

# **Virtual Mobilities: Backpackers, New Media and Online Travel Communities**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the role that new media play in the contemporary experience of backpacker travel, and explores the complexity of online communities as they emerge in travel discussion forums and social networking sites. With new media technologies now saturating the experience of travel, mediated word-of-mouth communication is easily accessible when on the move, with virtual mobility presenting opportunities for the strengthening of interactions and the maintenance of social networks. Focusing on the role that social media play in shaping the cultural meanings of travel to a mobile community, and the ways by which the travel experience comes to be filtered, mediated, and negotiated, this paper highlights some of the tensions that exist in understandings of virtual travel communities. In particular, questions are raised about traditional understandings of community now that it exists and is expressed virtually, as well as corporeally and locally. We suggest that in contemporary backpacker travel, new forms of community are emerging in the interweaving of mediated virtual connections and immediate face-to-face interactions.

*Keywords:* backpackers, mobility, social media, community

## **Introduction**

Travellers come to know about the places, peoples and cultures of travel destinations in various ways. Within the experiences of young, independent travellers, popularly known as backpackers, informal communication networks are fundamental with word-of-mouth from other travellers having a significant impact on the ways by which travellers come to see and understand the travelled and untravelled world. With new media technologies now saturating the experience of travel, mediated word-of-mouth communication is easily accessible when on the move, enabling travellers to increasingly engage in 'virtual' travel (Urry 2000). Travel experiences are expressed by backpackers in a range of online texts, such as emails, travel weblogs, and social networking sites. These media are used by backpackers pre-trip, on-trip and post-trip, providing spaces for reporting and reflecting on actual experiences whilst travelling. This paper examines the role that new media plays in the contemporary experiences of backpacker travel, and is intended to frame forthcoming research into the significance of social - 'community-oriented' (Jansson 2007) – in the experiences of backpackers in Australia, and the role that they play in shaping the cultural meanings of travel to this hypermobile community.

## **Mobilities, New Media and Backpackers**

Mobility is a defining feature of the contemporary (Urry 2000; Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006); a 'globalised' era characterised by an unprecedented scale of movement of (some) people, ideas and objects. There were an estimated 880 million international tourist arrivals for business and pleasure in 2009 (UNWTO 2010). Backpackers are especially mobile – 'hypermobile' (O'Regan 2008) – and have become a 'cultural symbol' of the 'increasingly mobile world' (Richards and Wilson 2004: 3, see also Paris 2010). Developments in information and communication technologies mean that backpackers 'can now manage multiple lifestyles (travel, work, home) while on the move' (O'Regan 2008: 110); a connectivity that was not possible for tourists before the advent of the internet and mobile phones (White and White 2007):

For the hypermobile, the world is one that has few barriers. Aside from having the right to travel where they want, when they want, at a price they can afford and the ability to communicate with (almost) anyone, anytime (from anywhere), the world today is so networked that strangers no longer exist, but are simply connections waiting to happen. (O'Regan 2008: 112-113)

Certainly, the 'type of society emerging from globalization has been characterised as one based around flows of information and networks' (Chow-White 2006: 885). Moreover, as Sheller and Urry (2006: 222) state, '[new] mobilities are bringing into being... surprising combinations of presence and absence as the new century chaotically unfolds'. Through the use of new media particularly, the boundaries between home and away are increasingly blurred; with contemporary life characterised by enhanced mobilities on the one hand and increased virtual moorings on the other (Paris 2010).

Jansson (2007: 21) notes that the internet and new media communications technologies 'involving interactivity, convergence, and increased mobility [and] portability' are now saturating the experience of travel. Germann Molz (2006: 378) uses the concept of 'interactive travel' to explain the 'intersection between physical travel and mobile technologies':

Interactive travel refers to the way leisure travellers are incorporating new information technologies such as the Internet, e-mail, and websites into their mobility practices. The concept of interactive travel recognises that travellers are travelling with the Internet *as well as on it*. While on the road, travellers are logging on to e-mail with friends and family back home, [and using the Internet] to search for hotels or currency exchange rates, or to post photographs and stories of their adventures abroad. (Germann Molz 2006: 378, emphasis added)

New media technologies can disrupt the established notions of place and time that frame dominant understandings of travel – the travel destination and traveller experience come to be filtered and mediated, with touristic representations becoming

‘more negotiable, and ready for immediate transmission/sharing’ (Jansson 2007: 20). Moreover, Germann Molz (2006: 378) believes the ‘question of the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 1990) becomes more complicated when the gazing tourist is also the object of the gaze’.

Arguably, backpackers more than other tourists are keen users of communications technologies. Backpackers, not surprisingly, given their demographic (commonly 18-35) and its relationship to technology (see Pendergast 2010), and the fact that as a group they tend to visit more locations and be ‘on the road’ for longer periods than most others, have embraced the use of new media and communication technologies whilst travelling (O’Regan 2008; Paris 2010). Indeed, ‘one of the most distinctive features of backpacking today is the consistent use of new media while on the move’ (Mascheroni 2007: 528). Unlike the low-budget, long-term, independent travellers who traditionally used guidebooks and word-of-mouth information to inspire their movements, and who stayed in touch with home using fixed line phone calls and poste restante, contemporary backpackers and ‘flashpackers’ (Hannam and Diekmann 2010) need only access the internet to perform these tasks. Hence, the technological infrastructure to support these nomads, especially the internet café, has emerged along established ‘backpacker trails’ (Gogia 2006; O’Regan 2008); what Paris (2010) calls the ‘virtualization of backpacker culture’. However, since backpackers are not a homogeneous group there would also be those who reject technology whilst travelling in the spirit of ‘dropping out’ for a time (Burns and O’Regan 2008).

According to O’Regan (2008: 115), internet cafes represent ‘technospace’ within the ‘travelscape’, playing a ‘vital function in traveller mobility networks and are a symbol of their mobility’ (O’Regan 2008: 109). For this reason travel guidebooks pay attention to locations for internet access and the prices of access (Sorensen 2003). Mascheroni (2007: 532) believes ‘internet points constitute mobile spaces of sociality, where mediated interactions at a distance overlap and intersect with face-to-face interaction with other travellers and, sometimes, local people’. In contrast, O’Regan (2008: 117) argued that internet cafes ‘allow travellers to detach from the local place in order to go elsewhere’ and that computer use, as a solitary activity, negates connection with other travellers. Indeed, he states that hypermobile travellers ‘are so busy managing [their] multiple mobilities... they have neither time nor need to seek

to communicate with others in the café' (O'Regan 2008: 118). Furthermore, internet cafes, through cost and location (in traveller ghettos), tend to exclude local users (primarily because backpacking is often done in developing nations) thereby reinforcing 'Othering' processes (O'Regan 2008).

In her study of backpackers' engagement with new media, Mascheroni (2007) identified three dominant uses of the internet. First, practical and instrumental uses (i.e., information gathering, reading other traveller's online journals or blogs); second, the use of the Internet for mobile occupations (she found that a number of her interviewees had online occupations that provided them with a job whilst on the move); and third, relational uses (evidenced by the emergence and increased use of emails, discussion forums and social networking sites). According to Mascheroni (2007: 533), social interactions among backpackers are being 'remediated' through the use of new media; 'reshaped [as] new communication practices emerge'. We are concerned here with the instrumental and relational uses of the internet, particularly as they are carried out on websites for travel information exchange.

Paris (2010) has also explored backpacker use of the internet – before, during and after travel. According to Paris (2010), although guidebooks are still used by backpackers for pre-trip information, the internet has overtaken them in importance, with online information enabling 'greater mobility while on the road' (Paris 2010: 60). Enhanced independence and mobility were reportedly experienced because of the internet and communications technologies; with backpackers using the internet to stay connected with friends and family, to 'add friends' to their online social networks, to find information and to secure bookings. Post-trip the internet is used for the sharing of experiences and information, as well as maintaining contact with backpacker culture, particularly through 'online communities' (Paris 2010). We now turn to a brief consideration of the backpacker community and online communities, and the ways by which the internet has influenced contemporary backpacker culture.

### **Virtual Communities, Virtual Moorings**

Despite being regarded by many authors as a heterogeneous group, backpackers do have in common a shared interest in travel and, in this sense, they can be considered

an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983; O’Reilly 2006). Indeed, O’Reilly (2006: 999) notes that many backpackers describe a ‘sense of having more in common with fellow travellers of different nationalities than with many fellow nationals’. Arguably, backpackers also have a commonly shared ideology about what constitutes the travel experience, which ‘serves as a bond to other travellers (Welk 2004: 80) and is central to understanding backpacker identities and communities.

According to Welk (2004: 80), backpacker ideology is based on five ‘pillars’ which include: travelling on a low budget; meeting different people; being (or feeling) free, independent and open-minded; organising one’s journey individually and independently; and travelling for as long as possible. As such, information and sociality are central to the travel experience. Certainly, ‘information on the go’ is important to backpackers (Burns and O’Regan 2008: 146) because of their flexible itineraries. Given the rapid obsolescence of information in guidebooks, it is little wonder that internet-based solutions have gained broad appeal (Kain and King 2004); with the internet increasingly replacing the guidebook ‘as the only fixed structure with the ability to hold and transfer information and culture’ (Sorensen 2003: 859). Moreover, in ‘backpacker culture, the possession and ability to pass on insider information is a status builder among other backpackers’ (Paris 2010: 60).

Mascheroni (2007: 530) suggests that sociality, the desire for interpersonal communication and to be sociable, is ‘a distinctive feature of the backpackers’ subculture’ (see also Sorensen 2003). Therefore, gathering places on the ‘trail’ are a significant part of backpacker culture – for example Khao San Road in Bangkok (as depicted in Alex Garland’s 1996 novel *The Beach*) – and allow for the coming together of like-minded travellers for community-building, status-making, and the all-important exchange of information through word-of-mouth. Increasingly, however, Mascheroni (2007: 528) argues, this sociality is mobile ‘in the sense that it is founded on the complex intersection between presence and absence, proximity and distance’; this ‘mobile sociality’ reflecting a co-presence between corporeal travel and virtual travel facilitated by new media.

With the growth of the Internet and concurrent scholarly interest in its social implications, the notion of the ‘virtual community’, coined by Rheingold (1993), has

been explored variously. Virtual or online communities are, by nature, interest-based and are typically used by members to share information (Illum, Ivanov and Liang 2010; Wilson and Peterson 2002; Wittel 2001). In contrast to the idea of community, Wittel (2001: 51) prefers the term 'network sociality' to describe social relations in the 'information age' arguing that they 'are not 'narrational' but informational; they are not based on mutual experience or common history, but primarily on an exchange of data and on 'catching up''.

As noted above, travellers are increasingly turning to the internet to perform travel-related tasks and the industry has been quick to foster communication among travellers and between travellers and the industry. Indeed, travel organisations have embraced the web and the desire of travellers to connect with other travellers and the influence of virtual travel communities is gaining momentum (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier 2002). For the individual, what begins as a search for information can eventually transform 'into a source of community and understanding' (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier 2002: 413):

As these communities evolve, the range, richness, reliability, and timeliness of information available to members is likely to be far greater than that of any information available through more conventional means' (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier 2002: 415).

For instance, the slogan of [virtualtourist.com](http://virtualtourist.com) is 'the people behind the places' and its website claims to offer 'the inside scoop from *fellow* travellers and *real* locals' (emphasis added) and 'the inside scoop from a million members on 73,949 destinations and counting'. The significance of not only word-of-mouth but also the importance of authenticity to travellers is highlighted here. The traveller desire for information that is real is further exemplified by [tripadvisor.com.au](http://tripadvisor.com.au) in their slogan 'Get the truth. Then go'. And [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com)'s Thorn Tree travel forum is 'the place where the Lonely Planet travel community get [sic] together to exchange travel information, advice, hints and tips'. It states 'get help, get connected, get inspired, have your say' which emphasises a range of services including creating networks between travellers and the importance of members' contributions. Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier (2002: 413) argue that for an individual's 'sense of community' to exist

‘being connected to people is not quite enough. There has to be some feeling of reciprocity: that is, a network of mutual understandings, obligations, and expectations of behavior on the part of others’.

Travel experiences are expressed by travellers in a range of online written travel texts, from emails to travel weblogs and through internet sites with online interactive social spaces. What is known as User Generated Content, made possible by Web 2.0, has revolutionised internet use in recent years. Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008) refer to user generated content on travel as a form of ‘collective intelligence’ which travellers can tap in to. The popularity of user generated content sites, such as the ‘Thorn Tree’ travel forum on the Lonely Planet website ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)), [virtualtourist.com](http://virtualtourist.com) and [tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com), is ever increasing. For instance, in just 24 hours the tripadvisor forum logged 6,767 posts with 11,347 responses (15 July 2010). Furthermore, social networking sites, such as Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) and MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)) have introduced online forums for backpackers around the world to discuss their travel experiences. One Facebook forum for backpackers, for example, has 94,812 members (as at 18 July 2010).

These websites are used by backpackers pre-trip, on-trip and post-trip, providing spaces for the reporting of actual experiences whilst travelling (O’Reilly 2006). Reflections on the travel experience can take place immediately (usually through a combination of text, image and interpretation) and through these reflections travellers are able to interact while in the material travel space, with both travelling and non-travelling others (Wearing, Stevenson and Young 2010). Discussion forums are used by travellers ‘to exchange information and give immediate feedback on their experiences’ (Chow-White 2006: 884); travellers are thus active contributors to the representation of destinations and experiences. As Tourism Australia (no date) has said of youth travellers in particular, they ‘can no longer be considered an ‘audience’. They are, simultaneously, readers, editors, and marketers’. Discussion forums and social networking sites are defined by Jansson (2007: 17) as ‘community-oriented media’ that ‘clearly fit the expressive nature of backpacking’.

As well as being a space to gain insights into particular destinations and share travel related information, community-oriented media provide ‘people with opportunities to



make new friends' (Markwell and Stolk 2005: 82). The mutual exchange of information and the facilitation of networks amongst like-minded people is key, and online social interactions have the potential to enlarge and reinforce the group's 'sense of community'; the 'often fleeting and temporally constrained interactions that occur on the road can now be maintained through online communities and other forms of internet-based communications *post-trip*' (Paris 2010: 62, original emphasis). Thus, online travel forums 'constitute new places of sociality where cultural values and norms are transmitted and fixed' (Mascheroni 2007: 538):

Inasmuch as they constitute a new kind of online travellers' ghettos, forums give shape to a mobile community, sustained by mediated interactions and periodic moments of physical proximity. The backpackers' community shares a symbolic space relocalized in a plurality of physical and virtual places: a kind of mobile community, or 'travelling community'... (Mascheroni 2007: 536)

The establishment of online forums can be seen as an innovation in the establishment of particular forms of community (Chow-White 2006). Lonely Planet, for example, describes their Thorn Tree forum, which was established in 1996, as an online travel community, touting themselves as 'one of (might we dare say *THE*) first travel communities on the web' (LP 2007). Using virtualtourist.com as an example Jensen (2008: 503) argues that such virtual travel communities bring 'together knowledge, identity, performance and aesthetics to communicate [ideas] not only about tourism, but also about living in a global society'. Thus, online forums are fundamental as communication networks, with word-of-mouth from other travellers and locals having a significant impact on the ways by which travellers come to see and understand the places, people and culture of travelled and untravelled destinations.

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides a conceptual framework for research currently being conducted by the authors into the role that social media and virtual travel communities play in shaping the cultural meanings of travel to a mobile community. With the rise of new media, research into the role that travellers themselves play in constructing and

shaping traveller identities and communities and the travel experience, as well as representations of places, peoples and cultures, is increasingly important. Understanding the shift from travellers simply gathering travel information through traditional media and networking whilst on the road to actually constructing the travel experience and networking in cyberspace with a virtual community of travellers is key. Traditional travel media, such as guidebooks, are being used in tandem with new media communication technologies to shape and frame travel, meaning that touristic representations and travel experiences are increasingly collaborative, complicated and negotiable.

This paper highlights some of the tensions that exist in the now ubiquitous virtual travel communities, and suggests that traditional understandings of community are being challenged now that communities are no longer localised, but are simultaneously online and virtual and local. Indeed, while virtual mobility presents opportunities for the strengthening of interactions and the maintenance of social networks, proximity and face-to-face interactions remain a factor in community. While virtual interconnection can lead to a reduction in local conversation and perhaps isolation, concrete social interactions still take place. The emergence of a mobile sociality is reflected in the co-presence of corporeal travel and virtual travel. New forms of community are emerging in the entanglement of mediated virtual and immediate face-to-face interactions. For this reason, we are sceptical of explanatory models that seek to dislocate the practices of online communities from concrete and local interactions between travellers.

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