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Travel Professors: A YouTube Channel about Tourism Education & Research

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on various aspects of life including tourism, education, and research. Educators increasingly engage with various online platforms transforming education, including YouTube. YouTube has been widely used for blended learning, online education, and for popularisation of research for several years prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, the use of YouTube in tourism academia has been lagging. One example is the Travel Professors YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/c/TravelProfessors>). It provides short videos filmed on location about various tourism-related topics. It both aims to popularise tourism research and be a useful reference for in-class and online learning. The present paper provides a detailed analysis of this YouTube channel over four years combining descriptive statistics, content analysis of reviews, and the creators' reflection. Opportunities and challenges in utilising YouTube in tourism education are demonstrated. Suggestions and recommendations for tourism academics on becoming YouTube creators are provided.

KEYWORDS

Education; social media; YouTube; Travel Professors; e-Learning, Communication technologies

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on all spheres of life including education. A variety of educational strategies in response to the pandemic have been implemented by institutions around the globe. Many of the responses relate to moving content online and facilitating education in virtual environments (Crawford *et al.*, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the internet already had a large impact on education, along with almost every other industry worldwide, however, COVID-19 accelerated the trend. Online learning, blended learning, use of learning management systems, massive open online courses (MOOCs),

videoconferencing, online collaborative tools, and social media applications are some of the approaches required for education in the COVID-19 world. Calls for embracing new technologies in the teaching space have been made pre-COVID-19 (Isacsson & Gretzel, 2011). Ashraf (2009) and Duffy (2008) suggest that the development of Web 2.0 created a new “learning ecology” that replaced previous pedagogies. Due to COVID-19 related restrictions, educators had no choice but to embrace innovative information and communication technologies. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the change towards online and blended education has been challenging for both students and educators (Ross, Sinclair, Knox, Bayne, & Macleod, 2014). The sudden and rapid shift to online learning and teaching has especially put a strain on the well-being of both groups (Govender, Naidoo, & van Wyk, 2020).

Considering this environment, the present paper discusses one source of online tourism educational content: the Travel Professors YouTube channel (Travel Professors, 2020). It is one of the few examples of a vlog-style (video blog) tourism academic channel. Discussions of the opportunities of YouTube’s potential use for tourism education and the popularisation of tourism research are lacking. To the authors’ best knowledge, there is no academic literature that focuses on YouTube use in tourism education. Thus, this case study provides some suggestions and reflections useful for those tourism academics who would like to produce videos on YouTube. The paper first provides a brief background on the use of YouTube in education, it then reports the experience of the Travel Professors channel creators; and lastly suggests ways in which tourism educators can better utilise online content, including the Travel Professors YouTube channel, to educate their students.

YouTube for Tourism Education

Technology plays an important role in tourism education. It affects the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Deng & Benckendorff, 2020). Some institutions now offer Massive Open Online Courses (Lin, Cantoni, & Murphy, 2018). These courses are held fully online and may be either credit-bearing, contributing to the completion of a qualification, or may be undertaken as part of professional development or even out of personal interest (Xiao, Qiu, & Cheng, 2019). However, a more common approach is blended learning, which introduces online components into pedagogy. Typically, within a university course, blended learning is manifest via the online tools available on the Learning Management System (e.g. Blackboard,

Canvas, Moodle). These learning management systems store content, facilitate student interactions with the instructor and peers, and help administer assessments (Bailey & Morais, 2005). More recently, a flipped classroom concept has been embraced by tourism education. In such an approach students familiarise themselves with the theoretical content at home, while in-class time is dedicated towards active learning (Davis, 2016). Videos play an important role across all the aforementioned approaches. There is a tradition of using videos in hospitality and tourism education for demonstrations and practical training as well as for the acquisition of broader knowledge. Currently, the most common platform to host videos is YouTube, however, discussion of using YouTube for tourism education is lacking.

YouTube is a video-sharing platform. According to Amazon's Alexa Traffic Statistics (2019) Youtube is the second most popular website in the world, behind Google. 'YouTube' domain name was activated in February 2005 (Smith, 2019). Google purchased YouTube for \$US 1.65 billion in October 2006 and by 2020, YouTube had almost two billion monthly active users (Smith, 2019). As of February 2020, 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, over one billion hours of YouTube videos are watched every day and the YouTube platform has launched in 91 countries (Smith, 2019). YouTube has helped create an 'amateur culture' where anyone owning a smartphone with a camera and access to the internet can post material to be potentially viewed by millions (Desmet, 2009).

Some of YouTube's content is educational. Popular education channels, such as TED-Ed (2019), SmarterEveryDay (2019), Vsauce (2019), AsapSCIENCE (2019) and CrashCourse (2019) have millions of subscribers and hundreds of millions of views. Berk (2009) is one of the first studies that lists a wide range of benefits of using videos, in particular YouTube in education. By 2011 there were already 39 papers discussing YouTube pedagogy (Snelson, 2011). As the prominence of YouTube video use in education grew, the studies on YouTube use have become more specialised. For example, Drozd, Couvillon, and Suarez (2018) note there were already 37 studies related to YouTube in the medical education field alone by November 2016.

There are various advantages of using videos, and specifically YouTube, in the classroom. These benefits include the impact on enhanced student attention and memory, skill development and application, diversity and learning needs, availability of material, and increased interactivity (Fleck, Beckman, Sterns, and Hussey (2014). The ability to replay

videos allows students who may not fully grasp the ideas and concepts the first time to refresh their understanding (Jones & Cuthrell, 2011). Clark and Mayer (2016) add that, if video content is to improve learning, it should be aligned with learning outcomes, exclude irrelevant text or graphics, reduce cognitive load and be appropriate for the target audience. The use of videos in teaching can increase student engagement (Sherer & Shea, 2011). The user-generated content and the opportunity for peer-to-peer engagement in YouTube's social media platform fosters peer group learning. Students can observe what their peers have created and learn from it. Szeto and Cheng (2014) note the open-ended constructivist affordance provided by YouTube. The constructivist collaborative learning approach can enhance relevance in many contexts (Duffy, 2008). Duffy (2008) suggests the following approaches to incorporating YouTube into teaching and learning:

1. Creating a learning community in which everyone can create, share and discuss content.
2. Replace written assessment with student-created videos.
3. Promote student use of YouTube to experiment with new media.
4. Record guest lectures and upload them to YouTube.
5. Ask students to search for videos on a given topic followed by the discussion.
6. Use YouTube videos to explain processes in motion.
7. Ask students to search for videos on a topic, and analyse the vocabulary used in the video, as a method for language learning.
8. Ask students to record videos of their work placement as part of work-integrated learning.
9. Use of YouTube to stimulate students networking with the industry and community.
10. YouTube resources form part of a virtual library supplementing assigned readings.

While YouTube has been used to teach a range of subjects, somewhat surprisingly, there is a lack of channels related to tourism and hospitality research and education. HTMi Switzerland (2019) runs a relatively successful YouTube channel with 103 videos, 3,310 subscribers, and 457,410 views (as of 20.08.2020). The content includes guest lectures, interviews, hospitality service tips, and promotional material. Professor Dimitrios Buhalis' (2020) channel has 183 videos, 720 subscribers, and 67,153 views, making it one of the most popular and content-rich YouTube channels of an individual tourism academic. To the authors' best knowledge, other channels related to tourism academia typically have less content and viewership. Research publications on the use of YouTube in tourism education are lacking. It is acknowledged as

one of the only social media platforms (Isacsson & Gretzel, 2011) without an in-depth discussion on creating and using Youtube channels and content. The Forristal (2012) study of videos about the work of cultural anthropologist Valene Smith is a notable exception.

Method

This paper uses a case study of Travel Professors YouTube channel to report and discuss the use of the online open-access video-sharing platform for providing educational videos about tourism to the general public as well as tourism and hospitality students. While the results of this study are not generalizable, they provide useful information regarding the use of online tools for tourism education. To provide a holistic analysis, the case study approach requires multiple sources of data. An overview of the channel is first provided. This is followed by the descriptive statistics gathered through the YouTube analytics tool; a commonly used technique to analyze YouTube. In essence, the analytic tool replaces the need for conducting surveys (e.g. Lam, Tsiang, & Woo, 2017; Liu, Cardenas, Zhu, & Enguidanos, 2019; Rangarajan, Begg, & Somani, 2019). Such analysis helps understand the type of content which appeals to the audience and shows the effective means of promoting videos. This is followed by the content analysis of comments on the channel. The themes emerging from the comments further demonstrate viewers' motivations to engage with the videos and show various types of engagement with the content. Lastly, the authors' self-reflections on operating a YouTube channel are provided. The self-reflections aim to assist other potential creators of online content to understand the skills required to initiate, manage and sustain an online educational presence for tourism education, open to the general public (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008; Austin *et al.*, 2017; Kang, 2018). As a result, both user and creator perspectives are provided within the present case study.

Concept of Travel Professors

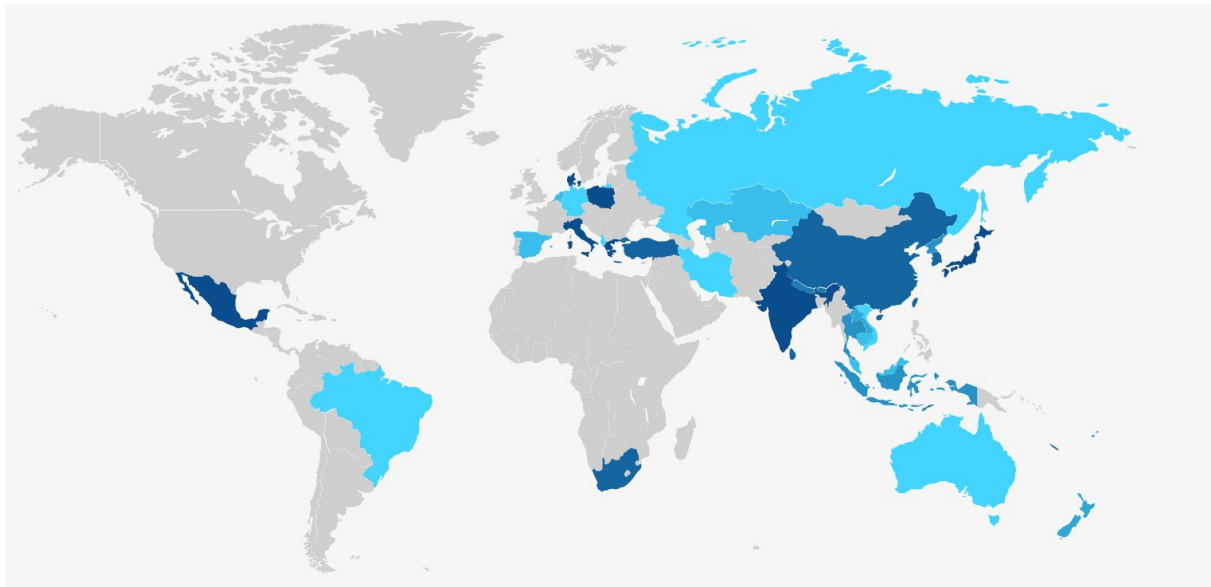
The following description of the concept of Travel Professors (2019) YouTube channel is stated on the about page:

The aim of this channel is to provide a brief overview of current trends and issues in tourism and relate them to academic research. Videos are filmed at tourist destinations around the world. Each video focuses on one topic that is considered of

importance by tourism academia. The channel aims to provide additional educational resources for students and lecturers and anyone curious about travel and tourism.

The channel is created and managed by two academic scholars. The channel has received no external funding to create it or film content, nor has it been part of any funded university project. No experts were consulted for the design or management of the channel. The first videos were uploaded on the channel on the 22nd of September 2016. Since then, 166 videos have been uploaded. Most of them have been uploaded between September 2016 and October 2018. The videos have been filmed across 40 countries (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of filming locations for Travel Professors



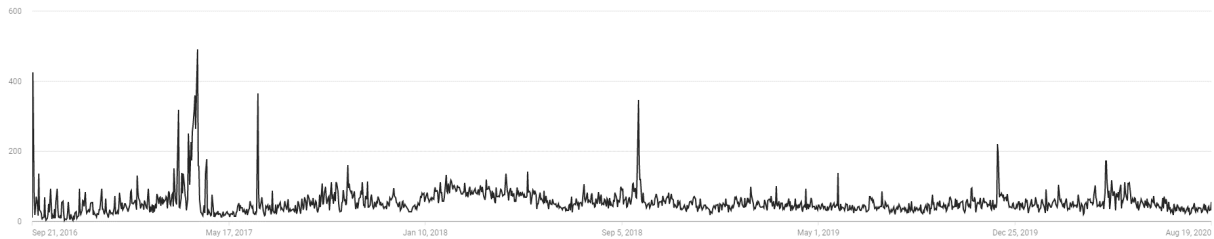
Source: Authors (note: the colour coding is provided solely to make the borders between countries clearer)

While the length of videos varies, the majority are about five minutes long. Most videos link the location of filming with a certain theoretical concept or a current issue, for example, “Voluntourism in Cambodia” or “Legacy of FIFA World Cup 2018”. The channel is promoted via Facebook pages of the channel’s creators, a dedicated Travel Professors Twitter and Instagram accounts, and a Travel Professors website.

Channel viewership analytics

After being established for nearly four years, the channel generated 79,055 views, 2,273.7 hours of watch time, and 708 channel subscriptions (on 19 August 2020) (see figure 2). Notably, the channel has been receiving a similar number of views in 2019 and 2020 even though the production of new content has slowed down in those years.

Figure 2. Timeline of views



Source: Authors

Notable peaks of views occurred on the day of the launch of the channel when an email regarding the channel's debut was distributed to the TriNet community of tourism academics; 9 April 2017, when the channel was used as part of an Information Technology course at the channel creators' home institution; 21 June 2017, when a link to one of the videos about North Korea was posted in a comment on an article by The Guardian; 25 September 2018, when links to three videos about Kazakhstan were shared with a university in Kazakhstan; and 9 December 2019 when a video about Hong Kong protests was uploaded thus commenting on a current affairs topic. None of the above strategies necessarily generated the same response, that is, posts on TriNet, comments on news websites, uploading a video about current events, sharing with students at home or partner institutions did not generate similar responses each time. This points to the difficulty of establishing a promotional strategy for the popularisation of tourism research.

According to YouTube, most views are generated in Hong Kong, United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Kazakhstan. Females comprise 62.1% of viewers and most viewers (72.5%) are between 18 and 24 years old. Males, on average, watch 33.3% of the full length of a video, while females only watch 21.6% of the total length. However, the availability of geographic and demographic statistics has been recently limited by YouTube due to privacy concerns. Therefore this data may not be entirely correct.

On average, each video generates 476 views. However, the number of views varies greatly. The most viewed video titled “Timor-Leste: developing tourism in a new country” has generated 9,370 views (11.9% of total channel views), while the least popular video, “In search of Nelson Mandela...” has only 21 views. Interestingly, a similar range can be observed in some of the tourism-related MOOCs that are professionally made and are hosted on a popular edX platform (University of Queensland, 2017). Among the tourism academics who have presented at TED conferences, Ian Yeoman’s talk on the Future of Tourism has gathered 120,465 views (TEDx talks, 2013), while Sara Dolnicar’s talk on how to waste less on vacation has gathered 7,259 views as of 21/08/2020 (TEDx talks, 2017). Both talks are of very high quality and are well suited for a general audience. For reference, many of TED’s videos attract millions of views. It should be of concern to tourism academics and university administrators that tourism education and research attract little public attention in popular media with or without institutional support. Additional efforts are required to popularise tourism academic work, promote the value of tourism education and research, gain more recognition of tourism academics within the society, which in turn would create greater opportunities for research funding and encourage student enrolments.

Generally, Travel Professors videos from less-known destinations attract more views, and videos that have been online for a longer period of time accumulate more views. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily so. A general rule is that a video needs to accumulate at least a hundred views within the first few days to be displayed in YouTube search results and Recommended videos. More popular videos appear to be the ones generally describing the destination without a specific academic topic. Amongst videos with over a thousand views that focus on a specific academic topic are videos about (in descending order of viewership) Sex Tourism, Begpacking, Authenticity, Environmental Impacts, Climate Change, Socio-Cultural Influences, Storytelling in tourism, World Heritage List, and Dark Tourism.

Audience interaction with the channel

Another set of metrics important for YouTube and other social media are related to engagement with content and feedback from viewers. This demonstrates whether the content is valuable to the audience, understood by the audience, what the audience has gained from the content. The interaction and the feedback help improve future content to increase the quality and improve the learning. Moreover, the engagement (i.e. likes and comments) makes

the videos more visible pushing them further up in search results. This helps to spread the message to general YouTube audiences. The feedback to the channel has been positive. The channel has 1,583 likes and 60 dislikes. “Timor-Leste: developing tourism in a new country” has the most likes (223). The most disliked video is “Travel Professors begpacking in Hong Kong”. It has 23 likes and 10 dislikes. The dislikes come primarily from the topic being controversial and the audience’s perception that the video defends the practice of foreign visitors begging or busking at tourist destinations to raise money for travel.

There are a total of 206 comments. The most common type of comments are messages of appreciation about the information shared in the video. Unfortunately, due to the anonymity of the internet users, it is challenging to identify who provides comments and from what perspective: a student, a tourist, or a resident. One common type of comment is made by residents of destinations covered in the videos, thanking authors for putting a spotlight on their place of residence. For example, 15 out of 29 comments on the “Timor-Leste: developing tourism in a new country” video are from Timorese viewers thanking the authors for uploading a video about their country. Another type of comment shares viewers’ impressions of a destination. For example, “Fear and beauty in Rio de Janeiro” discusses the importance of safety perceptions of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. One of the commentators shares his own feelings about being safe in the city, as follows: “been there last July and it was great fun. miss it lots. I found it to be quite safe tbh as opposed to what I've heard”. The third type of comment adds to the debate on the video topic. Such comments are more common for controversial topics and destinations, such as “Travel Professors Begpacking in Hong Kong” and “North Korea”. Here is an example of one such comment on the topic of begpacking: “Just scumbags who are like crybabies. Why should i pay for someone who has no financial plan and general sense of planning for living. Its just like investing on a drunkard to lay off on alcohol.” Other comments clarify some of the information provided in a video. The “Overview of Fiji” video describes Fiji as part of the Melanesian group of Pacific nations. One of the viewers clarified that several elements of Fiji’s culture are more closely related to other Polynesian, rather than Melanesian, countries. The fifth type of comment seeks general information about the videos or the channel; for example, asking the channel host’s background or the targeted audience of the video. Other comments express viewers’ reactions to the video more generally.

The videos are also used by creators of the channel while teaching their regular university classes during lectures, as a form of home reading, as material for online discussions, and in-class tutorial exercises. The feedback from students has been very positive. Students appreciate the effort that is put into the videos and the fact that these videos complement the courses by relating theoretical material to real-life examples at destinations across the world. The fact the videos are made on location, rather than in a studio is specifically acknowledged.

Reflection and Discussion

The Travel Professors channel was conceived by two academics who have had limited experience in video production and social media. However, a number of resources are now available for novice vloggers, e.g. YouTube provides lessons on creating educational videos (YouTube Creators, 2018). These tips are also useful for creating other educational video content, as there is an obvious overlap with COVID-19 online teaching recommendations (e.g. Bao, 2020; Lipomi, 2020; Luu *et al.*, 2021). Various online platforms contain additional materials on various aspects of social media management, including details as to when to publish a video on Facebook to maximise views. While Facebook posts are only popular when they are posted, YouTube videos manage to maintain or even gain an audience over time, sometimes months after posting, without clear reasons for gaining the higher viewership.

While it may appear that being a vlogger or social media influencer is easy and fun, it actually requires a lot of dedication. Vlogging is time-consuming and requires a set of technical skills, acting or public speaking skills as well as branding and marketing skills. Acquiring the necessary skills is a long-term process. Despite the existence of various online tools, it is nearly impossible to produce quality content from the beginning. Even getting used to speaking on camera is a long process. For an educator, interaction with these new technologies may result in acquiring a new identity (i.e. public figure) or result in a shift of perceived values (e.g. whether to appeal to broader audiences by using layman's language or to go into as much detail to appeal to an expert audience). As reported by Ross *et al.* (2014) involvement in MOOCs resulted in a change of teacher identity and questioning of the fundamentals of a teacher's job. Engagement with new technologies in a globalised, market-driven environment, and a change from interpersonal connection with students to uploading content into the public domain, open for scrutiny may feel uncomfortable. Similarly, in the

case of Travel Professors, it was unusual and surprising to receive negative comments and misinterpretations about the comments from anonymous viewers. Being open to scrutiny, management of online interactions and broadcasting views to the public means taking on a responsibility. Nevertheless, technical skills, public speaking, and marketing skills may become more important for academics in the near future, as the impact of Artificial Intelligence, automation, online education, and superstar professors is felt (Coelho, 2018). Thus, the ability to interact with the broader public and being open to scrutiny may become part of the job.

While the Travel Professors creators are not videography nor public speaking experts, the channel appears amongst the most popular channels with academic content about tourism. This is largely due to so little content being published and promoted online by colleagues, albeit this has started to change during the COVID-19 pandemic with the proliferation of recorded webinars (e.g. Professor Dimitrios Buhalis, 2020). As demonstrated earlier in this paper, even videos with institutional backing from edX and TED, which require professional production, do not attract a lot of public attention. How to stimulate interest in tourism research is a question worthy of discussion. Unfortunately, it has taken a major disaster of a COVID-19 pandemic that prevented the majority of the world from travelling to put a spotlight on tourism.

Besides online learning and entertainment, YouTube videos prove to be useful for in-class and blended learning (Berk, 2009; Snelson, 2011). The authors would like to encourage other colleagues to film videos on location about topics that they teach, which is especially useful when field trips and travel have become inaccessible, and show those videos to students. Positioning a topic within a destination improves understanding of theoretical concepts, according to student feedback and observations made in class. As previously noted, tourism and hospitality students appreciate the effort. Recorded webinars or PowerPoint presentations with a voice-over are unlikely to have a similar effect. Whenever possible and safe, an educator should film attractions and destinations on-site.

Because students can watch, share and comment on tourism and hospitality educational videos, such as those found on the Travel Professors channel, tourism and hospitality educators can set tasks such as asking students to create their own videos to upload (Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011). These videos might correct, update or challenge the video content

presented by the Travel Professors. The added benefit of asking students to create and upload their own videos is, that in addition to engaging with tourism and hospitality content, students also learn IT skills such as planning, creating, shooting, and editing their videos (Dreon *et al.*, 2011).

Conclusion

Through the Travel Professors YouTube channel, tourism academia encounters the world of the contemporary internet. Tourism academia is still establishing itself and aims to earn recognition as a serious field of study by other disciplines and other education stakeholders to demonstrate its legitimacy and value to the broader community (Filep, Hughes, Mostafanezhad, & Wheeler, 2015). Thus, tourism academia would benefit from embracing and developing a stronger online presence in various media, including personal websites, blogs, online publications (e.g. The Conversation), YouTube channels, and Twitter accounts. Tourism is a major social and economic phenomenon. Tourism academia has spent decades researching and generating knowledge about tourism. Disseminating this knowledge through social media and online video platforms such as YouTube should be an increasingly important objective of tourism academics, especially during and post-COVID-19 pandemic.

For the current generation of learners (both in formal education and informal), the medium is as important as the message. Creating digital tourism and hospitality stories connects with the current generation of digital natives (Dreon *et al.*, 2011). As noted by John and Sutherland (2005); Isacson and Gretzel (2011), quality learning depends on several factors including the pedagogy used, the subject domain, and the tools and technology implemented. Surprisingly, there were not more videos about tourism research created and uploaded, especially filmed on location, prior to COVID-19. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that digital natives are more proficient and quicker than their teachers to learn the IT skills needed to create video content. Many positive learning experiences can be created through watching, interacting with or creating tourism and hospitality-related videos. The Travel Professors YouTube channel takes a step in that direction.

Duffy (2008) compiles a selection of examples of how YouTube videos can be incorporated into the teaching and learning experience. We contextualize the examples for the case of the

Travel Professors YouTube channel for the benefit of those educators who would like to use videos in a formal education setting.

1. After watching one of the Travel Professors' videos, ask the students to create a short video in response, taking the discussion on the specific tourism and hospitality topic further. This link can be added in the comments of the Travel Professors YouTube channel.
2. After watching one of the Travel Professors' videos, ask the students to find other videos on YouTube on the same topic. Then ask the students to compare and contrast the different videos.
3. After getting the students to watch a small set of videos on the same geographical area (e.g. Travel Professors in India), students can then research into the different tourism typologies found there, commenting on other attractions that should be covered to give a more complete picture of the destination.
4. Pose a question at the end of the class where students can take different points of view. One example would be 'Travel Professor – Can tourism promote world peace?' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMw5HYaW2YM> Divide the students into small debating teams to argue their chosen stance.
5. Tourism and hospitality can be full of jargon. At an Introduction to Tourism course, students could review five or six videos and create a glossary of any jargon used.
6. Students can be assigned a specific video from the Travel Professors YouTube channel. Students across the class can then comment on the video. Towards the end of the semester, students can then review the comments and summarize the discussion, noting the responses from the creators of the video.

The use of YouTube in tourism and hospitality education can facilitate the flipped classroom experience. Content can be viewed outside of scheduled lectures and tutorials so those sessions are freed-up for engagement and support. While face-to-face teaching has been impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not recommended to use YouTube and other video platforms to replace face-to-face teaching permanently. However, it is a great tool to support teaching as many universities are starting to offer MOOCs and blended learning courses. As noted by Ashraf (2009), there needs to be a balance of human interaction and technology use.

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