

Methodological Choices in Tourism: A Review of the Application of Symbolic Interactionism in Tourism and Hospitality Studies

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Abstract

This article reviews the use of symbolic interactionism (SI) in tourism research. It uses papers published in top 11 ranked tourism and hospitality journals over a twenty-year period, 2000 to 2020. The objective of this paper is to establish the level of usage of SI, and opportunities that the theory avails for further research and understanding of tourism research. Using a combination of document analysis and an open-ended questionnaire sent to authors, this review found that SI is not a popular methodological theory in tourism research, and SI tourism studies adopted methods of data collection that were undiversified, limited largely to different forms of interviews. In addition, methods of analysing data centred on thematic analysis, narrative analysis, emerging themes, hermeneutics, and grounded theory. This paper contributes to tourism research by identifying the varying methods of data collection and analysis that enhances research particularly focusing on meanings, social construction, and the role of social interactions. Tourism researchers using SI need to embrace diverse range of data collection methods and analysis, including the use of sophisticated digital technologies.

Keywords: Symbolic interactionism; qualitative research; data analysis; review; journal rankings

Introduction

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is a social theory that focusses on micro-level interactions between individuals emphasising on how society is created and maintained through their repeated interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Franzese & Seigler, 2020). SI is widely applied in many fields of study (Calarco, 2014; Carter & Fuller, 2016; Handberg et al., 2015; Leonardo & Pribadi, 2021; Russell & Fusilier, 2014). However, there has been little application of SI in tourism and hospitality (Tang, 2014). Tang's (2014) investigation on the application of social psychology theories and concepts in tourism and hospitality studies found that out of 282 reviewed papers that pertain to the application of social psychology theories and concepts presented in 12 leading academic journals published between 1999 and 2012, only one (1) paper has used SI theory. However, SI is a theoretical and methodological thought with potential to contribute significantly to the creation of tourism knowledge (McKercher & Cros, 2003). Future studies using meanings derived from interpretive approaches, such as SI, "will further the understanding of the tourists' meanings of the service experience, quality design of services, and strategies to improve service quality in tourism" (Obenour et al., 2006: 40). Thus, advocating future research utilizing SI as a research philosophy to enhance theoretical understanding and comprehension of various tourism issues would deepen the understanding of the discipline (Thompson et al., 2017: 41).

The suggestion by McKercher and Cros (2003) to use SI as a theoretical perspective to understand tourism needs to be considered seriously. Despite its diversity application over many decades, SI in tourism studies remains virtually unexplored. Therefore, the objective of this study is to review the application of SI for a twenty (20) year period between 2000 and 2020. Consequently, this paper reviews the extent to which SI has been applied in tourism and

how this has contributed to the enhancement tourism knowledge. In doing so, the paper aims to provide a clear pathway for greater adoption of this methodology in tourism studies. The next section presents the merits the merits and limitations of SI, particularly its ability to contribute to tourism studies. This is followed by a methodology section on the identification of symbolic interactionist tourism studies and follow-up emails to authors whose papers were used in the study. Findings from a review of the selected studies and email responses are then presented with patterns emerging. The findings are then discussed in view of the future role of SI in tourism studies. A short conclusion completes this paper.

Literature review

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, a sociological perspective with foundations in pragmatism (Santos & Buzinde, 2007) has been identified as a theoretical perspective that could enhance the understanding of tourism research (McKercher & Cros, 2003). Three trajectories of SI (the Chicago School [Herbert Blumer], the Iowa School [Manford Kuhn], and the Indiana School [Sheldon Stryker]) are identifiable in the literature (Carter & Fuller, 2016). The Chicago School has remained the most influential. Therefore, this article looks at Blumer's SI (see House, 1977) as an alternative approach to the study of human group conduct in tourism. SI was first coined by Blumer in 1937 when he wrote an article identifying Mead as a "Symbolic Interactionist" (Blumer, 1937). In *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspectives and Method*, Blumer refers to the term "Symbolic Interactionism" as "a somewhat barbaric neologism" which has caught on and is now in general use (Blumer, 1969).

Burrell and Morgan (1979) describe this approach as realist, anti-positivist, voluntarist, and idiographic. Laughlin (1995) identifies the philosophical lineage of SI as the Immanuel Kant/Johann Fichte line of theoretical and methodological thought (The subjective/subjective line) that is made up of (Symbolic interactionism [H. Blumer] and Ethnomethodology. The writings of Hebert Blumer take their origin from those of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), himself essentially premised on varied intellectual influences, including but not limited to: Charles Darwin (Cochrane & Gardner, 2011; Delane, 2016; Mitchell, 2012); German idealism; American pragmatism; and behaviourism (Delane, 2016). Despite significant differences in the thought of symbolic interactionist scholars, Blumer (1969) argues that there is a great similarity in the general way in which they viewed and studied human group life.

SI is a vital force within contemporary sociology (Stryker, 1987). It has been considered by researchers to be well-established in the tradition of interpretivist sociology (Garrety & Badham, 2000). Although SI was a very influential theory during the 1960s, primarily as a critique of the ascendant Parsonian theory, its meaning has not been very clear. Many interactionists, including Charon (1998), George Herbert Mead [1863-1931], Charles Sanders Peirce [1839-1914], William James [1842-1910], John Dewey [1859-1952], Tamotsu Shibutani [1920-2004], including Herbert Blumer [1900- 1987] himself have asserted what constitutes SI without defining what it is. Nevertheless, more recent studies have attempted to define SI.

Meltzer et al. (1975: 1) define SI as "the interaction that takes place among the various minds and meanings that characterize human societies. It refers to the fact that social interaction rests upon a taking of oneself (self-objectification) and others (taking the role of the other into account)." According to Charon (1998: 153), SI is "the study of human beings interaction symbolically with one another and with themselves, and in the process of that symbolic interaction making decisions and directing their streams of action". Its departure as a social theory is the dialectic interdependence between the human organism and his natural and social environments (Singelmann, 1972) emphasising on how individuals interpret objects and other

people in their lives and how this process of interpretation leads to behaviour in specific situations (Benzies & Allen, 2001).

Blumer (1969: 2) describes the three basic premises of SI and observes that “the first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.” These “things”, he maintains, include everything that the human being may note in his world. This forms one of the major concepts of SI: symbols, any social object (e.g., a physical object, a gesture, or a word) that stands in the place of or represents something else. According to Blumer (1969: 2) the second premise is that “the meanings of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows.” By this Blumer refers to the sources of meaning. Blumer’s SI sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people. “The meaning of the thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person” (Blumer, 1969: 4). Meaning is therefore seen as a social product formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. The third premise (Blumer, 1969: 2) is that “these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters,” and this process has two distinct steps: (a) The actor indicates to themselves the things toward which they are acting, those that have meaning for them, and this is an internalized, social process in that the actors are interacting with themselves; (b) Then “the actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action” (Blumer, 1969: 5). Blumer (1969: 5) refers to this process as “self-interaction.”

Following Mead quite closely, Blumer brings in the notion of “the nature of objects”, that human beings live in a world of “objects” and their activities are formed around “objects.” According to Blumer (1969: 79), objects are products of SI and are defined as anything that can be indicated, designated or referred to and could be classified for purposes of convenience into three categories namely: (a) Physical objects such as organizational policies, organizational tangible resources; (b) Social objects such as managers, subordinates, students organizational stakeholders, the human resource in general; (c) Abstract objects such as moral principles, social responsibility, organizational culture, vision and mission statements and philosophy. Such categorization is not water-tight especially given the reason that all objects are formed and transformed by the defining process that takes place in social interaction. For this reason, all objects are social objects as defined in different situations.

While highlighting the same issue above, Blumer sees human beings as living in a world of meaningful objects “in which people are forming, sustaining, and transforming the objects of their world as they give meaning to objects” (Blumer, July 1965- May 1966). Another interesting observation Blumer makes is that people are not locked into their objects and may from time to time work out new lines of conduct toward them. Above all, objects do not have fixed status, their meanings are only sustained through definitions that people give them. Therefore, an object can change over time for the human being, not because it changes its properties, but because people change their definitions according to a line of action they are about to take towards the object.

Blumer (1969: 35) further observes that the social world is the actual group life of experience and consists of the action of human beings, and that it is the world of everyday experience of people as they meet the situations that arise in their respective worlds. As Garrety and Badham (2000: 105) observe:

in the symbolic interactionist scheme, social worlds are defined as more or less voluntaristic, formal or informal collectives in which people share meanings, material objects and joint activities. In keeping with the interactionist focus on interaction and communication, social worlds are characterized as ‘recognisable form[s] of collective

action’ rather than as fixed social structures. They are ‘universe[s] of regularized mutual response’, which may or may not coincide with more formal organizational boundaries.

The conclusion drawn from this summary, though not exhaustive is that SI provides a theoretical perspective for studying how individuals relate and interpret objects. Tourism research is about people and how they interact with social, physical and/or abstract objects. At the core tourism is interaction. This interaction can be with (i) social objects such as tourism company employees, host communities, tourists and/or guests; (ii) abstract objects such as ethics for tourism, tourism and culture, the responsible tourist, social responsibility in tourism etc.; and (iii) physical objects such as government laws/policies; the environment and an organizational or destination’s tangible resources. Central to symbolic interaction is also how researchers interact with these diverse objects in the course of their data collection and subsequently data analysis.

Method of gathering data

Classical SI is idiographic. It observes that social science can only understand the social world by obtaining first-hand knowledge of the subject under investigation; and by appreciating the way actors interact with “things”. Classical SI stresses the importance of letting one’s subject unfold in nature and characteristics during the process of investigation. Its methodological stance is that of direct examination of the empirical social world which permits the researcher to meet all the basic requirements of an empirical science: “to confront an empirical world that is available for observation and analysis; to raise abstract problems with regard to that world; to gather necessary data through careful and disciplined examination of that world; and to unearth relations between categories of such data,” (Blumer, 1969: 48). As Blumer (1969: 48) argues,

symbolic interactionism is not misled by the mythical belief that to be scientific it is necessary to shape one’s study to fit a pre-established protocol of empirical inquiry, such as adopting the working procedure of advanced physical science, or devising in advance a fixed logical or mathematical model, or imposing a statistical or mathematical framework on the study, or organizing it in terms of pre-set variables, or restricting it to a particular standardised procedure such as survey research.

While the means used to elicit data depend on the nature of the data to be sought (Blumer, 1969), methodological approaches aligned with symbolic interactionism tend to vary in terms of inductive or deductive style, idiographic or nomothetic causal explanation, and quantitative or qualitative research design (Carter & Montes, 2019). Carter and Montes (2019) identify interviews, surveys, ethnographies, content analysis, and experiments, as common methods used in empirical studies on symbolic Interactionism.

Benefits of symbolic interactionism

At a methodological level, SI lifts the veils that cover an area “by getting close to the area and by digging deep into it through careful study” (Blumer, 1969: 39). Therefore, researchers undertake a process of “careful and honest probing, creative yet disciplined imagination, resourcefulness and flexibility in study, pondering over what one is finding, and a constant readiness to test and recast one's views and images of the area” (Blumer, 1969: 40). Blumer (1969) emphasises a direct examination of the empirical social world where the researcher engages the natural world directly.

The benefit of SI is that in contrast to other social theories it does not pose a theory of society but, rather, focuses on individual acts and what goes on between people (Harris, 1979). It is

one social theory which does engage with the social world and with ‘real’ organisations, with a view to enable organisational actors to ‘self-reflect’ their actions. It recognises the fact that people act together and, in one another’s presence, most of the time with ease, deftness, intricacy, and smoothness. Turner and Stewart (1989) explain that how people interact is the question. They argue that the answer constitutes the universal, remarkable, and supremely valuable goal of symbolic interactional inquiry. This approach seeks to make social life an object of investigation by extracting the usual smoothness of everyday doings with one another from the taken-for-granted featureless background of people’s experience, and then holding those doings up for inspection and analysis of how people do them.

SI provides the essentials for a provocative philosophical scheme that is peculiarly attuned to social experience. Such experiences are essential for evaluating tourist experiences at the destination, and interaction(s) with tourism products. It also provides a basis for analysing the problems of social organisation or the process of internal relations and collective behaviour. As such SI is best suited for community-based tourism research, human and wildlife conflicts, festivals and events, and tourist behaviour. Its view of the social world is essentially processual and emerging from the internal acts of human beings, acting individually or in concert with one another.

Such view of interaction helps one to see organisations as social constructs which means different things to different people. Hence understanding the role of individuals in interpreting and sustaining views of social reality within an organisation or a team is seen as important. Unlike positivist studies which view people as cogs in a machine, symbolic interactionist studies recognise people as having a ‘self’ and their actions in organisations as based on meanings they give to various phenomena. In effect, this offers an understanding of why people in organisations act as they do or why organisations change or adopt certain organisational systems and processes. Furthermore, by emphasising the understanding of meanings of the management team members from the ‘inside’ rather than the ‘outside’, it is a very significant management research method because it gives the researcher the opportunity of experiencing and understanding the team from within.

Limitations of symbolic interactionism

SI is not without limitations. At a methodological level, SI has some limitations because its framework is not one that is easily researched, “and it contains no clear-cut prescriptions of either general procedures or specific techniques for enhancing its researcherability” (Meltzer et al., 1975: 84). Whereas it allows and encourages the researcher to be free in his/her involvement in the observation process completely uncluttered by theoretical rules and regulations on what is to be seen and how the “seeing” should be undertaken, such a freedom is a limitation, especially to young researchers who do not have any research experience to determine how far the research should or should not go (Laughlin, 1995). SI methods emphasise participant observation without mention of any explicit procedures, and the investigation is also difficult to report accurately, more so that so many actions may take place at the same time. Hence there is a likelihood of bias because the researcher may emphasise on observing certain phenomena which are of interest to him at the expense of some other phenomena which might have made the research much broader and richer in its focus. To this end, SI has been criticised for too readily dismissing conventional scientific techniques (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017).

Many of the basic symbolic interactionist concepts have been noted as being confused and imprecise, and therefore incapable of providing a firm basis for theory and research: “Because these concepts are imprecise, it is difficult, if not impossible, to operationalize them; the result is that testable propositions cannot be generated” (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017: 363).

The implications of these limitations are quite fundamental to SI as a study of human group conduct. Therefore, it can be argued that SI provides a weak or diffuse conception of society and social institutions. Turner and Beeghly (1981: 549) argue that symbolic interactionists rarely study “community organisations, societies and even small groups” and that SI put forward vague, simplistic and ambiguous concepts which are consequently impossible to operationalise for the purpose of measurement. These criticisms call for a struggle to develop a research programme that should guide SI researchers. The foregoing limitations are considerable, However, the benefits of this approach is greater and more far-reaching, especially because of its epistemological stance which offers a rich insight of why people become part of organisations or groups.

Methods

This study used a combination of document analysis and a survey to examine the application of SI in tourism and hospitality research in order to produce enough depth (Owen, 2014) and minimise bias and establish credibility (Bowen, 2009). “Although the strengths of document analysis are considerable, the researcher should not use it as a stand-in for other kinds of evidence that may be more appropriate to the research problem and the study’s conceptual framework (Bowen, 2009: 38). Document analysis is extensively used in social science research (i.e. Bravo, 2016; Higgins et al., 2016), and has been widely used in tourism studies, either as a single method (Ramos et al., 2000; Ruhanen, 2004), or as a combination with in-depth interviews (Boukas et al., 2013; Buultjens et al., 2016; Horng & Tsai, 2012b) or multiple methods [observations, interviews, focus groups, empirical evaluation] (Horng & Tsai, 2012a; Liu, 2014; MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003; Woodhead, 2013; Zhang Qiu, et al., 2013).

Document analysis

This paper used articles published in top eleven (11) tourism and hospitality journals published between 2009 and 2020 reporting primary data. The year 2009 was chosen for several reasons. Following Jamal and Hollinshead’s (2001) plea to penetrate the ‘forbidden zone’ of qualitative inquiry, McKercher and Cros (2003) suggested that the use SI as a theoretical perspective to understand tourism needs to be considered seriously. In addition, various journal editors called for more qualitative inductive approaches in tourism research (Tribe & Xiao, 2011; Xiao et al., 2013) of which SI is one. This nine-year period from Jamal and Hollinshead’s (2001) was considered long enough to allow for more research adopting SI to have begun to be published and gaining momentum given the commitment of journal editors to publishing qualitative work. The year 2020 was self-imposing as the last year before this article was completed.

While Gursoy and Sandstrom (2016) argue that it is relatively easy to identify the top journals in the tourism and hospitality fields, methodological variations used across previous journal ratings result in different rankings of tourism and hospitality journals (Okumus et al., 2017). In fact, ranking journals through either objective or subjective methods is debatable, and there is no commonly agreed tourism and hospitality journal ranking (Law et al., 2019). Several journal rankings exists in the field of Tourism and hospitality (Chang & McAleer, 2012; Clarivate Analytics, 2018; Ferreira et al., 1994; Gursoy & Sandstrom, 2016; McKercher, 2012; McKercher et al., 2006; Scopus®, 2017-2019). Clarivate Analytics (2018) ranked and published 52 Journals in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. McKercher (2012) ranked 58 tourism and hospitality journals, while Scopus® (2017-2019) ranked 123 tourism, leisure and hospitality journals. Lastly, Gursoy and Sandstrom (2016) ranked 18 tourism and hospitality journals.

Chang and McAleer (2012) were excluded because they limited their analysis to only 14 highly cited tourism and hospitality journals. Clarivate Analytics (2018) were also excluded



because they included Sports journals in their analysis. Table 1 shows only three published sources for journal ranking in tourism and hospitality were used, namely McKercher (2012), Gursoy and Sandstrom (2016), and Scopus® (2017-2019). McKercher (2012) was chosen because of his relevance to ranking tourism and hospitality journals, which was its sole focus. He used an alternative metric to assess the relative influence journals have on research by using an influence ratio measure. Influence ratio enables a suite of journals to be evaluated through the calculation of a score for each journal that reflects the share of citations and the share of papers it produces against all citations and all papers in the set (McKercher, 2012: 962). He evaluated and ranked 112 journals divided into three sets of tourism journals and hospitality (hospitality, tourism and a combined set of hospitality and tourism journals).

Gursoy and Sandstrom (2016) was also used because of their relevance in ranking tourism and hospitality journals. They updated ranking of tourism and hospitality journals by assessing the influence assigned to those journals by researchers in each field (Hospitality, Tourism, and Tourism and Hospitality). They found that journals that are considered “top tier” in tourism and hospitality have remained relatively constant over the years while there was little consistency among the rankings of journals beyond the top journals in both fields. On the other hand, Scopus was selected because it is one of the two most reliable databases (Pranckutė, 2021). Launched in 2004, Scopus has become a multidisciplinary and selective database that serves as a major tool for a variety of tasks from journal and literature selection or personal career tracking to large-scale bibliometric analyses and research evaluation practices in all possible levels (Pranckutė, 2021). Top 18 ranked tourism and hospitality journals were taken from Scopus® (2017-2019); Gursoy and Sandstrom, 2014; and McKercher, 2012 rankings (see Table 1).

Table 1: Ranking of tourism, hospitality and hospitality journals

Scopus®, (2017-2019).	R	Gursoy and Sandstrom, 2014	R	McKercher, 2012	R
Journal of Travel Research	1	Annals of Tourism Research	1	Tourism Management	1
Tourism Management	2	International Journal of Hospitality Management	2	Journal of Travel Research	2
Annals of Tourism Research	3	Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research	3	International Journal of Hospitality Management	3
International Journal of Hospitality Management	4	Tourism Management	4	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	4
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research	5	Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	5	Annals of Tourism Research	5
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	6	Journal of Travel Research	6	Journal of Vacation Marketing	6
Current Issues in Tourism	7	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	7	International Journal of Tourism Research	7
Sport Management Review Journal	8	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	8	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research	8
Cities	9	Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management	9	Event Management	9
Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing	10	Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	10	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	10
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	11	Tourism Analysis	11	Tourism Geographies	11
Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management	12	Current Issues in Tourism	12	Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism	12
International Journal of Tourism Research	13	International Journal of Tourism Research	13	Tourism Economics	13
Journal of Service Management	14	Tourism Geographies	14	Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education	14
European Sport Management Quarterly	15	Tourism Economics	15	Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing	15
Applied Geography	16	Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education	16	Current Issues in Tourism	16
Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism	17	Journal of Foodservice Business Research	17	Journal of Ecotourism	17
Cornell Hospitality Quarterly journal	18	International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration	18	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	18

Source: (Gursoy & Sandstrom, 2016; McKercher, 2012; Scopus®, 2017-2019)



An average score of each of these journals was then calculated to come up with ranking for the study. Any journal that did not appear in any one of the rankings was excluded from the study. This process produced eleven (11) journals as indicated in Table 2. A decision was taken to use all the eleven (11) top journals. Therefore, articles reporting primary data published in these eleven (11) tourism and hospitality journals published between 2000 and 2020 were then accessed. Search words such as ‘symbolic interactionism’, ‘symbolic interaction’, ‘interaction’, ‘Herbert Blumer’ ‘interactionist’ were used to search for relevant articles. While some of the articles did not have phrases such as ‘symbolic interactionism’, and ‘symbolic interaction’, they were assessed to establish the methodological perspective used and to make informed conclusions as to whether they were written in the context of symbolic interactionism. This search produced 23 articles which had used SI. A decision was made to analyse all of the 23 articles.

Table 2: Sampled journals for the study

Rank	
1	Tourism Management
2	Annals of Tourism Research
3	International Journal of Hospitality Management
4	Journal of Travel Research
5	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research
6	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management
7	Current Issues in Tourism
8	Journal of Sustainable Tourism
9	Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing
10	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management
11	International Journal of Tourism Research

Survey

A total of 45 authors were involved in writing the 22 articles which are indicated in Table 3. The next step involved generating emails for the authors. A total of 40 emails were sourced from their published papers and/or other papers they have published. An open-ended questionnaire was therefore sent to the 40 emails. However, 11 emails were not delivered. Two reminders were further sent by email. This process generated nine responses which were then used for this study. Open-ended questions were used to collect data from authors where participants were requested to type their responses and send to the author by email. Open-ended questions are used in many areas of the behavioural sciences (Connor-Desai & Reimers, 2019). The questionnaire requested them to answer the following four questions:

- a) Why did you use symbolic interactionism in this paper?
- b) Are there any reasons for your special liking of the theory in understanding tourism and hospitality issues?
- c) Would you consider yourself a symbolic interactionist, and an authority in symbolic interactionism?
- d) Are there any other publications where you have used the symbolic interactionist perspective? If yes, may you kindly refer me to those publications?

Results and discussion

Table 3 shows that only seven of the eleven sampled tourism and hospitality journals have published SI articles between 2009 and 2020:

Table 3: Symbolic interactionism studies

Article	Methods of data collection	Methods of data analysis	Topic/country
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Tourism Management				
1	Letheren et al. (2017)	Survey instrument using an online experimental design	Descriptive statistics; Analysis of Variance (ANOVA); ANCOVA; bootstrapping procedure using the SPSS PROCESS macro	Effects of personification and anthropomorphic tendency on destination attitude and travel intentions/ Australia
2	Lewis et al. (2019)	Two-phase approach: semi structured in-depth interviews	Coding; thematic analysis	Positioning a destination as fashionable: The destination fashion conditioning framework/Australia
3	Choi and Fu (2018)	In-depth interviews	Data coding; thematic analysis; narratives	Hosting friends and family as a sojourner in a tourism destination/ Macao.
4	Paraskevas and Brookes (2018)	Semi-structured interviews; qualitative survey; focus groups	Framework analysis approach; thematic framework; mapping process	Nodes, guardians and signs: Raising barriers to human trafficking in the tourism industry/ UK, Romania and Finland
5	Ryan & Gu (2010)	Reflexivity arising from observation of a partially understood event on the part of the two authors; attendance of the Buddhist Festival; visits to Wutaishan temples; Secondary data; ethnography; use of notes and photographs		Constructionism and culture in research: Understandings of the fourth Buddhist Festival, Wutaishan/China.
6	Yıldırım (2020)	Ethnographic approach: use of novels as data - <i>Malafa [The Mandrel]</i> ; audit trail method; face-to-face interviews;	Hermeneutic method	Individual, organization and structure: Rethinking social construction of everyday life at workplace in tourism industry/ Antalya, Turkey
7	Cunningham (2006)	Interviews, document analysis, participant observation	Grounded theory; Hermeneutics: text analogue	Social valuing for Ogasawara as a place and space among ethnic host/ Ogasawara Islands
Annals of Tourism Research				
8	Thompson and Taheri (2020)	Interviews	Thematic analysis, Abductive analysis/narratives	Capital deployment and exchange in volunteer tourism/ Cambodia and Kenya
9	Mordue (2005)	Ethnographic approach: Field observations; in-depth interviews; focus groups; secondary data	Transcribed, and imported into the "HyperResearch" software package to facilitate examination; narrative analysis	Tourism, Performance and Social Exclusion In "Olde York"/UK
10	McGehee and Santos (2005)	Focus groups	Discourse analysis: emergent themes	Social change, discourse and volunteer tourism/ USA
Journal of Travel Research				
11	Masset and Decrop (2020)	Longitudinal study (observations; semi-structured interviews; projective techniques; field notes); Visual materials (recorded videos and pictures of tourists and their tourist souvenirs)	Coding; Intratextual and Intertextual analyses.	Meanings of Tourist Souvenirs: From the Holiday Experience to Everyday Life/Portugal
12	Yarnal and Kerstetter (2005)	Participant observation; observation; participation	Transcription; Coding; thematic analysis	Casting Off: An Exploration of Cruise Ship Space, Group Tour Behavior, and Social Interaction/USA
13	Santos and Buzinde (2007)	In-depth interviews	Grounded theory; categories identification; concept and theory development	Politics of Identity and Space: Representational Dynamics/USA.
14	Lin et al. (2012)	Visitor-employed photography; semi-structured qualitative interviews;	Transcription; Coding; tangible, intangible, and universal concepts (TIUs); means-end analysis; Hierarchical Value Map, thematic analysis	Remember the Alamo: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Visitor Meanings/USA
15	Hosany et al. (2019)	Face-to-face survey	Structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM)	The Influence of Place Attachment, Ad-Evoked Positive Affect, and Motivation on Intention to Visit: Imagination Proclivity as a Moderator/ Swiss Alps

16	Mordue (2008)	Ethnography (field observations; in-depth interviews; focus groups; Photographic and video records; meetings)	Transcription; data interrogated via HyperResearch software.	Television, Tourism, and Rural Life/UK.
Current Issues in Tourism				
17	Duarte and Nyanjom (2017)	Visits to the research area and its events; face-to-face interviews; focus groups; online questionnaire	Descriptive statistics; thematic analysis; narrative analysis	Local stakeholders, role and tourism development/Australia
18	Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen (2011)	Exploratory interviews; in-depth interviews	Ideographic analysis; constant comparison technique; analytic induction; analysis of emerging themes	Disabled travel: not easy, but doable/ Denmark
19	Bui and Wilkins (2016)	Recorded interviews; survey instrument;	Content analysis; Factor analysis; assessment of internal consistency and construct validity; Discriminant analysis.	Social interactions among Asian backpackers: scale development and validation/ Vietnam/ Australia
20	Belhassen and Ebel (2009)	Participant observation; informal interviews, email survey, secondary data	Thematic analysis, narratives	Tourism, faith and politics in the Holy Land: an ideological analysis of evangelical pilgrimage/ USA
Journal of Sustainable Tourism				
21	Idziak et al. (2015)	Applied anthropology: Participatory observation techniques and informal interviews mainly direct observations, casual conversations, in-depth unstructured interviews, and semi-structured interviews and questionnaires; secondary data; follow-up study after 5 years	Thematic analysis	Community participation in sustainable rural tourism experience creation: a long-term appraisal and lessons from a thematic villages project in Poland/Poland
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management				
22	White and White (2008)	Semi-structured interviews	Transcribed and then thematically coded	Travel as Interaction: Encountering Place and Others/Australia.
International Journal of Tourism Research				
23	White and White (2009)	Semi-structured, Interviews.	Transcribed and then thematically coded	The comfort of strangers: tourists in the Australian Outback/Australian

As seen from the table, Tourism Management (7, or 30.4% of the total sample); Journal of Travel Research (6 or 26.1.8%); Annals of Tourism Research (3 or 13.0%); Current Issues in Tourism (4 or 17.4%); Journal of Sustainable Tourism (1 or 4.3%); Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management (1 or 4.3%); and International Journal of Tourism Research (1 or 4.3%). This study did not find any study using SI in International Journal of Hospitality Management; Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research; International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management; and Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing. Cumulatively, 2.1 articles are published every year in the top ten journals using a symbolic interactionist perspective. Majority of these articles were published from Australia (5) and the USA (5). The study also found that only one journal on hospitality, Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, had published only one article using SI. However, the article: “Travel as Interaction: Encountering Place and Others” by White and White (2008) is more on tourism than hospitality.

Methods used to collect data by published SI studies

Table 3 shows that an array of qualitative research methods was used in the 23 articles under examination. The articles can be categorized into two groups: mono-method and multiple methods. The first group of articles (ten) adopted a mono-method approach, using only one method, either quantitative or qualitative (Molina Azorín & Cameron, 2010). The most common one was interviews. Interviews were either semi-structured in-depth interviews; unstructured interviews, or focus group discussions (Blichfeldt & Nicolaisen, 2011; Choi & Fu, 2018; Lewis et al., 2019; McGehee & Santos, 2005; Santos & Buzinde, 2007; Thompson

& Taheri, 2020; White & White, 2008). Contrary to classical SI, two mono-method articles used a survey, one face-to-face survey (Hosany et al., 2019) and another a survey instrument using an online experimental design (Letheren et al., 2017).

The second group of articles adopted multiple methods that are differentiable into three. The first subgroup can be identified as multimethod research (multiple qualitative or quantitative methods, but not both) (Molina Azorín & Cameron, 2010). Six articles used a range of methods including semi-structured or unstructured interviews; qualitative survey; focus groups; document analysis, participant observation; visitor-employed photography; visits to the research area and its events; online questionnaire; informal interviews, email survey, and secondary data. In all these six articles, at least three methods were used. The second subgroup involved one article that used mixed methods involving recorded interviews and a survey instrument. The third group of articles (five) used ethnographic approach which involve the researcher(s) participating in the setting or with the people being studied. All these five articles used field observation along with several other methods such as, secondary data, use of notes and photographs, use of novels as data, face-to-face interviews; focus groups, photographic and video records, and meetings.

Data analysis procedures by published SI studies

Table 3 shows that two studies used quantitative data analysis. This consisted primarily of descriptive, and inferential statistical analysis. Statistical procedures used were Analysis of Variance (ANOVA); Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA); Discriminant analysis; and Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). All the other articles (21) used various forms of qualitative analysis. As Table 3 shows, the most common qualitative analysis methods used were: thematic analysis (47.8%), narrative analysis (21.7%), emerging themes (8.7%), hermeneutics (8.7%), and grounded theory (8.7%). Other forms of analysis included content analysis, abductive analysis, discourse analysis, ideographic analysis, and constant comparison technique.

Results of responses from researchers

All who responded to the email questions indicated that they are not symbolic interactionists, and they do not consider themselves as authorities in SI. As one respondent pointed out:

“I do not see myself as the representative or authority of any particular theory. In fact, I think it might be wrong for a scholar to position himself within the patterns of a theory.”

Two reasons seem to have driven the use of SI by the authors who responded to the emails. The first reason is ‘the purpose and problem of the research’. Most respondents indicated that they chose SI because it was related to the purpose and problem of the research. As one respondent indicated:

“For a question of my related research, SI gave me a functional view of problem solving. I also made use of the assumptions of different theories in the same study. Because this was the only way I could analyze my research problem. Just staying in SI could make this difficult. Maybe I can say this; for micro sociological issues, the SI is sufficient, but if we want to see the macro context, we must draw on other theories.”

The second reason for the choice of SI related to the nature of the study particularly in tourism research. Tourism and hospitality are the areas where human relations and interactions are most intense and dynamic. As one respondent says:

“There is a variety of social interactions and self-presentations. Employee-employee, employee-tourist, tourist-tourist encounters are examples of these. Each interaction reveals unique patterns of meaning. For example, success practices and acceptable work attitudes in a workplace reveal the common tendencies of that field over time. The same may be true for

tourists. In this context, finding common aspects of the actions and trends in the workplace can help us understand the written and unwritten rules of that field. Thus, we can understand action not only at the agency level, but within the framework of the interactions that are the characteristics of the structure. This is possible by performing the archeology of normalizing situations in daily life. I think tourism establishments are an important field of study with their versatile interaction pattern.”

This is supported by another respondent who says that he chose SI because of his ‘interest in people and a belief that good research requires an immersion in the lives of others - hence much of my research means I have visited certain sites for almost two decades, and become familiar with individuals, lifestyles and observe change’. A respondent, whose study was on cross-cultural analysis of visitor meanings, argues that:

“Heritage tourism creates a symbolic dialogue between people, time and places. Heritage sites are rich in the symbols of life, existence and belonging which empower people to search, share, remember, and worship their roots. Thus, this paper applied symbolic interactionism to suggest that people may experience heritage sites differently based on how they construct symbolic meanings.”

SI is a specialized field of sociology. The Symbolic Interaction Journal, the major publication of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI), highlights the specialist nature of SI by observing in its Aims and Scope that it (the journal) “publishes research that develops interactionist theories, generates new methodological directions and ideas, and studies substantive topics from the interactionist perspective. It recognizes the increasing global interest in interactionist approaches, and actively encourages submissions from scholars working from a variety of affiliations” (Symbolic Interaction, 2020). This possibly accounts for low application of the theory in tourism research. While the papers used in this article could be said to have been written by “scholars interested in the study of a wide range of social issues with an emphasis on identity, everyday practice, and language” (Symbolic Interaction, 2020), it cannot be said that these scholars are ‘Symbolic Interactionists’.

Implications and conclusion

Despite a call for the use of SI, sufficient evidence suggests a low up-take of symbolic interactionism as a social theory used to understanding social life to tourism research. Furthermore, this study found that most of the articles used either semi-structured in-depth interviews; in-depth interviews; unstructured interviews or focus group discussions. This is consistent with the ideals of SI. What was also found consistent with classical SI was the use of a range of methods as identified earlier. Whereas Carter and Montes (2019) argue that it seems unlikely that studies conducted in the interactionist tradition will deviate much from the variety of methods identified in Table 3, they concur that “these methods will evolve and will continue to be shaped by advances in technology as scholars find new ways to improve research designs and the process of data collection” (Carter & Montes, 2019: 13). Interactionist researchers in tourism should also adopt other methods such as action research, photo-voice, visual ethnography and other photographic and visual recording techniques, and e-interviewing (Berg, 2017). In fact, the Iowa School had historically used a variety of methods including quasi-experimental designs, statistical analyses, secondary analysis of survey data, ethnomethodological approaches, questionnaires, schedules, tests and laboratory procedures (Benzies & Allen, 2001).

Moving forward, pandemics and other global crisis such as COVID-19 will affect tourism research in the same way they would affect tourism and hospitality industries. While remaining committed to the symbolic interactionist perspective, there is need to embrace technologies by making use of digital technologies. Such technologies have permeated every

sphere of social life and have shaped and are shaped by social relations, social interaction and social structures (Fussey & Roth, 2020). Broadly, applicable technologies in this regard include “Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), computer mediated communication (CMC), the internet and the web (not to be confused!), social media, Big Data, artificial intelligence (AI), computational decision making and, increasingly, nanotechnologies” (Fussey & Roth, 2020: 2).

Moreover, online questionnaires, e-interviews (i.e. using bluejeans, webex, skype, Temi, Speech to text etc.), digital video, social networking websites, blogs, YouTube, Facebook or Flickr, Twitter (other forms of social media) (Berg, 2017; Brownlie & Shaw, 2018; Halford, Pope, & Weal, 2012; Murthy, 2008; Williams et al., 2017) “have become part of the sociologist’s data diet” (Williams et al., 2017: 1149). Few scholars in tourism research have utilised these technologies as sources of data. For example, the use of websites analysis (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012; Rus & Negruşa, 2014); electronically distributing a questionnaire (Chung et al., 2015); and Travel Blogs (Pan et al., 2007) has become commonplace in contemporary research, though not from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

The second perspective coming from the findings of this study is in respect to the use of multiple methods. This study found that some researchers in tourism research adopting SI used multimethod research (multiple qualitative or quantitative methods, but not both) (Molina Azorín & Cameron, 2010), and a range of mixed methods including recorded interviews and surveys instrument. While there is no doubt that qualitative and quantitative research rely on different epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge (Benzies & Allen, 2001; Burrell & Morgan, 1979), SI is a foundational perspective that could be integrated with other theoretical frameworks in multiple method designs (Benzies & Allen, 2001). Future research in tourism studies should develop frameworks of analysis that can best utilize SI. Such theoretical frameworks should link problems in tourism with SI as an approach, to methods applied for investigation. As such, tourism research would benefit from the use of SI, utilising survey data to complement qualitative interview or observational data, or in varying mixed methods designs. Ulmer and Wilson (2003) also suggest that scholars should consider SI as an outlet that uses both quantitative and qualitative data that advance interactionist concepts and propositions. They conclude that “more extensive use of quantitative data and methods in explicitly interactionist terms would enable researchers to address research topics, and do types of studies, that most people in the discipline do not associate with interactionism but to which interactionism might significantly contribute” (Ulmer & Wilson, 2003: 547).

The third perspective relate to data analysis. This study found that the most common qualitative data analysis methods used were: thematic analysis, narrative analysis, emerging themes, hermeneutics, and grounded theory. Other forms of analysis adopted included content analysis, abductive analysis, discourse analysis, ideographic analysis, and constant comparison technique. These are common methods for qualitative data analysis. However, what is striking is the absence of the use of technologies in data analysis. Only four articles reviewed in this study used such technologies. Mordue (2005) and Mordue (2008) used HyperResearch software while Lin et al. (2012) and Duarte and Nyanjom (2017) used NVIVO. While Kikooma (2010) maintains that computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) in social science research studies are still few and isolated, Kelle (2004) argues that nowadays more than twenty (20) different software packages are available to assist qualitative researchers in their work with textual data.

The fourth perspective addresses the use of quantitative techniques. This review found that only two studies used quantitative data techniques. Their analysis of data consisted not only of descriptive statistics but also inferential statistical analysis. Classical SI dismisses the use of any computing statistical packages but seeks to discover the nature of the empirical

world by a direct, careful and probing examination of that world “rather than by working with a simulation of that world, ... or with a picture of that world fashioned in advance to meet the dictates of some imported theoretical scheme or of some scheme of ‘scientific’ procedure” (Blumer, 1969: 49). Too often in sociological discourse, quantitative and qualitative methods have taken on the character of ideologies, with quantitative and qualitative advocates having disdain for each other’s methods (Becker 1998; Maines 2003). As Maines (1993) suggests, numbers are representations no less than words, and presenting statistical analyses in sociological writing is in fact a narrative technique to tell credible and competent stories of research. Thus, quantification and statistics are simply tools for understanding and representing the social world (see Becker 1998). “These tools do not threaten the interactionist perspective, and their principled, critical use can actually enhance it.” (Ulmer & Wilson, 2003: 548). Symbolic interactionists researching on tourism should be able to make use of quantitative methods without undermining the very essence of interactionism.

The fifth perspective comes from McKercher and Cros’ (2003) suggestion that more tourism research using SI is required. This observation is not essentially emphasizing tourism research by symbolic interactionists. Rather, it maintains that tourism research should utilize SI. Views by authors utilizing SI who responded to an email questionnaire suggest that they are not symbolic interactionists, but they utilized SI because of ‘the purpose and problem of the research’, and ‘the nature of the study particularly in tourism research’. The centrality of ‘the purpose and problem of the research’ has been raised in previous studies. While Bryman (2007) observes that the way research questions are formulated and how data are collected and analysed are influenced by researchers’ beliefs about the disciplinary requirements concerning what qualifies as acceptable knowledge; policy makers’ expectations concerning the kind of knowledge they require for policy; and expectations of funding bodies, Ulmer and Wilson (2003) maintain that the research question should determine the method. This is the dominant view from the authors who participated in this study. The choice of using SI was based on the theory’s efficacy to address ‘the purpose and problem of the research’ than the philosophical held views by the researchers (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), or demands by policy makers (Bryman, 2007).

The centrality of the papers reviewed were on meanings taking place within the context in which participants find themselves as they interact with one another. From the SI perspective, meanings emerge from the social interaction of a group at a particular time and place, and these are perceived through an interpretative process (Blumer 1986). For instance, Masset and Decrop (2020) studied the meanings attached to tourist souvenirs, emphasizing their temporal and spatial evolution through three processes, and symbolic meanings tourists attribute to destinations (Hosany et al., 2019). The meaning and significance of these interactions are filtered through the prism of the tourists’ occupation of a physically demanding, threatening and culturally unfamiliar landscape (White & White, 2009). The shaping of ‘meanings’ according to SI, requires appropriate organizational norms and values as well as alignment of individual and collective needs (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018).

The other contribution of these SI articles to tourism research is on social construction of varied tourism areas for instance, of space, events and meaning (Lin et al., 2012; Ryan & Gu, 2010), rural life (Mordue, 2008), and representations that affirm respondents’ cultural identity through space demarcation (Santos & Buzinde, 2007). In addition to social construction is the role of social interactions and conversations which are potent ways of dealing with the terrain and the circumstances in which tourists found themselves (White & White, 2009). White and White (2009: 47) concluded that “these interactions are multiple in nature taking place with travel partners, with fellow tourists, tourist industry personnel and, where possible, local residents in the various sites visited”. Such interactions filtered through

the prism of the tourists' experiences and cultural landscape (White & White, 2009). In conclusion, the emphasis on meanings, social construction and the role of social interactions underscores a unique way through which tourism research using SI have advanced the knowledge of SI in the tourism and hospitality field is lacking.

Limitations of the study

There are 123 tourism, leisure, and hospitality journals (Scopus®, 2017-2019). This study reviewed 11 top ranked tourism and hospitality journals over a twenty-year period (2000 to 2020) with the objective of establishing the level of usage of the theory of symbolic interactionism and opportunities that the theory avails for further research and understanding of tourism research. The limited number of articles is not a reflection of tourism and hospitality scholarship since it is not reflection of all tourism and hospitality journals across all sub-fields, approaches, and all methodological approaches exhibited in the whole broad field of tourism. In addition, search words were limited to the most popular trajectory of SI (the Chicago School [Herbert Blumer]. These finding therefore do not necessarily include all the SI published papers from the Iowa School [Manford Kuhn], and the Indiana School [Sheldon Stryker]) of SI.

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