



20th anniversary reflective commentary – from its drifter past to nomadic futures – future directions in backpacking research and practice

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Abstract

While the label 'backpacker' didn't originate in 1990 when first presented at an academic conference by the late Philip L. Pearce, its usage rose within an emerging academic discourse community that established shared interests, sources of information, terminology, and methods of communication, along with a certain level of expertise and knowledge on the subject. While the community internationalised and embraced interdisciplinary approaches, a review of the academic scholarship points to the communities increasing instability, as differential authoritative voices conflict over discursive conventions that regulate our understanding of backpacking. While once conceptual and theoretical developments in backpacker research were built through subject level *consensus*, distinctions within the community point to new hierarchies, with their own particular schools of thought and *reinterpretations*. As disparities, incongruities and deviations in backpacker research output emerge, this overview explores current research directions and identifies paradoxes, challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Keywords

alternative tourism, backpackers, backpacking, budget travel, discourse community, global nomads

Introduction

Backpacking as an 'alternative' type and form of travel is distinctively recognisable in the Western World, given backpackers and the structures that support them are inscribed

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in images, representations, symbols, narrative, text and video that circulate and flow across newspapers, mobile devices, bookshelves, cinemas and television screens. Backpacking has become embedded in Western social imaginaries as an organised field, with its building blocks, key story lines, narratives, cultural representations, affinities, performative conventions, understandings, regularities, ethos and practices firmly in the public domain. While guidebooks like the Lonely Planet that were instrumental in ideologically codifying and naturalizing the backpacker discourse have slipped away, backpacking's fluid and irregular shape has remained relatively intact and resilient. It remains characterised by extensive spatial mobility, time and space flexibility, as well as alternative social and cultural interactions and engagements (Chen and Huang, 2019).

However, while backpackers were once cast as categorically different from institutionalised tourism flows by an academic discourse community who shared a set of ideas, sources of information, terminology and beliefs about backpacking, the implicit assumptions and conventions surrounding background have broken down. As backpacker research reached across different subject disciplines and different socio-cultural contexts, the backpacker label has become unrooted, with increased claims that the label itself is redundant. As disparities, incongruities and deviations in backpacker research emerge, this overview explores the paradoxes and challenges emerging in the absence of a stable academic discourse community. While change and struggle within a discourse community is expected, new discursive texts not integrated into historical backpacker discourse has led to miscommunication, misunderstanding and confusion for students, new researchers and practitioners seeking to make sense of this type and form of travel. As COVID-19 and lockdowns restrict travel, a relatively unified discourse community is required to stress the importance and appropriateness of backpacking as lockdowns ease.

A discourse community

Backpacking discourse, within the genre of academic writing has long attracted a network of authoritative scholars who sought to exercise (or seek to exercise) control over the meaning of backpacker discourse, produce accepted 'truths' about it and make certain representations of it appear real. Since the late 1980s, scholars from within this discourse operated as a 'specific interest group' and generated numerous articles, books, articles and syllabi that entered into discursive circulation. The community produced competent discourse to describe a backpacker as preferring to travel alone, 'educated, European, middle-class, single, obsessively concerned with budgeting his/her money, and at a juncture in life' (Riley, 1988: 313). They were recast as a distinct category of tourists categorically different from mass tourists (Loker, 1991; Sørensen, 2003). Three Channel View edited books published in 2004, 2007 and 2010 became key texts in knowledge production (Hannam and Ateljevic, 2007; Hannam and Diekmann, 2010; Richards and Wilson, 2004), while a *ATLAS* (Tourism Scholars Association) Backpacker research group facilitated face-to-face discussion and debate at standalone conferences in location such as India, Bangkok and Beirut. After it was established, the group grew to more than 35 researchers across 15 countries by 2005. As an academic discourse community (Swales, 2016), these scholars developed a broad subject level consensus, with backpacker discourse operating within conventions defined by the community and

defined by a body of texts about backpacking. However, a discursive formation is never truly fixed, with no academic discourse community wholly harmonious or conflict free. While the 'backpacker' label has become dominant one in research studies (Pearce, 1990; Scheyvens, 2002), individual authors have positioned their own contribution from within a broad discourse to describe backpackers as 'free independent travellers' (Clarke, 2004), 'long-term budget travelers' (Riley, 1988), 'noninstitutionalised tourists' (Urieli et al., 2002), 'non-tourists' (Tucker, 2003), 'budget tourist/economy tourists' (Elsrud, 2001), 'youth students' (Richards, 2015), 'budget travellers' (Larsen et al., 2011) and 'anti-tourists' (Maoz, 2007). These struggles and contradictions are a normal activity, and indicate that one does not need full consensus to have a healthy academic discourse community.

Despite different members of the discourse community having varying perspectives, assumptions and interpretations, the language and discourse used nonetheless were similar, given this discourse community shared practices of thinking, research and learning. Despite conflict, changes in discourse was conditioned by the existing discipline-specific knowledge and ongoing work in the community about new developments, such as the use of technology (Germann Molz and Paris, 2015). This community, over two to three decades, brought backpacking firmly within the realm of tourism studies, and communicated it as a 'better mode of tourism' (Sørensen, 2003: 856). There was a positive shift in perceptions of a category of travel that had previously been 'tacitly ignored, or at worst actively discouraged in official tourism planning' (Hampton, 1998: 640). As the discourse community produced, disseminated and changed discursive knowledge in a range of arenas including associations, policy documents and conference, official attitudes changed. For example, the Australian government launched its 'National Backpacker Tourism Development Strategy' in 1995, and this proactive approach in developing strategic initiatives was followed by other countries such as Malaysia, Fiji, Taiwan and South Africa (Rogerson, 2007). While the discourse community was flexible enough to explore changes in backpacking, the community has become unstable as investigations peaked between around 2008 and 2010 and have since falling into a period of prolonged decline. The backpacker researcher group was renamed as the Independent Travel Research Group after the last standalone conference in 2013 (Richards, 2015), and where once authoritative writers shared common language, ideas, lexis and interests, new voices and discursive texts have emerged with conflicting focus, interpretations and knowledge.

The backpacker plus

Given any academic specific interest group's main purpose is to create or produce knowledge in a specific topic or subject area, academic discussion, criticism and academic competition remain at the heart of knowledge creation. This can emerge in the continual drive in research to explore the 'basic' form of backpacking, based on the search for road status (Sørensen, 2003) and subcultural capital (O'Regan, 2016), and other forms evoked by way of discursive deviations and fused discourses. These discursive deviations from 'standardised' backpacker characteristics represent a discursive struggle within backpacking texts, that pits the dominant discourse against those in the academic community

who sought to disrupt contemporary understandings of the backpacker by presenting new practices they perceived to be masked in backpacker discourse. Researchers found cohorts of ‘humanistic backpackers’ (Uriely et al., 2002), ‘holiday hippies’ (Westerhausen, 2002), ‘conformist backpackers’ (Hottola, 2008), ‘flashpackers’ (Paris, 2012), ‘backpacker tourists’ (Bell, 2005), ‘youth train backpackers’ (Bae and Chick, 2016) and ‘study backpackers’ (Jarvis and Peel, 2005). These conceptualisations of backpackers are often short-lived, and are advanced by different authors identifying deviations from codified understanding of backpacking found in early backpacker research or practices bound within national cultures. Those deviating from researcher imposed criteria are identified either as a new type of backpacker with specific type-related attributes or deviants/non backpackers.

The furious reaction to ‘begpackers’ prior to COVID-19 (Tolkach et al., 2019), for example, led to accusations of cultural superiority and entitlement, rather than appraising the practice as a common practice amongst some contemporary nomads, as well their drifter predecessors. Rather than moralise about the practice, Cohen (1973: 95) noted how his idealised drifter sought to see the world as it really is through ‘begging, scavenging and “sharing” food and lodgings with friends and acquaintances’ (Cohen, 1973: 95), while Richard Neville (1970: 210) boasted that he learned to say ‘I have no money’, in seven different languages. While it is important to explore what/who constitutes the quotidian reality of a shared world and deviations from commonly known ‘truths’, many of these deviations sought to bind backpackers into various economic, educational and humanitarian logics (O’Regan, 2018), whilst negating the legacy of the countercultural ideas which culturally shaped backpacking.

Backpacker diversity

A welcome shift from unifying depictions of the backpacker as a general type ‘toward an approach that stresses its diverse and plural characteristics’ (Uriely, 2005: 205) has also occurred, with research analysing backpacker homogeneity/heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, class, age and gender (Elsrud, 2001; Maoz, 2007). Rather than see backpacking as universal, the move to research backpacking practiced by citizens from various countries has had the effect of decentering the Western focus of much backpacker literature and reclaim epistemological space for backpackers from Israel, Brazil, Japan, China, South Korea and Indonesia (Prideaux and Shiga, 2007; Teo and Leong, 2006). Less welcome has been the growing propensity to apply the backpacking label to describe conventional touristic pursuits that are driven by novelty, escape/relaxation, interaction with others and self-development (Pearce and Lee, 2005). Such applications often excludes reflection on the arrangements most fundamental to backpacking, such as long length of trip, flexibility of itinerary, alternative clothing, thrift, hardship and so forth. While backpackers from different cultures can re-interpret and re-construct backpacking, to create their own spaces, dispositions, orientations and patterns of action, there often isn’t evidence of any ‘literal’ escape from oppressive, patriarchal and heteronormative structures, or opting out (or pushed out) of the system (social structure). Escape into an imagined community of backpackers might also be a reaction to stress caused by deaths in the family,

divorces, marriage break-ups, health scares or from workplace issues, retirement, redundancy, sabbaticals or the end of formal education and military service.

The backpacker label has become a convenient and accepted shorthand for those with disparate personality traits, beliefs, values, attitudes, interests and lifestyles. While there was never a singular, pure drifter or backpacker habitus, or 'turned-on league of nations' who 'could dress, talk and travel the same language' (Neville, 1970: 207–210), backpacking should exhibit similar type and form characteristics irrespective of ethnicity, language group and origin. While Chinese, Israeli and Japanese backpackers, for example, have distinct particular linguistic, historical, social and cultural codes, their mobility and mobility-related practices make their worlds visible as backpacking. They bring backpacking into material and social reality by drawing on implicit schemas of interpretation, rather than explicit backpacker ideologies, to produce 'knowledges, stories, traditions, compartments, music, books, diaries and other cultural expressions' (Clifford, 1992: 108) [AQ: 1]. While backpackers from various nations may not share a single code, their efforts should yield a recognisable style of performance. Israeli backpackers, for example, integrate Israeli culture, traditions, media, history, military service and language to develop their own set of dispositions that can be seen as a structural variant of the Western backpacker habitus (Maoz, 2007).

If we apply the backpacker label to acceptable and structured beliefs about tourism experiences and interactions dominated by one's own social culture and values, we may instead be describing the workings of an discursive formation, similar to what Poon (1993) calls 'new tourists' who are flexible, independent, educated, experienced and affluent. If researchers cannot identify a controlled disintegration or subjugation of old values in individuals as they socialise into the imagined world (community) of backpacking, they may not be discovering backpackers. Instead, they be finding a distinct type and form of tourism linked to the search for micro-adventures that offer short, temporary excursions for those seeking authenticity. For example, many studies apply the label to individuals who lack the time to withdraw from economic necessity, or lack the unrestrained freedom to travel cheaply over long periods because they are bound by national culture, and social and cultural restrictions imposed upon them. Rather than 'Chinese backpackers' for example (cf. Kimber et al., 2019; Zhu, 2009), they may be equally be identified as post-modern 'post-tourists' (Feifer, 1985; Li, 2017). That is not to say that Chinese backpackers do not exist, but if researchers apply only certain type/form backpacker characteristics, given the constraints and limitations they perceive in the discourse, they may instead be undermining the discourse rather than decentering backpacking discourse from its Western articulations, which historically formed out of the 1960s/1970s counterculture (Hellum, 2010). The presence or absence of one backpacking feature in a different cultural contexts may have a different or even opposite interpretation, if individuals draw from their own cultural schemas of interpretation for evaluation and interactions. As such, backpacking cannot effectively work as a form of categorisation if it includes individuals who do not mobilise themselves to reflexively align with a set of global practices, regulating principles and schemes of perception, thought and action that connect them spatially or temporarily with others in the pursuit of common cause.

Research challenges and opportunities

In the past decade, few researchers have sought to connect to backpacker informants by becoming socialised through and into their world and understanding the practical and spatial logic that drive them from place to place. Backpacker research has stalled as the label becomes a free-for-all, as particular form-related attributes that have become fixed defining criteria for manipulative hypotheses stated in advance in propositional form and subjected to flawed empirical tests. The use of pre-defined criteria as to whom backpackers should be, where they should be and what they should be doing, even though they may have never have previously backpacked is increasingly widespread. Collecting data from those staying in hostels (Hecht and Martin, 2006; Hughes et al., 2009), for example is problematic given hostels have changed beyond their original functions for budget travellers and backpackers (Richards, 2016). Imposing a predetermined, subjective, researcher stereotype of what a backpacker should be and sampling at places where researchers think backpackers might congregate may mean missing those experienced backpackers who behave in ways that are not necessarily accommodating to dominant forms of social and spatial organisation. Other criteria used to find 'proper' backpackers involves limiting respondents and informants to particular age groups, using research locations such as backpacker enclaves and identifying them by their use of a backpack (Chen et al., 2014) **[AQ: 2]**. Using restricting criterion to identify 'backpackers', is problematic, given the choice of one or two particular criteria is certainly no guarantee of finding them or probably a better guarantee of missing them. For example, identifying backpackers using the criteria of backpack (travel luggage travel) only, or hostel use (Chen et al., 2014; Larsen et al. 2011; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhu, 2009), whilst ignoring all other type/form characteristics is problematic. While criterion should be considered, the quality of the research project is positively affected when a 'backpacker-centred' approach takes precedence. Any use of criteria should first understand when and why they were developed, and whether they are still appropriate. Backpacker research is positively affected by investigating the relationship of mobility to subjectivity and exploring the lives, competences and experiences of backpackers through mobile methods (O'Regan, 2015). Researchers should also be careful when drawing on quantitative samples drawn from online sources without first sharing affinity with backpackers and backpacking.

As individuals act on the basis of a shared imaginary that is culturally shared and socially transmitted, by those who purposefully enter this world, backpacking will continue to be modified and change as people, norms, structure and contexts change. Researchers should guard against market and managerial focus driven by lifestyle entrepreneurs, governments, consultants and academics that flatten backpacking's meaning and depth, strip it of its original countercultural legacy, and push to rewrite it wholly within touristic discourses. While this makes backpacking legible in a modern society, which is a prerequisite for governance and governance systems, those appropriating or misusing the discourse may merely blunt any meaning beyond that of mainstream disposable play (Cohen, 2018). More research is required to explore whether the push to give backpacking order leads to mechanisms of exclusion and inequality for different groups (females, disabled, LGBTQIP2SAA, locals, older backpackers). As the countercultural imagination gave birth to backpacking, researchers should also explore other practices

that emphasise individual freedom, as a means for individual liberation and for rediscovering the lost potentialities of the self (Fairfield, 1972; Yablonsky, 1968). New forms of desire and ways of escape associated with the countercultural imagination include the resurgence of ecovillages, intentional communities, new age travellers (Kuhling, 2007), the Rainbow Family (González and Dans, 2019), WOOFING (Ince and Bryant, 2019), nomad houses, transformational festivals (John, 2001), hospitality exchange (Ince and Bryant, 2019), hitchhiking (O'Regan, 2014), wild camping (Caldicott, 2020), global nomads/neo-nomads (D'Andrea 2007), off grid living and vanlifers (Schelly, 2015).

Discussion

The contradictory values and language in backpacking texts is not merely the manifestation of difference in culture-specific aspects of backpacking. Research has stalled given there is no consensus as to evolving type/form characteristics of backpackers. The label is now interchangeable with fully independent travellers, solo travellers, budget travellers, student travellers and youth tourists. There is a divide between authors who argue there is a countercultural legacy in backpacking and those who argue that backpacking is a variation of ordinary tourism. The argument that backpacking should be treated as a touristic pursuit or a form of lifestyle capitalism has been around since the conception of the label 'backpacker', as authors sought to fuse or reconcile backpacker discourse with dominant tourist discourses. While discursive struggles are welcome, backpackers can be better understood as occupying disparate points on a continuum on which we can find discrete gradations or depth and breath.

Those starting their trip are slowly socialised into the role, a process initially fastening the subject firmly to social structures like hostels and enclaves given their need for proximity, solidarity, co-presence and sociability. They generate practices and performances that have a visible coherence, and which can be acted upon strategically upon by cultural intermediaries, who offer to take care of transport, visas, paperwork, itineraries, transport and so forth. Those who accumulate subcultural capital over time by gaining travel know-now, resourcefulness, endurance, fortitude and competences can see a range of visible tactical options and opportunities. By distancing themselves from the role so as to appropriate scarce capital, experienced backpackers can present a desirable image and project and affirm an authentic self and superior position to themselves and others. Some of their practices and performances (e.g. moneyless travel, wild camping) might transgress the 'proper', since they gain position by differentiating themselves against perceived attempts to co-opt their subjectivity. The less experienced backpacker and the more competent, knowledgeable 'lone wolfs' need each other, as their varying competences, experiences, skills and knowledge cross over in all sorts of ways and keeping backpacking energised and the concept itself resilient. While there is touristic consumption amongst those backpackers at the start of their journey as they inhabit an environment that has been planned and built expressly for the purposes of their occupation of the role, there is less research on those experienced, tactical backpackers who constantly re-position themselves in their orbit.

Rather than write off backpacking as simply as another strand of tourism, it is important to explore the considerable individual investment, belief and commitment by many

to a world that offers a second birth to those that seek it. While being a backpacker is hardly a rebellion or even pure anti-conformism, it is still a position that geographically dispersed individuals can aspire to. Rather than moralise certain practices and signifiers (e.g. thrift) and point to the privilege backpackers might draw from their status, class and ethnicity, scholars might reappraise the legacy of the counterculture and its promise (and contribution to) of liberation, community and non-consumerist relationships with others. Where once described as merely a white, middle class and the college educated phenomenon, there is increased attention on how countercultural ideas might enable escape from the confines of capitalist realism and ideological straitjackets that keep us compliant and unimaginative (Fisher, 2020). Rather than merely dismiss backpacking entirely as a subordinated, appropriated, commodified relic of the western counterculture, it can be seen as an alternative mobility culture that celebrates movement, made up of geographically dispersed individuals deploying shared socio-spatial imaginaries and practices that are generative of intrinsic signifying meaning, their global spread and scope involving social, political, environmental, cultural and economic dimensions.

Post COVID-19 backpacking

Different events and circumstances have affected the flow of pilgrims and tourists since the late Middle Ages because of revolutions, wars and plagues. Drifting declined in the late 70s because of deflation, recession, a resurgence of neo-conservatism in many Western countries, cold war conflicts, military dictatorships and proxy 'hot' zones in many regions. In addition, countries who had once welcomed the drifters labelled their mobility 'criminal' and 'deviant', with a number of countries refusing them entry visas. Just as drifting didn't die during that period and was soon reborn as backpacking, backpacking remains a 'mobility fantasy', and will continue to draw dispersed individuals to see movement as a vehicle to explore new subjective experiences. It indicates that '[u]topian desire doesn't go away [. . .]. in fact never really went away' (McKay, 1996: 6). However, restrictions on long-stay visas, or visas based on income are emerging as regulatory authorities look past backpacking's appropriateness and usefulness. If COVID-19 is being used as a means to reset tourism, authorities may focus on high value, capital bearing individuals. As the managerial elements of backpacker discourse can influence regulatory frameworks, those in the discourse community should come together to affirm the power of backpacking to empower those individuals whose temporal rhythms have been suspended or shattered by COVID-19 and help rural destinations and small businesses recover. As political, social cultural and technological changes caused by the pandemic give rise to feelings of depression, distrust, detachment and alienation, the search for a more authentic, truer self is likely to see individuals reposition themselves spatially, temporally and socially through travel and backpacking once more.

Conclusion

Backpackers inhabit a world endowed with history, desires, representations, understandings and intentions from its near past, to create a distinct type and form of tourism, with a memory of its own that has been represented, transmitted and recycled for over 30 years.

The deployment of images, stories and characters surrounding this world has never been so visible, as it outlines possible lives, possible futures and new paths. While the global scale of backpacking demands exchange of knowledge between geographically dispersed researchers, the implicit discursive rules by which the discourse community debated, and negotiated particular truth claims has broken down. While the discourse community has weathered change, there is a disconnect between authoritative voices sitting with the discourse, who have not come to share a set of conventions or implicit discursive rules. Unless more debate and research emerges, contradictions may become so exacerbated so as to demotivate future researchers entering the subject area and strategic investment by tourism and national authorities.

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Author biography

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