

# Understanding the Role of Social Media in Backpacker Tourism

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**Abstract**—The Web 2.0 revolution has affected many areas of society and tourism is not exception to that. Travel 2.0 replaced the first, booking-oriented wave with a crowdsourced, fully interactive one that aids travel planners in making decisions via user-generated content (UGC). In this work, we study how social media are shaping backpackers' experiences by employing sentiment analysis on their blogs. Into the bargain, there are two main research objectives which consist on providing insights into the contemporary backpackers' attitudes and examining the potential implications of their UGC to assist travel-related marketing strategies along with product and service improvement. Such information is found in word-based blog entries and is extracted and analyzed through a combination of methods, specifically sentiment analysis and digital ethnography.

**Index Terms**—Travel 2.0, backpacker tourism, flashpacker tourism, digital ethnography, sentiment analysis

## I. INTRODUCTION

The rise and predominance of information communication technologies since the 1980s has histrionically restructured the tourism and hospitality (T&H) industry all over the world largely due to the considerable growth of the Internet in the beginning of the XXI century [1]. Initially used as a mere intermediate to broadcast information, the Internet has been transformed into a dynamic and involving T&H network referred to as Travel 2.0 (Web 2.0 in tourism), enabling individuals to be the '*media*' themselves for sharing travel knowledge [2], [3]. Thus, social interaction has turned out to be one of the main features of Travel 2.0 by encouraging user-generated content (UGC) produced by one and all.

On the one hand, technological progress has allowed T&H corporations to put into practice e-commerce in order to conduct business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) on-line transactions [4] through platforms such as Skyscanner, Expedia, and Airbnb. On the other hand, there are countless examples of social media sites used by consumer-to-consumer (C2C) to explore, plan, share and note their travel tales and experiences including on-line communities (e.g., Facebook and Gogobot), on-line travel review sites (e.g., TripAdvisor and Zomato), blogs (e.g., Travelblog and Travelpod), media sharing sites (e.g., Instagram and YouTube), social bookmarking sites (e.g., Pinterest), social knowledge sharing sites (e.g., Wikitravel) and virtual worlds (e.g., SecondLife) as similarly identified by [5] and [6].

Social media have become increasingly popular among young people or millennials. They are rather a compulsory practice in millennials' daily routine [7] and young travelers are no exception [8]. Henceforth, the need for knowing these young travelers becomes a priority not only for T&H corporations but also for academic research. For instance, in 2010, the young travelers segment generated roughly USD\$165 billion and represented approximately 20% of the 940 million international tourists traveling [9]. In addition, forecasts by the UNTWO predict that the young travelers segment might reach nearly 300 million international trips annually by 2020, being one of the rapidest rising markets globally.

Perhaps a good illustration of how young people are traveling abroad might be described through buzzwords such as '*backpacker tourism*' or '*backpacking*'. Formerly commenced as an alternative type of tourism by a minor number of young travelers during 1960s and 1970s with the '*hippie trail*' in Southeast Asia [10]–[12], backpacking has gone forward to its contemporaneous form branded as '*flashpacker tourism*' or '*flashpacking*' [13]. Accordingly, answering how technology has restyled the backpacking experience may possibly offer "(...) a snapshot into one how technological innovations are impacting one aspect of life: travel and tourism" [14].

This paper presents a novel approach to understand how social media are shaping backpackers' experiences focused on the presence of emotions on their blogs. Into the bargain, there are two main research objectives which consist on providing insights into the contemporary backpackers' attitudes and examining the potential implications of their UGC to assist travel-related marketing strategies along with product/services improvement. Such information is found in word-based blog entries and is extracted and analyzed through a combination of methods, specifically sentiment analysis and digital ethnography. In terms of structure, it embarks with a literature review (Section II) where the current backpacker tourism literature is explored. Afterwards, the research methods (Section III) used are explained. In succession, the findings and discussion (Section IV) are presented and discussed. Finally, the paper proposes a synopsis of the main conclusions and future work (Section V).

## II. RELATED WORK

The recent technological advancements allied with the notable backpacker tourism growth has encouraged significant academic interest [15]–[18]. This section provides a review focused on specialized matters underlined in backpacker tourism literature including the emergence of the tech-savvy independent traveler and how social media are restyling the backpacking experience.

### A. From drifters to tech-savvy independent travelers

During the past few decades, backpacker tourism has been widely commercialized to the point of becoming strongly associated with a mainstream global phenomenon [10]. On its own, academic research on this trend has been primarily popularized by [19] where the term ‘*drifters*’ was used to describe young travelers from the 1960s and 1970s strongly related with the beatnik and hippie philosophies. Their emblematic trait was the need for traveling with no set route, plan or objectives, while dipping themselves entirely with the culture of the host destination [19]. Along these lines, ‘*drifters*’ would satisfy their traveling needs by adopting a ‘*go with the flow*’ posture. Thus, this alternative mind-set adopted came as consequence of the political, social and economic context of the time.

Next, [20] retorted to the pejorative connotations linked with the term (e.g., drug culture) by suggesting a movement with a purpose, referring to them as ‘*wanderers*’. Similarly to ‘*drifters*’, ‘*wanderers*’ were young travelers who desired to challenge their maturity and capability by undertaking extended and demanding trips. Then again, [21] labeled them as ‘*travelers*’ since the main aim behind their experience was to get the sense of freedom that travel brings accompanied by the necessity to get away from the imposed restraints of society. Yet, it was not until the 1990s when scholars have distinguished these young travelers as ‘*backpackers*’. At that time, [22] came up with five criteria to categorize them such as an inclination for low-priced lodging, an emphasis on meeting others travelers, a self-reliantly, well-thought-out and flexible travel agenda, easy-going posture along with engaging in partaking activities. These criteria were later on reorganized by [23] who included being free, independent, open-minded and traveling as long as possible. Therefore, Cohen’s original term ‘*drifters*’ may no longer be rigorously truthful to designate modern backpackers [10], since they are continuously addressed differently.

Although the core of the backpacking philosophy may somehow have persisted throughout time [17], [23], [24], the present-day political, social and economic context has altered dramatically. For instance, in recent years, backpacker tourism has been influenced by technological developments alongside with a shifted demography in the Western world (e.g., older age at marriage, older age having children, wealth and better-quality free time) [15]. In this manner, the so-called flashpacker has emerged as backpacking with ‘*style*’ as well as ‘*bucks and toys*’ [15]. According to [25], flashpackers pursue a lifestyle which combines the mainstream backpacker culture and the ‘*digital nomad*’ philosophy.

They carry high-tech gadgets such as laptop, flash drive, mobile phone which allow them to not only work from any place [15], but also connect instantaneously with multiple networks through social media [26], [27]. Hitherto, [12] observed that young travelers tend to be more agreeable to hold the backpacker label. In contrast, travelers who consider themselves as flashpackers are generally older, have higher purchasing power and stay in a diversity of lodgings [15], all at once being considered part of a new global elite [28].

On the one hand, flashpackers are regarded as a sub-culture of tech-savvy backpackers who are actively engaged with the latest technological innovations [18]. On the other hand, “backpackers today are much more wired today than they used to be (...) the nature of backpacking has totally changed and it’s not going back” (blog entry posted on NomadicMatt.com cited in [18]), implying that backpackers are incorporating portable technologies into their daily routine. Similarly to [13] and [16], this paper assumes that flashpacker tourism is a contemporary form of backpacker tourism which reaches out to backpackers of all ages due to the snowballing effect brought by new technologies and social media. In fact, as technologies advance, the terms are actually becoming adjacent and so the interSection between backpackers and flashpackers could be plausibly referred to as ‘*tech-savvy independent travelers*’ and from now onwards this concept will be widely adopted. For example, both backpackers and flashpackers have a preference for ‘*off the beaten track*’ destinations and particularly Southeast Asia is a well-trodden route among them [10], [11]. Likewise, recent developments in smart phones have allowed both backpackers and flashpackers to actively access social media before, during and after their journey “for information searches, posting of accounts of their experience as well as networking” [29]. Nevertheless, research concerning this up-to-date phenomenon is still at its infancy. Therefore, understanding how technological progress, and more precisely social media, has contributed to evolutions and adaptation of backpacking experiences is a main area for forthcoming backpacker tourism studies.

### B. From guidebooks to social media

For a long time, guidebooks have symbolized a permanent construction of the backpacker culture. Guidebooks brought a shared resource for backpackers which contributed momentarily to the establishment of backpacker tourism by making the experience accessible along with nourishing the expansion of typical trails [14], [24]. Accordingly, Lonely Planet (LP) has arisen as a pioneer unconventional guidebook brand in the 1970s which embraced for the first time the ‘*backpacker identity*’ [30]. Also, LP has increasingly transformed Southeast Asia in one of the oldest and most popular backpacker routes due to its link with Tony Wheeler’s original book ‘*Across Asia on the Cheap*’ published in 1973 [31], [32]. Thus far, LP is the most well-known guidebook brand among backpackers [12], [33]–[36], being even considered by [37] as the creator of backpacker tourism itself.

Contrariwise, in today's vibrant virtual reality, backpackers are no longer relying exclusively on their '*Backpacker Bible*' [12], [24] for travel information searches. In truth, according to [38] "social interaction and meeting others is an integral part of the [backpacking] experience" which means they are very likely to share stories and experiences either off-line (word-of-mouth) or on-line (electronic-word-of-mouth). Thus, interpersonal influence has become remarkably extensive as it began to include recommendations from acquaintances, family as well as strangers [39]. It seems that social interactions among all travelers are being restyled by new communication practices such as social media and mostly accomplished through Internet and mobile phone [26], [40]. Particularly, backpacker tourism has been referred to as "one of the cultural symbols of this increasingly mobile world" [12] due to its enormous expansion and changes in the past few years. As a matter of fact, mobile phones have allowed the previously alleged tech-savvy independent travelers to successfully connect to social media in any place either through wifi or mobile Internet data. Furthermore, social media offer an on-line network which enables these travelers to satisfy their necessity of sharing their travel knowledge and experiences [2]. Like so, they are able to produce UGC comprising vacation aspects such as expenses, meteorological conditions, attraction sites as well as communicating feelings, thoughts and imaginings about features of the vacation through snapshots, videos, texts, emojis, emoticons and further semantic indicators used in on-line communication [41].

Another point is that according to [42] backpackers may be progressively shifting from guidebooks to social media as this high level of interaction and individuality is currently unmanageable to be achieved by them. Although guidebook publishers have already begun launching on-line presence (e.g., LP created an on-line forum named Thorn Tree Forum where over 5,000 posts are shared per day) [42], [43], on-line travel review sites such as TripAdvisor.com have become increasingly influential. Undeniably, TripAdvisor.com allows all travelers to remark products, services and destinations they have experienced, and these reviews will inform as well as influence other travelers' purchase decisions [6], [44], [45]. In fact, over 24 million on-line users visit TripAdvisor.com a month (TripAdvisor.com, 2007 cited in [44]) showing its very high reputation among all travelers. Yet, weblogs remain as one of the most pervasive social media sites within the travel community [46], [47]. Weblogs, commonly called by its shortening term '*blogs*', are a communication tool where travelers are able create web-based entries of their journeys written in inverse chronological sequence and diary-style layout [39], [47], [48]. Blogs of travel experiences are usually referred to as travel blogs [49] and they are characterized not only by its user-friendliness but also its' inexpensive or costless value to access them. Besides, blogs "(...) seem naturally suited as a media format for backpackers because they support simple location and time-independent creation of web content that can include both multimedia functionality and interaction with other users" [50].

For that reason, [51] explains that blogs offer a vehicle for writers to express their genuine emotions and experience, while [52] confirms it by claiming that "regular readers thus can have a sense of the identifying '*voice*' behind the posts on the site". In reality, computer-mediated communication (CMC) occurring by computer-mediated formats such as social media sites might be aiding to preserve the backpacker culture to such a degree that "backpacking is becoming part of everyday life as its adherents consistently and actively participating in the culture even while at home" [43]. This type of virtual presence has given the opportunity for tech-savvy independent travelers to share key features, experiences and emotions about their accommodation, transportation, sightseeing, entertainment and destinations, providing highly useful UGC for target marketing strategies. In spite of the fairly advancement of state of the art on both backpacker tourism and the wide applications of social media in the T&H industry, there is still a lack of understanding on how to recognize tech-savvy independent travelers' emotions in social media. Henceforth, this research revolutionizes the current existing knowledge gap by aiming to understand the presence of emotions on their blogs using sentiment analysis along with digital ethnography, at the same time as encouraging further research on the topic.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

#### A. Methodology

In recent times, many specialized blogs have been established to allow backpackers to record their travel diaries and share them with acquaintances, family and strangers [48]. They reflect a suitable platform to communicate travel experiences above and beyond the typical descriptions executed by tourism marketers [53] such as guidebooks. Furthermore, they have essentially produced an advanced C2C way of interacting that is not controlled by businesses but instead by users [54]. Thus far, several of these blogs have become progressively more illustrious among the travel community [55]. For instance, [56] acknowledged Travel-Blog.org, TravelPod.com, Blog.realtravel.com, Yourtraveljournal.com and Travelpost.com as the most noticeable ones. In this manner, blogs are the preferred data collection method for this study as they offer the chance to disclose tech-savvy independent travelers' understandings of travel products, services and experiences, along with expressing their observations, perceptions, judgments, feelings and emotions [57].

According to [58] "affective sciences systems and psychological emotion research must develop together" implying that the growing interest in understanding human emotions is common to different research fields and the best way to carry on developing the state of the art is to combine them. Along these lines, this exploratory research adopts a mixed strategy to comprehend the presence of emotions in tech-savvy independent travelers' blogs by joining together theories of emotion with the applied engineering objectives of analyzing sentiments in natural language bridging the gap amongst (unstructured) multi-modal information as well as (structured) machine-processable data.

In particular, this research embraces two distinct methods namely sentiment analysis and digital ethnography from quantitative and qualitative approaches, respectively. On the one hand, we apply sentic computing [59] to extract aspects and polarity from travelers' stories. On the other hand, we use digital ethnography on such stories for better understanding human behavior, e.g., emotional state changes.

### B. Sample selection

Blogs are highly advantageous when compared to peculiar research settings such as face-to-face interviews since these hardly achieve to attain sincere information, while according to [60] data which is collected on-line provides occasionally greater 'intimacy'. Blog entries help to gain knowledge on how these travelers build, order and create significance from their involvements. In particular, the selected experimental reality is TravelBlog.org similarly to [49] and [48]. TravelBlog.org is a free online travel diary for travelers across the world which allows tech-savvy independent travelers to update their on-line journal in a not-for-profit bases. It is recognized as one of the most well-known Travel 2.0 sites since it has above 200,000 adherents, rises at around 100 novel adherents daily and hosts beyond 7 million photos, 60,000 maps as well as 700,000 blog entries. Then, the research site is undeniably picked appropriately through non-probabilistic purposive sampling as a decision has been made about which elements are involved in the paper according to the researchers' knowledge and judgment. The sample included in total 55 of the most recent blog entries written in English from TravelBlog.org about Southeast Asia (in February 2016), while 5 blog entries were allocated to each of the 11 countries part of Southeast Asia namely Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. However, if an entry comprised only a small number of lines (less than 10 sentences, which was seen as inadequate to describe a journey) it was excluded and replaced by the next most recent blog entry from the same site. Southeast Asia has been selected due to its oldest roots as a backpacker trail [31].

### C. Data analysis

We analyzed travel blogs through sentic computing, a cognitive-inspired framework [61] that leverages both knowledge representation [62], [63] and machine learning [64], [65] to extract aspects (that is opinion targets such as accommodation, entertainment, food and transportation) and the polarity associated to them (i.e., positive, negative or neutral). Sentic computing has been applied to many other applications of sentiment analysis, including healthcare [66], [67] and finance [68], [69]. In this work, we used it to mine travelers' opinions from text based on review helpfulness [70] and user intent [71]. While sentic computing is a multilingual framework [72], for this work we only focused on English blogs. In particular, we first extracted concepts [73] and aspects [74] from travel blogs and then used SenticNet [75] to infer the polarity associated to them.

Data collected has later been assessed through narrative analysis because "content and narrative analysis struggle continuously with the problem of the context (...) of a story within personal experience" [76], permitting one to draw inferences on the presence of emotions in tech-savvy independent travelers' blogs. Also, narrative analysis on travel blogs offers scholars, destination marketers, government officials and tourism marketing professionals insights into how these travelers create meanings and identities based on their travel experiences [57].

It is considered as a flexible technique for examining text data [77] which focuses on semiotics, and is thus consistent with the exploratory nature designated for the research. Throughout the narrative analysis of these blog entries, the data was reduced into aspects that integrate and generalize the major themes of these texts to assist the quantitative analysis. Also, these aspects have been taken into consideration for the narrative analysis in order to provide the social context of these stories which is in fact the key to their performance. In this manner, tech-savvy independent travelers have shared their feelings, thoughts and experiences regarding aspects such as accommodation, entertainment, food and transportation.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Travel blogs offer word-based stories told by a narrator with the purpose of conveying and negotiating his/her identity with others, for instance Travel Bug<sup>1</sup> notes that

"[t]his blog isn't intended to share how my life was before and how travel suddenly changed it. It's not intended to express how traveling is the best thing in the world (if you don't already know that, well... sucks to be you). The idea behind all my blogs will be to share one story from each trip. What you make out of that story, that's your journey. I already made mine!"

Along these lines, [78] confirms that storytelling allows individuals to build personalized meanings grounded on their cultural upbringing including common sense beliefs, religion and interpretations. Thus, narrative analysis of these texts offers a coherent method to advance a deeper and more significant understanding of tech-savvy independent travelers' behavior, emotions and experiences [79].

To start, it is necessary to get acquainted with these travelers: the term '*tech-savvy independent travelers*' has been previously acknowledged to define the interSection between the '*traditional*' backpacker (backpacker) and the '*tech-savvy*' backpacker (flashpacker) considering individuals of all ages. Interestingly, users such as Kristin Kelly<sup>1</sup> who states that "[m]y girlfriend Rochelle and I decided that Bali (...) was the perfect place to start our *backpacking excursion* around Southeast Asia" and Tom Cross<sup>2</sup> who emphasizes that "[t]alking of the SE Asian *backpacker trail*, time to jump on it ourselves for a few months. Next stop Singapore!" both consider themselves

<sup>1</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/blog-915154.html>

<sup>2</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Burma/blog-911496.html>

as backpackers, although they would rather fall into the flashpacker category due to their hi-tech endeavors, proving how suitable this novel term is applied to these travelers. Furthermore, as previously pointed out, guidebooks have become an outdated trend since tech-savvy independent travelers are seeking for uniqueness and high levels of interaction which is confirmed by Gerry Kataoka's<sup>3</sup> clarification that "[w]hat you want to avoid are restaurants that have become 'famous' among tourists thanks to mentions in guidebooks (...)" and by Bryan and Tanja's<sup>4</sup> statement that "[f]or example, we are very busy every day with planning routes, finding food and accommodation in strange countries, crossing borders, arranging visas, arranging bike shipping, writing blogs even!"

Hence, tourism corporations should now be more focused on establishing a strong on-line positioning such as having virtual presence in on-line communities, on-line travel review sites, microblogs, blogs, media sharing sites, and social bookmarking sites, rather than being broadly mentioned in guidebooks as travel discourse is making use of more personal language. Therefore, tech-savvy independent travelers offer a snapshot in their travel blogs of many aspects of traveling such as accommodation, entertainment, food and transportation.

#### A. Accommodation

Tech-savvy independent travelers describe their lodging experiences focusing on diverse features including the type of accommodation (e.g., home-stay, guest-house/hostel and flash hotel), amenities (e.g., infinity pool, double bed and sitting area), price (e.g., luxurious vs economical) and location (e.g., town center vs remote area). It is evident that tech-savvy independent travelers stay in a variety of lodgings from the budget friendly guest-houses to the luxurious hotels such as Lee Boxcat<sup>5</sup>, Brian and Tanja<sup>6</sup>, Rachel<sup>7</sup> who stayed at a guest-house, flash hotel and luxurious hotel, respectively. This means that these travelers widely differ in their spending patterns which consequently slows down lodgings' target marketing plans. Yet, home-stays are providing one of the most remarkable lodging experiences since tech-savvy independent travelers such as Todd Breton<sup>8</sup>, Gemma and Chris<sup>9</sup>, and Mallory and Warren<sup>10</sup> explain that "(...) I am forever *grateful* for the option to stay at a local flat and *enjoy* a local experience versus staying at a hotel which is what we normally do when traveling abroad", "[w]e have stayed in homestays before, but this felt the most *homely* we have been to with Ken's young daughter running around and the kittens eager to be fussed over" and "I think the *highlight* of our time so far in Laos has got to be our home-stay in the tiny remote village of Champasak (...) [a] very busy and vibrant place". Then, '*going*

*local*' is an important part of tech-savvy independent travelers' journey which offers the chance for novel tourism e-businesses to join the field with upgraded models compared to the ones applied by either Airbnb.com or Couchsurfing.com.

Another factor that tech-savvy independent travelers take into consideration is the lodging amenities, for example Kirsty Petherick<sup>11</sup> describes that her "(...) room is lush.. Massive, double bed, a bath that looks out over the jungle and pool", whereas Rubybolt<sup>12</sup> states that they "(...) went to a fancy resort for breakfast. It had a really nice pool and sun loungers for relaxing on" and Gerry Kataoka<sup>13</sup> thinks that "[t]hese are bungalows, with huge king beds, double twin sitting area, outside patio deck, full bath, work desk, fan, and part time AC", demonstrating that tech-savvy independent travelers choose their accommodation according to the amenities provided.

Also, they enjoy lodgings situated on off the beaten track settings, for example Melissa Walpole<sup>14</sup>, gillg<sup>15</sup> and Kirsty Petherick<sup>16</sup> in turn state that "[t]he wooden bungalows were beautifully situated in the midst of an uphill jungle scenery (...) [t]he view however was *unbelievable* and we did really feel in the heart of Thailand", "[t]he location of the hotel was fantastic- up a long and winding hillside with sensational views of the bay" and "[o]ne hour later I reached my hotel (...) [i]t's right in the middle of the jungle.. Loads of Palm trees and coconuts [smiling face emoji]". In this way, future lodging corporations targeting tech-savvy independent travelers should consider operating in remote areas with good-looking sceneries.

Lastly, tech-savvy independent travelers encounter rather more issues in guest-houses/hostels as Kirsty Petherick<sup>17</sup> describes that "Found Wheelers backpackers we all went in and found that they only had 2 beds left.. we made our booking wrong, booking it a day before. We emailed them to changed it but they said they didn't receive it.. *A complete Nightmare..*" and Melissa Walpole<sup>18</sup> says "[w]e probably should have done a bit more research as we were in for a *nasty surprise* when we arrived at the hostel(...)".

Alternatively, upgrades are often used to solve these matters and tech-savvy independent travelers appreciate it, for example Shona Travels the World<sup>19</sup> recognizes that she "(...) stayed at the Saigon Signature hotel and would stay there again because they gave me an upgrade, even if the bed was as hard as a rock", showing that these travelers perceive upgrades as an efficient approach applied by lodging corporations to solve any hazarded matters.

<sup>3</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Burma/blog-906254.html>

<sup>4</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/East-Timor/blog-718166.html>

<sup>5</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Laos/blog-917711.html>

<sup>6</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/East-Timor/blog-718166.html>

<sup>7</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Laos/blog-919445.html>

<sup>8</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Singapore/blog-911933.html>

<sup>9</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Cambodia/blog-914626.html>

<sup>10</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Laos/blog-916745.html>

<sup>11</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/blog-919115.html>

<sup>12</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/East-Timor/blog-873018.html>

<sup>13</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Burma/blog-906254.html>

<sup>14</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Thailand/blog-917933.html>

<sup>15</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/blog-915089.html>

<sup>16</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/blog-919115.html>

<sup>17</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Malaysia/blog-918327.html>

<sup>18</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Thailand/blog-917933.html>

<sup>19</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Vietnam/blog-920111.html>

## B. Entertainment

Tech-savvy independent travelers refer to their leisure activities focusing on three main features, namely adventure sports (e.g., snorkeling, diving and trekking), nightlife (e.g., jungle party) and recreation (e.g., massage). Adventure sports are the most common practice among such travelers, for example tab gangopadhyay<sup>20</sup> declares that “I always dreamt about sailing on the Mekong River where the jungles on both sides of the river are dense and a fear of uncertainty what may come out from the dense forest always *fascinated* me” and Kristin Kelly<sup>21</sup> confirms that when she says that “[e]xhaustion from four days of snorkeling, trekking, and searching for the planet’s craziest creatures finally kicked in and we retreated to our various guesthouses”. Hence, it is evident that “risk and adventure narrative (...) is (still) being manifested and expressed within backpacker communities” [80]. This means that tourism corporations such as travel agencies (TAs) and on-line travel agencies (OTAs) targeting tech-savvy independent travelers might well have the chance to embrace this predisposition for risk and adventures by providing them excursions or activities focused on these preferences.

Then again, tech-savvy independent travelers desire an active nightlife, for example Melissa Walpole<sup>22</sup> emphasizes that “[i]t really was a party island which means the days are for sleeping and the evenings are for making bad decisions with great people” and Kate MacDougall<sup>23</sup> says that “the night went a lot like this. We were stared at a lot, but everyone was dancing and drinking and having a *fantastic time*”. Nevertheless, not all tech-savvy independent travelers find these undertakings extraordinary, for example Becci and Nad<sup>24</sup> state that “the night got worse and worse, the vibe was not welcoming and all the people there were workers. Within 5 minutes we were *desperate* to leave”. Like so, tech-savvy independent travelers have mixed feelings about pubs and clubs which holds back potential personalized marketing by these corporations.

Last but not least, tech-savvy independent travelers give significance to a laid-back trip where they concurrently pursue a ‘*go with a flow*’ posture, for example Tom Cross<sup>25</sup> expresses that “[t]o be honest, we were pretty terrible tourists in Singapore. We ended up spending a lot of time just relaxing, sitting in cafes and bars, catching up on much needed laundry (proper washing machines! Such luxury to not have to do our washing in the sink...) and generally being lazy” and Theresa Nichols<sup>26</sup> explains “I *crave* a massage. I ask my driver to take me to a place where ‘people with not good eyes’ (as I said it) give massage”. Thus, tech-savvy independent travelers are highly likely to enjoy last minute deals provided by OTAs, allowing tourism corporations to specify deals for them.

<sup>20</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Vietnam/blog-918017.html>

<sup>21</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/blog-915154.html>

<sup>22</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Thailand/blog-917933.html>

<sup>23</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Laos/blog-918721.html>

<sup>24</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Cambodia/blog-918225.html>

<sup>25</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Singapore/blog-911933.html>

<sup>26</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Cambodia/blog-918661.html>

## C. Food

As referred previously ‘*going local*’ is a significant part of tech-savvy independent travelers’ journey and this is broadly visible when it comes to food. They appreciate trying out local meals and particularly street food is a commonly adopted diet among them. For example, Glen & Suzanne Cherry<sup>27</sup> declare that “[i]n the evening we ate street food again I ate Laksa this was the best Laksa I have ever eaten”, Rachel<sup>28</sup> affirms that “[b]ack to the road along the front and tadaaaaa, here were the Party People, having a right good time and eating delicious street food” and Tom Cross<sup>29</sup> emphasis “[m]y favourite evening meals were the street barbecues - Burmese barbecues are quite something to behold and something I will remember fondly”.

Yet, health concerns are prevalent regarding this type of food, for example Theresa Nichols<sup>30</sup> explains that “[t]he weaver offers fresh spring rolls she’s prepared just for me. I see the fresh lettuce, and danger screams in my head. I had just recovered from a bad belly and didn’t want another. (...) I gulp and pray I will remain healthy, then eat the delicious spring roll and peanut sauce”. Moreover, tech-savvy independent travelers feel that genuineness is rather an important criterion, for example Jackie Vickery<sup>31</sup> states that “I hope they don’t lose too much of their traditional lifestyle with the growth of tourism and investment from multi-national businesses”. Therefore, the local government and tourism corporations have a very important role in encouraging not only the destination’s traditional food culture but also improving food hygiene standards in order to attract tech-savvy independent travelers.

## D. Transportation

Tech-savvy independent travelers give an exceptional emphasis into their transport arrangements as they have been extensively pointed out throughout the blog entries. It is evident that tech-savvy independent travelers perceive themselves in the same way as Kristin Kelly<sup>32</sup> who explains that “[a]s a self-proclaimed nomad, I have had the *pleasure* of trying many different forms of transportation throughout my years of travel”. Then, tech-savvy independent travelers are traveling by different modes of transport including airplane, auto-rickshaw, bicycle, boat, bus, e-bicycle, ferry, lorry, motorbike, rickshaw, van and underground. One of the main features pointed out were the so-called unexpected circumstances, for example Kate MacDougall<sup>33</sup> says that “[t]here was a rooster on our bus. (...) Not a sound you *expect* to hear on a bus”, Brian & Tanja<sup>34</sup> declare “[w]elcome to the world of Indonesian ferries - they get progressively more *unpredictable* as the island’s population decreases” and clodagh breen<sup>35</sup> describes that “I got a *shock*

<sup>27</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Brunei/blog-868985.html>

<sup>28</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Laos/blog-919445.html>

<sup>29</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Burma/blog-911496.html>

<sup>30</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Cambodia/blog-918661.html>

<sup>31</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Vietnam/blog-917180.html>

<sup>32</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Indonesia/blog-915154.html>

<sup>33</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Cambodia/blog-918772.html>

<sup>34</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/East-Timor/blog-718166.html>

<sup>35</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/Burma/blog-916720.html>

as a taxi driver spit lots of red stuff out the window, I thought he was dying but turns out he was just eating the famous red addictive nut here!". Yet, they perceive these happenings optimistically as clodagh breen puts it "[w]e rented an E bike to head off and explore more of the temples, this was an adventure, let me tell you! (...) It was way heavier than we *expected* so balancing took some getting used to especially with the two of us but soon we were flying along at 40km an hour all around the temples [smiling face emoji]" relating to the profound experiences of adventure.

On the other hand, tech-savvy independent travelers are rather concerned about their budget regarding transportation seeking for the best economical deals, for example Brian & Tanja<sup>36</sup> state that "[r]iding a bike from London to Sydney is more like unpaid work, really. Expensive unpaid work at that", Gerry Kataoka<sup>37</sup> explains that "[b]uses are by far the least expensive way to get around the country, although the most time consuming", while Rachel<sup>38</sup> says "(...) you'd be crazily *insane* to contemplate taking a bike yourself. We had a bodyguard with us, really in case there was a puncture or something, and they were very professional and safety conscious. It is *fun* but an expensive 3 hours". Hence, the tech-savvy independent travelers have similar preferences regarding transportation and entertainment as they seek not only for good deals but also risky activities which means that tourism corporations have a great opportunity to apply personalized promotions to appeal them.

## V. CONCLUSION

This work has explored the key factors of flashpacker tourism via sentiment analysis and digital ethnography. Besides aspects like accommodation, entertainment, food and transportation, social interaction has been identified as the main part of the backpacking experience. Remarkably, tech-savvy independent travelers are no exception since the findings suggest that these travelers give an astonishing significance to it by strongly relying on CMC such as travel blogs to communicate features related to accommodation, entertainment, food and transportation as well as their own face-to-face interactions.

Accordingly, the use of sentiment analysis and narrative analysis has offered a better understanding of how important social media are for tech-savvy independent travelers as they have an exceptional desire for not only sharing their travel experiences virtually but also social interaction either on-line or off-line, enabling tourism corporations to have more control over their marketing approaches and increase the likelihood of positive electronic-word-of-mouth recommendations to survive and develop in this rising restructured industry.

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<sup>36</sup><http://travelblog.org/Asia/East-Timor/blog-718166.html>

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