Disconnected and Unplugged: Experiences of Technology Induced Anxieties and Tensions While Traveling

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of being disconnected while traveling for technologically savvy travelers. This paper will explore how new technologies 'separate' travelers from the physical and embodied travel experience, and how experiences and tensions caused by being disconnected or unplugged are negotiated. For this study, travelers' experiences were elicited through a series of online interviews conducted primarily through email and Facebook. Pearce and Gretzel (2012)'s technology-induced tensions and recent literature on internet/technology addiction provide a conceptual framework for the analysis.

Keywords: mobile technology, tourist experience, smartphone, technological involvement, spillover

1 Introduction

The developments in mobile networks, broadband, and Wi-Fi internet access, mobile devices and apps, cloud computing, and online communities have altered the travel and tourism landscape (Hannam, Butler & Paris, 2014; Paris, 2011). Traditional binaries of tourism research (home/away, work/leisure, presences/absence, etc.) have blurred as we become more 'involved' with our smart devices, social media (Hannam, Butler & Paris, 2014), and other recent advances in information and communication technologies. Recent research has also started to examine the impact of being 'constantly connected' on mental health, family, work, and other aspects of daily life (Harwood et al, 2014; Turel, Serenko, & Bontis, 2014).

We are witnessing a hybridization and virtualization of physical and virtual spaces (Paris, 2009; 2012a), as well as a blending of 'home' and 'travel' space and time, which has been referred to as 'digital elasticity' (Pearce, 2011; Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). Individual's everyday use of technology frames their use while traveling (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014). While these innovations and the conceptualization of the 'tourist' experiences have received considerable recent attention in the academic literature, there has been relatively less attention focused on how individuals negotiate this constant (and expected) connectivity and the pervasive use of devices while traveling. Further research is needed into how travelers manage

challenges and threats to their connected and technologically mediated lifestyles and how they address the tensions and anxieties that they experience when they are disconnected or 'unplugged' while traveling (Germann Molz & Paris, 2013).

The close virtual proximity (Paris, 2011), constant connectivity, intimacy afforded (Germann Molz & Paris, 2013), and smartphone involvement/dependency (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014) can all distract individual's attention from their physical experiences. Constant connectivity enhances the sense of obligation for travelers to maintain a normative level of presence, attention, and intimacy with their friends and family (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007). Pearce and Gretzel noted that 'the experience of being unplugged involves several strong sensory elements or more precisely the absence of highly familiar sensory inputs' (2012: 39). For some of the hypermobile elite and an expanding number of individuals managing complexity caused by the mobilites of the contemporary networked society, being 'unplugged' is upsetting and produces feelings of distress and anxiety (O'Regan, 2008). As individuals navigate their increasingly complex work, social, personal, family lives in both the 'real' world and the virtual world, there is a clear expectation and perceived necessity to be constantly connected.

On the other hand, some tourists are now choosing to be 'unplugged' while traveling, seeking an escape from 'connectedness' and, in a sense, therapeutic rehabilitation. The distress, anxiety, or even 'rehabilitation' of these connected travelers parallels recent literature that articulates and conceptualizes excessive, disruptive, and/or risky technology usage and connectivity using terminology from the study and treatment of addiction (Young, 1998; Byun et al., 2009; Harwood et al., 2014). Turel et al., (2011) noted that individuals have been shown to have difficulty controlling their use of technology in particular cases, which they attributed in part to social commitments, expectations, and to addictive dispositions tied to the technology itself.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the tensions and anxieties of being disconnected while travelling through the narratives and experiences of 'technologically savvy travelers' (who are defined by their self-identified high level of social media and mobile smart device use).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Travelling in Dead zones

The perception of being disconnected, unplugged, and/or travelling through a 'dead zone' is quite different nowadays for travelers. While previously, this perception would be based on physical isolation, today it is also based upon a perceived virtual isolation, as travelers juxtapose their 'disconnected' and 'connected' experiences. While dead zones have been defined as sparsely populated, remote destinations that lack Internet connectivity (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012), the same concept can be applied when individuals are unable to connect while traveling even in heavily populated locations. Service disruptions, lost smart-phones, inability to find a 'free Wi-Fi hotspot', or insufficient bandwidth can all result in a 'dead zone' experience for travelers.

The dead zone, whether expected or unexpected, can create a sense of anxiety or tension for travelers used to the affordances of connected travel (Germann Molz & Paris, 2013) and daily life so common today. Pearce and Gretzel (2012) conceptualized several technology induced tensions resulting from traveling in technological dead zones. These include social communication, work communication, security escape, and the immediacy connectedness tensions.

2.2 Social Tensions

Social tensions highlight the confrontation of the expectations of constant connectivity (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). These tensions can be exacerbated for individuals that have high levels of use and involvement with their social technologies. Increased use of a smart-device while traveling can be disruptive to an individual's experience and to people in close physical proximity to them. Additionally, a high level of involvement with the smart-device and other social technologies could indicate, in some cases, a potentially problematic and anxiety creating habit.

Increased levels of 'Smart-device involvement' have been found to influence/predict feelings of depression and stress (Harwood et al., 2014). Walsh, White, and Young (2010) noted that individual's mobile phone involvement had both cognitive and behavioral dimensions. The cognitive component of involvement includes thinking about the phone, the need to check to see if anything has 'happened', feelings of depression or social isolation when separated from the phone, and the keeping the phone in close physical proximity. Behaviorally, smart-device involvement can result in the preoccupation and compulsive checking of the device for updates, messages, or other 'rewards', which can become automatically triggered behaviors that can lead to the formation of habits or addiction (Harwood et al., 2014).

These habitual behaviors can spill over during travel, as Wang, Xiang, and Fesenmaier (2014) found that many of their respondents attributed a large part of smartphone use during travel to habits, norms, and obligations originating in their 'daily lives'. While the checking of a smart-device can provide individuals with interesting updates, events and lots of utility (especially during travel), they also are used to alleviate boredom and cope with everyday situations that do not provide stimuli (Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, & Raita, 2012) or from which they want to escape (sitting next to a stranger on a bus) (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014). However, many of these 'updates' are full of 'trivial information', another aspect of the social tensions highlighted by Pearce and Gretzel (2012). They allow a proliferation and sharing of the most mundane aspects of daily life or the travel experience (Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014), which may actually motivate people to 'escape' and disconnect by choice while on vacation.

2.3 Security-Escape Tensions

Another main technology induced tension suggested by Pearce and Gretzel (2012) is the 'security escape tension': the perceived issues of increased risk regarding personal safety and health, concern with notifying others of personal wellbeing and the worry caused to others. Nowadays individuals are followed through a 'surveilling gaze' that allows their personal networks to unobtrusively monitor or track them as they travel

(Germann Molz & Paris, 2013). Often this monitoring in the background allows individuals to feel at ease, knowing that their 'safety net' is in close virtual proximity.

However, when disconnected, particularly unexpectedly, tension and anxiety can arise for both the individual and their network (Paris & Rubin, 2013). On the other hand, this close virtual proximity, expectation of connection, and high level of virtual intimacy can create feelings of discomfort and claustrophobia (Crawford, 2009) driving people to disconnect. Of course, in cases of planned or expected disconnection, any anxiety (both personal and for an individual's social network) can be mitigated with some planning ahead.

2.4 Immediacy Connectedness Tensions

The immediacy connectedness tension can create an introspective environment where the traveler is focused on the present. In these reflective experiences dormant skills can be stimulated, for example using a paper map, and individuals may evaluate the necessity and level of existing connectedness outside of the 'dead zone' experience (Pearce and Gretzel, 2012). This tension can be seen as a manifestation of a society of connected individuals who are becoming increasingly embedded in their technologically mediated personal, social, and professional lives.

Recent advances in technology have removed barriers of physical presence and geographic distance to allow for immediate connection and interaction anyplace and anytime. This can result in an individual being both virtually 'at home' even while being 'away' physically (White & White, 2007). It is becoming more common for there to be an expectation for immediate connectivity and response both at work and among personal relationships. For the travel experience, this can often distract individuals from their immediate surroundings and experiences, as well as isolate travelers from social interactions with other travelers and individuals in host communities (Paris, 2012b). How those tourists or workers mitigate that conflict or tension may be determined by their initial travel intent and the level of perceived necessity for staying connected.

2.5 Work Communication Tensions

Work communication tension negatively creates a sense of missed opportunities, perceived work overload, compromises assumed availability, and limits micromanagement (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). For some travelers, being disconnected (even unexpectedly) can be beneficial or perceived positively as the often overused excuse "I can't be reached" is actually true. For others though, the violation of the assumed availability caused by being disconnected can cause work related anxieties. This anxiety can be dependent upon whether the traveler was implicitly intending to work while traveling, and thus the motivation for the trip is an important consideration. However for many individuals their work, travel, and virtual connectivity are all interconnected. Regardless of the capacity or work to travel ratio, greater importance has to be placed on delineating between the example of working-holiday tourist and the tourist stuck working (Clarke, 2005; Uriely, 2001).

As mobile devices are often used for both personal and work related communications, there is the potential for tensions to arise and be exacerbated (Middleton, 2009; Berger & Paris, 2014). These devices are liberating users from the confines of work

'spaces' creating and extending physically antisocial behaviors into home spaces and other non-work environments (Turel et al., 2011). While being constantly connected does allow individuals a certain level of perceived control over their work based communications and activities (Middleton, 2009), unexpected disconnection can violate this perceived sense of control. A respondent of Middleton's study went so far as to explain, that the connection (through a Blackberry) can be treated as a "pet" that can be coddled and attended to regardless of location. Turel et al. (2011) suggest that organizationally pervasive technologies can result in technological addiction, even though they can increase productivity. Other recent studies have suggested that social networking technologies are 'addiction prone' (Tarafdar, Gupta, & Turel, 2013; Turel & Serenko, 2012), and a large number of adults consider themselves 'addicted' to smart-devices (Ofcom, 2011).

2.6 Technology Addiction

Clinicians, researchers, media, and the wider public have given more attention to non-substance addictions including those to the internet, videogames, mobile devices, etc. (Karim & Chaudhri, 2012). Research on the legitimacy of technology and Internet addiction began in the mid-1990s (Griffiths, 1996). The technology and Internet addiction literature has focused on classification (e.g. Widyanto, Griffiths & Brunsden, 2011), how individuals can become disengaged from reality (Hartman, 2011), the similarity of symptoms to other types of addiction, and estimations of the addiction's prevalence (Young, 1998). Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) interchangeably referenced as Problematic Internet Use has been an area of academic interest since the term was coined in 1996 by Ivan Goldberg. One early attempt at classifying the behaviors related to IAD was provided by Young's (1998) criteria, included in Table 1. While attempts like Young's have resulted in mixed results and have received criticism within the psychology literature, they are still quite useful as an exploratory framework for the analysis of technology use.

Recently, Dodes' (2009) examination of the psychology of addiction suggests that an individual's anxieties can provoke feelings of helplessness or powerlessness, leading to a perceived threat to the person's self-esteem and ultimately a compulsive behavior that displaces those feelings. Within the context of our paper, this could suggest that control over 'being disconnected' would play a strong role in the anxieties and tensions that arise for travelers. Research by Middleton (2007) on BlackBerry users explored the relationship between user perception of balance and control over their devices, and the practicalities that resulted from their device's always-on and always-connected nature. Middleton's findings suggested that the constant connectivity and mobility of the device influences the individual's ability to disconnect as both user reliance increases and corresponding expectations of social and professional responsiveness increase. Even in cases where individuals were shown to make clear distinctions between work and non-work times, the introduction of the BlackBerry encouraged that time be spent disproportionately on work-related activities.

In an early study on mobile social networking, Humphreys (2008) built upon existing research that showed that in addition to aiding the maintenance of existing social connections, mobile phones can contribute to 'atomization and privatization' which hinders in-person interactions. Humphrey's research suggests that even when

individuals temporarily disconnect from the network, it is difficult to disengage because updates are readily available and archived once their connection is re-enabled.

Germann Molz (2006) argued that these technologies are playing an increasingly important role in shaping the way we relate to and engage with our peers socially within a travel context. Turel et al., (2011) note that tourists have been shown to have difficulty controlling their use of technology due to social obligations, norms, and expectations as well as to the addictive behaviors tied to the technology itself, which was also a key spillover effect of smartphone use in everyday life on travel in research by Wang, Xiang, and Fesenmaier (2014). With this brief review of literature on the impacts of recent technological devices on the travel experience and the potentiality of tensions and anxieties to form for travelers when they are disconnected, this study examines the short narratives of tech savvy' travelers. Through these shared experiences of disconnection, this study contributes an exploratory glimpse into an important dimension of the technologically mediated travel experience.

3 Methods

For this study, travelers own experiences were elicited through a series of online interviews conducted primarily through email and Facebook in August 2013. Three prompts were used: 1) Share a story or experience about how technology (mobile or social media) has disrupted or separated you from the 'travel experience', 2) Share a story or experience from traveling in a 'technology dead zone' where you were disconnected from your online social networks, 3) Have you ever 'unplugged' by choice while traveling? Why? Please share a story.

A snowball sampling technique was employed via Facebook and email in August 2013, during which self identified 'heavy users' of social media and mobile devices were asked to respond to the three prompts. The respondents included 13 men and 12 women and a range of ages (eleven 21-30, eight 31-40, two 41-50, and four 51+ years old). The sample was composed of individuals from North America (16), Europe (5), Australia (2), and Latin America (2), and about half earned some sort of income through their blogs based upon their own personal travels. Travel bloggers were specifically targeted in order to gain insights for individuals that were (at least partially) financial dependent on being connected and traveling.

Analysis of responses was conducted using a multi-stage process of coding/thematic analysis. During the first stage two of the researchers independently coded a sample of data using 'a priori' categories (presented in column 4 of Table 1) based on Pearce & Gretzel's conceptual framework 'Technology-induced tensions in dead zone tourism' (2012). During this initial coding both researchers recognized the prevalent use of 'addiction' terminology used by the respondents. Therefore an additional set of 'a priori' categories (presented in column 1 of Table 1) were established based on Young's (1998) criteria on 'technology addiction', and all of the data was then coded by the same two researchers using both sets of 'a priori' categories. The two researchers agreed on the definitions of the 'a priori' categories, based on the explanation of these categories in the previous applications. It was important that a shared understanding of the categories was established, as the calculation of inter-

coder reliability is not appropriate for this situation as the coders both agreed that the 'a priori' categories do not fulfill the assumption that they are independent, mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Cohen, 1960).

4 Discussion of Findings

In Table 1, illustrative quotes are organized according to Young's (1998) criteria for Internet Addiction. Additionally, for each criteria, one or more of the 'technology induced tensions' (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012) are included. In our study, we found that the travelers' reliance and expectations associated with social and mobile technologies often corresponded with negative experiences that they shared. An example of this is clearly illustrated by the 'Siberian café' story in Table 1. Several respondents gave examples of how technology distracted them from their travel experiences, often unconsciously at the time, as they were preoccupied with their social and mobile technologies. Respondents conveyed a feeling of being "programmed" to fill downtime with technology vs. real world experiences, a similar response to findings in Wang, Xiang, and Fesenmaier (2014)'s recent study on smartphone use during travel.

Pearce and Gretzel (2012) noted that technology induced tensions often cause both positive and negative feelings for travelers when they are disconnected, and that the intensity of the tension is related to the unexpectedness of being disconnected/unable to connect virtually. This mélange of feelings is evident in some of the selected quotations presented in Table 1. Additionally, how those tourists mitigate and deal with the tension is influenced by their initial intent of trip, the perceived necessity of staying connected, and the perceived level of control/choice over the disconnection.

In our study, many of the 'travel bloggers' noted that they experienced high levels of work communication tension when they were going into a dead zone, but if they had advanced warning they would employ strategies, such as scheduling posts for when they were 'away', in order to minimize the impact of being disconnected. Conversely, several also noted occasions where they had very negative responses or anxieties due to an unexpected disconnection. Dead zones create a space for introspection that is warranted, yet unwelcomed, for some whereas it is desired and demanded by others. Individual responses to these tensions often were expressed using metaphoric addiction language (Table 1).

Pearce and Gretzel (2012) noted several positive outcomes from the technology induced tensions of dead zone tourism, including the reflection, evaluation, and in some cases behavioral change in regards to the value or necessity of connected travel. Our findings suggest that some individuals are able to 'rehabilitate' themselves, change their behavior, and/or actively seek out opportunities for travel in dead zones. This is an important consideration for the tourism industry as technologically mediated travel becomes even more prolific. It also provides an area for future study as research on how individuals are coping with technology addiction while traveling is largely uncovered within the tourism literature. It has, however, started to receive increasing amounts of coverage in the media (Lovitt, 2013; Doyne, 2013; Horn, 2013).

Table 1. Respondent Quotes, Technology-Induced Tensions, and Technology Addiction Criteria

Young's Criteria		Respondent quote	Likely Tension if in a dead zone
Pre-occupation	constantly thinking about past/future use.	*I'm sure technology constantly distracts me from travel experiences because I'm obsessed with it and it's in my face every day.* *Every time your smartphone beeps, buzzes, or vibrates when you're trying to absorb yourself in another culture or place, you're losing something in the experience*	Immediacy Connectedness
Increased use	more and more time required to reach satisfaction	*For the first 3 days of the trip to Greece (before my phone was lost/stolen), I was constantly checking it and using it as a way to fill time. I would play saved games on it versus getting to know the people around me or exploring my surroundings. I also felt more distracted, as I was responding to e-mails and texts from people on an almost real-time basis*	Immediacy Connectedness Security Escape Tension
Inability to stop	cannot reduce/halt use of internet services	*I don't know what "unplugging by choice" would mean - being in a place with Wi-Fi signal and not using it? For the last five years I haven't travelled without either my laptop, or my iphone or both I chose places to visit or stay based on whether they're good or not, not on whether or not they have Wi-Fi*	Social Communication
Withdrawal symptoms	noticeable impact on mood and state of mind	*The only times I have real 'Internet Withdrawal' symptoms are when there is *supposed* to be Internet access but it doesn't work properly*	Social Communication
Lost sense of time	regularly lose track of time and important deadlines	*Focusing too much attention online with social media sometimes causes me to forget the special moments of travel, worrying more about posting things online than enjoying the occasion. Most of the time my girlfriend, now my wife, sets me straight*	Immediacy Connectedness
Risky behaviors	jeopardizes key professional or personal relationships	*Technology has presented a challenge at times to relationships. I remember sitting across the table in a cafe in Siberia with my girlfriend last winter (who was kind enough to come with me to Siberia in winter). I was well engrossed in social media at the expense of what could have been a great real life conversation. In hindsight it was downright rude*	Immediacy Connectedness Social Communication
Escapism	excessive use of internet to avoid real-life problems	*When I'm traveling in an area with Wi-Fi, the temptation is always there to check email and Facebook, post to Instagram, and so on. When you're in a place (disconnected), the temptation is removed and it's one of the most refreshing things ever*	Social Communication Immediacy Connectedness

Groups like Digital Detox (thedigitaldetox.org) have emerged promoting "off the grid, no boss, no internet, no cell phone, no clock, no work" events, retreats, and summer camps". In 2013 NBC posted an article titled, "Tech-addicted travelers 'disconnect to reconnect' which cited that 80% of smartphone owners don't leave the house without their device. It highlighted rules such as "no cell phones in the bedroom" and a Yoga retreat that provides a 15% discount to guests that turn over their electronics for the entirety of their stay (Lovitt, 2013). The New York Times has offered suggestions such as the "phone stack game" during dinner parties, and establishing no-phone zones (Doyne, 2013). The popular tech blog Gizmodo published, "The Right Way to Disconnect from Technology on Your Next Vacation" which outlined several rules that ranged from the benign "Change your whole home screen, actually" and "Make rules and stick to them" to the more extreme "Delete work email from your phone" and "Don't pack your laptop" (Horn, 2013).

Many of our respondents gave examples of personal rules, such as 'leaving their phones at home' or carving out specific times/places during their trips when they would 'reconnect' virtually. Additionally, several individuals suggested that escaping the connected world allowed them to refresh their minds, allowing for a better 'vacation experience'. However, for some respondents, the trial disconnection, even for a short period while traveling actually caused them a higher level of anxiety. In these cases, the respondents suggested that even if they physically 'turned off' their devices or 'unplugged' mentally they were still thinking about being connected or what they were missing out on by being disconnected.

Hotels are developing offers and programs, to target the potential 'digital escaper' market, where guests are asked to give up their technological devices. For example: Four Seasons Costa Rica's 'disconnect to reconnect' program, Lake Placid Lounge's 'check-in to check-out' package, Riverplace Hotel in Portland's 'romantic revival' package aimed at rekindling romance between couples without the digital distractions, and the 'luxury boot camp' at the Ranch in Malibu which allows travelers to rid themselves of technology while also focusing on physical and spiritual health (Haq, 2013).

The findings also illustrate a particular tension for mobile networked workers, like the travel bloggers in this study, who experience a tension between a dependency on being connected and self-identified problematic usage. One respondent, a full time travel blogger, reflected on a time in Dahab, Egypt where he shut himself up day and night in his room writing stories for his blog. He expressed concern that he was only emerging for meals, and was mindful of the fact that he was actually missing out on the destination he was in, and that he'd probably never have a chance to return.

Popular travel bloggers, such as Ayngelina Brogan, author of Bacon is Magic, who are 'professional travelers' and make their income through social media and the internet have written on the advantages and need for disconnecting. Her blog post notes, "I know I have a problem" and when commenting on being in a quasi-dead zone states, "I have felt the immediate, panicky withdrawal symptoms. I know they will go away. I know that life will go on if I am not on Facebook". She closes the post out by noting that, "My addiction to the internet burns me out and drains my creativity".

5 Conclusion

The tensions and anxieties when disconnected while traveling are likely to increase as individuals embrace the freedom of mobility afforded by smartphones, mobile bandwidth, and cloud computing. As our ability to socialize, play, work, and learn become more dependent on mobile technologies and less dependent on physical location, a greater level of spillover between travel and non-travel experiences is likely. Thus, in addition to the great opportunities and potential afforded by the advancements in mobile technologies, there are psychological, social, and even ethical concerns that should be examined. In the travel context, one particular aspect that will influence the level of anxiety and type of tensions travelers experience by being disconnected is their level of control over the decision to be connected. A traveler can take measures and precautions to avoid being 'plugged in' or 'reachable', for example, 'leaving the work phone at home'. Additionally, if a traveler knows ahead of time that they are traveling to a dead zone they can take additional precautions for keeping connected even while absent by scheduling blog posts, informing their online networks that they will be 'off-the-grid', etc.

In these cases the traveler has a level of control or prior knowledge about the level of connectivity to expect during their travel experience, and even if it is uncomfortable, connectivity can still be 'managed'. In cases where there is a lack of control or prior knowledge disconnection can have a negative impact, for example an individual is disconnected by accident due to a lack of infrastructure or connectivity that is inconsistent and/or expensive creating an unexpected barrier to staying 'plugged in'. The intent of the trip tends to foreshadow the traveler's reaction to the dead zone. The purpose of travel needs to be delineated, because the basis for the travel could determine the perceived joy or anxiety associated with not being connected.

In practice, there may be some potential for 'disconnected holidays' to be developed and marketed toward travelers seeking refuge from their over-connected and over-stimulated daily lives. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that cases of disruption or inability to connect while traveling can cause quite powerful emotional and behavioral responses, which has practical implications for the industry. Customers now have a general expectation that they will be able to connect while traveling, and barriers to this connection could cause negative reactions, negative satisfaction, and thus have real-world implications for tourism businesses.

This paper provided an exploratory glimpse at the experiences of being disconnected for a small group of travelers. The findings are not generalizable, but instead provide a basis for further study. As this study focused primarily on technologically savvy individuals from predominately western societies, future studies should extend the breadth of this study to include populations from other cultures/societies contexts. Additionally, studies examining the behaviors and reactions to being disconnected during travel for solo travelers, travelers in groups or with family, business travelers, and travelers with different motivations could provide additional insights. Future studies employing ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, quantitative and experimental methods would be appropriate.

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