

Leave your phone at home this holiday and you'll feel better (after you feel worse)

August 14 2019, by Brad Mckenna, Lena Waizenegger And Wenjie Cai



Credit: Gustavo Fring from Pexels

What did we do before smartphones? Our devices have become an essential tool for modern life, even when we're on holiday. In fact, technology is [revolutionizing tourism](#). We navigate with Google Maps,

we use TripAdvisor to find good restaurants, we share our travel experiences on Instagram, and we instantly message people back home. Imagine if all of these things were taken away from you.

That's what we did to 24 people who volunteered for our [interview-based study](#) on what it's like to give up your smartphone and travel digital-free. With a growing concern about the [negative impact digital technology](#) can have on people's wellbeing, [especially on holiday](#), we wanted to find out if a digital detox would help. But we found that disconnecting on holiday comes with [emotional](#) challenges of its own.

We asked our volunteers to keep a diary of their emotions and feelings before they disconnected, during their trip, and after re-connecting when they returned home. We also conducted interviews after their digital-free journeys.

Individuals who choose to disconnect on holiday tend to be looking for some therapeutic rehabilitation. But we found the digital-free journey was not always easy. Travellers experienced different levels of emotions due to technology disconnection. Feelings of anxiety started to build with the anticipation of disconnecting, with worries about what would happen. One participant said: "To be honest, two days before the trip I was a little bit nervous about it."

The [negative emotions](#) escalated in the first few days of the disconnected holiday with a mixture of frustration, worry, isolation, and anxiety. The feelings were especially overwhelming for some tech-savvy travellers who were used to technology in their daily lives. They struggled to settle into a new environment without their usual support of technology. One participant mentioned their anxiety around safety: "There is a chance that I might be in danger or have an accident, and my family cannot reach me."

Travellers at this stage were forced to travel in an old-fashion manner, navigating using a printed map, talking to strangers, and reading printed bus timetables. Two of our participants even gave up at this stage as they found the emotional experience unbearable.

The strength of emotions was not the same for everyone. In the research, we discovered several influencing factors. It was easier to disconnect in rural destinations, if participants had travel companions, if they had fewer work commitments back home, if they had strong motivations for disconnecting, or if their reliance on technology in daily life was low.

Our participants overcame the initial emotions and then started to enjoy the digital-free experience. They found themselves more immersed in the destination, created more valuable moments with their travel companions, and had many more memorable and authentic encounters with locals.

They felt free, happy, excited, and relieved. One participant said: "I feel quite good that I made it this far without technology. I feel quite liberated." Without the disruptions of digital technologies, they were fully engaged with their holiday experience, demonstrating that a digital-free [holiday](#) can contribute to wellbeing.

Reconnecting to normal life

All detoxes must come to an end, and our travelers had to face reconnecting to technology at the end of their holidays. Many started to feel anxious or guilty, but others, although they enjoyed the disconnected experience, felt excited to reconnect.

Interestingly, first time digital-free travelers felt disappointed as they anticipated the things they missed out on while disconnected, but then realized they had not missed much. Many reevaluated their relationships

with technology. One of our participants stated:

"It was rather disappointing turning my phone back on. Seeing Facebook likes and messages I had, I felt how superficial they were. Not important stuff. I started to think why am I so addicted to counting my likes and reading comments that don't really have a huge impact on my life? Technology, especially Facebook, has become my life."

Understanding the emotions of tourists can also provide insights for tour operators and destination management organizations when developing either off-the-grid packages or tech-savvy tour products. Understanding what triggers consumers' negative and positive emotions can help companies improve products and marketing strategies.

Digital-free travel provides an opportunity for many travelers to re-examine their relationships with technology. Many participants reflected on their addictions and "[fear of missing out](#)", and considered bringing this digital-free idea into their daily life, or do it more during their holidays.

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