1   Digital Free Tourism – An Exploratory Study of Tourist Motivations

2

3 **Abstract**

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

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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 in people's lifestyle, work place, and communication habit 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 the positive impacts on the travel experience. Most studies aim to further develop and enhance ICT application 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 made it a hub or one-stop shop for myriad activities from function to fun (Wei, 2008). While the smartphone itself does not carry a lot of functions, it is the variety of software or application that can be installed in the smartphone develops 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 the smartphone addiction traps (Lee. Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014; Salehan & Negahban, 2013). Deloitte's 2018 Global Consumer Report surveyed mobile users across 23 countries. The report suggested about 20 percent would check their phone more than 50 times a day; more than one-third would check their phone within five minutes after waking up in the morning; and near half would check their phone sometime during the night (Deloitte, 2018). 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 Phone Phobia) – has been found among younger generations, aged between 18 to 24 (Merz, 2013), delineating potentially complex impacts on personal wellbeing. Individuals

78 suffering from this disorder are found to be anxious when they cannot use their
79 mobile phones (SecurEnvoy, 2012). Another symptom, called "fear of missing out"
80 (FOMO), defined as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having
81 rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski, Murayama,
82 DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013, p. 1841), has recently emerged in related literature;
83 as people feel a need to be constantly connected with one another and up to
84 date on other people's lives. Furthermore, digital devices have become
85 affordable commodities for contemporary consumers and are a ubiquitous part of
86 21th century daily life; widening their potentially negative impacts to different
87 areas of private and work-life. The so-called "spillover effect" refers the situations
88 when people carry their routines and habits of using smartphones in everyday life
89 to non-daily contexts (MacKay & Vogt, 2012; White & White, 2007), among which
90 travel and tourism is a prominent example.

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

99   Such dilemma has motivated some scholars to explore the possibilities for
100 pursuing "digital free tourism" (DFT), a form of tourism where internet and mobile
101 signals are absent, or digital technology usage is controlled (Li, Pearce, & Low,
102 2018). Slightly different from "technology-free", the term "digital-free" was
103 introduced to emphasize technology overuse due to tourists "being wired for
104 information consumption and social communication" through electronic devices
105 (Li, Pearce, & Low, 2018, p.318). Several academic angles in regard have been
106 taken. For example, Tribe and Mkono (2017) explored the concept of e-lienation
107 and travelers' opinions on "tech free" tourism; Cai et al. (2019) investigated
108 tourists' emotional reactions and attitude changes during their digital-free
109 experiences; Kirillova and Wang (2016) examined the impact of smartphone use
110 for social purposes during a vacation on tourists' recovery; and Dickinson et al.
111 (2016) explored camping tourists' desire for digital connections and
112 disconnection. Although literature exists concerning digital disconnection, DFT
113 has often been approached as a negative consequence of being disconnected,
114 rather than as a voluntarily chosen mode of travel. Consequently, what motivates
115 tourists to undertake DFT voluntarily is hardly understood.

116   In order to bridge this gap, this study thus explores individuals' motivations
117 for experiencing DFT; defining DFT as a sought-after tourist experience rather
118 than as an inconvenience of travel. A specific group of participants (digital
119 natives born after 1980), considered to be the most vulnerable to digital
120 technology dependencies (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008), are targeted for this
121 purpose. The findings contribute new insights into the motivations of engaging in

122 DFT, laying the foundations for follow-up studies on this emerging trend.
123 Practitioners can learn how DFT can be further promoted to help reduce anxiety,
124 stress and growing mental health issues, which are most likely related to the
125 growing technology addictions and might motivate people to undertake this type
126 of holiday.

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2. Literature review

129 2.1. Negative impacts of ICT on the tourist experience

130   Studies of ICT in a tourism context have largely been focused on the
131 positive impacts on the overall travel experience. Due to the penetration of ICTs
132 into humans' daily lives, it has become natural for tourists to remain connected
133 while being away for holiday (Pearce, 2011). For many tourists, ICTs provide
134 convenience and flexibility especially when their trips have not been well-planned
135 (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014; D. Wang et al., 2016). They can search for
136 information and direction on-the-go and make impromptu decisions. Additionally,
137 it has become commonplace to see tourists sharing their experiences through
138 social media (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Wang et al., 2014). Maintaining
139 communication with families and friends throughout the trip has also been
140 associated with safety concerns (i.e., the tourist's location and condition is
141 known). Travelers who cannot get away from work issues while on holiday also
142 rely on digital devices to manage and communicate work-related tasks (Pearce &
143 Gretzel, 2012). Entertainment functions in gadgets also help tourists to fill
144 downtime during their trip (e.g., waiting time, on flight, in hotel room) (Wang et al.,
145 2016). However, recent studies have highlighted potentially negative impacts of
146 technology use on the tourist experience, several of which have been discussed
147 in literature.

148   Traditionally, the idea of tourism is closely related to a sense of escape
149 from everyday life and recovery from work. Accordingly, being at a destination
150 should be about feeling the authenticity of unfamiliar places and reflecting selves
151 (MacCannell, 1976). A number of studies have looked at the influence of
152 technology use on escapist experiences. While travelers are expected to rest and
153 relax during their vacation (Pearce, 2011) the ability to constantly connect to
154 work-related issues through ICTs can harm the tourist's quality of recovery
155 (Dickinson et al., 2016). Ultimately, this has resulted in a blurring between work
156 and leisure time, which has both negative and positive implications (Kim &
157 Hollensbe, 2018; White & White, 2007). On a similar line, Kirillova and Wang
158 (2016) investigated whether the use of smartphones for social purposes during a
159 vacation enhances or hinders the potential of delivering a sense of recovery.
160 They found frequency of work-related social presence to be a negative
161 moderator between destination restorative qualities and vacation recovery. On
162 the other hand, quality of work and non-work social presence was found to
163 positively moderate the impact of destination restorative qualities on vacation
164 recovery. Tribe and Mkono (2017) explored consumers' general views about

165 technology use in travel. Through analysing online user generated contents, their
166 results discuss how tourists can be frustrated and distracted by ICTs. The
167 authors argued that ICTs have overturned the original idea of travel and blurred
168 the distinctions between home and away, work and leisure.

169   Other researchers have argued that mobile technology detaches tourists
170 from their physical and social environment (Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Zhao, 2003).
171 Spending too much time checking out what others are doing potentially distracts
172 tourists from being "there", who may sequentially miss out valuable moments in
173 the real setting (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Rifkin, Cindy, & Kahn, 2015; Tanti &
174 Buhalis, 2016). Tourists who are multi-tasking may not be able to fully sense the
175 real surroundings (i.e., views, sounds, cultures, social interactions) (Ayeh, 2018).
176 Furthermore, personal relationships in the real settings may also be negatively
177 affected when tourists are indulged in their own digital world (Ayeh, 2018;
178 Dickinson et al., 2016). This does not only detach tourists from their immediate
179 surroundings, but also exposes them to a constant "gaze" of expectations from
180 an online audience (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Molz, 2006). Ayeh
181 (2018) examined the extent to which tourists can focus on the real experiences at
182 the travel site while concurrently paying attention to their mobile devices. The
183 author concluded that mobile distraction takes "something" away from tourist
184 experiences when tourists are distracted from truly enjoying the real setting (e.g.,
185 sights and sounds, social interactions, experience of 'others'). The findings
186 demonstrate how the problematic use of mobile media devices in the vacation
187 context could harm tourists' mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.

188   Next, tourists may not even notice when mobile distraction reduces their
189 satisfaction with their travel experiences (Ayeh, 2018). Based on these
190 arguments, tourist experience can be impaired when tourists focus more on the
191 technologies than the experience itself (Neuhofer, 2016). The recent
192 conversation on DFT indicates that people have started realizing how
193 technologies have changed their personal experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010)
194 and that it might even change perceived levels of authenticity (Tribe & Mkono,
195 2017). The need to further understand how to reduce the negative impact that
196 ICTs bring to the travel experience continues thus to grow in research (Floros,
197 Cai, McKenna, & Ajeeb, 2019; Twenge, 2013).
198   Recently, studies have also highlighted that technology is one of the key
199 factors leading to diminished levels of wellness balance during travel (Dickinson,
200 Hibbert, & Filimonau, 2016; Lehto & Lehto, 2019; Li, Pearce, & Low, 2018). The
201 distraction caused by digital devices which takes tourists out of the "touristhood"
202 are subsequently believed to harm their mental recovery (Carr, 2002; Jafari,
203 1987), resulting in a need for "detox" (Floros et al., 2019).
204   Going beyond studies which are concerned with ICTs, social
205 psychologists and environmental philosophers have also highlighted the complex
206 interrelationship between human perceptions, behavior and preferences, and
207 their surrounding environment. Attention Restoration Theory (ART), for example,
208 proposes that *selective attention* is a crucial psychological mechanism, which
209 directs our attention to certain objects and properties in the environment, to the

210 exclusion of others (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Following
211 philosopher William James, they argue that attention can be *involuntary* (directed
212 towards inherently interesting stimuli) and *voluntary* (directed towards stimuli
213 which are more difficult to understand or less interesting). While the former is
214 mostly effortless, the latter causes attentional fatigue; which can lead to negative
215 implications, such as poor decision making, low self-control, and health issues
216 (Ohly, White, Wheeler, Bethel, Ukoumunne, Nikolaou, & Garside, 2016). ART
217 proposes that restoration, a period where the need for directed attention is
218 eliminated, improves peoples' health, wellbeing, and overall performance (Kaplan,
219 1995; Kaur Kler, 2009).
220   While past studies have suggested that this preferably happens through
221 the immersion in a natural environment far away from urban stimuli (e.g. Kaplan
222 & Talbot, 1983; Talbot & Kaplan, 1986), the negative impacts of involuntary
223 attention echo some of the negative impacts of ICT, as previously highlighted. It
224 could thus be assumed that tourists even get distracted from restorative settings,
225 such as the natural environment (e.g. Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016),
226 although there are physically not in an environment with many voluntary stimuli.
227
228   2.2. Digital Free Tourism
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230   To overcome the negative impact of ICTs on the travel experience,
231 scholars have suggested focusing on the "real world" rather than on the virtual
232 one (Bhattacharya, Bashar, Srivastava, & Singh, 2019). In response, the idea of
233 traveling without being connected has emerged. Li et al. (2018) defined this type
234 of "digital free tourism" as "tourism spaces where internet and mobile signals are
235 absent or digital technology usage is controlled" (p.317). While there is
236 increasing academic concern about the topic, new tourism and hospitality
237 products, such as DFT, "digital-free" cafes and restaurants, "technology dead
238 zones", disconnected holidays, and digital detox programs started to become
239 popular (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Tribe & Mkono, 2017). These digital free
240 products in general feature the absence of or limited access to ICTs; And their
241 purpose is to reduce participants' internet addiction, anxiety and stress, through
242 maximizing the value of tourism; so as to enhance work-life balance, improve
243 health, and draw people's attention back to what is considered to "truly matter" in
244 the real world (Smith & Puczkó, 2015).

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

250   A comparatively large number of studies concerned with DFT focuses on
251 the (positive and negative) consequences of being disconnected. Cai et al. (2019)
252 identified emotional benefits such as reconnecting with the physical and social
253 environment, as well as heightened levels of self-reflection. Other studies have
254 largely focused on the negatives, such as anxiety, tension, and diminished levels

255 of communication, availability, information obtainability, time consumption and
256 supporting experience (Dickison et al., 2016; O'Regan, 2008; Pari, Berger, Rubin,
257 & Casson, 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016). Dickinson et al. (2016) furthermore
258 investigated camping tourists' view on technology use in general. They found that
259 tourists do not always want to be connected and identified the factors influencing
260 their desire for connection and disconnection, highlighting a conflict of positive
261 and negative emotions and experiences.

262   Recent studies have gone more in detail on the tourist experience in a
263 DFT context. Li et al. (2018) analyzed DFT and the ways in which the concept
264 has been discussed in various contexts. Most recently, Cai et al. (2019) analysed
265 travellers' various emotional reactions throughout the process from pre-
266 disconnection and disconnection to reconnection. Based on the findings, they
267 created a conceptual framework to summarize travellers' emotions when
268 experiencing digital disconnection. This study in particular lays a foundation for a
269 deeper understanding of DFT. In a study of millennials' experiences, Floros et al.
270 (2019) have furthermore uncovered their belief that DFT is beneficial for their
271 well-being, encouraging research into more potentially positive effects of DFT.

272   In light of ART, scholars have also discussed in how far aforementioned
273 concepts such as "benefits", "impacts" and others are related to tourist motivation;
274 the underlying psychological or mental force that drives a person towards certain
275 courses of action (Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003). Citing the core tourist
276 motivations of "escape and relaxation", "novelty" and "relationships and personal
277 development", Kaur Kler (2009) states that tourists choose certain environments
278 through their motivation for "being away", "extent", "fascination" and
279 "compatibility". Following previous studies on DFT, it can thus be assumed that
280 tourists are not only impacted by a digital-free experience, but are well-aware
281 and motivated by the potential perceived benefits which a ditigal-free
282 environment could bring. As researchers continue to study the detrimental
283 effects of digital technologies, this study thus complements previous ones by
284 providing a holistic view and new insights into travellers' motivations for
285 disconnecting whilst on holiday, taking DFT not as an involuntary moment of
286 disconnect, but a sought-after tourist experience. Having a more complete
287 understanding on the subsequent motivations to opt for a DFT experience can
288 help practitioners to promote DFT to a wider range of demographics, especially
289 the younger generation.
290

291 **3. Methodology**

292   Due to the highly exploratory nature of this study, this research was
293 undermined by a constructivist paradigm, aiming at capturing experiential and
294 subjective realities of the respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Savin-Baden &
295 Major, 2013, p. 63).

296   As mentioned earlier, the target population was identified as "digital
297 natives" (born after 1980) first, as these were most likely to be aware of

298　potentially negative impacts of technology on their personal life. Within the
299　population of digital natives, a purposive, experience-based sampling technique
300　was employed. The experience of interest followed the previously established
301　definition of DFT by Li et al. (2018, p. 37) "tourism spaces where internet and
302　mobile signals are either absent or digital technology usage is controlled" and
303　participants had to have voluntarily undertaken this experience or self-define this
304　as one of their main travel motivations. Interviewees were subsequently self-
305　confirming to have had a similar experience within the last 2 years.

306　　　　　Respondents were initially approached through experience-based
307　sampling on different social media platforms and later a snowball-technique was
308　incorporated. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews which allow
309　higher flexibility and more inductive reasoning as respondents were asked to
310　provide answers with fewer restrictions. Based on the literature review, an initial
311　interview guide was developed, centering on the core themes of (1) general use
312　of digital technology (e.g. types of ICT used in daily life and when traveling,
313　general relationship with ICT); (2) the DFT experience(s) in question (e.g.
314　location, length, number of travelers, destination); (3) motivational factors leading
315　to undertake DFT (e.g. why was this trip undertaken, what motivated the decision)
316　and finally (4) supplementary questions to close the interviews (e.g. satisfaction
317　with the experience).Throughout the interview phase, modifications to the
318　interview guide and spontaneous follow-up questions were employed if new
319　information arose.

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

324

325　　　　　　　　　　　　***INSERT TABLE 1 HERE***

326

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

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338　　　　　　　　　　　　***INSERT TABLE 2 HERE***

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340   Finally, a total of 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted
341   via face-to-face and telephone during the period of May to July 2019 and lasted
342   between 25 and 35 minutes in length. Although in-depth interviews usually from
343   30 minutes to an hour (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), the relatively short
344   duration of these interviews might be explained by a concentrated focus on
345   particular experiences of choice and the fact that some of them were held
346   through telephone (Novick, 2008). All interviewees were interviewed in English.
347   All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone for more accurate transcriptions
348   at a later stage.

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

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 & Wellbeing* and *Relationships* (Figure 1). The following sections present the findings related to these themes and their significance as motivations for experiencing DFT.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE*

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 this 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 being intrinsically linked to the need for escapism, particularly from daily life and work routines (e.g. Ateljevich & 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's et al. (2016) notion that tourists have a longing to escape but yet continue to be cautious around the degree of dysconnectivity 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 which has emerged 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

397   the close relationship between technology and diminished levels of relaxation
398   while travelling (e.g. Dickinson et al., 2016; Kim & Hollensbe, 2018; Kirillova &
399   Wang, 2016; White & White, 2007). Several participants noted that this feeling of
400   "being liberated" as "one isn't being sent constant reminders of things one needs
401   to do", allows for a "decrease in social and work pressures and more of a focus
402   on meaningful value in life", drawing connections between relaxation and self-
403   reflection as a motivational factor for DFT. Participants also emphasized how
404   they desired their concentration levels to be "greatly improved" when opting for
405   DFT, allowing them to "focus on their scenic surroundings". It can be remarked,
406   as stated earlier, that there is a potentially close link between a motivation for
407   "being in nature" and a needed "feeling of relaxation". Accordingly, participants
408   were motivated not be "distracted by technology", mirroring previous studies
409   which have heightened the importance of immediate surroundings (Ayeh, 2018)
410   and a detachment from the online "gaze" (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Molz, 2006).
411   Interviewees noted that they feel that these connections are perceived to take
412   away from the experience itself and, therefore, motivate to opt for DFT which
413   potentially generates superior perceived levels of relaxation: *"Being at the*
414   *campsite, outside in nature, cooking over a fire, playing cards and having my*
415   *phone nowhere near me, the most relaxed I have been in a very long time"* and
416   that "*If the views are amazing, you could sit on a rock and just watch the sunset*
417   *for two hours and not feel like you need your phone." (Informant #4,8.*
418   The third motivational subtheme emerged under escape is wanderlust
419   (explore the unknown). The concept of wanderlust had been documented as a
420   reason to travel, suggesting individuals' internal desire for getting to the
421   unfamiliar (Shields, 2011). This desire for the unfamiliar was mentioned as an
422   escapist motivation for DFT. Participants made note of this "longing to explore"
423   the unknown as a central motive for why they enjoyed travelling: "*You really get a*
424   *feel for the city when you don't use google maps and if you know a few places it*
425   *is always nice to have a paper map and mark where you should go rather than*
426   *using google maps you can kind of make your way or say oh that street looks*
427   *nice I will go there instead of this boring main road." (Informant #6)*. This
428   suggests that respondents were largely aware of the perceived negative impact
429   of technology on their overall tourist experience (Tribe & Mkono, 2017; Xiang &
430   Gretzel, 2010) and potentially facets such as self-realization and authenticity. In
431   light of these findings, it can be assumed that escapist motivations for DFT are
432   thus multifold and related to push, pull and personal factors.

433   4.1.2. Personal Growth

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

436   In regard to immersion, when it comes to travel, heightened
437   consciousness comes into play as one is experiencing a new, unfamiliar
438   destination. Travelling is highly experiential and therefore being self-aware is
439   imperative in order to assimilate the experience. This theme mirrors previous
440   studies which had hinted that tourists may be distracted from their setting by

441 technology (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012; Rifkin et al., 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016;
442 Zhao, 2003). Respondents highlighted how they are motivated to choose DFT in
443 order to get a more immersive and intense travel experience: *"When you are*
444 *travelling, you experience things you cannot plan on experiencing or things that*
445 *you would never experience back home. You learn different things, you meet so*
446 *many people from different countries with different views, and when you really*
447 *immerse yourself in the culture that is when you will have the best experience."*
448 *(Informant #7).* Interestingly, participants linked a heightened sense of immersion
449 in their travel experience to a possibility of more personal growth, as ICT is
450 "taking one's attention away" from self and surroundings. Accordingly, when
451 technology is involved, "one is unable to become fully immersed in their
452 surroundings". One participant recalled how "the level of self-awareness
453 augmented" when technology use decreased. This demonstrates that with a
454 digitally- limited or free tourism experience, one's self-awareness potentially
455 flourishes. This is because there are "fewer possibilities for distraction", such as
456 the compulsion for individuals to compare what they and others back home are
457 doing. This allows for a more focused concentration on the self and the activities
458 around them which leads to a more heightened tourism experience overall. This
459 motivational factor mirrors studies which highlighted the importance of self-
460 discovery and the need to accept one's true self as primary travel motivations
461 (Hassell, Moore, & Macbeth, 2015; Kim, Lee, Uysal, Kim, & Ahn, 2015; Moscardo,
462 2017).

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

480 4.1.3 Health and Wellbeing

481   A third main motivational theme identified in the semi-structured interviews
482 was a focus on *health and wellbein*g. The theme was subdivided into
483 *mindfulnes*s, *connect with natural surroundings*, and *curb social media anxiety*.

484   A focus on desiring mindfulness was very apparent from the participants,
485 as the majority noticed "enhancements in their ability to be more present" when
486 their technology usage was more controlled. This is in line with previous studies'
487 definition of mindfulness, which generally refers to a state of mind which allows to
488 actively process available information within the surrounding environment
489 (Frauman & Norman, 2004) as both, a state of mind and response to surrounding
490 environments (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Mindfulness has generally been
491 positively related to superior tourist experiences in previous studies (Chan, 2019;
492 Frauman & Norman, 2004; Van Winkle & Backman, 2008; Taylor & Norman,
493 2019). From the interviews it results that, when one isn't distracted by mobile
494 devices, one can "focus more on the surroundings" and this is what drove
495 respondents to opt for DFT. Practicing mindfulness was accordingly important, as
496 respondents stated it allows for "a more heightened experience". Actively seeking
497 to stay present whilst on holiday appears to be a fundamental motive for DFT; as
498 it was hoped to enhance the overall experience and promote a more regulated
499 digital wellbeing: *"My focus should be on the present, on the people that are with*
500 *me, on learning about the histories of the area and listening to locals and their life*
501 *experiences. I want to be conscious of the experiences I have at all times and not*
502 *focus on what others would think, how many likes the experience would generate.*
503 *All that I care about is enjoying every moment." (Informant #4).* Participants
504 repeatedly noted that when taking photographs to capture their surroundings,
505 they feel their "consciousness is interrupted" and attention is drawn away from
506 the experience itself. Instead of allowing them to truly experience what is in front
507 of them, photographing distracts them by "having the need to capture something
508 to prove to others". It was also noted by participants that their memories of a trip
509 seemed "more heightened" when they did not take photos rather than capturing
510 the entire experience hidden behind a screen. Participants shared how the desire
511 of regulating the photographs taken on holiday can aspire towards superior
512 memories of the trip and a more heightened experience.

513   Also concerning a motivation for health and wellbeing, findings show that
514 motivations for participating in DFT fall in line with motivations for nature-based
515 tourism (e.g. Luo & Deng, 2008). Accordingly, "connecting with natural
516 surroundings" through DFT was mentioned as a need for mental health and
517 wellbeing. Pursuing nature-based tourism has been identified as a way for
518 tourists to gain a sense of relaxation (Hassell et al., 2015), as it can function as a
519 way to disconnect from everyday life (Kim et al., 2015). These parallels for
520 connecting with nature was also a driver for respondents to opt for DFT.
521 Individuals felt motivated to limit their technology use in order to focus more on
522 their surroundings and to create a more enhanced connection with mainly the
523 natural environment: *"I came to appreciate smaller details more and felt more in*
524 *touch with natural patterns, such as waking with the sunrise and sleeping earlier*
525 *when the sun has just set"* and *"I think this connection plays a big part in my want*
526 *to not use technology, it encourages me to focus on it instead…there is nothing*
527 *more relaxing than just being in nature, minimalism, and just listening and feeling*
528 *nature." (Informant #17,4).* Previous studies have highlighted that technology
529 potentially detaches tourists from their surroundings (Ayeh, 2018; Pearce &

530 Gretzel, 2012; Rifkin et al., 2015; Tanti & Buhalis, 2016; Zhao, 2003), but in this
531 case respondents particularly found ICT as inhibiting a deeper connection with
532 nature, showing a potential to combine DFT with various forms of nature-based
533 tourism.

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

547 4.1.4 Relationships

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

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

561   A second underlying theme was related to making new connections.
562 Participants felt that making connections with new contacts usually became
563 "much easier" and "more natural" when they were not engaging with technology
564 and this subsequently inspired them to engage in DFT. Recalling the authenticity
565 issues highlighted by Tribe and Mkono (2017), respondents were generally
566 motivated to experience genuine human contact whilst travelling, but found that,
567 when technology is overly present, these interactions can be hindered: "*The*
568 *people I don't know on the trip ….I should be able to get to know them better*
569 *because of spending time with them and having real conversations, and not just*
570 *communicating over a device"* and *"When you're bored, you pull out your phone;*
571 *but instead, when you're bored, get to know someone". (Informant #5).* In
572 addition to their motivation for DFT, one participant also noted the same

573 phenomenon in his daily life, experiencing more social disconnection with
574 strangers: *"It creates awkwardness in society when you constantly rely on your*
575 *phone and people are so weirded out when you talk to them on the street*
576 *thinking, why do you have to talk to me?" (Informant #3).* This shows that
577 (potential) tourists are often aware that their personal relationships may be
578 negatively affected by ICT (Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016; Xiang & Gretzel,
579 2010) and that this is a likely motivator to undertake DFT.

580 *4.2 Overall attitude of Digital Free Tourists towards ICT*

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

601

602 **5. Conclusion**

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

609   This leads to several theoretical contributions. First, the follows the
610 conceptualization of Cai et al. (2019) and Floros et al. (2019), defining DFT as a
611 voluntarily sought experience, rather than as an inconvenience of travel. This is
612 in line with recent tourism products which have entered the market, promising
613 positive outcomes of absence or limited access to ICT while traveling (Smith &
614 Puczkó, 2015). This study has effectively shown that tourists do search for a DFT

615 experience and are motivated by a range of factors to undertake this type of
616 tourism. This opens the door for an array of follow-up research, not only on
617 motivators and the experience, but also different stakeholder perspectives and
618 management aspects of DFT.

619   Next, several motivators for DFT have been identified. Smith and Puczkó
620 (2015) have stated that DFT promises reducing ICT addiction, anxiety, stress,
621 maximizing the value of tourism, enhancing work-life balance, improving health,
622 and a more "realistic" tourist experience. Previous studies have also
623 hypothesized that ICT has serval potentially negative impacts on the tourist
624 experience, such as diminished recovery (e.g. Dickinson et al., 2016),
625 detachment from immediate physical and social surroundings (e.g. Zhao, 2003),
626 lower levels of satisfaction and authenticity (e.g. Ayeh, 2018), and diminished
627 levels of wellness balance (e.g. Lehto & Lehto, 2019). This study confirms a need
628 for escape, personal growth, health and wellbeing, as well as relationships when
629 opting for DFT. While these are all traditional motivators for tourists, it appears
630 that our respondents are aware of ICT negatively influencing these factors and
631 opt for DFT to mitigate this issue. However, participants in general agreed that
632 their experiences become richer while travelling without technologies, but also
633 realized that technologies were useful to some degree and did not show
634 hospitality towards their general use. This is consistent with previous findings
635 suggesting travelers have needs for both connection and disconnection (e.g.,
636 Dickinson et al., 2016; Tanti and Buhalis, 2016).

637   Also, the proposed motivational framework (Figure 1) adds theoretical
638 value to the existent literature on DFT and the complex relationship between
639 technology and travel in general. First, the identified motivators add to the value
640 of *selective attention*, and the overall relationship between DFT and ART. As
641 previously mentioned, ART proposes that immersion in a natural environment
642 aids people's restoration as external stimuli are minimized (Kaplan & Kaplan,
643 1989; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983). This has previously also been thought as true for
644 tourism, whereas restoration and detachment were beneficial for mental and
645 physical health. The findings of this study show that DFT is mainly motivated by
646 escape, personal growth, health and well-being, and relationships; suggesting
647 that in the digital age a physical detachment from urban environments might not
648 be enough to allow for restoration. In other words, tourists carry voluntary stimuli
649 with them, even into environments where these are not inherently present. While
650 some studies have made a connection between the use of ICTs and diminished
651 wellness in tourists (e.g. Dickinson et al., 2016; Floros et al., 2019), this research
652 opens to the door for a whole now stream of research, where ART stimuli are not
653 environmentally bound, but increasingly detached and omnipresent; making
654 metal and physical recovery for tourists more challenging.

655 On a broader scale, only very recently a more critical perspective on technology
656 in tourism is starting to emerge. Scholars have successfully highlighted
657 technological communication and coordination related issues in the tourism field,
658 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, 2019). Since particularly DFT-related research is at an emergent stage, there is and 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 need 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 help tourism service suppliers 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 the benefits of DFT. They can show their clients that DFT may work with different holiday length, holiday types, activities and locations. In other words, potential tourists need 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

704 consequence, future research can triangulate the findings of this study by
705 capturing different demographic groups and using different methodologies.
706 Furthermore, the focus on only one demographic group is limiting by nature, as it
707 does not allow a broader perspective on the technology perception of other age
708 groups. Next, respondents have been selected based on the fact that they had
709 undertaken DFT in the past. Asking motivating factors in hindsight could have
710 resulted in a memory bias. Future studies could approach this issue
711 phenomenologically or with different qualitative tools, in order to get a better
712 understanding of pre-trip motivators and the overall DFT experience. Finally,
713 investigating the phenomenon from tourism suppliers' perspective will also help
714 providing a more complete view of DFT, investigating the phenomenon from a
715 tour operators' perspective. As mentioned earlier, getting the right balance for
716 technology use during travel is a potentially complex question and it is not clear
717 how the supply side deals with this issue. Future research may start to explore
718 feasible ways to control technology use for tourists.

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