

Social Network Analysis and its potential for tourism research

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Social Network Analysis (SNA), as it has been used by sociologists and anthropologists for quite some time, rests on the assumption that the relationships between actors constitute a structure that can be studied in its own right. As such, SNA embraces a family of methods that allow the systematic and computational examination of social structure and organisation of a group as a whole as well as of the social embeddedness of individual actors within this group. Its strength lies in its ability to discover order (or disorder) in social systems that either constitute too many actors or are too complex (i.e. actors are linked through multiple types of relationships) to be analysed 'by eye'.

This paper suggests that – considering the interdependencies between tourism stakeholders and the growing body of research on tourism partnerships, cooperation and networks – SNA might also be fruitfully employed in tourism research. Its application seems particularly promising for the exploration of regional tourism networks thereby allowing to advance the recent research of tourism clusters, dynamics and interrelations of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMTEs), tourism planning and entrepreneurship. In particular, SNA is considered to be well suited for the examination of generic (historically, spatially and socially embedded) SMTE networks at a destination level.

This paper will therefore introduce SNA as a method of social research, briefly review its evolution, provide an overview about what sort of problems it has traditionally been applied to and present some consideration about the prospects and value of its application in a tourism context.