

# BACKPACKING CULTURE: DIGITAL NOMADS IN PORTO - BRIEF APPROACH TO SELINA CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

As globalization provided a more efficient path to mobility meanwhile facilitating the search for information, the urge to travel and seek new cultures became intense. People from around the world engaged in the act of traveling more deeply than what was known previously. The backpacker phenomenon evolved into a lifestyle, as being a tourist simply was not fulfilling for this new generation of travellers; an evolution of Cohen's "drifters".

Backpacking culture has been growing exponentially over the years, becoming the answer for young, creative, and adventurous individuals to find freedom and life purpose. Consequently, as digital transformation takes over due to a market in need of change and innovation, the work regulation adapts itself to flexible schedules, remote work and begins to value change in organizational culture as a major factor inside each business.

Moreover, as digital nomadism progresses, spreads a high concern from companies to extend their vision and include this profile as their workers. Through the creation of cowork spaces, the objective is to develop an environment of mutual help, embracing new connections and, above all, strengthen productivity.

With this in mind, this article aims to briefly present and analyze a case study - Selina -, as an example of innovation and creativity in the hospitality business. This is a company that targets backpackers and digital nomads, creating a market strategy suitable not only for them but locals as well, by enhancing intercultural exchange. Our focus will be an approach to the creation and organization of Selina, the beliefs of its' employees and values inside the firm, and how that internal culture is in consensus with that of the audience they wish to capture. Furthermore, following the same line of thinking and on a detail attempt, understanding how the company appropriates itself and encourages new behaviors (coworking) as a way to attract clients for its business.

**Keywords:** backpacking culture; digital transformation; digital nomadism; organizational culture; cowork.

## RESUMO

O processo de globalização veio permitir uma mobilidade mais eficiente, ao mesmo tempo facilitando a procura e obtenção de informação. Sendo assim, a necessidade de viajar e conhecer novas culturas intensificou-se. Mundialmente, indivíduos serviram-se desta mudança e deram início a uma nova forma de viajar, diferente

da realidade conhecida. O fenómeno da “mochila às costas” transformou-se num estilo de vida, uma vez que ser considerado turista já não era suficientemente gratificante para esta nova geração de viajantes.

A cultura de “mochila às costas” tem crescido significativamente ao longo dos anos, tornando-se na solução ideal para jovens aventureiros e criativos que procuram incessantemente a sua liberdade e propósito na vida. Consequentemente, à medida que a transformação digital se apoderou de um mercado com necessidade de mudança e inovação, a jornada de trabalho também se adaptou a horários mais flexíveis e trabalho remoto, começando a valorizar cada vez mais a cultura organizacional como um fator importantíssimo dentro de cada empresa e negócio.

Além disso, ao mesmo tempo que se fez sentir a progressão do nomadismo digital, também surgiu um grande interesse por parte das empresas em estender a sua visão e incluir este tipo de perfil nos seus trabalhadores. Através da criação de espaços de trabalho colaborativo/cooperativo, o objetivo tornou-se então em desenvolver um ambiente de trabalho caracterizados por ajuda mútua, procura de novas conexões e, acima de tudo, um ambiente em que fosse possível fortalecer a produtividade individual.

Tendo em consideração o exposto previamente, este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar e analisar um caso de estudo – Selina – como exemplo de inovação e criatividade no setor da hotelaria. Esta é uma empresa que tem como público alvo os viajantes de mochila às costas e os nómadas digitais, criando uma estratégia de mercado apropriado não só para os mesmos, mas também para os locais, realçando uma troca intercultural. O foco será uma abordagem à criação e organização do Selina, as crenças e valores praticados dentro da empresa, assim como entender o consenso entre a cultura interna e da audiência que pretendem captar. Em continuação, seguindo a mesma linha de pensamento e numa tentativa de detalhe, pretendemos também entender como a empresa se adapta e encoraja novos comportamentos (trabalho colaborativo) como uma forma de atrair novos clientes.

**Palavras-chave:** cultura de mochila às costas; transformação digital; nomadismo digital; cultura organizacional; trabalho colaborativo.

## 1. INTRODUÇÃO

Tourism has been identified as an important sector and a tool for development (O. Mtapuri, A. Giampiccoli, 2017). The studies of backpacking engaged in academic literature around 1990 (Richards & Wilson, 2004), considering Scott Cohen as the father of this subject matter. The term “backpacker” is considered an evolution of Cohen’s drifters (Cohen, 2011; Currie et al., 2011): a traveller who acknowledged a need to distance from the stereotypical tourist, to search for authenticity and provide meaning to one’s lives (Cohen, 2011).

The immense growth of travellers wishing to live an alternative lifestyle, in which home is considered a backpack (Kerry, 2013) led to the adaptation and innovation of the hospitality sector, having to correspond to the new demand. For these travellers, working while traveling could boost the opportunity for the trip to last longer, usually quite flexible jobs in terms of schedule and presence (e.g. technology IT, yoga instructor) (Cohen, 2011). With that in mind,

the concept of Digital Nomadism (DN) arose from cultural change and adaptations in the labor market, creating new work modalities, nimble management practices, as well as collaborative entrepreneurship (Aroles et al., 2020).

Digital Nomadism has its roots in the facility for individuals to be in contact with any person from any part of the world, at the same time that collecting information is as simple as going online (Aroles et al., 2020). This evolution enhanced cheaper, long-distance, and real-time communications, helping freelancers, bloggers, YouTubers, and writers to establish their business both as a professional tool and lifestyle (Aroles et al., 2020).

Consequently, due to the bigger demand from flexible workers (people who are open to work anywhere in the world in a balanced work environment, provided with the right technological tools), the coworking spaces came to life- reshaping the shared office concept. The main goal of the coworking environment is to transform the work process into a much more human connection (Orel,

2019), fighting against the feeling of isolation, the difficulty to balance work with leisure, the lack of creativity, and unproductiveness.

This article will be focused on this new context, where companies such as Selina, chose to differentiate from other possible competitors in the hospitality sector (Da Camara et al., 2016). In order to create a business innovative in itself, both adapted and adaptable, Selina came as a breath of fresh air in the area of hospitality, going beyond that. One of the most prominent characteristics is the fact that the values the target market holds (flexibility, interculturality, work/leisure balance) are also the values followed inside the company by all employees; recognizing a firm as a social and economic reality is the first step to create its organizational culture. Having in mind the backpackers and digital nomads, as well as the recent travel/work trend, the investment in multiple coworking spaces around the globe felt like the right next step to be focused on.

## 2. THE EMERGENCE OF BACKPACKING CULTURE AS A LIFESTYLE

Nowadays, the thematic of location-independent individuals is still to be explored more deeply in literature. However, due to the progression of the global nomad phenomenon, especially in western societies, there has been a significant rise in its studies (Cohen, 2011; Currie et al., 2011; Kannisto, 2016). It is hard to unify the backpackers as a whole. They do not conform to the society they grew up in, therefore will not conform either to stigma or premade definition of their identity, sometimes perceived as “a dropout culture”. Overall, running away from labeling, concept, categories (Kannisto, 2016).

For a backpacker, it is liberating to escape from a globalized modern society in search of personal growth (Currie et al., 2011; Dayour et al., 2017). When it comes to backpackers, it is only fair that they share elements to separate themselves from other tourists (Currie et al., 2011; Dayour et al., 2017); Usually, traveling on a low budget, with no returning home date and cheap sleeping/eating places (Currie et al., 2011), such as hostels for exemple. On a personal growth basis, it equals freedom and recognition

among the backpacking culture. Additionally, the more adventurous, the better for recognition, as the share of stories within backpackers is quite common and leads sometimes to intense friendships (Currie et al., 2011).

By referring to themselves as “travelers”, the backpackers at a certain point end up rejecting other tourists (Cohen, 2011; Dayour et al., 2017; Kannisto, 2016). There are already stereotypes concerning the “regular” tourist, their symbols being the map or the camera holding from the neck. As Riley affirms, the symbolism behind the backpacker culture not only represents their identity to others but also has the goal to separate them from other types of tourists (Cohen, 2011).

Culture confusion happens when global nomads have to learn and adopt the rules or behaviors of the locals, different from their own. Sometimes these can create adversities along the way (food, climate, health, language issues) (Richards, 2015).

In modern society, lifestyle travel is a phenomenon that brings together daily life and tourist experiences (Cohen, 2011; Dayour et al., 2017). Backpacking is considered an alternative lifestyle, where both identity and life belong in a backpack (Kerry, 2013). The fact that backpackers will potentially become the new “regular tourist”, depends deeply on marketing strategies from destinations (O. Mtapuri, A. Giampiccoli, 2017; Richards & Wilson, 2004).

It is based on the backpacking phenomena that the initial conception of the “drifter” as a marginal, poor activity, developed into a major global industry (Richards & Wilson, 2004).

### 2.1. Digital Transformation: from backpacker to digital nomad

For backpackers, the longer the trip could be extended the better. With that being said, working while traveling could boost that opportunity. Usually, the chosen path would be quite flexible jobs in terms of schedule and presence (Cohen, 2011), as expressed before. As technological development became more apparent, it created the possibility to engage in work outside the regular office and 9-5 hour schedule every day.

Digital Transformation is characterized by the classification of the rising impact within societies monopolized by digital tools, affluent information, and digital procedures (Lindgren, 2018).

Simon Marginson defines a new “global synchrony”, the diverse communication which determines the will individuals hold to be connected with others, at the same time that a sense of individual autonomy is being explored. Creativity, imagination, and knowledge are key factors in the current global age of business, economics, and culture as well. The social and organizational turn perceived since the industrial revolution values the ability to think outside of the box, economically but culturally also (King, 2011).

The culture industry conserves information, leisure, discussions, and opinions, gathering intellectual perception, and converting it into economized entertainment for a market of consumers (Ossewaarde, 2019).

## 2.2. Concept and mannerism of the digital nomad

Returning briefly to the backpacking issue, thus traveling to touristic places, the digital nomad, just like the backpacker, tries to differentiate from regular tourists, due to the fact that they are more involved with the community (Mouratidis, 2018). The search for authenticity is a real factor in both backpackers and digital nomads.

Due to its liberating and emancipatory nature, can be a romanticized lifestyle based on stereotypes alone (Aroles et al., 2020). Some difficulties demean the individual’s potential to work and travel; digital nomads still respond to nationality, citizenship, passport, and, of course, a work routine (Mouratidis, 2018). However, there are more evident constraints that can be felt daily or on long-term observation. Regarding finances, it is a two-way street. On one hand, DN represents self-development and personal growth; on the other hand, there is wealth and income necessary to be successful working while traveling (Mouratidis, 2018).

Concerning a more personal level, even though the digital nomad is part of a community, the long run can be quite lonely at times, due to the constant moving (Mouratidis, 2018); cowork spaces, which will be considered upcoming, are a solution for this feeling of isolation. Even though the environment of operations and motivations are different, DN brings up similar problems to more traditional ways of working, such as financial matters, amount of experience, the importance of regulations, fear of failure (Mouratidis, 2018).

## 3. SELINA: THE CREATION OF COWORK SPACES

Firstly, it is important to understand the concept behind Selina, the type of company it is and how/where it operates.

With that being said, Selina has its foundation in Latin America, in a surf town called Venao, in the year of 2014. The company was born by the minds of Rafael Museri and Daniel Rudasevski (current CEO’s). Selina is a concept which focuses on five main aspects: stay, explore, surf, cowork, and wellness. In the present time, it has developed into sixty new destinations worldwide.

The main goal of the coworking environment is to transform the work process into a much more human connection (Orel, 2019), fighting against the feeling of isolation, the difficulty to balance work with leisure, the lack of creativity, and unproductiveness.

According to Reichenberger, digital nomads follow this specific lifestyle to have a more improved life quality, in which work, leisure, and travel are merged (Reichenberger, 2018). Furthermore, coworking spaces provide events and activities that can blossom into new job opportunities and networks for their users (Orel, 2019).

Coworking is as well an area of Selina’s expertise. As working digitally in a nomadic way started to grow within society, pioneer companies started to benefit from that modernization of a nine-five job. Decidedly, there was a market need to create spaces where any person could rent a few hours for meetings or for working alone.

Going back to the year 2014, the founders of the company immediately invested in coworking spaces, aiming at digital nomads who were simply visiting for a few months or staying at the destination for a couple of years. In 2019, there was an increase in their budget (around US\$100 million) for finding new properties, with the goal set at 400 cowork spaces by 2023 (Davison, 2019).

Selina’s cowork space in Porto was designed and implemented in an old Arabic building. Aiming its efforts at freelancers, digital nomads, entrepreneurs, and local start-ups to outgrow themselves. It is an area influenced by the past and future, finding the work/fun balance in a well-equipped technological place.

Independently from location, some specific traits can be found in all of the cowork spaces and

Selina's hostels, mostly concerning design, upcycled materials, and locally sourced artwork. Nevertheless, each location offers its own culture in different forms, such as in food, outdoor and indoor activities, music, and art.

## 4. BRIEF ANALYSIS OF SELINA'S ORGANIZATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Regarding the discussion of organizational culture, it provides a reference to all the members of the organization, from the lowest to the highest person in charge, founded on a company history that will be exposed implicitly on visual aspects, such as logo, buildings, name, products, top management (Jo Hatch & Schultz, 1997).

A company is composed of different ancillary subcultures. Those peculiarities of its' organizational culture aim at professional groups, relationships with power, and work, which provoke cultural differences among the corporate community. The differentiation mentioned has two different perspectives on it. On the one hand, it helps to create flexibility in times of change (as we are facing right now), due to the enveloping parts inside the company, each with different visions of reality, nevertheless based upon the same values; this factor will enhance an effective and faster solution as well, protecting performance levels. On the other hand, this differentiation of cultural order must be followed by a single, own identity- that of the founder organization itself; this will grant the subcultures with a unique identity (Da Camara et al., 2016).

As for Selina, the current Covid-19 crisis affecting the whole world came to emphasize the progress and evolution of remote work, as many businesses resorted to it as a solution for the economic decline. Working from home has been a reality for quite some time, despite always being associated with traveling. Nowadays, there has been an increase in businesses created and developed digitally only, without a physical space. Thereby, cowork spaces that comply with the safety norms established (such as this case), can be a great solution for what single owners, bosses, and employees or professional teams/groups are expecting from the labor market. When Selina was

founded back in 2014, the feature of coworking was significant, and it is projected to grow exponentially in the following years, as an account of cultural, social, and economic changes. Nevertheless, due to the pandemic, these spaces also had to readapt and change their focus. It is expected that cowork spaces will have to compromise in financial terms (landlords and memberships wise), in order to entice new and fellow members to join, creating a bigger corporate demand. As the remote work movement grows, workers may choose to work outside of their homes, with the advantage of being placed in a safe environment following all the hygiene rules. Also, these spaces may present new forms, such as "pop-up", only temporarily for specific events/projects at a certain local. Definitely, the pandemic came to redefine the practices and dynamics of the coworking (Pitts et al., 2020).

The Latin American company is often depicted as an ecosystem for explorers, digital nomads, and travelers, reconceptualizing the meaning of work and travel. As the future of work follows a new tendency, where remote jobs and flexible timetables prevail, it is highly expected that the community of the cowork space in Porto will continue to develop, grow and be innovative in itself. Ditto, the same will occur in the other Selinas in the rest of the country and locations in Central and South America, Asia, and Europe.

Supporting creative artists, national artifacts and international talents is one of Selina's biggest goals and accomplishments. Apart from being a brand, owing to their own merchandise, it is equally predominant to share clothes, jewellery, handmade crafts, paintings, drawings, and sculptures from different local street artists that wish to have their work displayed at Selina. At Selina Porto, at the beginning of this year, it was possible to find clothing lines, paintings, and jewellery exhibited from Portuguese (people and brands), everything handmade (for instance, La Luna, Mariana Baldaia, and SUFILOU).

To finalize, creative clusters are the outcome of the development and change felt in society, brought to life to capture cultural life, a sense of community, and to encourage city identity. (Evans, 2009). The example of Selina demonstrates how local culture attracts and enhances the opportunity for different experiences, creating value for the company.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the emergence of unequal lifestyles caused by modifications in the insight of living, working, and personal realization. This new course of action promotes intercultural exchange, adaptability, creativity, and innovation, especially in the work field.

The phenomenal growth of digital nomadism and remote work has assembled a new working persona - the digital nomad - with the market focusing on their needs, posture, and willingness. Selina focuses its business on the customer. Therefore, the company itself felt obliged to ambulate accordingly to the new trend, starting from the organizational culture of

the corporation, transposing those same values and ideals to the outside: for freelancers, digital nomads, entrepreneurs, and local start-ups, through coworking spaces.

Future research reclines upon the events arbitrated at these new work environments, to capture how what they offer can entice digital nomads to participate and engage in the community, instead of committing only to work methods. Moreover, due to the fast pace at which digital nomadism is growing worldwide, it would also be interesting to understand what is Selina's coworking space in Porto through the managerial perspective and what are the future thoughts on remote work's evolution.

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