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Digital free tourism – An exploratory study of tourist motivations

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ABSTRACT

The problem of technology overuse - and related mental health and addiction issues – has spilled over into the tourism context. Recent literature has also suggested that heavy use of technology while travelling could potentially have negative impacts on the overall tourist experience; and that tourists might search for "disconnection" while travelling. As a result, this study focuses on the recently emerged and scarcely understood phenomenon of "digital free tourism" (DFT), exploring participants' motivations for voluntarily abstaining from, or limiting their use of, technology on their travels. The findings aid relevant theory by identifying four main factors that motivate tourists to participate in DFT – escape, personal growth, health and well-being, relationships – and highlight several exploratory subthemes underlying these motivators. Considering DFT not as an inconvenience but a travel choice, this study can finally aid practitioners to better promote DFT as a tourism product; maximizing the participants' related benefits and positive experiences.

1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have undeniably changed human life. In the tourism and hospitality literature, a series of research has acknowledged the impact of technology innovations on the transformation of industry practices and tourist behaviours (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Law, Buhalis;; Cobanoglu, 2014). The penetration of ICTs into people's lifestyle, work place, and communication habits inevitably spills over into the contexts of travel and affects the tourist experience (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016). Contemporary travellers frequently carry mobile devices for making decisions on-the-go, managing travel itineraries, connecting with work and the social world, and filling up spare time. Subsequently, ICT research in travel and tourism has been largely concerned with positive impacts on the travel experience. Most related studies aim to further develop and enhance ICT applications in the tourism and hospitality industry (e.g., Law, Leung, & Au, 2013; Marasco; DeMartino; Magnotti, & Morvillo, 2018).

However, it is now widely acknowledged that heavy use of technology, especially mobile devices and social media, has caused problems such as rising anxiety, stress, mental health issues, sleep deprivation, and diminished human interactions (Beyens, Frison, & Eggermont, 2016; Ortiz & Garrido, 2019). In particular, smartphones have been designed in a way that makes addiction and dependence easier to occur (Lundquist, Lefebvre, & Garramone, 2014). The pocket-sized, handheld device, which allows immediate exchanges, has become a one-stop shop for myriad activities, from function to fun (Wei, 2008). While the smartphone itself does not carry many functions, it is the variety of software or applications that can be installed which develop its "stickiness". These applications are designed to be easily installed on smartphones for quicker and easier access to different functions, particularly social network sites (Salehan & Negahban, 2013). Users who wish to maintain such convenience may eventually increase their reliance on smartphones and fall into smartphone addiction traps (Lee. Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014; Salehan & Negahban, 2013). Deloitte, 2017 Global Consumer Report surveyed mobile users across 23 countries. The report suggested that about 20 percent of respondents would check their phone more than 50 times a day; more than one-third would check their phone within 5 min after waking up in the morning; and near half would check their phone sometime during the night (Deloitte, 2017). Digital natives (i.e., the younger generations raised in a digital world) (Prensky, 2001), born after 1980, are particularly susceptible to these technology addictions; as they were born during the emergence of digital technologies and the consequences of their heavy use are not entirely known (Bennet, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Wang, Sigerson, & Cheng, 2019).

Recent studies have shown that these negative impacts can be related to potentially serious mental health issues. "Nomophobia" (No Mobile

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Phone Phobia) – has been found among younger generations, aged between 18 and 24 (Merz, 2013), delineating potentially complex impacts on personal wellbeing. Individuals suffering from this disorder are found to be anxious when they cannot use their mobile phones (SecurEnvoy, 2012). Another symptom is called "fear of missing out" (FOMO), defined as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013, p. 1841) and has recently emerged in related literature; as people feel a need to be constantly connected with one another and up to date on other people's lives. Furthermore, digital devices have become affordable commodities for contemporary consumers and are a ubiquitous part of 21st century daily life; widening their potentially negative impacts to different areas of private and work-life. The so-called "spillover effect" refers the situations when people carry their routines and habits of using smartphones in everyday life to non-daily contexts (MacKay & Vogt, 2012; White & White, 2007), among which travel and tourism is a prominent example.

Experts furthermore warn that recent concerns with mobile phone and social-network addictions may only be scratching the surface (Brooks, Wang, & Schneider, 2020). While software companies make deliberate use of infinite feed-scrolls, auto-play, push-notifications, disappearing stories, bright colours and gamification, a future potential addiction to Virtual Reality (VR) devices has painted as a grim picture (Pradan, 2018). In tourism, like in other fields of study, raising caution about the possible negative impacts of present and upcoming ICTs is still not widespread; but increasingly acknowledged.

Such dilemma has motivated some scholars to explore the possibilities for pursuing "digital free tourism" (DFT), a form of tourism where internet and mobile signals are absent, or digital technology usage is controlled (Li, Pearce, & Low, 2018). Slightly different from "technology-free", the term "digital-free" was introduced to emphasize technology overuse due to tourists "being wired for information consumption and social communication" through electronic devices (Li et al., 2018, p. 318). Several academic angles in regard have been taken. For example, Tribe and Mkono (2017) explored the concept of e-lienation and travelers' opinions on "tech free" tourism; Cai et al. (2019) investigated tourists' emotional reactions and attitude changes during their digital-free experiences; Kirillova and Wang (2016) examined the impact of smartphone use for social purposes during a vacation on tourists' recovery; and Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau (2016) explored camping tourists' desire for digital connections and disconnection. Although literature exists concerning digital "disconnection", DFT has often been approached as a negative consequence of being disconnected, rather than as a voluntarily chosen mode of travel. Consequently, what motivates tourists to undertake DFT voluntarily is hardly understood.

In order to bridge this gap, this study explores individuals' motivations for experiencing DFT; defining DFT as a sought-after tourist experience, rather than as an inconvenience of travel. A specific group of participants (digital natives born after 1980), considered to be the most vulnerable to digital technology dependencies (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008), are targeted for this purpose. The findings contribute new insights into the motivations of engaging in DFT, laying the foundations for follow-up studies on this emerging trend and critical tourism ICT studies. Practitioners can learn how DFT can be further promoted to help reduce anxiety, stress and growing mental health issues, which are most likely related to the growing technology addictions and might motivate people to undertake this type of holiday.

2. Literature review

2.1. Negative impacts of ICT on the tourist experience

Studies n ICT in a tourism context have largely been focused on the positive impacts on the overall travel experience. Due to the penetration of ICTs into humans' daily lives, it has become natural for tourists to remain connected while being away for holiday (Pearce, 2011). For many tourists, ICTs provide convenience and flexibility especially when their trips have not been well-planned (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014; D.; Wang et al., 2016). They can search for information and directions on-the-go and make impromptu decisions. Additionally, it has become commonplace to see tourists sharing their experiences through social media (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Wang et al., 2014). Maintaining communication with families and friends throughout the trip has also been associated with safety concerns (i.e., the tourist's location and condition is known). Travelers who cannot get away from work issues while on holiday also rely on digital devices to manage and communicate work-related tasks (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). Entertainment functions in gadgets help tourists to fill downtime during their trip (e.g., waiting time, on flight, in hotel room) (Wang et al., 2016). However, recent studies have highlighted potentially negative impacts of technology use on the tourist experience, several of which have been discussed in literature.

Traditionally, the idea of tourism is closely related to a sense of escape from everyday life and recovery from work. Accordingly, being at a destination should be about feeling the authenticity of unfamiliar places and reflecting selves (MacCannell, 1976). A number of studies have looked at the influence of technology use on escapist experiences. While travelers are expected to rest and relax during their vacation (Pearce, 2011) the ability to constantly connect to work-related issues through ICTs can harm the tourist's quality of recovery (Dickinson et al., 2016). Ultimately, this has resulted in a blurring between work and leisure time, which has both negative and positive implications (Kim & Hollensbe, 2018; White & White, 2007). On a similar line, Kirillova and Wang (2016) investigated whether the use of smartphones for social purposes during a vacation enhances or hinders the potential of delivering a sense of recovery. They found frequency of work-related social presence to be a negative moderator between destination restorative qualities and vacation recovery. On the other hand, quality of work and non-work social presence was found to positively moderate the impact of destination restorative qualities on vacation recovery. Tribe and Mkono (2017) explored consumers' general views on technology use in travel. Through analysing online user generated contents, their results discuss how tourists can be frustrated and distracted by ICTs. The authors argued that ICTs have overturned the original idea of travel and blurred the distinctions between home and away, work and leisure.

Other researchers have argued that mobile technology detaches tourists from their physical and social environment (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Zhao, 2003). Spending too much time checking out what others are doing potentially distracts tourists from being "there", who may sequentially miss out valuable moments in the real setting (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Rifkin, Cindy, & Kahn, 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016). Tourists who are multi-tasking may not be able to fully sense their real surroundings (i.e., views, sounds, cultures, social interactions) (Ayeh, 2018). Furthermore, personal relationships in the real settings may also be negatively affected when tourists are indulged in their own digital world (Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016). This does not only detach tourists from their immediate surroundings, but also exposes them to a constant "gaze" of expectations from an online audience (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Molz, 2006). Ayeh (2018) examined the extent to which tourists can focus on the real experiences at the travel site while concurrently paying attention to their mobile devices. The author concluded that mobile distraction takes "something" away from tourist experiences when tourists are distracted from truly enjoying the real setting (e.g., sights and sounds, social interactions, experience of others). The findings demonstrate how the problematic use of mobile media devices in the vacation context could harm tourists' mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

Next, tourists may not even notice when mobile distraction reduces their satisfaction with their travel experiences (Ayeh, 2018). Based on these arguments, tourist experience can be impaired when tourists focus more on the technologies than the experience itself (Neuhofer, 2016).

The recent conversation on DFT indicates that people have started realizing how technologies have changed their personal experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and that it might even change perceived levels of authenticity (Tribe & Mkono, 2017). The need to further understand how to reduce the negative impact that ICTs bring to the travel experience continues thus to grow in research (Floros, Cai, McKenna, & Ajeeb, 2019; Twenge, 2013).

Recently, studies have also highlighted that technology is one of the key factors leading to diminished levels of wellness balance during travel (Dickinson et al., 2016; Lehto & Lehto, 2019; Li et al., 2018). The distraction caused by digital devices which takes tourists out of the "touristhood" are subsequently believed to harm their mental recovery (Carr, 2002; Jafari, 1987), resulting in a need for "detox" (Floros, Cai, McKenna, & Ajeeb, 2019).

Going beyond studies which are concerned with ICTs, social psychologists and environmental philosophers have also highlighted the complex interrelationship between human perceptions, behavior and preferences, and their surrounding environment. Attention Restoration Theory (ART), for example, proposes that *selective attention* is a crucial psychological mechanism, which directs our attention to certain objects and properties in the environment, to the exclusion of others (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Following philosopher William James, it argues that attention can be *involuntary* (directed towards inherently interesting stimuli) and *voluntary* (directed towards stimuli which are more difficult to understand or less interesting). While the former is mostly effortless, the latter causes attentional fatigue; which can lead to negative implications, such as poor decision making, low self-control, and health issues (Ohly et al., 2016). ART proposes that restoration, a period where the need for directed attention is eliminated, improves peoples' health, wellbeing, and overall performance (Kaplan, 1995; Kaur Kler, 2009).

While past studies have suggested that this preferably happens through the immersion in a natural environment far away from urban stimuli (e.g. Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Talbot & Kaplan, 1986), the negative impacts of involuntary attention echo some of the negative impacts of ICT, as previously highlighted. It could thus be assumed that tourists get distracted from restorative settings through ICT, such as the natural environment (e.g. Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016), although they are physically not in an environment with many voluntary stimuli.

2.2. Digital free tourism

To overcome the negative impact of ICTs on the travel experience, scholars have suggested focusing on the "real world" rather than on the virtual one (Bhattacharya, Bashar, Srivastava, & Singh, 2019). In response, the idea of travelling without being connected has emerged. Li et al. (2018) defined this type of "digital free tourism" as "tourism spaces where internet and mobile signals are absent or digital technology usage is controlled" (p.317). While there is increasing academic concern about the topic, new tourism and hospitality products, such as DFT, "digital-free" cafes and restaurants, "technology dead zones", disconnected holidays, and digital detox programs started to become popular (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Tribe & Mkono, 2017). These digital free products in general feature the absence of, or limited access to, ICTs; and their purpose is to reduce participants' internet addiction, anxiety and stress, through maximizing the value of tourism; so as to enhance work-life balance, improve health, and draw people's attention back to what is considered to "truly matter" in the real world (Smith & Puczkó, 2015).

In the tourism and hospitality literature, studies about DFT are still limited and focus mostly on involuntary disconnection during travel (Floros et al., 2019). Cai et al. (2019) also highlight that existing literature has been limited by a lack of focus on tourist emotions, contextual understanding, positive outcomes and the environmental and social context where the experiences took place.

A number of studies concerned with DFT focuses on the (positive and negative) consequences of being disconnected. Cai et al. (2019) identified emotional benefits such as reconnecting with the physical and social environment, as well as heightened levels of self-reflection. Other studies have largely focused on the negatives, such as anxiety, tension, and diminished levels of communication, availability, information obtainability, time consumption and supporting experience (Dickison et al., 2016; O'Regan, 2008; Paris, Berger, Rubin, & Casson, 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016). Dickinson et al. (2016) furthermore investigated camping tourists' view on technology use in general. They found that tourists do not always want to be connected and identified the factors influencing their desire for connection and disconnection, highlighting a conflict of positive and negative emotions and experiences.

Recent studies have gone more in detail on the tourist experience in a DFT context. Li et al. (2018) analysed DFT and the ways in which the concept has been discussed in various contexts. Most recently, Cai et al. (2019) analysed travellers' various emotional reactions throughout the process from pre-disconnection and disconnection to reconnection. Based on the findings, they created a conceptual framework to summarize travellers' emotions when experiencing digital disconnection. This study in particular lays a foundation for a deeper understanding of DFT. In a study of millennials' experiences, Floros et al. (2019) have furthermore uncovered their belief that DFT is beneficial for their well-being, encouraging research into more potentially positive effects of DFT.

In light of ART, scholars have also discussed in how far aforementioned concepts such as "benefits", "impacts" and others are related to tourist motivation; the underlying psychological or mental force that drives a person towards certain courses of action (Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003). Citing the core tourist motivations of "escape and relaxation", "novelty" and "relationships and personal development", KaurKler (2009) states that tourists choose certain environments through their motivation for "being away", "extent", "fascination" and "compatibility". Following previous studies on DFT, it can thus be assumed that tourists are not only impacted by a digital-free experience, but are well-aware and motivated by the potential perceived benefits which a ditigal-free environment could bring. As researchers continue to study the detrimental effects of digital technologies, this study thus complements previous ones by providing a critical view and new insights into travellers' motivations for disconnecting whilst on holiday, taking DFT not as an involuntary moment of disconnect, but a sought-after tourist experience. Having a more complete understanding on the subsequent motivations to opt for a DFT experience can help practitioners to promote DFT to a wider range of demographics, especially the younger generation.

3. Methodology

Due to the highly exploratory nature of this study, this research was undermined by a constructivist paradigm, aiming at capturing experiential and subjective realities of the respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

As mentioned earlier, the target population was identified as "digital natives" (born after 1980) because these were most likely to be aware of potentially negative impacts of technology on their personal life. Within the population of digital natives, a purposive, experience-based sampling technique was employed. The experience of interest followed the previously established definition of DFT by Li et al. (2018, p. 37) "tourism spaces where internet and mobile signals are either absent or digital technology usage is controlled" and participants had to have voluntarily undertaken this experience or self-define this as one of their main travel motivations. Interviewees were subsequently self-confirming to have had a similar experience within the last 2 years.

Respondents were initially approached through experience-based sampling on different social media platforms and later a snowball-technique was incorporated. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews which allow higher flexibility and more inductive reasoning, as respondents were asked to provide answers with fewer

restrictions. Based on the literature review, an initial interview guide was developed, centering on the core themes of (1) general use of digital technology (e.g. types of ICT used in daily life and when travelling, general relationship with ICT); (2) the DFT experience(s) in question (e.g. location, length, number of travelers, destination) (3) motivational factors leading to undertake DFT (e.g. why was this trip undertaken, what motivated the decision); and finally (4) supplementary questions to close the interviews (e.g. satisfaction with the experience). Throughout the interview phase, modifications to the interview guide and spontaneous follow-up questions were employed if new information arose.

Table 1 shows the profile of interview participants. The age of respondents ranged from 20 to 28. Mobile phones and laptops were the most commonly used digital technologies among the respondents, while more than half indicated some self-perceived sort of dependency on mobile phones.

Table 2 summarizes the details of each participant's DFT holiday. The most common holiday type and activities were associated with nature-based tourism and outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, backpacking and nature. Some did undergo their experiences within a more urban setting. The majority of participants travelled with at least one companion. Finally, the length of participants' holidays and their DFT experiences varied. Following the definition of DFT in this study, there were no particular conditions required, based on length of time to experience DFT. Thus, time constraints did not define the experience-based sample. All participants understood this and agreed that their experience corresponded with the definition.

Finally, a total of 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via face-to-face and telephone during the period of May to July 2019 and lasted between 25 and 35 min in length. Although in-depth interviews usually from 30 min to an hour (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), the relatively short duration of these interviews might be explained by a concentrated focus on particular experiences of choice and the fact that some of them were held through telephone (Novick, 2008). All interviewees were interviewed in English. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone for more accurate transcriptions at a later stage.

All data was transcribed and coded based on emerging themes in the research software Nvivo. To heighten trustworthiness of the data, findings were verified by two researchers separately; which in qualitative studies aids truth value, consistency and neutrality of the research method (Noble & Smith, 2015). Finally, 4 mayor motivational themes were identified as several sub-themes were grouped by the researchers.

Table 1
Profile of participants.

Informant no.	Gender	Age	Nationality	Use of Technology	Commonly Used Technology
1	Female	20	British	High	Phone, laptop, tv
2	Female	23	Canadian	Low	Phone, laptop, tv, ipad
3	Female	24	Polish	High	Phone, laptop
4	Female	23	Scottish	High	Phone, laptop
5	Female	25	Canadian	High	Phone, laptop, tv
6	Male	27	British	High	Phone, laptop, dsl camera
7	Female	28	Canadian	High	Phone, laptop
8	Male	24	Finnish	Low	Phone, laptop
9	Female	26	British	High	Phone, laptop
10	Female	26	Canadian	Low	Phone, laptop
11	Female	24	Canadian	High	Phone, laptop
12	Female	21	Dutch	Low	Phone
13	Male	25	New Zealander	Low	Phone, tablet
14	Female	26	Canadian	Low	Phone, laptop
15	Female	26	Canadian	Medium	Phone, laptop, tv
16	Female	25	Canadian	Medium	Phone, laptop
17	Female	21	New Zealander	Medium	Phone, laptop

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Motivations for digital free tourism

Four main motivations for DFT emerged from the semi-structured interviews: *Escape, Personal Growth, Health & Well-being* and *Relationships* (Fig. 1). The following sections present the findings related to these themes and their significance as motivations for experiencing DFT.

4.1.1. Escape

One of the major motivational themes emerged from the data analysis was a *desire to escape*. This theme was further divided into three subthemes – *disconnection*, *relaxation*, and *wanderlust* (explore the unknown).

First, an apparent underlying subtheme was a desire to disconnect from digital technologies. Most participants highlighted their desire to disconnect because their undistracted focus could allow them to "be present" and "concentrate on the experience itself", while "refraining from instant gratification via technology". Participants who desired to be disconnected generally wanted to be more "engaged" in the travel site to absorb their surroundings. Taking disconnection as a standalone escapist motivation, the participants' observations reinforce the fact that tourists feel an underlying desire to break from their normal routine and feel themselves to truly "be in the present" whilst travelling. This is in line with traditional views of tourism as being intrinsically linked to the need for escapism, particularly from daily life and work routines (e.g. Ateljevic and Doorne, 2001; Crouch, 1994; Hsu, Cai, & Wong, 2007; MacCannell, 1976). However, several participants did feel a degree of "necessity to use technology" whilst on holiday as a form of security, reaffirming Dickinson et al. (2016) notion that tourists have a longing to escape, but yet continue to be cautious around the degree of disconnectivity they desire; negotiating their initial motivations for undertaking DFT with the reality of their experience. Such strong reliance on technologies during holiday poses challenges to regulate technology usage, even when individuals have a desire to disconnect: "*I think the only thing that was hard was not having access to talk to my family,*" and *"Technology become a safety blanket for feeling like you can get an Uber, or having directions so more feeling like you're on the right path or getting where you need to be, getting a bus or something like that." (Informant #2,5)*.

The second motivational subtheme within escapism is relaxation. Motives to go on holiday are often centered around relaxation, as individuals are away from their everyday life/work stresses. Interviewees highlighted their DFT-related need for an "ability to relax better"; due to their lack of technology usage during the holiday. This mirrors previous studies highlighting the close relationship between technology and diminished levels of relaxation while travelling (e.g. Dickinson et al., 2016; Kim & Hollensbe, 2018; Kirillova & Wang, 2016; White & White, 2007). Several participants noted that this feeling of "being liberated" as "one isn't being sent constant reminders of things one needs to do", allows for a "decrease in social and work pressures and more of a focus on meaningful value in life", drawing connections between relaxation and self-reflection as a motivational factor for DFT. Participants also emphasized how they desired their concentration levels to be "greatly improved" when opting for DFT, allowing them to "focus on their scenic surroundings". It can be remarked, as stated earlier, that there is a potentially close link between a motivation for "being in nature" and a needed "feeling of relaxation". Accordingly, participants were motivated not be "distracted by technology", mirroring previous studies which have heightened the importance of immediate surroundings (Ayeh, 2018) and a detachment from the online "gaze" (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Molz, 2006). Interviewees noted that they feel that these connections are perceived to take away from the experience itself and

Table 2
Participants' DFT holiday information.

Informant no.	Location	Holiday type	Activities	Travel Companion (s)	Length of Holiday	Length of DFT experience
1	Indonesia & Interrailing across Europe	Sightseeing, cultural, social, active, outdoor	Outdoor water sports	4	1 month	1 month
2	On a farm in Italy	Work trade		Solo	3 weeks	3 weeks minus dial up with some email access
3	Poland	Family trip, outdoor adventure, nature	Hiking	1	5–7 days	3 days
4	Drumheller, Alberta	Camping, adventure	Outdoor activities, hiking	3	4 days	Majority of trip
5	Belize	Family trip, adventure tourism	Outdoor activities, camping, sea kayaking, snorkeling, rafting, horseback riding	5	2 weeks	2 weeks
6	Canada and the US	Urban city, backpacking	Urban tourist, city landmarks	Solo	6 weeks	No travel sim card so daytime was always digital free, evening and mornings had WIFI at hostel
7	Sri Lanka	Cultural, sightseeing	Cultural activities, outdoor activities, local cuisine	1	1 month	1 week actually limited, the rest had good WIFI when not exploring the country
8	Finland	Outdoor and active	Outdoor activities	2	2 weeks	10 h per day approximately
9	France and Spain	Cycling trip	Cycling everyday	1	6 weeks	No technology minus the use of a basic mobile phone once a week to contact home
10	South America, Emerald Lake British Columbia (Canada), various camping trips in Canada	Adventure (SA), Work (Emerald Lake), camping (outdoors)	Touring, sightseeing, outdoor activities, camping	2-5, 100–80, 2-10	3 months, 6 months in summer, 2 week trips to 2 days	SA 1 week, Emerald Lake 2–3 weeks, camping 2 weeks
11	Southeast Asia	Outdoor adventure, some urban	Hiking, scuba diving, exploring small towns	2	6 weeks	No one brought technology just an iPad to connect to when WIFI to book accommodations and flights and contact home
12	Ibiza and America: San Francisco and Colorado	Outdoor, social	Hiking, sightseeing	Solo but met people along the way	1 month	In the mountains probably each full day, limited use only for google maps
13	New Zealand	Nature and urban, cancer camp for kids	Day trips into cities natural landscapes	Around 160	8 days	8 days, was not allowed to bring phone
14	Bolivia, Columbia, Peru and Spain	Backpacking	Outdoor and urban activities and sightseeing	1	2 months	2 months
15	Peru	Urban and outdoor trekking	Sightseeing, cultural activities, outdoor activities (hiking)	1	2 months	2 months limited, 30 min sometimes approx. per day
16	Mexico, India	Personal, tourist, social and independent travel	Outdoor and urban activities, sports	First 2 weeks (20), next 3 weeks (3), Last 5 days (solo)	5 weeks	Frequently during the days as no travel sim, longest 36 h
17	Anakiwa, New Zealand	Outdoor adventure course	Hiking, Running, Sailing, Canoeing, Kayaking and Rock Climbing	14	3 weeks	3 weeks

therefore, motivate to opt for DFT which potentially generates superior perceived levels of relaxation: *"Being at the campsite, outside in nature, cooking over a fire, playing cards and having my phone nowhere near me, the most relaxed I have been in a very long time"* and that "*If the views are amazing, you could sit on a rock and just watch the sunset for 2 h and not feel like you need your phone." (Informant #4,8)*.

The third motivational subtheme emerged under escape is wanderlust (explore the unknown). The concept of wanderlust had been documented as a reason to travel, suggesting individuals' internal desire for getting to the unfamiliar (Shields, 2011). This desire for the unfamiliar was mentioned as an escapist motivation for DFT. Participants made note of this "longing to explore the unknown" as a central motive for why they enjoyed travelling: "*You really get a feel for the city when you don't use google maps and if you know a few places it is always nice to have a paper map and mark where you should go rather than using google maps you can kind of make your way or say oh that street looks nice I will go there instead of this boring main road." (Informant #6)*. This suggests that respondents were largely aware of the perceived negative impact of technology on their overall tourist experience (Tribe & Mkono, 2017; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and potentially facets such as self-realization and authenticity. In light of these findings, it can be assumed that escapist motivations for DFT are thus multifold and related to push, pull and personal factors.

4.1.2. Personal growth

The second motivational theme identified was a focus on *personal growth*. This theme was further subdivided into *immersion* and *self-reliance*.

With regards to immersion, when it comes to travel, heightened consciousness comes into play as one is often experiencing a new, unfamiliar destination. Travelling is highly experiential and therefore being self-aware is imperative in order to assimilate the experience. This theme mirrors previous studies which had hinted that tourists may be distracted from their settings by technology (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Rifkin et al., 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Zhao, 2003). Respondents highlighted how they are motivated to choose DFT in order to get a more immersive and intense travel experience: *"When you are travelling, you experience things you cannot plan on experiencing or things that you would*

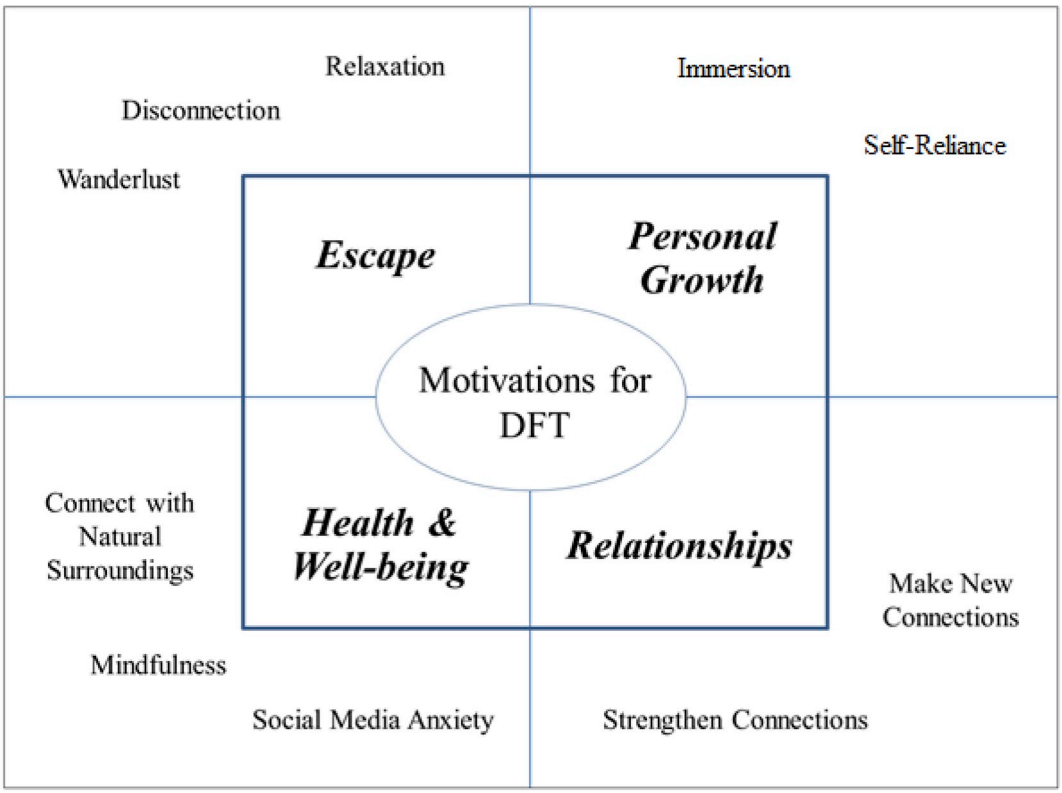

Fig. 1. Motivations for DFT

never experience back home. You learn different things, you meet so many people from different countries with different views, and when you really immerse yourself in the culture that is when you will have the best experience." (Informant #7). Interestingly, participants linked a heightened sense of immersion in their travel experience to a possibility of more personal growth, as ICT is "taking one's attention away" from self and surroundings. Accordingly, when technology is involved, "one is unable to become fully immersed in their surroundings". One participant recalled how "the level of self-awareness augmented" when technology use decreased. This demonstrates that with a digitally-limited or free tourism experience, one's self-awareness potentially flourishes. This is because there are "fewer possibilities for distraction", such as the compulsion for individuals to compare what they and others back home are doing. This allows for a more focused concentration on the self and the activities around them, which leads to a more heightened tourism experience overall. This motivational factor mirrors studies which highlighted the importance of self-discovery and the need to accept one's true self as primary travel motivations (Hassell, Moore, & Macbeth, 2015; Kim, Lee, Uysal, Kim, & Ahn, 2015; Moscardo, 2017).

The second subtheme of personal growth is self-reliance. A strong motivation for many while travelling, especially when travel is digital free, is "becoming more self-dependent". Participants stated that, when technology is more limited, "one can learn to trust oneself more therefore developing greater overall confidence". Several interviewees made reference to this, as they felt a "great deal of independence" due to a "greater reliance on themselves" during their travels. Two participants also observed how, by actually being disconnected, their "confidence grew" as they had to rely on others and, therefore, met new people. It is evident from the findings that, when the use of digital technologies was reduced, face-to-face communication was encouraged. It should also be noted that by decreasing one's reliance on technology, participants suggested that this can allow for greater overall confidence in the future; creating more independence and certainty for future travels. Kelly (2012) had also stated that a focus on the self while on holiday can make a tourist gain greater confidence and self-esteem; leading to factors of personal growth. On the other hand, excessive use of digital technologies has been found to negatively affect one's confidence levels and tourism experience (Li et al., 2018).

4.1.3. Health and wellbeing

A third main motivational theme identified in the semi-structured interviews was a focus on *health and wellbeing*. The theme was subdivided into *mindfulness*, *connect with natural surroundings*, and *curb social media anxiety*.

A focus on desiring mindfulness was very apparent from the participants, as the majority noticed "enhancements in their ability to be more present" when their technology usage was more controlled. This is in line with previous studies' definition of mindfulness, which generally refers to a state of mind which allows to actively process available information within the surrounding environment (Frauman & Norman, 2004) as both, a state of mind and response to surrounding environments (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Mindfulness has generally been positively related to superior tourist experiences in previous studies (Chan, 2019; Frauman & Norman, 2004; Taylor & Norman, 2019; Van Winkle & Backman, 2008). From the interviews it results that, when one isn't distracted by mobile devices, one can "focus more on the surroundings" and this is what drove respondents to opt for DFT. Practicing mindfulness was accordingly important, as respondents stated it allows for "a more heightened experience". Actively seeking to stay present whilst on holiday appears to be a fundamental motive for DFT; as it was hoped to enhance the overall experience and promote a more regulated digital wellbeing: *"My focus should be on the present, on the people that are with me, on learning about the histories of the area and listening to locals and their life experiences. I want to be conscious of the experiences I have at all times and not focus on what others would think, how many likes the experience would generate. All that I care about is enjoying every moment." (Informant #4)*. Participants repeatedly noted that when taking photographs to capture their surroundings, they feel their "consciousness is

interrupted" and attention is drawn away from the experience itself. Instead of allowing them to truly experience what is in front of them, photographing distracts them by "having the need to capture something to prove to others". It was also noted by participants that their memories of a trip seemed "more heightened" when they did not take photos rather than capturing the entire experience hidden behind a screen. Participants shared how the desire of regulating the photographs taken on holiday can aspire towards superior memories of the trip and a more heightened experience overall.

Also concerning a motivation for health and wellbeing, findings show that motivations for participating in DFT fall in line with motivations for nature-based tourism (e.g. Luo & Deng, 2008). Accordingly, "connecting with natural surroundings" through DFT was mentioned as a need for mental health and wellbeing. Pursuing nature-based tourism has been identified as a way for tourists to gain a sense of relaxation (Hassell et al., 2015), as it can function as a way to disconnect from everyday life (Kim et al., 2015). These parallels for connecting with nature was also a driver for respondents to opt for DFT. Individuals felt motivated to limit their technology use in order to focus more on their surroundings and to create a more enhanced connection with mainly the natural environment: *"I came to appreciate smaller details more and felt more in touch with natural patterns, such as waking with the sunrise and sleeping earlier when the sun has just set"* and *"I think this connection plays a big part in my want to not use technology, it encourages me to focus on it instead … there is nothing more relaxing than just being in nature, minimalism, and just listening and feeling nature." (Informant #17,4)*. Previous studies have highlighted that technology potentially detaches tourists from their surroundings (Ayeh, 2018; Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Rifkin et al., 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Zhao, 2003), but in this case respondents particularly found ICT as inhibiting a deeper connection with nature, showing a potential to combine DFT with various forms of nature-based tourism.

Finally, curbing the use of social media for one's health and wellbeing has become a clear motive for engaging in DFT; whereas respondents mentioned that "anxiety can be created by excessive technology use", recalling issues such as Nomophobia, FOMO, anxiety, stress, mental health issues, sleep deprivation, and diminished human interactions (Beyens et al., 2016; Ortiz & Garrido, 2019; Merz, 2013). As noted by one participant, "*relieving, not stressful and relaxing …. the pressure from social media, it is just nice not to have to worry about this." (Informant #3)*. Many found an "artificial reality created through social media" pressuring participants to constantly prove to others that they are enjoying themselves; recalling the "gaze" of expectations from an online audience (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Participants mentioned a "sense of relief" when no technology is present in daily life and this was especially sought for through DFT, confirming Floros et al. (2019) recent findings.

4.1.4. Relationships

The final main motivational theme emerged was a focus on how DFT *affects participants' relationships with others* whilst on holiday. The theme was subdivided into a desire for *strengthening connections* and *making new connections*.

The desire to pursue new relations has traditionally been identified as a motivation for travel (Kim et al., 2015; Moscardo, 2017) and previous studies have shown that leaving social media can help individuals to focus on developing their abilities and skills to socialize in the real world (Ortiz & Garrido, 2019; Twenge, 2013). First, a common theme evoked by participants was a desire to improve their relations with others through DFT. All participants who usually travelled with companions noted that "reduced distractions would allow for more focus on those around them" and give a possibility to "develop connections with one another".

A second underlying theme was related to making new connections. Participants felt that making connections with new contacts became "much easier" and "more natural" when they were not engaging with technology and this subsequently inspired them to engage in DFT. Recalling the authenticity issues highlighted by Tribe and Mkono (2017), respondents were generally motivated to experience genuine human contact whilst travelling, but found that, when technology is overly present, these interactions can be hindered: "*The people I don't know on the trip …. I should be able to get to know them better because of spending time with them and having real conversations, and not just communicating over a device"* and *"When you're bored, you pull out your phone; but instead, when you're bored, get to know someone". (Informant #5)*. In addition to their motivation for DFT, one participant also noted the same phenomenon in his daily life, experiencing more social disconnection with strangers: *"It creates awkwardness in society when you constantly rely on your phone and people are so weirded out when you talk to them on the street thinking, why do you have to talk to me?" (Informant #3)*. This shows that (potential) tourists are often aware that their personal relationships may be negatively affected by ICT (Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and that this is a likely motivator to undertake DFT.

4.2. Overall attitude of Digital Free Tourists towards ICT

At the final stage of the interviews, participants were asked about their overall attitude towards ICT and travel. Although the general consensus regarding participants' DFT experience was extremely positive and all respondents mentioned that they would participate in a similar experience again, they did not hold a generally negative attitude towards technology use in a travel context. On the contrary, one participant felt more post-DFT appreciation and privilege in regard to how technology has simplified travel: "*It definitely puts it in perspective to where travelling has become so easy and accessible because of google maps. But when you can just google trains and even just have maps up on your phone it is an unbelievable luxury because I don't know how … we would all struggle to do it now." (Informant #11)*. In this sense, a feeling of gratitude and appreciation was provoked by meeting the expectations set through the motivations. Although much of the digital-detox related literature advocates the detrimental consequences of excessive digital technology usage, the evidence shared by the participants shows how a potential break from these technologies can provide a new sense of appreciation of the simple benefits digital technology provides. Therefore, despite how problematic these technologies can be, engaging in a disconnection break through DFT was found to potentially allow for a renewed appreciation and possibly more controlled usage of ICTs in the participants' future travels.

5. Conclusion

This study explores individuals' motivations for experiencing DFT. It provides empirical evidence of tourists voluntarily embracing DFT and shines light on their motivations. Four main factors related to tourists' motivations for DFT were identified (i.e., escape, personal growth, health and well-being, and relationships). The relevant subthemes underlying each main theme were also further elaborated.

This leads to several theoretical contributions. First, it follows the conceptualisation of Cai et al. (2019) and Floros et al. (2019), defining DFT as a voluntarily sought experience, rather than as an inconvenience of travel. This is in line with recent tourism products which have entered the market, promising positive outcomes of absence or limited access to ICTs while travelling (Smith & Puczkó, 2015). This study has effectively shown that tourists do search for a DFT experience and are motivated by a range of factors to undertake this type of tourism. This opens the door for an array of follow-up research, not only on motivators and the experience, but also different stakeholder perspectives and management aspects of DFT.

Next, several motivators for DFT have been identified. Smith and Puczkó (2015) have stated that DFT promises reducing ICT addiction, anxiety, stress, maximizing the value of tourism, enhancing work-life

balance, improving health, and a more "realistic" tourist experience. Previous studies have also hypothesized that ICT has serval potentially negative impacts on the tourist experience, such as diminished recovery (e.g. Dickinson et al., 2016), detachment from immediate physical and social surroundings (e.g. Zhao, 2003), lower levels of satisfaction and authenticity (e.g. Ayeh, 2018), and diminished levels of wellness balance (e.g. Lehto & Lehto, 2019). This study confirms a need for escape, personal growth, health and well-being, as well as relationships, when opting for DFT. While these are all traditional motivators for tourists, it appears that our respondents are aware of ICT negatively influencing these factors and opt for DFT to mitigate this issue. However, participants in general agreed that their experiences become richer while travelling without technologies, but also realized that technologies were useful to some degree and did not show hostility towards their general use. This is consistent with previous findings suggesting travelers have needs for both, connection and disconnection (e.g., Dickinson et al., 2016; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016).

Also, the proposed motivational framework (Fig. 1) adds theoretical value to the existent literature on DFT and the complex relationship between technology and travel in general. First, the identified motivators add to the value of *selective attention* and the overall relationship between DFT and ART. As previously mentioned, ART proposes that immersion in a natural environment aids people's restoration as external stimuli are minimized (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983). This has previously also been thought as true for tourism, whereas restoration and detachment were beneficial for mental and physical health. The findings of this study show that DFT is mainly motivated by escape, personal growth, health and well-being, and relationships; suggesting that in the digital age a physical detachment from urban environments might not be enough to allow for restoration. In other words, tourists carry voluntary stimuli with them, even into environments where these are not inherently present. While some studies have made a connection between the use of ICTs and diminished wellness in tourists (e.g. Dickinson et al., 2016; Floros et al., 2019), this research opens to the door for a whole now stream of research, where ART stimuli are not environmentally bound, but increasingly detached and omnipresent; making metal and physical recovery for tourists more challenging.

On a broader scale, only very recently a more critical perspective on technology in tourism is starting to emerge. Scholars have successfully highlighted technological communication and coordination related issues in the tourism field, such as the rapidly increasing need for digital detox (e.g. Cai et al., 2019), impacts of "fake news" (e.g. Fedeli, 2019), the potential use of big data for political control of tourism flows (e.g. Wassler & Tolkach, 2019) and ways of using ICT to improve economic, socio-cultural and environment sustainability (e.g. Benckendorff, Xiang, & Sheldon, 2019). Research has also emerged that examines the limits of the theoretical backing for many of these studies (Pourfakhimi, Duncan, & Coetzee, 2018). Since particularly DFT-related research is at an emergent stage, there is an opportunity to encourage tourism research to move beyond technological advocacy and adopt a more critical perspective on ICT in tourism, particularly in a context of physical and mental wellbeing. The findings of this research thus suggest that critical ICT studies in tourism are not only of utmost importance, but should actively be encouraged. It is also hoped that the findings of this study could offer a framework for future research, particularly in a DFT-context. Future related studies could use the identified motivators as guidelines of research and further investigate tourists needs for escape, personal growth, health and wellbeing, as well as relationships in the digital age.

There are also practical implications for the findings of this study. Tour operators and other supply-side stakeholders of DFT have recently entered the market (Smith & Puczkó, 2015) and made various promises to market their products. This study finally helps to identify the motivators which drive tourists to opt for DFT, allowing tourism providers to not only market, but to tailor their products towards this growing market. The empirical evidence in this study also helps tourism service suppliers to better understand tourists' needs when designing products that embed technology components (e.g., VR tour; smart tourism initiatives). Furthermore, mental health and wellness practitioners can recognize a growing need for disconnection and can potentially consider tourism as a tool to do so. This would not only allow for better recreational experiences, but also to limit mental health and addiction issues. As such, practitioners and academics alike should consider to use the findings of this study to foster a stronger cross-disciplinary collaboration among tourism professionals and mental health experts; in order to maximize the potential benefits which DFT can offer. To help customers who have difficulties taking breaks from technology, practitioners can recommend tailored DFT products. They can consider the interviewees' sharing in this study as successful cases to convince customers of the benefits of DFT. They can show their clients that DFT may work with different holiday lengths, holiday types, activities and locations. In other words, potential tourists needing to disconnect should be considered as a serious endeavor, linking it to other forms of detachment and addiction patterns. As indicated by the findings as well as previous literature, it seems to be more possible to limit or reduce technology use, rather than eliminate it entirely. As a resistance to cut off technology use still exists amongst the younger generation, marketing DFT as a component of a trip seems to be more appealing to prospective tourists.

This research also has to recognize several limitations. This study is exploratory in nature and does not aim at offering generalizable results. The aim of this paper is to develop a foundation for future studies only. As a consequence, future research can triangulate the findings of this study by capturing different demographic groups and using different methodologies. Furthermore, the focus on only one demographic group is limiting by nature, as it does not allow a broader perspective on the technology perception of other age groups. Next, respondents have been selected based on the fact that they had undertaken DFT in the past. Asking motivating factors in hindsight could have resulted in a memory bias. Future studies could approach this issue phenomenologically or with different qualitative tools, in order to get a better understanding of pre-trip motivators and the overall DFT experience. Finally, investigating the phenomenon from tourism suppliers' perspective will also help providing a more complete view of DFT. As mentioned earlier, getting the right balance for technology use during travel is a potentially complex question and it is not clear how the supply side deals with this issue. Future research may start to explore feasible ways to control technology use for tourists from a more critical perspective.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104098.

Author contribution

Egger 50%: initial conceptualisation, data collection, data analysis, Lei 30%: literature review, theoretical strengthening. Wassler 20%: initial conceptualisation, theoretical strengthening.

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