Flashpacking: A Discussion of Independent Travel in a Digital World

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of the impact of the convergence of ICT and independent travel from the perspective of a small group of tech-savvy flashpackers. Key informant e-interviews were conducted with a small group of eight flashpackers with an established virtual presence. This paper employs the mobilities paradigm to discuss the convergence of technology and backpacking tourism. The study of the flashpacking phenomenon through a 'mobilities lens' provides a vehicle for developing an understanding of the complexities of the intersection of physical travel, technologies, and daily life. Several themes emerged from the interviews including the conceptualization of connection and disconnection, impact of technologies on traditional physical spaces of backpacking, social interaction, and increasing fluidity of 'tourist' and 'non-tourist' experiences.

Keywords: Social Media, Backpacking, Technology in Society, Hybrid Spaces.

1   Introduction

The backpacker phenomenon provides a context through which critical questions about the relationship between contemporary society, tourism, and technology can be discussed. Recently the emergence of the flashpacker has been embraced as an increasingly important sub-segment of backpacking both in the academic literature and the tourism industry (Jarvis & Peel, 2010). The flashpacker has been viewed as a 'key constituent of contemporary society' emerging from the economic, demographic, technological, and social changes in the world (Hannam & Diekmann, 2010). Flashpackers' travel experiences are mediated by communications technology and technological devices (Paris, 2010; Hannam & Diekmann, 2010). Flashpackers seemingly embody both the backpacker culture and that of the 'digital nomad' (Makimoto & Manners, 1997), often living a location independent lifestyle. Flashpackers could also be considered part of a new global elite (Bauman, 2000; 2007). These elite are hypermobile mentally, corporeally, and virtually. They have the means to move fluidly across the globe through the various travelscapes using the 'nomadic institutional structure' and have the ability to connect instantly with multiple networks from virtually anywhere through an array of mobile technologies (O'Regan, 2008). Hannam and Diekmann (2010) note that the emergence of the flashpacker "exemplifies the changing demographics in western societies where older age at marriage, older age having children, increased affluence and new technological developments, alongside increased holiday and leisure time have all come together" (p. 1-2). In Bauman's (2000; 2007) discussion of 'liquid modernity' he suggest that nomadism is a universal trait of the liquid modern person. Research concerning the relationship between technology and society needs to adapt in order to address the complexities of liquid modernity. Technological innovations have transformed the daily lives of individuals and communities worldwide. Several recent studies indicate

that backpackers are very active users of communication technologies, particularly social media (Paris, 2010), and the emergence of the 'flashpacker' sub-segment is representative of the increasing fluidity of the travel experience and daily life caused by the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT).

Increasingly, the tourism experience is mediated by ICT (Xiang and Gretzel, 2009; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). This mediation occurs before, during, and after an individual's trip (Paris, 2010). Tourism products are booked and information is collected via social media and e-word-of-mouth (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2007) prior to the trip (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). Individuals maintain connections with home, collect information, book travel, upload photos, blogs, twitter, Facebook, and download travel guides while travelling. After the trip, individuals also use social media and other technologies to portray, reconstruct and relive their trips (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009; Pudliner, 2007). Some have argued that technology can detract from tourist experiences, which are emphasized by the contrast to everyday life (Uriely, 2005). The distinction between tourist experiences and home experiences has blurred, and now experiences are more liquid as tourists experiences can flow through virtual networks and thus are accessible even during everyday life without the necessity of physical movement (Uriely, 2005).

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 travelling and at home through social networking sites, email, and other technologies, which have blurred the boundaries between home and away. The close virtual proximity that backpackers maintain allows them to be able to be instantly in contact with friends, family, work, school, and fellow travellers. Further, the backpacker ideals of independence, freedom, and physical travel are all enhanced and impaired by the virtual mobility of backpacker information, identities, and culture. The objective of this study is to examine the convergence of information technology and backpacking and develop an understanding of some of the socio-technical implications of social media and other technologies for the backpacking experience and backpacking culture. Understanding how technology has affected flashpackers' backpacking experience could provide a snapshot into one how technological innovations are impacting one aspect of life: travel and tourism.

2   Theoretical Background

The New Mobilities Paradigm (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006) seeks to establish a movement-driven social science. The mobilities paradigm examines the increasingly complex world through the exploration of the varying levels of movement of people, ideas, objects, and information. The mobilities paradigm provides a strong basis for understanding how the advancement of Internet and related technologies have been incorporated into the daily lives of people around the world. This paper employs the mobilities paradigm to discuss the convergence of technology and backpacking tourism. The study of the flashpacking phenomenon through a 'mobilities lens'

provides a vehicle for developing an understanding of the complexities of the intersection of physical travel, technologies, and daily life.

The recent innovations of the Internet and communications technologies have created a more networked patterning of social life, home life, and work life (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). No longer are the simple discussions of the opposition of 'real' vs. 'virtual' or online vs. offline relevant, instead it is more useful to examine the hybridity between physical spaces and cyberspace. These technologies have allowed many people to maintain intermittent co-presence with these networks. Co-presence is further enhanced by 'virtual travel' as many social interactions need to take place over long distances, where corporeal travel is not as easy. This virtual proximity is proliferated by advances in cyberspace, including email, social networking sites, blogs, and other virtual extensions of personal identity. The virtual proximity of an individual's multiple networks allow them to shift easily between or simultaneously interact with more than one network. In the increasingly complex world, where people need to maintain close networks over large geographical distances, virtual mobility allows for the strengthening of interactions (Urry, 2002). The virtual mobility of personal networks allows people to connect to their networks anywhere and at anytime, especially with advances in personal wireless technologies (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). The spatial division between 'home and away' is now less important, which allows people greater flexibility with concerns to their movements through time and space. The profusion of information available and adoption of e-commerce by travel service providers have made independent travel much easier.

A number of studies have examined aspects of the virtual mobility phenomenon with specific reference to backpackers. For example, Mascheroni (2007) explored the convergence of new communication media, the Internet and mobile phones, and travel by backpackers. The author concluded that "global nomads produce and maintain mobile spaces of sociality, founded on a complex interaction of face-to-face interaction and mediated communication, co-presence and virtual proximity, corporeal travel and virtual mobilities" (p.527). Backpackers have increasingly used email and social networking sites to stay in contact with fellow backpackers met during their trip (Paris, 2010), and their social network thus becomes accessible anywhere at any time (Mascheroni, 2007). An increasing number of backpackers are carrying laptops, smart phones and wireless access in hostels and guesthouses, as well as cafés, restaurants, and bars in backpacker enclaves provide an almost constant connectivity of the Internet while travelling.

The interaction with fellow travellers in online communities has provided backpackers with a useful source of travel information. Many backpackers use narrative emails and/or travelogues via personal websites, blogs, or social networking sites to share their experiences with friends and family back home, as well as fellow travellers. Mascharoni (2007) points out that travelogues allow backpackers to maintain mobile spaces of sociality that follow individuals during their trip, are constantly updated, and with an email address that represents the only permanent address of the traveller. The mobile sociality allows backpackers to maintain connections with fluid social networks made up of friends, family, travellers met

while on the road, local people, and unknown travellers (Paris, 2011; Mascheroni, 2007). Against this brief backdrop of literature, the purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of the impact of the convergence of ICT and independent travel from the perspective of a small group of tech-savvy flashpackers.

3   Methods

Key informant e-interviews were conducted with a small group of eight flashpackers with an established virtual presence. Potential individuals were contacted using a snowball sampling procedure. This group was selected as part of a larger research project that also sought to examine the online social interactions among the small group of individuals, thus pre-existing connections were assured through the sampling method. An initial contact, who is an active backpacker and maintains a travel blog, YouTube account, Twitter account, Facebook account, was contacted. The initial key informant was asked to recommend other backpackers who were tech savvy and actively contribute to the production of online content. Five additional individuals were contacted and asked to participate and recommend other potential participants, who then recommended a total of 10 other individuals. All fifteen individuals were screened, with only individuals who actively maintained a minimum of three of the following were invited to participate: a blog, Facebook profile, Twitter and YouTube account. Eleven individuals met this requirement and were then sent an email explaining the study. Eight of the eleven individuals agreed to be interviewed. The interviewees ranged in age from 23-45, and were mostly from North America or Europe, with the exception of one Brazilian and one Australian. Six of the respondents were male and two were female. Three of the respondents were married, and two were currently travelling with their spouse. Four of the respondents were currently travelling on long-term trips of more than a year, of which two earned their primary income through their online backpacker blogs and as free-lance travel writers. Two of the respondents were recent university graduates, and another two were employed in the IT industry. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via email and Skype. Questions focused on how impacts of information and communication technologies have been incorporated with and changed the backpacker experience. In order to preserve the anonymity, the names of each individual have been changed. Each of the interviews were transcribed and then subjected to a thematic analysis. The following section discusses the main findings.

4   Discussion of Results

Several themes emerged from the interviews including the conceptualization of connection and disconnection, impact of technologies on traditional physical spaces of backpacking, social interaction, and increasing fluidity of 'tourist' and 'non-tourist' experiences.

4.1 Hybridization of backpacker spaces

Backpacker enclaves, made up of hostels, restaurants, and bars, provide the spaces for meaningful interactions, communication, expression of shared values, and the backpacker travel identity (Sorensen, 2003; Murphy, 2001). Backpacking literature

often depicts backpacker enclaves as meta-spaces that provide a space for adjustment, reduced culture shock, respite from life on the road, perceived control, and often provide comforts of home. These spaces also include what 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 such as internet café's, Wi-Fi, or mobile phones. Increasingly these connections are offered free of charge within a backpacker enclave. This hyper-connective ability has also created some experiential conflicts in the physical destination. Brandon (respondent 6) reflected on a recent hostel experience:

> I've sat in hostel common rooms where 10 backpackers were silently staring at screens gathering information about the city they are in on Twitter rather than talking to each other, meeting new friends, and sharing information through the 'traveler network' that is right in the room. I can't count the times that I have sat next to a stranger on a bus that I would have spoken to and interacted with had they not spent the entire journey playing with iPhone apps.

The hybridization of backpacker spaces facilitated by developments in information and communication technologies has created a mobile sociality that exists virtually and physically. Social media offer individuals a place for co-presence and interaction with various networks, but also are spaces of expression through digital media. Many backpackers maintain social connections with people they once met physically, as strangers, as well as contacts in future destinations. All of these contacts are virtually proximate to each other allowing for backpackers to interact instantly and simultaneously with people from all over the world. As Sara (respondent 4) stated,

> The rise in social media has fostered a community where it is incredibly simple to find people to meet up with and keep in touch with. I can find a couch to crash on in New Zealand, ask a friend for travel recommendations on Vietnam and email that Canadian kid I met in Bosnia last summer within the span of 5 minutes.

4.2 Social interactions

Each of the individuals interviewed did agree that innovations in communication technologies have affected the backpacking culture, especially in terms of the social interactions. Alan (respondent 5) claimed that these innovations have 'revolutionized' backpacker culture in terms of social interactions while on the road. Alan (respondent 5) further described traditional backpackers' social interactions on the road as, "…transient in nature. You met, you socialized, you enjoyed each other's company and then you parted ways. If lucky you'd bump into each other later down the road in a different city or country, but for the most part good-bye was just that." This account of the fleeting interactions of backpackers is echoed in the backpacker literature (Murphy, 2001). Recent developments have also been 'revolutionary' by increasing the ability for individuals to 'meet-up'. Alan (respondent 5) recounted a personal experience of when he had planned to meet a friend at the McDonalds in the train station in Florence several years ago: "I didn't have a cell phone at the time, making

timing of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, not only was there a train strike, but the train station and immediate area had two separate McDonalds." He ended up spending the majority of the day and his patience trying to find his friend. Nowadays, social media developments, Wi-Fi, Internet access, and mobile phones have decreased this hassle for some.

While social media, and in particular social networking sites, are used to maintain social relationships, most are primarily focused at already established relationships. Backpacking, traditionally, has consisted of fleeting social interactions with individuals while travelling. With the rise of social networking sites, like Facebook, maintaining connection with individuals met on the road is easier, but yet sometimes the relationships do not develop. As Don (respondent 3) noted, "People are relying heavily on Facebook to stay connected, especially with other travellers met along the way, but after time passes, unless the connection was really strong in person, then usually those people fade into the background and you'll never write them or hear from them again." Virtual relationships through Facebook are intimate and must be reciprocally nurtured. Other social networking sites, however, are focused on providing a space for individuals to meet strangers and build relationships. This reciprocity is also evident in social networking sites that are meant to facilitate off-line connections, such as Couchsufing.com, a site that provides a space for backpackers to meet individuals who are both strangers and locals that wish to share their own personal space (couch) with other strangers. This community is unique in that it requires individuals to also commit to allowing fellow couchsurfers crash on their own couches at some point. Even though there are social networking sites directed at facilitating both on-line and off-line interactions, the strength of these relationships are dependent upon the effort put into them by individuals. The level of effort in maintaining online or offline relationships could be related to each individual's value of the mode of the relationship.

4.3 (Dis)Connection

The innovations of social media have changed the way backpackers communicate with home. Another one of the interviewees traced these innovations through the travel experience of his parents and himself. When his parents over-landed from Scotland to New Zealand, his grandparents could only expect an occasional postcard or letter, where as now when he travels his parents, friends, and other networks can follow his blog, view photos uploaded onto Flikr.com, and interact on Twitter and Facebook. Additionally Chris (respondent 2) produces podcasts from the road, both as guides for other travellers, but also as an auditory story telling for his followers. For some backpackers, who travelled pre-Web 2.0, a dramatic change in both communication and experience can be traced. Don (respondent 3) reflected on a backpacking trip in 1998 around Europe:

> I kept a written journal of my experiences and after 2 months home, I taught myself HTML and put it all up on a website. It was a long and slow process, but even strangers would find it and read along. There was no Facebook—you lived in the moment, sent postcards to people at home. Now social media, blogs, and quality internet

connections around the world make it incredibly easy to update people on your travels and experiences. Plenty of backpackers do not keep blogs, but simply post updates and photos to Facebook from time to time. It's the norm.

These increased innovations in communication have provided a 'safety-net'. Instantaneous communication with people anywhere in the world can reduce the perception of risk of independent travel. This can be particularly true for women backpackers travelling on their own. Sara (respondent 4) said that, "it's very important for me to keep in touch with my immediate family. I want them to know where I am and that I'm safe. I usually email them daily or whenever I have internet connection. My friends usually just follow my blog." Sara (respondent 4) uses email, a much more private form of communication, to maintain daily contact with her family. On the other hand, she uses her blog to share her experiences with her friends. Homesickness is often something travellers experience at some point during their trips, especially long-term or trips to destinations far different than an individual's home. Social media allows for instant contact and thus, as Alan (respondent 5) pointed out, "often helps to alleviate/reduce homesickness. It also dramatically reduces the catch up time when re-integrating at the end of a trip."

Social media also provide a means for friends and family to seek out news and help when crises do occur. Previously, the ability to get news updates, and mobilize searches was nearly impossible. With contact only through occasional letters and postcards the location of backpackers could never really be known by family and friends back home. Instant, global contact mediated by social media now provides friends and family a better starting point from which to begin when the worst occurs. Chris (respondent 2) provided a first-hand account of the Chilean earthquake and the social media response. "Following the Chilean earthquake last week, we found dozens of comments on Facebook and Twitter asking where we were, if we were OK, and if we needed help. People were asking the Twitter community if anyone had heard from us and by the time I answer emails and logged into Twitter to say we were safe, people I had emailed had posted on twitter and Facebook that we were safe. It was nearly instantaneous and this wide group of virtual friends we've never met were rallying around to look for us."

While this instant contact with home, friends and family, and the virtual community can be very beneficial when travelling, and during disasters, a theme emerged from several of the interviews that suggests that being too connected can take a way from the experience of travelling. Brandon (respondent 6) urges that "being TOO connected to home dissipates your focus….and really takes away from the place you are exploring. How can you really enjoy what's going on in a local village if your mind is thinking about gossip and updates from home that come straight to your phone?" Gasser and Simun (2010) suggest in their discussion of the travel experiences of 'Digital Natives' that while these individuals are physically traveling, they are mentally and emotionally at home. The innovations in communication technologies make it increasingly easier for individuals to have undisturbed connections with home. As the barriers for maintaining continuous contact with various networks have decreased, individuals now have the *choice* of who they will

stay in contact with, how they will stay in contact, and when they will make contact. Some self-described flashpackers, such as Don (respondent 3), carry lots of technological devices meant to maintain connections with home, virtual community, and to document their experiences to share virtually. Despite this Don (respondent 3) said that he, "Purposefully did not bring a cell phone with me on my trip, as a way to stay somewhat disconnected." This marks an interesting shift in the perception of 'being disconnected' from previous backpackers, who were disconnected by default of their form of travel. Using a net-book or laptop to connect and interact with a virtual network through social media appears not to be defined as 'being connected.' As Alan (respondent 5) explained, "I typically check in (depending on how wired my destination country is) between 3-6 times a week via email, Facebook and Twitter. I do not, however, take a cell phone with me…I enjoy my lack of phone/limited connectivity on the road."

4.4 The virtual backpacker experience

The recent innovations in information and communications technologies have given rise to virtual-cultural hybrid spaces (Paris, 2010). Previously the backpacking culture was immobile, only accessible to a select few while travelling to backpacker enclaves and over backpacker trails. This limited accessibility also facilitated the noticed gap between backpacking ideals and backpacking experience. Backpacking culture could only be experienced in the close physical proximity to other backpackers, thus decreasing the independence and local immersion. Virtual moorings of backpacker culture arguably allows individuals to have intimate contact with the backpacking community from anywhere at any time. Alan (respondent 5) was aware of the importance of technological innovations for backpacking culture. He said that, "It [technological developments] further empowers backpackers, and encourages backpackers to develop an extensive social network of friends and contracts which offer constant insights into different cultures and peoples." These hybrid spaces resulting from the technological developments allow individuals to experience and interact with the backpacker culture freely without the physical limitations of the past. This arguably allows them the freedom to travel completely physically 'off-the-beaten-track' if they so desire, as they will be safe in knowing that they will be able to share their experiences with the virtual backpacker community.

The virtualization of the backpacking culture provides spaces for individuals to maintain their sense of belonging and connection with like-minded individuals. As Sara (respondent 4) puts it, "Before I discovered Twitter, I really didn't have a community of travellers to connect with while at home. It was very discouraging, but now I have encouragement, I have advice, and I have an outlet for expression." The online backpacker community has developed a social structure that in itself complements the physical backpacker spaces by providing a place of continuity of the culture, instead of sporadic interactions on the road with the 'road' culture. The continuity of the backpacker culture from 'on-the-road' to the virtual to the home, also means a continuity of individuals' identity. Current innovations have led to an increase in the virtual proximities of an individual's networks. Individuals' online identities are losing their anonymity and privacy. Social networking sites, like

Facebook and Twitter, allow individuals to interact with multiple networks simultaneously, but they also decrease an individual's ability to maintain anonymity. Similarly, travellers on the road have seen a decrease in their anonymity, as the ability to maintain connections with other travellers they have met has benefited from the communication developments. In terms of developing authentic relationships with other travellers as well as individuals at the location, this was perceived as a positive development by some of the interviewees. Alan (respondent 5) believed that for him, "the reduction of anonymity in both [travel and internet] is a push towards more real friendships and interactions."

Another interesting effect of the Web 2.0 developments for backpacking and tourism in general is that User Generated Content can influence or at least be perceived to influence more people to travel. Tara (respondent 7) attributes both the development of Web 2.0 and the inclusion of backpacking in mainstream media as a contributing factor, as she concluded that, "more young people are backpacking and exploring due to the ability to explore blogs, travel sites, reality shows, and hear other fellow backpacker stories." Brandon (respondent 6) noted that by posting photos and stories online, people at home are able to dream and escape by virtually taking part in the traveller's adventures. He also notes a downfall to this; that it can have a negative effect on the exploration, expectations, and overall experience. As Brandon (respondent 6) stated, "when you arrive and you now have a filter planted firmly in your head rather than an open mind in which to form you own personal opinions."

The abundance of information and the ease of accessing it through Social Media and mobile devices has arguably resulted in the increased independence of backpackers (Paris, 2010), which is one of the main ideals of the backpacking culture. Alan (respondent 5) summed up the 'pre-Facebook' and 'pre-iPhone' backpacking experience as, "Less connected. Harder to research on the go. Less spontaneous." It is important to note that there were conflicting views on whether social media and communications technologies increased the independence of backpackers in the interviews. Chris (respondent 2) argued that the new developments have just replaced past dependencies, "Where someone used to religiously carry around their Lonely Planet bible, they're now perhaps using a Google search, Wikitravel or other personal favourites to find the same information." In Sara's (respondent 4) response, a similar sentiment emerged suggesting a dependence on information via the Internet might exist. Sara (respondent 4) said, "it is so much easier to plan and book your own travel on the internet. I would say I do 75% of my research for trips on the internet." On the other hand individuals have more control and flexibility in their travel planning. The virtualization of word of mouth recommendations allow individuals to instantly access vast stores of peer reviews on destinations, accommodations, restaurants, etc, while being physically mobile. Alan (respondent 5) is a big proponent of this innovation, "Social functions (such as real time reviews) on booking sites have made a huge difference. One of my favourites is Hostelworld.com which provides a multi-point review system with user comments for each hostel. There is nothing better than being able to look through tens if not hundreds of reviews left by real travellers." Some individuals try to find a middle-ground between planning and allowing time for drifting. As Chris (respondent 2) summed up, "With so much access to information

and online booking, many people are planning much more in advance than in the past. We try to find a middle point between understanding our destination, booking flexibly and a few days in advance, and also finding space and time to go with the flow and take local advice from people online and offline."

While the general feeling of respondents is that the technological innovations and increased amount of information available online has made backpacking easier, Jess (respondent 8) pointed out that, "There is also conflicting information that sometimes complicates things, especially when you go off the beaten path. So we would say that it's [recent technological developments] made it [backpacking] both easier and more complex." As information is available instantly, anywhere, and at anytime, independence and pre-planning using consumer-generated media have become a balancing act. The resulting time-compression of the developments in information and communication technologies has also resulted in different constructions of time and the backpacking experience.

5 Conclusion

The nearly constant connectivity of backpackers while travelling creates a situation in which experiences are shared across physical distances instantaneously with multiple networks. This mobile sociality is now blurring the boundaries between home and away are allowing individuals to portray, construct (and reconstruct) and relieve their trips interactively within their mobile sociality as they are experiencing them. This instant mediation needs to receive more attention in future studies, as it has in the reconstruction of experiences through social media after returning home (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009; Pudliner, 2007). Future studies should focus on re-conceptualizing what it means to be connected and disconnected, as well as explore more deeply the fluidity of the tourist experience as the increasing convergence of information and communication technologies and tourists' experiences allows individuals to remain embedded in their social networks while maintaining a state of physical mobility and localness. The ease of connection and the multiple channels of connectivity mean that the constraints of connecting are being quickly marginalized. The actual experience of travel could be impacted negatively because of the easy and instantaneousness of virtual interactions with home social network, which supports the argument by some that technology can detract from the tourist experience (Uriely, 2005). Several examples were given of situations in which individuals were so tuned into their virtual networks that they were not mindful of their physical location, experiences and social interactions. Additionally, backpacking has often been seen as a time of 'finding oneself' or a rite-of-passage, achieved through a period of detachment, which arguably is threatened by the constant connectivity with friends, family and home.

Developments of social media positively affect the backpacker experience by allowing greater independence through the access to information and the ability to let friends and family at home know they are fine, safe and secure, enhancing their ability to have a more authentic experience by focusing on building relationships with local people via social media, creating a greater ease of return home and reducing reverse culture shock, and documenting a trip through more advanced means.

Essentially, being continually connected facilitates positive benefits allowing individuals to embody the shared cultural understanding of backpacking to a greater extent. Continual connection also empowers individuals with the ability to choose which networks they maintain connection with. Additionally, the findings suggest that individuals might avoid particular technologies in order to create an artificial constraint to connecting to certain social networks. For example, the results indicate that many individuals chose to not maintain connection with work by leaving their cell phone at home, not checking their work email, and not using 'professional' social networking sites like LinkedIn. Greater understanding of these preferences and uses of different types of social media and mobile devices can help the industry to adapt strategies with maximum effectiveness.

Participation and interaction with the online backpacker communities implicate individual backpackers in the collective and collaborative creation of cultural knowledge. Each of the 'online communities' represent hybridized spaces of virtual and corporeal mobilities, social interactions and knowledge generation. It is important to note that a social context is needed to give meaning to the various mobilities, knowledge, and technologies on which the online communities are based (Molz, 2010). The backpacking culture provides the social context for these online backpacker communities. Thus the virtualization of the backpacker culture is a process in which the backpacking culture is manifested through the various information and communication technologies, the knowledge creation process, the social interactions, and the continued hybridization of the physical and virtual spaces through the individual use of mobile technologies.

The virtual moorings of backpacking are based on a fluidity of networks and purposeful collaborations (Molz, 2010) instead of a more hierarchical structure, as conventional with the backpacker road culture. Future studies into the social and cultural interactions in these hybrid spaces and the impact on the 'real-world' travel and tourist experience will become increasingly important in the near future. The convergence of information and communication technologies has created a more decentralized and democratized space where knowledge is collaboratively and collectively created, shared, filtered, contested, and consumed. Virtual spaces and processes can dramatically increase the time it takes for a piece of knowledge to become integrated into the shared culture. In the past, the backpacking road culture has been noted as experiencing very little or no change over many decades as a result of limited time that backpackers would spend in the physical spaces of backpacking, and the lack of access to the 'road culture' from home (Sorensen, 2003). The rate of change and adaption could be argued to be much greater now because of the virtual nature of the backpacking culture. The virality of backpacker knowledge creates an environment in which knowledge can be experienced, created, shared, contested, reconstructed, and authorized in an extremely short amount of time. This has large implications for the backpacker tourist industry. Previously, just being located in close geographical proximity to a backpacker enclave, or being listed in a Alternative travel guidebook was enough to ensure viability. Nowadays the market place is much more complex because of the proliferation of online (and often unfiltered consumer based) information, competition between business online, and geographically

independent technologically connected travellers. Just as the 'backpacker' industry adapted and evolved during the past hundred years to follow the progression of travellers from tramps to drifters to backpackers, the industry needs to adapt to the current forces of change that have resulted in the emergence of the flashpacker.

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