Reaching the end of the unbeaten path?: An Analysis of *Lonely Planet's* Digital Media 'Requiem'

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This paper examines the responses of the online community towards media reports of the potential decline of *Lonely Planet* (LP) guidebooks. After the sale of LP by BBC Worldwide to NC2 Media in March 2013, reports in July surfaced to suggest that NC2's new strategy, namely to move away from physical printing to online content, would potentially mark the end of the iconic brand. Through the inductive analysis of Tweets and comments posted in response to news articles in the online version of *The Guardian,* this findings of this study suggest that two interesting narratives developed in response to potential demise of LP. First, many users expressed nostalgia and feelings of sadness and loss of something they believed to be a key ingredient of previous and indeed, future travel experiences. Second, some users were critical of LP for its exclusionary impact on some businesses and destinations and of the LP users themselves. Thus, this paper adds new perspectives to a growing body of literature that has sought to question and scrutinise the influential role of arguably the strongest brand in independent travel literature and the increasing impact of technology on published guidebooks.

Introduction

In the 1970s, Cohen (1972, 1973) and Vogt (1976) produced their seminal texts on backpacking sub-cultures that would act as the cornerstone for multiple subsequent studies on independent travel as it shifted from a peripheral to mainstream activity. During this same period, two guidebooks were penned by travellers, Tony Wheeler and his wife, Maureen that

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would lead to the emergence of one of the most prominent global travel guidebook brands – *Lonely Planet* (LP) - which they would eventual sell in 2008 to BBC Worldwide. However, in March 2013, it was reported that BBC Worldwide had sold the *Lonely Planet* brand to NC2 Media at a loss of almost £80m, just 5 years after BBC Worldwide had purchased LP in a deal worth a reported £130m from the Wheelers. On July 19th, 2013 *The Guardian's* online Australian edition reported that the acquisition would result in considerable job cuts predominantly at LP's Melbourne headquarters. These cuts were due to NC2's strategy to shift focus towards developing digital content and away from print media. It was argued that this move had been triggered by a recent slump in LP's physical sales including a 14% decline between 2010 and 2011, followed by a further 21% between 2011 and 2012. LP had already reduced staff numbers in 2011, but 2013's cuts, reported to be up to 20% of its 399-stong global workforce, prompted a number of media articles to suggest that this was perhaps the end (or the beginning of the end) of an iconic brand, synonymous with backpacking and independent travel.

Building on the reports of LP's potential demise, *The Guardian's* Australian online edition published two additional articles on July 22nd; *Is this goodbye to Lonely Planet?*, followed by *Do you still use Lonely Planet?* The latter, also included an online poll for readers to respond to 2 questions about contemporary usage and methods of engagement. However, it was the response to these articles in the form of online commentators and tweets that arguably prompted wider attention. *Time World* reported that within hours of the July 19th reports, current and ex- backpackers had begun a 'Twitter requiem' using the hashtag #lpmemories (*Lonely Planet Jobs Cull Prompts Social-Media Euology From Readers Fearing Guide's Demise*, July 23rd 2013). Indeed, on the morning of July 19th over the course of approximately 2 years, just 14 tweets had used the hashtag #lpmemories. By midnight on July 22nd, 341 tweets had emerged and within 2 weeks this number had grown to 1029. *The Guardian's* online articles from July 22nd, had also enabled readers to post comments as part of their 'comment is free' section. Within a closed period of 48hrs (comments are only permitted for a short period of time), 481 posts were made whilst more than a thousand readers responded to the online poll.

Preliminary observations of the responses via Twitter to the reports of LP's potential decline appeared to be on one hand overwhelmingly in support of the brand and its guidebooks. This

support was often articulated through feelings of nostalgia. Indeed, tweets were largely structured around favourite memories (#lpmemories) or unique experiences that frequently included photographs from the same journey. Other tweets were constructed around emotions of sadness or a sense of loss. Similar sentiments were witnessed on the comments section of *The Guardian*'s' two aforementioned articles from 22nd July. However, concurrently, a different perspective also was observed that not only criticised the role of LP guidebooks for transforming destinations, but the people that wrote fondly about their LP-induced experiences.

As a consequence of these preliminary observations, this purpose of this paper is to analyze the responses generated via Twitter and *The Guardian*'s comments section in more depth. First, we explore why the potential demise of the brand caused a strong emotional response amongst travellers. Second, we analyse the LP- user vs. non-LP user debates that emerged predominantly in the *The Guardian*'s comment section. Previous literature has frequently portrayed backpackers as being travellers in search of independence, adventure, and settings away from conventional tourists. However, the very nature of the guidebook is arguably structured to remove feelings of independence and adventure by providing users with a range of solutions to common travel problems. Moreover, LP guidebooks have arguably standardized the backpacker experience and the destinations on the 'LP trail' that they inadvertently make popular. The aim of this paper, thus, is to analyse the response to the news of the decline of LP within the context of LP's role in mainstreaming of backpacking and independent travel. To do this, we first provide a review of the academic literature on the relationship between guidebooks and backpacking culture. Next, we analyse the tweets and comment responses to recent news stories of LP decline. Finally, we interpret the conflicted narratives emerging from these responses.

Literature Review

Historical Context

During the late 1800s, the few independent travellers often documented their travels in journals, a practice still very much in use today. While travellers during this period did send letters home, the majority of their experiences were shared through travel narratives based upon their travel journals. Some of these narratives became the basis for mainstream literary works by authors such as Mark Twain. During this period a very select few individuals had

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the personal and social standing to embark on global 'tramping' trips, and as a result they were the sole brokers of independent travel information. Many of these early independent travellers took it upon themselves to share their expert 'insider' information related to the practice of tramping through their travel narratives. While many of the consumers of this information unlikely had the means to actually utilize the information provided in these narratives, the 'travel guide' advice in the narratives often could evoke the imaginations of the readers. For example, in his tramping narrative titled, *Tramp Trip: How to See Europe on Fifty Cents a Day,* Lee Meriwether (1886) offered:

> As a tramp, with a modest bag on your back, you will be taken for an itinerant journeyman or peddler, and as such can fraternize and live with the peasants and people. The rider of a bicycle, however, if not mistaken by the simple peasants for some strange sort of animal, will at any rate be looked on as a *tourist*, and will be treated accordingly…. The bicycler might go faster, but he would see less; so my advice is—leave your wheel at home and walk. (p.7-8)

Meriwether's advice to shun more comfortable forms of transportation, for 'local transportation' in order to preserve the local experience is very similar to the advice offered through alternative guidebooks like *Lonely Planet*. While the 'information' provided has been updated accordingly since the 1800s, there is a common thread in the advice offered by those with the experiential knowledge and the consumers of that information.

In the 1970s the increased number of young independent travellers with a strong association to the counterculture, referred to as 'drifters' in the academic literature (Cohen, 1973), led to the development of the early backpacker trails and enclaves, including the infamous 'Hippie Trail', an overland route that connected Western Europe with India, Nepal, and Southeast Asia (Cohen, 1973). It was after taking a long-term overland trip from Europe to Southeast Asia on the Hippie Trail that Tony Wheeler and his wife wrote the first Lonely Planet guidebook (Welk, 2008, Wheeler & Wheeler, 2005), *Across Asia on the Cheap*. This title soon grew into the 'yellow bible', *South East Asia on a Shoestring*, taking on a similar connotation to Meriwether's title *Tramping Europe on 50 Cents a Day*, printed nearly a century earlier.

Today, the travel experience is mediated by information and communications technologies (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2009; Hannam, Butler & Paris, 2014). Arguably, this mediation has contributed to the decline of printed guidebooks, just as the popularization of e-books and readers or mp3s have contributed to challenges for the publishing and music industries. This mediation occurs before, during, and after an individual's trip (Paris, 2010). In real-time, tourism products are booked and information is collected via social media, mobile devices, and e-word-of-mouth (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2007) prior to the trip (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). Individuals maintain connections with home (White & White, 2007), collect information, book travel, upload photos, blogs, twitter, Facebook, and download travel guides while traveling. After the trip, individuals also use social media and other technologies to portray, reconstruct and relive their trips (Pudliner, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). Mobile devices are important tools and travel companions for contemporary independent travellers (Germann Molz & Paris, 2015) and play a similar performative and material role as the published LP guidebook. The recent developments of social media empowers individual backpackers to contribute to the knowledge pool (Paris, 2012a), thus adopting a role that was previously held by a select few experts, such as the tramps and guidebook authors.

The advancements of communication technologies contributed greatly to the continued mainstreaming of backpacking (Paris, 2012b) and, arguably, to the diminished value of printed guidebooks. Combined the advancements in communication and information technologies has changed the way independent traveller information is produced, consumed, mediated and shared. Where previously, independent travellers were dependent upon the guidebook to facilitate the 'independence' of their travels, the recent advancements in mobile information and communication technologies allows for individual travellers to not only access relevant location based information, but to also create, share, and publish their own information (Germann Molz & Paris, 2015). LP has attempted to evolve with the virtualization of the independent travel experience (Paris, 2010). The LP Thorn Tree Forum is a popular online forum for independent travellers to seek and give travel advice, and LP also sells PDF versions of their guidebooks downloadable by chapter. However, the sales of their e-guidebooks and their printed guidebooks receive considerable competition by the freely available online information, as well as more 'alterative' online guides, such as *Travelfish.org*. Despite these challenges, LP has played an important and symbolic role as the

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'backpacker bible', a role that has received considerable attention within the academic literature.

The 'Backpacker bible' paradox

The *Lonely Planet* brand according to Kenny (2002) and Iaquinto (2011) has played a highly influential role in popularising backpacking since its inception during the early 1970s. The association of LP guidebooks with independent travel and backpackers rapidly crystallised during their growth in the late 1970s and 80s and they have arguably emerged as the most popular guidebook amongst backpacking circles. The guidebook represented a fixed structure of the backpacker culture that facilitated information and culture transfer between current backpackers, new backpackers, and from one generation of backpackers to another (Sørensen, 2003; Paris, 2009; Paris, 2010). Guidebooks provided a common reference source for backpackers while mediating the backpacker ideology of independent, free, and long-term travel. Guidebooks also reinforced the development of backpacker trails and enclaves by providing information to cultural insiders. The expansion of the guidebooks contributed greatly to the mainstreaming of the backpacker culture (Paris, 2012b) by making the actual act of backpacking easier.

Zillinger (2006) suggested that despite alternative sources of information available on the internet, guidebooks have remained popular because of their association with reliable information, trustworthiness and their impartiality - particularly as they are seen to show no bias towards tourist organisations or hostel chains. Indeed, LP's current website reveals the following:

> *At Lonely Planet we tell it like it is, without fear or favour… we never compromise our opinions for commercial gain. If you read something written by a Lonely Planet author, you can guarantee they've been there, had a look for themselves and are telling you what they really think. It's trusted advice from a trusted source.* (Lonely Planet, 2013)

LP guidebooks, consequently, have often been referred to as 'backpacker bibles' due to their widespread popularity and perceived reliability (Richards & Wilson, 2004; Welk, 2008). However, it has been additionally posited that LP guidebooks, as well as other similar well-known brands, became popular in backpacker circles because of their ability to arouse

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notions of 'adventure' and 'exploration' (Bansal & Eiselt, 2004), or feelings of 'independence' and 'freedom' (Koshar, 2000). Others have asserted that one of the key motivations of the backpacker is that he or she is strongly motivated by a desire to become involved in travel which involved elements of 'risk' and 'adventure', which would then fulfil their need to be seen as being 'brave', 'courageous' or 'independent' (Elsrud, 2001; Maoz, 2007; Noy, 2004; Pearce & Foster, 2007; Sørensen, 2003; Paris & Teye, 2010). Thus, LP guidebooks are frequently structured around a format that enables backpackers to feel they are attaining individualistic experiences by moving away from more mainstream sources of information (Ioannides & Debbage, 1997). LP guidebooks, then, may provide backpackers with an ability to gain Sørensen's (2003) notion of backpacker 'road status' - the aim to be seen as a credible backpacker by avoiding tourist traps and by bargaining for better deals and rates:

> *Road status is obtained in many ways: paying 'local prices', getting the best deal, travelling off the beaten track, long-term travel, diseases, dangerous experiences, and more. In total, it comprises hardship, experience, competence, cheap travel, along with the ability to communicate it properly.* (p. 856)

LP's first publications, *Across Asia on the Cheap* (1973) and *Southeast Asia on a Shoestring* (1975), were largely constructed around the idea of exploring less conventional destinations (from a Western perspective) without the need to pay expensive package tour prices by shopping, eating, sleeping, and travelling 'local'. They were also developed along the theme of visiting settings that perhaps epitomised the risks and hardships Sørensen (2003) discussed. Indeed, LP's current website reveals the story of LP's beginning through the experiences of its founders, Tony and Maureen Wheeler that included 'a beat up old car' with only 'a few dollars in the pocket' (Lonely Planet, 2013).

Over time, LP guidebooks have established extensive guidelines on the use of local transport, an idea that again strongly resonates with the backpacker's need to distinguish their travel as 'going local' (Muzaini 2006, p. 148). It has frequently been cited that to travel using local transport is seen as an attempt to attain a more realistic or 'whole' experience (Bell, 2002; Muzaini, 2006; Noy, 2004; Sørensen, 2003). However, because of these behavioural characteristics it has been suggested that the backpackers may identify themselves as being 'representatives of a better mode of tourism' (Sørensen, 2003, p. 856), often, due to a strong

belief that their journeys are deemed to be self-controlled or self-fulfilling. This feeling is in contrast to the assumption that tourists are merely controlled and 'herded' around by tour operators to tourist-saturated locations (Sørensen 2003). Indeed, it is frequently assumed that backpackers will frequently seek unusual routes, as well as the avoidance of crowds (Elsrud, 2001; Muzaini, 2006; Sørensen, 2003; Tsaur, Yen, & Chen, 2010; Urry, 1990). This is, suggests Muzaini (2006, p. 145), because backpackers desire to be at 'one with the locals', and desire a deeper travel experience that ventures beyond 'superficial encounters'.

As a result of these demands, the backpacker is portrayed as a 'superior' (Sørensen, 2006) or more 'genuine' (Jacobsen, 2000) traveller, a notion largely based on the belief that backpackers will actively seek to 'face challenges and risks' (Maoz, 2007, p. 131) or attain 'individual achievement', develop their 'strength of character', and, enhance their 'adaptability' skills (Desforges, 2000, p. 928). To some extent, by virtue of its language and content, LP guidebooks have arguably helped perpetuate the notion that users of its paraphernalia are indeed superior even if they did not intend to do so. The use of the Wheeler's inaugural journey through Europe and Asia to arouse feelings of adventure by LP's website certainly supports this perspective. Here, a narrative is developed to reveal the hardships and challenges they faced as they 'begged and borrowed' and arrived home 'flat broke' after the completion of a journey 'few thought to be possible'. As a consequence, LP guidebooks have emerged not only as sources of reliable information for backpackers but as keys to attaining other experiences that are depicted to the reader as being more challenging, exciting or authentic. However, a paradox clearly emerges. As Zillinger (2006) points out, guidebooks will often play significant roles in the processes of destination planning and consequently control the journeys of many travellers as 'they determine the tourists' starting-points as well as provide vector points in advising and guiding them…the information directs the tourists' movements to and through the destination' (p. 231). Thus, despite the promise of adventure or risk, LP guidebooks, as indeed with any other guidebook, effectively act as scripts that shape and control many users' journeys.

Although LP originally developed around the idea of providing information about lesser known destinations to enable people to venture *off the beaten track*, the popularity of the brand has paradoxically ensured that experiencing the 'other' is increasingly difficult. Indeed, LPs own website proclaims that they are now 'the world's most successful travel publisher'

and that they have printed over 120 million books that currently include 500 titles and 195 countries (Forbes, 2013). With this in mind, it appears that the overwhelming success of LP has effectively standardised the processes of mainstream backpacking. Not only has the guidebook systematically reduced the backpacker's ability to attain individualistic experiences, it has simultaneously sanitised many of the challenges and risks associated with the act of travelling. LP guidebooks provide detailed information on a range of diverse criteria, ranging from the acquisition of visas to bus timetables and from vaccine requirements to brief histories of destinations. The LP guidebook then, has removed to some extent the backpackers *need to think* and has subsequently removed many of the 'problems' of travel (Pearce and Foster, 2007; Tsaur et al., 2010). Moreover, due to their widespread reach and popularity, LP guidebooks have now enabled the unknown to become known and perhaps ironically, it too, now herds backpackers in a similar fashion associated with more conventional methods of travel. Before we analyse the responses to the potential decline of LP guidebooks, the methodology used in this study is discussed.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of online comments posted in response to media reports on the potential decline of *Lonely Planet* in order to explore the sentiments and underlying themes of those comments. These comments, which form the qualitative data set for the study, included both tweets tagged with the hastag #lpmemories on Twitter and comments posted in the online comment response section of three articles on potential decline of the *Lonely Planet* brand published on the Australian edition of *The Guardian* July 19th and 22nd, 2013. These two sources are valid sources of data for our study purposes. The online comments and tweets allow readers/commenters more freedom to discuss issues raised in the article, and in some cases, due to the potential anonymity commenting online affords, these comments can be more candid and genuine (Gao & Koo, 2014). An additional strength of these two sources of data included the large quantity of data available and the availability of that data directly after and in response to the publication of the articles in the *Guardian*. This allowed the responses to the articles and subsequent discussions that emerged to be collated for analysis.

However, there are a couple drawbacks that should be acknowledged when analysing this type of data. First, due to the nature of the data, no assumptions of the independence of

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responses should be made, as they are posted as 'threads' or tagged with a hash-tag. Interrelatedly, the online comments tend to gravitate towards more polarized and/or strong viewpoints within the thread (Gao & Koo, 2014), due to the fact that individuals that make the effort to comment online tend to have strong opinions and due so voluntarily, and thus the overall sample often has a pre-selection bias of individuals that represent more 'extreme' views. The potential limitations stemming from the non-independent nature of the data are minimal in the case of this study. The online comments and tweets provide a good source of valuable information that would not be available through standard survey or interview data collection methods. Additionally, keeping the above in mind going into our analysis, we openly acknowledged that there were some distinct and strong viewpoints represented within the comments and tweets that stimulated our initial curiosity and motivation for this study.

The Data Collection and Analysis

The use of online comments in response to news articles have been recognized and employed as valid sources of data by researchers in a variety of disciplines. For example, Gao and Koo (2014) examined the factors affecting traveller's choice of air carriers using online comments, Glenn et al (2012) looked at responses to articles about weight loss surgery, Cho and Hong (2009) examined comments to news articles about corporate social responsibility, and Zhao et al. (2013) explored the online comments in response to the food safety crisis in China. In our study, the comments made to the news articles posted on *The Guardian* were selected as a suitable source of data due the position of the paper as one of the world's largest English-language newspaper websites (ranked 2nd globally, *The Guardian*, 2014) and the concentration of reports focused on the potential decline of *Lonely Planet* that emerged in a relatively short timeframe in the travel section of the online Australian edition. Each article we examined drew considerable responses from readers in the form of comments. With 48 hour period after the publishing of each article, a combined total of 481 comments posted on the site were downloaded.

The content analysis of tweets has also been employed in other disciplines, including the examination of concussion-related tweets (Sullivan et al. 2011) and the examination of the Occupy Wall Street movement (Gleason, 2013). The content analysis of tweets posted on Twitter has also been employed in previous studies on backpackers (Paris 2011; Paris, 2013;

Germann Molz & Paris, 2015) as they provide direct, timely, and concise input from respondents. For this study, the hash-tag '#lpmemories' was searched for using the dedicated search function on Twitter.com. In total, 1029 tweets were downloaded. All tweets downloaded were posted during the two week period following the publication of the article in the *Guardian,* spanning from July 19th to August 2nd 2013.

The comments and tweets were then processed into one transcript, during which all respondents' names or usernames were removed for the purposes of confidentiality. The transcripts then were analysed using a multi-stage qualitative analysis procedure. First, both authors did an initial read through of the transcripts to develop some familiarity with the data. This was then followed by in-depth reading of the data by both researchers independently, during which the researchers analysed the comments and tweets and started to inductively code the raw data and identify emergent themes (Cresswell, 2007; Jennings, 2010). For the final step, the researchers examined the emergent themes generated individually, and agreed that two main emergent themes were apparent and named these *Nostalgia* and *LP's decline...Good Riddance.*

Discussion of Findings

Nostalgia

Based on the comments posted in the *The Guardian* and via twitter using the hashtag #lpmemories, it was evident that LP guidebooks in print form would be heavily missed by many. Similar to Zillinger's (2006) observations, respondents identified LP guidebooks as reliable and trustworthy sources of information. Indeed, one tweet likened LP guidebooks to 'a collection of addresses and advice, written down on paper by a good friend and a companion to nearly every trip'. Due to the loss of this imagined companionship, numerous tweets expressed feelings such as 'sadness', 'melancholy' and a sense of 'loss'. LP guidebooks had clearly played influential roles in many of the commentors' journeys:

> *RIP Lonely Planet. You have literally taken me all round the world (several times)*
> *and the next generation will be poorer for your passing. I give thanks to the countless*
> *people who contributed to the books - you were the people who made travel fun for*
> *me. You guided me into some hovels I would never have found without you and*

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palaces (at extraordinarily cheap prices) I would never have known existed. You will be missed but never forgotten!

I hadn't heard about the sale of Lonely Planet, and this article saddens me. My immediate impulse right now is to go buy the guidebooks of all the destinations I'd like to visit before their printing is discontinued...

Using the hashtag, #lpmemories, tweets were also found to expressive of the sense of loss associated with LP's potential end. Examples of this melancholic tone included:

I truly can't imagine the world without @LonelyPlanet. My heart hurts at the notion. Such a huge part of my young life. **#lpmemories**

Heard that Lonely Planet are no longer making guidebooks! A sad demise for the backpacker's bible! **#lpmemories #lonelyplanet #travel**

Our observations reveal that LP guidebooks have developed an important role in the travel experiences of many independent tourists. However, LP guidebooks did not only play important roles *during* journeys but before travel plans had been made. Purchasing a LP guidebook was frequently identified as being the first step in developing new ideas or a sense of inspiration. It could be argued that LP formed a distinctive part of many respondents' travel rituals as they planned their trips either before or during their journeys. Indeed, it was posited that 'reading about destinations is already half the magic':

Everytime [sic] *I bought one meant the beginning of a new and exciting journey. Stay Alive! #lpmemories*

The idea of a new adventure always begin with the purchase of a Lonely Planet. #lpmemories

Flicking through the books in my local book store as a kid and dreaming of all the places I could go to **#lpmemories**

After journeys had ended, LP guidebooks emerged as physical reminders of completed journeys. For some, they were used as informal diaries as notes and contacts were made in them *ad hoc*. For others, swapping LP guidebooks at border crossings with backpackers revealed a common bond with others. Thus, the ritual of travel with LP did not just include before and during the journey but as a record of achievement *after* it had been completed (see Desforges, 2000). The following comments highlight the role of LP guidebooks post-travel as records of achievement and adventure:

> *I still keep my old books - dog- eared, highlighted, food- stained and annotated pages are sometimes worth more than a photo when it comes to reminding you of your holidays.*

> *There is/was something satisfying about building a library of your travel destinations #lpmemories deep respect to Lonely Planet; providing much inspiration for my backpack adventures around Asia. hope their business lives on #lpmemories*

> *Love is a Lonely Planet full of notes and papers and souvenirs and more kept on the bookshelf. #lpmemories*

> *Bookshelf full of LPs reminding me everyday of my great adventures! #lpmemories Is this goodbye to Lonely Planet?*

The sense of nostalgia fostered by LP guidebooks was evident in many of the comments and tweets analyzed. Although the information contained within the LP guidebooks mobilised culturally important knowledge for independent travellers and backpackers (O'Regan, 2010), our analysis revealed that they also acted as a vehicles for memories and experiences to be stored. Indeed, the performativities and materialities (Hannam, Butler, & Paris, 2014) of the LP guidebook –that had literally been shaped and modified (such as dog-eared and food stained pages) on their journey—illustrate the socializing nature of 'things' (Van der Duim, 2007) within the backpacker culture. The observations suggest that the LP guidebooks are more than just sources of information and mobilized cultural knowledge. They are

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performative objects within backpacking and independent travel (Walsh & Tucker, 2009). They are important and meaningful artefacts that embody the memories and ritual of a generation of independent travellers' experiences. For many, the LP guidebooks retain a 'secular sacred character' (Morgan & Prichard, 2005), encoded with memories and personal travel histories. They have played an important role in the pre-trip ritual and imagining, as they represent both the dream and fantasy of travel and symbolize the first step or decision to embark on a trip. Additionally, they provide 'messenger for meaning' for which memories of a trip can be stored, not unlike tourist souvenirs collected during trips (Swanson & Timothy, 2012). It has been posited that information and communication technologies are now the dominant medium for recording and reliving travel experiences (see Pudliner, 2009; Xiang and Gretzel, 2009), yet our observations suggest that print guidebooks offered additional benefits. Although online guides provide more contemporary and fluid information than guidebooks, the former cannot provide a tangible record of experiences in the same way. Whilst backpackers can now digitally record experiences on social media platforms with ease, the guidebook is still deemed to be an intrinsic tool for memories to be stored due its ability to provide sensory references to the journey. Indeed, the guidebook may act as a vehicle for unique experiential references to be stored – be it in the form of a stained page from a favourite coffee house or scribbled notes from a brief acquaintance *in situ*. How backpackers negotiate the demands for tangible records of experience without print media guidebooks emerges here as an important point of debate and maybe indicative of a wider generational shift from a 'backpacker culture' to that of the more tech savvy 'flashpacker culture' (Paris, 2012b). However, despite the many supportive comments and tweets analysed, others celebrated the news of LP's decline.

LP's decline...Good Riddance

> *Be of good cheer **@LonelyPlanet** people. Thanks to you the Planet is Lonely no more!* **#lpmemories**

Although many tweets and posts were largely constructed around the idea of saying farewell to LP guidebooks, a number of anti-LP comments emerged both on Twitter and on *The Guardian*'s comment section. Even some commentators who posted positive comments

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suggested that LP had, to some extent, affected destinations in a negative way. Several posited that it had perhaps 'sanitized' the process of travel, and argued that using a LP guidebook was arguably the antithesis of 'real' travel. This was because according to one tweeter, they enabled the 'hordes' to descend on the places they featured. It was also suggested that LP's tendency to foster beaten paths had led to many perceptions of destinations to become 'distorted'. The 'reductive picture' provided by LP guidebooks highlights and prioritises what 'should be seen' by the readers (O'Regan, 2010). Thus for some commenters the LP guidebooks fostered inauthentic experiences. The following comment reflects this:

> *what was the actual reason for the Lonely Planet? It was NOT authentic adventure. It was to make the adventure easier, the hard work was done. It removed or lowered obstacles to those insecure or incapable... It encouraged people to take the easy path, to opt out from conversation with the locals and to be frank it created inflation by making a tick list of places that were recommended... I traveled once with a LP and it was the saddest trip I had. I found that it made me less adventurous, more dependent, more foreign. Of course the demise of a company as iconic as this is sad but when the founders sold it to a corporation the writing was on the wall. If they did not care enough to keep it in the family who am i to mourn it's loss. Goodbye LP*

Similarly, an additional commenter added that LP was to some degree responsible for developing 'jaundiced' perceptions of the destinations they covered; in this case, Vietnam:

> *As an example, it's partly Lonely Planet that has transformed tourism in Viet Nam over the last 20 years into a conveyor belt from north to south, leaving many tourists with a severely limited experience of the country and a jaundiced view of the locals, based on jaded tour guides, apathetic hotel and restaurant owners and grasping vendors who are by no means representative of the rest of the country. Also, the quaint 'out-of-the-garden-shed' side of Lonely Planet was already history a long time ago - though that hasn't stopped them trading off it ever since.*

Others additionally argued that LP guidebooks had had a profoundly negative impact on the destinations and the lives of locals that inhabited them. As the 'backpacker bible', LP "its

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influence can make or break not just businesses but cities, districts and even countries by folding them in and out of the [travel] scapes" (O'Regan, 2010, p.164).Consequently, commenters argued that LP's approach of listing favourite destinations, hostel, bars and restaurants had popularized certain destinations, attractions, and businesses to the detriment of others.

> *Seems like a very one-sided presentation of Lonely Planet…How would the demise of LP look from the perspective of a family running a small guesthouse somewhere in SE Asia, I wonder? Would they be sad to see the end of these guidebooks? I very much doubt it. Sticking to SE Asia, more than a decade of experience in these regions leads me to seriously question the impact LP have had there - with the far from meritocratic way that they cause tourist dollars to be distributed among these communities being the real issue*

> *The "Recommended by Lonely Planet" stickers you find now in cafes and restaurants in Asia (some even paint the LP logo on their buildings) have become warning signs, because businesses aimed at tourists don't have to maintain high standards, repeat business is ensured by their inclusion in the book…*

> *I remember using LP in the early 2000s. I was impressed with the fact that it seemed to be discerning and not afraid to pull punches in terms of telling you about places to avoid and why…Now it is little more than a compendium of glowing adverts for certain establishments, and lacks any sense of objectivity that gave it its credibility in the first place.*

The issue of LP's endorsement of certain establishments leading to inflated prices was reflected via a number of tweets also. The following examples perfectly summarise these feelings amongst some travellers:

> *All those hotels & restaurants who raised prices, lowered services because they had a 'golden ticket' LP recommendation. #lpmemories*

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> *#lpmemories Never have been a huge fan of the Lonely Planet, since everything it touches turns to expensive,... http://fb.me/EI400f48*

A number of comments and tweets were heavily critical of the users of LP guidebooks rather than the destinations guidebooks affected that led to an assertion that LP users were not genuine travellers. Some mocked their use of the term 'traveller' largely due to the belief that only embarked on conventional itineraries and visited mainstream destinations. They were also frequently portrayed as pretentious, batik-wearing, banana pancake-eating, parent-subsidised, 'travel snobs' that 'sneered' at those that, in their own opinion, had failed to attain authentic experiences. Examples of these views are provided by the following passages below from *The Guardian* comments section:

> *Hacky sack players necking cocktails on the beach in Thailand all talking about the "real" travel experience and "connecting" with the locals while boasting about how hard they bargained over the price of their authentic fisherman pants. I was there to drink cocktails too, the difference is I didn't pretend I was there for any other reason.*

> *Sorry but those* [LP users] *are THE most God awful types. I've come across them in pretty much every continent: Exclusive, snobby, self -satisfied but at the same time utterly misguided and often insecure. Some of the crassest comments I have ever heard have been uttered by such "travellers"..:*

For others, negative views stemmed from the beliefs of LP users that their experiences were perceived to be 'real' and authentic. The following commenter argues that LP users were not only followers of pre-meditated tour itineraries but arbiters of what locales were representative of local cultures or not, much to his or her frustration:

> *They* [self-termed travellers] *were the ones telling me that I hadn't seen "The Real China", or "The Real Asia". One, for example, told me that Taiwan was not "The Real Asia" because people had cars and TV and jobs. Another told me I "couldn't understand China" without going to "a real village, like Lijiang, where life is, like, so simple and traditional"; at the time I was living in Tianjin - a city of 10 million - and he'd never heard of it…I don't have a problem with people all doing the same thing,*

whether it's going to Lijiang or a Koh Pha Ngan Full Moon Party or Tenerife or Blackpool. But there was a generation of Lonely Planet "travellers" who spent an awful lot of their time lecturing us about how they were "real travellers, not tourists", and were therefore superior to us.

The above comments reveal that although LP guidebooks were popular with many independent tourists, they had simultaneously shaped negative perceptions amongst others. LP guidebooks were deemed to have negatively affected many destinations as they popularised locales off the beaten track. In particular settings it was argued that they had also championed certain tourist establishments at the expense of others and that its impact would not missed. What was certain from the virtual responses analysed in this paper, was that LP guidebooks heavily polarised opinion. Although numerous comments and tweets were in strong support of the brand, many were as equally against. The critical point of the debate surrounding LP users echoed earlier academic discussions about whether backpackers truly are courageous, adventurous or indeed independent (see Elsrud, 2001; Maoz, 2007; Noy, 2004; Pearce and Foster, 2007; Sørensen, 2003). Evidently, many believed that users of LP guidebooks were not.

Conclusion and Research Implications

The aim of this study was to examine the virtual response to the news of the potential demise of LP. Responses to the potential decline of LP guidebooks reflect the highly polarised views of the brand and tourists who elect to use them. On one hand, the LP guidebooks are reflected upon positively and nostalgically. The findings of this study further illustrate some of the challenges faced by both the travel publishing industry and the wider challenges facing other similar industries in midst of the contemporary technological advancements of the new millennium and the 'generational' shift within the backpacker culture. While the nostalgic and romanticized feelings of many consumers suggest a personal and inherent value of the LP brand and guidebooks, from a business and industry standpoint these feelings are not enough to be sustainable.

While a range of interesting insights were observed that reflect the changing nature not only of backpackers' themselves but how they – and the tools they use – are viewed by contemporary tourists, these findings also encourage further research into the role of

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guidebooks and their diminishing status in physical form. The advancements in ICT and the increased mediatisation and virtualization of the backpacker and wider tourist experience foretell the decline of LP as suggested in the news articles. Future studies could seek to examine this shift in more detail by examining both the use and emotional attachment of online and mobile travel guides published guide-books, and consumer generated material (in the form of review sites like Trip Advisor). Additionally, further studies can examine the impact of technologically mediated travel on the formation of 'trails' for backpackers and independent travellers. Are these technologies producing 'winners and losers' among businesses and destinations as LP was perceived to have produced? Although guidebooks may be deemed obsolete by many younger backpackers, they have– and likely will continue to have - a meaningful role in the travel experiences of a generation of backpackers.

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