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# Understanding the Statusphere and Blogosphere: A Mobile-Virtual Ethnography of Virtual Backpacker Spaces

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## Abstract

The continued commoditization of attention suggests that researchers shift their questions to focus on how information is consumed, shared, created, and applied. In this context, a greater understanding of the virtual infrastructure could provide some insights into the mediation of the tourist experience by social media, the uses and meanings associated with certain types of social media, could have great implications for tourism marketing and management. The main objective of this paper was to understand the spatial structure of the virtual space of backpacking through the mobile-virtual ethnographic examination of four types of social media (Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and Twitter) by eight tech-savvy backpackers. The findings are discussed within the context of two main virtual spaces: the Statusphere and the Blogosphere.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Web 2.0, Backpackers, Virtual Methods,

## 1 Introduction

During the last two decades of the Information Age, information became a main “economic commodity.” Now companies like Google, Apple, Microsoft, and social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube all provide users with access to limitless amounts of information. Web 2.0 and social media have given rise to user-generated content allowing for individuals anywhere, to create and disseminate information to wide audiences. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Wikis, Blogs, Trip Advisor, etc, are all results of this. Information thus is now de-commoditized as individuals’ attention has become the most important commodity. People are technologically connected. Many individuals, particularly those of Gen X and Gen Y, spend time connected to multiple networks at the same time through multiple means. These technologies have allowed many people to maintain intermittent co-presence with these networks. Co-presence is further enhanced by ‘virtual travel’ as many social interactions need to take place over long distances, where corporeal travel is not as easy. This virtual proximity is proliferated by advances in cyberspace, including email, social networking sites, blogs, and other virtual extensions of personal identity. The virtual proximity of an individual’s multiple networks allow them to shift easily between or simultaneously interact with more than one network. In the increasingly complex world, where people need to maintain close networks over large geographical distances, virtual mobility allows for the strengthening of interactions (Urry, 2002).

Within the context of tourism, individuals are increasingly able to contact their networks via social media, internet smart phones, laptops, Wi-Fi and Wi-Fi enabled devices. Hotels, restaurants, transportation systems, and attractions are all implementing technologies in accordance with the demand of the modern tourist. The

tourism industry is also implementing technologies to enhance the tourist experience, including things like Wi-Fi on airplanes and GPS tour guides at attractions. Increasingly, the tourism experience is mediated by information and communications technologies (Xiang and Gretzel, 2009; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). This mediation occurs before, during, and after an individual's trip (Paris, 2010a). Tourism products are booked and information is collected via social media and e-word-of-mouth (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2007) prior to the trip (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). Individuals maintain connections with home, collect information, book travel, upload photos, blogs, twitter, Facebook, and download travel guides while traveling. After the trip, individuals also use social media and other technologies to portray, reconstruct and relive their trips (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009; Pudliner, 2007). Some have argued that technology can detract from tourist experiences, which are emphasized by the contrast to everyday life (Uriely, 2005). The distinction between tourist experiences and home experiences has blurred, and now experiences are more liquid as tourists experiences can flow through virtual networks and thus are accessible even during everyday life without the necessity of physical movement (Uriely, 2005; Urry, 2007). The role of consumer generated media for tourism has received considerable attention lately, as it has tremendous implications for the future of the tourism industry, particularly in understanding how tourism marketers can leverage social media (Gretzel, 2006), better organized travel information for search optimization (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009), to understand the influence and implications of eWOM (e-word of mouth) (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008), and the use of mobile devices and connectivity while traveling.

Developments of social media are currently influencing the tourism industry particularly how consumers and the industry interact. For this study, backpacker tourists were focused upon. Understanding the consequences of technological developments for both backpackers and business has been an increasingly important direction for academic backpacker research (Pearce, Murphy, Brymer, 2009). Furthermore, the importance of examining the impacts of technology on the backpacker experience has been identified as one of the three main future directions that backpacker research needs to address (Pearce, Murphy, Brymer, 2009). In this context, this paper addresses the online behavior of eight highly 'connected' backpackers, while also attempting to map the virtual space of backpacking. At the time of research, five of the eight key informants are currently traveling, and thus maintaining their virtual spaces while being physically mobile. While traveling, they are using the social media outlets to maintain connections with friends, family and the online backpacker culture, document and share their experiences, and some are even prolonging their physical mobility by earning income through their virtual endeavors.

Another important reason for understanding the ways in which the different types of social media are used and how information is spread between virtual spaces and to virtual audiences is the increasing importance of consumer-generated media (CGM) in promoting backpacker businesses and the development of brands. Traditionally, consumer branding has been the product of top-down marketing plans developed by companies and 'targeted' towards consumers. Christodoulides (2008) suggests that there is a shift from the top-down marketing communications to a new-age branding built from an emphasis on relationships between businesses and consumers.

Successful businesses now are adapting to the movement towards user-generated branding in which consumers are partners in collaborative relationships that seek to create mutual value and brand meanings (Burmam & Arnhold, 2008). There are a few examples in tourism of the power of this co-creation of branding. Websites like TripAdvisor, Kayak ratings, and Google Pages, and for the backpacking industry—Hostelworld.com, have become tremendously powerful spaces in which consumer branding and decisions are simultaneously created. Tourism businesses are quickly realizing the potentially negative and positive influences on consumer decisions that social media sites can have. Poor quality products or services can now ‘go viral’ and be instantly spread to entire markets. Successful businesses have been able to adapt and embrace the technological advancements seeking to be proactive in the development of user-generated branding and building relationships with consumer markets through social media. While being proactive about adapting to the changes is a necessity, doing so nearly blindly without proper understanding of the medium can be both inefficient and harmful for the businesses.

The proliferation of connections and overwhelming amount of information availability and choices that these recent technological innovations have created is also shifting society into a ‘new’ age. This new age was recently referred to as the Attention Age and has emerged from the late information age as a result of Web 2.0 technologies (Attention Age, 2010). The Attention Age derives its name from Attention Economics (Davenport & Beck, 2001). As information systems have been constructed for the efficient production and dissemination of information, information overload has started to occur. Recently, there is now a need for information systems to be developed that allow individuals to apply their attention more efficiently. Simon (1971) envisioned this:

...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it (p. 40-41).

Information is no longer the commodity. High-quality, valuable information is now not only abundantly available, but it is instantly available, producible, and sharable.

Each individual only possesses a limited amount of *attention*. Individuals are forced to ration their attention. Young (2009) uses the metaphor of informational diet and suggests that people risk ‘Infobesity’. Social networks, real-time activity streams, and increasingly complex mobile devices have resulted in an extremely complex situation in which information must be processed from a variety of different sources. As the world transitions into the Attention Age, research needs to focus on systematically understanding the role that new technological developments play in individual’s lives, as well as the meanings and uses that individuals associate with each technology. The continued commoditization of attention suggests that researchers shift their questions to focus on how information is consumed, shared, created, and applied. In the context of tourism, a greater understanding of the virtual infrastructure could provide some

insights into the mediation of the tourist experience by social media, the uses and meanings associated with certain types of social media, and the implications for tourism marketing and management. The main objective of this paper is to understand the spatial structure of the virtual space of backpacking through the mobile-virtual ethnographic examination of four types of social media (Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and Twitter) by eight tech-savvy backpackers.

## **2 Method**

Using a mobile ethnographic approach, eight backpackers were ‘followed’ as they traversed their multiple virtual moorings. The connections between their virtual spaces were examined in order to gain a stronger grasp of the four different types of social media.

Ethnographic research has evolved since its early colonial origins, especially when taking into account the emergence of globalization, technological innovations, and a ‘more networked’ daily life of individuals today. Today, ethnographic methods have become more multi-faceted and multi-sited. The ethnographic methods employed in this study are mindful of the mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006), and thus differ from the classical understandings of ethnographic research. Traditional ethnographic research is generally localized and a-mobile (Larsen, 2008). Humans and technologies are increasingly mobile, and therefore it is vital that ethnographic approaches engage with mobilities that connect the ‘fields’ or localized spaces of interest across distances. Recent studies employing virtual ethnography or cyberethnography have moved away from the bounded/exotic elsewhere of traditional ethnographic studies in an effort to study populations that are not easily ‘located’ and that only have moments of ‘common fixedness’ virtually through spaces like online communities (Fay, 2007). Virtual ethnography has emerged recently as the need for methods to understand the significances, implications, and meanings associated with developments in computer-mediated communications. Technological developments leave the Internet and other communication technologies in a constant state of flux that challenges researchers to adapt to new research methods (Toulouse, 1998). Research is moving from research about the Internet to Internet research (Mann & Stewart, 2000) capturing the complex interface between technology and society (Sassen, 2002). As Hine (2000, p. 34) stated, “virtual ethnography aspires to give a distinctive understanding of the significance and implications of the Internet.”

A multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) or mobile ethnography (Sheller & Urry, 2006) involves participating in patterns of movement while conducting ethnographic research. There has been a call for mobile ethnographic research in tourism, as tourism is a mobile phenomenon, which involves following tourists’ movement, instead of just observing them at a stationary site. Similarly, to understand fully the virtual spaces and mobilities of backpacking, a mobile ethnography of the content, communications, and networks must be employed that follows the digital ‘objects’ through the virtual spaces.

### **2.1 Sampling and data collection**

This study employs the mobile-virtual ethnography based upon participant observation in the backpacker virtual culture. Potential individuals were contacted

using a snowball sampling procedure. The initial key informant was asked to recommend other backpackers who were tech savvy and actively contribute to the production of online content. Five additional individuals were contacted and asked to participate and recommend other potential participants, who then recommended a total of 10 other individuals. All fifteen individuals were screened, with only individuals who actively maintained a minimum of three of the following were invited to participate: a blog, Facebook profile, Twitter and YouTube account. All of the individuals maintained a Twitter account and a Blog. Eleven individuals met this requirement and were then sent an email explaining the study (including the observation of their social media accounts) and were asked to fill out the short questionnaire that included 15 open-ended questions. The participants' Twitter accounts were used as the starting point for the ethnography. The 60 most recent tweets were examined. First, the text of the Tweet was examined to see if it was a 'status update', a tip, a news article, or a link to a blog post, YouTube Video, Flickr picture, etc. Once this was established, Tweet communication tools were counted. Each individual's level of interaction with other Twitter users was determined by his/her use of RT, @, and #. Individual's use the RT (re-tweets) was used to forward on someone else's Tweet to their own followers. The @ symbol is used to respond directly to another individuals tweet, with the response visible to all of that person's followers. The hash-tag symbol, #, is used to categorize the tweet and link it to some other general topic, group, and/or geographical location. Global tweets for each hash-tag can be viewed by any individuals. Finally, the method that the individual used to post a tweet was examined. This could occur through a variety of methods including directly through Twitter using a web browser or a mobile phone application, through a integration site (that would update an individual's multiple social media profiles from one centralized platform), through a Facebook application that would simultaneously update an individual's Twitter through his/her Facebook status update function.

Each link was then followed, and destinations documented and further examined by repeating a similar process. Destinations from links to Facebook, YouTube, and Blogs were documented. Next, each individual's blog was examined for linkages to and integration with other types of social media websites, the source of the content. The linkages were then followed to the Facebook and YouTube (if they existed). Any linkages from Facebook and YouTube to Twitter or the Blog were also followed and documented. Notes from the observations for each individual were then used as a basis for constructing maps of each person's online social movements and integration of their social media.

### **3 Results**

All of the key informants were heavy social media users with strong connections to the backpacker culture. Even so, there were major differences in the group in terms of the ways that individuals used the types of social media, where they focused their attention, what they used the types of social media for, and who the content they created was targeted to.

Each of the eight maps show the pathways connecting the four different types of social media, where and what kind of content is produced, the number of people that

are directly interacting with the individuals, and the integration of the social media outlets. These maps are not included due to space, but they can be found in Appendix D of Paris (2010b). While each of the individual's social media maps are different, several trends did emerge in terms of individuals level of influence, level of integration, type of content, blurring of personal and 'professional' profiles, and the type of social media on which the online behavior of the individual was centered upon.

All of the individuals had larger Twitter networks than Facebook Networks. This could suggest that Twitter is used to connect to a wider audience, whereas Facebook is used to connect with a more intimate group of people. The content of these individuals can be extremely influential to other backpackers in terms of where they travel to, what products they consume, and what behavior they exhibit at destinations. The influence of online word-of-mouth plays an important role in consumer behavior, even more so in the tourism industry as the product that individuals purchase is experience based. The advice from other travelers who have had previous experience with a tourist product is considered the preferred and most influential source of pre-purchase information (Crotts, 1999). Several studies have examined the impact of blogs on marketing in the travel and tourism industries (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Mack, Blose, & Pan, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Some of the individuals focus on particular media outlets more than others. Alan (respondent 5), for example, has the 'least' active blog of the most active group and his Twitter network is the smallest, but his Facebook network is the second largest and he has the most video views on YouTube. Previous literature in this area has focused primarily on blogs as the source for eWOM (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008), but the current findings suggest that individuals have varying levels of influence across different types of social media, and therefore researchers and tourism marketers should study the pre-purchase influence of individuals across the varying types of social media.

A review of the social maps also suggests that some of the individuals' online behavior was centered on a particular social media, while others were not. Mike (respondent 1) centered his online activities on his Blog as a center for content, Twitter as his communication outlet, and Facebook as a platform to interact on a more intimate level, as well as a platform to access the other types of media. Mike (respondent 1) had the most visited blog, most Facebook Fans, and largest Twitter network. While Mike (respondent 1) had a tri-modal focus, the bi-modal behavior was the most common for the sample. The online behavior of six of the individuals was focused on two of the virtual moorings, their blogs and Twitter. The blogs were the center of their content and Twitter was used to disseminate most content (blogs, YouTube, Podcasts, etc), and provide status updates (at home and while traveling). Jess (respondent 8) was the only individual whose online behavior focused upon one type of social media, her blog. The process of mapping individuals' online behavior in this study suggests that while individuals do have differences in how they use social media, usage patterns have emerged. In the future this study should be repeated with individuals who are not as active as the individuals in this study. The findings here could suggest that most people focus the majority of their online attention on two types of social media. While they may participate in 'lower-rung' activities as 'spectators' or 'joiners' (Bernoff, 2010) using a variety of social media,

higher-level online behaviors might be the focus of only a few particular types of social media. Having a better understanding on the types of social media those individuals of a particular tourist segment focus on would allow tourism marketers to properly channel their resources to be more efficient and effective in targeting those segments.

While this study was not meant to go into details of the actual content, a brief discussion of what kinds of content are produced and disseminated through each type of social media as well as the differences and similarities for each group is warranted. The majority of content for all individuals was presented through blog posts. Most blogs contained embedded photos from Flickr.com and other sites and embedded videos from YouTube. The blog posts included personal content that the individual wrote. This content often included a current or historical account of a travel experience, a review of a destination/product/service, a 'top-ten' list, and/or travel tips. Three of the individuals had what could be considered 'commercial content.' These included podcast travel guides (Chris (respondent 2)) and eBooks on backpacking (Mike (respondent 1)). All three individuals used their blogs as a central aspect of their personal branding as backpacking experts. During a discussion with the three individuals, they indicated that they used the websites as primary sources of income. Mike (respondent 1) and Chris (respondent 2) have been traveling for more than two years, using the websites to generate income to prolong their travels. The blogs from Chris (respondent 2) and Don (respondent 3) both include a large number of posts from contributing authors. While Chris (respondent 2) and Don (respondent 3) both author a great number of the posts, the addition of the other contributors give both blogs an almost e-Magazine feel. Twitter was used by most of the individuals to communicate with their networks. The content that was posted through Twitter varied with each individual. One popular use of Twitter was to provide updates every time they made a new post or uploaded new content to their blog or YouTube account. Twitter was also widely used to provide 'status' updates of what the individual was doing or thinking. Other types of content were updated through Twitter using other applications available in the Twitterverse (Solis, 2009, May 27). The most popular is one that allows individuals to upload a picture from their mobile phone or other mobile application. Similarly, updates to Facebook status and the use of Facebook mobile photo uploaders were used by several of the individuals. Twitter and the Facebook status represent what has been referred to as the statusphere. The statusphere is the "the state of publishing, reading, responding to, and sharing micro-sized updates" (Solis, 2009, March 10).

Solis (2009, March 10) suggests that as we progress into the Attention Age, the traditional ways of measuring a blog's authority are outdated. The increased participation in 'micro communities' and social networks are detracting from the amount of time individuals spend writing blogs, commenting on blogs, and reading blogs. This rise of the statusphere, which is dominated by Facebook and Twitter, has changed the way that the online interactions and conversations are taking place. Instead of focused on the host site, they are occurring through syndication. Content is now spread and curated by peers through the statusphere. Individuals are now empowered in the dissemination of information and the evolution of connectivity through social networking tools like Twitter's RT and Facebook's 'likes' and

comments. While the amount of traffic and interaction in the blogosphere is declining, it can also be argued that the influence of the blogosphere is increasing. Solis (2009, March 10) argues:

One blog post can spark a distributed response in the respective communities where someone chooses to RT, favorite, like, comment, or share. These byte-sized actions reverberate throughout the social graph, resulting in a formidable network effect of measurable movement and activity. It is this form of digital curation of relevant information that binds us contextually and sets the stage to introduce not only new content to new people, but also facilitates the forging of new friendships, or at least connections, with the publisher in the process.

Essentially, the statusphere provides the space for which social interaction can be maximized.

The results of the mobile-virtual ethnography in this study support the notion of the emergence of two distinct virtual spaces: the statusphere and the blogosphere. Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the relationship between these two spaces. The statusphere provides a mediator between users and the content of the blogosphere. As the developments of social media have allowed a dramatic increase in the amount of consumer-generated content, certain technologies have developed that allow individuals to manage their attention more efficiently, allowing them a more direct way to the information they want. In this study, Twitter and Facebook provide this buffer to the content provided on blogs and YouTube. Many other tools are also available in the statusphere including: RSS feeds, friend feed, recommender systems, and even Google's efforts for personalized searches. Similarly, the blogosphere is a title given to the content of the Internet, which is not limited to just YouTube and blogs. For this study, however, the relationship does emerge through the analysis of the four types of social media.

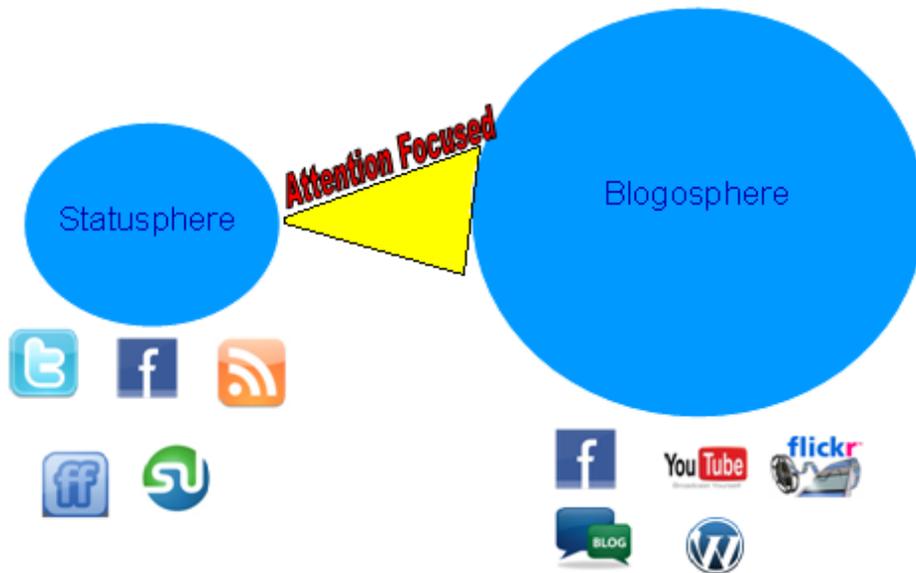


Fig. 1. Statusphere and Blogosphere

#### 4 Discussion

The statusphere provides the means for content in the blogosphere to reach more people, more effectively and efficiently. This is an important thing for tourism businesses to recognize. Instead of just blindly creating social media or online marketing plans, they should realize that these two distinct spaces exist. A backpacker hostel, for example, could design a blog on which it provides destination information, tips, specials, etc. This would be their presence in the *blogosphere*. Next, the hostel would then maintain a presence in the *statusphere* through Twitter and/or Facebook, with the purpose of building relationships and drawing individuals back to the source page through back linking. The online behavior maps of the 8 individuals in this study support this two-sphere phenomenon that is emerging. All of the individuals maintained a blog and used Twitter and/or Facebook to link people to the original blog post and to facilitate discussion.

The integration of these individuals' content and networks is evident through the blogosphere and statusphere example above. Web 2.0 advancements have also provided tools for the integration of individuals' social media. These tools allow individuals to increase the mobility and close the virtual distance between their multiple virtual moorings. The individuals in this study had varying levels of integration. Alan's (respondent 5) Twitter, Facebook, Blog, and YouTube were all highly integrated. Every content update he added to his blog or YouTube account produced an automated status update for his Facebook profile. His Facebook status and Twitter status were also coordinated, so that anytime he updates either (manually or automatically) the other also updates, thus maximizing his connectivity with his multiple networks. This integration connects his two networks. When he Re-Tweets or Replies @ to a message on Twitter, it also shows up on his Facebook Profile, along

with the message he sent, thus allowing his friends of friends to connect across the two social networks. Several of the other individuals had similar auto-updates connecting their blogs or YouTube accounts with their status updates. Mike's (respondent 1) social media outlets were all highly integrated as well. His Twitter and Facebook Page status updates were integrated. Additionally, Mike (respondent 1) used Facebook Applications to provide an extra Tab on his Facebook Page for both his YouTube and Twitter. This allowed individuals to visit these other sites without leaving his Facebook Page. Alan (respondent 5) also had one more level of integration. His blog comments were all integrated. Anytime a blog update on his Facebook or Twitter status was responded to or commented on, the comment would also appear on the original blog post along with the direct comments. This final level of integration represents the completed circuit of the integration between his blogosphere and statusphere.

Using this integration example for the backpacking hostel, the hostel that has both the blog and the Twitter/Facebook account, can then integrate them so that all the comments are aggregated on their blog profile. The user-generated content, such as comments or user reviews, are the information that is most trusted by other consumers. If a tourism business is able to centralize this feedback from multiple sources, it has the opportunity to maximize the benefit of this eWOM. Another aspect of integration that seemed to be a part of some of the individuals was the 'blurring' of personal and professional identities. Social media is the basis for several of the respondents' main source of income. Chris (respondent 2), Don (respondent 3), and Mike (respondent 1) all use social media to create a backpacker brand, but some of these brands are blurring what is personal and what is professional for each of these individuals. Don (respondent 3), for example, has a branded backpacking blog, Facebook profile, and YouTube account, but uses a personal Twitter account. Chris (respondent 2) maintains his 'professional profile' that is integrated with his other social media, as well as a personal blog, that is essentially a travelogue of his current journey. All of the individuals have created some sort of personal backpacking brand of themselves as experts; otherwise they would not have the authority to grow the large networks that they have. The blurring of personal and professional social media, echoes what is going on in society at large, as a more networked patterning of life has emerged in which the boundaries between home and away and work and leisure have become increasingly fluid. Understanding that this blurring does not mean that individuals want to be 'friends' with a hostel, for example, just because they added them as 'friend' or became a Fan on Facebook, is crucial in understanding how tourism businesses must approach the online B2C (business-to-customer) interactions. Also understanding that whatever B2C interactions occur, there must be a level of mutual benefit and reciprocity for a relationship to develop (Paris, Lee, & Seery, 2010), and that all virtual B2C interactions online are mediated by C2C (customer-to-customer). This is more obvious in the tourism industry with the rise of review websites like TripAdvisor and Hostelworld.com, but the C2C interaction that occurs through social media is less obvious.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper presented initial observations resulting from a mobile-ethnography of eight individuals' use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and blogs. Transformations that can

be attributed to the development of Web 2.0 and the emerging Attention Age create a necessity for the tourism industry to incorporate social media as a means of communicating with potential and actual tourists. Up until now much of this has been done blindly, with little understanding of the differences in how each type of social media is used, how the different types of social media are integrated, as well as the emerging space of the statusphere. This paper has provided some insights into what is occurring and discussed how these eight individuals behave online. While these eight individuals in this study were much more engaged, virtually, than most tourists, they do help in developing a useful understanding of the role of social media in the tourist experience. The individuals here are some of those responsible for the curating of the online backpacker culture and the production of content that is consumed by other independent travelers. They are the ‘Creators’ and ‘Conversationalists’ (Bernoff, 2010) that help to maintain the structure and content of the online backpacker community, facilitate many of the social interactions that occur online, and influence the consumer behavior of other independent travelers. The findings of this study also provide greater insights for the tourism industry into the structure of the virtual spaces of backpacking, allowing for a more informed, efficient, and effective use of social media.

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