, seeing it as an exciting tourism object?
>
> (Sven, 50s)

Tourism and its standard photographic practices are here inferred as acts of exploitation that stand in sharp contrast to "all that heavy work" that people used to carry out in the factory. The habit of "travelling around taking photos" of such places thus involves not just the potential abuse of people of the past, but also the classification of oneself as "just another tourist". What Sven describes is thus a whole series of moments of hesitation – ultimately problematizing the ascending class trajectory of his own family – which must be reflexively handled. In this particular case it means that he is very restrictive as to what kinds of pictures he takes and publishes on his website. It also means that he documents the sites and frames his photos in an almost scientific manner, assessing the historical significance of certain industries in relation to modern society through facts and figures. This approach reflects Munt's (1994) point regarding the intellectualizing elements characterizing some types of post-tourism.

The ethical register also pertains to people that are still alive and may have a personal relation to the place. When posting a site in a public domain one cannot predict who will actually see the pictures and how these people will react. Abandoned places may sometimes harbour tragic histories or memories of a very personal nature.

> *Do you always take pictures?* Yes, I do. But I don't post all pictures. […] If it becomes too private for somebody else, then I don't want that person to see it, that I have been there. It has happened that we've been contacted by a daughter, or a grandchild, who has found her grandfather's house and who is really sad. And that is something one really has to respect and take away the picture.
>
> (Milton, 30s)

In short, the ethical register of reflexive hesitation concerns how spreadable media may affect others. It is basically a matter of taking responsibility for what is circulated and thus necessitates a certain level of media literacy (in order to assess how texts may spread) *as well as* a foundational capacity to social and historical imagination (in order to see things from the perspective of "the other"). Spreadability *per se* is devoid of such ethical aspects.

Conclusion

This article has been an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of how the new cultural condition of spreadable media affects post-tourism, and, by extension, the boundaries of tourism in general. This ambition was fulfilled by means of a recent study of urban explorers in Sweden; a group that is heavily reliant on media technologies, but at the same time try to resist "touristic" modes of spatial consumption and representation. The findings of the study can be summarized in two main points.

First, spreadable media tend to foster heightened cultural reflexivity in terms of how urban explorers relate to sites and chose to represent them. The analyses detected an attitude that was termed reflexive hesitation, which largely revolves around the question of whether or not to share images and other forms of information about a particular site, and, if so, in what ways. The increasingly open-ended consequences of online mediation prompt this fraction of post-tourists to modulate their practices and, perhaps more importantly, question the relations between themselves and the surrounding world (see Fig. 1). These relations concern not only how their activities may affect the sites *per se*, what is here called the place-political register of reflexive hesitation, but also how different forms of mediation will influence their cultural identity and reputation (the aesthetic register) and possibly the lives of others (the ethical register). These registers are more or less intertwined and may sometimes collide, thus generating further experiences of ambiguity and hesitation (e. g., aesthetic aspirations colliding with ethical or place-political considerations).

Secondly, the ways in which different agents handle the question of "whether to share or not to share" have an impact on the structuration of the UE community. The interviews underscore that spreadable media and extended circuits of circulation sustain increasingly porous boundaries between the UE community and various forms of tourism and leisure (notably "ruin tourism" and "heritage tourism"). But while certain agents are inclined to obey the logic of spreadability in order to gain maximum exposure, others are keen to preserve the boundaries and distinctiveness of urban exploration and try to maintain strict rules for what they post and how they frame things. These dynamics seem to confirm Bourdieu's (1979/1984, 1983) theory of how social fields are re-negotiated through internal competition. Spreadability thus becomes a factor of internal differentiation among UE groups *as well as* de-differentiation in relation to adjacent cultural formations (see Lash & Urry, 1994) – which in turn evokes a need for new modes of

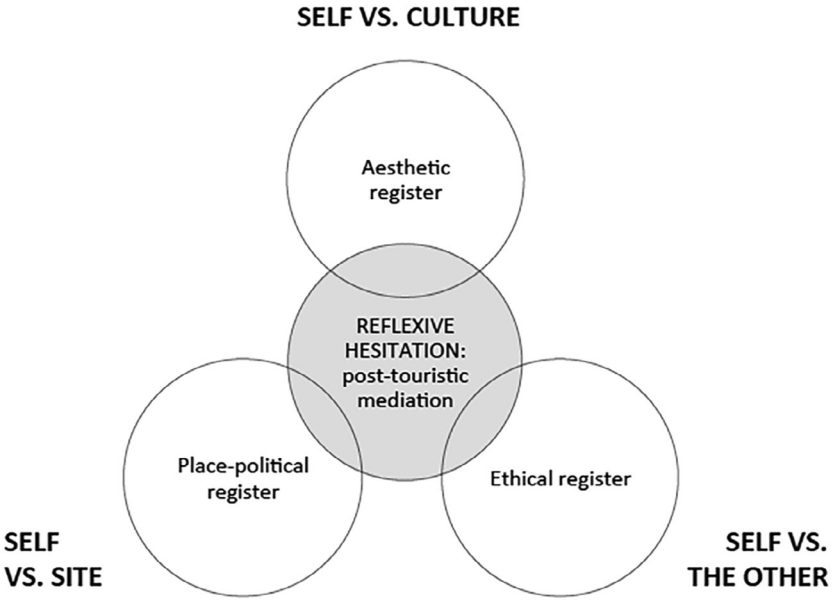

Fig. 1. Three registers of reflexive hesitation.

distinction. Simply put, while spreadable media provide extended resources for personalized communication they also make it more difficult to uphold cultural distinctions. Spreadable media reinforce the status of post-tourism as a generalized social condition, including both de-differentiation and various forms of cultural reactions against this predominant trend.

By extension, this study opens up to further discussion on how the handling of spreadability is related to more fundamental symbolic struggles concerning status positions within the middle classes. While the empirical sample of this study is not big enough to expand on this broader sociological argument, the findings support the established view of post-tourism as an ambiguous space of class-related distinction (see especially Munt, 1994). Notably, the aspiration among urban explorers to resist de-differentiation seems closely related to cultural capital (see also Jansson, 2018; Jansson & Klausen, in press). A larger study on contemporary post-tourism (of different kinds) would be of great value in order to establish a more solid understanding of the socio-cultural mechanisms (especially in terms of habitus and capital) involved in the handling of new means of communication (also beyond spreadability). Such a study should also examine to what extent the argument concerning reflexive hesitation as a "cultural response" to spreadable media is applicable to post-tourism at large, and even to the wider field of tourism. Other kinds of (niche) tourism would probably expose other registers of reflexive hesitation. Still, one can assume that the symbolic struggles and ambiguities related to media-induced de-differentiation that this study has exposed would appear also in other contexts of middle-class biased tourism.

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