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Disconnection in nature-based tourism experiences: an actor-network theory approach

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ABSTRACT
Recent studies question whether ubiquitous connectivity via mobiles represents an enhancer and facilitator in nature-based tourism experiences or a potential destructor to disconnect from. We argue that extant research approaches cannot fully grasp the complexity of the connectivity-disconnection dilemma, specifically how tourists appropriate, reinterpret, reshape, and negotiate with meanings inscribed in mobiles and how such negotiations link to valuations of nature-based experiences. This research adopts an interpretivist approach and uses actor-network theory to investigate negotiations of connectivity and their experiential meanings through field interviews in Fulufjället National Park, Sweden. Results reveal translations of social connectivity, facilitation of information and orientation as thematic cores of tourists' embodiments of mobile connectivity. Results also show how the comprehensive tourismscape where such embodiments find meaning contributes to tourists' definitions of disconnection. Such definitions comprise human and non-human actors on site, off site, and cannot be exhausted by essentialist dualisms between being plugged and unplugged.

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Introduction
Technologies granting ubiquitous Internet connection are mostly considered enhancers and facilitators of the tourism experience (Benckendorff, Xiang, and Sheldon 2019). Thus, extant research has been concerned mostly with developing, enhancing and integrating mobile Internet-communication technologies (mobile ICTs) into tourism experiences (Cai and McKenna 2021; Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013). However, recent studies acknowledge the harmful effects of mobile ICTs on tourist experiences, mainly due to pressures to stay connected in the presence of enabling infrastructure at the destination and forced disconnection in its absence (Cai, McKenna, and Waizenegger 2020). Research on disconnection, either forced or voluntary, is often linked to activities in natural and rural areas such as camping, backpacking, and hiking. Nature-based tourism experiences are increasingly mediated by the consumption cultures of mobile ICTs and social media (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021). Elmahdy,
Haukeland, and Fredman (2017) and Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau (2016) confirm a specific trend to ‘disconnect’ in nature-based tourism experiences. Thus, understanding the phenomenon of disconnection and its relation to connectivity is particularly timely and needed by nature-based tourism stakeholders.

Studies on disconnection in the tourism experience are not as comprehensive as those exploring connectivity (Li, Pearce, and Oktadiana 2020; Cai, McKenna, and Waizenegger 2020). Moreover, most research on connectivity and disconnection maintain ontologies of technology which overgeneralize mobile software and hardware, as well as the contexts where these are connected and disconnected (Conti and Lexhagen 2020; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013). Mobile ICTs as objects are considered entities whose contribution to meaning-making within the tourism experience is neutralized or predetermined by suppliers (Fast, Ljungberg, and Braunerhielm 2019; Walsh and Tucker 2009). Their semiotic role in shaping tourism experiences is sidelined or neglected compared to human actors (Cheng and Agyeiwaah 2021).

In addition, although explorative studies identify tourists who seek a balance between connectivity to mobiles and disconnection (Tan 2017; Tribe and Mkono 2017), disconnection and connectivity are typically treated as opposites of dualism. Thus, the focus remains to report on whether tourists disconnect or not from their mobiles in homogenous or unproblematized spatialities or what objective consequences a generic ‘being connected’ might have as opposed to being ‘disconnected’ (Tanti and Buhalis 2017). When connectivity and disconnection are understood in such a dichotomous way, nature-based tourism scholars and practitioners are presented with fragmented results on whether mobile ICTs are experience ‘enablers’ and ‘enhancers’ as opposed to ‘destroyers’ (Neuhofer 2016). It is also unclear the extent to which nature-based tourism experiences are ‘plugged’ as opposed to ‘technology-dead’, ‘unplugged’, or ‘digital free’, and whether ‘being plugged’ disables, inhibits or harms positive experiences of disconnection (Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020; Pearce and Gretzel 2012; Gretzel 2010).

Perspectives more attentive toward how tourists negotiate between connectivity and disconnection, and the experiential meanings associated with both, are needed to clarify the connection/disconnection phenomenon within tourism (Fast, Ljungberg, and Braunerhielm 2019; Tanti and Buhalis 2017; Walsh and Tucker 2009). Such perspectives should consider more in-depth the role of mobiles and their constitutive parts in meaning-making, e.g. single apps and hardware, and how these relate to other entities within tourists’ experience network (Ibid; Binkshorst and Dekker 2009).

In this paper, we use actor-network theory (ANT) to explore the relational ties between disconnection and connectivity to mobiles while escaping antinomic dualisms typically imposed on both (Lugosi 2016; Latour 1996). We present empirical results from field interviews conducted at Fulufjället National Park, Sweden, and explore how disconnection and connectivity to mobiles are negotiated and valued within nature-based tourist experiences through appropriations, reinterpretations, and embodiments. Following ANT, we explore how such negotiations link to other entities in ordering nature as tourismscapes (Van der Duim 2007), enabling tourist lived experiences of places, proximity, and distance (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021; Rickly-Boyd 2013; White and White 2007) which are also actors in the definition of disconnection. Exploring such questions while departing from ANT’s emphasis on relationality and rejection of binaries (Latour 1996) helps to address significant gaps. First, tourists’ agency and motivations in
negotiating between connectivity and disconnection and the experiential meanings attributed to connectivity and disconnection (Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020; Neuhofer and Ladkin 2017). Such gap is further underlined by perspectives recognizing hybrid forms of connectivity and disconnection (Tanti and Buhalis 2017). Secondly, the meanings which technological objects carry as actors in relation to tourist identity, social life and experiences of nature (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013; Walsh and Tucker 2009).

Theoretical background

**The impact of mobile ICTs on the tourism experience**

Mobile connectivity blurs traditionally sharp distinctions between being away and the everyday, as well as the traditional unity of physical and social presence (Floros et al. 2021; Jansson 2020; Tan 2017; Hannam, Butler, and Paris 2014; Neuhofer, Buhalis, and Ladkin 2012). Pearce (2011) argues that the idea of tourism mobility between ‘home’ and ‘away’ needs to be replaced by a notion of perpetual ‘digital elasticity’ between home and away. Binkshorst and Dekker (2009) add that destination-based relations co-exist fluidly with home-based ones in a single ‘tourism experience network’. Neuhofer and Buhalis (2017, 2) refer to these as characteristics of an era of ‘constant connectivity’. Generally, extant research considers the consequences of constant connectivity for tourists to be positive (Cai and MckKenna 2021; Cai et al. 2021; Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020). Thanks to mobile ICTs, tourists can access social media, email accounts and similar digital platforms while at home or away (Tanti and Buhalis 2017; Prebensen, Chen, and Uysal 2014; Neuhofer, Buhalis, and Ladkin 2012). Mobile ICTs introduce ubiquitous sources of value from a tourist perspective, ranging from communication and entertainment to facilitation, e.g. guiding and information search (Wang, Xiang, and Fesenmaier 2014; Neuhofer, Buhalis, and Ladkin 2012). They also enable tourists to share their experiences across social platforms, which allow them to continuously add, re-shape and re-contextualize meanings of what they experience (Conti and Lexhagen 2020; Jansson 2020; Conti and Cassel 2020).

Nevertheless, mobile ICTs can also interfere with the tourism experience, destroying value rather than creating it (Benckendorff, Xiang, and Sheldon 2019; Neuhofer 2016). Fundamental aspects of experiencing a place, such as sociality, esthetical immersion and fun, can be disjointed from the physical space of reference (Tanti and Buhalis 2017; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013). Thus, the geographical locations of the tourism experience can become secondary or irrelevant, leading to disembodied experiences, loss of sense of place, and lack of engagement with communities and places (Cai, McKenna, and Waizenegger 2020; Voase 2018). Several studies reported that a conflicting stance between being offline and online could affect the tourism experience by causing distraction (Ayeh 2018), self-estrangement (Tribe and Mkono 2017), anxiety (Gretzel 2010) and discomfort (White and White 2007). These results reflect the relation between mobile ICTs and addiction phenomena such as FOMO, ‘fear of missing out’, and Nomophobia, ‘no mobile phone phobia’ (Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020). Mobile ICTs can lead to contradictory valuations of proximity and distance to/from home, which at times introduce feelings of social bonding and other times of obligation, loss of time, overwhelming expectations
and distress (Floros et al. 2021; Cai, McKenna, and Waizenegger 2020; Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau 2016; White and White 2007).

Whether interpreted as positive or negative conditions, tourism research usually treats being connected and disconnected as conflicting opposites. Yet, Tan (2017) and Tribe and Mkono (2017) provide evidence of tourists who compromise their use of mobile ICTs, not jeopardizing their experience but rather enjoying positive aspects of connectivity. Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau (2016, 200) argue that disconnecting behaviours are ‘highly personal and contextual to individual experiences and circumstances’. Tanti and Buhalis (2017) refer to tourists’ personal and context-sensitive negotiations between different kinds of connectivity and disconnection as ‘selective unplugging’. Yet, what leads tourists toward specific unplugging strategies remains largely understudied. Speculatively to the term ‘connectivity’, the use of the term ‘disconnection’ might lead to overgeneralizing notions about the meaning of ‘being disconnected’, which make the very idea of selective unplugging under-represented (Li, Pearce, and Low 2018; Tanti and Buhalis 2017).

**Disconnection and connectivity in nature-based tourism**

Nature-based tourists can use an increasing number of mobile ICTs as experience facilitators in planning, guiding, accessing wilderness areas, or achieving relaxation (Elmahdy, Haukeland, and Fredman 2017; Tan 2017). However, Gretzel (2010, 21) warns that the expansion of mobile ICT-enabling infrastructure to remote areas, fuelled by tourists ‘seeking out the unknown while being backed by mobile phones’ will make genuinely ‘wild’ and remote places increasingly rare. The hegemony of hyper-connectivity will change nature-based adventure tourism by shaping it, culturally and experientially, into a choice between leaving connectivity items at home or bringing them into the tourism experience (Voase 2018; Gretzel 2010). Conflicting demands are likely to arise between hyperconnected tourists and tourists who view mobile ICTs ‘as barriers to experiencing the natural environment’ (Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau 2016, 196).

Gretzel (2010) defines rural, natural and remote areas as technology-dead zones, negatively signified by the absence of something critical for safety, relaxation and enjoyment, and where disconnection from the Internet is enforced and stressful (Tan 2017; Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau 2016). Such definition reflects the negative valuation normally given to disconnection as an enforced condition (Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020). Yet, studies have revealed that disconnection in nature leads tourists to enjoy better on-site spaces and relationships (Pearce and Gretzel 2012), avoid work and home-related intrusions and expectations (Li, Pearce, and Low 2018; Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau 2016), and experience the authenticity and simplicity of outdoorism (Tribe and Mkono 2017; Elmahdy, Haukeland, and Fredman 2017). Li, Pearce, and Low (2018) defined Digital-free tourism (DFT) as tourism in areas positively valued by limited or non-existent technological access. DFT is becoming increasingly contiguous to nature-based tourism by building symbolic connections between disconnection from mobiles, remoteness, rurality, wilderness, ‘taking a break’, ‘reconnecting’, mindfulness, wellness and authenticity (Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020; Hansen, Jones, and Tocchini 2017; Fuggle 2015). JOMO, ‘joy of missing out’, is emerging as a trend in response to FOMO, ‘fear of missing out’, and focuses on taking a break in nature from a daily environment saturated with Internet-based demands (Putra 2019; Aranda and Baig 2018).
Elmahdy, Haukeland, and Fredman (2017) and Fredman, Wall-Reinius, and Grundén (2012) suggested that recent studies may indicate a thematic change from ‘purist’ escapism in natural areas, concerned with remoteness and wilderness, towards escapism mediated by services and infrastructures to facilitate experiential goals. However, whether and how concepts of ‘escaping’ and ‘wilderness’ changed because of mobile connectivity remains an open question (Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau 2016).

**Actor-network theory**

Most research on mobile ICTs within tourism is founded on the idea that human users, contextualized in an objective reality, respond rationally and predictably to technological development (Gretzel et al. 2020; Fast, Ljungberg, and Braunerhielm 2019; Pourfakhimi, Duncan, and Coetzee 2019; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013). Accordingly, technological objects are seen as disembodied items (Cheng and Agyeiwaah 2021; Walsh and Tucker 2009) whose uses, values and meanings are predetermined by suppliers and designers (Gretzel et al. 2020; Monteiro 2000). In most tourism experience literature, mobile ICTs are seen as mere props in the service of human designers, and contextual human interactions, interpretations and meanings attached to mobiles are hegemonized by their designed functions (Braga and Suarez 2018; Walsh and Tucker 2009).

Perspectives more attentive towards how the meanings of objects are co-constructed, negotiated, reinterpreted and appropriated have been developed to contrast such determinism (Gretzel et al. 2020; Fast, Ljungberg, and Braunerhielm 2019; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013; Monteiro 2000). Introduced in the 1980s by the work of Latour, Callon and Law, actor-network theory (ANT) is one of the most important frameworks of this kind and is increasingly acknowledged within tourism research (Yan and He 2020; Van der Duim, Ren, and Jóhannesson 2017; Lugosi 2016; Van der Duim 2007). ANT postulates that non-human and human actors interconnect and shape the meaning of reality by both being entities which ‘take their form and acquire attributes as a result of their relations with other entities’ (Law and Hassard 1999, 3). ‘Entities’ within ANT include all actors and range from technologies to facts, institutions (Lugosi 2016), events, procedures and ideas (Braga and Suarez 2018), to name a few. Within tourism, important actors are the embodied performances and ideas about being a tourist and doing tourism, spaces, information and media (Yan and He 2020; Van der Duim 2007).

Relations between such entities are constructed according to principles of symmetry and flat ontology. Namely, no predetermined order or hierarchy of meaning (e.g. scale, importance or spatial) or disciplinary dualisms (e.g. nature/culture, global/local) can be imposed on entities other than the role they have in a network (Latour 1996). Entities’ meanings are constantly reconstructed through contextualized practices which bring them into a network as experiential actors, or objects (Lugosi 2016). The dependence of actors on their network is highlighted by the unified notion of ‘actor-network’, meaning that actors are defined by their network and, at the same time, are assemblages of actors themselves (Yan and He 2020; Braga and Suarez 2018; Latour 1996). For instance, a smartphone can be seen as a networked actor, yet at the same time as an assemblage of actors such as apps and hardware networking together.

ANT further illustrates the nature of technological artefacts as actors by conceptualizing ‘inscriptions’ and ‘translations’. ‘Inscriptions’ refer to patterns of use and meanings
embodied in a technological artefact and reflect specific ‘visions’ about the world which designers, innovators, influencers, and other social forces have (Monteiro 2000; Law 1992; Akrich 1992). Such ‘visions’ lead to assumptions about how an artefact is to be embodied and used (Akrich 1992). ‘Translations’ are individual embodied reinterpretations, negotiations, and appropriations of an artefact’s inscriptions according to the interpreter’s context, needs and visions (Prout 1996; Callon 1990; Latour 1990). Translations generate personal and contrasting uses, embodiments and visions. These, in turn, emerge from an ordered network between a user, their networked lifeworld, a technological artefact and its inscribed meanings (Cresswell, Worth, and Sheikh 2010; Monteiro 2000). Within tourism, according to Van der Duim (2007), destination spaces and experiences can be seen as orderings of relationships of various actor-networks entangled by complex processes of translation. Such processes create tourism experiential landscapes, or ‘tourismscapes’, which often compete and collide with other touristic and local translations (Yan and He 2020; Van der Duim 2007). As such, ANT research within tourism always refers to tourismscapes and the way they are ordered, constructed, experienced, signified, and embodied.

In tourism, ANT describes mobile ICTs as multifaceted actor-networks inscribed with valuations with which tourists interact depending on valued ideas of proximity and distance (White and White 2007). From such interactions stem valued, embodied and meaningful senses of being and ‘being there’ (Conti and Lexhagen 2020; Cardell and Douglas 2018; Van der Duim, Ren, and Jóhannesson 2017; Walsh and Tucker 2009), where ‘being there’ is not defined by objective spatial absolutes or extant disciplinary dualisms but by performing actor-networks (Van der Duim 2007). Moreover, the significance of mobile ICTs as experiential actors is not aprioristically prioritized or demoted compared to other human and non-human actors, such as tourists and destinations (Braga and Suarez 2018; Lugosi 2016; Monteiro 2000; Latour 1996). Mobile ICTs are.

Studying disconnection through ANT allows to escape extant aprioristic dualisms and hierarchies between being connected and disconnected, and aprioristic depictions of experiences of connectivity and disconnection. Conversely, ANT unveils grounded relationality between actor-networks, the actor-networks linked within them and those that link to them. Examples are the technological object, the human being, the landscape, yet also their constituents, e.g. the weather, a sound, a physical effort, the emails, and embodiments of leisure. Disconnection opens into a holistic question of meaning, translated by tourists and their networks while negotiating with an inscribed agent (e.g. a smartphone) which contains several other networked and inscribed agents (the apps, the functionalities, etc.). Negotiations with such agents link symmetrically to lived and meaningful experiences of places, identity and other entities which create meanings within the tourismscape (Yan and He 2020; Van der Duim, Ren, and Jóhannesson 2017; Lugosi 2016; Gopal and Prasad 2000).

Methods and limitations
The research is qualitative, explorative, and uses data from 37 participants interviewed during 17 field group interviews at the visitor centre of Fulufjället National Park, Sweden. Field group interviews are a type of interview indicated for field-based
research where the researcher tries to be an empathetic observer and a proactive inquirer about a phenomenon (Frey and Fontana 1991). Accordingly to the method’s rationale, we did not arrange the groups themselves, as these were constituted by families, couples or friends visiting the park together who were interviewed at the local visitor centre. We arranged an interview set-up at the centre which encouraged extensive enquiries and undisturbed discussions in a relaxed environment (Frey and Fontana 1991). The interviews followed an emergent sampling strategy, which is well suited for qualitative and explorative research (Patton 2002). Groups comprised at least two participants. Participants were all European and encompassed different genders and age groups.

We used a semi-structured interviewing approach which offered flexibility to raise additional questions based on participants’ answers (Bernard, Wutich, and Ryan 2016) and which allowed participants to build on each other’s answers (Frey and Fontana 1991). The whole research design aimed to stimulate the emergence of meanings attributed to connectivity and disconnection, and how these connect to mobiles and other actors in a naturalistic and empathetic manner (Helkkula, Kelleher, and Pihlström 2012; Gopal and Prasad 2000). Thus, the interview guide was very flexible and included questions about visitors’ connectivity to mobiles and the Internet before, during and after their experience, and about how this linked to aspects of their experience that they found personally meaningful.

Due to the nature of the research design, we do not claim any generalizability of the results, which we acknowledge as a limitation. Although we followed ANT’s approach, we acknowledge the limits implicit in our subjective interpretations, which are always influenced by several factors across the research, including our background and aims (Willig 2013; Miller and Brewer 2003). The report and discussion of our findings reflect a collaborative effort to confront our different hermeneutics in-depth both when analyzing and collecting data, with attention to self-criticism aimed at refining our analysis’s quality (Flick et al. 2014). A significant limitation is that, although fluent, English was not the first language of either the interviewers or most participants, which limited the depth of some participants’ accounts depending on their and our use of the language (Temple and Young 2004). Thus, we paid particular attention to deepen our understanding of participants’ statements during the interviews.

**Results and discussion**

More than a theory in a traditional sense, ANT is a flexible toolkit to tell ‘stories about how relations assemble or don’t’ (Law 2009, 141), thus there are several ways to use it to report and discuss findings. We base our account on two important milestones highlighted in the literature. First, to identify and follow actors as they are unveiled by the field, illustrating how they link together in ways that give meaning to each other according to principles of translation and flat ontology (Rodger, Moore, and Newsome 2009; Van der Duim 2007; Monteiro 2000). Second, to highlight the linkages of actors into orderings (Ibid; Latour 1996; Yan and He 2020), that is, within tourism, tourismscapes (Van der Duim 2007). Following these principles helped generate two grounded themes of translation and finally an elucidation of disconnection as a tourismscape of actor-networks.
**Social connectivity**

Embodiments and meanings inscribed in being socially connected by mobile to everyday social networks (e.g. friends, followers and colleagues) constituted a first thematic group of critical actors in defining tourists’ disconnection, particularly due to how these were translated. Most participants owned social media and email accounts and apps. Following Van der Duim (2007) and Lugosi (2016), they represented, together with mobiles, assemblages of actors (objects yet also people, places and ideas linked to them) which they brought with them to the park. While at the park, participants translated such assemblages into behaviours, embodiments and meanings to disconnect from.

‘Impossibility to relax’ and ‘waste of time’ emerged as recurring reasons to negotiate personal uses of social media, partially reflecting findings highlighted in digital-free travel research (e.g. Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020; Li, Pearce, and Low 2018). However, a more widespread factor was the disapproval of social attitudes toward ‘showing off about where one is’ through social media and the linked ‘need of approval’, which emerged as translations of social connectivity in the form of ideas and embodiments (as in Walsh and Tucker 2009). In ANT terms, both reflected the incoherence between inscriptions normally given to sociality online and the destination space together with actors networked to it (Ibid; Van der Duim 2007). One participant, for example, stressed that ‘I’m not here for publication to show everyone what we are experiencing’, where ‘everyone’ represented both humans within the participant’s network as well as a more general Internet-based audience.

Seeing others at the park using social media also reflected negative embodiments of how mobiles are inscribed in the everyday social world. For instance, some noticed other visitors texting and taking selfies and translated that negatively into embodiments of signalling onés whereabouts (‘People always like, ‘Today I’m here. Today I’m there’), youth problems (‘young people have it all times in the hand and they are looking here [mimic the act of looking at a smartphone], and it’s a problem for them’), and crowding (e.g. ‘being in Venice’). One participant reflected on how they connected to social habits linked to restlessness: ‘it’s distracting myself from being in the moment because when I see someone else picking up their phone or taking a lot of pictures, my first instinct is to do the same because there’s this restlessness inside this, and it touches that part of me when I see other people being this restless’. Others explicitly lamented that noticing such behaviour ‘brings you back to your civilization, to your daily life’. Negative links to daily life and the jeopardization of experiences of being away were implicit in many participants’ responses when addressing social connectivity, and how, following Braga and Suarez (2018) and Van der Duim (2007) the latter translates into assemblages of actors (e.g. perceptions, embodiments and ideas) to ‘unplug’ from.

In addition to a complete unplug, two main selective unplugging strategies (Tanti and Buhalis 2017) emerged concerning social media. First, almost all participants used their smartphones to take pictures, yet most preferred to share them online after the experience regardless of Internet coverage. Sharing pictures embodied inscriptions of social connectivity described above more than taking pictures alone. Thus, sharing afterwards was a context-sensitive translation which allowed participants to take pictures without jeopardizing their experience by the negative meanings associated with social connectivity in nature. Second, several participants distinguished between different audiences
with whom they share pictures, even when sharing in real-time. Embodiments of private or selective sharing (participants mentioned, for instance, private messaging on WhatsApp or Messenger or setting up private Facebook or Instagram profiles), linked to ‘share the beauty with my family and friends […] people that I love, that they know where I am and what we’re doing’, as opposed to public sharing which translated into ‘showing off’ as described above. Following Van der Duim, Ren, and Jóhannesson (2017) and Lugosi (2016), such strategies reconfigured social media into experiential objects coherent to the park’s experience.

Other strategies concerned how to ‘unplug’ from work-related actors (e.g. email apps, when not phones and phone numbers themselves) Such entities were translated by all participants as creating a lack of solitude, excessive busyness and hecticness in contrast to smart or comfortable connectivity usually inscribed in such ‘enabling’ actors. In ANT terms, they linked to embodiments of working bodies (Walsh and Tucker 2009; Van der Duim 2007), e.g. being reachable by colleagues, receiving and looking at emails, and were stressed by participants as something which they needed disconnection from. Various unplugging strategies were related to how phones, hardware or apps connected to work were translated. Some participants left their phones in their car before venturing into the park as the phone itself meant ‘being exposed to work’ and thus ‘to your civilization, to your daily life’, which following Yan and He (2020) and Braga and Suarez (2018) all represented actors networked within ‘work’. Yet another participant needed to switch off just the 4G connection on his smartphone to disconnect from work, as that allowed him to disconnect from emails: ‘I don’t want to put on 4G, because then also all my emails are received. So, I left my phone off of 4G’. Similarly, other participants kept their phones but deactivated email clients or set up automated replies to feel a positive experience of disconnection. For others, the experience of freedom of not looking at emails when in nature was a sufficient embodiment of being disconnected: ‘I’m free not to use it, I don’t look for the emails which are arriving’. All these embodied translations were associated with disconnection from work, both symbolically and experientially. Following White and White (2007), they all permitted the establishment of an experience of distance from work-based social networks. Thus, they aligned mobiles to the destination experience, despite inscriptions on apps and hardware which valued proximity to colleagues.

**Orientation and information**

Negotiations with actors inscribed with facilitation of orientation through mapping, tracking and information retrieval represented a second important theme about the use of mobiles at the park. Previous research has found that such inscriptions are appreciated in nature-based experiences (Elmahdy, Haukeland, and Fredman 2017; Tan 2017). Our findings, however, offered a more complex picture.

Some participants translated facilitation of orientation and information into excessive easiness incoherent with tourist embodiments of exploring and conquering nature, or challenging oneself. These embodiments are known in nature-based tourism (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021; Pearce and Gretzel 2012), and emerged as important actor-networks in relation to facilitation and orientation. A participant, for instance, aimed to ‘explore or walk towards nature on my own and to see some things on my own. Or to conquer some things on my own’. Participants in one group used their mobile devices to check if
some berries found in the woods were edible which, according to one of them, ‘makes life easier’. Yet, another participant added: ‘Even if you don’t want to have it easy. That’s the problem’. The same group tried to find a landmark tree in the national park (Old Tjikko) without any mapping or guidance offered by the smartphone without success, but ‘to try one’s best’ was the point of their tourist bodies as actor-networks more than ‘finding the tree’: ‘It’s a challenge to find the Old Tjikko even if we couldn’t find it for two hours, but yeah, we gave our best, and that’s it. I just don’t want to make it that easy’. Participants in other groups found it ‘energizing’, ‘challenging’, and ‘exciting’ to find their way without the help of real-time tracking offered by mobiles: ‘there is the uncertainty of, am I on the right track or not? Is this the trail or not? When is it done? Are we close to the end?’ In ANT terms, tourist embodiments and meanings associated with experiencing the park’s landscape conflicted, as actor-networks, with inscriptions of mobile facilitation and their consequences for such embodiments and meanings (Yan and He 2020; Van der Duim 2007). In these circumstances, unplugging facilitation and orientation represented the most common translation.

Other participants appreciated orientation and guidance coming from GPS apps and welcomed information about their surroundings via their mobiles. In one group, participants used a GPS tracker ‘so we can find out where we are right now. Gives a little certainty and security to know where we are’. Another participant associated more easiness to orient oneself with ‘increased possibilities’. Unlike a human guide, GPS helped him feel both independent and safe. These and other participants linked easiness, safety and independence to freedom which, as we will see later on, was a central actor-network in tourists’ experiences of being disconnected. As such, facilitation by mobile did not damage the feeling of being disconnected. Arguably, in helping participants to feel independent and free, it facilitated such feelings. Using selective unplugging strategies (Tanti and Buhalis 2017), such participants filtered out unwanted social connectivity while using functionalities such as checking forecasts and hiking paths. In ANT terms, social connectivity and facilitation, as separate actor-networks, were embodied differently. For instance, a participant said, ‘I would probably not open up the messages I’ll get. I’ll just leave them’.

Yet in several groups this was a debated issue, due to how translations given to apps and devices, networked into assemblages, shape the experiential meanings of each other in complex, conflicting and often inseparable ways (Lugosi 2016; Braga and Suarez 2018). Specifically, the coexistence of social connectivity actors with facilitation actors within the smartphone as an experiential actor was sometimes problematic. It led a participant not to share the positive ideas of facilitation attributed by his companion to the smartphone: ‘most of it it’s there, and if someone will call me and beep beep you go to that, it’s crazy …] I hate it. I hate it’. Participants in other groups did not welcome any orientation or informational app which would expose them to unwanted social connectivity. For instance, although he valued smart orientation and information retrieval, the participant who disconnected from 4G connectivity to avoid email exposure would never connect to 4G for facilitation purposes, regardless of how facilitation itself was translated. Noteworthily, some participants concerned with excessive easiness did not translate non-technological facilitation actors such as guides, signs and maps similarly to facilitation by mobiles. Following Walsh and Tucker (2009), often this was due to overreaching negative translations given to mobiles and their embodiments, even when using just an app inscribed with
mere facilitation purposes. One participant argued that ‘you find yourself with the phone again, instead of walking around quietly’. According to this participant, the phone, more than being simply distracting, ‘takes you out of the quiet, atmosphere and the feeling with nature’, all actors involved in the embodiment of ‘walking around quietly’ in nature as opposed to ‘being with the phone’.

**Disconnected tourismscapes**

Participants’ accounts suggested disparate types of plugging and unplugging from a dualistic point of view. Arguably, several participants had essentially ‘connected’ experiences according to extant literature (e.g. as in Tanti and Buhalís 2017; Tribe and Mkono 2017). Yet, all participants reported ‘being disconnected’ while at the park, namely experiences where embodied translations of mobiles aligned with correspondent translations of selves, objects, feelings, ideals, spaces, society, and significant others. Following Van der Duim (2007), participants described being disconnected based on the re-ordering of several actors, including mobiles, in tourismscapes, rather than on being essentially plugged, selectively plugged or unplugged from mobiles.

Whereas specific translations of mobiles, apps and functionalities varied, participants’ ‘disconnected tourismscapes’ had shared connotations. Escapism and its acknowledged linkages to nature and liberation (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021; Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020) were recurring in almost all groups. Other than simply unplugging specific hardware and software, participants linked disconnection to being ‘far away’ from ‘the world’, freedom ‘from everything’, ‘from home’, and the consequent freedom of ‘walk on your own, thinking to yourself as […] these open lands open your mind’. Landscapes of daily life translated into limits, constraining social relations or alienation, whereas the park’s landscapes translated into specular distance, freedom or a different way of feeling and thinking. For instance, a participant felt free from civilization, humanity and ‘the limits perceived in the homeland’. Another from consumerism: ‘it doesn’t matter how much cash you have with you […] some things that are important at home aren’t really important here’. Another from ‘being connected to everything and everyone’. As actors within tourismscapes, such escapist states were intimately connected to the translations of social connectivity and facilitating functions of mobiles described before. For instance, a participant defined the ‘stress’ of climbing and hurrying to find shelter from a thunderstorm at the park as ‘relaxing stress’ and ‘adventurous stress’, not to be eliminated by weather forecasting or orientation offered by mobiles. In contrast, urban/daily stress was negatively associated with comfort yet also with hecticness and constraints and was the stress, embodied in mobiles, to ‘liberate from’ according to selective unplugging.

Disconnection as liberation from exposure to news, work and unwanted social attention typically experienced in daily life were recurring topics from participants employing uses of mobile limited to orientation and information facilitation or private sharing on social media. For instance, participants of a group who used GPS-based guiding by phone still felt he was ‘disconnecting from the phone’, as this was an embodied translation of feeling free not to care about being reachable: ‘you don’t care about email or everything, it’s just nice for a while’. Another participant appreciating facilitation similarly felt that
differently from every day: ‘I want to have my choice […] I don’t have to look what’s wrong, what’s in the world’. Another participant specified that for him and his partner, when in nature, ‘we always cut from the life at home, so we don’t want to use social media […] we don’t want to know if there are problems’. Participants in another group who did not appreciate facilitation by mobile were frustrated due to WhatsApp-based pressures from their partners, which research argues inhibit disconnection (Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau 2016). However, these participants experienced disconnection, defined as ‘this feeling that you are in duty to work for your studies’, because they could avoid checking study documents online.

Other groups linked liberation from daily use of mobiles while at the park to a rediscovered connectivity to family members experiencing nature with them. One participant who was not appreciative of facilitation by mobile claimed that she and her group ‘disconnected from our daily lives, so we can connect more to our family […] To spend the whole day with the kids without computer, without any screen. That’s helping connecting within your family with the kids’. Though still used, embodying mobiles to merely private sharing and occasional scrolling of feeds without posting translated the mobile into an actor-network linked to a specific disconnected tourismscape.

Tourist embodiments of mobiles often linked to lived experiences of place. These are normally constructed according to objects, perceptions, behaviours and existential conditions (Rickly-Boyd 2013). Non-human actors associated to lived experiences of place at the park, such as timelessness, silence and calm were recurring and linked to being disconnected. Some participants felt that disconnecting from ‘the internet’ related to disconnecting from ‘society’ and connected to the park as an ‘empty’ and ‘timeless’ place. A participant contrasted silence and the absence of crowds experienced in nature to ‘our world […] hectic and loud and fast, and internet’. One participant associated disconnection with calm, silence, yet also with time, ‘distance’ and ‘freedom’, ‘so the stress is going, and I feel how slower I get, in everything I do’. Others connected disconnection to silence, calm, ‘the feeling that you are alone’, ‘the loneliness, the apartness from everything else’ which, according to another participant, ‘empties my mind and helps me’. The silence was also associated with sensing emptiness and civilization’s absence which allowed some participants to ‘appreciate fully the wilderness’. A perceived and meaningful absence of crowds, cars, cities, and people was mentioned by most groups. All the diverse translations of mobiles and their constitutive actor-networks aligned to such assemblages of human and non-human actors into tourismscapes. Following Van der Duim (2007), all contributed to an ordered network of translations of the park’s experiential landscapes into a disconnected tourismscape whose qualities contrasted the cityscapes experienced in daily life and often related to daily uses of mobiles.

Visitors in the park and their mobiles, as entities of a network, are in a dialogue with other entities inside and outside the park and their embodiments. Negotiations of mobile connectivity reflect the dynamism of the network and the constant reconstruction of its actors (Lugosi 2016) which lead to the establishment of ‘disconnected tourismscapes’ in nature. Disconnected tourismscapes suggest a networked understanding of connectivity and disconnection in nature-based experiences, where definitions of disconnection cannot be reduced to dualistic states or generalized ideas of specific actors and their usage.
Conclusion

Extant research suggests that mobile connectivity liquifies distinctions between being away and the everyday, as well as between physical and social presence (Jansson 2020; Floros et al. 2021; Hannam, Butler, and Paris 2014). In tourism, ‘digital elasticity’ (Pearce 2011) and ‘constant connectivity’ (Neuhofer and Buhalis 2017) reflect the idea of destination-based networks continuous with home-based ones (Binkshorst and Dekker 2009).

Although being away and the everyday may be envisioned as continuous in inscriptions given to mobile use within tourism, our data suggest that tourists’ translations reflect the need for assembling tourismscapes where an experiential separation is always performed. The unplugging from mobiles that we unveiled reflects translations, particularly of social connectivity, orientation and information retrieval in nature, which allow tourists not to be e-lienated from much needed experiential states of ‘being away’ and ‘being elsewhere’ which are part of their tourismscape (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021; Tribe and Mkono 2017; Rickly-Boyd 2013; White and White 2007). Very rarely the perceived intrusion of mobiles, mostly translated as social pressures to engage in social connectivity (Floros et al. 2021), threatened such tourismscapes. Even so, data does not suggest that the location of the tourism experience becomes irrelevant or secondary (Fan, Buhalis, and Lin 2019; Voase 2018), neither that experiences of disconnection are hindered. We always detected the ordering of disconnected tourismscapes experientially aimed at ‘being away’ in all our participants, even those who experienced intrusions, aided by selective unplugging strategies (Tanti and Buhalis 2017). If digital elasticity is a condition ‘involving ongoing connections which render everyday life and vacation time mutually influential’ (Pearce and Gretzel 2012, 4), we propose that such mutuality is only the premise of the ‘digital flexibility’ of negotiating disconnected tourismscapes in relation to a hyperconnected world.

While investigating disconnection in the context of nature-based tourism using ANT, we could tackle the open question of Fredman, Wall-Reinius, and Grundén (2012) and Dickinson, Hibbert, and Filimonau (2016): whether the notion of escapism in nature-based tourism is shifting due to technological developments. Our data suggest that well-known ideas of escapism persist in nature-based tourism experiences (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021). What is shifting though is how cultural resources such as mobiles are negotiated to help construct escapist tourismscapes (Rokka 2021; Van der Duim, Ren, and Jóhannesson 2017). In our data, escapism did not depend on the essential absence or presence of generalizable, essentialist technological objects but on the meaning placed on them and how they could be negotiated through embodiments and translations of disconnection. Nature-based tourists can feel ‘disconnected’ even while essentially ‘plugged’ into forms of mobile connectivity. ICT-enabling infrastructure alone does not necessarily inhibit escapism; neither does it shape escapist experiences in nature into a choice between to be or not to be connected (Gretzel 2010). As highlighted by participants’ different negotiations, dualistic and dichotomic approaches to disconnection, as well as approaches which do not consider different translations given to different apps and devices (Walsh and Tucker 2009), are too deterministic to understand disconnected experiences. ANT represents an effective framework to study disconnection precisely because it helps to overcome such determinism.
The noticeable need to construct experiences of freedom to translate mobile ICTs into the tourism experience, in comparison to the lack experienced in the everyday, reflects the need to discuss visions and inscriptions inherent in the ‘hegemony of hyper-connectivity’ (Voase 2018) in future tourism research. Extant research may reflect an era of ‘techno-optimism’ around mobiles which does not account for the rapidly shifting socio-cultural implications of technology enough (Kozinets 2021; Gretzel et al. 2020). Our data suggest that these impact nature-based tourism experiences and their networked experiences of place (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021; Rickly-Boyd 2013) and are, thus, worthy of future research efforts. Escapism in nature through negotiated mobile connectivity leads to different ways of living, sensing, and socializing which are also signified in relation to how mobiles are signified in the home environment. In a certain way, disconnection in nature serves to counter the self in daily life (Brown 2013; Wang 1999). It also allows tourists to experience personally valued and embodied escapism and liberation. These are not entirely new themes in fields which study the relationship between nature and humans. Yet, their contextualization in the context of contemporary consumption cultures of technology is lacking (Kozinets 2021), and we hope that our conclusions will be thought-provoking for future research.

We encourage future research initiatives implementing research designs which elaborate more systematically and in-depth the interaction between the digital, the human and the natural world as a constantly redefined network. Although we do not claim that our results can be generalized, we do believe that they are interesting for a variety of contexts. As well as nature-based tourism, an increasing variety of destinations, leisure and tourism products and services are concerned with experiences of disconnection. Examples include high-end and luxury travel, boutique resorts, wellness centres, retreats and spiritual centres (Putra 2019; Aranda and Baig 2018). Therefore, we encourage the pursuit of similar research efforts based on ANT in other tourism and leisure contexts.

Managerial implications

The research has implications regarding the practice and management of tourism. We agree with Pearce and Gretzel (2012) that stakeholders of nature-based tourism should consider the term ‘technology-free’ as a value proposition of disconnection. The focus on ‘freedom to disconnect’ is in line with a demand for digital-free tourism, motivated by increasing needs for relief from constraints, pressures, stress and anxiety caused by hyperconnected societies (Egger, Lei, and Wassler 2020; Li, Pearce, and Low 2018). Noteworthily, we add that ‘freedom to disconnect’ can exist as a proposition even in plugged experiences or in the absence of a total detachment from mobile ICTs. The objective absence or presence of human infrastructures is not the main point of disconnection because disconnection itself (and the related tourismscapes) cannot be exhausted by the dualistic absence/presence of technological objects.

Thus, we do not recommend discarding facilitation such as orientation and information retrieval by mobile entirely due to fear of losing valued experiences of disconnection and escapism. Facilitation of access and safety by mobiles should still be considered for tourists of diverse mobility and know-how, given also that contemporary visitors’ lack of preparation and information are increasingly worrying for stakeholders concerned about safety and sustainability in natural areas (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021). If such facilitation
does not force visitors into unwanted uses and functions, it can paradoxically help them in assembling valued disconnected tourismscapes by leveraging independence and safety. Overall, communication, facilitation and safety/emergency services should not work by enforcing unwanted mobile Internet connectivity. Software developed to aid locals’ and visitors’ safety could be downloaded at hotspots such as visitor centres and then used offline or on a slow Internet speed to filter out unwanted exposure.

Speculatively, marketing initiatives focused on the co-creation of value by maintaining mobile social connectivity (Wang, Xiang, and Fesenmaier 2014; Neuhof, Buhais, and Ladkin 2012) should be aware of how tourists translate such connectivity on site. The pre- and post-travel phases should be targeted as touch points and phases where social sharing is more likely to be translated positively (Conti and Leshagen 2020; Conti and Cassel 2020) and possibly turn into visitation intention (Mykletun, Oma, and Aas 2021).

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