

# E-mindfulness – the growing importance of facilitating tourists’ connections to the present moment

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to introduce e-mindfulness as a tourism trend. Mindfulness meditation is becoming increasingly mainstream, which is reflected in a rapidly growing number of related technology applications. Such technology-assisted mindfulness is typically referred to as e-mindfulness. The e-mindfulness trend creates opportunities for the tourism industry but also implies changed consumer perspectives on tourist experiences.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The paper is based on a general review of academic literature, news reports and online resources regarding the offerings of related technologies.*

**Findings** – *Implications of e-mindfulness for consumers, tourism service providers and designers of future tourism experiences are outlined.*

**Originality/value** – *This is the first paper to conceptualize e-mindfulness as a tourism trend.*

**Keywords** *Mindfulness, E-mindfulness, Technology, Tourist experience, Business innovation*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

## Introduction

Mindfulness is described as a person’s capability to self-regulate their attention by stepping away from the stream of thoughts and by taking a role of a non-reactive and non-judging observer to the things that are unfolding in the mind and the nearby surroundings in the present moment (Bishop *et al.*, 2006). As such, it has become a practical skill to be learnt to overcome the stress of modern life, to deal with health issues and to enhance overall subjective well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness as a concept is experiencing a renaissance in tourism research. Most recent research on this topic deals with the rethinking of the tourism sustainability agenda (Chan, 2018; Lengyel, 2018) and with ways of integrating the positive outcomes of mindfulness within the various forms of tourist experiences (Chen *et al.*, 2014; Chen *et al.*, 2017; Kirwin *et al.*, 2019; Loureiro *et al.*, 2019).

If cultivated intentionally, a mindful state can be achieved through practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). To this end, there is a growing number of information and communication technology (ICT) solutions that aim to teach, assist or even physically create the state of mindfulness. This combination of technology and mindfulness practice can be referred to as e-mindfulness (Tedder *et al.*, 2015).

In the case of e-mindfulness, technology acts as a mediator that enables or creates a mindful state. Thus, apart from the user, a technology and/or content provider (e.g. a holiday resort) and the use context of the application (e.g. a leisure vacation) become facilitators of the mindfulness practice. From that perspective, significant potential exists for providing more engaging, meaningful or relaxing tourist experiences (Stankov and Filimonau, 2019). This potential has been recognized by the luxury segment of the

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hospitality market, such as wellness and spa providers, where mindfulness has been used mostly in the form of mindfulness-based programmes for stress reduction (Buck, 2018). It has also been embraced by airlines, where mindfulness content has been added to the in-flight entertainment systems (Headspace, 2019).

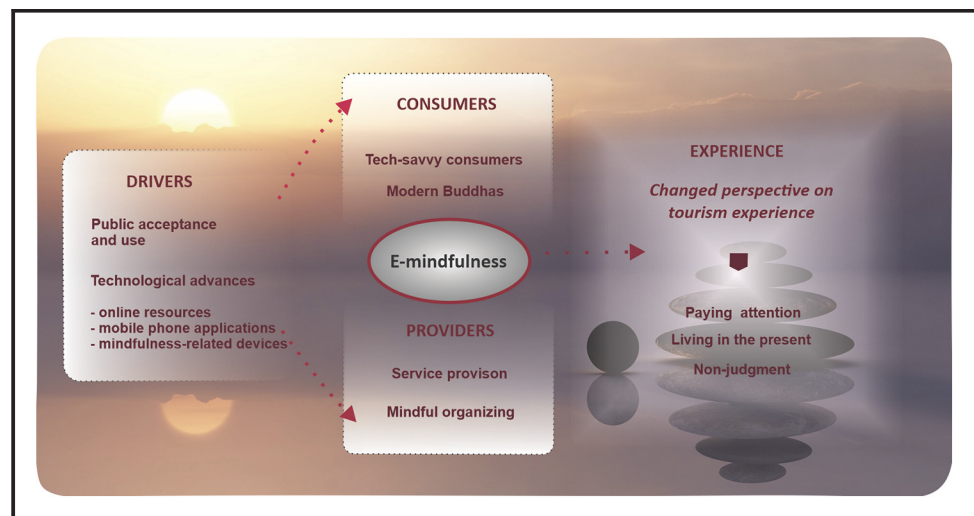
The need for e-mindfulness arises from growing anxiety and stress caused by modern occupational patterns, changing lifestyles and new technologies that consume users' attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; King, 2016). It is particularly pertinent in tourism, where negative spillover effects from daily life into tourist experiences (MacKay and Vogt, 2012) can hamper the achievement of mindful states across all travel phases. Accordingly, there is an emerging trend of digital-free tourism (Li *et al.*, 2018), i.e. niche tourism offers that favour digital disconnectedness (Gretzel, 2014). Here, mindfulness is a complementary process defined as "[...] the ability to let go of cyberspace and all that it means in order to notice and focus on something else that is unfolding in people's lives in that moment" (Suler, 2016, p. 298). Additionally, there are calls to raise consumer awareness of the problem of addictive technology (Alter, 2018) and advocate "ethical" ICT designs to create more responsible, humane or positive technology (Calvo and Peters, 2019; Riva *et al.*, 2012; Stankov and Filimonau, 2018).

Emerging from consumer needs and technological advances, it is evident that the e-mindfulness trend creates novel opportunities for the tourism industry to monetize mindfulness but also has the potential to change consumers' perspective on their tourism experiences (Figure 1). At the same time, monetizing mindfulness in such a manner could be problematic from certain viewpoints. Seen as a form of meditative practice or teaching, mindfulness has been an integral part of some of the world's oldest religions and traditions, from Taoism and Buddhism in Asia to Stoicism in Europe (Becke, 2014). Although mindfulness as an imminent state associated with all human beings is nowadays usually stripped from religious meaning, it still holds spiritual connotations (Lewis, 2016). Thus, the whole concept of commodification of mindfulness with the help of technology for achieving personal gains is sometimes negatively labelled as the "McMindfulness trend" (Purser, 2019).

### Drivers of e-mindfulness

Drivers of e-mindfulness can be attributed to increased public acceptance of general mindfulness use in various scenarios (Kabat-Zinn, 2014) and the advancements in ICT that

**Figure 1** Logical flow of e-mindfulness inclusion into tourism experience



facilitate mindfulness (Bend *et al.*, 2016), making it more available and tangible. Over the years, public interest in mindfulness has significantly evolved and moved beyond the realm of personal lives to include different sectors of global economic activity, such as education, business or even the military (Crane, 2017). Research suggests that meditation, including mindfulness, is the fastest growing health trend in the USA (Clarke *et al.*, 2018). The UK trials different mindfulness exercises in schools to test their effectiveness in supporting the mental health and well-being of students (UK Government, 2019). It is anticipated that mindfulness will grow in popularity at a global scale (ETC, 2016), mostly as a means of avoiding burnout and of reaching an optimal state of mental, physical and social well-being (Ninivaggi, 2018).

Facilitating online access to mindfulness resources, offering mobile phone applications and providing other mindfulness-related devices represent three basic ways of how technology could facilitate mindfulness (Diamond *et al.*, 2017). Mobile apps attempt to bring consumer awareness to the present moment, increase awareness of experiences or external surroundings, or provide feedback and/or directions to support the interconnectedness between humans and nature (Diamond *et al.*, 2017; Van Gordon *et al.*, 2018). Currently, there are nearly 1,500 meditation and mindfulness applications available but the market has been highly consolidated with two apps, Headspace and Calm, commanding 70 per cent of the market share (FactMR, 2019; Global Wellness Summit, 2019). The use of electronic devices to promote mindfulness is usually based on simple time reminders, sensors that track body parameters and point to the level of a mindful state or changes to a user's environment to make them more conducive to mindfulness (Diamond *et al.*, 2017). The key market trend is creating synergy between mindfulness mobile apps and smartwatches/wearables that have integrated body sensors (FactMR, 2019). Apart from consumer gadgets, there are devices with the potential of application in tourism settings that create physical conditions to induce a mindful state, such as the cocoon-like meditation pod Somadome, which combines colour immersion therapy and audio therapy (Diamond *et al.*, 2017) or devices that merge mindfulness meditation with aromatherapy (Redstone, 2015).

## Implications

### *Consumers: tech-savvy consumers or modern Buddhas?*

The general openness of tourists to new experiences (Lengyel, 2015) makes the tourism context a suitable environment for adopting e-mindfulness. According to Loureiro *et al.* (2019, p. 4), mindful tourists can be described as “[...] those who pay attention to the present moment (not in the past or future), attending to the actual somatic sensations lived at the destination in an open, non-reactive and non-judgment, rather [than] tourists [who] accept their present emotions and thoughts”. However, since various personal motivations, attitudes and/or technology acceptance levels drive the use of technology to achieve mindful states, it would be reasonable to assume that users would range from tech-savvy consumers, willing to try a new toy to relax, to modern Buddhas that strive to cultivate mindful states in every activity.

Providing e-mindfulness services can be seen as a genuine gesture of sincere care for customer well-being, which respects the contemporary consumers' needs, values the service doctrine in the tourism industry and creates space for improving consumer loyalty. At the same time, mindful consumers are more able to perceive such care and more likely to build deep relationships with providers or places (Kang and Gretzel, 2012). In contrast, a negative rebound effect could also happen. Consumers' awareness of their own consumption patterns and their focus on the non-materialistic views could influence the desire to consume (Ndubisi, 2014), posing a threat to current business models used in the tourism domain.

### *Experience: altering tourism consumer experience with e-mindfulness – a switch from an autopilot to a mindful state*

Whether considered from a socio-cognitive (Moscardo, 1996) or meditative perspective (Chen *et al.*, 2017) mindfulness is generally viewed as a factor that significantly enhances the tourist experience. Consumer attention can be seen as a limited resource through which consumers filter the external and internal stimuli into their awareness (Ooi, 2005). Being in the mindful state during the consumption process challenges current notions of tourists as superficial and easily distracted consumers. Here, the concept of e-mindfulness becomes particularly relevant as the main components of mindful tourist experiences, i.e. paying attention to the experience, living in the present, building non-elaborate and/or non-judgmental awareness (Kang and Gretzel, 2012; Chen *et al.*, 2017), come into play.

A number of mindfulness-based interventions are extremely relevant for tourist experiences, such as being mindful while walking and/or eating (Thompson and Waltz, 2007). With a “living-in-the-moment” attitude, consumer attention is focused on a particular feeling, object or the wholeness of the moment and the surroundings (Chittaro and Vianello, 2014). This may prompt conscious consumers to better engage with whatever is currently unfolding in the present moment using the omnipresent access to ICT. This provides multiple opportunities to boost profitability for tourism service providers. For example, consumers that are mindful of their “unhealthy” relationship with technology may consciously decide to break their addictive habit during their hotel stay. Less time spent by guests on mobile phones creates more time to explore the hotel offerings and, potentially, to consume services that would otherwise go unnoticed.

In relation to non-judgmental awareness associated with mindfulness, it can be argued that a mindful consumer will be more tolerable of errors in tourism service provisions. For example, if patience, one of the main mindfulness attitudes, is cultivated among tourists, then delays in on-time service provision would not contribute too much to consumer dissatisfaction and could even be seen as useful time for self-reflection.

### *Providers: a wellness service or a path to mindful tourism service providers?*

A tourism service provider's perspective on e-mindfulness would largely depend on business goals that drive the adoption of mindfulness as a service component. These can include rather simplistic offerings of e-mindfulness as wellness services to respond to growing consumer demand for quick solutions that reduce travel anxiety or stress. However, mindfulness, in general, cultivates kind and perceptive attitudes, actions and behaviours to the self, society and the environment (Fischer *et al.*, 2017). Tourism providers could strive to create more transformational experiences with the adoption of e-mindfulness. This scenario implies the necessity for mindful organizing (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014) underpinned by mindful leadership and mindful employees (Reb and Choi, 2014), that are able to grasp the sensibility of this offering. The expected outcomes of this scenario can thus extend beyond the subjective well-being of consumers and business profitability, by supporting the mindfulness movement's universal goal of wider social change (Steidle, 2017).

### *Concluding remarks*

While the tourism industry has started to use e-mindfulness, there is currently no dedicated stream of research connecting e-mindfulness and tourist experiences. At the same time, there is a strong potential in e-mindfulness to offer a new perspective on the issue of digital overload during tourist experiences. While existing approaches to cope with the problem favour digital disconnectedness in the form of temporally limited or blocked access to technology during holidays, e-mindfulness, when properly adopted as an attitude, which does not hold either positive or negative associations with technology, could aid consumers

in changing their perspective of technology use. This would allow them to use technology in more meaningful ways, as suggested by Newport (2019). Most importantly, e-mindfulness could be more strongly associated with its potential to fulfil tourists' eudemonic motivations (Lengieza *et al.*, 2019) and to encourage wider social innovation and change (Steidle, 2017). This stands in contrast to most current market offers that promote personal goal-oriented uses of e-mindfulness tools.

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