The Virtualization of Backpacker Culture

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Abstract

Backpacking is a culture symbolic of the increasingly mobile world. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the stabilization and creation of the social structure of the backpacking culture that has resulted from the convergence of technology and ideology. Using theory from the field of evolutionary anthropology, the backpacker culture is examined as an integrated system composed of technological, sociological, and ideological subsystems. Age cohort analysis is used to examine the differences between age groups in terms of their online information search, participation in backpacker specific forums, usage of social networking sites, and the virtual connection to the backpacker culture. While previous studies have considered the mainstreaming of backpacking as the main barrier to examining backpacking as a culture, the results of this study suggest that the convergence of backpacker ideology with the advances in communications technologies have created the social structure to support the mainstream backpacker culture of today.

Keywords: mobility; virtual communities; systems theory; subculture.

1 Introduction

Backpacking is a culture symbolic of the increasingly mobile world. With cultural roots growing from the beatnik and hippie counterculture’s of the 1950s-1970s, backpacking has been a mainstreaming phenomenon in tourism that has evolved and adapted to technological, social, political and economic trends in both the home and destination societies of backpackers. These global trends over the last 50 years have lead to a democratization of backpacking to a large, heterogeneous, and globally diverse group of people (Paris, 2008). The pillars of ideology of the backpacking subculture (Welk, 2003) have persevered over the last few decades, but the social cohesiveness, imparted early on by the close connection with the social countercultures of the time, arguably, has not. One of the largest constraints to depicting backpacking as a subculture is that it has become so mainstreamed (Scheyvens, 2002; Welk, 2003; O’Reily, 2006) it is difficult to illustrate clearly the boundaries between the backpacker community and other mainstreamed tourists.

Recent developments in information and communications technology have provided the basis for the backpacker culture to once again gain the cohesiveness without the temporal or spatial constraints of the ‘backpacker trail.’ These developments allow backpackers to be fully integrated and maintain a sustained state of co-presence between the backpacker culture and their home culture (Paris & Teye, 2008;
Mascheroni, 2007). The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the stabilization and creation of social structure of the backpacking culture that has resulted from the convergence of technology and ideology.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Culture

There is no definitive definition of ‘culture’. This study uses a systems approach to examine culture. According to White (1949), culture can be conceptualized as an organized and integrated system that can be divided into three interrelated subsystems: technological, sociological, and ideological. The technological subsystem includes the instruments and techniques by which people negotiate their environment. The sociological subsystems of culture represent the interpersonal relations between people that are articulated through patterns of behaviour. This subsystem is made up of the multiple human systems, for example, social, recreational, political, economic, and ethical systems. The sociological subsystem can also be considered the organized human attempt at using the technological system. The ideological system represents the organization of beliefs about the human experience. Experiences and interpretations are influenced by technologies as well as the sociological systems. All three subsystems are interrelated and condition one another. (White, 1949) Keeping this in mind, the cultural system can be metaphorically approached as a layer cake. On the bottom layer as the base, is the technological system, on the top layer is the ideological system, and both are mediated by the social system. Over time all three of these systems adapt and influence each other, thus evolving the entire system of culture.

Evolutionary and ecological theory has been applied to the examination of cultures as adaptive systems. Keesing (1974) summed up a broad assumption agreed upon by most ‘cultural adaptationists’: ‘cultural change is primarily a process of adaptation, technology….and elements of social organization directly tied to production are the most adaptively central realms of culture (p.4)’. As a subsystem of culture changes, the other subsystems adaptively change. The following section will conceptualize the technological, social, and ideological subsystems of the backpacker subculture.

2.2 Backpacker Culture

Many researchers have been hesitant to examine backpacking in its entirety as a culture (Anderskov, 2002). Welk also argues that the backpacker community is not a real subculture, but it does take on some of the characteristics of one constrained by a constant assimilative pressure by mainstream tourism. Backpackers on the road are temporary members of the ‘road culture’. The social interactions (Murphy, 2001) between backpackers revolve around the shared ideology, but are constrained to just the time spent while travelling.