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WOM antecedents in backpacker travelers☆

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the antecedents of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) message content (MC) of backpackers' travelers. How travel motivation, the sense of belonging, social interaction places and cultural activities influence WOM-MC in the case of backpacker travelers. The study tests a model empirically using a survey of 656 backpackers from 75 different countries.

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1. Introduction

Backpacking is an important social, cultural and economic phenomenon at a global level (O'Reilly, 2006; Sorensen, 2003) mostly sustained by the growth of international travel, low cost accommodations, labor flexibility, and changes in lifestyle (Thyne, Davies, & Nash, 2005). Backpackers are independent travelers who show preference for affordable accommodations, meeting other travelers, opting for flexible travel itineraries, traveling for long periods of time and who like participating in recreational activities (Hillman, 2009; Pearce, 1990). Understanding the motivations that lead backpackers to travel and their behavior is highly important since these travelers tend to spend more money than any others due to the longer duration of their stay and the larger contact with the host populations (Minotta, 2015).

In fact, socialization is an essential aspect of the travel experience for backpackers, playing an important role in the development of

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) (Murphy, 2001). WOM is an important information source and in tourism it is a major aspect influencing travelers' behaviors and buying decisions (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Gitelson & Crompton, 1984). As far as backpackers are concerned, WOM information transmitted and shared with other backpackers largely conditions and influences their travel decisions and behaviors (Murphy, 2001). Few studies focus on how backpackers share information (Pearce & Lee, 2005).

The academic interest on the backpackers' study is increasing. However the need for multicultural studies on the topic is substantial. Backpacker tourism is a culture (Sorensen, 2003) and this study validates the importance of the backpacking phenomenon.

The scope of the present study is the relationship between backpackers' motivation, their travel experience and behavior, specially the dynamics of social interactions, and information sharing among backpackers. The present study aims to contribute to the understanding of the antecedents of WOM message content (MC) with a particular focus on backpackers' travel motivations, characteristics and experiences. The authors seek to analyze the dynamics of social interactions among backpackers and provide a framework that facilitates the understanding of the factors influencing the transmission of WOM information.

This paper begins with an overview of the current literature and then develops the conceptual framework and the hypotheses. A discussion of research methodology follows. Using data from 656 backpacker tourists, this study uses confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling to test the conceptual framework empirically. The article concludes with implications for theory and for managerial practice in the tourism sector.

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2. Literature review

Social identity theory (SIT) can provide a strong theoretical basis for explaining WOM-MC among backpackers. This theory presents the “self” as a multiple layered identity formed by different widening circles of membership groups. In a given context, an individual may feel, think and act based on the sense of belonging to a given group. The individual's identification with a group is the search for his own self-definition, basing his attitudes, motivations, actions and behaviors on the willingness to belong to a group with which he identifies himself (Tajfel, 1974).

2.1. Travel motivation and sense of belonging

Backpackers' travel motivations are strongly heterogeneous since they are diverse and multifaceted (Cohen, 2003; Pearce & Foster, 2007; Uriely, Yonay, & Simchai, 2002). Nevertheless, some travel motivations are recurrent in the backpacker literature: the quest for independence, identified as a major reason for backpackers' desire to travel (Cohen, 2003; Elsrud, 2001; Maoz, 2007; O'Reilly, 2006); the search for adventure, seen as a cornerstone of the backpacker's identity building (Cohen, 1972; Elsrud, 2001) and as an integral part of the backpacking experience (Elsrud, 2001; Reichel, Fuchs, & Uriely, 2009). Backpackers also look opportunities for new adventures and challenges, seeking unusual routes and unconventional trips with destinations “off the beaten track” (Cohen, 1973; Elsrud, 2001).

Backpackers choose flexible and organized, independent travel itineraries, which allow them to travel for long periods of time (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995). That way they are able to stay for an extended period in the host communities. Backpackers develop their social skills by interacting with other backpackers and locals as well (Murphy, 2001). They wish to learn about the locals and their lifestyles (Maoz, 2007; Riley, 1988) and also desire to know about the other backpackers' culture of origin. This learning process is achieved primarily through social interactions (Hottola, 2004).

Backpacking is often an ongoing life practice which allows its travelers to feel a unique sense of self and a distinct social identity (Cohen, 2011). Backpackers develop their own unique sense of belonging (Paris, 2010), searching for resemblances, for something with which they might identify themselves or for people with whom they may share interests with, creating communities. Backpackers' communities have a similar opinion about traveling and about how they see the world (O'Reilly, 2006) and are built around shared passions and emotions linked by a shared identity and philosophy, idiosyncratic rituals and a sense of belonging (Sorensen, 2003) and commitment (Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993).

Many backpackers are motivated to travel in quest for independence, wishing to build a new sense of self during the trip, a more autonomous and fearless one, while relaxing in an unadulterated and genuine destination (Cohen, 1973; Elsrud, 2001). However, they also seek the contact with other backpackers with similar preferences and interests; developing their sense of belonging to the communities they feel they might be part of (Murphy, 2001; Ross, 1997; Sorensen, 2003).

H1. Backpackers' travel motivation leads to a community sense of belonging.

2.2. Sense of belonging and social interaction places

Backpackers are often associated with a particular type of accommodation or transport (Butler & Hannam, 2012). Most backpackers prefer to stay in hostels (Nash, Thyne, & Davies, 2006), not only because they are an affordable type of accommodation but mainly because they allow the creation of a closer environment with other backpackers

with similar interests and behaviors which will promote contact and the sharing of useful information (Murphy, 2001).

Backpackers also seek to move in busses so they can be in contact with backpackers from other communities (Hottola, 2004; Murphy, Mascardo, & Benckendorff, 2007; Riley, 1988). Traveling by bus gives them the opportunity to obtain independence and go through different experiences (Butler & Hannam, 2012), do some sightseeing (Larsen, Øgaard, & Brun, 2011) and enables the development of social interactions (Mohsin & Ryan, 2003; Uriely et al., 2002).

Backpackers look for the company of their peers, tourists with similar interests (Maoz & Bekerman, 2010). Making new friends and meeting interesting people are considered the highest points of the trip. Thus, they opt for a flexible travel itinerary since they want to meet other backpackers in order to socialize (Cohen, 2003; Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Murphy, 2001; Riley, 1988). In this context, social interactions occur in accommodations, busses and transport facilities due to the sense of belonging to the community which makes backpackers looking for places where they can meet people with similar values and interests (Vogt, 1976).

H2. Backpackers' community sense of belonging contributes to an increased use of places where social interactions occur: busses and travel centers and accommodation.

2.3. Travel motivation and social interaction places

The means of transportation that backpackers choose are an important aspect of the way they travel (Maoz, 2007; Nash et al., 2006), capable of defining a hierarchy. This aspect is not assumed by the backpacker community, though (Sorensen, 2003). Traveling by bus raises the backpackers' road status (Sorensen, 2003), as well as their necessity to leave every time they can, allowing a greater exchange of experiences and know-how (Butler & Hannam, 2012) and redesigning new communication practices (Marscheroni, 2007). This way backpackers increase the number of social interactions (Ryan & Mohsin, 2001; Uriely et al., 2002) and sightseeing possibilities (Larsen et al., 2011). These sporadic experiences in a wider social environment, as well as the itinerant way of life, are important for cultural communication and for the social construction of the backpacker's self, one of the main backpackers' travel motivations (Cohen, 2011).

Backpackers tend to move in busses driven by the sense of adventure and independence that these means of transportation provide them (Butler & Hannam, 2012). This corroborates the observation that motivations for traveling are a behavior stimulator (Mansfeld, 1992). In this context, social interactions that occur on busses and other transportation are related to travel motivations (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995).

H3. Backpackers' travel motivations influence positively backpackers' use of busses and travel centers.

2.4. Sense of belonging and cultural activities

Backpackers tend to develop activities that match their social identity (Ross, 1997) like recreational activities, since this creates value among the community members (Uriely et al., 2002). Hearing them dialoguing about the activities developed as a way of self-differentiation is a common occurrence (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995). So status is achieved by those who are off the beaten track (Uriely et al., 2002) and the difference between conventional tourists and backpackers is highly valued. Despite the difference from conventional travelers, backpackers also tend to visit attractions and both share an obligation to visit international places and cultural landmarks (Welk, 2004). Backpackers' group sense of belonging is directly related to the pursuit of cultural activities (Yan & Bramwell, 2008). Visiting

tourist attractions makes the connection between backpackers and the community possible (Tajfel, 1974).

H4. : Backpackers' sense of belonging contributes positively to the development of cultural activities.

2.5. Travel motivation and WOM-MC

WOM plays an important role in the individuals' behavior and attitudes (Abrantes, Seabra, Lages, & Jayawardhena, 2013). Backpackers consider that the “best information” is the one acquired by WOM shared among backpackers (Riley, 1988). While seeking to be independent, backpackers establish interpersonal relationships and create networks (Vogt, 1976). This rich environment in social interactions allows “storytelling” to occur (Elsrud, 2001; Noy, 2004) in which traveling content is the most common topic (Murphy, 2001) and where there is a mutual exchange of advice and assistance on every aspects of the trip (Maoz, 2007). The backpackers' exchange of information through WOM focuses on the recommendation of places, experiences, and places (Murphy, 2001). Backpackers consider WOM as one of the most important sources of information (Mohsin & Ryan, 2003; Murphy, 2001). It is common to backpackers to rely more on WOM information from other backpackers. They are more skeptical about the information transmitted by commercial sources.

Most of the time, backpackers have a flexible itinerary, which is likely to be changed depending on the information received by WOM. Their travel plans can be modified at any time and, consequently, backpackers need new information such as where to go, where to sleep or eat, and what activities will take place at their next destination (Uriely et al., 2002). Motivational factors may vary whenever individuals want to satisfy their inherent needs (Fodness, 1994). Accordingly, the content of the message depends on several WOM motivations (Welk, 2004).

H5. Backpackers travel motivations affect the content of WOM-MC.

2.6. Social interaction places and WOM-MC

Backpackers enjoy sharing stories of their own travels (Buttle, 1998). Chatting with other backpackers acquires a relevant role in the exchange of information on places to go and to stay in, on sharing stories and travel experiences (Murphy, 2001). In order to satisfy their need for communication, backpackers use open spaces or common rooms, especially in hostels, busses, and on transportation facilities to interact among themselves and share information with individuals that have similar interests and believes (Mohsin & Ryan, 2003).

H6. Places where social interactions occur affects backpackers' WOM-MC.

2.7. Cultural activities and WOM-MC

Backpackers build unique experiences along their journey that will originate stories conveyed through interpersonal communication and storytelling about experiences and places (Elsrud, 2001). The emotional connection with the place and people and the activities they carried out at the destinations are major influences on backpackers' behavior and WOM-MC (Gitelson & Kerstetter, 1995; Hillman, 2009).

H7. The cultural activities carried out by backpackers affect WOM-MC.

In sum, several factors contribute to the development of WOM-MC, factors that include travel motivations, sense of belonging, looking for places to interact socially with other backpackers and cultural activities developed at the destinations.

Fig. 1 includes the conceptual model analyzing the antecedents of WOM-MC between backpackers.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection and measures

An online survey publicized on social networks and on several backpackers' specific online communities between November 24th 2012 and April 5th 2013 allowed data to be gathered. To respond, and after reading the definition available in the questionnaire, tourists should answer whether they considered themselves backpackers. The final sample of 656 allowed having a proportion of 41 observations for each indicator (16 variables) (Westland, 2010). Table 1 includes the questionnaire measures, constructs and scales adapted from relevant literature to the research context.

3.2. Data profile

Backpackers from 75 different places compose the sample: USA (16.6%), Brazil (7.2%), Germany (6.9%), UK (5.8%), Canada (5.5%), Australia (4.4%), Italy (3.4%), Malaysia (3%), Croatia (2.9%), Holland (2.7%), France (2.6%) and Portugal (2.4%) among others (36.6%). The respondents' average age is 29 years old, the youngest was 16 years old, 41% were less than 25 years old, 44.9% were between 26 and 35 and the oldest was 76 years old. There were more men (51.2%) than women (48.8%). Most of them are single/divorced or widows/widowers (80%). More than 70% of the respondents have scholar degrees.

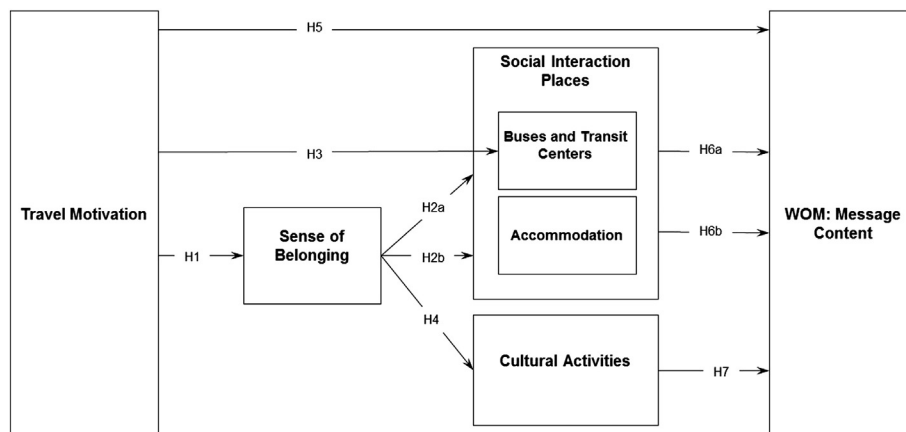


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

Table 1
Constructs, scales, and reliability.

Items	Standardized values	t-Values
<i>Travel motivation</i> ($\alpha = 0.759$; $\rho_{vc} (n) = 0.52$; $\rho = 0.76$)		
V1 I am traveling to be independent (a)	0.63	15.71
V2 I am traveling to enjoy daring/adventurous thrills (b)	0.74	18.82
V3 I am traveling to develop my abilities and accomplishments (b)	0.78	19.89
Scale ranging from “1 – not important” to “5 – very important”		
<i>Sense of belonging</i> ($\alpha = 0.694$; $\rho_{vc} (n) = 0.53$; $\rho = 0.70$) (a)		
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 can find other backpackers	0.70	16.65
Scale ranging from “1 – strongly disagree” to “5 – strongly agree”		
<i>Cultural activities</i> ($\alpha = 0.761$; $\rho_{vc} (n) = 0.62$; $\rho = 0.76$) (a)		
V6 Visiting cultural activities	0.83	16.52
V7 Visiting popular, well know tourist attractions	0.74	15.29
Scale ranging from “1 – not important” to “5 – very important”		
<i>Social interaction places: accommodation</i> ($\alpha = 0.836$; $\rho_{vc} (n) = 0.66$; $\rho = 0.85$) (a)		
V8 Kitchen/eating area	0.76	21.91
V9 Common room	0.95	29.44
V10 Room/dorm	0.71	19.98
Scale ranging from “1 – never” to “5 – always or almost always”		
<i>Social interaction places: busses and transit centers</i> ($\alpha = 0.731$; $\rho_{vc} (n) = 0.59$; $\rho = 0.74$) (a)		
V11 On busses	0.83	14.91
V12 Transit centers	0.7	13.56
Scale ranging from “1 – never” to “5 – always or almost always”		
<i>WOM: message content</i> ($\alpha = 0.734$; $\rho_{vc} (n) = 0.53$; $\rho = 0.81$) (a)		
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	0.80	22.54
V16 Exchange information about places, hostels, transportation, etc.	0.64	17.04
Scale ranging from “1 – never” to “5 – always or almost always”		

Backpackers prefer traveling alone: 44% of the respondents traveled alone and 10.8% traveled with other backpackers they met during the trip. 49% of them visited less than 5 countries and 26.2% visited 5 to 9 countries, 22.8% visited more than 10 countries. The trip lasted more than one year (9.6% of the answers), between 6 months and one year (12%), 1 to 6 months (36%) and one month (40%). The average travel time is 163 days.

With accommodation, food, entertainment, transportation and general expenditures, the respondents' average daily spending was €61. 11.7% of them spent less than €15 per day, 18% spent between €15 and €30, 19.4% spent between €1 and €50 and 12.8% between €51 and €70. 21.5% of the respondents spent more than €71 per day. 16.6% did not know how much they spent per day. Concerning transportation, 31.4% of the backpackers chose the plane, 51.2% of them traveled by

bus, 32.8% by train. 16.9% usually hitchhiked during their trips. Regarding accommodation, 63.7% stated they frequently stayed in hostels.

4. Results

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

4.1. Measurement analysis

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, additional fit indices are also considered: the Comparative Fit Index (.98), the Incremental Fit Index (.98), and the Tucker–Lewis Fit Index (.98). The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation is .042 and the RSMR is .032, which proves to be a good fit for the model (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

All six constructs present good composite validity (ρ) above .63 (Bagozzi, 1980) and the extracted variance of each construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) is always higher than 0.5, as presented in Table 1.

Only the construct “Sense of belonging” has a Cronbach's alpha under the recommended value of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). However, considering that the alpha value is quite close to the recommended value and that this construct is composed solely by two variables, the authors decided to include it in the model, as in other studies (Abrantes et al., 2013).

Table 2 shows that the weight of each item in the respective factor is also always higher than 0.62, with an average value of 0.75. All constructs have a cross-correlation significantly different from 1, and the shared variance between any two constructs is smaller than the average of the variance explained by the constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

4.2. Structural equation model (SEM)

The final SEM has a chi-square value of 225.12 with 95° 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). Fig. 2 represents the estimated final model.

4.3. Hypothesis test

All nine hypotheses receive support. Sense of belonging has a positive impact on social interactions in busses and transport facilities ($\beta_{21} = 0:33$, $t = 5.87$), as well as on the accommodation ($\beta_{31} = 0.61$, $t = 10.69$), which supports H2a and b. Consistently, social interactions in busses and transport facilities and accommodation, respectively H6a ($\beta_{52} = 0:15$, $t = 3.17$) and H6b ($\beta_{53} = 0:34$, $t = 7.77$) have a positive impact on the WOM-MC. Sense of belonging has a direct significant and positive impact on cultural activities ($\beta_{41} = 0:38$, $t = 6.72$), H4 is supported. Travel motivations have a significant impact on the sense of belonging ($\Upsilon_{11} = 0:34$, $t = 6.48$), which supports H1 and on social interactions in busses and transport facilities ($\Upsilon_{21} = 0:12$, $t = 2.30$)

Table 2
Correlation matrix (n = 656).

	Social Interaction Places: Accommodation	WOM: Message Content	Social Interaction Places: Busses and Transit Centers	Travel Motivation	Cultural Activities	Sense of Belonging
Social interaction places: accommodation	0.81 (a)					
WOM: message content	0.48*	0.73 (a)				
Social interaction places: busses and transit centers	0.32*	0.36*	0.77 (a)			
Travel motivation	0.19*	0.4*	0.24*	0.72 (a)		
Cultural activities	0.21*	0.42*	0.25*	0.28*	0.79 (a)	
Sense of belonging	0.59*	0.5*	0.32*	0.31*	0.34*	0.73 (a)

Notes.
(a) Diagonal values represent the “average variance extracted” (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).
* $p < .01$.

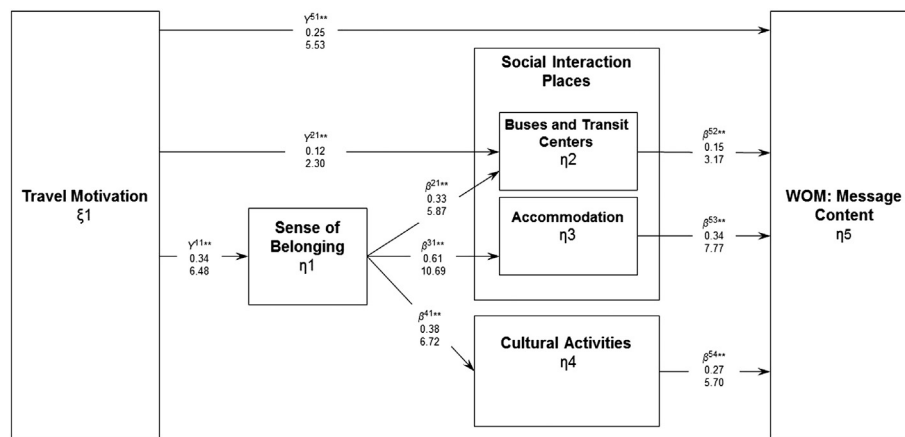


Fig. 2. Final model.

and WOM-MC ($\gamma_{51} = 0.25$, $t = 5.53$), supporting H3 and H5, respectively. H7 is also confirmed: cultural activities have a positive impact on WOM-MC ($\beta_{54} = 0.27$, $t = 5.70$).

5. Conclusions and implications

The present study provides an understanding on the factors that influence the development of WOM messages and their content for backpackers' tourists, namely travel motivations, sense of belonging, the use of social interaction places, and cultural activities. It is evident that information sharing is of major importance for backpackers, making WOM study essential. This study proves that backpackers share information about the places they visited and those they intend to visit, about the differences between their countries of origin, share touristic experiences and exchange information about hostels, activities and transportation.

What could at first sight be thought as a weak spot in a traveler's accommodation, the existence of dorm rooms is a strong point for backpackers, since they like getting together in order to exchange data with tourists sharing the same interests. This turns out to be crucial for their sense of belonging, as supported by other studies (Maaoz & Bekerman, 2010). In fact, another effect of WOM development proved to be the sense of belonging to the community and, in particular, the fact that they prefer looking for places where there might be with other travelers.

The cultural activities undertaken by backpackers, including visits to cultural attractions, touristic well-known and popular places, are important factors as well. On the other hand the most important travel motivations for backpackers are the independence, the look for thrills/adventure and the development of their own skills and achievements all of which support previous studies (Cohen, 1979, 2011).

Backpackers are important information sources, which points out the importance of WOM and personal communication in travel decisions and behaviors as conveyed in other studies (Abrantes et al., 2013; Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007). For managers it is essential to consider these tourists as opinion leaders and work to meet their expectations and satisfaction. They can turn into major information sources that can influence and attract other tourists. If destinations and touristic facilities enable social interactions, they will benefit from the backpackers' engaging and positive WOM, thus achieving good publicity contributing to a good positioning.

Regarding science this study responds to a call in the literature for additional research on the social interactions between backpackers, particularly in the WOM case. It also presents a wide geographical base of backpackers, which involved 75 countries, and which contemplates various ages, thus enabling a more comprehensive insight into the backpackers' social behavior in light of the Social Identity Theory scope.

6. Limitations and directions for future research

This study has some limitations. The first is that the questionnaire may have created common method variance inflating construct relationships. To avoid this threat the respondents were not told about the specific purpose of the study and all of the construct items were separated and mixed. The second limitation has to do with the research setting; data was gathered through online backpackers' communities. It is suggested that data should be gathered through other approaches. Qualitative methods could improve future studies.

Furthermore, this model should be more developed regarding travel motivations antecedents and WOM consequences among backpackers. Another construct should be introduced and tested that might have a strong impact on WOM, particularly the use of travel facilities and their performance.

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