Special Issue – Independent Travel

Edward Alex Berger
University of Copenhagen

Cody Morris Paris
Middlesex University Dubai

Exploring the Influence of Facebook on Backpacker's Social Experience in Hostels

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between Facebook usage and the corresponding impact on travel relationships within the hostel and backpacker community. An online survey was administered to backpackers which were both hostel and Facebook users by way of travel-centric online communities. The impact of Facebook on backpacker behaviors, decision making, and relationships was examined. Analysis indicates that Facebook is shaping the evolution of social, behavioral, and communicative norms within the backpacker hostel environment and that there is still a gap in the research that examines the impact of social networking websites on the hostel experience.

Keywords: Independent Travel, Social Interaction, Social Media, Mobilities, hospitality.

Edward Alexander Berger
Masters Student, Communication and Cognition
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
Email: edward.a.berger@gmail.com

Cody Morris Paris, PhD
Senior Lecturer and Programme Coordinator
Middlesex University Dubai
Knowledge Village, Block 16
PO Box 500697
United Arab Emirates
Email: c.paris@mdx.ac

Edward Alexander Berger is a Masters Student in the Communication and Cognition program at the University of Copenhagen. He completed his BA in Human Communication at Arizona State University. Alex is also an active journalist operating within the tourism and study abroad space. His main research interests include technology and tourism, online communities, technology and journalism, tourism mobilities, and backpacker tourism.

Cody Morris Paris is Senior Lecturer and Programme Coordinator for Social Science programmes at Middlesex University Dubai. He completed his PhD in Community Resource Development at Arizona State University. Cody is also a Senior Research Fellow at the School of Tourism and Hospitality, University of Johannesburg in South Africa. His primary research interests include: Geopolitics and Tourism, Technology and Tourism, Sustainable Development, Mobilities, and Experiential Learning and Tourism.

Introduction and Background

Backpackers are pioneers of mobility, who provide a unique domain for critical tourism research. The lineage of backpacker ideals, including pursuit of authentic experiences, independence, escape and social interaction, can be traced back to the 'tramps' of the 1880s (Meriwether, 1886) and the 'drifters' of the 1970s (Cohen, 1979). Backpackers are members of a 'global elite' that symbolize the ongoing convergence in society of technology, physical travel, and daily life. The enduring ideals, history of mobility and the increasing use of information and communication technologies by backpackers provide a rich context from which to the study the relationship between contemporary society, tourism and technology.

Backpackers on the road are temporary members of the 'road culture' participating in short-term fleeting social interactions, often traveling together, eating together, and sharing common experiences together. The social interactions (Murphy, 2001) between them revolves around the shared ideology and a sense of companionship in the midst of social insecurity of traveling in a distant unknown place, but, traditionally this ideology was temporally and physically constrained to the time spent traveling and the physical spaces traveled to and through. The backpacker sociality was preserved through the shared ideology.

New virtual moorings (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006) have developed that allow backpackers to be fully integrated in their multiple networks and maintain a sustained state of co-presence between the backpacker culture and their home culture (Mascheroni, 2007). Backpackers manage their multiple networks while traveling and at home through social networking sites, email, and other technologies which have blurred the boundaries between home and the road. The close virtual proximity that backpackers maintain allows them to be able to be instantly in contact with friends, family, work, school, and fellow travelers.

Understanding the impacts of emerging technologies on the backpacking experiences and businesses was one of the eight main themes for future research that emerged from a recent study of the backpacker market in Australia (Pearce, Murphy, & Brymer, 2009). Many of the respondents to that study, both academic researchers and the backpacker industry, felt that not enough was understood about how new technologies are impacting the backpacking experience and industry. Several recent studies indicate that backpackers are very active users of communication technologies, particularly social media (Hofstaetter & Egger, 2009; Paris, 2010; Mendes-Filho, Tan, & Milne, 2010).

Backpacker hostels have become a fast growing segment of the hospitality industry which has evolved significantly over the past couple decades. Hostels are important spaces within the backpacking travelscape that enable, represent and provide structure to backpackers' mobilities (O'Reagan, 2010). Hostels are symbolic of the backpacking and, historically, similar spaces in which backpacking is consumed and performed. They provide the time and space for the 'backpacking' trip, where individuals construct their own backpacker identities, narrate stories, exchange knowledge, and interact (O'Reagan, 2010). The overall hostel experience is structured around facilitating social interaction and engagement on a limited budget. Recent shifts in what is expected of a hostel have resulted in widespread availability of wifi on a free or discounted basis, public common areas, hostel kitchens available for traveler's needs, common events, and in many cases an onsite lounge or hostel bar. The hostel atmosphere takes into account travelers' desires to interact and socialize with their fellow travelers. In reality, the shared nature of most of the dormitories makes this unavoidable.

As of December 31st, 2012 Facebook boasted an active user base of more than 1.06 billion people worldwide (Facebook, Inc., 2013). This means that around 15% of the global

population is on Facebook as active users and have used the site at least once over the past month. Of these, 618 million are daily active users. Of equal interest to this paper and the associated research is the nature of the service's growth. Not only is the site experiencing explosive growth globally but that growth is resulting in increased user connectivity and time on-site. Daily active users increased by 28% from December 2011 to 2012, which out-performed a 25% monthly active user increase over the same period. Facebook has also reported that there are more than 150 billion friend connections on Facebook. Thus far 240 billion photos have been shared on Facebook of which 350 million per day were uploaded in the 4th quarter of 2012 (Facebook, Inc., 2013).

Facebook identifies the following four factors as primary ways in which the site generates value for its users (Facebook, Inc., 2013):

- Connect and Share with Your Friends.

- Discover and Learn.

- Express Yourself.

- Stay Connected Everywhere.

Explored within the context of Facebook's potential impact on hostel and backpacker culture, these four values become particularly interesting as they mirror many of the issues targeted for discussion in this paper. The convergence of virtual and physical spaces of backpacker social interaction provides a fascinating opportunity to explore the ongoing shift in communicative and behavioral norms at the core of existing backpacker culture. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived impact that Facebook has had on backpacker's communicative and social behavior in hostels.

Methods

In order to overcome some of the difficulties in sampling backpackers previously identified (Paris, 2013), an online survey was developed and administered through Facebook and Twitter. Targeted respondents were social media users that had stayed in a hostel at least once and self-identified with the backpacker culture. All data was collected through a self-administered online survey conducted through the Survey Monkey platform.

Convenience and snowball sampling procedures were employed. A link to the survey was posted to Twitter supplemented by a series of travel and community-related #hashtags. Participants were encouraged to use the "re-tweet" function to amplify exposure. The survey was also distributed across five Facebook groups with a total of 7,572 members. Bumping, the posting of a new comment on the original post to move the item back to the first position in the discussion group, was used during the course of the survey period to improve visibility. The survey was also posted on one of the researcher's Facebook profile with 1,390 contacts. A message with the link and at the introduction of the survey made it explicit to respondents that the survey was targeted toward 'social media users who had stayed at least once previously in a hostel and identified with the backpacker culture.' The survey utilized a series of demographic and previous travel experience questions. A set of Likert-like questions (1 = no influence, 5 = significant influence) were developed to measure the perceived impact of Facebook on social interaction and behavior. The survey was available online between May 18th, 2012 and May 25th, 2012. In total, 157 responses were collected, of which 132 were complete. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results

While a significant disparity was found between male and female respondents as shown in Table 1, these results align with previous findings by other researchers. The 66/34

Special Issue – Independent Travel

split is slightly more exaggerated than previously found by Paris but still aligned with past

findings (2012). Demographic data concerning educational attainment, employment and age

breakdown also resemble previous studies. As was anticipated due to the fashion in which

the survey was distributed, language barriers, and historical data on backpacker

demographics a western-centric sample was observed. Of the respondents, forty-four percent

were found to be from North America, forty-three percent were from Europe and

Scandinavia, and eight percent were from Australia and New Zealand.

Table 1. Demographic Profile

Attribute		*Number*	*Percentage*
Gender			
	Male	45	34
	Female	87	66
Age (years)			
	17 or younger	0	0
	18-22	13	10
	23-27	59	45
	29-32	29	22
	33-37	10	8
	38-50	15	11
	51 or older	6	5
Education			
	Less than high school degree	0	0
	High School/GED	4	3
	Some College	13	10
	Associate Degree	4	3
	Bachelors Degree	65	49
	Graduate Degree	46	35
Employment			
	Employed, working part time	17	13
	Employed, working full time	46	35
	Student, not working	17	13
	Student, working (part/full time)	30	23
	Not employed, looking for work	8	6
	Not employed, NOT looking for work	13	10
	Retired	1	1
	Disabled, not able to work	0	0

Special Issue – Independent Travel

Several questions were used to gather information about respondent's Facebook usage and relationship. The data in Table 2 shows that twenty percent of respondents joined Facebook during the time when it was exclusive to American university students, and the majority joined after it was opened to the global public in 2006. While sixty-three percent of respondents reported that travel did not have any influence upon their decision to sign up for Facebook, thirty-eight percent of respondents reported that it had at least a minimal influence on their decision.

Table 2's data is noteworthy because it indicates that travel has, at least to a limited degree, played a role in driving users to use the social network. Only five percent of respondents stated that they do not use Facebook while traveling. Meanwhile sixty-four percent of respondents noted using the site at least several times a week while traveling. This would seem to support findings by Mascheroni (2007) that suggest many long-term backpackers have traded regular access to physical addresses for e-mail and social media profiles. A core shift in their accessibility and day-to-day behavior.

Table 2. Facebook Usage

Year Joined	*Number*	*Percentage*	*While Traveling*	*Number*	*Percentage*
2004	13	10	Yes, occasionally	41	31
2005	13	10	Yes, several times a week	49	37
2006	16	12	Yes, every day	35	27
2007	50	38	No	7	5
2008	23	17			
2009	9	7	*Travel A Factor In Signing Up?*		
2010	3	2	Significant Influence	14	11
2011	4	3	Some Influence	11	8
2012	0	0	Neutral	6	5
			Minimal Influence	18	14
			No Influence	83	63

Most of the respondents were either novice/light hostel users or heavy/regular hostel users. As noted in Table 3, the follow-up question which looked at hostel stays over the last twelve months suggests that most of that travel has been in previous years. Only two percent

of respondents reported having never stayed in a hostel, though a full 34 percent had not used a hostel in the last 12 months. This suggests that a sizeable number of hostel users utilize hostels for semi-rare trips which likely occur every few years.

Table 3. Previous Hostel Experience

Total Hostel Stays	Number	Percentage
1 to 5	32	24
6 to 10	22	17
11 to 15	9	7
16 to 20	9	7
21 to 25	7	5
26+	50	38
Never	3	2
Hostel Stays Last 12 Months		
1 to 5	47	36
6 to 10	19	14
11 to 15	7	5
16 to 20	3	2
20+	11	8
0	45	34

Table 3 highlights that only eight percent of respondents reported having visited more than twenty hostels in the last year. These power users are likely on extended-duration trips such as 6-12 month long Round-The-World trips or open itinerary Gap Year vacations. The majority (50%) report having stayed in fewer than ten hostels which would fit with limited hostel stays while on shorter 2-3 week trips or study abroad where accommodation is taken care of for all but weakened trips and end-of-study travel.

Facebook and Hostels

The results presented in Table 4 are focused on the respondents' perceived impact of Facebook on the way people relate to the hostel experiences, communicate those experiences, and engage with their fellow travelers. The results are discussed in terms of two emergent themes: anonymity and connectivity.

Special Issue – Independent Travel

Table 4. Facebook and Hostel Culture

	Strongly Disagree	*Mostly Disagree*	*Neutral*	*Mostly Agree*	*Strongly Agree*	*Mean*	*Std. Dev.*
I am more connected to my fellow travelers because of Facebook.	7	11	20	47	46	3.87	1.15
Facebook has made travel less anonymous.	5	9	34	54	29	3.71	1.01
Before Facebook hostel/backpacking was anonymous.	9	33	56	18	5	2.81	0.93
Facebook makes hostel/backpacking more anonymous.	31	57	37	1	0	2.06	0.76
I have maintained friendships made while traveling which would not have been possible without Facebook.	5	14	11	51	50	3.97	1.11
There are things I did before Facebook which I would no longer feel comfortable doing.	37	35	42	10	2	2.25	1.02
Facebook has made my hostel experience more social (photos, communication, events, etc.).	3	11	31	52	21	3.65	0.97
I worry about other travelers sharing my personal activities on Facebook.	19	50	29	23	6	2.58	1.09
I feel more accountable for my actions while traveling due to Facebook.	19	40	28	33	6	2.74	1.14
Before Facebook I was able to sustain relationships with people I met during my trip.	4	31	40	25	10	3.05	1.01
Facebook has made it possible to sustain relationships with people I met during my trip.	0	4	17	63	40	4.12	0.76
Facebook is detrimental to the hostel experience.	34	48	31	5	1	2.08	0.89

Anonymity can be a powerful behavioral factor shaping the way individuals communicate and interact, particularly for backpackers. The backpacker hostel and enclave

"provides a social space which is suspended between intimacy and anonymity…provides a space where new identities can be forged…at the same time maintain the distance of strangers" (Wilson & Richards, 2008, p. 194).   The use of Facebook within hostels are part of what Germann Molz (2006) referred to as a 'system of surveillance.' The system of surveillance is the hybridizing of the physical and virtual spaces of backpacking. Backpackers 'surveil themselves by documenting their experiences for others to see using connections communal computers, hostel Wi-Fi, or mobile phones. In doing so, backpackers are also surveilling each other, which can result in information, photos, videos, and other digital representations of behavior being transmitted virtually to extended networks of friends, family, and strangers.

A large majority of respondents indicated that through Facebook they feel more connected to their fellow travelers, and that the use of Facebook has resulted in the backpacking experience being less anonymous. As a powerful social tool, this makes sense as before Facebook the semi-transient nature of the backpacker experience resulted in fairly brief and semi-anonymous interactions. The results of this study suggest that respondents had a neutral perspective of how anonymous the hostel/backpacking experience was before Facebook, however prior to advances in social media, connectivity, and mobile devices there was spatial and temporal distance between their personal networks and their hostel/backpacker experiences. The results suggest that the respondents strongly felt that Facebook has made the hostel experience less anonymous, suggesting that their 'home identities' and 'road identities' are converging.

However, the response to the item 'there are things I did prior to Facebook that I would no longer feel comfortable doing, suggests that a majority of respondents indicated that their behavior had remained largely the same despite the introduction of Facebook. It is

interesting to note, however, that while the average response to this question indicated general disagreement a sub-group of respondents indicated that Facebook does influence their behavior in hostels and while traveling.

Additionally, some of the respondents did worry about the sharing of their personal information on Facebook by fellow travelers, and some of the respondents did feel an increased sense of accountability for their actions while traveling because of Facebook. Most respondents felt that overall Facebook increased their level of connectivity to their fellow travelers, and specifically that Facebook helped them to maintain the relationships formed during the hostel experience that would not have been possible previously. This high level of agreement aligns with literature on backpacker social interactions that suggested that the friendships made while traveling were extremely difficult to maintain and labor intensive for both parties after the individuals returned home or moved to their next destination (Paris, 2010; Murphy, 2001). While traveling, many backpackers develop relationships, often fleeting, that do not have the time to develop into lasting friendships. Facebook creates a second space that allows for these relationships to be sustained, and thus creates the potential for friendships to grow beyond the spatial and temporal constraints of social interactions within the hostels. Thus Facebook allows for backpackers to both sustain *relationships* and maintain *friendships*.

The way in which Facebook does this is evident in the high level of agreement of respondents with the item, 'Facebook has made my hostel experience more social (photos, communication, events, etc.)'. Beyond the 'social network' function that facilitates an extension of social interaction, Facebook provides a virtual space through which relationships can be more intimate and pervasive in the daily lives of travelers, as well as a space in which the virtual backpacker culture can be engaged with continuously.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to explore the evolving relationship between Facebook usage and hostel culture as it relates to shaping the modern backpacker experience. More specifically, this study explored how Facebook, as a relatively new communication technology, is shaping the evolution of social, behavioral, and communicative norms within the backpacker hostel environment.

While there is a growing amount of literature focused on backpackers and elements of their relationships with social networks there is still a gap in the research that examines the impact of these technologies on the hostel experience. As a fundamental part of the backpacker experience it is extremely important that we understand the extent of Facebook's influence on the modern backpacker experience and how that influence is continuing to grow and become more pronounced. The findings in this study suggest that Facebook may be having a powerful impact on re-crafting the way backpackers build, maintain and relate to their casual, social, and even romantic relationships. While additional research is required to explore the connections between the self-reported observational responses evaluated in this survey and backpacker's actual behaviors, this data offers support that there is cause for such research.

The demographic and usage data that resulted from this survey paints a compelling picture of the modern backpacker. These are highly educated, productive, capable, well-traveled individuals with a global footprint that stretches across the majority of the world's continents. The conversations, experiences, and networks that result from the synergies between backpackers, hostels and Facebook have implications for the future of the budget travel industry, and the way in which 'travel' is actually experienced and done.

Special Issue – Independent Travel

This survey was executed as an exploratory study, and the results suggest that the backpackers surveyed believe that Facebook has had a significant impact on the nature and level of communication occurring and originating in hostels. The data suggests that overall there was a positive sentiment among respondents regarding the impact Facebook has had on communication within the backpacker hostel community, despite some concerns over privacy. While the self-reported nature of these findings limit the generalizability, the findings of this study could provide a foundation for further empirical studies on the impact of social technologies within the various travelscapes that backpackers travel through.

References

Cohen, E. (1979). A phenomenology of tourist experiences. *Sociology*, 13(2), 179-201.
Facebook, Inc. (2013). 10-K Annual Report 2012. Retrieved from
http://investor.fb.com/secfiling.cfm?filingID=1326801-13-3&CIK=1326801.

Hannam, K., Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). Editorial: Mobilities, immobilities and moorings.
Mobilities, 1(1), 1-22.

Hofstaetter, C. & Egger, R. (2009). The importance and use of weblogs for backpackers. In

Hopken, W., Gretzel, U. & Law, R. (Eds.) *Information and Communication Technologies in
Tourism 2009: Proceedings of the International Conference in Amsterdam, Netherlands 2009*
(pp. 99-110). Vienna: Springer.

Mascheroni, G. (2007). 'Global Nomads' Network and Mobile Sociality: Exploring New
Media Uses on the Move. *Information, Communication and Society*, 10(4), 527-546.

Mendes-Filho, L., Tan, F., & Milne, S. (2010). Backpacker use of user-generated content: A
consumer empowerment study. In U. Gretzel, R. Law & M. Fuchs (Eds.) *Information and
Communication Technologies in Tourism 2010: Proceedings of the International Conference
in Lugano, Switzerland* (pp. 455-466). Vienna: Springer.

Meriwether, L. (1886). *A tramp trip: How to see Europe on fifty cents a day.* St. Louis:
Harper & Brothers.

Molz, J. G. (2006). Watch us wander: Mobile surveillance and the surveillance of mobility.
Environment and Planning A, 38(2), 377-393.

Murphy, L. (2001). Exploring Social Interactions of Backpackers. *Annals of Tourism
Research, 28*(1), 50-67.

O'Regan, M. (2008). Hypermobility in Backpacker lifestyles: The emergence of the internet
café. In P. Burns and M. Novelli (Eds.) *Tourism and mobilities: Local-global connections*
(pp. 109-132). Walingford: CABI.

O'Reilly, C. (2006). From drifter to gap year tourist: Mainstreaming backpacker travel.
Annals of Tourism Research, 33(4), 998-1017.

Paris, C. (2010). The virtualization of backpacker culture: Virtual moorings, sustained
interactions, and enhanced mobilities. In K. Hannam & A. Diekmann (Eds.), *Beyond
backpacker tourism: Mobilities and experiences* (pp. 40-63). Bristol: Channel View
Publications.

Paris, C. (2012). Flashpackers: An emerging sub-culture? *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2),
1094-1115.

Paris, C. (2013). Surveying "difficult-to-sample" backpackers through Facebook? Employing a mixed-mode dual-frame procedure. *Anatolia: An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*, (in press).

Pearce, P., Murphy, L., & Brymer, E. (2009). *Evolution of the backpacker market and the potential for Australian tourism*.   Retrieved March 10, 2010, from CRC for Sustainable Tourism Pty Ltd Web site: http://www.crctourism.com.au/WMS/Upload/Resources/110017%20EvolBackpackerMarket%20WEB.pdf

Wilson, J. & Richards, G. (2008). Suspending reality: An exploration of enclaves and the backpacker experience. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 11(2), 187-202.