

*"I just really disconnected,
not completely":*
Extended Walking Pilgrimage,
Smart Phones, and Social Ties

Kathleen E. Jenkins
Professor of Sociology
William & Mary

Abstract: Pilgrims who engage in extended walking often note the desire to escape their everyday lives, to take on new roles, and to connect with self and unknown others in fresh ways. At the same time, researchers have stressed the weight of digital technologies and mobile media in contemporary experiences of extended walking pilgrimage. I extend the conversation by exploring the stories of pilgrims who desire to escape the everyday as they reassess their sense of self in the wake of ending intimate long-term relationships. Drawing from ten formal in-depth interviews with individuals who have engaged in extended walking on the Camino de Santiago and the Appalachian Trail, I detail the numerous social forces that intersect as pilgrims work to distance themselves from digital obligations to claim time away. I illustrate how their relationship to smart phones, economic position, life stage, and the character of their intimate relationships off the trail shape their time away from everyday life as they work to fortify self and reflect on relational loss. My findings suggest directions for new research to explore how social position and ever-present digital connections shape walking pilgrimage in a post-COVID world.

Keywords: Walking pilgrimage, family, mobile media, Camino de Santiago, Appalachian trail, ending relationships.

"Realmente, no me desconecté del todo": peregrinación a pie a larga distancia, teléfonos inteligentes y vínculos sociales

Resumen: Los peregrinos que realizan caminatas prolongadas a menudo notan el deseo de escapar de su vida cotidiana, asumir nuevos roles y conectarse consigo mismos y con otros desconocidos de nuevos modos. Al mismo

tiempo, los investigadores han destacado el peso de las tecnologías digitales y los medios móviles en las experiencias contemporáneas de peregrinación a pie a larga distancia. Amplié la conversación explorando las historias de peregrinos que quieren huir de lo cotidiano mientras repiensan su sentido de sí mismos, una vez terminadas relaciones íntimas de largo plazo. A partir de diez entrevistas formales en profundidad con personas que han realizado caminatas de larga distancia por el Camino de Santiago y el Sendero de los Apalaches, detallo las numerosas fuerzas sociales que se cruzan a medida que los peregrinos trabajan para distanciarse de las obligaciones digitales para buscar tiempo libre. Ilustro cómo su relación con los teléfonos inteligentes, su posición económica, su etapa de vida y el carácter de sus relaciones íntimas fuera del Camino moldean su tiempo al margen de la vida cotidiana, mientras trabajan para fortalecerse y reflexionar sobre la pérdida relacional. Mis hallazgos sugieren direcciones para nuevas investigaciones que exploren cómo la posición social y las conexiones digitales siempre presentes dan forma a la peregrinación a pie en un mundo post-COVID.

Palabras clave: Peregrinación a pie, familia, medios móviles, Camino de Santiago, sendero de los Apalaches, relaciones que se acaban.

“Realmente, non desconectei de todo”: peregrinación a pé a longa distancia, teléfonos intelixentes e vínculos sociais

Resumo: Os peregrinos que realizan camiñadas prolongadas a miúdo notan o desexo de fuxir da súa vida cotiá, asumir novos roles e conectarse consigo mesmos e con outros descoñecidos de novos xeitos. Ao mesmo tempo, os investigadores salientaron o peso das tecnoloxías dixitais e os medios móbiles nas experiencias contemporáneas de peregrinación a pé a longa distancia. Amplíei a conversación explorando as historias de peregrinos que queren fuxir do cotián mentres repensan o seu sentido de si mesmos cando rematan as relacións íntimas de longo prazo. A partir de dez entrevistas formais en profundidade con persoas que realizaron camiñadas de longa distancia polo Camiño de Santiago e o Sendeiro dos Apalaches, detallo as abondosas forzas sociais que se cruzan a medida que os peregrinos traballan para se distanciar das obrigas dixitais para procurar tempo libre. Ilustro como a súa relación cos teléfonos intelixentes, a súa posición económica, a súa etapa de vida e o carácter das súas relacións íntimas fóra do Camiño moldean o seu tempo á marxe da vida cotiá, mentres traballan para fortalecerse e reflexionar sobre a perda de relacións. Os meus achados suxiren direccións para novas investigacións que exploren como a posición social e as conexións dixitais sempre presentes dan forma á peregrinación a pé nun mundo post-COVID.

Palabras clave: Peregrinación a pé, familia, medios móbiles, Camiño de Santiago, sendeiro dos Apalaches, relacións que rematan.

Introduction

A key motivation that people who engage in extended walking on the Camino de Santiago, the Appalachian Trail, and similar structures report is seeking extended time away from everyday social routines and relationships in order to discover or work on the self¹. At the same time, scholars have called attention to the growing weight digital technologies and mobile media exert on contemporary pilgrims, forces that complicate goals of escaping everyday social relationships and responsibilities.² How do people negotiate social ties in post COVID attempts to find time away from their everyday lives as they walk for weeks or months? What strategies might people employ as mobile devices and digital connection have become taken-for-granted in spaces where nature, landscapes, and religious or spiritual rituals are meant to provoke sacred time away? I explore the experiences of pilgrims who desire to escape the everyday as they pursue making sense of self in the wake of ending close long-term relationships. Drawing from 10 in-depth interviews with people who engaged in extended walking pilgrimage, I detail the many social forces that impacted their attempts to leave behind responsibilities and everyday routines.

Those who engage in extended walking pilgrimage today confront numerous opportunities to connect with people and institutions through mobile media. Extended walking and pilgrimage on foot have become increasingly popular,³ as have the business, government, and volunteer structures that support these journeys.⁴ Digital platforms, organizational websites, and directional and other apps associated with publicized walking structures have also grown.⁵ Two examples of routes that have experienced such growth are the Spanish pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, multiple secular

- 1 Brumec, Snežana, "Examining the Pilgrims' Experience: Communitas Along the Camino de Santiago", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 11, 3 (2023), pp. 38-50. Fondren, Kristi M., *Walking on the Wild Side: Long-distance Hiking on the Appalachian Trail*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2016. Gomes, Carlos; Losada, Nieves and Pereiro, Xerardo, "Motivations of Pilgrims on the Portuguese Inner Way to Santiago de Compostela", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 7, 2 (2019), pp. 30-40. Kurrat, Christian, "Biographical Motivations of Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 7, 2 (2019), pp 11-18.
- 2 Amerson, Kensey; Rose, Jeff; Lepp, Andrew and Daniel Dustin, "Time on the trail, smartphone use, and place attachment among Pacific Crest Trail thru-hikers", *Journal of Leisure Research*, 51 (2020), pp. 308-24. Frey, Nancy, "The Smart Camino: Pilgrimage in the Internet Age", Keynote Address, Annual General Meeting of the London Confraternity of St. James, St. Alban's Center, London, United Kingdom, January 28, 2017. Jenkins, Kathleen E. and Ken Chih-Yan Sun, "Digital Strategies for Building Spiritual Intimacy: Families on a 'Wired' Camino", *Qualitative Sociology*, 42, 4 (2019), pp. 567-585. Jorge, Ana, "Pilgrimage to Fátima and Santiago after COVID: Dis/connection in the post-digital age", *Mobile Media & Communication*, 11, 3 (2023), pp. 549-565.
- 3 Coleman, Simon, *Powers of Pilgrimage: Religion in a World of Movement*, New York, New York University Press, 2021. Hall, Michael C.; Ram, Yael and Shoval, Noam, eds., *The Routledge International Handbook of Walking*, London, Routledge, 2018. Olsen, Daniel H. and Timothy, Dallen J., *The Routledge Handbook of Religious and Spiritual Tourism*, New York, Routledge, 2022.
- 4 Reader, Ian, *Pilgrimage in the Marketplace*, Abingdon, Routledge Press, 2014.
- 5 Amaro, Suzanne; Duarte, Paulo Alexandre O. and Antunes, Angela Isabel Lopes, "Determinants of intentions to use a pilgrimage app: a cross-cultural comparison", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 7, 2 (2019), pp 19-30. Jorge, Ana, "Pilgrimage to Fátima and Santiago after COVID...", *op. cit.*

routes in Europe that lead to a Catholic shrine in the city of Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain, and the Appalachian Trail (AT), a 2181-mile-long route that crosses fourteen states in the eastern United States, beginning in Georgia in the south and ending in Maine in the extreme northeast. Contemporary pilgrims traversing these paths can make reservations for lodging on their smart phones, pay digitally for goods and services, check the weather, journal about their experiences, read, listen to music or podcasts, or look for information on websites run by individuals, non-profits, or businesses. Pilgrims in general now routinely use their smart phone technology to document their journeys, engage with other pilgrims' stories and blogs, and take photos of themselves in nature or sacred spaces, all reactions that they may post on social media or relay to family and friends.⁶ They may also monitor their steps, blood pressure, or other biofunctions on personal devices like smart phones or watches. Digital connections are now "deeply embedded in the experience of pilgrimage" in a post-COVID world, leading many pilgrims to understand establishing "disconnection" from digital engagement as "part of the pilgrim ethos."⁷

Scholars have documented how pilgrims may strive to mitigate their use of mobile devices when communicating with family members at home, handling work responsibilities, and otherwise disciplining their use of digital media. For example, some pilgrims decide to set aside "tech-free" time or assign a companion as a "designated controller" to manage essential digital tasks and connections so those they are walking with might disconnect.⁸ Others may rein in technology use by turning off notifications for emails or specific apps, while some may choose to keep just one app active for communication with close friends, family, and other pilgrims.⁹ Such choices are determined by the character of one's social position and the qualities of their intimate relationships. In many ways, to engage in digital-free tourism or walking pilgrimage is a privileged pursuit, made possible by digital technologies that help to maintain kin and work ties at home.

Part of the pressure to connect while working to establish time away on extended walking pilgrimage is related to contemporary expectations of "digital kinship" through smart phone and mobile technologies. Contemporary families with the means to acquire digital devices and access to Wi-Fi often take for granted that they will be able to monitor where their loved ones are and their wellbeing. Families use mobile media like smart phones and tablets to share life experiences with each other through photos, texting, and video calls. Apps like LINE, Instagram, and Facebook help to maintain

6 Cadia, Nadia; Beazley, Susan and Colomer Marquez, Laia, "Holy Selfies: Experiencing Pilgrimage in the Age of Social Media", *International Journal of Information, Diversity, and Inclusion*, 2 (2018), pp 8-31. McLaughlin, David, "Digital and non-digital representations as actors in the enactment of selfhood and community on the Appalachian Trail", *Social & Cultural Geography*, 24, 6 (2023), pp. 912-929.

7 Jorge, Ana. "Pilgrimage to Fátima and Santiago after COVID...", *op. cit.*, p. 550.

8 Jenkins, Kathleen E. and Ken Chih-Yan Sun, "Digital Strategies for Building Spiritual Intimacy...", *op. cit.*

9 Jorge, Ana. "Pilgrimage to Fátima and Santiago after COVID...", *op. cit.*

routine emotional support for kin and sustain family connections.¹⁰ Digital kinship is also intensified by the increased use of tracking technologies (e.g., Life360 and iPhone Family Sharing) to identify family members’ locations.¹¹ Expectations to narrate one’s experiences in real time shapes the extent to which pilgrims who walk for weeks or months can disconnect from parents, children, and other close kin.

Contemporary extended walking ventures sustain numerous contradictions characterized by digital expectations and possibilities. Pilgrims can be removed from their everyday world, and at the same time deeply involved in relationships and responsibilities back home. Nancy Frey wrote in her ethnography of the Camino de Santiago and pilgrims’ experiences in the 1990s¹² that pilgrims’ feeling “out of time and out of place,” through walking and bending time, allowed them to discover new insights. In her more recent observations on Camino routes, she suggests that digital forces have ushered in a “fragmented” experience of pilgrimage where pilgrims are firmly “in” rather than “out” of everyday time.¹³ It is inevitable that most contemporary pilgrims will experience some fragmentation – a part of themselves will be on route walking and away from familiar concerns and relationships, and another part will be thinking about everyday social ties and be pulled back into responsibilities and issues at home.

In many ways, pilgrims’ attempts to experience disconnection are made possible by the functions and attributes of mobile media and digital connection. Smart phones allow pilgrims to take care of pressing economic and kin ties, but such digital engagement is not experienced in the same way by all pilgrims.

In the sections below, I show how trekkers’ relationships with their smart phone combines with other social forces in their lives to shape their experience of finding time away from the everyday. Economic position, occupation, life stage, the character of the intimate relationships recently brought to closer, as well as the expectations of remaining ones, frame their stories of reflecting on self and the relationships that have ended.

Methods

My analysis draws primarily from 10 in-depth formal interviews with people who have engaged in extended walking on the Camino de Santiago or the Appalachian Trail after ending a long-term intimate relationship, part of a larger ongoing ethnographic project exploring extended walking as a practice after relational loss. All research participants

10 Hjorth, Larissa and Lupton, Deborah, “Digitised Caring Intimacies: More-than-human intergenerational care in Japan”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24, 4 (2021), pp. 584-602.

11 Mavoa, Jane; Coghlán, Simon and Nansen, Bjørn, “It’s About Safety Not Snooping”, *Surveillance & Society*, 21, 1 (2023), pp. 45-60.

12 Frey, Nancy, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998.

13 Frey, Nancy, “The Smart Camino: Pilgrimage in the Internet Age”, *op. cit.*

walked the Camino de Santiago or the Appalachian Trail after the COVID pandemic. I use the term extended walking to mean journeys that are typically a week or longer, and where individuals walk approximately 4 hours or more each day. Researchers note that people who walk on the Appalachian Trail often speak about their practice as spiritual and for some the journey has religious significance.¹⁴ The Camino de Santiago has Catholic origins and still holds religious significance for some who walk, but many pilgrims also understand their journey as spiritual. I use the term pilgrim here as many contemporary scholars of pilgrimage do, to represent those who seek a walking journey that is spiritual, transformative, and/or transcendent. People may engage in extended walking for purely leisure or tourism goals, but my sample is composed of those who tell stories about primarily transformative or transcendent journeys, where spiritual or religious connections with nature, or building relationships with walkers on paths represent the beginning of new identity or personal change. My respondents talked about their walks as fostering transformation and change related to self after relational loss. Eight identified as spiritual people, one as an atheist, and another as Christian.

I recruited interviewees by walking on paths, reaching out through pilgrim social networks, and interactions with organizations that help pilgrims in planning and processing experiences. The sample is diverse in age, gender, and economic position. Interviewees ranged from 30 to 70 years of age, 5 identified as women, 5 as men, half of the sample were at retirement age. One purposive goal in sampling was to capture various types of endings and relational dynamics. Some research participants instigated endings, others described mutual endings, one was in the process of ending, some had ended marriages, and one had experienced being cut off by their adult child. I recruited individuals both online and in person to open the sample to those who may not be as active in online spaces. Camino respondents generally walked for a month or more and all AT respondents walked for approximately 6 months. Nine respondents were from the United States, and one Camino respondent was from Sweden. Six interviews were with individuals who walked the Camino de Santiago and four had through hiked the Appalachian Trail (AT). All interviewees were white, which reflects larger race privilege in the U.S. and a history of National Parks and Trails in the U.S. as primarily white spaces that have only recently made efforts to become more inclusive.¹⁵ While I draw primarily from these formal interviews, my analysis of digital connectivity, social ties, and extended walking experience is also framed by a handful of informal interviews with

14 Fondren, Kristi M., *Walking on the Wild Side...*, *op. cit.* Redick, Kip, "Interpreting contemporary pilgrimage as spiritual journey or aesthetic tourism along the Appalachian Trail", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 6, 2 (2018), pp. 78-88.

15 D'Anieri, Philip, *The Appalachian Trail: A Biography*. New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021. Finney, Carolyn, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2014. McLaughlin, David. "Digital and non-digital representations...", *op. cit.* Partnership for the National Trails System, november 2023. Available online: <https://pnts.org/new/resources/diversity-and-inclusion-resources/>, accessed 1 November 2023.

pilgrims who had ended intimate relationships, and fieldnotes taken while walking on the Portuguese Camino in the Spring of 2023 from Porto to Santiago de Compostela.

All interview participants gave informed consent. Interviews were on Zoom and lasted approximately an hour. They were transcribed and coded. My ongoing analysis of the interviews for this project reflects a grounded theory process of open, focused, and axial coding.¹⁶ All names have been changed, as well as some details of life position to maintain confidentiality. All walked within the last two years, but I do not include the exact month or year that individuals walked to help strengthen internal confidentiality, especially for through hikers on the AT.

My questions were broad and aimed primarily at hearing pilgrims' stories but designed to bring detailed responses regarding experience with technology, relationships that ended, and social position. For example, I did not ask questions directly about their economic resilience, but details about job and financial position were offered when I asked the broad question, “Can you tell me about how you came to walk?” When I asked them to “tell me about the relationship that ended,” they shared stories about the reasons and timings of endings and, for some, how the final decisions about ending carried into their time on pilgrimage. My question, “Can you tell me about your relationship to your cell phone,” brought numerous details about how they used their phone, the importance of their phone while on pilgrimage, and information about connections with intimate others at home. Most hikers talked about their phones as critical for letting their family and friends know that they were okay through WhatsApp or texting, and as a necessity for communicating with other hikers, as well as for safety. One Camino respondent listed the multiple functions the phone provides: “The phone is your MP3 player, your camera, your GPS, your journal, your ebooks, all that stuff.” Another Camino pilgrim noted: “I used the phones [*he carried two*] to check my banking and Instagram and take pictures and to pay for things.” Most Camino trekkers also noted the phone as a necessity for making accommodation reservations. One pilgrim on the Camino told me she would be “lost without” her smart phone, emphasizing that she wouldn’t know how she would survive and that it was frightening to even think of losing it. In a society where digital technology and mobile media often construct and manage everyday relationships and institutional experiences of family, education, medicine, wellness, work, religion, spirituality, and tourism, it is not surprising that trekkers would talk about their digital devices as an inevitable part of their pilgrimage experiences.¹⁷

16 Corbin, Juliet and Strauss, Anselm L., *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 4th edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015. Glaser, Barney G. and Strauss, Anselm L., *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago, Aldine, 1967.

17 Bruno, Fernanda and Rodríguez, Pablo Manolo, “The Dividual: Digital Practices and Biotechnologies”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 39, 3 (2022), pp. 27-50. Campbell, H. and Evolvi, G., “Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies”, *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2, 1 (2020), pp. 5-17. Couldry, Nick and Hepp, Andreas, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017.

I provide a detailed picture below from four pilgrims' journeys, stories that demonstrate the weight that intersecting social forces played in their experiences of leaving behind the everyday to connect with other trekkers and make sense of self and relationships. Their interviews suggest that mobile devices can support a level of detachment from everyday relationships and responsibilities, but also that smart phones uphold norms of digital kinship and connection that bring frequent connection with significant others.

Findings and Analysis

The motivations and goals of people who engage in extended walking pilgrimage may involve breaking away from their relationships and responsibilities at home, but the ability to establish this distance is deeply shaped by their social ties. For all the respondents, the character of their family and close relationships, their economic resources and professional status (or lack of it), and their relationship to their smart phone emerged as significant regarding efforts to disconnect. I draw from interviews with Sydney, Jackson, Tom, and Elaine to provide in-depth illustrations of how social ties and mobile media intersect to determine individuals' experiences of distancing themselves from their everyday lives.

Appalachian Trail

"He used that money as a way to jerk me around, to force me to talk to him."

Sydney, age 32 from U.S.

Sydney hiked the AT after losing her job and leaving her fiancé, whom she had been with for two years. She stressed that her fiancé was a good person, but ultimately someone who struggled to find his way and that they were not compatible. The impact of social isolation during COVID and spending so much time together had only magnified these issues. Ending the relationship was her choice. He did not want her to leave and thought they might get back together. Sydney had saved some money and was given a strong severance package when she was let go from her job. These funds left her on secure financial footing to hike the AT for six months from Georgia to Maine. She described beginning the AT as unemployed, severely depressed, and with a desire for distance from her everyday life and to immerse herself in nature. She made a point of telling me that her ability to engage in this long journey reflected privilege: "I just thought, this is such a luxury, to have the money and the time to do this, and like really feel like the sun on my skin coming through the green trees and feeling like, okay."

Sydney had funds in the bank, but they were not limitless, which made her vulnerable to texts and phone calls from her ex-fiancé, who owed her several thousand

dollars. Partly to keep the lines of communication open, she sustained a relationship with him at first while walking: "We were talking not daily, but here and there and both of us were kind of more emotional support" until "maybe halfway through Virginia." At that point, she felt his texts became a ploy to get her to talk. He would write: "I want to talk about the money." And he would text: "there are a couple of things I have to go over with you." Inevitably, she said, they would then talk on the phone when she had service. She went through this cycle several times until she "got sick of it." He would talk to her about wanting to set up a payment plan: "I'll sell your engagement ring and I'll pay you back, but he never did. He would use this kind of talk to pull me back in to talk. He would just want to tell me about his life, about how he was doing and his friends and how his family was doing, how our cat was doing, just regular stuff, not talking about money." Sydney felt he was using the subject of the money to keep the "relationship alive." In addition, she had shared her location with close family members and her ex-fiancé before they ended their relationship. He still had this everyday digital tie in place and would use the knowledge to try and see her: "He was like, oh, you are only this many hours from me so when you hit this spot, I want to come visit you." She came to understand that she was probably not going to get the money and that she had enough funds to follow through with her plans for the following year without it. She eventually told her ex about a close relationship that she had developed on the AT, a member of her "tramily" [*trail family*], that grew into a romantic attachment later during her hike. She said, "I just had to discourage him to contact me anymore...I kind of felt like I needed to shut the door completely."

When I asked Sydney if she kept an online journal or an Instagram or anything that would make her story readable for family or friends, or to document the trip, she said that she did not, but that she sent "photos and text messages, especially" to her mom: "My mom I kept in touch with every day." Her mother was always aware of Sydney's physical location through her smart phone. Sydney also sent pictures and messages about the weather and the mileage and where they were sleeping, communications that she thought of as "journal logs." She called her picture taking on her phone "photo documenting": "I am like forced to write these things, so this is just how I'm going to do it." Her text messages to her mother with photographs were expected, a daily digital kin responsibility.

Once Sydney was able to cut off communication with her ex, she could more fully remove herself from her everyday relationships and concentrate on her walking practice. Other than communicating with her mother through daily updates, she had few ties from her everyday life that pulled her away from the AT and the new people she was meeting. She talked about having time alone to think about why her last two serious partnerships did not work out. She said she was able to reflect about these relationships and what she could have done better. She described the walking as becoming "Zen," and "meditative," feeling "always so happy and in control," of "life."

Sydney did not talk about trying to limit her phone use or to disconnect from social media. She did not question her phone as a central communication device with the people who were active in her everyday life and her life on the AT. While finding a location to charge her phone and battery pack were determined by the AT structure, she talked about her phone as a necessary part of her journeying, a taken-for-granted and constant part of her life on and off the trail.

Appalachian Trail

"I didn't bring a backup battery, so I had only the charge in my phone on purpose, which was just enough to get me from one resupply to the next."

Jackson, 35, U.S.

Jackson, like several of the people I interviewed for this study, talked about having ended intimate partnerships during COVID. He was in a long-term polyamorous relationship that for many years seemed ideal, until his partners' anxiety issues, brought on by COVID and other concerns, put significant strain on their relationship: "I absolutely ran myself ragged trying to be the only support for both of them." The ending of the relationship and the life they had built together with other members of a tight-knit community instigated his own issues with anxiety. Jackson talked about having lost relationships and a way of life that he had worked hard for, and that he had thought would last forever: "I was this close to perfection, to my absolute dream and it was utterly heartbreaking. I didn't know where to go, I didn't know what to do, I was very lost." He said he "needed some kind of direction," that would help him get his "head on straight." Jackson began to seek a space and practice where he could disconnect from his relationships and work responsibilities. At first, he considered "one week meditation retreats," but his need for escape and therapeutic space meant "one week," was "not going to cut it." He said he need a "long meditation," and that is when "the AT crept into" his "head." Since childhood he had "always been a hiker." Hiking was a familiar and successful therapeutic practice. Given Jackson's intense feelings of loss and anxiety, he decided to engage in an intense and challenging physical practice and to limit his use of mobile media to claim time to embrace walking meditation.

Jackson was not concerned with being able to recover financially when he returned from through hiking the AT from Georgia to Maine. He worked in the healthcare sector, which had been a difficult experience during COVID, but the contingent nature of this position and his sought-after skills allowed him to go where the industry needed him. He was also able to liquidate his investments, and while this did not produce a large sum of money, it was enough to allow him to through hike the AT: "I stuffed everything in my car, and put it in storage, and hit the trail." He was in touch a few times with one of his ex-partners while on the AT,

but not in a way that pulled him regularly into the relationship. At one point he ran out of funds and one of his former partners helped him to continue: "I would contact them from time to time and eventually they actually helped support me on the trail, sending me boxes and helping bounce things around, and actually I ran out of money as I got to the end of the trail, and they were able to help me finish the trail."

Jackson used his smart phone for light communication with one of his ex-partners and to stay connected to fellow trekkers, but his ability to limit smart phone usage and the limited number of charging opportunities on many sections of the AT allowed him to keep everyday life at a distance and engage in deep meditation practice: "I brought my phone, I didn't bring my headphones and I didn't bring a backup battery so I had only the charge in my phone on purpose...So, I had a lot of time to think and wound up doing half an hour to an hour spurts walking meditation through the woods, meditating up to six hours in a day, easily half or more of my hiking day and my intuition got very, very sharp." He talked about this meditative walk being transformative and used the term pilgrimage directly to describe the experience: "My memories of the trail are not really dominated by the difficulty of it, but of what I got out of it and the experience of it and very much the pilgrimage part of it...It didn't solve any of my problems, but it calmed me and helped me renew my faith in myself and to a certain extent it changed me."

Unlike Sydney's story, Jackson named a concerted effort to disconnect and limit his digital contacts with his life off the AT. Disciplining his phone use was planned and deliberate and made possible by his family position and the character of the relationships that were ending. He and his intimate partners had accepted the break, unlike Sydney whose ex-fiancé desired to maintain contact. There were no relational ties that had to be kept up, no children, no financial tasks as he had liquidated his assets and had put all his belongings in storage. His only family obligation was to check in with family members from time to time to let them know he was okay. He was free of workplace ties and his professional life was not dependent on maintaining contacts; he was confident he would find a position in the medical field when he returned home. Jackson's circumstances came together in a way that allowed enough of a disconnect to bring about the deep meditative journey that he craved.

Camino de Santiago

"Trying to unplug as much as possible...I was just trying to get off the grid. I was trying to build a new foundation."

Tom, 58, U.S.

Tom walked the Camino de Santiago from Jean Pied de Port to Santiago after multiple relational losses and challenges. He described a grief compounded by early childhood emotional trauma, the recent loss of his father, and a divorce from the woman he had been married to for thirty years and with whom he had had three children. He described parting with his wife as bringing a "meteor shower of,"

emotional "stuff." So much of his "persona" he said, was "caught up in the marriage." On top of these relational losses, Tom decided to end his job. His occupation brought him a high salary, but it demanded long working hours and his workplace environment had become unhealthy. To address the grief from his father's death and Tom's divorce, as well as the stress from work-related relationships and demands, he had engaged in various therapeutic programs and approaches to healing that included traveling and hiking abroad.

Tom identified as a "hiker" and was drawn to the Camino because he wanted to do a longer hike where he could be "alone." The Camino offered a long and structured walk that he thought would help him do some "deep personal inner work." While he said he was not a religious person, he was drawn to the "mystical" aspect of the Camino that he had read about and heard described in other pilgrims' writings. In pursuing this transcendent ideal of the Camino, he strived to disconnect as much as possible from digital communications and media. He saw the Camino as providing a day-to-day walking structure and environment that would help him create this distance from his everyday life. Like other pilgrims on the Camino, he faced a hospitality structure and walking paths where connecting to Wi-Fi and recharging a smart phone was almost always possible. His desire to "unplug," then, required some level of discipline.

Tom had the funds to take significant time away to walk the Camino and had left his employment position entirely, which helped him to distance himself fully from his work self. He had been highly successful in his job, but the work relationships in the position he left before walking were extremely difficult. Even though the Camino would bring him time to reflect on his divorce and his father's death, he said, "it was really letting this abusive relationship with my job go that was probably the primary reason that I did the Camino. I was like, I need to start over because I'm in this toxic relationship." He also talked about needing a sabbatical from a workplace that had become his life: "I had two consulting gigs with a company, a part-time job and a full-time job, so I had been working non-stop for 12 years, I didn't even realize that I was working this much." He attributed his work habits to trying to make as much money as possible to be able to get his children through college: "I wasn't really smelling any roses; I was just trying to make bank." With his children's college taken care of, a huge financial pressure was lifted. He was able to get fully away from his workplace: "The benefit of leaving my job you know I had a lot of stuff in my head, I had a lot going on all the time, and I had so many T's to cross and I's to dot with my job and I never really had any chance to just be who I was, for the most part trying to unplug as much as possible." Tom's economic position also enabled him to take a few months after walking the Camino to think about the kind of job he wanted to take, one that would allow him to cut back on the hours worked each week and to bring some of the peace he had found on the Camino back into his everyday life.

Tom did not keep a Facebook page or blog; like Jackson, he sent messages to close kin in a way that he described as not interrupting his Camino routine. His children were all over 18 and were on their own at school or working. He did not need to talk with them each day or help them with issues while he was away. Nor did he see his children or other kin at home as therapeutic others who might help him as he faced difficult parts of the Camino. Tom talked of using WhatsApp to send photos and information about where he was on the Camino back to his children and to his mother, but these connections did not take significant time from his walking practice, or from the group of pilgrims he was walking with.

Ultimately, Tom was able to find the time alone and disconnect somewhat from relationships at home. He was able to claim extended time alone to "walk everything out" that was troubling him. He said that after the Camino he was "internally much more at peace, definitely 100%." He had traveled and hiked in many places, but he stressed that the "duration" of the Camino was its biggest "asset": "everything else I had done was two weeks, three weeks...you know, if you are dealing with a lot of adversity, sometimes the longer you are away," with the "discipline and structure" of the Camino, the stronger the experience of "walking" out issues. Tom's job, his life position, children's age, and his economic position, came together to help him let go of daily worries and disconnect from relationships back home. His relationship with his ex-wife was resolved. They had both accepted the ending and Tom had been in other therapeutic programs doing, he said, "marital work," to process the ending of his marriage, as well as the "griefwork" after the death of his father. He had been involved in an ongoing healing relational process that was, he said, "cumulative," the Camino bringing the ultimate end to establishing more meaning in his life. Working to "unplug" on the Camino he was able to let go, find "more meaning in life," and not have to "worry about control." Tom described his experience: "It's like something is, like the anxiety of living is lifting itself out of you...In a lot of ways, it's pretty intangible, which I guess is the spiritual aspect of it."

Camino de Santiago

"I don't know that I even checked the news. I just really disconnected, not completely, I had WhatsApp."

Elaine, U.S., 70

After ending a difficult marriage to her husband of 45 years, Elaine came to build a new life characterized by what she called a "spaciousness" and a new sense of freedom. Immediately following the divorce, she had considered doing the Appalachian Trail, or biking across the country, desiring a kind of "pilgrimage." She decided on walking the Camino Francés from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago by herself, noting that if her adult children had gone with her, it would have "been a very different Camino" with "someone else to worry about and juggling schedules." She wanted to have "an adventure" away from family where she could "draw closer

to God and "simplify" and "leave behind everything" in her daily life. As in most contemporary pilgrims' stories, leaving everything behind was partial, shaped by friendships and kin ties at home, her economic position, and her relationship with her smart phone.

Like Tom, Elaine was in a stable economic position with a job that did not necessitate her connecting with work while away, which shaped how much she needed to use her smart phone while walking. She was able to disconnect easily for a month from her business in the body wellness industry: "I am in a time in my life where my clients knew what I was doing and where I was going and that I would be out of touch." She also did not need to use her phone to manage her finances or bank accounts as often. Like several people I interviewed, her important bills were paid automatically. Her relationship to her phone was primarily for directions (GPS), taking photographs, and using WhatsApp to maintain connections at home.

Even though Elaine speaks in the quote above as being "disconnected," like most pilgrims, she qualifies and describes "connecting" with her children and group of close women back home "daily." WhatsApp and smart phone technologies shaped her level of communication with these significant others. Her children were grown and had their own lives and families to take care of, but it was important to Elaine that they were aware of where she was in her journey and that she was safe. The photographs she took on her new iPhone were digital aids in constructing a "journal": "I needed to connect with WhatsApp and I needed something to take pictures". Pictures were a "huge" part of her "journal." She had purchased the "most updated iPhone" before she left, "only because," she said, she "wanted to take pictures." Her digital interactions with her close friends and children were not just updating them on her journey; she called her friend group at home a kind of "support group" while she was walking and noted that her adult children also helped her process feelings. She noted being "honest" with this group of women friends "in a way," she "wasn't always with her kids." Still, there was one occasion when her daughter intervened during a particularly challenging part of Elaine's journey: "There were times that I said, I am so missing home, I need pictures of grandchildren and they would send me all these pictures of my grandchildren, and this one time I was past the Meseta, and I was just so homesick and one of my daughters, I said I'm ready to quit and she texted back, mom, you can do this and that is what I needed to keep going." Her iPhone allowed regular connection with friends and adult children as advisors, bringing everyday therapeutic relationships into her Camino journey.

Despite Elaine's connections to her everyday support network, she made a point in her story of stressing that these relationships were not the bulk of her journey; she had an abundance of alone time to reflect, to think more deeply about her life moving forward, and to come to terms with the ending of a long marriage. Elaine kept a small handwritten journal while on the Camino, a practice that provided her more of a "kinesthetic writing" experience that, she said, was not the same thing as

typing on a smart phone. She was also able to foster therapeutic connections with other pilgrims through extended walking on the Camino: "When you talk with other people the question you ask is why are you walking the Camino, it's not what is your job, how many children do you have, none of that, it's why are you walking the Camino." Elaine named walking and being a pilgrim among other pilgrims as a "sense of being stripped of all roles" from home, bringing her to a "core pain that was so, so present." She said: "The combination of the repetition of the step after step after step and the physical movement, as well as the simplicity life as I knew it narrowed down to a very repetitious walk: shower, wash your clothes, eat and do it again." She described establishing this time away through walking practice as allowing her to let go of and process emotions related to the divorce: "I think that the fact that I was no longer teacher, body worker, church leader, mother, grandmother, all of those roles were gone, and it was just this stark thing to face things from my past, but especially the marriage, the anger that I just couldn't get a hold of came in spades." Ultimately, she stressed that she was able to be "vulnerable" on the Camino, while "being held by the container" of her support group back home.

Elaine's story reflects the social dynamics and individual contradictions at work in efforts to disconnect and leave the everyday behind through extended walking pilgrimage. Her economic and life position allow her to travel to Spain, to take over a month to walk Camino paths without concern about her business. Her children were grown and out of the house, as young adults they had their own lives and were not as emotionally demanding as when they were younger. Her children were also comfortable with her taking on extended walking as long as they received daily updates. Elaine's relationship to her new iPhone and WhatsApp made this communication easy, allowing her to feel she was letting go of everyday roles even as she embraced her familiar therapeutic relationships with family and friends. She saw daily communications with these significant others at home not as overbearing, but as tangential to her day-to-day Camino rituals of walking, interacting with other pilgrims and, as a religious person, taking part in various Christian rituals and services.

Discussion and Implications

Social ties and their relationship to smart phones shaped the character of pilgrims' attempts to claim time away from everyday roles and responsibilities. Mobile media allowed them to satisfy norms of digital kinship: their families knew where they were and were given visual images that offered detail regarding the spaces they traveled through, the food they ate, and the people they met. Pilgrims were also able to monitor bank accounts and pay bills, if they needed to, and could check in

on clients and business matters if they were employed. Most of the pilgrims I interviewed for this study at some time on their journey used their phones as they would in their everyday lives to listen to familiar music, write in journal apps, and engage digital video entertainment like Netflix. As Bruno and Rodríguez¹⁸ well articulate: "From body care and health care to love and sexual encounters, from music to meditation, from photography to cognitive training and increased productivity, digital applications cover a huge range of social activities that are now shaped by a technically assisted management of self." My respondents' relationship to their phone in everyday life reflected such management of self, but the practice of walking so many hours each day, day after day, and the resulting physical exhaustion, as well as charging limitations for AT hikers, diminished the dominance of this technically assisted self and allowed some sense of disconnection. The apps and platforms that were most prominent in their stories of claiming space away from their everyday lives were those that allowed them to maintain necessary social ties.

In each of their stories, social expectations related to presentation of self on pilgrimage and digital kinship are clear. Smart phones and their camera and video functions brought family members and friends into individual pilgrimage spaces and experiences. Like taken-for-granted modes of communication in wider society such as LINE, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, visual digital tools became mechanisms through which pilgrims and their families can offer therapeutic support to each other. As my interviews suggest, the obligation to be available for emotional care was ever-present among family and close friends, and while not all pilgrims could stop immediately to engage, they had multiple opportunities on paths and in towns for an extended phone call or Facetime. In addition, tracking technologies used increasingly to monitor family members, like iPhone's Family Sharing, fueled the expectation that pilgrims let parents or adult children always know their physical location¹⁹. For people whose parents or adult children are engaged in extended walking in another country or through challenging terrain, such technology may feel obligatory. Simon Coleman²⁰ calls attention to the importance of contemporary studies that focus on social spaces and relationships that, while not physically present in pilgrimage structures, accompany pilgrims at sacred centers and on sacred paths. Pilgrimage scholars would do well to dig deeper into how the dynamics of digital kinship impact pilgrims' experiences of sacred space and encountering others.

The life position of the pilgrims I interviewed also suggests that extended walking is a practice available to those whose family ties and economic responsibilities

18 Bruno, Fernanda and Rodríguez, Pablo Manolo, "The Dividual: Digital Practices and Biotechnologies", *op. cit.*, p. 41.

19 Mavoa, Jane; Coghlan, Simon and Nansen, Bjørn, "It's About Safety Not Snooping", *op. cit.*

20 Coleman, Simon, *Powers of Pilgrimage...*, *op. cit.*

allow the time and resources to be away for a month or more. In fact, pilgrims often noted their privileged position, as Sydney, in the first case here, when she named it a "luxury" to have the time and money to walk the AT. If Sydney or others had small children or youth at home, it would have been difficult to claim such extended time away. Given that women continue to do more of the care work and care giving in families, extended walking pilgrimage is likely out of reach for many mothers and women caring for aging parents. This would be true as well for any individual in a position of having to offer daily physical care for a family member themselves. Such care giving obligations cannot be fulfilled through digital presence. While the ease and pervasiveness of digital connection may make extended walking possible through helping pilgrims to maintain family and kin expectations, the intersection of precise family care giving roles and economic position is determinative.

My interviews also suggest that unpacking social ties and relationships to mobile media can reveal important power dynamics at work in pilgrims' intimate relationships back home and those that form while walking. Sydney was pulled back into a relationship that she was trying to end partly through a financial tie to her ex-fiancé. Tracking technologies and texting made his presence on her journey constant. In other formal and informal interviews for this project, women told stories of men they met on paths who attempted to start romantic relationships with them and how these men used WhatsApp and pilgrim group social media posts to try and communicate if they became separated while walking. While Sydney ultimately uses her mobile device to end contact with her ex-fiancé, such experiences raise the question of how new technologies and increased digital presence can make breaking from abusive or unwanted relationships more difficult.²¹ My data also suggest that engagement with ex-partners on the trail is not always negative. Another woman who walked the AT told me a story that demonstrates the power of digital connection to share a transformative experience with an ex-partner: "I had a little smidgen of service and I was sending text messages to my family, and I got one from my ex, and that is how they came out to me as trans. I was just standing, looking at this beautiful place, the expanse of mountains and valleys and had a moment of, yea, we are both in exactly the places that we need to be." In several cases, like Jackson's, a mutual decision to connect only when necessary allowed pilgrims to have time away from intimate relationships that were ending. Another trekker on the AT told me that he and his ex-partner texted a bit, but only for necessary reasons: "The arguments daily were gone. I spoke to her maybe three or four times and they were texts only and strictly administrative issues because we lived in the same house. Things concerning mail or bills." He described the level of

21 Brown, M.L. Reed *et al.* "Technology-based abuse: Intimate partner violence and the use of information communication technologies", in Vickery, J.R. & Everbach, T., eds, *Mediating Misogyny*, Springer, 2018, pp. 209-227.

disconnection as a relief for their relationship: If they spoke it was, "short and to the point and nothing emotional so gone was the relationship, gone was the emotional planning, there was no day to day, no nothing. I had a complete and total separation from her." Some pilgrims who had just ended relationships thus worked to discipline their use of mobile media as a means of relational empowerment.

Conclusion

My analysis contributes to a larger conversation in social sciences regarding the power and nature of digital spiritual and religious pursuits that take place outside religious institutions and congregations.²² Extended walking pilgrimage, as lived religion, inevitably speaks to how people use media and technology to enhance religious/spiritual practice and to what extent digital forces shape and determine such experience. As scholars of pilgrimage have made clear, the inevitable and deep interconnectedness of pilgrimage and technology is a global force that can empower individuals, and at the same time control the spaces through which pilgrims travel in ways that diminish spiritual connection and religious purpose. Placing family and intimate relationships at the center of analysis can assist in probing the complex, dynamic, and often contradictory nature of connectivity in contemporary transformative walking practice.

My data and analysis also speak to questions of social control and hyperconnectivity as a condition and force that inevitably impacts social relationships and practices.²³ Exploring how family and economic ties intersect in the digital experiences of these pilgrims brings to the forefront the inescapable relationship between digital forces, human identity, and personhood.²⁴ As Elaine's statement, "*I just really disconnected, not completely*," suggests, people who engage in extended walking pilgrimage work to balance a pilgrim ethos of leaving behind the everyday alongside relational and economic digital ties. COVID brought an intensification of digital connections in religious and spiritual organizations and lived religious pursuits like extended walking pilgrimage.²⁵ As more social interaction becomes digitized, as surveillance and tracking tools become normalized, as digital family apps grow in number and kind, as banking and work tasks extend to new digital spaces, as biotechnology and therapeutic apps

22 Campbell, Heidi A., *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority*, London, Routledge, 2021.
Gao, Quan; Woods, Orlando; Kon, Lily & Ying Shee, Siew, "Lived Religion in a Digital Age: Technology, affect and the pervasive space-time of 'new' religious praxis", *Social & Cultural Geography*, 25, 1 (2024), pp. 29-48.

23 Brubaker, Rogers, "Digital Hyperconnectivity and the Self", *Theory and Society*, 49 (2020), pp. 771-801.

24 Bruno, Fernanda and Rodríguez, Pablo Manolo, "The Dividual: Digital Practices and Biotechnologies", *op. cit.*

25 Jorge, Ana, "Pilgrimage to Fátima and Santiago after COVID...", *op. cit.*

become taken-for-granted methods of maintaining health and wellness, pilgrimage scholars must continue to uncover how transformative walking practices might offer opportunities to disconnect in a mediatized world that demands connection.

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