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## Leisure and innovation: exploring boundaries

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### ABSTRACT

Innovation has been widely debated in various fields. However, except for leisure innovation in ageing and digital leisure, scant research has been done on the relationship between leisure and innovation. This article presents an overview of the field by mapping out the areas of innovation and leisure, suggesting also a taxonomy for innovations in leisure. Considering both supply and demand perspectives, a roadmap for future leisure and innovation research condensed into 10 priority areas is proposed.

### Sumário

O conceito de inovação tem vindo a ser amplamente debatido em várias áreas de estudo. Contudo, com a exceção de inovação em lazer para a população sénior e lazer digital, pouca atenção tem sido dada às relações entre lazer e inovação. Este artigo procura fazer um ponto da situação neste campo, mapeando áreas de lazer e inovação, sendo que sugere também uma taxonomia de tipos de inovação em lazer. Novas avenidas para a investigação em lazer e inovação são propostas, agregadas em dez áreas prioritárias e considerando tanto perspetiva da oferta como da procura.

### KEYWORDS

Leisure; innovation; research; technology; digital leisure; sustainability

### Palavras-chave

lazer; inovação; investigação; tecnologia; lazer digital; sustentabilidade

## 1. The challenge

“Download the app for jogging.” “Download the app for meditation.” “Haven’t you seen it yet? It’s on Netflix.” “I really recommend homeswapping.” “What queue for the museum? Book online.” “I have hundreds of books to read on my holiday.” “You should get a detox retreat.”

And so it goes on. Much has been happening in leisure and changes are rapidly taking place. New forms of leisure consumption and practice, new leisure businesses, new challenges and new opportunities. During the re-organization of the research groups, some of the questions which were discussed in the Board of Directors of the World Leisure Organization revolved around identifying novelty in the leisure field, its current trends and emerging avenues of research. It was in this vein that the Special Interest Group (SIG)

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on Leisure and Innovation was founded, in 2018, with an inaugural public panel within the World Leisure Congress in São Paulo, Brazil. This first meeting also enthused its members to advance the academic knowledge of such a promising topic.

The SIG Leisure and Innovation was motivated by the need to develop and strengthen research in emerging issues in the field of leisure which relates to innovation. When we looked around us, many examples of innovation in leisure could be found, from children using creativity in their games and playful moments to new leisure products.

The role that technological developments – including the global expansion of the internet – has been having on leisure is colossal, affecting products, practices, communities and lifestyles. Digital leisure was also born and its impact is now being widely studied (Spencer Schultz & McKeown, 2018). Relations between individuals and society developed from being physical to being (also) digital. In the digital world, the notion of time and space is transformed, and leisure diversifies in unexpected ways (Arora & Rangaswamy, 2013; Carniceli, McGillivray, & McPherson, 2016; Silk, Millington, Rich, & Bush, 2016). Nevertheless, although technology is of major importance, not all innovation practices necessarily involve technology. Or do they?

This special issue of the *World Leisure Journal* is a first attempt to explore the gap in academic studies that considers the manifestations, effects and implications that innovation has in different aspects of leisure. The challenge is, we are aware, staggering, as this is not only a very rich field, but also an everchanging one in a “liquid” world (Bauman, 2005). The aim is, therefore, to pinpoint some aspects and open new avenues for discussion at the intersection between leisure and innovation.

## 2. Mapping the field: leisure and innovation crossovers

The relationship between leisure and innovation can be viewed from different perspectives, as the collected case studies by Vaugeois, Parker, and Weighill (2015, 2016, 2017) have illustrated. Even if only looking at it in terms of supply and demand, a few issues arise. From a supply perspective, it becomes clear that innovation is strongly happening in leisure in diverse moments of the value chain. Hjalager (1997) has considered different categories of innovations in the service sector, which includes leisure: product innovations; classical process innovations; process innovations in information handling; management innovations; institutional innovations. This typology was later revisited in the following categories: product or service innovations; process innovations; managerial innovations, management innovations and institutional innovations (Hjalager, 2010). However, these categories are not self-contained. An innovation in one area will have rippling effects in other areas. Therefore, innovation can occur in different points of the value chain.

When focusing on leisure, a taxonomy of innovation can be made (see Table 1). The first type of innovation, and often the most visible, is the product/service innovation. However, innovation can also be related to the optimization of processes. Operational innovation relates to how the product/service and processes are put into place. Management innovation is on another level and can have spillover effects in particular in managerial and process innovation. Innovation can also happen at the level of administration, affecting, one way or the other, the manner in which leisure is understood, lived, experienced and offered.

**Table 1.** Taxonomy of innovation in leisure (types adapted from Hjalager, 2010).

| Innovation type            | Description   | Examples   |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Product/Service innovation | A new product is invented or put together. A new service is put in the market. It can also be a new addition or new way of presenting a certain product or service.   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• eBook</li> <li>• eSports competition events</li> <li>• creative workshops</li> <li>• Virtual reality set</li> <li>• Music and film streaming (e.g. Spotify, Netflix)</li> </ul>                         |
| Process innovation         | The innovations brought into activities that are on the backstage of a product/service offered, for example related to access and logistics.                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apps providing access to coaching or performance (e.g. Headspace, Running calculator)</li> <li>• Different forms of payment (e.g. mobile money)</li> </ul>  |
| Managerial innovation      | Related to human resources, mainly internal collaboration and knowledge sharing.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in the ways that staff are managed (e.g. Disney)</li> <li>• Facilitation of internal communication and collaboration by flexibilization of processes (e.g. Disney)</li> </ul>                    |
| Management innovation      | Changes and experiments at different areas of management, such as in organizational design, strategy, marketing, finances, leadership and human resources management. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in the management structures of film or music production companies (e.g. Disney)</li> <li>• Introduction of alternative models of leadership (e.g. dual-leadership models in museums)</li> </ul> |
| Governance innovation      | Innovative ways of governing leisure at central, regional and local level. This can include decision-making in terms of infrastructures or policy.                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternative funding (e.g. crowdfunding)</li> <li>• Creative tourism policy (e.g. Thailand)</li> <li>• China's plan to develop fitness and leisure industry</li> </ul>                                   |

Innovations from the supply perspective can also consist of seizing new opportunities and the adoption of new business models. It is crucial to foster entrepreneurship and innovation in leisure contexts, as Amsden and McEntee (2011) point out. From the demand perspective, new hobbies, new tools, new means have been surfacing. From reading ebooks to monitoring sporting activities with apps; from attending an eSports competition to being part of a Meet Up group.

These leisure practices are not necessarily totally new. However, new innovative elements have been added which have contributed to change. The impacts of technology are very visible in these practices and experiences; for example, theme parks are not new, but now Virtual Reality is used to enhance the experience and respond to more demanding and more technological savvy customers. The networked nature of leisure and tourism becomes clear in these practices and experiences (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2018; Marques & Gondim Matos, 2019). People are involved in a larger and faster-working network. They are connected and look for connections with like-minded people, for example in events (Richards, Marques, & Mein, 2015).

Another important aspect which has also led to different innovations in the field of leisure from a demand perspective relates to relationality (Richards, 2014). People have been seeking not only better experiences but also more meaningful ones (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sundbo & Darmer, 2008). These experiences are often made in social contexts, where human relationships play an important role in the decision-making process as well as in the quality and symbolic value of such experiences.

These innovations in the leisure field have only had scant attention from academic studies. Leisure innovation has been a concept mainly used for new leisure practices within the aging population (Campbell & Yang, 2011; Nimrod, 2016; Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007; Nimrod &

Rotem, 2012). Such studies have been pointing out “that the adoption of new leisure activities in later life (leisure innovation) may facilitate healthy ageing through personal growth, interest renewal, identity reconstruction and increased sense of meaning in life” (Liechty, Yarnal, & Kerstetter, 2012, p. 389). Although this is very important for healthy ageing, one can expand these contributions of leisure to a better life for different groups of people, since leisure practices and experiences are key to wellbeing and quality of life. Innovations in the various realms of leisure are therefore important to be studied and understood in their characteristics, implications and impacts at different levels.

### 3. Roadmap for future research

From the overview in the previous sections, it becomes clear that various research avenues still need to be pursued. The continuous changes in the world around us, together with the challenges that the leisure studies field has been facing, such as a decline in educational programmes in the western world, ask for urgent innovations in the field. These innovations ought to be in different areas (see Table 2) and realized as different types (see Table 1).

Research in leisure should also be considered in the light of these changes, challenges and opportunities. How to go forward with research in leisure? How does this research currently relate to society? What is the role of the economics of leisure? (Veal, 2006) How has the relationship between work and leisure changed given our current industrialized and urbanized condition? (Bowers, 2007; Snape, Haworth, McHugh, & Carson, 2017). How can research in leisure and innovation make a more meaningful contribution to policy-making and better practices? What methodologies are most suited? How are practitioners, entrepreneurs and companies innovating?

Innovative ways of doing research on leisure are needed as well as continuity in innovation in leisure education programmes across the globe. These include the fields of recreation, recreational therapy, events, sports, culture or any other leisure-related activity. In addition, innovation in leisure research through new methodological approaches and new thematic perspectives can add to and strengthen leisure studies specifically and leisure in general.

Some of these advancements and innovations in the leisure field could relate to the following 10 main aspects:

1. Leisure as an important element for social change and social innovation;
2. Changes in lifestyle and lifestyle choices, in which often the boundaries between work and leisure are blurred;
3. Forms, practices, experiences and developments in digital leisure;

**Table 2.** Main areas of innovation in leisure.

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|                                   |
|-----------------------------------|
| Leisure theories                  |
| Leisure experiences and practices |
| Leisure businesses                |
| Policy-making                     |
| Research                          |
| Methodologies                     |
| Education                         |
| Technology                        |

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4. Evolution of leisure in society, also through the lenses of sociology of leisure, which can contribute to understanding fundamental developments such as networked relationality;
5. Leisure products, process, operational, management and governance innovations;
6. Need for policy-making to support leisure in its varied and innovative forms;
7. Profit and non-profit organizations and their actions on and with leisure;
8. Leisure and placemaking, in cities in particular, where leisure can contribute heavily to a healthier, happier and more balanced way of living;
9. Leisure offerings as a stepping-stone for local and regional competitiveness;
10. Sustainable leisure, i.e. leisure offerings, practices, experiences, processes and policies that are sustainable for the economy, the cultural and natural environment, and for future generations.

The challenges are therefore manifold, as are the opportunities. By fostering research in these areas, the field of leisure studies is also progressing and advancing in an innovative way.

#### **4. Contributions in this special issue**

This special issue on “Leisure and Innovation” is a contribution to the advancements in the field, and is positioned as a first attempt to not only provide an overview of what research has been done, but also highlighting the opportunities ahead. The articles in this special issue provide an outline of the diverse issues, areas, approaches and cases that the relationship between leisure and innovation encompass.

In “Rainbows Looming Large: Digital Leisure and Youth Innovation”, Aaron Tham explores the example of rainbow looms as an innovative product. These colourful rubber bands, which are put together by the user, develop different types of skills physically, cognitively and digitally. By exploring this leisure practice, factors for innovation through rainbow looms are pinpointed, such as a clear relation with a positive play culture, in which self-confidence and value creation assume a central role.

This connection between physical spaces of leisure activities and the digital world are explored in another leisure field. As an example of product/service innovation, Malcolm Burt and Candice Louw investigate the use of Virtual Reality (VR) in theme parks by looking in particular into roller coasters and the creation of new digital experiences. In “Virtual Reality Enhanced Roller Coasters and the Future of Entertainment – Audience Expectations”, the authors explore a user-centric model, the VR Entertainment Primer, which aims at supporting industry to assess VR experiences overlay.

Technology and its impact on leisure are not only expressed in terms of product innovation, but also in terms of practices and experiences. The focus of “Digital Heritage Tourism: Innovations in Museums”, by Trilce Navarrete, is on the digital-based innovation happening at museums. Beyond product innovation, there are also several process innovations and management innovations, namely in audience engagement. With a focus on the final user (i.e. the visitor, or the “digital heritage tourist”), this paper investigates how visitors engage and explore museum collections.

Leisure practices and experiences are also affected by work configurations. Beatty and Torbert (2013, p. 468) have claimed that work and leisure have lost their boundaries, sometimes completely, and develop a Ying-Yang relationship, “each pregnant with its emergent other”. The distinction between leisure and work is challenged with new working and leisure practices as often enacted by digital nomads. In “Coworking Environments and Digital Nomadism: Balancing Work and Leisure whilst on the Move”, Marko Orel analyses the developments of digital nomadism, namely in terms of the existence and use of coworking spaces. The author explores how these “work” spaces are part of a digital nomad lifestyle and the effects that they have on the work-leisure balance.

These changes are caused in the first place by a product/service innovation. The consequences of such type of innovation on work, leisure and travel (often related to high levels of mobility), also challenge cities to rethink their leisure infrastructures, offer and policy (Richards & Marques, 2018). Nicholson and Stewart (2013) have pointed out that the traditional approach by governmental entities to regulate leisure, and namely sports, has experienced a shift from a focus on social health and wellbeing to personal meaning, albeit commodified. Therefore, a change has also occurred in the ways that leisure, and sport, in particular, are provided, promoted and consumed. This realization had led to governance innovations and city initiatives, such as in Bodø, Norway. Anne Tjønndal and Maja Nilssen analyse “Innovative Sport and Leisure Approaches to Quality of Life in the Smart City”, highlighting how urban planning can integrate innovation, leisure and sport. By analyzing five examples taken from “The Smart Bodø” initiative, the authors explore socially innovative approaches to sport and leisure within the context of the smart city.

These papers provide an insight into the different dimensions of the dynamic relationship between leisure and innovation. The important role of innovation has also been recognized for several years at the heart of the World Leisure Organization, in particular by the creation of the World Leisure International Innovation Prize, a management innovation in itself. In an invited paper, the WLO COO, Cristina Ortega Nuere, and Isabel Verdet Peris write on “Leisure as a Creative Solution to Collectively Enhance the Social, Cultural, Environmental and Economic Quality of Life of Communities: A Retrospective Overview of the World Leisure International Innovation Prize”. In this paper, the authors explore the link between leisure and innovation by describing the winners of the prize throughout the years.

This special issue is the first academic publication within the World Leisure Organization Special Interest Group on Leisure and Innovation, gathering different examples and perspectives that the binomial leisure and innovation can present. The articles explore different types of innovation in leisure, from product innovation to governance innovation, as well as seek to understand how users, audiences and visitors are engaging and contributing to such innovations in the leisure field.

From the roadmap for future research, there is still work ahead. This special issue can, therefore, serve as an introductory exploration of these new avenues for research, which will contribute to a better understanding of leisure and how innovation in leisure can contribute to social change and a better quality of life.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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