

BACKPACKER TOURISTS: SENSE OF BELONGING AS A KEY MEDIATOR BETWEEN TRAVEL MOTIVATION AND WOM CONTENT

Sandra Alves

POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF VISEU, Portugal

Email: sandrascensao@gmail.com

José Luís Abrantes

POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF VISEU, Portugal

Email:jlabrantes@estv.ipv.pt

Cláudia Seabra

POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF VISEU, Portugal

Email:cseabra@estv.ipv.pt

Maria José Nogueira

POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE OF VISEU, Portugal

Email:mjnogueira@estv.ipv.pt

Ram Herstein

THE COLLEGE OF LAW AND BUSINESS, Israel

Email: ramh@clb.ac.il

Abstract

This study examines the antecedents of *Word-of-Mouth* (WOM) message content of *backpackers* tourists. We propose a model in which travel the sense of belonging, social interaction places and cultural activities are key mediating constructs between travel motivations and *Word-of-Mouth* (WOM) message content to *backpackers* tourists. The model is empirically examined by means of a survey conducted with 656 *backpackers* from 75 different countries. A structural equation model indicates that travel motivation, sense of belonging, the place where social interaction occurs and the cultural activities undertaken by *backpackers* are important antecedents of *Word-of-Mouth* content. Theoretical, managerial and marketing implications of this study are discussed. Directions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: Backpackers, Word-of-Mouth, Social Interaction, Motivations

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I. Introduction

The backpacker tourism has proved to be an important social, cultural and economic phenomenon at a global level (Cohen, 2003; O'Reilly, 2006), sustained mostly in the growth of international travel (Wyllie, 2000), in the increased of low cost accommodation (Ryan & Mohsin, 2001; O'Reilly, 2006), in the increasing labor flexibility and the changes in lifestyle choices (Thyne *et al.*, 2005).

The *backpacking* is considered by researchers as one of the most promising sectors to the development of countries at a national, regional and local level (Hampton, 1998; Scheyvens, 2002). Past research shows that the *backpackers* tend to spend more money than any other category of tourists due to the longer duration of their stay; their expenditures cover a larger geographical area, justified by the greater tendency that these type of tourists travel to different destinations, including to remote and unusual locations (Scheyvens, 2002); and also consume more local products and services than any other category of tourists (Cohen, 2011; Hampton, 1998; Hottola, 2008a; Wilson, 1997).

The backpackers have specific characteristics and behaviors that identify the essence of the backpacking phenomenon: young people show a preference for budget accommodations and recreational activities, which emphasize meeting other travelers, who choose flexible and organized independently travel itineraries and that travel for long periods of time (Pearce, 1990). This definition was the basis for further studies, showing since then a growing academic interest and publications on this tourist segment (see Hillman, 2009; Maoz, 2004; O'Reilly, 2006; Ross, 1992; Slaughter, 2004; Sorensson, 2012).

The literature indicates that backpacker tourists want to socialize with other backpackers and that these social interactions play an important role in the *Word-of-Mouth* information transmission (Murphy, 2001). Information and socialization are important aspects of the travel experience for backpackers (Welk, 2004) and the travel decisions are largely conditioned by WOM information transmitted by other backpackers (Murphy, 2001), which makes the social interactions between those tourists commercial information exchanges (Arnould & Price, 2000; Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau *et al.*, 2009). The exchange of information with other backpackers on experiences and places during the trip has a strong impact on the tourism industry (Murphy, 2001).

WOM is an important information source (see Brown & Reingen, 1987; Herr *et al.*, 1991; Swan & Oliver, 1989), in tourism information is one fundamental aspect influencing tourist behaviors and buying decisions (Mäser & Weiermair, 1998). Taking this into account the understanding of the social interactions among backpackers is fundamental to analyze the spread of WOM information in communication informal networks (Murphy, 2001). Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the antecedents of WOM message content, with particular focus on backpackers'

travel motivations, characteristics and experiences. We seek to analyze the dynamics of social interactions among backpackers and provide a model that facilitates the understanding of the factors influencing the transmission of WOM information.

II. Literature Revision

We developed a conceptual model (see Figure 1), where it is analyzed the antecedents of WOM messages between backpackers. Several factors contribute to the development of the content of the messages WOM, including the motivations for traveling, looking for places to interact socially with other backpackers and cultural activities developed in the destinations.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

III. Research Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

The research setting refers to an online survey approach. The final data was collected from November 24th 2012 to 05th April 2013. To publicize the link of the questionnaire social networks were used and in some cases also we sent emails (see Paris, 2013). The questionnaires were self-administrated, which allowed us to ensure that the data was not biased. We obtained a final sample of 656 valid questionnaires. The final sample allowed us to have a proportion of 41 observations for each indicator (16 variables) (see Bentler, 1989 in Westland, 2010).

We sourced measures from the literature and adapted to the research context. Constructs were first order, and we measured them with multi-item scales. We used Likert type scales ranging from 1 to 5.

IV. Results

In order to assess the validity of the measures, the items were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis, using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation procedures in LISREL 8.8 (Jöreskog & Sorbom, 1996).

Measurement Analysis

In this model, each item is restricted to load on its pre-specified factor, with the factors allowed to correlate freely. The chi-square for this model is significant ($\chi^2 = 193.38$, df = 89, p = .0000). Since the chi-square statistic is sensitive to sample size, we also assessed additional fit indices: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Incremental Fit Index (IFI), and the Tucker-Lewis Fit Index (TLI). The

CFI, IFI, and TLI of this model are .98, .98, and .98, respectively. Since fit indices can be improved by allowing more terms to be freely estimated, we also assessed the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), which assesses fit and incorporates a penalty for lack of parsimony. The RMSEA of this measurement model is .042 the RSMR is .032 also prove a good fit for the model (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

All the six constructs present good composite validity (ρ) above .63 (Bagozzi, 1980). Moreover, the extracted variance of each construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) is always greater than 0.5 (see table 1).

It is observed that only the construct "Sense of belonging" has a Cronbach's alpha below the recommended value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). When submitting an alpha of 0.694, the inclusion of this construct in the model may be questionable (Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004). However, considering that the alpha value is quite close to the recommended value and that this construct is composed solely of two variables, we decided on their inclusion in the model, similar to other studies in another context with alphas between 0.60 and 0.70 (see Abrantes *et al.*, 2013).

Table 1. Constructs, scales and reliabilities

Items		Standardized Values	t-values
Travel Motivation ($\alpha=0,759$; $\rho_{vc(n)}=0,52$; $\rho=0,76$)			
V1 I am travelling to be independent		0,63	15,71
V2 I am travelling to enjoy daring/ adventurous thrills		0,74	18,82
V3 I am travelling to develop my abilities and accomplishments		0,78	19,89
Sense of Belonging ($\alpha=0,694$; $\rho_{vc(n)}=0,53$; $\rho=0,70$)			
V4 I am somebody who prefers hostels because I can find other backpackers		0,76	17,87
V5 I am somebody who looks for places where I know I can find other backpackers		0,7	16,65
Cultural Activities($\alpha=0,761$; $\rho_{vc(n)}=0,62$; $\rho=0,76$)			
V6 Visiting cultural attractions		0,83	16,52
V7 Visiting popular, well known tourist attractions		0,74	15,29
Social Interaction Places: Accommodation ($\alpha=0,836$; $\rho_{vc(n)}=0,66$; $\rho=0,85$)			
V8 Kitchen/eating area		0,76	21,91
V9 Common room		0,95	29,44
V10 Room/dorm		0,71	19,98
Social Interaction Places: Buses and Transit Centers ($\alpha=0,731$; $\rho_{vc(n)}=0,59$; $\rho=0,74$)			
V11 On buses		0,83	14,91
V12 Transit centers		0,7	13,56
WOM: Message Content ($\alpha=0,734$; $\rho_{vc(n)}=0,53$; $\rho=0,81$)			
V13 Places they have been/are going to		0,77	21,44
V14 Home, countries' differences/comparisons		0,68	18,16
V15 Share touristic stories/ experiences		0,8	22,54
V16 Exchange information about places, hostels, transportation, etc.		0,64	17,04

α = Internal reliability (Cronbach, 1951)

ρ = Composite reliability (Bagozzi, 1980)

$\rho_{vc(n)}$ = Variance extracted

The weight of each item in the respective factor also is always higher than 0.62, and the average value of 0.75. All constructs also have a cross-correlation significantly different from 1, and the shared variance between any two constructs (i.e., the square of its cross-correlation) is smaller than the average of the variance explained by the constructs (Fornell, 1981).

Structural Equation Model

The final structural equation model has a chi-square value of 225.12 with 95 degrees of freedom and a p-value of zero. The adjusted indices also indicate that the model correctly fits the data ($CFI = 0.98$, $IFI = 0.98$, $TLI = 0.96$ and $RMSEA = 0.046$). The estimated final model is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Summary of significant relationships

As can be seen in the final model, all nine hypotheses are confirmed (see Figure 2).

V. Conclusions and Implications

The results provide important information for academics and managers of organizations involved in activities for backpackers.

In this study it is showed that backpackers talk among themselves about the places they visited, those who want to visit and the differences between their countries of origin, comparing them on different aspects. In this sense, backpackers also share their stories and their experiences of tourism. These travelers also consider essential to exchange information about the places they visit or intend to visit, accommodations offered by tour operators and transport they use.

It is thus evident that the message content is necessary to manage any place used by backpackers so it is essential to foster WOM.

It was also possible to understand the factors that influence the development of these messages and their content. The most important effect was shown to be the use of places of social interaction, in the case of accommodation, particularly in kitchens, dining areas, common rooms and dorm rooms. What might be thought of as a weak spot in a tourist accommodation, the existence of dorm rooms, proved to be a strong point in the accommodation for backpackers. Second in importance, was shown to be the cultural activities undertaken by backpackers, including visits to cultural attractions and well-known and popular places of tourist attraction. Thirdly motivation for travel, is to be independent, they want to enjoy the thrills of adventure and develop their own skills and achievements. To a lesser but significant degree, perhaps by its transitional character , it was revealed the effect of the use of buses and transportation facilities in the development of WOM among backpackers.

Another effect of WOM development, but of indirect nature, proved to be the sense of belonging to the community of backpackers, hostels and in particular the fact that they prefer to look for places where there may be other travelers.

It is thus crucial for tourism organizations to manage how they interact with backpackers in particular having in mind the travel motivations. They should also ensure that the local developed a sense of belonging to this community. It is important to be located near transport infrastructures, particularly road and in the case of accommodation, create common spaces where backpackers can develop their WOM activities. And, finally, facilitate them knowledge and access to the cultural activities that are developed in the areas of influence of those units of tourism.

This study has important contributions to science once only a few group of studies focused on the social interactions between backpackers, particularly in the case of WOM and content of the messages that it develops. This is also an important study because of the wide geographical base of backpackers which involves 75 countries, of various ages, thus enabling a more comprehensive insight into the social behavior of backpackers.

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