

The Influence of Social Media on Travel Motivations

Chanel C.N Scott

Curtin University

Abstract

This paper explores the convergence between the communication of travel motivations and the emergence of new media uses among Generation Y (Gen Y) and suggests a convergence of travel profiles from backpacker to flashpacker, characterised by digital nomadism. It questions, is Generation Y growing up in the emerging digital sphere the reason for the changes to tourist motivations? How have traditional notions of travel motivations changed and is the proliferation of social media responsible for this change? The text draws on Bolton et.al (2013), to define the characteristics of Gen Y and highlights the works of Richards (2015) in analysing the differences between backpackers and digital nomads.

Keywords: Digital Nomads, Flashpacking, Social Media, Generation Y, Travel Motivations.

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have reshaped travel motivations among Generation Y and choreographed a convergence between traditional notions of backpacking to an emerging mediated concept known as 'flashpacking' or digital nomadism. Within these transformations has come changing habits for Generation Y whilst travelling, relative to social media usage and its role in their travel experiences. SNS have reshaped travel motivations in several ways; the amount of travel information and the ability for travel communities to form has allowed for new ways of sharing travel experiences, while the influential abilities that social media provides creates new reasons for travel. The societal profiles of Generation Y highlight changing life arrangements of work, travel and education from traditions of previous generations. These changes are provided by the profitability of social media platforms when utilised for travel purposes. This includes travel influencers monetising their travel experiences through platforms such as YouTube and blogging sites. The traditional notions of youth travel are now diversified by new emerging niches that are characterised by social media and increased mobility efforts among Generation Y, through digitisation has brought several differences in travel motivations.

Generation Y, Social Media and Tourism

The parameters of social media are defined by Kaplan (2015) as a “group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. Social media giants such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube are the foundations for which the sharing of media and communications exist, with YouTube the second largest search engine behind Google (Kaplan, 2015). One group adopting social networking platforms to arrange their travel habits and motivations are those known as Generation Y. In comparison to previous generations, the framework to define the age of Gen Y is not congruent across research sources. For the clarity of discussion, this paper will utilise the suggestions of Bolton (Bolton et al, 2013), for which Generation Y are the members of society born between 1981 and 1999, making them currently between the ages of 19 and 37 as of 2018. The authors highlight a key characteristic of Gen Y is their early exposure to technology from a young age, responsible for their current frequent use of digital media. The lack of formality around the parameters of Generation Y may be influenced by their connection to the emerging platforms provided by the internet and the debate around when the internet became popularised. The World Wide Web, invented by Tim Berners Lee, has existed since 1989, however the adoption of social networks and the collaborative spaces within did not emerge until after 2003. Currently, as of 2018, social media encompasses a web-based platform consisting of social networking sites, video and photo sharing, online communities and user generated content spaces (blogs and forums). Growing up in the emergence of the digital sphere, Gen Y practice connectivity and participatory communication through these platforms. Their use of social media, observed by Bolton et.al (2013), is seen as involving contribution, sharing, consumption, searching and participatory practices, which are somewhat advanced from previous generations. [See Appendix A].

However, for Gen Y and other Generations alike, social media is primarily used for information, leisure and entertainment purposes. Social media has created much opportunity for the tourism industry, from marketing strategies and travel blogging, to influencing purchase decisions through peer-to-peer networking. In this sense, each platform can serve a different purpose; YouTube provides a platform for which digital media such as vlogs, travel diaries and travel channels are uploaded. YouTube data research by Crowel, Gribben and Loo (2014) suggests that viewing of travel videos are increasing 118% year on year and found that 71% of users who intend on purchasing a trip will simply input their desired destination name into YouTube and view the content, rather than traditionally searching Google (26%). Instagram is one of the largest influencers of travel motivations and purchase behaviour. Images posted on Instagram paint the ultimate picture of a destination and, for the traveller, if the image doesn't do quite that, it will not be posted. Instagram is an

effective marketing tool for a destination as posts from models, travel influencers or bloggers may receive more trust from viewers than a brand would. One of the most popular social media influencers of travel motivation among Generation Y, known on SNS as Lost le Blanc, is an avid traveller who utilises the viral power of SNS, such as hashtags and YouTube videos to promote his own travel brand. He sells filter packs for travel photos on Instagram, products on his website and has recently launched an online video segment on Patreon that focuses on more practical elements of travel rather than just the image. Consumer motivations to travel can also be based on push and pull factors; push factors being those internally motivated desires for the individual to travel for relaxation, health, social interaction and adventure. Pull factors are the qualities of a destination that the individual is attracted to. Terttunen (2017) highlights these two factors as conclusive, however in recent years, the power of social media has contributed as a third factor of motivation as social media influencers in the travel industry, such as Christian LeBlanc (@lostleblanc), create a strong level of desire for consumers to 'be like them', rather than the destination itself.

From Backpackers to Digital Nomads

Tourist types based on technological adoption have emerged from academic discourses that, from research of travel behaviour, have indicated significant changes throughout time. Traditional travel practices among youth travellers, commonly known as backpackers, were once a kind of open-ended question, a journey with a small amount of pre-planning but mainly revolved around a desire to take each day as it came. The recent convergence of the internet and SNS has been welcomed by backpackers to present an emerging cultural subgroup known as 'Flashpackers', a term that represents a shift away from tight-budgeted backpackers, towards an ability to travel fluidly around the world through various "Travelerscapes" (Molz & Paris, 2015). Whilst travelling, they use social media to connect, document and share their experiences with friends and followers and from which, can provide a source of income. The key difference between backpackers and flashpackers indicates significant increase in budget size and need for expensive equipment whilst travelling, with technological advances enhancing their ability to gain travel experiences that were once not accessible without the smartphone. In this sense, flashpackers were exposed to new marketing strategies that better suited their travel preferences such as travel guides aimed at iPhone photography and volunteering packages such as those held by Shoot My Travel. The growing independence of backpackers, characterised by their changes in the process of becoming flashpackers, is reasoned by Paris (2012) as the abundance of information and the ease of access SNS provides. From the term Flashpacker, came an extension of global mobility, researched by Greg Richards (2015), the rise of the 'Digital Nomad' has brought a contemporary, digitised take on

traditional notions of travel. "The increasing blurring of the boundaries of work and leisure allied to the growth of digital technology has given this group the freedom to work anywhere they can connect to the internet" (Richards, 2015), he suggests that lifestyle and travel are becoming more fluid with access to the internet providing them with everything the travellers need to perform a mobile lifestyle.

The advancements of Social Media have allowed Generation Y to travel successfully, with their interactivity with User Generated Content, travellers are finding and creating new ways of maintaining their travel lifestyles. The emergence of the travel lifestyle bounded with new mobilities has created a new profile for young people regarding life arrangements, travel motivations and ways of making money among digital nomadism. The transformations of mobile technologies present the idea that work and information for individuals may no longer need to be in a single physical place, suggesting that travel and work can co-exist through smartphones, laptops and tablets. The WYSE Travel Confederation Survey (2013) presents significant differences between general tourists, flashpackers and digital nomads in terms of their idealisation of the future. Figure 2 [Appendix B] shows flashpackers and nomads are extremely focused on changing their lifestyle between study, work and travel, compared to that of tourists and volunteers preferring to study and work continuously. Bolton et.al (2013) point out that Gen Y is often referred to as the 'Peter Pan Generation', accused by the older generations as not wanting to grow up and delaying traditional notions of the life cycle such as marriage and careers. This accusation suggests that Gen Y's adoption of the internet and its influence on their travel lifestyle may have something to do with their new life arrangements. The internet creates new ways of making money for young travellers, through social media anyone can become a travel influencer with the right content to appeal to younger markets. Currently, some of the most effective ways of gaining views and therefore income, is selling the 'secrets' of travel, making travel recommendations and 'how to be' professional travellers. Jinti Fell, a popular Australian travel vlogger began documenting her continuous travel lifestyle on YouTube after quitting her job and selling most belongings she bought a van and travels around Australia with her family. After gaining more than 320,000 YouTube subscribers, her travel life became monetised, she expanded into other SNS like Instagram and Facebook, created her own website, began networking with travel related brands and in turn, merged her travel and work life together. Just one of the many examples, the prevalence of user generated content has created a focus of travel documentation on social media and in turn has changed the habits of users to influence a need for income and social following.

Changing Travel Habits

Digital Nomads, Flashpackers and travel influencers have contributed to changing habits of travel and travel content, characterised by the prevalence of SNS. Overall, photo sharing is becoming a far less private activity, once used for friends and family has now expanded to a global scale. Travellers post photos, vlogs and blogs to create an overall ideal image of a destination or how positive their experiences were at a destination. Instagram is used as a means of 'showing off' their lifestyle, caused by a need to receive validation from their friends and followers and travel destinations are often chosen based on how it will look through social media. Travel blogs and vlogs on YouTube contain in-depth information about a destination, more so than heavily produced travel documentaries. This documentation of the 'small stuff' is influencing a change in travel agendas where, through heavy consumption of travel content on social media, users are become less hesitant to travel to less well-known places. This suggests a shift in the use of word-of-mouth to influence travel motivation from trusted family and friends, to a notion where user generated travel content from social media users is becoming a more trusted source of information.

In a travel context, identities are created and pursued online and has created a segregation between who users are, and who they want other users to view them as. Magill (2017), suggests a consequence of oversharing and overthinking about uploading travel experiences as "prioritising sharing content to virtual online connections instead of enjoying the immediate moment". This suggests that for Generation Y, the ability to impress or influence a travel decision is becoming more important than the experience and the physicality of the destination itself. Figure 3, from WYSE Travel Confederation Survey (2013), sourced by Richards (2015), suggests differences between the travel motivations of traditional backpackers to flashpackers, outlined in [Appendix C]. The figure shows backpackers are motivated by cultural experience, internal development and social interaction, whereas flashpackers are far less motivated by these travel styles. This suggests a correlation between adoption of digital technologies and social media by Generation Y and their diminishing emotional attachments to culture and travel. The traditional, emotional motivations of travel are being reshaped by the forces of social media now in a focus on influencing and gaining attention from travel decisions.

Social media has reshaped the travel motivations among Generation Y and choreographed a convergence between traditional notions of backpacking to emerging mediated concepts of digital nomadism. Social Media and the advancing digitalisation of user generated content is responsible for the reshaping of travel motivations for several reasons. In an online context, travel influencers don't need face-to-face interactions, the ease of which is characterised by users' ability to enhance their social media following through engagement and posting of their own content. The amount of

travel information online created by users is overtaking businesses such as travel agents and tour guides, where the notion of trust is created from personal experience rather than marketing efforts. Due to the amount of information on social media, travel motivation is created by users wanting to have the same travel experiences as the influencers. Magill (2017), depicts this idea of motivation by suggesting that the “proliferation and pervasiveness of social media in the lives of Generation Y, often results in diverse opinions and perceptions when viewing shared content from other online users. Exciting or interesting images can often create users feeling irritated or anxious and creates motivation to make similar decisions”. Social media has not only reshaped the ways in which travel experiences are motivated to growing audiences but has also influenced new reasons for travel that did not exist before Generation Y and the emergence of the internet. The feeling of needing validation from friends influences an individual choice to travel to a destination and motivates their decisions to post content travel content. The ability to earn money from internet following as a travel influencer and gaining popularity online is characterised by the influential capacities of social media and the growing demand for devices such as cameras and smartphones to enhance visibility online.

Conclusion

The emergence of SNS has altered the traditional notions of travel motivations, suggesting a shift from backpackers to digital nomads. The adoption of digital media throughout Generation Y has contributed to the vast amounts of travel information on social media, with their adoption of the use of user generated content to influence travel experiences, they allow for the formation of travel communities to skyrocket. New media uses in the tourism industry has influenced changing habits, from the type of content posted, to a shift in travel style from backpackers to flashpackers. Internet adoption has also suggested new life arrangements for Generation Y, motivating them to travel before their careers or work whilst travelling. The viral abilities of the internet also allow user generated content to be monetised, creating an income for travel influencers. This reshaping of the travel industry is a demonstration of how technological advancements have strong capabilities of transforming traditional notions of society that existed before the internet became popularised.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

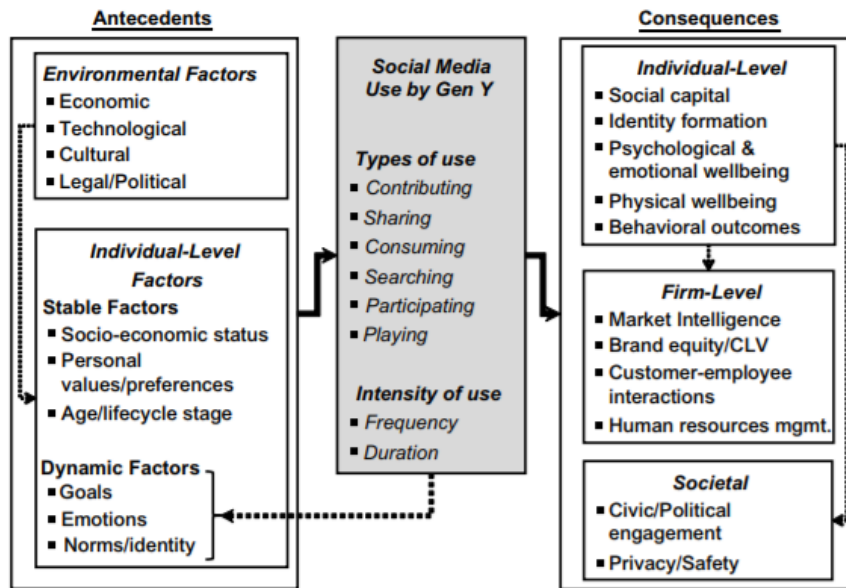


Figure 1. Antecedents and Consequences of Social Media Use by Gen Y (Bolton et.al, 2016)

Environmental factors can influence the impact of social media on an individual such as employment opportunities, globalization and technology infrastructures. Individual factors such as stage in life cycle and socio-economic status may affect the ways the individual uses social media. For example, a low level of education may encourage the use of social media for entertainment instead of research.

APPENDIX B

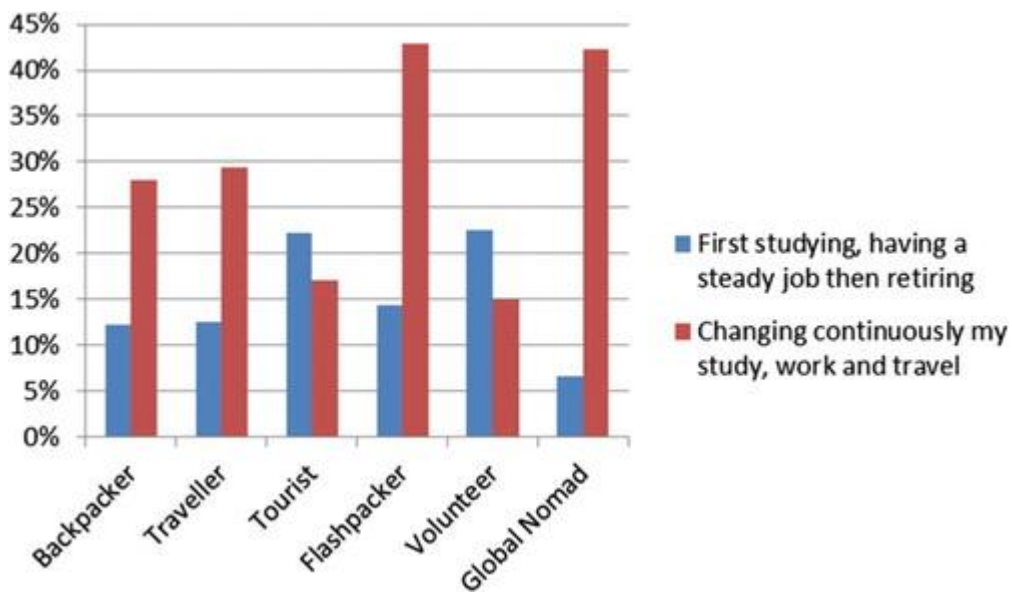


Figure 2. Ideal Future Lifestyle by Travel Style. (WYSE Travel Confederation Survey, 2013)

APPENDIX C

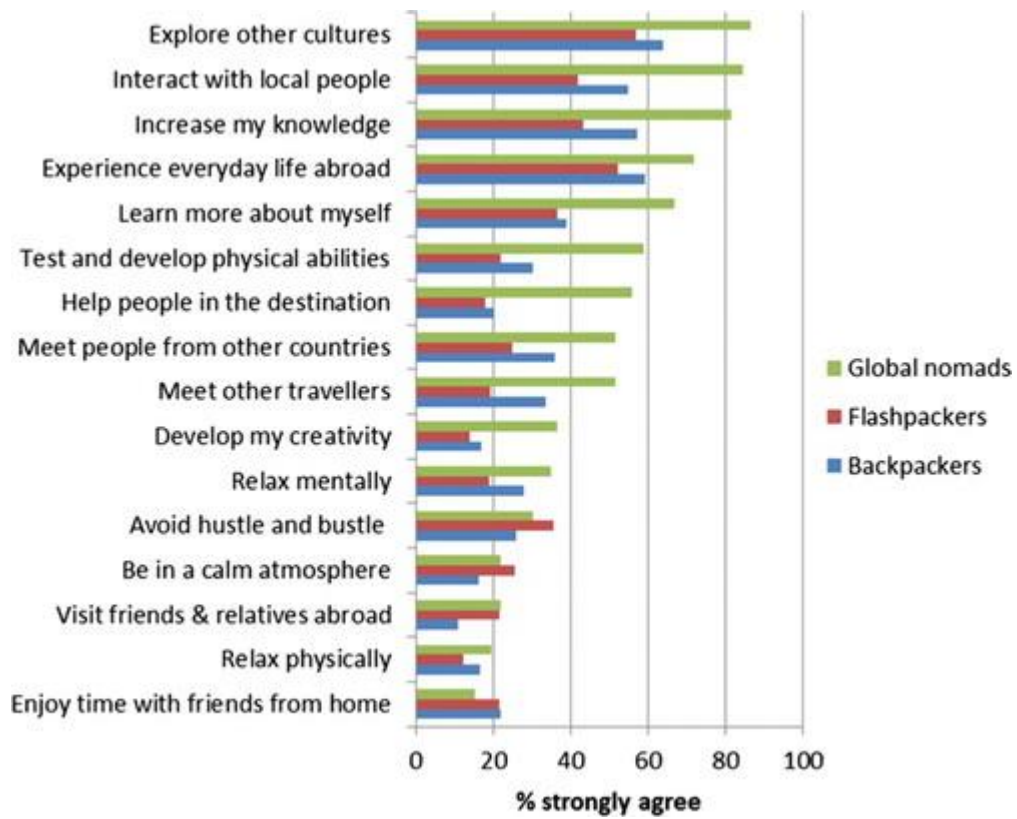


Figure 3. Travel Motivations by Travel Style. (WYSE Travel Confederation Survey, 2013)

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