

# ECREA The Synthetic City

## Introducing playful navigation in the city

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Urban dwellers increasingly rely on digital information sources to navigate the modern city (Gursoy et al., 2017; Xiang et al., 2015). Therefore, the available information and the so-called 'digital layer' of contemporary cities mediate urban life (Smets et al., 2021). In current literature on hospitality consumers, the general assumption is that they are rational actors, seeking to mitigate uncertainty (Gursoy, 2019). However, qualitative research about how urban dwellers currently navigate the city is lacking.

Based on 119 interviews and through a grounded theory analysis, we build a first understanding of the properties of this digital layer, how urban dwellers interact with it, and how it influences urban navigation. We find that it brings the world to our fingertips, unites hospitality customers through review platforms, and creates a personalized map of the physical city.

We identify two distinct navigation modes:

*Instrumental navigation* involves a rational approach, where individuals carefully select events or places to visit by comparing ratings, reviews, and extensively plan their trips. Ratings and reviews play an important role in this navigation mode because they generate trust in the hospitality product, which is important because they are 'experience goods' and can't be tested before purchase (Gursoy, 2019). This mode is driven by a desire for certainty and is typically employed in unfamiliar and high-stakes situations, like a first date.

Conversely, *playful navigation* focuses on the intrinsic value of the navigation process. It encompasses three subtypes: *social navigation*, driven by relationship-building and affection and relying on social networks for recommendations; *go-with-the-flow mode*, motivated by curiosity and characterized by spontaneous decision-making; and *flaneur mode*, characterized by receptivity and resonance and motivated by a desire for distinction. These navigation modes are more prevalent in familiar and low-stakes contexts, such as spending a leisurely Saturday afternoon in one's own city.

Our research challenges the notion of urban dwellers as instrumental navigators (Gursoy, 2019) and emphasizes the importance of considering both playful and instrumental navigation. The different identified navigation modes and their characteristics can inform future digital media design

## Biographical statement

**Brett Binst** is doctoral researcher at imec-SMIT (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) with a background in psychology and sociology. His research focuses on serendipity in the city and how digital media can stimulate the occurrence of serendipity in the city.

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