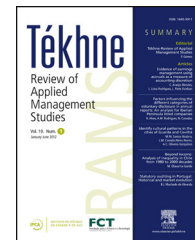




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## ARTICLE

# Toward a better understanding of backpackers' motivations

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**Abstract** The aim of this paper is to assess whether the importance of different characteristics of the overall hostel guests' experience vary according to the age, gender and nationality of backpackers'. This research took a two-step approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. An interview with a hostel manager and a content analysis of hostel booking websites were carried out in order to identify the main aspects that customers value in a hostel experience. Then, a survey was performed in order to gather data from hostel customers. Based on a sample of 313 hostel guests staying in Lisbon from December 2012 to February 2013, the results indicated an emerging diversity and increasing heterogeneity of backpackers' preferences. Therefore, different marketing strategies should be developed for different market segments in this sector in order to delight backpackers.

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## 1. Introduction

Hostel backpacking has emerged as a global cultural, economic and social phenomenon (Thyne, Davies, & Nash, 2005), supported by the relative ease of international travel, the emergence of low cost airlines and a growing network of hostels. Backpacking is perceived to have grown substantially over the last years and has received an increasing importance in the tourism market literature (Leslie & Wilson, 2006; Musa & Thirumoorathi, 2011). Backpackers are considered a valuable niche market for tourism development given that on average they stay longer, visit more

locations than mainstream tourists (Chitty, Ward, & Chua, 2007) and their spending patterns largely benefit small local enterprises (Musa & Thirumoorathi, 2011).

The focus of this research is to gain a better understanding of the requirements of hostel backpackers. The more hostel managers know about their market, the more effective their market strategy will be. As the success of this type of accommodation is largely dependent on backpackers' patronage, it is of utmost importance to understand what factors influence the backpackers' overall experience in this budget accommodation.

Recent studies have also argued that to view hostel backpackers as a homogenous group could mislead market decisions and that research on backpackers profile and preference are warranted (Thyne et al., 2005). Therefore, in order to delight experience for backpackers' hostel

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managers must be aware of how to fulfill the needs of different market segments.

The objectives of this paper are twofold: (i) to identify the key attributes that determine hostel backpackers' overall experience; (ii) to identify whether the key determinants vary according to the demographic profile of the visitors. Lisbon is chosen as the target destination for this study, due to its popularity as a destination and given that the city has received awards in the hostel business.

This paper begins with reviewing the literature in the area of hostel backpacker tourism. This is followed by methodology, which briefly includes the description of the qualitative and quantitative approaches used. Results will be analyzed before drawing out the final conclusion.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Hostel concept

Hostels offer a budget accommodation and target a particular tourist segment commonly known as backpackers (Nash, Thyne, & Davies, 2006). Hostelling International, a hostel federation founded in 1932<sup>1</sup> that has over 4000 affiliated hostels around the world, defines the hostel as a good quality budget accommodation that offers a comfortable night's sleep in friendly surroundings at an affordable price.

Although they both provide lodging, there are a few important differences between hostels and hotels. Hostels provide different types of accommodation, as shared dormitories or private rooms. Whereas customers book a single or a double room in a hotel, they may book an individual bed from a shared room in a hostel. A hostel is more informal and is more adventure oriented compared with a hotel, attracting the younger segment of travelers. A hostel generally offers more and better opportunities for guests to socialize and meet new people from different cultures, given the common areas or the dormitories.

Hostels are not homogeneous. Hostelbookers, the famous hostel booking website, provides some interesting definitions for different types of hostels. There are 'family hostels', which offer low budget rates and clean and comfortable rooms in order to attract parents looking for a cheap family holiday in a destination. 'Activity hostels' are the ones that focus on providing a wide range of activities for their guests, like surfing, skiing, hiking, biking, scuba diving, amongst many other possible activities. 'Party hostels' are perfect for travelers looking to party and to experience the night scene of a city. These hostels have no curfew, usually have a bar in the hostel providing drinks and snacks, and organize activities like pub crawls, where guests get together with a local guide for a bar tour of the city.

### 2.2. The backpacker – a definition, types of backpackers and motivations

Defining what or who a backpacker actually is should be considered as a challenging task. Backpackers are not easily distinguished economically or demographically (Nash et al.,

2006) and might be best described and defined in social terms (Pearce, 1990).

The literature has established some basic criteria to identify a backpacker (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Nash et al., 2006; Pearce, 1990; Thyne et al., 2005): aged frequently between 20 and 24, but can range from 15 to 60 years of age; preference for budget/low cost accommodation options; emphasis on meeting other travelers and having memorable experiences; flexible and independently arranged travel plans; longer rather than brief vacations; and preference for informal and participatory recreational activities. Although backpackers spend less on a daily basis than other tourists, the overall backpacker spending should not be neglected, due to the larger stay (Hecht & Martin, 2006; Scheyvens, 2002; Westerhausen & Macbeth, 2003).

As backpackers tend to be socially active, to enjoy meeting other people and making friends, to get to know new cultures and costumes and to share experiences, informal and word-of-mouth communications are of utmost importance for this group of travelers (Moshin & Ryan, 2003). Their journeys are often to multiple destinations (Sorensen, 2003) and are aided by guidebooks, maps and the internet (Nash et al., 2006).

The idea behind the backpacker and backpacking in general has been changing for a long time now (Musa & Thirumoorthi, 2011). First of all, backpackers are not today only young and budget-conscious tourists (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2002). This preconceived idea behind backpackers is being challenged by the "peter pan" travelers (Moschis, 2002), who are trying to get a chance to live a second youth (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995), and also the "baby boomers" who are rediscovering hostels and enjoying their old age in the best way they can, or want to travel but do not have large retirement incomes and have to opt for cheaper accommodation options (Moschis, 2002). Moreover, there is an emergence of the "backpacker-plus" market, that encompasses well-educated, future leaders of society, or professionals on temporary leave but with clear intentions to return to their 'normal' life (Hampton, 1998; Musa & Thirumoorthi, 2011).

Hecht and Martin (2006) identify three main market segments in the backpacking business, according to travelers' age group, as follows: the youth tourist backpacker – between 15 and 26 years old; transition backpackers – between 26 and 29 years old; the contemporary tourism backpacker – 30 years and older. Although backpackers are normally within the 18–33 year age bracket, age barriers are falling and backpacking has become more about the type of traveling choice than about the age or income.

A crucial aspect fairly important to highlight is the motivations behind backpacking that differ from the mass tourism ones. The destination is not most of the times the major motivation for traveling (Hecht & Martin, 2006). Backpackers tend to seek personal development and a sense of discovery, to experience other cultures and environments, to meet other people, to make new friends and to improve knowledge/education (Leslie & Wilson, 2006). Backpackers were found to be significantly less motivated by the needs for luxury than mainstream travelers (Larsen, Øgaard, & Brun, 2011).

In their study, Hecht and Martin (2006) found that motivations, expectations and demands about traveling and hostels

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hihostels.com/web/who-we-are.en.htm>.

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