



Title	Virtual Spaces for Mobile Lives
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Citation	With Corona or Post Corona : The Opportunities and The Challenges for Virtual Learning and International Exchange. 2021, p. 35-37
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/84839
rights	
Note	

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Virtual Spaces for Mobile Lives

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A Personal Account

Since the start of the pandemic, we have had to stay at home to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Accordingly, we have had to start relying on several kinds of mobilities and in particular, electronic communication tools such as Social Networking Services. Although these tools are not brand new, they have become more common since last year. Currently, even university lectures and office work are being digitalized because of COVID-19.

It is almost one year since the start of the pandemic. Many people have experienced considerable changes. I, too, have experienced changes at university. Since last spring, I have had online lectures. Those who started university in 2020 have only been taught through online lectures and have not had any in-person lectures. Although a personal matter, I would like to highlight that I am a member UNISC (University Student Chamber), a student group. Our past activities include volunteering at events hosted by consulates in Kansai, visits to consulates, overseas study trips, and organizing conferences on various topics such as international cooperation and women's participation in society. However, because of COVID-19, the group's plans had to change. Even though new members joined the group in 2020, we have yet to meet them in person. We advertised our group through Twitter and had briefing sessions on Zoom. A welcome party and all activities were also online. If the pandemic does not end within two or three years, we may never meet with our new members in person and they may have virtual university lives. I assume that they may not be satisfied with virtual human relationships.

However, I have personally started to become accustomed to a virtual relationship. Even when we have a Zoom meeting, I feel as though I am meeting with them. It is important to ask what a meeting is. What makes you feel you are meeting someone? In my opinion, it is, essentially, sharing the same place at the same time. If these two criteria are not met, you may not feel that you are meeting with anyone. My 60-year-old German friend was curious about a man and a woman who did not communicate with one another, but were playing with their phones at a

café. Presumably, he was puzzled because although they were in the same place physically, their consciousness was not in the same place but in different virtual places. It is noteworthy that they may have felt they were meeting because they were physically close to each other. From this example, one may deduce that my definition of a meeting is not completely correct because a place is not only a physical space but also a virtual space. Thus, even if two people appear to be in the same physical space, it does not mean that they are in the same place. Passengers looking at their smartphones on a train is another example. Although they may be in the same place, they are moving in a virtual space as they listen to music, watch YouTube, or read e-books.

Sociologists Elliot and Urry (2010) asserted that people today represent “life on the move”. In other words, they have mobile lives. Various kinds of detraditionalized lives based on the progress of public transportation and electronic communication tools, that is, mobile lives are evident. Such lifestyles require flexibility, adaptability, and reflexivity “to be ready for the unexpected, to embrace novelty as even one’s significant others are doing different things at different times” (Elliot & Urry, 2010,p.4). “People’s experiences are de-synchronized from each other, so that systems and people have to be available ‘just-in-time’” (Elliot & Urry, 2010,p.4) In addition to our highly scheduled society, electronic devices enable us to re-schedule. Mobile lives encompass very strict schedules and flexible time changes to ensure one is just-in-time. Most online meetings are possible when people join the same virtual room at the same time. Although virtual meetings were common before COVID-19, so many other aspects of our lives have become virtual such as university lectures, company conferences, concerts, and even tourism since the start of the pandemic.

Virtual Tourism

In this paper, I want to discuss what is referred to as virtual tourism because it represents some of the problems regarding our way of life. Urry (1995) suggested that global space is a result of a considerable influx of tourists. This influx has affected people’s sense of home (Urry, 1995). In other words, cosmopolitanism is supported by people traveling throughout the world. However, since COVID-19, it has become difficult to travel. Travel companies have suffered financial losses and have subsequently, started offering alternative tours known as virtual tourism. Viewers visit tourists sites on the Internet. While some of the tours have been recorded, others are live broadcasts. JTB, a Japanese Travel Agency, sells virtual tours with real-time guidance. Travelers acquire a link to Zoom before the start of

the tour. When a viewer clicks the link at the appointed time, a guide in front of travel site, walking around the site, and giving some tips will appear on the screen. The tour does not only entail watching the video but is also interactive. The viewers are able to ask the guide questions in real-time.

I was given an opportunity to go on a virtual tour in Sydney with UNISC members on March 3, 2021. When I opened the Zoom link, a guide standing in front of the Opera House appeared on the screen. We walked around the bay for one hour and the tour ended on a hill in the Rocks. We enjoyed the tour very much. Although everyone was in different places, I felt that we were traveling together. Although we chose to tour Sydney, JTB offers potential travelers many options, including New York, London, Roma, and Cambodia. A tour does not only involve walking in a city. One has the option to visit the likes of museums and markets too. One can even join a local festival in India through the Internet. The more choices the company offers, the more popular they are likely to be.

However, virtual tours have a few disadvantages. First, you cannot touch things on the screen. Second, you do not actually move. Traditional tourism involves a process where tourists are transported from their point of departure to their destination. However, when on a virtual tour, one stays at home. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, virtual mobility has replaced physical mobility. One can visit a number of places such as a university, business, and restaurant while at home.

Conclusion

In essence, spaces between home and one's destination are fading and becoming vacant in virtual mobility. Elliot and Urry (2010) noted that Heidegger's Being-in-the-world may be reinterpreted when our changing lifestyle is considered. Elliot and Urry (2010) stated, "In a mobile society, our ways of Being-in-the-world tend toward the individualized, privatized collecting of experiences, places, events, trips, acquaintances, data, and files." It is expected that post COVID-19, we will continue to live mobile lives and acquire our experiences primarily through the Internet. We will travel into virtual spaces where there is no non-symbolized physical space. In virtual space, we tend to move from place to place and door to door without experiencing the process. The process appears to be vacant. It may be necessary to ask what this vacancy means in relation to ontology.

