

DISCONNECTING TRAVELERS FROM TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

24 people of seven nationalities traveled to 17 countries and regions during a study published in the 'Journal of Travel Research'. Most of the subjects were disconnected for over 24 hours, while researchers examined their emotions before, during, and after the disconnection.

The research, conducted by the universities of East Anglia (UEA), Greenwich, and the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), in Australia, and published in the Journal of Travel Research, studied how engaging in tourism activities while free of digital devices affected the travelers' holiday experiences. It involved losing access to technologies such as mobile phones, laptops, tablets, Internet, social media and navigation tools.

The researchers, who also took part in the study, examined the participants' emotions before disconnecting, during disconnection, and after reconnecting.

The findings show that there were initial anxiety, frustration, and withdrawal symptoms among many of the travelers, but later on they experienced growing levels of acceptance, enjoyment, and even liberation.

These results justify that the demand for the so-called 'digital detox' holidays is increasing. Lead author Dr. Wenjie Cai, from the Greenwich University School of Business, points out that "in the current, ever-connected world, people are used to constant information access and various services provided by different applications. However, many people are increasingly getting tired of the constant connections through technologies and there is a growing trend for digital-free tourism, so it is helpful to see the emotional journey these travelers are experiencing."

"Our participants," he said, "reported that they not only engaged more with other travelers and locals during their disconnected travels, but that they also spent more time with their travel companions."

In addition to looking at emotions, Dr. Cai, working with Dr. Brad McKenna of the Norwich Business School of the UEA, and Dr. Lena Waizenegger from AUT, used the affordance theory to understand the loss or gain of technological opportunities while travelers engage in digital-free tourism. For example, Google Maps allows navigation and, when removed, participants lose the ability to navigate, which caused anxiety in some of them.

"We found that some participants embraced and enjoyed the disconnected experience straightaway or after struggling initially, while for others it took a little bit longer to accept the disconnected experience," he said. "Many also pointed out that they were much more attentive and focused on their surroundings while disconnected, rather than getting distracted by incoming messages, notifications or alerts from

their mobile apps.”

In total, 24 participants from seven countries traveled to 17 countries and regions during the study. Most disconnected for more than 24 hours and data was collected via diaries and interviews.

By talking to other travelers, especially locals, many reported that they were given excellent advice and learned more about tourist attractions, sites and beaches that were not on any tourism websites or guidebooks, but were the highlight of their trips.

Once reconnected, many participants expressed they were upset and overwhelmed as soon as they saw all the incoming messages and notifications, they received over the days they were disconnected. However, having enjoyed the engagement with locals and physical surroundings during disconnection, some decided to undergo another digital detox in the future.

Various factors affected how travelers perceived the digital-free tourism experience. Participants suffered more anxiety and frustration in urban destinations due to the need for navigation, instant information access, and digital word-of-mouth recommendation. On the other hand, those in rural and natural destinations tended to have withdrawal symptoms related to being unable to kill time.

Disconnected travelers holidaying as a couple or in a group tended to be more confident to disconnect than solo travelers. They reported suffering less or even had no negative withdrawal symptoms when traveling with companions who are connected; **while solo travelers tended to feel vulnerable without technological assistance to handle cultural differences, such as an unknown language.**

On a personal level, withdrawal symptoms tended to be stronger for travelers who participated in digital-free tourism with many social and professional commitments. They were also more likely to have negative disconnected experiences. Some participants tried, but could not disconnect during their travels, either because they did not feel safe and thought they would get lost, or because they had private commitments that did not allow them to be unavailable.

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