

Flashpacking revolution: The importance of the use of ICT in the hostel market



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Nowadays a transformation is going on regarding the backpackers scene. The “old” way of backpacking and discovering the world already transformed into a mainstream travel activity. Nowadays, technological development in information communication technology (ICT) is affecting this group of travellers in a rapid way towards a new phenome named flashpacking (O’Reilly, 2006; Paris, 2011). For tourism, these technological developments can considered both an opportunity as a threat (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Xiang & Gretzal, 2009; Melian-Gonzale & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016). However, academic research doesn’t show the importance the evolutions in relation with the hostel market. Although this market has both back- and flash packers as main target group, research on this specific topic hasn’t been conducted yet (Mohsin & Ryan, 2002; Hect and Martin, 2006; Cave, Ryan & Thyne, 2008; Marabese, 2012).

Backpacking has been a way of travelling since the 60’s and 70’s and according to Cohen (1972) were known as “drifters”. Motivations for backpackers during that period of time are completely different compared to the current mainstream backpack travellers (Cohen, 2003; O’Reilly, 2006). During the start of backpacking, travellers explored the world in an alternative way with an attitude of freedom on non-discovered tracks which stressed the public opinion (O’Reilly, 2006; Cohen, 2011). Contemporary backpacking, from the period 2000 until now, can be described as mainstream travel activity that follows already explored routes and destinations. Through economic and political development, globalization started and backpacking changed from a alternative way of travelling to an acceptable way of travelling which comes with freedom, personal development and fulfilment (Cohen, 2003; O’Reilly, 2006).

Due to technological developments, contemporary backpacking is evolving into a new sub-segment named flash packing. In academic research a discussion emerged focused on flashpacking being a trend or new reality in the world of backpacking (Paris, 2011; Molz & Paris, 2013). Flashpackers, also called backpacker plus, virtual drifters or tech-travellers, embrace the new technology and use it for travelling communication and information purposes. This group is relative older compared to backpackers, uses a higher travel budget and communicate and plan their trip making use of technological gear. (Paris, 2011; Marabese, 2012). According to Paris (2011) this group is developed due economic, political, technological and social change in the global world. Although the social tradition of backpacking maintains, the connectivity and interaction in a virtual world changed rapidly. Besides this major change the flash packers obtain information about destinations, accommodations and activities through a virtual world (Molz & Paris, 2013).

Since the start of contemporary backpacking in 2000, tourism destinations noticed the potential of this niche-market in tourism. Destinations, located in Australia, Asia and Europe, started to develop low-budget hostels, transportation systems and activities focused on this target group (E. Cohen, 2003). In the current tourism market the potential of flashpackers is recently noticed and research on this topic started to increase (Paris, 2011). According to Jarvis and Peel (2010) the tourism industry needs to recognize and adopt the flashpacker market as a new, strong developing niche. The strongest connection between flashpackers and a stakeholder in the tourism industry, is the relationship between *back/flash* packers and the hostel industry. According to several published articles, this is the most used type of accommodation for both target groups and is a well-researched topic (Mohsin & Ryan, 2002; Hect and Martin, 2006; Cave, Ryan & Thyne, 2008; Marabese, 2012).

Although the relationship between flashpackers and the hostel market is clear, the direct connection between the use of ICT by flashpackers and the hostels market hasn't been made yet. Research distinguishes different uses of ICT in general and in the tourism industry. The technique can be used by travellers and tourist organizations with a focus on obtaining and using information. Besides that, flashpackers use technical tools to create a platform to share experiences to different networks regarding their travels (Paris, 2011; Marabese, 2012; Molz & Paris, 2013).

Academic research reveals the importance of ICT for the customer service and commercialization in tourism. Due to the use of ICT in tourism (or eTourism), tourism businesses are empowered to create an info-structure as a key element to inform and interact with clients. It allows business to monitor client satisfaction and behaviour which can lead to a better knowledge of target groups (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Melian-Gonzalez & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016). However, tourists are becoming more powerful through ICT because it makes them able to determine their choice in tourism products. Through their increased knowledge, this results in tourists who are more difficult to satisfy (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Furthermore, the role of ICT is mostly discussed in the field of marketing and described in terms of reviews, opinions, word-of-mouth and social media. As mentioned before, flashpackers already recognized and adapted the global trend of social networking. In a social-psychological prospect, research on this topic has been broadly explored. Nevertheless, the focus on the impact on tourism and hostels hasn't been made yet (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). The relationship between tourism and "virtual" travellers can't be denied. Flashpackers use the online platforms for information exchange and discussion. However, the impact on the tourism business comes from the platforms where reviews and rankings are published. In multiple case studies the website Tripadvisor is named as an example for a website affecting tourism business. Nevertheless, the connection between these topics and the

hostel market is missing (Litvin, Goldmith & Pan 2007; Xiang & Gretzal, 2009; Filieri, Alguezaui & Mcleay 2015).

Although authors stress both topics, academic research doesn't show a strong relationship between the importance of ICT in the hostel market and the upcoming market of flashpackers. Despite the fact that the transformation of backpackers to flashpackers and the ICT evolution is identified as important, research hasn't been conducted focused on the hostel industry. Through this information, it can be stated that there is a lack of knowledge about effective use technological tools by the hostel industry. Especially the focus on flashpackers as target group is missing. (Melian-Gonzalez & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Xiang & Gretzal, 2009). To maintain an effective business, the accommodation sector must consider the use of ICT to inform, interact and monitor their main target group of back- and flashpackers (Melian-Gonzalez & Bulchand-Gidumal, 2016).

Back- and flashpackers frequently considered as an homogenous group in research. However, some academic articles stress this approach (O'Reilly, 2006; Paris, 2011; Marabese 2012). This absence in current analysis of back- and flashpackers as a non-homogenous group can affect the decisively use of ICT by hostels.

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