Mobile technology and the tourist experience: (Dis)connection at the campsite

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 50% of tourists have some desire for mobile disconnection.
- Tourists have dilemmas regarding mobile connectivity.
- Digital engagement has a small effect on desire for mobile disconnection.
- Developers of digital solutions should not assume the tourist is ‘always connected’.

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ABSTRACT

Mobile technology is playing an increasing role in the tourist experience and a growing body of tourism research has focused on this area. There is often an implicit assumption that tourists embrace mobile connectivity and relatively little research has explored the tourist experience of disconnection, whether purposeful or imposed by technological limitations. This study explores the desire for digital (dis)connection during camping tourism. Data compiled using interviews and a survey revealed that the tourist is not ‘always connected’ and up to 50% have some desire to disconnect. There is ambiguity about mobile technology use in tourism with dilemmas regarding the value of connectivity versus the desire to ‘get away from it all’. The analysis found digital engagement had a small effect on desire for disconnection however, patterns were not marked. The findings have implications for mobile technology solutions in tourism.

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1. Introduction

Mobile technology has considerable utility in the tourism domain since tourists are on the move in unfamiliar environments and seek information to resolve practical travel problems and to enrich the tourist experience (Gretzel, 2010). Mobile devices have become central to the tourist experience of some users (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014; Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016), opened up new marketing and communication opportunities (see for example, de Oliveira Nunes & Mayer, 2014; Kang & Gretzel, 2012) and created new challenges for a service based industry where word of mouth recommendations have a powerful influence (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The opportunity to exploit mobile technology has been grasped by tourism providers, computer scientists seeking new domains for their expertise and tourists alike. In response, a growing body of research has sought to understand how mobile technology can best be harnessed by the industry (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Much of this research has focused on enhancing technological solutions for the tourism domain (see for example, Neuhofer et al., 2014) and tends to assume mobile technology use will continue to grow, be widely embraced and add to the tourist experience. A second strand of research has taken a more critical stance to understand how mobile technology refigures tourism (see for example, Germann Molz & Paris, 2013; Gretzel, 2010; Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014) and even de-values the experience (Neuhofer, 2016). While tourists’ use of mobile technology has grown rapidly, there is less research taking a critical view of the value of this technology and questioning the often implicit assumption that mobile technology is a desirable contribution to the tourist experience, though there is recognition of the potential for exclusion due to digital divide (Gretzel, 2010; Hannam et al., 2014). Lalicic and Weismayer (2016, p.10) suggest tourism research in this field is in an “emerging state”.

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Evidence is emerging of a tourist backlash to the pervasiveness of technology in everyday life. New terms are emerging such as ‘digital detox’ (Lay, 2014) and ‘digital switch-off’ (Gretzel, 2014). ‘Digital addiction’ is widely discussed in the human computer interaction literature (see for example, Lalicic & Weismayer, 2016; Samaha & Hawi, 2016; Turel, Serenko, & Bontis, 2011) and digital disconnection in tourism has been associated with positive well-being (Smith & Puczko, 2015). Therefore, while much of the research in tourism assumes mobile technology will become indispensable to the tourist and add to their experience, relatively little research has critically explored tourists’ desire to disconnect or how tourists negotiate constant connectivity (Paris, Berger, Rubin, & Casson, 2015). Those seeking to disconnect are likely to not only see little value in attempts by industry to engage them with technology, but may also resent the need to use mobile technology where this has become essential in some contexts.

This paper emerges from a project that was primarily involved in developing and testing a mobile technology solution in the tourism domain. Early in the project it became apparent there were various barriers to mobile technology adoption and engagement which were explored throughout the project. The focus of this paper is on digital (dis)connection, the desire to remain connected or to disconnect within the tourism setting. The aim is to analyse the extent of digital (dis)connection, its relationship with mobile engagement and the impact on use of a purpose built tourism app.

The study context was UK camping tourism, but has implications for mobile technology solutions in the wider tourism field and particularly in rural tourism. The paper makes a theoretical and practical contribution in three respects. First, there is currently comparatively little research addressing a desire to disconnect in tourism. This study therefore makes a contribution in measuring the current extent of the phenomena and analysing demographic patterns. Second, use of mobile technology is related to digital engagement, including social motivations such as social media use in other domains (Kim, Kim, & Wachter, 2013), however, studies have yet to analyse whether these patterns translate to the tourism setting where tourists may be seeking to go off grid. Third, the development of mobile technology solutions in tourism assumes that tourists will have and be willing to use an appropriate mobile device. This paper therefore explores the impact of digital (dis)connection on desire to use a purpose built tourism app which will enhance knowledge of the viability of technological solutions in the tourism domain.

2. Digital (dis)connection in tourism

The interest in this paper is focused on mobile devices, especially mobile phones which are small, easily carried and practical to utilise in most tourism contexts. Mobile phones have increased in sophistication with smartphone ownership now outstripping other forms of mobile devices (ownership of smartphones stood at 76% in the UK as of September 2015) and heading towards market saturation (Mintel, 2015a). Smartphone developers have increasingly embedded a range of functionalities into devices that are of value to the tourist. Use patterns vary but have been categorised into: logistical (for example, seeking travel updates during tourism); relational (for example, use of social media); informational (for example, exploring local tourism opportunities); and mobile entertainment (for example, gaming or watching videos) (Campbell & Kwak, 2011). A similar categorisation has been applied to later work in the tourism context: facilitation, communication, information search and entertainment (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014) and Lalicic and Weismayer (2016) extend this by discussing emotional support. These capabilities are enhanced in mobile devices by a raft of sensors, such as GPS and accelerometers, which enhance context awareness (Dickinson et al., 2014; Gretzel, 2010). Smartphones potentially add value across all phases of the tourist experience: anticipation; travel to destination; destination based activity; return travel; and recollection (based on Clawson & Knetsch, 1966), though tablets and personal computers may play a greater role in the first and last phases. Smartphones have also increased tourists’ ability to engage in the pre and post consumption phases during the core consumption experience, removing the need for advanced planning and facilitating changes of plans (Dickinson et al., 2013; Fotis, Buhalís, & Rossides, 2011; Wang et al., 2014). However, Gretzel (2010) argues the tourist experience is altered by mobile devices which can cause disengagement leading to disembodied experiences, a loss of sense of place and lack of interaction with those physically present.

The value of smartphones in tourism was initially curtailed by the additional costs of use outside of the tourist’s country of origin, however, legislation has reduced the costs of calls, texts and data roaming, and will reduce this further in 2017 (European Commission, 2015). Also, more widely available free Wi-Fi has almost eliminated this obstacle in most contexts. Signal quality and availability is also an issue in some tourism destinations, particularly rural areas, however, the shift to a 4G network has improved the coverage and speed of connection although there are still ‘dead zones’ where users are unable to connect (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012) even in developed countries.

The capacity of mobile technology to transcend space/time so users can be in two spaces or times is widely reported in other fields (Humphreys, 2010; Sheller, 2004; Wilken, 2010; Wittel, 2001) and mobile devices have reshaped a variety of social practices (Llamas & Belk, 2013; Wajcman, 2008) such as shopping, banking and working. Some people, but far from all, can work at home, while travelling and during tourism (Dickinson & Peeters, 2012). This blurring of work and leisure space and time has been referred to as ‘fragmented time’ (Klein, 2004) and ‘digital elasticity’ (Pearce, 2011). MacKay and Vogt (2012) have used spillover theory to explore how technology use at home can transfer to tourism. It is arguably no longer normal to be disconnected and Wang et al. (2014) found that tourists were influenced by subjective norms, specifically peer mobile use patterns, and that routines of smartphone use from everyday life pervaded the tourist experience. However, there are questions about whether this is desirable (Brooks & Longstreet, 2015; Llamas & Belk, 2013; Neuhofer, 2016), for example, Paris et al. (2015) found remaining connected to work while a tourist can be a blessing, but also cause anxiety and sociologists have explored in general whether technology weakens, reinforces or supplements co-present sociability (Fortunati, Taipale, & de Luca, 2013).

The use of mobile technology in tourism has led to a growing body of research which can largely be categorised into three streams (Wang et al., 2014): human computer interaction studies focused on optimising design of systems (for example, tourism apps and guides); adoption of mobile information services mainly using the Technology Acceptance Model and its derivatives; and the impact of technology on the tourist experience. Studies largely assume connection is a positive thing and an opportunity to be harnessed by the industry that will enhance tourist experiences and business opportunities. The concept of ‘technology dead zones’ emphasises negative connotations of places where connection is unfeasible, though this can lead to positive experiences (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012) and the selective non-use of smartphones needs to be explored further (see for example, Wang et al., 2014). Also work on disconnection has been largely related to where backpackers find themselves unable to connect, though within this there is some discussion of purposefully choosing to disconnect, for instance when users temporarily want to hide their whereabouts...
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