Offline tourism: digital and screen ambivalence in Norwegian mountain huts with no internet access

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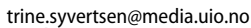
ABSTRACT

Digitalisation is a major transformative factor in tourism, yet studies show that holidaymakers are ambivalent about smartphone and Internet use. This study explores screen and digital ambivalence in nature-based tourism in and around the huts and routes of the Norwegian Trekking Association. While digital ambivalence describes ambiguous sentiments over being constantly connected, screen ambivalence covers mixed feelings regarding the presence of smartphones and screens. Methodologically, this qualitative study combined observations at 3 offline sites with an analysis of 30 field dialogues. The study found that hikers were highly aware of the positive and negative functions of digital media. Offline tourism may intensify the experience of taking a break, realising what tourists perceive to be the true nature of *friluftsliv* [outdoor life], heighten the sense of adventure and self-reliance. However, tensions concerning safety, missing social communication, and obstacles to posting on social media were also evident. This study contributes to the limited research on digital disconnection and offers new insights into the experiential qualities of offline holidays. Few studies have mapped tourist experiences in specific offline sites, and this study contributes to nature-based tourism research by showing how local norms mitigate tensions and nudge hikers towards positive interpretations of being digital-free.

Introduction

We live in an increasingly connected world, and the impact of digitalisation is felt in all spheres of society (van Dijck, 2013). In Nordic countries, more than 9 out of 10 people own a smartphone, enabling instant access to information and entertainment and 24/7 availability (Deloitte, 2019). The use of digital platforms is increasingly addressed in tourism studies as destinations go online, and holidaymakers use smartphones to search for travel information and sustain communication routines (Doorly, 2020; Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020; Styvén & Wallström, 2019; Wacker & Groth, 2020). While most research addresses the positive benefits of digitalisation, studies from the mid-

2010s began to question tourists' need to be constantly connected (Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016; Gretzel, 2014) In 2017, Neuhofer and Ladkin (2017, p. 357) advocated a research agenda emphasising the "flipside of technology" in tourism studies, arguing that the understanding of leisure travel as an escape from everyday life was fading with constant connection. A 2021 bibliometric analysis identified 20 publications on disconnecting while on holiday, a significant increase from 2016 (Ozdemir & Goktas, 2021).

Based on a review of the extant literature, studies on digital-free holidays can be divided into two main categories. Tourism trends have been studied, including research on destinations (Doorly, 2020; Pawłowska-Legwand & Matoga, 2021; Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021; Smith & Puczkó, 2015) and media representations of offline travel (Jorge, 2019; Li et al., 2018). These studies show how digital-free holidays invoke the ideals of balance, wellness, and authenticity.

On the other hand, there have been studies on tourists' motivations and experiences. While some explore the motivations for and perceived benefits of disconnecting (Ayeh, 2018; Floros et al., 2021; Rosenberg, 2019), others explore actual offline experiences (Cai et al., 2019; Egger et al., 2020; Jiang & Balaji, 2021; McKenna et al., 2020; Rosenberg, 2019). Most studies focus on individual travellers to various locations, thereby decontextualising participants from the geographical and social contexts important to their trips. However, some studies have explored experiences and reactions at specific sites, including campsites (Dickinson et al., 2016), retreats (Hesselberth, 2021), and digital detox camps (Sutton, 2020).

This study adds a new location to the last sub-type – offline tourism within the Scandinavian context of *friluftsliv*. The huts and routes of the Norwegian Trekking Association (DNT) are not defined as digital detox sites; instead, the study makes disconnections relevant within the broader context of nature-based tourism (Fredman & Margaryan, 2021). Situating studies at different sites is essential. As with other sites, Norwegian *friluftsliv* is saturated with meaning about what constitutes authentic experiences (Westskog et al., 2021) and harbours historical conflicts over the role of technology (electricity, television, and modern appliances) (Lien & Abram, 2019; Vittersø, 2007).

Existing studies indicate that research on digital ambivalence in nature-based tourism is important because we see both rapid digitalisation and efforts to promote nature-based tourism as alternatives to the frantic online life. As noted by Björk et al. (2021), the demand for nature tourism is likely to increase, and in light of the COVID-19 crisis and environmental concerns, research should address "whether new, innovative forms of outdoor tourism experiences will be developed and whether tourists will be interested in more distant rural areas" (p. 6). Paradoxically, offline tourism may be experienced as "new and innovative" in this context; as Internet access grows, tourism in non-connected areas stands out as an alternative.

This study bridges three research gaps. First, it contributes to offline tourism research by addressing how disconnection affects mountain hikers. Although there are references to offline experiences (Garms et al., 2017, p. 252; Varley & Semple, 2015, p. 78), studies of digital ambivalence and disconnection in the Scandinavian mountains are lacking, and there is limited knowledge of how (dis)connection influences markets and expectations.

Second, this study contributes to tourism research by providing insight into the critical home/away dimension and the relationship between holidays and everyday life (Large & Schilar, 2018; Sthapit & Björk, 2017). While studies note that tourists bring familiar objects,

such as communication devices, on holidays, few address how digital media radically change the home/away balance and the tensions arising when connections are interrupted (McKenna et al., 2020; Rosenberg, 2019).

Third, this study addresses the need for more context in studies on tourism and offline experiences. Cai et al. (2019) point out that most studies on digital-free tourism gather data after the experience, while Sthapit and Björk (2017) observe that there is little research on family holidays. The advantage of this study is that groups and families were observed together and interviews were conducted in the field. By adopting a qualitative design, the study supports the argument for more qualitative research on the meaning of tourist experiences (Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017; Jensen et al., 2015; Sthapit, 2019).

Theoretically, this study distinguishes between digital and screen ambivalence, adding a critical nuance to how media are considered intrusive (Das & Ytre-Arne, 2018; Syvertsen, 2020; Ytre-Arne et al., 2020). In this article, digital ambivalence describes ambiguous sentiments over being reachable and (always) connected, whereas screen ambivalence covers mixed feelings regarding the presence of smartphones and screens. As shown in the conclusion, this dual notion of ambivalence can clarify dilemmas faced by destination managers.

This study aimed to explore screen and digital ambivalence in nature-based tourism in and around the huts and routes of the DNT. The research objective was to uncover nuances in the experience of disconnectivity; hence, a qualitative design was chosen and the study was set in offline areas. Three research questions were examined: *To what degree are hikers aware of (dis)connection issues in offline huts and routes? What are the positive expectations of going offline (if any)? What tensions arise around connectivity and screen use in areas with limited coverage?*

Literature review

Nature-based tourism and digital (dis)connection

Experiencing nature is a primary travel motive in Scandinavia, and nature-based tourism is booming worldwide. Decreasing populations in rural areas and efforts to create new employment have inspired tourism development, and COVID-19 has further boosted domestic nature experiences (Fredman & Margaryan, 2021). In contrast to many countries where nature-based tourism takes place in designated areas, the right of public access in Finland, Norway, and Sweden allow for wide-ranging recreational use of nature (Fredman & Tyrväinen, 2010). While nature-based tourism is encouraged, environmental, social, economic, political, and technological challenges affect sustainability and demand (Fredman & Margaryan, 2021).

Digitalisation is a transformative factor for both providers and consumers (Doorly, 2020). Websites, apps, and social media are cost-effective means of promoting destinations and attracting visitors. Tourists use digital maps, share travel experiences on social media, and retain message-checking routines (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020; Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017; Styvén & Wallström, 2019; Wacker & Groth, 2020). At the same time, studies show that multitasking and digital distractions may adversely affect travel

experiences (Ayeh, 2018; McKenna et al., 2020; Rosenberg, 2019) and produce conflicts within groups and families (Dickinson et al., 2016).

Research also addresses the expansion of digital detox holidays, defined as "tourism spaces where internet and mobile signals are either absent or digital technology usage is controlled" (Li et al., 2018, p. 317). Gretzel (2014) notes that offline destinations enable more focus on the present, stimulation of dormant skills, and the possibility of evaluating the value of connectedness. Similarly, Egger et al. (2020) point to escape, personal growth, well-being, and strengthening relationships as benefits of offline holidays.

Contested sites: outdoor and cabin life

Studying ambivalence in a contested area offers insight into tourism experiences and expectations as well as the norms that govern media morality in various contexts (Bengtsson, 2012). This article argues that the domains of *friluftsliv* (outdoor life) and *hytteliv* (cabin life) are among the sites in Scandinavia where ambivalence concerning digital media is most evident. Although outdoor recreation is performed globally, the notion of *friluftsliv* has a special significance; linked with the right of public access, outdoor recreation as a cultural practice is significant to the image and self-identity of Scandinavians. Its roots can be traced back to the romanticism of the eighteenth century and reactions to industrialisation and urbanisation (Gelter, 2000). Varley and Semple (2015) link *friluftsliv* to the more recent notion of "slow adventure", focusing on the "experiential dimension rather than the chore of getting to the destination" (p. 79). Interestingly, the parallel concept of "slow media" (Rauch, 2018) describes sustainable media production and consumption and a lifestyle with more offline time.

While scholars warn against romanticism and nostalgia, *friluftsliv* is also deemed inspirational with elements of counterculture and resistance (Wolf-Watz et al., 2011). Going on nature hikes is Norway's most popular outdoor activity; a 2017 survey showed that nearly 8 in 10 had been on a nature hike in the preceding year and 5 in 10 had been on a long hike (SSB, 2017). Men and the highly educated are overrepresented in long hikes, but governmental and non-governmental organisations intensively promote outdoor life for the whole population.

The 150-year-old DNT has a significant role in these efforts; with more than 80 local chapters and marked routes all over the country, it is Norway's largest outdoor leisure organisation with 300,000 members (DNT, 2019, p. 5). The DNT has a vital impact on how outdoor recreation is performed and defined (Tangeland, 2011; Westskog et al., 2021); it sets and reflects norms for both outdoor and cabin life as the organisation provides both trails and huts. Especially among the middle class, Vittersø (2007) notes that Norwegian holiday homes represent a back-to-nature ideology where outdoor recreation is prioritised, and indoor life should be old-fashioned and cosy. Although cabins increasingly offer modern comforts, Lien and Abram (2019, p. 151) observe that that "[o]ne of the most controversial changes in Norwegian cabins has to do with technology", including conflicts over TV and the Internet.

The contested nature of digital technologies is evident in DNT communications. Digitalisation is a critical priority in its 2019–2023 strategy; digital platforms are advocated as the primary link between employees, volunteers, and members (DNT, 2019). More than half of the members follow the DNT on social media (Lauring Pedersen, 2017).

However, many of its 550 huts lie in areas with poor coverage, and the DNT notes that "Comfort or high standards in the cabins are not the most important factor for the value of the experience" (DNT, 2019, p. 8). Rapid digitalisation and the proliferation of iconic images on social media have led to "wear and tear on natural and cultural values, increased littering and greater climate emissions", as well as challenging the right of public access (DNT, 2019, p. 29). The use of screens was also explicitly commented on as follows:

> It has never been easier to share dreams and travel experiences on social media. Nevertheless, reactions to a digital stressful life are essential drivers for growing interest in the outdoors. People want to be in balance with themselves and their surroundings and are concerned that children should experience something other than bright mobile screens. (28)

Techno-scepticism is also reflected in the occasional promotion of digital-free holidays on the DNT's website, with titles such as "Leave the mobile" and "Retro Easter" (DNT, 2015). Digital detox holidays in the Norwegian mountains are also promoted in international travel magazines (n/a, 2015).

Methods

Research design and sample selection

This article draws mainly on field notes from three three-day visits to DNT sites in 2020. During the visits, I adopted the role of observer as participant; I interacted with those being observed, although I always revealed that I was a researcher (Brennen, 2017, p. 172). There are also elements of the participant as observer stance, as I am a member of the DNT, and my partner accompanied me on field trips.

One hut was visited in winter and two in summer; two were staffed, whereas one was unstaffed with a host present. Two had no Internet or mobile phone connections for guests, and the third was marked as a no-mobile hut, but certain networks offered coverage. The huts are nodes in a broader ecosystem; besides sleep-over guests, they welcome day trippers and act as a meeting point for cabin-dwellers, campers, hunters, and locals. One is located in an alpine area with demanding routes, the other is in a family friendly area with shorter walks, and the third is in a popular area with a mixture of trails. Huts have simple dwellings with outside toilets and bunk beds, connoting frugality and a simple lifestyle (Westskog et al., 2021).

In addition to observations, this study was based on field dialogues with 30 hikers. The dialogues were designed to obtain information from a diverse population, and the sample included approximately equal numbers of men and women. Constellations vary among families with children, couples, friends, mixed groups, and solo walkers. I did not ask for education, work, age, or other identifying information, but an estimate is that one-third were in their early 20s and younger, another third in their 50–70s, and the rest were in the middle. Few hikers offered socioeconomic information, and I have mentioned this if relevant.

The dialogues lasted from five minutes to several hours; most took place during meals, in the lounge, on benches outside, or on trails. While some conversations were brief, the topics of awareness, motivations, and tensions were covered with questions such as, "Did you know that this hut was offline?", "How do you feel about it?" and "Anything you miss?"

I took notes between dialogues, memorising shorter quotes, and the general direction, including notes on behaviour and situations.

Data analysis and interpretation

Notes from the observations and dialogues were coded using NVivo, emphasising hikers' views and behaviour in context (Brennen, 2017, p. 168). Each person was given a coded identity. Since several dialogues occurred in social settings, careful attention was paid to variations and disagreements. The coding was deductive based on the initial research themes supplemented with inductive bottom-up coding. Examples of observations emerging from the inductive analysis were the frequency of hikers pointing to others as a negative contrast and the tendency to repeat that they were "fine" despite tensions, both providing information on implicit norms.

Findings and discussion

Awareness

To what degree were hikers aware of (dis)connection issues in the mountains? Most conversations began with me briefly introducing myself and stating my interest in offline hiking. In general, hikers would respond immediately, indicating an issue with high awareness. In extended conversations, for example, at the dinner table, I would change the subject after a while, but guests would still, in many cases, bring conversations back to smartphones and social media.

None of the guests I spoke to were unaware that the site had no (or fluctuating) coverage. Some interpreted my quest as merely practical; for example, one person asked, "Are you sent by Telenor or DNT to determine whether they should extend coverage to this area?" However, most immediately began describing norms and practices concerning digital media outdoors.

A topic in the digital detox literature is the difference between forced and voluntary disconnection and the degree of preparedness (Gretzel, 2014; Jiang & Balaji, 2021). When explicitly asked, "Did you know before you arrived that this hut had no/limited mobile coverage", almost all said no, and few would have tried to find out beforehand. However, this did not mean that they would expect coverage as many were used to poor access in rural areas. Interestingly, no one knew what to look for on the DNT website to determine whether the hut had phone coverage (neither did I until I asked the DNT staff). Huts do not explicitly state that they are not covered; instead, the lack of access is visible only by the absence of a mobile phone indicator in the list of "Facilities". In an era where the Internet is extensively used for destination information (Styvén & Wallström, 2019), this feature is notably under-communicated.

The fact that many were generally, but not specifically, prepared makes it challenging to determine whether disconnection was forced or voluntary. Nevertheless, distinct differences were observed, as illustrated by three families. The first was a family with young children that I met in the summer; they were explicitly prepared for and had chosen an offline hut. The mother was the only one who referred to the DNT's articles on mobile-free holidays; she knew the names of other offline huts and had visited several.

The second family, a middle-aged father with three adult children from another European country, was more divided. When they arrived at the hut to ski, the father immediately asked for WiFi; he seemed slightly irritated that there was no connection, although he said it was "no problem". His adult children were content to be offline; they were critical towards social media, and their phones were turned off and placed in their backpacks, a familiar avoidance strategy (Rosenberg, 2019).

The third family, a father with two children, appeared decidedly prepared when I saw them at breakfast; the children were patiently drawing with coloured pencils, and the father held a paper notebook. Later, I asked if he knew there was no coverage, and he said "No, that was unexpected." Among other things, he wanted to check the weather. He expressed no desire for a mobile-free holiday but also said that it was not important; when I commented on the children drawing, he said, "My daughter was disappointed that there was no Internet".

These families illuminate ways in which hikers may be unprepared-yet-prepared for offline holidays. Although a few had explicitly prepared to go offline, they all seemed to adapt quickly, and norms of self-reliance kicked in. However, some guests' slight irritation indicated that a different hut could have been chosen if its status had been communicated clearly.

Motivations

The second research question concerns motivation: "What are the positive expectations of going offline (if any)?" Motivation is a central topic in nature-based tourism research (Fredman & Heberlein, 2005; Fredman & Margaryan, 2021; Hjalager et al., 2018) as well as in research on digital disconnection (Cai et al., 2019; Egger et al., 2020; Jiang & Balaji, 2021). As noted by Tangeland (2011), motives are multifaceted and complex, and the relationship between motivation and behaviour is intricate; however, motivations are fundamental for understanding the choice of activities.

In field dialogues, only a few described Norwegian mountain sites as digital detox retreats defined by a primary motive to get away from digital media. Answers reflected broader motivations for *friluftsliv*, but the offline/online dimension brought certain motivations into sharper focus, especially in three aspects.

First, an offline hut enhances the experience of taking a break from the daily routine; if you are offline, hikers said that there is a stronger sense of escape. The consensus was that a lack of connection is beneficial: "It's nice to be off for a few days" and "It does not hurt to look up from the phone" were common responses. Other studies identified escape from "technostress" and a desire for mindfulness as key motives for digital-free holidays (Jiang & Balaji, 2021), as well as negative perceptions of constant connectivity, needing mental distance, and being able to relax (Floros et al., 2021).

The second motive also reflects an explication of norms, as hikers saw offline time as a way to realise the true value of *friluftsliv/hytteliv* (Gelter, 2000; Vittersø, 2007). Hikers referred to well-documented ideals of being outdoors during the day, appreciating nature without technological disturbances, and doing something cosy together in the evening rather than being separated by individual screens. "It is more sociable", one boy said. "We talk more, and I like to talk". Although tensions exist, these values are rarely problematised; instead, they are explicated as "the way it is". Hence, this study

supports the observation that mountain tourism is an area where traditional norms persist to a greater degree.

The third motive concerns autonomy: offline sites provide an opportunity for hikers to demonstrate that they are not dependent on digital tools in nature. Offline tourism was seen here, as elsewhere, as a site of immersion and self-reliance (Egger et al., 2020). I could detect a sense of pride among hikers that they mastered offline life, also described in other studies (Gretzel, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Hence, it is also common to post offline experiences on social media (Jorge, 2019).

Although the motives appear to be shared, it is interesting to note how many hikers contrasted themselves with others who do not adhere to the same norms. I met a couple who immediately stated "it is really nice" when I ask them about offline hiking, but the man immediately added that his son "would have suffered if he had gone along". An elderly woman told me that she loves orienteering in inaccessible conditions alone in the woods or mountains, yet relatives and friends do not understand; they tell her to stick to covered areas "since I am so old now". A middle-aged man I met on the track told me he cared little about connection; he made a gesture of staring down into an imaginary phone and said, "This would not be suitable – not at the cabin, no". However, he said that his family wanted Internet in the cabin. Another man echoed, "I think it is fantastic", but pointed to his partner, saying "but she is really struggling". In group conversations, hikers jokingly shamed others for being "addicted" and mentioned friends who would not have coped.

While most hikers said that they were "fine" offline, some expressed deeper convictions. Some motivations were related to being offline and unreachable, whereas others were related to the absence of screens. Two examples illustrate the relevance of these motives in different contexts.

I met a couple in their forties, skiing on a remote track and later at an offline hut. They were from another European country and expected the area to be offline. "That is how we like it", the woman said, "We believe that we have a right to personal space, not to share everything or to be constantly available". At huts, they liked to read or talk to other hikers, both of which could be disturbed by the presence of phones. If smartphones were everywhere, they would consider not coming; however, a no-phone policy in communal areas could offset these disadvantages. Their vocabulary reflected the ideals of a slow adventure as authentic (Varley & Semple, 2015).

In the winter, I also met a family of cabin-dwellers stopping by the hut. The father voiced positive motivations for being disconnected; he described how his mates considered it an adventure to go hunting and be unreachable for a couple of days. When he talked about the children, he was concerned about screen presence: "We kicked out the TV when we took over", he said, preferring paper books and board games. "It is important for us that our kids experience this life. This is how we grew up, and we want the same for them."

In conversations with others, a similar belief shone through: it is good for adults to be non-reachable, good for children to be off-screen, and good for social relations to have smartphones out of the way. Many parents expressed a desire to pass on cabin and outdoor life norms to the next generation and viewed electronic media as intrusive (Vittersø, 2007).

Tensions

The third research question concerned how tensions are experienced and managed. Research on nature-based tourism describes numerous tensions connected to being away from home (Fredman & Heberlein, 2005; Imboden, 2012; Löfgren, 2008), some of which may be exacerbated by (dis)connection issues. In digital-free tourism studies, safety concerns and missing social and work communication have emerged as the most prominent tensions in addition to general reactions to poor connectivity (Dickinson et al., 2016; Gretzel, 2014; McKenna et al., 2020; Rosenberg, 2019).

Concerning safety, a division emerges between what we may term expert hikers and ordinary walkers, a parallel to the division between "hard" and "soft" ecotourists (Weaver, 2005). Experts have trekked in non-connected areas before; they use paper or downloadable maps, agree on procedures if they are not heard from, or use GPS devices with preset emergency messages. Hikers who embark on long trips belong to this category; for example, trekkers doing "Norway lengthwise" or "Norway across" through wilderness areas.

On the other hand, there are ordinary walkers who mostly use familiar treks, walk in good weather, and rely on Google Maps when lost. During the COVID-summer of 2020, I met several inexperienced guests who had chosen mountain holidays because other options were limited, and several had little navigation equipment and limited skills. A couple I met at breakfast seemed nervous; they had a map and a compass but had never used them and were insecure about their options if anything should happen in an offline area. In friendly mountainous areas with well-marked trails and good weather, being offline is part of such hikers' adventure; they may appreciate the added thrill and build competence for future walks. Under other conditions, the outcome could be misadventure (Imboden, 2012).

Social communication tensions were also evident. Many of the women I talked to at the huts were fine without a connection but were frustrated because they could not send simple messages or call: "I am happy to be offline, but my daughter might try to get hold of me". "I should have told my parents that we have arrived safely". As noted by Beattie (2020, p. 175), disconnection is gendered; it is more difficult for women to go offline because they are allocated greater responsibility for sustaining relationships. However, the expectations may be vague or unreasonable. One woman was sensitive to the expectations of her mother-in-law; even though they often go offline, she said, "His mother thinks that he is dead" if she cannot reach them. Spillover from home to holidays is common (Large & Schilar, 2018; Sthapit & Björk, 2017), but managing expectations from the home environment is becoming increasingly demanding as everyone is expected to be online.

Tensions concerning missing work communication are a topic in the disconnection literature (McKenna et al., 2020) but are described here to a lesser degree. Few described jobs where they are obliged to be available, but several described self-imposed pressure to check messages and news. Greater tensions were described among those who rely on social media posts. A young man doing "Norway lengthwise" described how he had spent frustrating times trying to upload. His expedition was not professional; however, he had commercial sponsors and was expected to share updates. Others also identified such in-between situations as the most annoying.

Finally, interesting and subtle tensions emerged over screens. The couple who was sceptical of smartphones (above) both had Kindles; they classified these as "books" and not intrusive. One woman told me that she enjoys being offline because her husband often gets lost on his phone and is unavailable for conversation. I asked if it would be the same if he was lost in a newspaper; she said no, the "closed" screen is the problem, as you cannot see what people are doing. Visible scrolling on a smartphone in natural settings and communal areas drew sceptical reactions, while it was more acceptable to use phones as cameras. Some complained about smartphone versatility; an old-fashioned phone or camera would be better to avoid distractions, and several expressed support for a "slow media" life (Rauch, 2018).

Conclusion, managerial implications, limitations, and future research

This study explored screen and digital ambivalence in and around DNT huts and routes. It was found that hikers were highly aware of the positive and negative effects of digital media. Going offline was not described as a distinct motive but rather as an experiential dimension bringing certain motivations into sharper focus: a heightened sense of escape, the possibility of realising the true nature of *friluftsliv*, authenticity, and self-reliance. Nevertheless, tensions existed in relation to the prevalent "culture of connectivity" (van Dijck, 2013). Although connections are not necessarily expected, tourists are often unprepared for situations where they cannot send messages, check news and weather, use smartphones as a safety tool, and post on social media.

By studying awareness, motivations, and tensions in context, this study contributes to the literature on disconnection, tourism, and nature-based holidays. First, it contributes to the still-limited body of research with a critical perspective on digitalisation in tourism (Ozdemir & Goktas, 2021), describing specific qualities that disconnection adds to nature experiences. Few studies map tourist experiences in specific offline sites (Sutton, 2020), and this study contributes to the international literature by offering insights from the context of Scandinavian *friluftsliv*. Digital detox retreats are often exotic or luxurious, targeting international travellers (Isalska, 2015), whereas DNT destinations are more affordable and sustainable (Westskog et al., 2021). The study shows that most hikers see the offline element not as an exclusive aspect but more as "the way it is" or "the way it was" – an authentic reminiscence of a not-so-distant past and a vehicle to realise critical holiday aims.

Second, this study contributes to research on nature-based tourism, particularly studies of norms and expectations (Vittersø, 2007; Westskog et al., 2021). The study shows that the online/offline dimension matters to hikers and should be explored as an experiential factor alongside documented aspects, such as nature, rhythm, and local food (Sthapit, 2019; Varley & Semple, 2015). However, this study also shows that offline/online cannot be considered a binary dimension. While many studies approach digital-free holidays as "a conscious and voluntary choice of the traveller" (Jiang & Balaji, 2021, pp. 13–14), it is evident from this study that tourists are often ambivalent. It is difficult to draw a line between voluntary and forced disconnection; instead, this study shows how norms for performing *friluftsliv* are used to mitigate tension. However, tourists experience actual and self-imposed obligations to connect with others. This study offers insight

into how holidays are interwoven with everyday life (Large & Schilar, 2018), and especially the pressure on women to remain in touch (Beattie, 2020).

Qualitative research is helpful because it describes the context in which an experience occurs. This study has provided deeper insight into the benefits and risks of rural tourism in Scandinavia from a managerial perspective. The findings reinforce the recommendation that operators should be mindful of the potential adverse effects of digitalisation on hikers (Ayeh, 2018; Dickinson et al., 2016; Neuhofer & Ladkin, 2017). However, this study also complicates the managerial recommendations offered in other studies, especially recommendations for developing digital detox holiday products and target niche segments (Egger et al., 2020; Jiang & Balaji, 2021). These suggestions tend to underestimate existing norms and histories on-site as well as the point of ambivalence. There are indistinct divisions between different segments, demanding a subtler approach (Pawłowska-Legwand & Matoga, 2021; Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021).

Distinguishing between screen and digital ambivalence may be helpful in this regard. The notion of screen ambivalence indicates that tourists sometimes desire breaks from devices. This demand can be dealt with locally through nudges and norms, for example, by signalling a no-phone policy in communal areas. It is more difficult to find a simple solution concerning ambivalence regarding being constantly available. As connectivity expands, self-regulatory behaviour becomes necessary to find the right balance, and non-connected destinations may be more in demand. In such cases, more explicit destination information may be advantageous to attracting potential guests.

This study has several limitations that indicate directions for further research. The qualitative research design was chosen to explore nuances but cannot ensure representativity; site visits were relatively short, with a limited number of dialogues. Future research may include huts in different areas, and it would also be valuable to design comparative studies that include areas with stable connections. Trip-related factors are essential; variations in locations, routes, and travel companies influence the findings (Jiang & Balaji, 2021).

This study was designed to obtain information from a diverse population, but few people in each category were included; a recommendation would be to follow up with different groups (Large & Schilar, 2018). Another limitation is that the study observed hikers over a short period; their reflections and behaviour would likely evolve as they hike across various offline/online spaces. Future studies could use walk-along methods to study what happens over time (Duedahl & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020).

The topic of digital media is contested; hence, what hikers say is constrained by what they perceive as acceptable. Socioeconomic data could have offered nuances but, at the same time, constrained the conversations as hikers' dialogues often omit such information, reflecting the idea that people meet on equal terms in nature (Westskog et al., 2021). Creating a relaxed atmosphere was deemed crucial for this study's success. Future studies could include secondary data such as social media, press clippings, documents, and guest books to obtain a richer picture. More research is needed on the views of destinations and managers (Egger et al., 2020; Pawłowska-Legwand & Matoga, 2021; Schwarzenegger & Lohmeier, 2021). While the present article focuses on tourist experiences, another part of the study (which was paused due to COVID-19) will emphasise facility and management perspectives.

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