

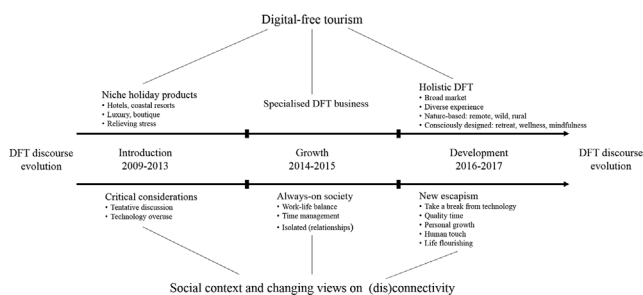
# Media representation of digital-free tourism: A critical discourse analysis

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## GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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## ABSTRACT

Digital-free tourism (DFT) describes tourism spaces where internet and mobile signals are either absent or digital technology usage is controlled. By employing critical discourse analysis of over 450 media texts produced between 2009 and 2017, the study reported the conceptual understanding of DFT, the ways the media representation has changed over time and explored the broad social context and debates in which the concept is embedded. By reading and reviewing the texts, unsupervised (automatic) Leximancer analysis, and manual coding, a shift in the representation of the concept was established. Initially framed simply as a reaction to the pressures of abundant connectivity in the years 2009–2015, recently the possibility for human flourishing, well-being and an enhanced lifestyle have emerged. Holiday making in a digital-free environment is intimately linked to the ways individuals can manage their contemporary relationships and experiences rather than be controlled by the technologies others have created.

## 1. Introduction

Digital technologies and the internet have penetrated much of contemporary life, altering the way people live, work and travel. Studies about the relationships between technology and tourism tend to emphasise the power and possibilities of the linkages (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Buonincontri, Morvillo, Okumus, & van Niekerk, 2017; Chathoth, Altinay, Harrington, Okumus, & Chan, 2013; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014; 2015). Nevertheless, some questioning of the value of sustained use of digital communication devices on holidays is emerging (Neuhofer, 2016; Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017, pp. 347–359; Pearce,

2011). Depending on the way that the technology is used, ubiquitous connectivity, or the perceived need for that resource, may frustrate tourists and limit the benefits of their holidays (Wang, So, & Sparks, 2017). There are growing voices which argue for sometimes limiting technology usage on holidays. Avoiding work related communications and reducing habitual social-media engagement are particularly seen as desirable experiences for some holiday makers (Chen, Huang, Gao, & Petrick, 2018; Tribe & Mkonko, 2017).

In a seminal work, Pearce and Gretzel (2012) identified the concept of “technology dead zones” which they described as “locations with limited or no internet technology access”. In a more positive sense, we

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propose “digital-free tourism (DFT)” which features the absence of or severely limited access to information and communication technologies (ICT). In particular, ICT in current research include internet-based techniques facilitating social contacts and information consumption. The interest in this study does not extend to the use of cameras, music players, e-readers, GPS devices, and wearable fitness trackers, although they are also usually owned by tourists and may require connectivity (MacKay & Vogt, 2012). Instead the focus is directed at being “wired” for information consumption and social communication.

Pragmatic efforts by tourism practitioners have preceded academic analysis in grasping the demand for digital-free vacations. The phenomenon of holiday makers switching off electronic devices or disconnecting from the internet has been noted in industry reports and has recently generated considerable media coverage. For instance, a Scottish tourism sector report revealed that more and more vacationers are seeking “digital downtime” (Visit Scotland, 2015). Moreover, resorts and travel packages weaning tourists off the internet are gaining global popularity. “Black hole” resorts have become popular luxury vacation choices in the United Kingdom and North America (Carrier, 2016). Similarly, “digital detoxing” holidays are new selling points for many island destinations, such as the Maldives, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Little Palm Island in Florida (Anita, 2016; Discover SVG, 2016; Little Palm Island, 2016). Additionally, lifestyle-oriented retreat programs, where participants are temporarily deprived of digital devices, are prevalent as one way to treat internet addiction, manage stress and enhance work and life resilience (Smith & Puczkó, 2015). Such innovative digital-free holiday products are increasingly reported on various media platforms, including newspapers, magazines, and promotional webpages.

Media discourses not only reflect social practices; but also contribute to identifying certain phenomenon and shaping public opinions and behaviours (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairclough, 1995; Habermas, 1989; Koller, 2005; Wu, Xue, Morrison, & Leung, 2012). Further, media representations of vacation and travel issues affect tourism development. Media discourses contribute to constructing destination images, identifying rising and declining markets, and shaping tourist behaviours (Mercille, 2005; Stepchenkova & Eales, 2011). Therefore, the understanding of media representation may predict future tourism trends. The clues to the future stem from reports about tourists’ emerging interests and the rise of new destinations (Cheng, 2016).

The present study investigates media discourses about holidays in environments where internet and mobile signals are either absent or digital technology usage is controlled. The guiding generic aim of the research can be articulated as follows: to understand how the media is representing DFT through a critical discourse analysis of web-based documents. More specifically, three aims can be expressed. Firstly, we attempt to gain a conceptual understanding of DFT as presented in the media. The second aim is to review the ways the media representation has changed over time by noting any shifts in prominent concepts and themes. Thirdly, we strive to inquire into the broad social context where DFT emerges and the relevant media discourses are produced. Particularly, we will examine various online written records, including news, business statements and reports, advertisements, magazine articles, novels, expert reviews and personal travel dairies. The present research is important because an insight into the media discourses should help to clarify the current trends of (not)using technology on holidays and improve the understanding of the significance and value of DFT. In addition, the market trends revealed in the media discourses may indicate future opportunities for regional tourism development.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Prevalent endorsement for ICT adoption in tourism

Tourism researchers have been highly biased towards promoting the

advantages of ICT adoption, endorsing the ever-widening use of technology in predominantly positive ways. There has been an implicit assumption that digital communications will be embraced more and more by both tourists and the tourism entrepreneurs (Dickinson, Hibbert, & Filimonau, 2016). The untrammelled adoption of the innovative technologies has been driven by both utilitarian and hedonic goals (Turel & Serenko, 2012). There are several background reasons explaining the rise of technology use on holiday. Firstly, there is ownership and affordability. Contemporary tourists clearly own more digital devices because they are affordable and woven into the fabric of daily life (MacKay & Vogt, 2012; Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016). Secondly, some people have a strong specific need to manage work issues while on holiday (Kirillova & Wang, 2016; Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016). Thirdly, many tourists seek to maintain links to friends and families as well as to share memorable/thrilling experiences (Minazzi & Mauri, 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014). Fourthly, some tourists also resort to digital devices to take a break from physical interactions at tourism settings or fill downtime during their trips (Neuhof, 2016; Wang et al., 2016). A further reason is that tourists tend to appreciate the convenience, efficiency and flexibility of using ICT to facilitate their travels (MacKay & Vogt, 2012; Minazzi & Mauri, 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Wang et al., 2014, 2016).

Social media, which influences both tourism industry and tourist experience, has in particular gained prominence in tourism and hospitality research (Xiang, Du, Ma, & Fan, 2017). The roles that social media is playing include but not limited to access to information, awareness of products, experience sharing through a variety of platforms, and evaluation postings (Hudson & Thal, 2013; Li & Pearce, 2016; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

### 2.2. Emerging voices of reducing ICT engagement on holiday

There is evidence that some tourists do dislike the “digital leash” and even feel stressed by the expectations surrounding being connected (Fitzpatrick, 2008; Wang et al., 2014). Firstly, distraction from the holiday settings is one of the most apparent drawbacks of ubiquitous technology in tourism (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016). Digital communications, especially addiction-prone social media applications, are barriers to fully enjoying the present tourism environment (Echeburúa & de Corral, 2009). Secondly, unlimited digital communication can exert a harmful effect on interpersonal relationships because it hinders the interaction among travel companions (Dickinson et al., 2016). Considerable importance is often attached to enhancing family bonds and friendship during holidays. Face-to-face communication and physical interaction are viewed as the most effective ways to reinforce interpersonal harmony and bonding. Digital connectivity can subvert the opportunities to strengthen personal connections forged by co-presence (Smith & Puczkó, 2015). Thirdly, the pressure induced by obligatory social connections while on holiday frustrates some tourists. Ubiquitous ICT can make tourists feel that they are forced to “show and live” tourism experiences for others. Moreover, some tourists are stressed because they lack an excuse for shutting down or ignoring the external “ever-present expectation” in this digital era (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016). Fourthly, tourists who are “elsewhere”, rather than being present “in the moment”, can miss valuable opportunities to build their skills such as expressing themselves, solving travel problems, appreciating cultures of host communities, and learning from others (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012).

Some tourists have become aware of these disadvantages of digital connection when travelling and therefore seek to be disconnected. For example, many backpackers disconnect themselves from the internet because they are concerned with the “surveillance” of social media applications (Germann, Molz, & Paris, 2015). Some tourists want to make use of holiday time to manage the habits of device use within the family. For example, many parents encourage their children to go

camping in off-line environments. This activity may offer the opportunity to control young people's engagement in technology (Dickinson et al., 2016). Further, some international tourists choose to stay off-line rather than connect to Wi-fi or use local cell services because they do not trust unfamiliar providers due to concerns about privacy and information security issues (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016).

### 2.3. Increasing concerns over ubiquitous ICT use

Habitual use of the internet and digital technologies has become a widespread phenomenon among families, in businesses, and across leisure contexts. Undoubtedly, technologies make life easier and more efficient, while the enjoyment of using technologies drives further use, and in turn, develops enduring habits (Cyr, Head, & Ivanov, 2006; Kirillova & Wang, 2016; Limayem, Hirt, & Cheung, 2007; Turel & Serenko, 2012; Van der Heijden, 2004). Technology services which produce thrills or fill social-psychological needs are the most addictive, such as social media, messaging applications and internet gambling (Echeburúa & de Corral, 2009; Fenichel, 2004; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Young, 2010). Less positively, empirical evidence demonstrates that very frequent use of digital technologies can result in side effects in such domains as health, family interaction, and productivity at work (Byun, Ruffini, Mills, Douglas, Niang, Stepchenkova, ..., Atallah, 2009; Young, 1998a, 1998b). Moreover, excessive involvement in the virtual world can interfere with physically-based tasks, produce mental stress and influence interpersonal relationships. In a poll among social media users, half of the participants admitted their lives and moods were altered for the worse, revealing lower levels of confidence, inability to fully relax, sleep disorders and problematic relationships (Donnelly, 2012). Furthermore, dependence on and even addiction to the internet and technologies are very contemporary concerns (Block, 2008; Karaiskos, Tzavellas, Balta, & Paparrigopoulos, 2010; Turel & Serenko, 2012). Heavy usage of ICT may develop harmful psychological conditions and social isolation of users when digital activities dominate daily life and real-world relationships become secondary to on-line contacts (Byun et al., 2009; Ferraro, Caci, D'amico, & Blasi, 2006; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Young, 1998a).

The focus on the adverse impacts of excessive technology engagement is increasing in multiple fields. However, the perspective that ICT confers substantial advantages are certainly prevalent in tourism scholarship (Akaka & Vargo, 2014; Chathoth et al., 2013; Neuhofer et al., 2014). The complexity and variability in the outcomes of the growing use of ICT prompts a comprehensive understanding of situations where people can experience their holiday time without internet connection or digital devices. Therefore, the present study attempts to explore DFT experiences.

### 2.4. Media influences and tourism

Public discourses can be viewed as powerful systems for forming and articulating socially shared realities (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). A close analysis of media representation can locate a phenomenon in its historical, social and cultural background (Koller, 2005). Discourse analysis approaches have already been applied in multiple fields to examine the ways that media communications systematically construct social practices (Gale, 2004; Gee & Green, 1998; Lupton, 1992). For example, Gale (2004) employed media discourse analysis in his study about Australian media statements describing refugees. Three dominant themes were identified from the Australian media coverage, namely humanitarian, national interest and human rights. All these themes were linked to the country's populist culture. Moreover, persuasive media discourses are powerful in framing knowledge; they serve to illuminate, constitute, negotiate and even modify the experience, beliefs, stereotypes, values, feelings and ideas of the public (Cukier, Ngwenyama, Bauer, & Middleton, 2009; Habermas, 1989; Koller, 2005). Therefore, analyses of the media statements and expressions can

demonstrate trends in social practices (including tourism practices).

In the tourism field, media discourses are regarded as important information sources to help tourism researchers grasp an overview of current issues and clarify the relationships among powerful voices (Cheng, 2016; Schweinsberg, Darcy, & Cheng, 2017; Thurnell-Read, 2017; Wu et al., 2012). For example, the examination of media coverage on global medical tourism depicted the integration of the healthcare and tourism industries and associated gradual power changes (Mainil, Platenkamp, & Meulemans, 2011). Initially, ethical objections in medically oriented discourses dominated media coverage of medical tourism. Such discourses questioned the implicit hedonistic lifestyle of medical tourists, made assertions about the quality of the medical services, and argued that undeveloped supplier regions were misdirecting their medical effort. A multitude of trade and service discourses appeared after 2011, and began to outweigh the ethical emphasis, focusing more on industrial development, socioeconomic benefits and tourists'/patients' well-being. This shift of emphasis over time was seen by Mainil et al. (2011) as effectively characterising the debate overall and legitimising medical tourism.

Secondly, the media representation shapes tourists' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours because influential terms and language are used (Iwashita, 2003). One obvious influence of media discourse is building tourists' image of a place. Mercille (2005) confirmed the congruence between tourists' perception of Tibet and the repeatedly produced, hence crystallised, images in novels, tour guide books and geography magazines. Mercille's study also highlighted that the varied perceptions that tourists held were due to the kinds of media to which people had been exposed. In a similar style of work, Stepchenkova and Eales (2011) found significant correlations between British news coverage on Russia and tourist flows from the UK to Russia during the same period.

The present study seeks to extend the link between media discourses and tourism. Despite the increasing media presentation of digital detox travels, little research has been done to build a comprehensive understanding of how DFT has been constructed in the media. Neither the conceptual construction of DFT, nor the presented value and significance of holiday making in digital-free zones, has been fully studied.

The goal of the study is to examine the media representations of tourists' motivations for and the experience of leaving behind digital devices and internet connection on holidays. The themes and issues in this media discourse will be examined to understand why and how DFT has become a meaningful issue. Secondly, the ways the media representation has changed over time will be analysed by noting the shift in prominent concepts and themes. Thirdly, the study will explore how the significance and value of making holiday without digital connection has been positioned in relation to broader sociocultural circumstances. Building on these outcomes, the researchers will present key directions for DFT.

## 3. Research design

### 3.1. Framework for the critical analysis of media discourse

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach was used to examine the media representation of DFT. Multiple web-based documentary resources were analysed. Using the Google search engine, the researchers collected diverse information about digital-free holidays; that is, those vacations where tourists are without the internet connection and/or digital devices. The data set included news stories, industry and survey reports, magazine articles, expert reviews, tourism advertisements, editorials and travel dairies. The analytical framework was established based on Fairclough's (1995) critical approach to discourse analysis and modified by introducing Carvalho's (2008) scheme of media discourse analysis (MDA).

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis fundamentally seeks to reveal how discourses and their strategic presentation relate to,

particularly instantiate, constitute or reflect, the evolutionary socio-cultural realities. CDA is suitable for research into social and cultural changes because it facilitates the integration of discourse analysis and the analysis of macro contexts. Moreover, CDA is “critical” in the sense that it focuses on the links between a phenomenon and the selective use of language in communication efforts. It makes the implicit and obscure more apparent. Fairclough suggested a three-dimensional analytical framework for critical analysis, including linguistic description, interpretation of discourse practice (producing and interpreting text), and explanation of sociocultural embeddedness. This nested model incorporates three different types of analyses, namely textual, processing and social analyses, which are simultaneous but interdependent (Fairclough, 1995; Janks, 1997). However, the textual elements such as grammar, semantics and syntax-based features of discourse (e.g., word use, transitivity, rhetoric) were not of the concern in the present study because this research pursues the wider social issues rather than pursuing a close linguistic examination.

Carvalho (2008) clarified and restated three significant components of CDA, in relation to media texts, including sequences over time, the strategies of social actors and the constructive effects of media discourses. The time sequence accounts for the historical trajectory of discourses including attending to changes in the way that media presents an issue, and the ways the meaning of concepts evolves. The topic of the strategies of social actors includes considering the roles of different parties and their ways of framing social knowledge. The suggested constructive component pursues the links between the text and the circumstances of its production and interpretation.

In this study, a comprehensive Critical Media Discourse Analysis (CMDA) framework was developed by integrating Carvalho's (2008) media discourse analysis into Fairclough's (1995) CDA approach. Fairclough's CDA approach provides a skeletal frame; while Carvalho's scheme offers analytical components for each dimension of CDA. More specifically, Carvalho's textual analysis programme was applied to text description. The contextual analysis was used for interpretation of processes. Both textual and contextual analyses facilitated social explanation (See Fig. 1).

The critical analysis of media discourses about DFT was conducted with the guidance of this CMDA framework. Importantly, different categories of analyses (text, process and social) were carried out simultaneously by moving backwards and forwards among them; rather than undertaking an appraisal separately or sequentially. Such cross-referencing was useful because analytic comments for each kind of analysis can inform subsequent moves and assist with other levels of the analysis. Open-ended reading, unsupervised content analysis by Leximancer and manual coding were combined to build the CMDA.

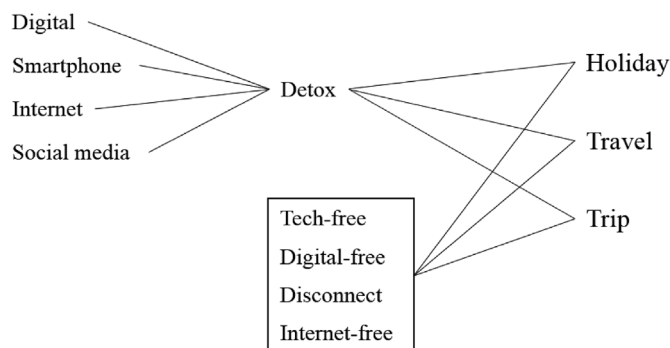


Fig. 2. Key words used in the search queries for DFT.

### 3.2. Methods

#### 3.2.1. Data collection

Queries using Google search engine were applied to obtain the archival media documents about DFT. Prevalent search engines are effective in providing clues for the understanding of potential tourists' interests, opinions and intentions (Bangwayo-Skeete & Skeete, 2015; Dotson, Fan, Feit, Oldham, & Yeh, 2017; Li et al., 2017). Data collection began with selecting keywords. At first, five terms representing technology (digital, technology, smartphone, internet, ICT) and three words indicating disconnected conditions (disconnect, free, no) were used in combination with tourism, holiday, vacation, travel or trip. A total of 75 possible inquiries were created and typed in sequence, such as “digital-free tourism”, “internet disconnected travel”, “no smartphone holiday” and “disconnected holiday”. Compounds which appeared most frequently in the trials were selected as the keywords for data collection. In addition, another three terms, namely detox, social media and tech-free appeared frequently in the query results. These terms were also used to generate keywords. Consequently, 24 compound keywords were used in queries to search for media discourses on DFT (Fig. 2).

The data collection was a rolling process between 16 December 2016 and 4 April 2017. A total of 16 rounds of searching and downloading was repeated week by week to achieve a critical volume of data and cover the entire course of media coverage on DFT. In each search-collect round, the researcher submitted pre-set querying keywords to Google search engine and then visited all of the returned URLs. New documents retrieved in the next searching round a week later were also considered. The discourses reporting DFT products, describing actual experience of reducing ICT engagement on holiday, or including content of endorsing DFT ideas were incorporated into the data set for

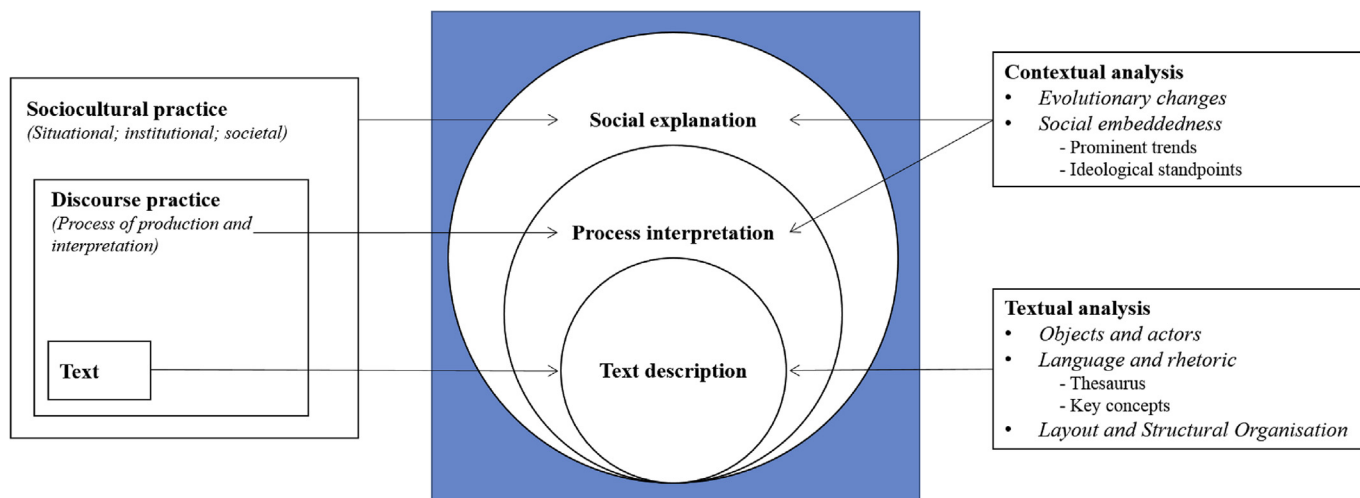


Fig. 1. Framework for critical media discourses analysis (CMDA).

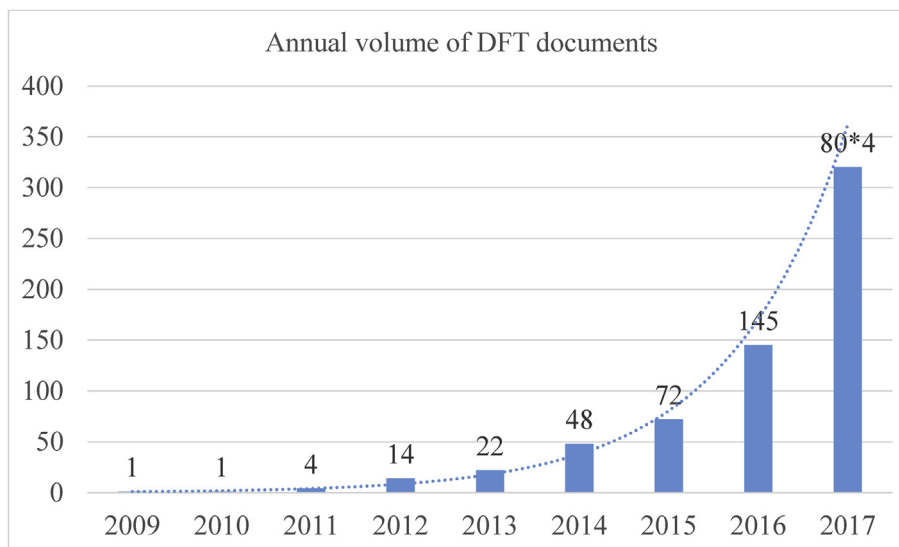


Fig. 3. Distribution of 387 documents about DFT.

Note: the number of articles in 2017 were represented by the quadruple of the number for the first three months.

CMDA. Consequently, a total of 456 documents was assembled by reviewing the archival materials and filtering out any irrelevant or duplicated items.

### 3.2.2. Data analysis

The researcher employed thorough reading and reviewing of the texts, unsupervised (automatic) Leximancer analysis, and manual coding to undertake the CMDA. The study team recorded analytical comments for the appropriate dimensions of CMDA (text, process, social) whenever relevant terms appeared throughout these three phases. Firstly, researchers read the sampled media discourses without specific questions or a tight study scheme to avoid constraining and filtering effects. This phase assisted in providing an overview of the relationships between technology and tourism as well as identifying some significant features of digital-free holidays (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Janks, 1997). Secondly, Leximancer 4.50 software was employed to conduct an automatic content analysis. Minimal researcher driven directives were used in the application of the Leximancer program. The dominant concepts, themes and their correlation nexus informed both textual and contextual analyses. The Leximancer results offered evidence for summarising the text, as well as stimulating interpretation of the processes at work and providing clues for sociocultural explanations (Tseng, Wu, Morrison, Zhang, and Chen (2015). Finally, thorough manual coding was carried out. In this phase of the analysis, the researchers were able to use the terms identified by Leximancer as a guide and focus on discussing digital life and describing DFT experience. This coding approach is purposive and integrative. It is, as Glaser, 1978 (p. 72) suggested, able to “weave the fractured story back together again”. In addition, Leximancer’s function of producing inter-group comparison maps assisted historical-diachronic analysis which revealed changes in the ways that the media have represented DFT over time.

Leximancer is a suitable tool for efficient CMDA basically because it is built on the attributes of the texts and seeks to reveal underlying concepts and relationships (Leximancer Pty Ltd, 2017, p. 8). Leximancer’s systematic “words to meanings to insights” approach to understanding textual material is accomplished through phenomena observation, pattern analysis and relationship formulation (Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele, & Cretchley, 2015). This process of categorising, refining and generalising texts fits well with the three dimensions of CMDA. Secondly, Leximancer is superior to many other manual techniques due to the lack of researcher bias which is premised on the principle of minimal analyst intervention (Cretchley, Rooney, & Gallois,

2010). In addition, Leximancer deals with the text information within each controllable coding block. In this study, very few changes were made to the default setting of Leximancer. Only very basic variations on the automatically extracted concept seeds (such as think and thought) were combined. The coding resolution was set as one sentence per coding block in the current research; instead of the normal two-sentence blocks because the published media discourse is effectively already edited and more concise and efficient than everyday conversations (Ford, 1994).

## 4. Critical media discourse analysis

### 4.1. Textual analysis

This section considers the features of concepts and key terms used about holidays without digital technology. The researchers examined objects (as in key terms), actors involved, language employed for communication, and the way that the texts were organised (Carvalho, 2005).

#### 4.1.1. Objects and actors

The core object to be constructed was DFT and its value; and as a broader topic, digital lifestyle. Firstly, the topic of digital detox vacations appeared online for the first time in 2009 and subsequently has gained increasing coverage. The sheer number of media discourse items is the first indicator of the relative salience and public attention awarded to an issue. There were 387 documents with identifiable publishing time among the 456 searchable articles on DFT. This material covered the period from 2009 to the end of data collection on 31 March 2017. Fig. 3 illustrates the increasing trend of media reports on DFT. Secondly, the pressing phenomenon of ubiquitous digital technology use in business fields, everyday life and vacation time was commonly discussed in relation to the rise of DFT. Discussion about the digital lifestyle in the media discourses ranged from the perceived usefulness of technology to the adverse impacts of excess usage. The disadvantages surrounding pervasive technology/internet adoption were presented to convince audiences of the significance of digital detoxing. Examples of frequently reported events include: luxury resorts and hotels encouraging customers to surrender digital devices; the Scottish tourism authority revealing the demands of holiday makers for digital down time and boosting its highland areas as a perfect destination for escaping; the rise of some companies specialising in

designing and organising digital-free travels; and famous figures practising digital detox when on holiday.

Among the actors and producers of the discourses, there were bloggers who recorded and shared their experiences, advertisers who strived to promote products, journalists who aimed to present investigations about the ideas of the public, and magazine columnists who introduced attractive options to boost readership and profit from commercial income. Apart from the writers, there are other actors involved in the construction of DFT. The media frequently considered the providers of DFT. Those consumers who were tired of the digital leash as a social condition were highlighted. Several individual figures were also mentioned. This group included experts whose views were quoted and iconic popular figures who set an example by vacationing without digital connectivity. Moreover, some public sector reports and institutions contributed to the construction of DFT when their findings or practices were represented by the media. An additional, long and itemised list of information about these objects and actors can be viewed in supplementary material provided to this article (or directly from the authors).

#### 4.1.2. Layout and structural organisation

Many of the media discourses on DFT were delivered with images. Providing a visual impression is effective in portraying a concept with which the audiences are unfamiliar. Furthermore, writers tended to organise the texts to progressively build cognitive, affective and conative reactions of the recipients (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). A typical discourse often attempted to stimulate the audience's awareness of DFT as an emerging mode of travel through using powerful slogans in headlines complemented by other engaging expressions in the leading and first few paragraphs. The main body often began with a depiction of life and holiday scenarios where there is continuing heavy use of digital technology. The presented digital lifestyle usually led readers to consider the costs and benefits of people being constantly connected to the internet and attached to their electronic screens. The next section reported either the favourable or adverse effects of ubiquitous ICT, depending on the standpoint – endorsement or objections to the idea of DFT. In the discourses which were supportive of DFT, the conviction was reinforced by further reminding audience of the negative tourist experience of excessively using technologies. The text then moved on to the description of exciting tourism experience of suspending digital communication and staying away from electronic devices. There were three main types of discourse closure: leaving it open for discussion, advocating the audiences to switch off on holidays, or providing methods of accessing DFT products. Not surprisingly, the more commercial oriented documents marketed DFT products.

#### 4.1.3. Language and rhetoric

**4.1.3.1. Labels.** The vocabulary used to present a certain phenomenon is a significant component of the constitution of meanings. Close attention was paid to the thesaurus of terms labelling DFT in headlines and the first paragraphs of media articles which direct the preferred reading. Many intriguing phrases beside “digital detox” were employed to represent vacation situations where ICT are limited or absent. The list is extensive and is reported in Table 1 to capture the style of this communication. Some other persuasive expressions were also used across the articles to convey the idea of holidays without ICT (See Table 1.).

In addition, a small selection from across the years reveals the commonality of the addiction metaphor. These phrases were used to represent the recipients who are identified as needing to practise DFT, such as the Internet Addicts, Tech-addicted Adults, Gadget Junkies, Stressed Executives, Tech Geek, Social Media Addict, Those Who Have Everything-Except Willpower, iPhone Addict, the Digitally Overwhelmed, the Mobile-Fixated, Overachievers, Tech Savvy, A Slave to Your Device.

**4.1.3.2. Conceptual themes.** The identification of key concepts and their relations is an essential part of discourse analysis. Unsupervised content analysis was carried out with the sampled documents by employing Leximancer software to identify essential concepts and dominant themes of the media discourses on DFT. As a result, 94 concepts emerged from the text which were refined into 12 themes, namely digital, phone, social, guests, experience, night, free, beach, email, natural, service and Wi-fi. The connecting thread runs from the discussion on digital lifestyle to the specification of the DFT experience. Theme “free” lies in between these two groups as a mediator and defines the border between digital life and disconnected holidays (See Fig. 4).

In Fig. 4, the researchers were able to identify coherent patterns in the clustering of the themes. In the lower half of the image, five themes, namely digital, phone, social, email and Wi-fi, appear as involving the penetration of digital technologies into everyday life and vacation time. The theme *digital* reflected people's habitual usage of electronic devices and the internet; and the frequent compound word “digital detox” presented the ideas of breaking away from the virtual world on vacations. Theme *phone* was related to the technique and machinery issues of digital communication, revealing the prevalence of smartphones as a medium device connecting users to the internet. Theme *social* concerned the impacts of digital communication on interpersonal relationships. Social media usage has dominated many people's social life, but it is arguable whether ICT makes people more connected or isolated. Theme *email* comprised concepts email, friends and Facebook which altogether stood for the influential digital communication applications. These tools play significant roles in maintaining constant connections to work places and social networks. The concept *Wi-fi* emerged as a theme by itself, indicating the prominence of wireless internet in daily information and communication activities; and the overwhelming need people feel to have Wi-fi connection.

Another group of six conceptual themes, namely guests, experience, night, beach, natural and service, were oriented to the elements of the detoxing tourist experience. The theme *guests* incorporated digital-free environments offered by resorts, hotels, retreat centres, and travel packages. The theme *experience* represented situations where holiday makers appreciate exotic places, marvellous scenery, and engaging culture as substitutes for digital usage. The theme *night* comprised digital detoxing experience featuring tranquillity and privacy. Concepts related to island and coastal destinations, which are some of the prevalent physical environments hosting digital detox holiday resorts, were subsumed under the broad heading of *beach*. Additionally, the theme *natural* identified being close to nature-based environments and wild animals, which were regarded as distractions from digital screens. Finally the theme *service* identified facilities and supportive incentives provided by digital-free accommodation, such as hotels offering discounts to customers who surrender digital devices.

#### 4.2. Evolution of the discourse and social context

One focus of the current research is understanding the timeline of the treatment of DFT by the media. In the terminology of CDA and MDA, this level of consideration involves historical-diachronic analysis of both discourse strategies and social context. In particular, the researchers considered shifts in the wider sociocultural environment over time as the embeddedness and explanation of the evolving media representation of DFT.

Three phases of media coverage can be identified: the introduction stage (2009–2013), a growth stage (2014–2015) and a development stage (2016–2017). Select events characterise the stages. One article in 2009, and another in 2010, noted the value of the digital detoxing experience. This information was presented by a writer from a solo travel community and appeared in a travel diary format. Serious media presentation of digital-free holidays started in 2011 with debates about the practices of resorts and hotels offering digital-free rooms or

**Table 1**  
DFT labels and persuasive expressions used in media discourse.

DFT Labels	2009–2013	Digital Sabbaths; PTDD: the “Partial Travel Digital Detox”; Tech-free Getaways; Such a Turnoff; Holidays Unplugged; Hotel without Wi-Fi; Travel without Technology; “I am Here” Day.
	2014–2015	On Disconnecting; A Trip without My iPhone and the Internet; Digital Detox Getaways; Tech-free Tourism; Tech-free Travel; Detox Tourism; Internet-free Family Holidays; Child-friendly Digital Detox; One Day Offline; “Off Grid” Camping; Summer without Social Media; Smartphone-free Vacation; Digital Detox Breakaways; Unplugged Travel.
	2016–2017	Locations to Disconnect and Disappear; Tech-free Family Holidays; Internet-free: a Family Detox; Far-Flung Digital Detoxes; Unplugged Hotels for a Truly Relaxing Vacation; Digital Detox at the End of the World; Changing Lanes; Detox-a Literal Eye-opener; Off-the-grid Places; Digital Detox: Escape from Reality; Nature Wellness Getaway; Cosy & Offbeat Places for a Digital Detox; A Travel-enforced Digital Detox; Chalo Offline; Trips that Encourage You to Lose Your Phone; The Cold-Turkey Option for Tech-obsessed Travelers; No-tech Destinations; Tours for the Digitally Overwhelmed; New Luxury of Switching Off; Tech-free Holidays for a Real Escape; No Wi-Fi; National Day of Unplugging; A Silent Retreat; A Thai Beach Escape; Signal-free Holidays; Cord-cutting Experiences; ‘Back to Basics’ Tourism.
Persuasive expressions	2009–2013	Surrender Your Gadgets at Check-in; Leaving Technology Behind; Unplug & Recharge; Turning Off the Noise; Powering Down
	2014–2015	Go Off the Grid; Less Screen More Green; Switch Off; Avoid a Modern Meltdown; Taking Time to Disconnect and Connect; Unplugging from Technology; Disconnect to Reconnect; Turn Off, Shut Down, Log Out; Going Offline; Unplug and Unwind; Turn off Tune Out and Drop Out; Abandon Your Smartphones; Put down that Smart Phone; Checking in on Facebook is Definitely a No-No; Resist the Lure of Facebook; Kick Back and Relax.
	2016–2017	No Internet was Actually a Bliss; Escape to the Best Off-grid Destinations; Navigate Your Digital Anxiety; Learn How Recharging Can Be a Huge Accelerator for You; Leave the Phone at Home for an Offline Adventure; Ultimate Digital Detox Escapes to Help You Feel More Human Again; Beyond Just Proper Sleep; Shut Down & Take Off; Unplug From a Virtual World and Live in the Real One; Go on a Digital Detox and Find Your Perfect Lifestyle; Tackles Stress with its New Digital Wellness Program; Finding “Me Time”; Escaping Technology; Ditch Smartphones; Rejoin Real World; Take a Break from Your Phone; Travel Smart; Instagram Nirvana; Recharge and Reconnect; Leave Your Smartphone at Home; Taking Overachievers to African Bush for Digital Detox.

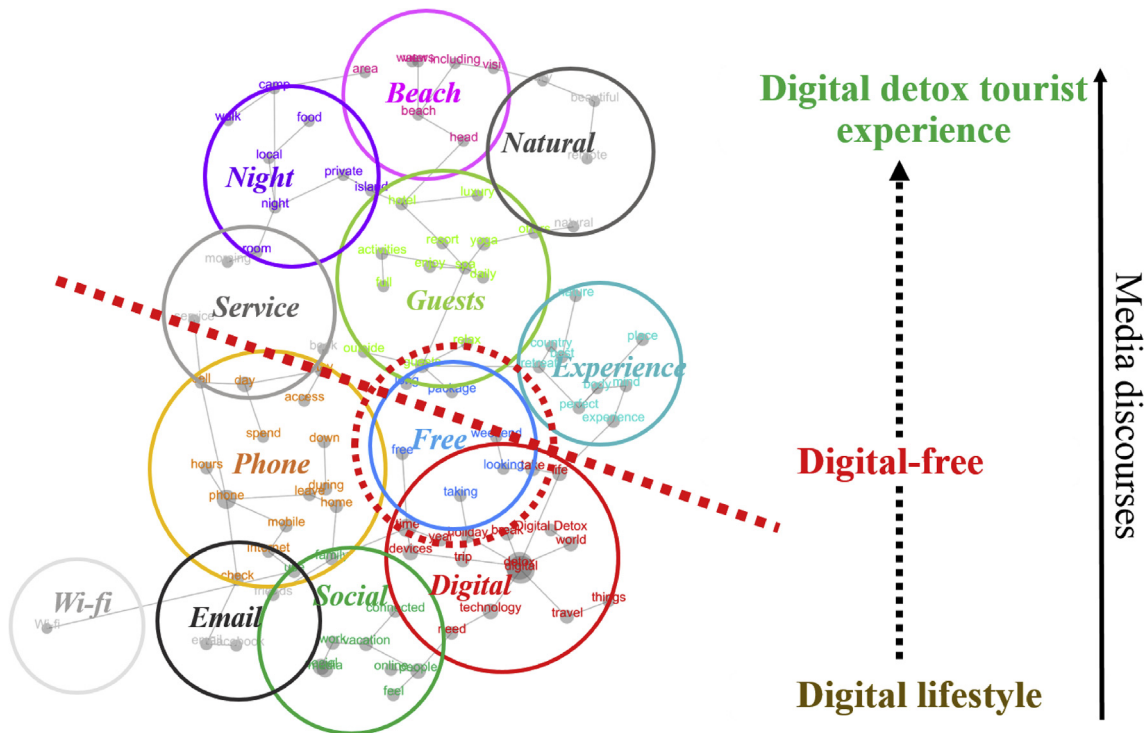


Fig. 4. Conceptual networking map of media representation of DFT.

confiscating customers' electronic devices in the United States and Europe, especially the United Kingdom. In that year, a digital-detox travel story was posted on the official homepage of the British Tourism Authority (Visit Britain). From that point, there was a blossoming of online messages about holidays without digital devices or internet connection. The media reports acted to construct the idea of DFT fuelled in part by heated discussion on technology (non-) usage in daily life.

The number of DFT discourses soared sharply in 2014, with frequent discussions on the establishment of enterprises specialising in providing digital detox experience. Also, in 2014 Scottish Tourism marketed their highland regions as ideal off-line destinations for people seeking digital detox settings. Multiple promotional efforts appeared in 2014 and 2015 when commercial marketers started to play active and deliberate roles

in defining the concept of DFT. From 2014 on, diverse digital detox options, such as finding peace at a Buddhist monastery, and vacationing beyond connected resorts and hotels were stressed. The second surge of media coverage about DFT was in 2016. The media discourses revealed keen competition among DFT providers and the diversification of digital-free holiday products. Both tourism authorities and private businesses were promoting and reporting various DFT experiences, such as watching the northern lights and travelling to remote, off-the-digital-grid places to view wildlife. Importantly, by 2016 and in 2017, there was an obvious transformation of emphasis about DFT from a niche product to an offering appealing to a broader consumer base.

The changes throughout time in the way that media represented DFT are revealed by the time-based Leximancer analysis. Both evolutionary conceptualisation of DFT and changes in sociocultural contexts





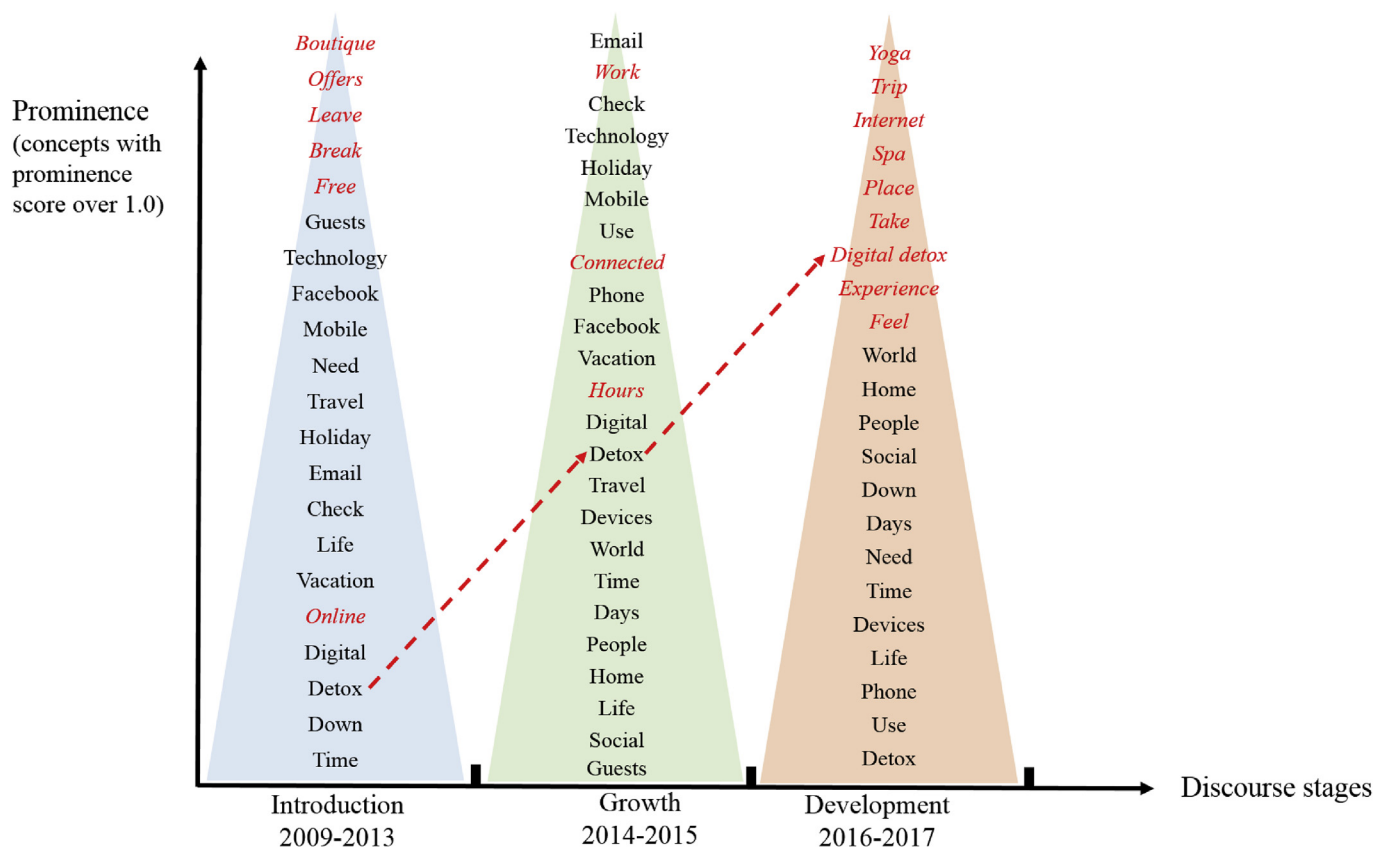


Fig. 6. Ranked prominent concepts for each DFT discourse stage. Note: the highlighted/italic are distinctive concepts for certain discourse stages.

discourses identifying a growing popularity of DFT following its first unveiling in the introductory discoursing stage. The many examples of overusing ICT were referred to as the major antecedents of vacation demands for getting rid of electronic devices.

Compared with the first stage, even-handed debates and rational, logical discussions were relatively fewer in 2014 and 2015. Discourses at the second stage stressed prevalent “burnout” and noted the mental state of being “always stressed”. These texts explicitly advocated DFT as a solution. Concepts “work”, “connected” and “hours” were unique to the growth stage of the DFT discourse (2014–2015). Texts surrounding these concepts revealed the situations where advanced internet technology has reinforced the perception of being compelled to maintain constant access to information, the workplace and social networks. In particular, “email” and “work” stood out as prominent concepts characterising discourses in 2014 and 2015. The texts around “email” were mainly about the powerful erosion of the line between work and life by digital technology. Email served as the most important means of making workers contactable whenever and wherever, which lead to the expansion of work time and associated stresses. Other concepts which co-occurred with “email” and “work”, such as “check”, also presented the realities that people felt the need to respond to work contacts during free time. In addition, there are some other concepts characterising the growth stage of DFT discourses, such as “social” and “Facebook”. Together these terms indicate that work and social activities were the dominant use of technology by holiday makers.

The development stage of DFT discourse (2016–2017) was characterised by concepts “yoga”, “trip”, “internet”, “spa”, “digital detox”, “place”, “experience”, “take” and “feel”. “Digital Detox” has been accepted as an established term by the third stage and a clear definition appeared then in the tourism field: “a period of time during which a person refrains from using electronic devices such as smartphones or computers, regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress or focus on

social interaction in the physical world.” (East West Retreat, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Compared with the general definition of digital detox by the Macquarie dictionary in 2014, this vacation-oriented digital detox extended the value of detoxing to include benefiting relationships and social life beyond the process of de-stressing.

In this third phase, the concepts “internet” and “take” particularly revealed the rising demands for digital-free experience among tourists. “Internet” and other closely associated concepts, such as “access”, “cell”, “phone” and “service”, together represented two sides of the issue of ubiquitous internet connectivity. On one hand, modern societies have become constantly wired due to the internet penetration driven by easier access to computers and an increased use of smart-phones. On the other hand, there is a recognition of “new escapism” emerging in this always-wired society: to escape is not only to stay away from the physical home environment; but also to disconnect from the digital world of routine work and life. “Take” was used mainly in two situations: taking a break from ICT as an important DFT motivation; and discussing tourists’ behaviours of taking travel photos. The majority of excerpts from the concept “take” addressed “take a break” from digital engagement.

The third stage of media discourses also frequently presented the rising market demands for DFT and the rapid growth of businesses and institutions offering digital-free holiday products. Concepts which constituted the character of digital-free experience were aggregated into two groups, each of which presented a distinctive category of DFT products. Particularly, the dominant concept “experience” and other highly associated concepts, namely “nature”, “local”, and “remote”, promoted the experience of nature-based DFT. The nature-based DFT encouraged people to travel in remote, rural or wild regions where

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.eastwestretreats.com/california-june-2017.html>.



time. Older discourses mainly presented the stress and overwork induced by the “always-on” culture in the digital era; while articles in the last two years have covered various effects of ICT on social life and harmonious interpersonal relationships. Such shifts revealed not only the changes in the way that people are using digital technology, but also a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of digital engagement. The adverse effects of constant digital connection and excess technology use have been firmly asserted in recent discourses. Initially, there were more tentative discussions about the negative effects, while now, the disadvantages of constant digital connection are fully expressed. These finding from media discourses are consistent with ideas of academic studies (Byun et al., 2009; Ferraro et al., 2006; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Young, 1998a). Human society is becoming less connected through presence; although the internet makes individuals more closely linked in virtual space. Almost twenty years ago, Putnam (2000) reported on the decline of social capital in his much cited work “Bowling alone”. It is not yet clear how the social capital of being online together works to meet human needs for flourishing traditionally achieved through the company of others. Certainly, in the texts analysed by the researchers, greater importance has been attached over time to how to live well with technologies, and prevent social isolation induced by digital connection.

The rhetoric has changed from one that mainly focused on surrendering electronic devices to one that now contains a number of messages to build various elements of tourism experience. The media represented the digital detox ideas at the introductory stage mainly by delivering the fact that some luxury hotels and resorts offered incentives to guests who surrendered electronic devices. Better relaxation was claimed as the primary outcome. In contemporary offerings, a tailored range of tourism experiences in digital-free environments have been represented. The emphases have included ways tourists can have richer sensory, emotional, cognitive, and relationship experiences through digital-free activities (Pearce, 2011). For example, sensory experiences have been highlighted by focussing on the direct visions, sounds, comfortableness, taste of cuisines of the physical setting. Attention to emotions has been stressed, some of which such as quiet contemplation, and a sense of freedom have been seen as uniquely achievable in DFT. In terms of fulfilling cognitive goals, development of abilities to learn about settings first hand, explore unfamiliar environments, know how to communicate with unfamiliar others, and maintain self-discipline are claimed as DFT experiential benefits. Behavioural and relationship components of DFT experience were often represented in discourses on DFT. The behavioural element has been extensively addressed by presenting alternative activities to technology usage. The relationship benefits stressed in DFT experience are related to not only interactions happening during travels but also longer term benefits for partners, families and friendships are mentioned.

The implications of the findings above lie in three directions: providing clues for the prediction of future DFT tendencies; advising tourists of appropriate behaviours for digital-free travels; and offering information to tourism and hospitality business and organisations for the design and management of DFT experience. As a preliminary observation, however, the researchers note that the media representations have begun to use the expression digital detox quite widely. It can be suggested that there are some residual negative connotations implicit in this language that are linked to metaphors of addiction disorders. The researchers therefore continue to propose and prefer to use the

expression digital-free tourism (DFT) as introduced at the start of this paper to highlight the positive possibilities of disconnection.

A continued rise of DFT market demand can be forecast. Further, some characteristics of the needed DFT experience in the future, such as temporary disconnection, engaging alternative activities, personalised digital-free experience and special programs for certain groups (family with children, colleagues) can be conceived as likely developments. All importantly, abandoning technology usage does not mean discouraging technology adoption in tourism industry. It may initially appear paradoxical, but further studies are required as how to make use of advanced technologies to assist the development and management of DFT. As noted in one of the media pieces, “in the Mongolian grasslands, tech is now fuelling tech-free tourism”. Substantial advice is emerging for tourists to optimise their digital-free onsite experience through a raft of pre-visit and post-travel actions. For example, organising both the home and work world to advise of the time away from digital connectivity have become all important actions to reduce the constancy of connectivity expectations. Even practising using less screen time has been recommended as a form of digital detox training. Such behaviours coupled with a full itinerary of what to do and how to occupy holiday time enjoyably are seen as keys to detox vacation success.

The present study has the limitation of studying only the English language discourse. For example, heavily populated Asian countries such as China, Japan, India, Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea have high levels of mobile phone use across the community and strong expectations of connectivity (Pearce & Wu, 2017). Studies within these language groups may add to the international awareness of the generalisability of the English language discourses and the changes over time observed in this study. Some specific communication behaviours, such as sending on-site holiday photographs, which were not a strong focus in this study may be of special importance to select tourist groups. The frustrations and negativity of being disconnected for this behaviour may be a special case study for further work.

The potential areas of future research on DFT can also be directly developed from the media discourses. The benefits of DFT on tourists' wellbeing after travel is a first direction. What are the specific outcomes from DFT and how long can these effects last? These issues need longitudinal study and with a broad range of consumers from different countries. Secondly, the DFT market can be segmented, and it is valuable to identify the differences in the digital-free experience between groups with greater or lesser felt dependence on their devices. Thirdly, it is important to work out how DFT can make contributions to regional development. A discourse in the New York Times has presented the concerns of communities in the village of Cabo Polonio, Uruguay which is marketed as a remote, digital-free destination. Seasonal travellers are adamant that Cabo Polonio maintain its quaint charm (without electricity); whereas residents complain that the preserved primitive lifestyle is unnecessary and detrimental to the development of their businesses and the society in general. A singular focus on the tourist is never enough in tourism development studies, and the implications of DFT for wider sets of stakeholders can be identified as pivotal for further work.

**Author contribution**

Jing Li-65%  
Philip L. Pearce\*-25%  
David Low-10%

**Appendix 1. Attributions of DFT items presented in media discourses**

Document type	2009–2013	2014–2015	2016–2017	Geographic distribution ( <i>redunduplicative items included</i> )	2009–2013 (%)	2014–2015 (%)	2016–2017 (%)
Advertisement	11.9%	17.5%	32.9%	North America	40.7%	38.8%	27.0%

Magazine column	28.6%	30.0%	17.3%	South America	14.8%	12.8%	7.4%
Editorial, Expert reviews, News story	31.0%	32.5%	24%	Europe	25.9%	14.6%	19.9%
Business statements and survey reports	9.5%	5.8%	13.8%	Asia	9.9%	18.9%	22.7%
Travel dairies	19.0%	14.2%	12%	Australia	4.9%	10.2%	11.2%
<b>Total volume</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>225</b>	Africa	3.7%	3.9%	10.4%
				Antarctica	0.0%	1.0%	1.4%
				<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>498</b>

Category of digital-free environments (reduplicative items included)	2009–2013 (%, counts)	2014–2015 (%, counts)	2016–2017 (%, counts)	Means of disconnection (reduplicative items included)	2009–2013	2014–2015	2016–2017
Natural/wild/remote/rural areas	23.5% (19)	30.1% (62)	35.3% (176)	Self-concession/confiscation	79.0% (64)	74.3% (153)	68.9% (343)
Consciously designed resorts/hotels/retreats/restaurants without ICT	76.5% (62)	69.9% (144)	64.7% (322)	Removing internet coverage and mobile signal	18.5% (15)	22.3% (46)	27.9% (139)
Activities (substitutes for digital use)				Technology and facility under-development	2.5% (2)	3.4% (7)	3.2% (16)
	Natural/outdoor sports			Safari, adventure, trekking, hiking, horseback riding, bike riding, climbing mountains, fly-fishing, wild camping, fishing, swimming, golf, kayaking, zip-line canopy tours, high ropes obstacle courses, sail, tie-die, water ski, tennis, soccer, kite surfing, trap and skeet shooting, GPS treasure hunts skylight/sunrise/sunset watching (e.g., northern lights), star-gazing, wildlife watching, jet blasting, husky/reindeer sledding, sled ride, scavenger hunting, taking a survival challenge, etc...			
	Skill development			Working farms, mango harvesting, tree planting, crafting workshops, art classes, group therapy session, painting, cooking, watercolour classes, glass mosaic workshops, pond studies			
	Wellness/retreat programs			Yoga, Spa massage, body treatment, fitness classes, meditation, healthy eating, organic facials, detoxifying scrubs, stretching, Tai-Chi, Qi Gong, deep water running, hot spring bath, Finnish sauna, etc...			
	Group games			Board games, fireside sing-alongs, chitchat, conversation, capturing the flag, rock wall, kicking ball, talent shows, etc....			
	Spiritual/cultural experience			City tours, participating events and festivals, listening to folklore, archaeological exploration, visiting museums and heritage sites, visiting religious holy lands, temples and monasteries, doing pujas/prayers, etc...			
	Others			Shopping, gourmet meals, organic fresh farm meals			

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