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Tourism development through the Backpacker market in Highland Scotland

Keywords: backpackers, travel motivation, destination development, Scotland, flashpackers

1. Background

Academic interest in backpacker tourism has grown in recent decades (Richards and Wilson 2004; Sorensen 2003). However, the majority of this interest has been in South East Asia, Australia and New Zealand where the impact of backpacking is noticeable. Europe has only really been considered as a source of outbound backpacker tourism with minimal attention paid to those backpacking within Europe (Richards and Wilson 2004; Wilson, Fisher and Moore 2008). Keeley (2001) presents information on backpackers in Britain but this is limited and now dated. The only studies involving backpackers visiting Scotland are based on their satisfaction levels with budget accommodation (Nash, Thyne and Davies 2006), a lifestyle segmentation analysis of the backpacker market (Thyne, Davies and Nash 2008), and any insight into their motivations has been survey based (Speed and Harrison 2004). VisitScotland appears not to recognise backpacking tourism as a market segment in its own right, and currently no data exists on the market, despite extensive research into other sub markets such as adventure, business, and sailing tourism (Tourism Intelligence Scotland 2012).

This research is based in Scotland and Inverness was chosen as a location for the research because of its title “Capital of the Highlands” (Voigts 2012). A significant motivation for backpackers is to experience the natural landscape (Speed and Harrison 2004) and as the Scottish Highlands contain the largest area of natural mountains and lakes in Western Europe (Boniface and Cooper 1994) it is an ideal destination for backpackers to visit (Scheyvens 2002). More importantly, Inverness is generally positioned half way through backpackers’ routes when travelling around Scotland.

Despite the adverse conditions created by the economic downturn, the Scottish hostel sector has performed well since 2008. Between 2008 and 2012 hostels have maintained a strong performance within the Scottish accommodation sector, generating an average of 413 000 total trips, 2.4 million nights, and £126m per annum, with most notably the average spend per trip during 2011 nearly doubling that in 2010 to £248, and the average spend per trip being higher in 2012 than any over the last 5 years. (VisitScotland 2014).

In recent years a new backpacking segment has emerged, the “Flash-packer”. These free individual tourists stay longer, spend more money in the visiting country, “although they may not look like big spenders” (Silva 2014).

According to (VisitScotland 2014) flashpackers are likely to stay in budget accommodation (hostels), but splurge on higher value experiences and excursions, with the crucial difference between backpackers and flashpackers being the amount of disposable income.

2. Literature Review

The term “backpacker” is commonly used to describe a young budget traveler on an extended holiday or working holiday (Loker-Murphy, 1997). The characteristics of backpackers include the preference for budget accommodation, a flexible schedule, and a long rather than short holiday period (Nash, Thyne, & Davies, 2006). To add to this definition, backpackers include people travelling as a “rite of passage” between life stages (experiencing push motivation), and tend to be “long stay visitors who are particularly large spenders on outdoor orientated activities” (Mohsin & Ryan, 2003 p.167).

According to the study by Tourism Australia in 2011, of 948 travelers, each spent a minimum of one night in a hostel. In this survey 49% planned to or had worked during their trip, and 69% stated that money earned was to be used to fund their travels. The most popular occupations included bar work and hospitality. (Tourism Australia, 2011).

By taking jobs in hospitality backpackers are helping overcome the labour shortages reported in the Scottish hospitality industry. (Magd 2003). Labour shortages in hospitality businesses in rural and remote areas, typified by Scotland, is a growing and pressing problem for peripheral regions engaged in tourism. There is an increasing dependence by hospitality businesses in remoter parts of the country upon migrant workers to meet both numerical and skills gaps within local labour markets. (Devine and Hearnes 2007).

The push and pull motivation in the desire to travel and destination choice is described by Goossens (2000) as being pushed by emotional needs and pulled by emotional beliefs. Kim and Lee (2002 p. 257) state these factors are “psychological needs which play a significant role in causing a person to feel a disequilibrium that can be corrected through a tourism experience”. This theory is extrapolated by Brown (2013) who applies a Heideggerian theory of the Spielraum to the tourism experience, which suggests that the traveler seeks a space to reflect on life from a distance and to consider change - as Pearse and Packer (2013) point out, tourism research can profit from developments in contemporary psychology. Paris (2010 p. 244) found the two key dimensions consistently present in backpacker motivation are relaxation and cultural knowledge which “suggests that these two dimensions constitute the core motivations for backpackers”. Elsewhere, Pariss’ findings are supported by Correia et al. (2013) who explores and extrapolates push-pull theory, finding also, in the development of a scale to measure satisfaction, that culture is the dominant and constant motivator for the backpacker. Schneider and Vogt too (2012), in a study investigating the motivation for adventure travel, found cultural experiences to be a consistent predictor of adventure travel propensity. The backpackers’ ability to cover significant geographical areas in relatively short periods of time has been used to identify them as “boundless” or “nomadic” tourists. Richards and Wilson (2004).

The media is key when developing and pushing an image of a destination and the successful portrayal of culture and heritage in Scotland owes much to the media and there are many documented cases of these successes. From an Australian perspective research in this area, Frost (2010 p. 707) noted that of twenty two feature films portraying the Australian Outback, all depicted characters arriving in the Outback for the first time having “profound and life changing experiences” which, he goes on to say, is what is promised to viewer as films project the attributes of a destination and endow upon the potential traveler visions of experiences they could have themselves. Similarly, Cheal and Griffin (2013) found that visitors to Gallipoli remembered memorable and moving experiences through engagement with a site of historical significance. The parallels for cultural and historical appeal in Scotland and the Highlands are abundant. It has been the location for a significant number of high-grossing box office hits such as *Braveheart* and *Highlander*, and more recently *Skyfall*, as well as low-budget cult classics such as *Breaking The Waves* and *Dog Soldiers*. The history and mystery of the Celtic Highlands of Scotland are explored by Inglis and Holmes (2003) who identify ghosts and the unexplained as a key attraction in Scottish tourism, while Knox (2008) looks to Scottish folk song as an attraction in Aberdeenshire

Larsen (2011) argues backpackers differ from traditional tourists in that they have little interest in luxury and are less concerned about risk. In depth interviews with long term budget travelers, Elsrud (2001 p. 597) found that, “culturally and socially constructed narratives about risk and adventure are manifested by individuals in backpacker communities”. Such manifestation is carried out through the consumption of, for instance: experiences, food, beverage, and clothing. It is argued that tales and acts of ‘risk and adventure’ work particularly well in individuals’ efforts to ‘narrate identity’.

In the 1970’s with the rise of “drifter” travel, (Cohen 1972) backpacking began to receive academic attention. By the late 1990’s, with the arrival of internet cafes on the backpacker routes gave rise to an emergent market of flashpackers. Paris (2012) defines the flashpacker as affluent and tech-savvy, sharing the same ethos as the backpacker, but affecting it in style and comfort. Flashpacking refers to two interrelated developments in backpacker travel. First, it describes a shift in the backpacker population away from the twenty-something travellers getting by on limited budgets, to older, more established and relatively affluent travellers. The second connotation of “flashpacking” refers to the backpackers increasing use of new technologies and social media (Jarvis and Peel 2010).

In their work Butler & Hannam (2013) acknowledge that both backpackers and flashpackers demand highly adventurous and unique experiences through journeys off the beaten track, the modes of transport chosen is likely to differ. Backpackers are more inclined to travel on public transport, largely on account of restricted travel budgets. Flashpackers in contrast indicated private modes of transport were key to satisfying travel demands.

Methodology

As backpackers tend to opt for budget accommodation (Pearce 1990; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995), two hostels were chosen as locations for data collection in Inverness. Non probability sampling methods were used as probability sampling methods seldom apply to the qualitative approach (Mason 2002). A mixture of purposive sampling (maximum variation) and self identification sampling were used.

The research replicated Godfrey's research into backpackers' motivations for visiting New Zealand (2011). Data collection consisted of three phases.

Phase 1: The respondent sample consisted of 14 backpackers with 7 participants recruited from each hostel in Inverness. The interviews and the 7 questionnaire themes used were largely based on those used by Godfrey (2011) and these are listed below:

1. Background information on interview participant
2. Previous travel experience
3. Current backpacking trip
4. Motivations for travelling in general
5. Travel style
6. Motivations for visiting Scotland specifically
7. Returning home

Phase 2: Additional interviews were conducted in Inverness that consisted of a further 20 respondents.

Phase 3: In addition to the qualitative interviews and in a departure from Godfrey's study, three focus groups were conducted to further develop the themes and to provide greater depth to the studies. These focus groups involved 7 respondents, 5 respondents and 8 respondents respectively and they were all convened by a senior member of the tourism community and all three were conducted in Inverness. The themes for the focus groups followed the seven themes outlined above.

All interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed and brief notes were taken in addition to the recording. After reading the transcriptions and becoming familiar with the data, notes of key points were made before the transcriptions were content analysed (Schwandt 1997). The coding process involved creating categories and assigning them to selected data (Dey 1993). The interview guide provided the guidelines for data analysis and helped to produce an initial coding frame (Miles 1994). Firstly, descriptive coding occurred. This was a simple process where interviewee attributes such as gender, age and nationality, were stored in table form. Following this, topic coding took place. This stage involved text being labeled according to its subject. Coding schemes, in the form of mind maps, were applied to the transcribed texts utilising the initial categories in the coding frame. Following this, the data relating to each theme was grouped together so aggregation relative frequency could be determined. Any remaining text that did not belong to a category was reviewed. If it was deemed relevant to the research aims and objectives an additional category was created, if not then the text was removed thereby reducing the data considerably (Richards 2005). Next, analytical coding was implemented. Common themes and patterns were examined (Miles 1994) with any apparent relationships between categories being identified. After these were identified, alternative explanations were explored. Deviant case analysis, where negative instances of the patterns were apparent, was then conducted (Silverman 2005) with critical challenges being made to the relationships that seemed so apparent. This was a continuous process with reading, reflection, and interpretation of the data occurring for as long as time would allow before the most plausible explanation was decided on (Arskey and Knight 1999; Marshall and Rossman 1999).

Findings

A key aspect of backpacking is to travel on a budget. However, quite surprisingly, the majority of the interviewees in this study were significantly less concerned about budgeting than anticipated:

“I could keep it cheaper but I don't have to” Interviewee K

This was further illustrated in their reasons for choosing to stay in budget accommodation. Low price was not the only factor involved, and in some cases not important at all, but to have the opportunity to “meet people” and for this social interaction leading to “lots of information of where to look for jobs, how to get around, where to go and visit”.

The findings of this study do not support the claims stating that backpackers are travelers who spend more time with members of the local communities and become more immersed in a culture than tourists do. The results actually support Noy (2004), Sorenson (2003) and Binder (2004) in that, generally, backpackers spend most of their time with other travelers and have minimal interaction with local communities:

“Actually, I don’t meet many people from the places I went to” Interviewee K

“In Edinburgh there are a lot of Spanish...and you find Spanish and it’s easy...you make like a little ghetto but it’s so difficult don’t enter the ghetto” Interviewee L

The backpackers preferred to spend time with other travelers, creating a backpacker enclave. This can be seen as a way of them remaining within their environmental bubble and not coming into contact with too much ‘otherness’ so their level of arousal did not exceed their optimum. Subsequently, this suggests that these backpackers were low sensation seekers, resembling organised mass tourists, which suggests these tourists were at a relatively early stage in their travel career. Also, it appears that in these backpackers’ social cluster it is not necessary for them to travel to ‘exotic’ destinations for cultural capital to be achieved but for them to visit a large number of different destinations.

Many of the backpackers decided to embark on their trip at a transitional period in their lives: passed over for a promotion at work, the death of a parent, and before beginning university. Some of the interviewees commented on how they were bored, or losing interest at work (relating to optimal arousal theory), which caused them to go travelling.

“I felt like I was going nowhere and needed a change” Focus group A

Undoubtedly the push motives for backpackers directly link to optimal arousal theory. The backpackers’ characteristics and travel behaviour are linked to push and pull factors and these are linked to Iso Ahola’s (1980) optimal arousal theory whereby “we search for a level of interaction with our environment that maintains our psychological equilibrium” (Holden 2006 p. 69). The most common push motives identified related to escape and knowledge seeking. It can be suggested that those individuals who were travelling for escape reasons did so because they were subject to a higher level of stimulation in their ordinary lives and needed to re establish their arousal level. Scotland being perceived as a quiet place with lots of open space was thus appealing to these individuals and these backpackers could have been described as anomic tourists who were lower in their travel career.

“Scotland seemed like a great place to get some real freedom.” Focus group A

On the other hand, those that travelled for knowledge seeking purposes could have been sitting at a lower level of arousal in their ordinary lives and were searching for ways to reach their optimum and could be described as ego enhancement tourists and at a slightly higher level of their travel career. Scotland was appealing to these backpackers because of outdoor activities and the ability to socialise as no language barriers existed. The facilitation of social interaction was not a common push motive theme and arguments were put forward that this ‘motive’ could be placed under the broader heading of knowledge seeking, or that in fact it only impacted on backpackers’ travel style. As well, relaxation was not a common push factor and where it was stated it could be deemed as an escape motive.

The pull factors for coming to Scotland were predominantly due to its scenery that was noticed from media exposure, job opportunities, English as a language, close proximity to other locations, present location, outdoor activities such as hill walking and hiking, word of mouth recommendations, place of ancestral routes, and tangible aspects including history, art, climate, and cultural attributes such as whiskey, haggis, and kilts. Quite interestingly, some of the interviewees said that they had never met anyone who had visited Scotland and in fact this is why they came, this can be linked to creating distinction and cultural capital. Also, price was deemed as an irrelevant factor in the choice to visiting Scotland.

“Hey, I’m from Australia so everything is cheap over here.” Focus group B

Lastly, many of the backpackers were residing in Scotland on a long term basis and were using it as a 'base' where the rest of Europe could be explored while they returned to Scotland to live and work. Similarities in pull factors for backpackers in New Zealand were: natural scenery, adventure tourism/outdoor activities (although not a major draw) and its geographic position in relation to other countries making it an 'add-on' destination. Differences in pull factors to New Zealand were that backpackers did not travel to New Zealand for history or art and job opportunities, ancestral routes, the actual absence of word of mouth recommendations and English being the native language, were recognised as pull factors in this study but not in the New Zealand study.

The research suggests that Scotland attracts low sensation seekers, or backpackers resembling organised mass tourists, who are at a low level on their travel career, from psychic similar countries, or physically near countries in Europe. The variable of physical proximity needs to be addressed in the travel career pattern theory. As Scotland is not too culturally alien from their home culture and English is the national language it means they are not subject to added stress.

"There are a lot of similarities with home." Focus group B

Moreover, Scotland's abundance of natural scenery offers opportunities for the backpackers to enter more authentic settings and yet not too far outside of their environmental bubble. Alternatively, this study has also demonstrated that Scotland has the potential to attract high sensation seekers, backpackers resembling drifters, or explorers, who have obtained a high travel career ladder but who are looking to travel in Scotland for a longer period of time, with the likelihood of working. These individuals have the push motive of self development which is achieved via host site involvement and it is therefore necessary to be able to immerse yourself into the host culture; language is obviously important.

"Things are easy here. The language and the driving on the same side of the road as well as some sports are the same." Focus group C

Perhaps the travel career pattern reaches a saturation point where accumulated travel experience eventually leads to visits to culturally similar destinations as a satisfactory amount of cultural capital has already been achieved. It may be that Ryan's (1998) travel career pattern is more applicable than Pearce's (1988) travel career ladder as individuals do not necessarily transcend the rungs of the ladder but can move between levels as their dominant motive alters.

Conclusions

Highland Scotland as a tourism destination can satisfy both the desire for both push and pull motivation sought by backpackers.

Backpacking tourists are understood to be pushed into travelling to avoid over exposure of over stimulation from work and stress, or from under stimulation due to boredom. All of these elements share a common thread and reinforce the point that travel motivation is challenging, endless, highly heterogenic and complex. It is, however, possible to say that Scotland has the capacity to attract all subgroups of backpackers based on Cohen's (1972) classifications of international tourists, from those that resemble organised mass tourists to the drifters, depending on their own travel career pattern and optimal arousal level. The respondents' choice to use budget style accommodation in general and hostels in particular is important. This allied to the relatively strong performance reported by hostels (VisitScotland 2014) suggests that Paris's (2012) flashpacker niche segment could be a future market opportunity for Highland Scottish tourism growth.

Consequently, the results do not agree with Crompton (1979) in that any destination can satisfy push factors. Scotland has allowed the individuals in this study to reach their optimum arousal level (a push motive for travelling) and reinforces how push and pull factors are directly connected. This argument further confirms Um and Crompton's (1990) destination choice set model where tourists will select a destination that will best meet their needs. Some large generalisations have been made on the small sample size but the findings put forward are nevertheless plausible based on the available evidence. The relevance of cultural pursuits and adventure tourism as motivators for backpackers to visit the Scottish Highlands, and the portrayal of Scotland in film and TV is a lucrative and free vehicle to increase the pull motivations associated with Scotland.

Highland Scottish backpackers value: time with fellow travelers, and seek out networks to help find jobs. This is endorsed by reports of using Scotland a base for exploring Europe. Interestingly this survey found respondents took comfort from familiarity to home countries.

Recommendations

VisitScotland needs to recognize the current contribution backpacking is making to the economy of Scotland, and future potential flashpacking offers the country. The National Tourism Organisation (NTO) should be encouraged to collect data on this market segment to help inform future market development and provide a service to those providers catering in the widest sense for the backpacking market.

In their study of flashpackers in Fiji, Jarvis and Peel (2010) suggest that policy makers at destinations need to recognise the flashpacker market as a potential niche for future sustainable tourism development, and that destinations should focus on supporting local industry to address new demands associated with “flashpackers”. In Scotland the SYHA (Scottish Youth Hostel Association) provides the largest network of hostels with 70 locations across the country. These hostels need to be fit for purpose for the emerging flashpacker niche.

A recommendation follows, then, that the Scottish Government through industry lead bodies VisitScotland and Scottish Tourism Alliance work to meet the current and future needs of flashpackers. This will force VisitScotland to recognize the importance of backpacking in Scotland. This will require not only incentives backed by the two Enterprise Companies to improve (electronic) infrastructure at a national level, but also e-enable SHYA locations.

The many Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) throughout Scotland and Highland Scotland in particular need to provide Apps that can get backpacker and flashpackers networked. This extension of social media will satisfy the need to meet fellow travelers and also can inform backpackers of job opportunities in a just in time manner.

Simplifying employment legislation and taxation to make employing backpackers on short term contracts for work in the hospitality industry would help alleviate the labour shortage pressures in rural areas, providing a flexible solution with social and political benefits.

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