

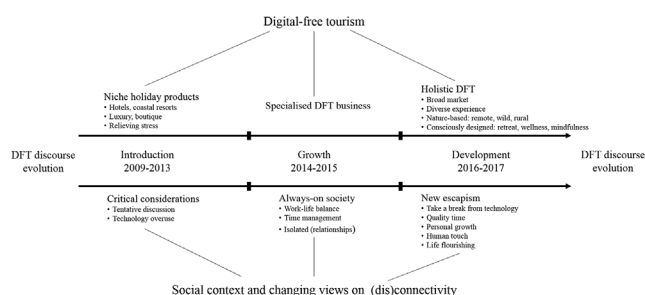
# Media representation of digital-free tourism: A critical discourse analysis

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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 & Puczko, 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 & Puczko, 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

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