Understanding Backpacker Motivations:

A Travel Career Approach

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to conceptualize backpacker motivation within the framework of the Travel Career Pattern (TCP) theory of travel motivation. An online survey was administered to backpackers targeted in backpacker-specific online communities in order to obtain a diverse sample. First, underlying dimensions of backpacker motivation were identified. Second, backpackers were clustered into two groups based on travel experience and age: 'high travel experience' and 'low travel experience'. Finally, the relationship between backpackers' travel experience and motivations was examined. Six underlying dimensions of motivation were extracted. Four of the motivations, *personal/social growth, experiential, budget travel,* and *independence* were found to be fluid in relation to backpackers travel experience. Notably, two motivations, *cultural knowledge* and *relaxation* were found to be constant in relation to the two travel experience groups, which suggest that they are core motivations for all backpackers.

Keywords: backpacker motivation, travel career pattern, travel experience, segmentation

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Travel motivation has been a central topic of tourism literature for decades. While many travel motivation theories have been developed, this study is concerned with conceptualizing backpacker motivation within the Travel Career Pattern (TCP) (Pearce and Caltabiano 1983; Pearce 1988, 1993; Pearce and Lee 2005) framework. Using the TCP framework, this study will conceptualize backpacker travel motivation in relation to travel experience. Also, this study could provide further empirical corroboration for the TCP theory.

Review of Literature

Backpackers' motivations have been studied extensively in previous literature. Moscardo (2006) noted four recurring motivations reported in previous studies (Elsrud 1998; Newlands 2004; Richards & Wilson 2004a; Ross 1997) of backpacker travel: a desire for authentic or genuine experience, novelty and action, affiliation or social motives, and achievement or learning. Murphy (2001) found the main reasons respondents of the study traveled as backpackers, were in ranking order: economic, social, a more real experience, longer trip length, independence, flexibility, ease and convenience, previous backpacker experience, and being recommended by other people.

An online study was conducted by the ATLAS Backpacker Research Group (BRG) in collaboration with the International Student Travel Confederation (ISTC) (Richards and Wilson 2004). The study which consisted of more than 2,300 respondents, found that four main motivational factors existed and characterized them as experience seeking, relaxation seeking, sociability, and contributing to the destination. The four most important motivations of the respondents to the survey were in ranking order: to explore other cultures, to experience excitement, to increase my knowledge, and to relax mentally. Newlands (2004) repeated the BRG study in New Zealand, and extracted four similar motivational factors, which were summarized as physical-mental challenge, responsible sociability, fun times with friends, and relaxation. The four most important motivations of the respondents to the survey were, in ranking order: to explore other

cultures, interact with local people, increase my knowledge, and relax mentally. Niggel and Benson (2008) also found that the top four push motivations for backpackers visiting South Africa were: to discover new places and things, to broaden knowledge about the world, to escape from everyday work, home and leisure scene/monotony of the daily routine, and to have a good time with friends. The findings of these studies suggest the existence of a set of core backpacker motivations. The motivations, to explore other cultures, increase one's knowledge and relax mentally, were all in the top four most important considerations in both the BRG study (Richards and Wilson 2004) and the study in New Zealand (Newlands 2004). This is similar to the top four motivations found in the South Africa study (Niggel and Benson 2008).

It has been noted that backpacking has a social function as a rite-of-passage (Cohen 2004; Maoz 2004; Noy 2004; Shaffer 2004; Teas 1988), and the initial trip is often the first time the person has been away from home for an extended period of time. The trip can mark a transition between youth, university, and career life stages (Cohen, 2004; O'Reilly, 2006; Simpson, 2005). Travel experience of backpackers increases with age, and as travel experience increases backpackers tend to visit more exotic and distant destinations (Richards and Wilson 2004), which gives some indirect support to the idea of a backpacker travel career (Pearce 1993). In an Australian study, Loker-Murphy (1996) conducted a motivational segmentation of the backpacker market using ten statements to measure backpackers' motives to visit Australia within the context of the Travel Career Ladder theory of travel motivation. The study found that the most important backpacker motives to visit Australia were *to seek exciting/active/adventurous things to do, to meet local people and characters, to enjoy and improve my knowledge of*

the country's physical and environmental settings, and *to enjoy and improve my*

knowledge of the country's history and culture.

The Travel Career Ladder (TCL) theory of travel motivation (Pearce and Caltabiano 1983; Pearce 1988, 1993; Pearce and Lee 2005) created a hierarchy of travel motivations based on Maslow's (1970) needs hierarchy theory of motivation. The TCL consisted of five different levels including from the lowest level to the highest level: relaxation needs, safety/security needs, relationship needs, self-esteem and development needs, and self-actualization/fulfillment needs. The hierarchy of travel needs was combined with the idea of travel career, or that as a person's travel experience increases their motivation to travel changes (Pearce and Lee 2005). The original TCL theory proposed that traveler's progress up the 'ladder' of travel motives as their travel experience increases, which created some questions of validity of the theory (Ryan 1998; Pearce and Lee 2005), and led to development of Travel Career Pattern (TCP) theory. The TCP deemphasized the hierarchical focus of the TCL and recognized that travel motivation is dynamic and multileveled. The concept of travel career is still central to the TCP, as is the idea that travelers will have changing motivational patterns during those travel careers (Pearce and Lee 2005).

Pearce and Lee's (2005) study aimed at providing empirical support for the TCP. The study found 14 dimensions to travel motivation, of which the most important were: *escape/relax, novelty, relationship,* and *self-development.* The study supported the main concepts of the TCP theory, the existence of a travel career and the changing of travel motivations during the travel career. The findings also suggest that there is a core or 'backbone' of the travel career pattern motivations as the three most important travel

motivations in the study did not have significant differences between the high and low travel experience level groups. Pearce and Lee (2005) suggest that more studies, particularly cross-cultural, are needed for verification and supplementation of the TCP. Loker-Murphy (1996)'s study differentiated the backpackers based on their motivations within the framework of the Travel Career Ladder theory. However, the findings were constrained by the limited number of motivation statements as well as the hierarchical structure of the TCL theory. This study seeks to address these constraints by using a greater number of backpacker motivation statements which have been empirically tested(Richards and Wilson 2004; Newlands 2004). Further, the understanding of backpacker motivation will be enhanced by examining backpacker motivations within the framework of the non-hierarchical TCP theory (Pearce and Lee 2005).

Research Objectives

Against this background review of some of the key literature on motivational studies on backpacker travelers, the main goals of this research were to examine underlying dimensions of backpacker motivation and to conceptualize the motivations in relation to the Travel Career Pattern (Pearce and Lee 2005) concept. The following are the main focus of this study:

1. Examine the importance of backpacker motivations identified in previous backpacker motivation studies,

2. Identify underlying dimensions of backpacker motivations,

3. Measure backpacker travel experience, and

4. Apply the Travel Career Pattern framework to backpacker motivations and travel experience.

Research Methodology

A self-administered online questionnaire was used to collect data.. Backpackers were targeted through the backpacker specific groups on the social networking site Facebook.com and through Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree Forum. A link to the survey was posted with a short message and a heading 'Backpacker Survey' on Facebook.com and Thorntree.lonelyplanet.com. On Facebook, the posts were to discussion boards within 15 backpacker-specific groups which members had chosen to join, and on the Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum a post was made under each of the 22 geographical regional threads. The online questionnaires were chosen because of their economic viability and to overcome some of the difficulties in reaching a large diverse backpacker sample (Huxley, 2004; O'Reily, 2006; Speed, 2008). Further, the online communities are advantageous because they provide access to people who share common and specific interests, attitudes, beliefs, and values (Wright 2005).

The questionnaire was designed to gather information on respondents' general pleasure travel motivations, previous travel experience, and socio-demographic characteristics. Respondents' motivations to travel were examined using 26 general travel motivational items that were created by the authors and selected from previous studies of the motivations of backpackers (Richards and Wilson 2004b; Pearce 1990; Loker-Murphy 1996; Newlands 2004). A 5-point Likert-type scale was used (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree.)* During the 4 week period in September 2007 a total of 359 valid respondents completed the online survey. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the overall sample profile. Principal component analysis was conducted to examine the underlying motivational dimensions. A K-means cluster analysis was

used to classify the respondents according to their travel experience. Discriminant analysis was then used to determine which travel experience variables best discriminated between the travel-experience groups. The profiles of the travel-experience groups were then compared through cross-tabulation. Finally, independent t-tests were used to examine the differences in the motivational factors between the travel experience groups.

Results

Sample profiles. More of the respondents were female (57.1%), than male (42.9%), and only 11.2% were currently married. Over 63% of the respondents were between ages 21 and 30, while 15.6% were between 18 and 20, and 13.8% were over 36 years old. In general, the respondents were highly educated, with all but 9.2% having at least some college. Furthermore, 34.3% of the respondents possessed a 4 year degree, and 28.8% of the respondents had an advanced degree. At the time of the study nearly 35% of respondents were students, 64.6% were employed, and 11.8% were unemployed. The sample included individuals of 30 different nationalities. The four most represented nationalities were from the United States, Canada, UK, and Australia.

Travel motivation analysis. One of the main objectives of this study was to explore the travel motivations of backpackers. The most important travel motives in this study reflect the novelty, self-development and relationship aspects of motivation such as *to explore other cultures* (mean=4.63), *increase my knowledge* (4.54), *to experience once in a lifetime activities* (4.42), *to experience excitement* (4.31). Also reflected by the high scores of the two motives, *to be free, independent, and open-minded* (4.30) and *to organize one's own journey* (4.22) was the motivation for independence. The least important travel motives reflect the relaxation aspects of motivation such as *to be in a*

calm atmosphere (3.02), and *to relax physically* (3.02), *to avoid the hustle and bustle* (mean=2.83), as well as the motive *to gain a sense of belonging* (2.83).

The overall sample size was found adequate to conduct a principal component analysis on the 26 travel motives using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measurement. The KMO was meritorious (.865) as it was greater than the suggested .70 baseline (Ryan and Glendon 1998). In order to examine the underlying dimensions of backpackers' motivations for travel, principal component analysis with a varimax rotation was applied to the 26 motivational variables used in the questionnaire. Six factors (eigenvalues >1) were extracted, explaining 61.54% of the overall variance before rotation. The results from the principal component analysis are presented in Table 1. The highest loading for each variable (>.30) was used to assign the variable to a factor. The six motivational factors were named: Personal/Social Growth, Experiential, Relaxation, Cultural Knowledge, Budget Travel, and Independence. Cronbach's coefficient alpha scores were determined for each of the factors in order to test the reliability and internal consistency of each factor. The results show alpha coefficients ranged from 0.672 to 0.841, all of which are greater than the minimum value for accepting reliability tests (Nunnally 1967).

The six generated motivational factors were named, in order of importance: (1) *cultural knowledge,* (2) *independence*, (3) *experiential*, (4) *budget travel,* (5) *personal/social growth,* (6) *relaxation*. These findings indicate that there are six identifiable dimensions of backpacker motivations.

INSERT TABLE 1

Travel experience levels analysis. In order to measure respondent's travel experience, the following four variables were used: *age*, *number of countries visited*,

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number of international trips taken, and *number of global regions visited*. The four

variables were subjected to a cluster analysis in order to classify the sample into

identifiable travel experiences groups. Each of the four travel experience variables were

measured on different scales, and needed to be standardized prior to the application of

cluster analysis. This was necessary so that variables with larger scores did not influence

the calculations of the classification results. The variables were all standardized on the

same scale, 0 to 1. A K-means cluster analysis was then applied to the four standardized

travel experience variables and resulted in a 2 cluster solution presented in Table 2. The

first cluster, named high-travel experience, consisted of 145 (40.4%) respondents and the

second cluster, named low-travel experience, consisted of 214 (59.6%) respondents. The

high-level travel experience group were older and had greater international travel

experience in contrast to the low-level travel experience group who were generally

younger with less international travel experience.

INSERT TABLE 2

Discriminant analysis was used to determine which of the four predictor variables

contributes most to the difference between the two travel experience groups. The results

for the discriminant function are listed in Table 3. The function accounted for 100% of

the variance with an eigen value of 2.86. The canonical correlation associated with the

function, 0.86, shows that the function is strongly related to the difference between travel

experience groups. Also, squaring of the canonical correlation, $(.86)^2 = .74$, indicates that

the 74% of the variance in the dependent variable, travel experience group, is explained.

The groups are also separated very well, which is indicated by the very low Wilk's

Lambda value (.26), and the separation of the travel experience groups is highly significant (Wilk's Lambda $x^2=479.31$, $p<.001$).

The standardized discriminant function coefficients were examined to determine which of the predictor variables contributed the most to the discriminant function. These are presented in Table 4. An examination of the standardized coefficients indicates that *the number of international trips taken* is the strongest predictor in separating the two travel experience groups, followed by *number of countries visited*, *age*, and *number of international regions visited*. Also identified were the two travel experience levels group centroids, which indicate the value of the discriminant function at the group means. *High travel experience group* has a positive value (2.05), and *low travel experience group* has a negative value (-1.39). Since the signs of all the coefficients related with the predictors are positive (Table 4), the group centroids suggest that higher levels of the *number of international trips taken*, *number of countries visited*, *age*, and *number of international regions visited* are more likely to result in higher travel experience. Finally, the classification matrix was examined to determine whether the discriminant function is a valid predictor of travel experience group. The classification results indicated that 98.9% of cases were correctly classified into the appropriate travel experience group.

INSERT TABLE 3

INSEART TABLE 4

A profile for each of the travel experience groups was identified using cross-tabulation, as presented in Table 5. Chi-squared statistics were calculated to determine the statistically significant differences between the two groups. The high travel experience group had an equal number of male and female respondents (50%) with a

higher level of education attained (76% with at least 4 years of university). Seventy

percent of the respondents in this group were older than 25, and the top three nationalities

represented were United States (25%), United Kingdom (20%), and Australia (12%).

Ninety percent of the respondents in this group have been to more than 17 countries,

seventy-two percent have traveled to five or more global regions, and eighty-two percent

have taken eleven or more international trips (Table 6).   The low travel experience group

had more female (63%) respondents, and eighty percent had four years of university

education or *less*. Seventy-two percent of the respondents in this group were younger

than 25, and the top three nationalities represented were United States (32%), Canada

(28%), and United Kingdom (13%) (Table 5). Eighty-five percent of the respondents in

this group have traveled to 16 or less countries, eighty-four percent have been to four or

less global regions, and ninety-one percent have been on ten or fewer international trips

(Table 6).

INSERT TABLE 5

INSEART TABLE 6

Travel motivation and travel experience. Independent t-tests were used to

determine which motivational factors were influenced by travel experience. The results

are displayed in Table 7. According to the results, all of the motivational factors were

more important to respondents in the low travel experience group. There were significant

differences between the two travel experience groups for four of the six motivational

factors, *personal/social growth*, *experiential, budget travel, and independence.* Two

factors, *cultural knowledge and relaxation,* had non-significant differences. Cultural

knowledge was the most important motivation to the sample, and relaxation was the least

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important factor. The non-significant difference between these two motivation factors could suggest that they are at the core of backpacker motivation no matter what level of travel experience they have.

INSEART TABLE 7

Discussion

This study examined general backpacker travel motivations within the framework of the Travel Career Pattern. The results indicate identifiable patterns of backpacker travel motivation which were influenced by previous travel experience and age. Six motivational factors were identified, including four that were significantly different between backpackers with low travel experience and those with high travel experience. Similar to Pearce and Lee's (2005) findings for general travel motivations, a core to backpacker travel motivation could be suggested by the two factors that showed no significant difference in relation to previous travel experience. The two motivational factors at the core of backpacker travel motivation in this study were *cultural knowledge* and *relaxation*. The *cultural knowledge* factor was the most important factor and included the three motivational items, *to explore other cultures, to increase my knowledge, and to interact with the local people*, which were nearly identical to the most important motivational items in Richards and Wilson's (2004b), Newland's (2004) results. While the *relaxation* was the least important motivational factor in this study, it was still found to be at the core of backpacker travel motivation. Relaxation has been found to be central to backpacker motivation (Richards and Wilson 2004a; Newland 2004) as well as general travel motivation (Pearce and Lee 2005).

Four motivational factors in this study were found to be influenced by backpackers' level of previous travel experience and age: *personal/social growth, experiential, budget travel,* and *independence.* The two motivations *budget travel* and *independence* have been central to the development and explanation of the backpacking phenomenon (Pearce 1990; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995; Murphy 2001; Richards and Wilson 2004a), and there were significant differences between the low travel experience group and the high travel experience for these two motivations, which suggests that over time they change. Backpackers often combine periods of independent travel with periods spent in backpacker enclaves, which provide comforts of home and a more comfortable travel infrastructure (Richards and Wilson 2004b), or 'doing a Contiki' (Wilson, Fisher, and Moore 2008) and 'off-the-beaten-track' destinations. Also, for more affluent backpackers, commonly referred to as *flashpackers*, traveling on a strict budget is not as important (Paris 2008). The two other dynamic motivational factors identified in this study, *experiential* and *personal/social growth*, were very similar to motivational factors identified in previous backpacker motivational studies (Richards and Wilson 2004; Newland 2004; Moscardo 2006). Backpackers in the low travel experience group had higher scores for all of the travel motivational factors, which was similar to Pearce and Lee's (2005) finding that 7 of the 9 motivational factors that were significantly different between low and high travel experience groups were emphasized more by the low travel experience group.

This study effectively applied the Travel Career Pattern of travel motivation to backpacker travel motivations. It suggests that the motivations of *cultural knowledge* and *relaxation* formulate the core of backpacker motivations, and that the motivations of

independence, budget travel, experiential, and *personal/social growth* are dynamic

throughout a backpacker's travel career.

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Table 1

Summary of Principal Component Analysis Results for Backpacker Motivation

Factor	Loading	Mean	Eigenvalue	% of Variance Explained	Cronbach Alpha
Factor 1: Personal/Social Growth			3.635	13.98	.841
To use my physical abilities/skills	.689	3.43			
To contribute something to the places I visit	.641	3.11			
To challenge my abilities	.638	4.10			
To use my imagination	.605	3.71			
To build friendships with others	.577	4.00			
To gain a sense of belonging	.571	2.83			
To develop close friendships	.475	3.36			
To associate with other travelers	.473	3.64			
Factor 2: Experiential			3.216	12.37	.700
To experience once in a lifetime activities	.728	4.42			
To gain experiences to share with friends and family	.671	3.99			
To have a good time with friends	.636	3.99			
To experience excitement	.591	4.31			
To attend special events	.438	3.39			
Factor 3: Relaxation			2.730	10.50	.796
To relax physically	.870	3.02			
To be in a calm atmosphere	.743	2.94			
To relax mentally	.731	3.83			
To avoid hustle	.646	2.83			
Factor 4: Cultural Knowledge			2.381	9.16	.672
To explore other cultures	.769	4.63			
To increase my knowledge	.764	4.54			
To interact with local people	.618	4.17			
Factor 5: Budget Travel			2.039	7.84	.742
To travel on a low budget	.821	3.46			
To travel for as long as possible	.771	3.76			
Factor 6: Independence			1.999	7.69	.698
To organize one's own journey	.726	4.22			
To get off the beaten track	.698	4.09			
To be free, independent, and open-minded	.516	4.30			
To discover myself	.408	3.86			

Note: Total variance explained 61.54%. Varimax-rotation was used.

Table 2
Cluster Analysis Results

Travel Experience Parameter	High Travel Experience (N=145 (40.4%))	Low Travel Experience (N=214 (59.6%))	ANOVA Significance Level
Number of international trips taken	0.85	0.35	0.00
Number of international countries visit	0.73	0.31	0.00
Age	0.59	0.28	0.00
Number of global regions visited	0.52	0.23	0.00

Table 3
Tests of Significance of the Discriminant Function

Function	Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Canonical Correlation	Wilk's Lambda	Chi-Square	Significance Level
1	2.86	100	.86	.26	479.31	.000

Table 4
Canonical Discriminant Function Coefficients and Loadings

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Discriminant Loadings
Number international trips taken	3.56	0.69	0.75
Number of international countries visited	2.12	0.44	0.59
Age	1.48	0.39	0.47
Number of global regions visited	1.01	0.18	0.34
(Constant)	-3.94	N/A	N/A

Table 5
Cross-Tabulation Profiles of Travel Experience Groups

Profiles	Categories	Travel Experience Levels			
		High	(%)[a]	Low	(%)[a]
Gender*	Male	72	(50.0)	79	(36.9)
	Female	72	(50.0)	135	(63.1)
Educational Level**	Jr. High (up to year 10)	1	(.7)	1	(.5)
	High School (up to year 12)	10	(6.9)	20	(9.3)
	Some College	21	(14.5)	80	(37.4)
	College (4 Years)	53	(36.6)	70	(32.7)
	Graduate School (advanced degree)	60	(41.4)	43	(20.1)
Nationality**	USA	36	(25.2)	68	(31.8)
	UK	28	(19.6)	27	(12.6)
	Canada	14	(9.8)	59	(27.6)
	Australia	17	(11.9)	21	(9.8)
	Other	48	(33.5)	39	(18.2)
Age**	18-20	7	(4.8)	50	(23.4)
	21-24	36	(24.8)	104	(48.6
	25-30	41	(28.3)	50	(23.4)
	31-35	19	(13.1)	4	(1.9)
	>36	42	(29.0)	6	(2.8)

[a] % within travel experience group.
*p<0.05. **p<.001.

Table 6
Cross-Tabulation Previous Travel Experience of Travel Experience Groups

		Travel Experience Levels			
Travel Experience	Categories	High	(%)[a]	Low	(%)[a]
Number of international trips taken**	0	0	(0.0)	1	(.5)
	1-3	0	(0.0)	76	(35.5)
	4-6	5	(3.4)	67	(31.3)
	7-10	21	(14.5)	50	(23.4)
	11-13	20	(13.8)	14	(6.5)
	14-16	6	(4.1)	5	(2.3)
	>16	93	(64.1)	1	(.5)
Number of countries visited**	1-4	0	(0.0)	24	(11.2)
	5-8	1	(.7)	38	(17.8)
	9-12	10	(6.9)	69	(32.2)
	13-16	11	(7.6)	51	(23.8)
	17-20	32	(22.1)	21	(9.8)
	21-24	26	(17.9)	9	(4.2)
	25-30	21	(14.5)	2	(0.9)
	>30	44	(30.3)	0	(0.0)
Number of Global regions visited**	1-3	15	(10.4)	133	(62.1)
	4-6	84	(57.8)	81	(37.9)
	7-10	46	(31.8)	0	(0.0)

[a] % within travel experience group.
**$p<.001$.

Table 7
Independent T-Test: Motivation Factors by Travel-Experience Groups

	High Travel Experience		Low Travel Experience			
	Factor Score	Mean	Factor Score	Mean	T-Score	Significance
Cultural Knowledge	-.007	4.41	0.05	4.48	-1.07	0.29
Independence	-0.15	4.00	0.10	4.19	-2.29	0.02
Experiential	-0.41	3.78	0.27	4.18	-6.43	0.00
Budget Travel	-0.25	3.37	0.16	3.77	-3.78	0.00
Personal/Social Growth	-0.31	3.31	0.20	3.66	-4.72	0.00
Relaxation	-0.09	3.06	0.07	3.22	-1.46	.144