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Original Citation

Canavan, Brendan (2017) The complex cohort: a netnographic review of generation Y backpackers. *Leisure Studies*. ISSN 0261-4367

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The Complex Cohort: A Netnographic Review of Generation Y Backpackers

Abstract

This article uses exploratory netnographic analysis of 12 generation Y backpackers on an extended joint holiday in order to better understand and represent a rapidly emerging but underrepresented cohort. Insight is gained into a complex cohort with high expectations of leisure and tourism. Freedom and familiarity, challenge and indulgence, customisation and community, emerge as the themes which frame their often contradictory consumption. On the cusp of a sometimes unwelcome and not always achievable adulthood this is a generation in a unique position who accordingly have unique expectations of their leisure and tourism.

Keywords: Generation Y; Netnography; Backpacking; Generational Cohorts

1.0 Introduction

Generation Y, widely accepted as those born 1982–2002 (Pendergast, 2010), is viewed as the next big lifelong cohort with its unique combination of needs, wants and expectations (Leask, Fyall & Barron, 2013). They appear to be a complex consumer cohort; unpredictable, uncertain, diverse, demanding and contradictory (see Boztug, Babakhani, Laesser & Dolnicar, 2015; Giovannini, Xu, & Thomas, 2015). Large size and growing spending power means that generation Y is a strategically important consumer segment (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015). Leisure and tourism appear to be particularly significant to a generation which is demanding in terms of self-development and self-pleasure (Halliday & Astafyeva, 2014) and places greater emphasis on leisure within the work-leisure balance (Smith, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, 2010). Generation Y is often afforded much downtime to pursue leisure and tourism by an extended adolescence. Leisure time has continued to grow disproportionately for those not in paid employment (Roberts, 2011), something likely to include many of generation Y affected as they are by socioeconomic restrictions (Pew Research Centre, 2010; 2016). Leisure and tourism activities and lifestyles may become a viable alternative or necessary coping mechanism for those experiencing extended adolescence (Canavan, 2011).

This suggests significant opportunities and challenges for leisure and tourism academics and practitioners, something which requires more original research to address (Leask *et al.*, 2013). Generation Y will serve as the next generation of leaders, managers and

consumers of leisure and tourism, however research focussed upon generation Y within leisure and tourism studies is limited (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010; Joseph & Wearing, 2014). This is a unique and influential consumer group often discussed but poorly understood (Noble, Haytko, & Phillips, 2009; Bucic, Harris & Arli, 2012; Halliday & Astafyeva, 2014). Both theory and practice suffer from this dearth of research (i.e. Leask *et al.*, 2013).

Contribution of this article is therefore to enriching representation of this cohort and developing understanding of the leisure and tourism behaviours prioritised by. As a secondary contribution this paper advances the use of netnography within leisure studies. The evolution of online communication enhances the dynamism of online interactions and creates new and exciting possibilities for internet-based research including netnography (Mkono, Ruhanen, & Markwell, 2015). The approach has recently been extended to leisure studies (i.e. Jong & Drummond, 2016; Li & Wood, 2016), however remains underutilised and somewhat outside the mainstream (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). There is also growing critique of misuses of the method (Kozinets, 2015; 2016). This is an opportunity to illustrate the relevance and application of contemporary netnography to research investigating generation Y, using an exploratory study with 12 backpackers sharing and documenting online an extended period of travel together.

Backpacking is a unique tourism niche (Cohen, 2011). It is made up of many 'small leisures' (Roberts, 2011), including leisure and tourism sub-niches such as hiking (Kyle, Graefe, Manning & Bacon, 2003) or climbing (Dilley & Scraton, 2010). Backpacking involves the more casual and hedonistic side of leisure (Moaz, 2007), but with an emphasis also on overall serious leisure (Stebbins, 2011; Littlefield & Siudzinski, 2012), and even leisure as a lifestyle (Cohen, 2010). Backpacking thus covers much of the tourism-leisure continuum (Carr, 2002) and has a tradition of being used within leisure studies to investigate various issues such as leisure identity, motivation and consumption (i.e. Sharpe, 2005; Cohen, 2010). Backpacking moreover remains popular amongst young, implicitly generation Y, consumers (Chen, Bao & Huang, 2014). Hence backpackers have previously been used to draw insights into generation Y leisure and travel (i.e. Ong & du Cros, 2012), albeit these studies remain rare and greater breadth of original research is likely to add weight to the area.

2.0 Literature Review

Generational theory looks to categorise individuals based on their membership of distinctive cohorts. When looking at generation Y certain influences are considered to have shaped what is argued to be a new and distinctive generational segment. These influences upon generation Y are linked in the literature to varied and sometimes contradictory leisure behaviours.

2.1 Generational Cohorts

Stemming from the work of Mannheim (1952), generational theory seeks to understand and characterise cohorts of people according to their membership of a generation, revealing patterns across the generation group in the process (Pendergast, 2010; Muskat, Muskat, Zehrer, & Johns, 2013). Kopperschmidt (2000: 66) defines a generation as being an identifiable group of cohorts that share year, age, location, and significant life events. The sharing of these particular events, especially those experienced during formative ages, shapes a collective identity (Gardiner, Grace, & King, 2014). Intergenerational segmentation is based on the premise that each cohort shares similar patterns of behaviour with regard to work, leisure and consumption (Leask *et al.*, 2013). Generational cohorts provide an interesting perspective for considering the implications of social and demographic change (Donnison, 2007). According to Gardiner *et al.*, (2014), “In both academia and practice, grouping people on the basis of generational cohort membership has become a popular way to explain consumers’ past, present and future behaviour” (p. 706).

Mannheim (1952) refers to three core principles for studying generational behaviour. *Location* refers to the span of time for the birth years of a cohort of individuals (Donnison, 2007). For generation Y those born between 1982 and 2002 is usually identified in the literature (i.e. Pendergast, 2010; Leask *et al.*, 2013; Debevec, Schewe, Madden, & Diamond, 2014), although alternative dates have been proposed (i.e. Valentine & Powers, 2013). *Actuality* relates to the manner in which a generation responds to social changes and how these responses form the persona of the generation (Donnison, 2007). Suggestion is that generation Y has become a new culture, with a unique set of values, skills and behaviours that transcend geography and ethnicity (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010). Like every generation before, today’s generation Y stands for unique consumers and producers of culture (Muskat *et al.*, 2013). *Units* relates to sub-cohorts within the broader generational segment (Leask *et al.*, 2013). Various sub-cohorts may be readily observed within such a broad classification. Debevec *et al.* (2013) for example, offer a split into older and younger cohorts,

with the latter perhaps best described as holding even stronger generation Y characteristics such as strong self-confidence.

2.2 Generation Y

Broadly speaking three distinct but overlapping influences are considered to have shaped the uniqueness and complexity of generation Y: technology, globalization and parenting. The influence most often used to describe and define this cohort is their technological embedment. This is the first generation to have grown up with ready access to and increasingly immersed in online social worlds (Pendergast, 2010). Empowering as technology has been for generation Y there are potential negative implications of online immersion, such as unhealthy self-image, growing narcissism, anxiety and depression, resulting from unrealistic peer-comparisons that are facilitated through social media (Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013).

Beyond the online world, generation Y have come of age in a globalised era. Globalization of ideas, values, social networks, outlooks and aspirations have all been associated with generation Y as a group which transcends geography and ethnicity (Donnison, 2007; Pendergast, 2010). Highlighted is generation Y's ethnic diversity, and their openness and flexibility regards social issues, diversity and change (Pew Research Centre, 2010). Nevertheless if globalisation has opened many opportunities to generation Y it may be linked to challenges experienced also. The extended adolescence of generation Y may be observed in the temporary lifestyles of cohort members who typically put off major life decisions, such as getting married and having children, and who stay for prolonged periods in education, temporary or unemployment, and parental housing (Pew Research Centre, 2010). Coming of age during economic recession and the uncertainty, poor employment, and indebtedness that accompanies may explain such curtailed adulthood (Debevec *et al.*, 2013).

Finally, indulgent parenting of generation Y who were much wanted, valued and protected by their parents, has been suggested as the defining feature of this cohort (Howe & Strauss, 2009). This indulgent upbringing is linked to generation Y as having high levels of self-esteem, optimism, and confidence (Pendergast, 2012). They hold a firm belief in being special (Howe and Strauss, 2009). The self-confident individualism of generation Y is however not particularly robust (Doster, 2013). Generation Y is simultaneously identified as having high self-esteem and as being highly self-conscious (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015). Expectation of respect and sense of entitlement is combined with limited self-confidence and the need for validation from others (Fountain & Charters, 2010). Generation Y has been

described as sheltered, conservative, conformist and highly group dependent (Howe & Strauss, 2009; Pendergast, 2012).

2.3 Generation Y Leisure and Tourism

These influences upon generation Y in turn shape their particular emphasis upon, expectations of, and behaviours involving leisure and tourism consumption. These are important from an academic and practitioner perspective as they govern the future set up of these domains around generation Y stakeholders (Leask *et al.*, 2013).

On the one hand this is a confident, open-minded, ambitious and out-going cohort. Technology has networked and empowered the generation Y consumer (Howe & Strauss, 2009). Technological advancements and social changes converge in social media which has shifted the boundaries of both marketing and consumer behaviour into one which is far more co-creative (Gamble & Gilmore, 2013). Globalisation means that generation Y consumers are described as highly open-minded and keen to seek out new and varied experiences (Pew Research Centre, 2010). Their transcendence may make them particularly restless travellers keen to try new places and experiences and hungry for more adventurous and unusual forms of tourism (Gardiner *et al.*, 2014). Meanwhile, belief in self-significance translates into consumption which helps to reinforce this sense of uniqueness. It has been suggested for example that generation Y seek tourism experiences that allow them to stand out from others (Gardiner *et al.*, 2014). This is moreover a group which is ambitious in terms of being fulfilled, which seeks self-actualisation through leisure experiences, with high expectations and demands of themselves and their consumption (Fountain & Charters, 2010; Debevec *et al.*, 2013; Valentine & Powers, 2013).

Nevertheless, perhaps compounded by the pressure exerted through the influences upon them, generation Y is said to exhibit a somewhat fragile and still developing sense of self. This appears to be a somewhat cautious and peer-dependent cohort, who tend to make more conservative choices (Pendergast, 2010) and whose purchasing decisions are based on the influence and opinions of their peers (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015), making them somewhat conservative in their experiential choices (Gardiner & Kwek, 2016). Customisation has been highlighted as a consumption issue of importance to generation Y (Gardiner *et al.*, 2014), which appears to balance the desire to stand out individually with that to conform, by providing variations on commonly agreed themes. Online teenagers for instance, maintain the balance between blending in with their social peers and blending out by using customisation to present their individual identity (Doster, 2013).

Thus generation Y emerges as a complex and often contradictory cohort (Leask *et al.*, 2013). This is something which may arise from both the confidence of a strong sense of self built during supportive formative years, and the frustrations which this sense of self can come up against in the difficult adult world. This tension perhaps drives their high expectations and demands of self and others (Debevec *et al.*, 2013), expectations which moreover are carried into their leisure and tourism consumption (Jennings *et al.*, 2010).

3.0 Materials and Methods

Research in this case adopted netnography, an approach which accounts for the online world in which generation Y is embedded and which utilizes the extensive data made available therein. These virtual worlds are legitimate as contexts of culture and meaning (Sumiala & Tikka, 2013) and they are becoming more a part of overall and everyday social behaviour (Kozinets, 2015). Concepts of netnography have emerged to describe fieldwork conducted on virtual environments. These essentially adapt the open-ended practice of ethnography to the contingencies of the online environment, seeking to selectively and systematically incorporate digital approaches within this (Kozinets, 2006; 2010; 2015). If online ethnography is a broad category that encompasses a wide range of different research practices, then netnography is a specific kind of online ethnography which remains rooted in participation-observation through researcher engagement and conversation (Kozinets, 2016).

Netnography takes advantage of the changing virtual landscape, the rapidly growing participation in such communities, candour and richness of these (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Indeed according to Stebbins (2010), “the Internet as a source of useful exploratory data on leisure activities is unparalleled in the history of science” (p. 474). Netnography is moreover a particularly simple and rapid means of data collection (Mkono & Markwell, 2014), which works well as an exploratory approach, assessing newly emerging novel phenomena (Kozinets, 2010; Wu & Pearce 2014). Nevertheless limitations of the netnographic approach include people presenting themselves online in ways significantly different to their offline selves (Sandlin, 2007), difficulty of verifying online participants, and lack of physical context traditional ethnography provides (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Nevertheless the sampling approach adopted here may mitigate these. As with qualitative research generally the ability to generalise from results is constrained by sampling drawbacks and superficiality of netnography (Mkono, 2011) and is not sought in this study.

The netnographic process adopted here involved the widely described stages of planning and entrée, data collection, analysis and interpretation, ethics and representation (as per Langer & Beckman, 2005; Nimrod, Kleiber, & Berdychevsky, 2012). Amongst diverse forms which it has taken, the nature of contemporary netnography is that of a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data is collected through a very humanist participant-observational research stance (Kozinets 2015).

3.1 Planning and Entrée

Planning and entrée was somewhat serendipitous and opportunistic in that this project was inspired by observations of online contacts' travel behaviour, and participants were drawn from the authors' existing social media networks. This raises the risk of backyard sampling, albeit sampling is often opportunistic (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Social networks are typically consocial; based upon commonplace and often incidental forms of association (Kozinets, 2015); hence the backyard issue may be less significant. Pragmatic advantages in terms of access were felt to outweigh such concerns in the case of an exploratory study which seeks to provide insight and description rather than generalization (see Hartmann, 1988). Utilising existing social media contexts not only inspired the study but provided entrée to observing online discussions, presentations, reviews and narratives. The deeper relationships built up over time add study context and knowledge about individual participants, helping combat uncertainties of online representation.

Selected from the roughly 400 contacts the author has on social media were 12 participants. These were chosen partly serendipitously, as discussed, but because subsequent online reviewing demonstrated these to be of research relevance. As such sequential purposive sampling was adopted (Teddlie & Yu, 2007) whereby selection of units or cases is based on their relevance to the research questions not their representativeness (Bryman, 2007), a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

The 12 participants were members of generation Y, publically documenting a discreet, communal, and extended (3-6 months), backpacking holiday. Basic biographic details (see Table 1) available on profiles confirm age-appropriateness. Descriptions of travel meanwhile, were typical of backpacking as members have few possessions, are portable, use local infrastructure, associate with fellow traveller communities, and spend on a small daily but significant cumulative budget (Cohen, 2011). A further 2 potential participants associated

with the collective holiday were not studied as background research found these to be older than generation Y and of only limited time-involvement. Whilst many other members of the authors' social network might be identified as generation Y backpackers, it was felt that an emphasis on this one group had advantages in terms of providing a cohesive and discreet research and narrative focus. It has also been suggested that leisure research should study the social nature of the recreational experience (Auld & Case, 1997). A group holiday meant this dynamic could be reviewed in depth.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection consisted of reviewing all publically shared posts relating to the group holiday, including planning for, undertaking of, and reflections upon. Kozinets (2015) guidelines for capturing, collecting and storing data were used. Although a small sample was involved the content produced was significant: 1500 textual and photographic posts and 20 minutes of video posts across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Blogger were reviewed. This is comparable to other recent studies (i.e. Doster, 2013). Netnography does not prescribe specific rules about sample size or how much data is required (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). The amount and type of data collected vary and is largely dependent on the nature of the phenomenon of interest (Logan, 2015).

3.3 Analysis and Interpretation

Textual, photographic and video posts relating to the travel experience were analysed using broadly classed visual methods. These include certain practises to collect visual primary data and practises for analysing that data, including content analysis and semiotics (Pink, 2013). Doster (2013) presents a comparable interpretivist approach to content analysis regarding the mix of visual and narrative content created by teenagers on social media, whilst Ong and du Cros (2012) use similar but with focus on narrative content of blogs. As with Hunter (2015), analysis involved interlinked stages of collecting data, content analysis and interpretive analysis. All written posts were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft word by the author where they could then be thematically coded at the analysis stage (as per Nimrod *et al.*, 2012; Jong & Drummond, 2016). Visual data was screen-shot and collated with themes amongst and reflections upon these made in author field notes. In netnography, taking the time to introspect is part of the method (Kozinets, 2016) and data analysis was a gradual process involving decoding and contextualising of the language, practice and rituals of the online crowd (Kozinets, 2015). Research was a broadly inductive process using a social

constructivist approach to interpret data and build conclusions (see Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). This allowed for a back-and-forth approach to data construction and emergence of concepts through data analysis, with data interpreted in an on-going basis and patterns and meanings allowed to emerge from (Thornberg, 2012).

3.4 Ethics and Representation

A passive approach was taken to netnography in this study (as is usually the case; Mkono, 2011). Hereby researchers do not reveal their research activity to online participants, nor participate in online exchanges (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Non-disclosure can be a methodological (Kozinets, 2016) and ethical issue (Kozinets, 2006). However gaining individual consent is arguably not required when the data collected are from publicly accessible sites, whilst the ‘lurker’ format ensures that participants remain unaware of the researcher and interact in the relatively uninhibited manner characteristic of online communities (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). The passive format does preclude the possibility of engaging with users and seeking clarification on their postings (Mkono & Tribe, 2017), but such process is not always necessary (Langer & Beckman, 2005). Generation Y leisure is furthermore not a topic of a highly sensitive nature (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Codes have been used nonetheless to anonymise participants.

Table 1: Table of Respondents

| Codename | Age | Place of Residence | Education |
|-----------------|------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| W | 28 | UK/Aus | Masters |
| K | 25 | UK | Degree |
| A | 25 | UK | Degree |
| S | 25 | UK | Degree |
| C | 29 | UK/Aus | Degree |
| R | 27 | Aus | Degree |
| B | 25 | UK | Degree |
| J | 25 | Aus | Degree |
| G | 25 | UK | Degree |
| U | 25 | UK | Degree |
| T | 24 | UK | Degree |
| Z | 27 | Aus | Degree |

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Netnographic research gives an insight into the period of travel undertaken by the 12 participants, the individual leisure activities and overall leisure ethos of this period. All of the participants take part in the ‘Rickshaw Run’, a semi-structured event, whereby contestants independently race rickshaws through India to a set finishing point within a two week period. Following the completion of this event the group travel throughout South East Asia. There are various periods of collective travel, fragmenting into separate constituent groups, and being joined by others. Travel and leisure itinerary differs widely amongst and between participants during this latter stage with various activities, attractions, tourism styles, behaviours and consumption noted. Nonetheless broad similarities are apparent. Analysis collated around three broad themes.

4.1 Freedom and Familiarity

Pursuit of freedom arises as an important theme of online posts with emphasis on the uninhibited nature of living for an extended period of time without responsibilities. This liberation is particularly described in terms of avoiding adulthood; something typified as dreary, constrained and difficult. *“No commitments whatsoever. Just complete liberation. I’ll never be this free as I am right now #thisisliving #free #travellingtheworld #openroad. Completely in my element and loving this life with my mind, body and soul #iwasmadeforthis #borntotravel #somuchtosee #soakingitallin #carefree #freedom”* (K). Travel is referred to as a way to stay young, keep having fun, avoid responsibilities and not become boring. *“This one exploded glitter all over her face, threw on her huge sequin silver skirt to sit and drink rum on our balcony. K you understand how boring adult-life is, may we never grow up and live in Wonderland together forever #idontknowhowtoadult”* (W). As such it highlights the desire of these specific members of generation Y to pursue an extended adolescence. Acknowledged as a contrast to everyday roles, backpacking is regarded by participants as a simpler, freer, more spontaneous, romantic and authentic, less serious or utilitarian lifestyle which enables a distance from or transcending of daily lives (Wang, 1999).

Also illustrated are descriptions of freedom from mundane landscapes, routines and roles back home, as K infers when she captions a pair of photographs contrasting her home town and current beachside location: *“Rain and job I don’t miss you. Hello sand for days. #thisisliving.”* A return to these is negatively anticipated as the holiday draws to a close. As such evidence is of travel being used by participants to get away from dissatisfying home and

work domains (Pearce & Lee, 2005). This freedom may be important to members of a generation typified by uncertain and stressful home and working lives (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

Travel may therefore enable liberation both from responsibility in an active embrace of extended adolescence as something fun and carefree, and also from the lack of responsibility extended adolescence may imply over home and work lives. In either case freedom is temporary however, and participants share posts reflecting their disappointment and difficulties readjusting at the end of travel. Shortly after returning home R posts: *“Are rickshaw withdrawals a thing? Jet lagged, sick and spent but just want to get back on the highway for more. Also a devastating lack of chai in my day.”* Backpacking in this case echoes notions of lifestyle travellers for whom extended leisure travel is a preferred way of life that the individual returns to repeatedly (finances permitting) as a means of escapism from restrictions of home (Cohen, 2010).

Familiarity is also brought into the holiday by participants. Although wide-ranging in terms of geographic variety, posts reveal a largely standardised pattern of leisure activities, as with the Rickshaw Run which follows a consistent theme of challenging journeying each day on the road. The run is itself an established tourist package, albeit a loosely defined one which provides space for participant co-creation. Similar leisure activities and infrastructure are used throughout. Variety is in terms of number of destinations visited, rather than variety in types of destination visited (as per Fountain & Charters, 2010). This quotidian routine alongside the socially familiar reviewed later, are illustrative of the blurring of boundaries between home, work and leisure spaces (Obrador, 2012). The conservative sides of generation Y may value these.

4.2 Challenge and Indulgence

Emphasised through social media posts is the seeking of deeper experiences. Evidence of seeking out challenge, and adaptability and resilience in the face of this, linking with descriptions of serious leisure requiring development of skills and knowledge, accumulation of experience and expending of effort (Stebbins, 2011). Individual leisure experiences which make up the holiday often require additional investment (Littlefield & Siudzinski, 2012). Various trips to isolated natural attractions for instance involve long and difficult minibus journeys, as a post by K depicts: *“Yes that is a crack in the windscreen. Chickens, scooters, a man playing the drums the entire time. 8 hour minibus journey. #howisthismylife #thisisliving.”* These also often require close involvement and co-creative inputs into

developing, as descriptions of last minute adjustments, temporary fixes, changed routes and compromises attest.

Meanwhile the Rickshaw Run involves on-going adaptations to challenges met on the road for example, including amateur mechanics, working with local people and adjusting routes and timetables, as summarised by W in a post celebrating the completion of the event: *“We actually did it! We finished!! We drove ourselves 4000kms across India in just a rickshaw!! We had countless breakdowns, many moments of wondering if we’ll survive, one flipped rickshaw, one hospital visit, multiple runs from police, charged by wild boars, rabid dogs and monkeys. It has been the most unpredictable, intense, testing adventure but undeniably the most incredible thing I have ever done in my life. I am so lucky to have such a great team: you guys are my forever family.”*

Similarly, regards cultural exchanges the group is willing and glad to be involved with local residents, reiterating the flexibility and openness associated with this cohort. In one post for example, W captions a photograph of her sewing with two local inhabitants: *“These two Laotian women were fascinated by my sewing kit, red wool and handmade tassels. We spent some time trading crafting skills and traditional Laotian techniques via hand-gestures.”* In another, C comments on photographs and video of the travellers playing spontaneously with a group of village residents: *“Last part of the bike-loop and these guys flagged us down. We couldn’t speak each other’s language but we danced, had water fights, ate noodles and drank beer. Laos knows how to party.”* In several cases online and offline friendships are made with local people, as when K describes attending the wedding of a former host, now friend: *“Indian wedding. What an absolute privilege to be part of!! So special to be able to wear traditional Indian dress: I shall wear this sari to the grave.”* Although the superficiality of these exchanges and relationships is open to interpretation, more substantial shared experiences are suggested. The online documentation of these by participants at least highlights their perceived importance.

Findings suggest that deep experiences are sought out despite extra effort required, because of their value in terms of catalysing self-development. A post by W captures the reflexivity travel has provoked: *“Even when you think you have your life all mapped out, things happen that shape your destiny in ways you might never have imagined. Trust your journey” these words #preach they get me right here #trustyourjourney #ibelieve #thedoorisopen #newchapter #newbeginning #gratefulheart.”* Collective bonding is likewise described as stimulated by sharing deep and challenging experiences. S summarising the Rickshaw Run posts: *“I can’t believe we shared this experience together. We overcame all*

those obstacles and became better people as a result. We know each other better than I thought possible and if we can do this can do anything together.” Thus findings relate to notions of inter and intrapersonal authenticity in tourism (Wang, 1999; Shepherd, 2015). R’s review of the Rickshaw Run illustrates the appreciation of this blend of personal and collective challenge and development: *“It’s impossible to put this experience all into words. It’s been the toughest challenge of my life and I wouldn’t change a single second of it. I couldn’t have done it without my amazing rickshaw family. I owe them my everything.”*

Noble *et al.* (2009) highlight how feelings of accomplishment and connectedness drive Y consumers. Repeated references are made by participants to learning, self-discovery, reflexivity, deepening connections with others and nature, and these are clearly considered valuable. These themes may broadly relate to notions of self-actualisation, something highlighted as important amongst generation Y consumers (Williams & Page, 2011). Self-actualisation is derived from tourists’ participation in the event rather than from merely being spectators of it (Wang, 1999), and may be stimulated by challenging experiences gained on the road (Rickly-Boyd, 2012). Such challenges are celebrated and shared, highlighting their importance to participants. A updating her travel blog during the Rickshaw Run for example summarises: *“Roof rack collapsed into the rickshaw, driving wrong way down the highway, haven’t eaten for 2 days but absolutely loving every minute of this crazy adventure.”* Co-creation, itself stimulated by the emergent solutions which need to be crafted by the group in the face of emergent challenges, may also be an important source of meeting the transcendent experiences sought by generation Y (Halliday & Astafyeva, 2014).

Nevertheless, alongside this enthusiastic embrace of challenge, travel is often depicted as more hedonistically self-indulgent. Various periods of over a week are spent largely static in beach resorts for instance. Backpackers are well-known to be motivated by both the hedonic and eudemonic (Sørensen, 2003; Cohen, 2011). Hedonism and fun seeking are associated with generation Y (Howe & Strauss, 2009). Jennings *et al.* (2010) provide a similar discussion of backpacker tourism by generation Y, illustrating their voracious appetite for new experiences and their simultaneous willingness to relax and have fun. Descriptions are of relaxation at length in idyllic surroundings, of luxury afforded by currency-conversion rates, of drinking, lying in and living without any cares. Group members often express their gratitude, disbelief and humour when making such posts, highlighting their awareness of and appreciation for their fortunate situation. *“I’d just like to let all you hard working people back home know that it’s 3.40pm here and while you’re starting your day I’ve just cracked my first birthday beer. #smug” (B).* One can question the depth of encounters with host cultures

which appear to be frequently brief and commercial (as per Maoz, 2007; Cohen, 2011). Visits to attractions are often presented in a self-referential manner: *“One of the wonders of the world and she takes a picture of me taking a picture of the wonder of the world... classic A.”* (S). Descriptions of learning and encounters can seem quite superficial, as a review by W at the end of her travel seems to capture: *“I can now say hello in 7 different languages and have eaten food with my hands, chopsticks, bamboo and banana leaves.”*

4.3 Customisation and Community

A last theme revealed by netnography was the individualised nature of leisure and tourism consumption. Much of the holiday is apparently created through group inputs and tailored to own selves. Customisation of experiences is frequent. For example, W describes how a boat is privately hired for a long weekend of cruising around Vietnamese islands, visiting unknown locations and facilitating a festive atmosphere: *“The BEST two days. Scored a private boat and cruised around the Vietnamese islands with some of my best friends. So many belly-laughs, so many failed somersaults, the world's biggest jellyfish, the most majestic game of beer pong ever played, a near Wilson castaway, rum and no water.”* The group is also willing to break up, dividing into separate units or joining others for periods of time in pursuit of individually interesting leisure activities such as dolphin watching. Hence research agrees with previous assessments of generation Y consumers as outgoing, flexible and involved in customising their purchases (i.e. Gardiner *et al.*, 2014; Halliday & Astafyeva, 2014).

As noted however, customisation tends to be variations on established themes of backpacker travel. Research also illustrates the strong group nature of this holiday. Established backpacker trails and communities are relied upon. Backpackers have been described as preferring to stay in ethnic enclaves to experience home comforts and similar company (Maoz, 2007). Cohen (2010) reports lifestyle travellers often found socialising with other tourists rather than the ‘other’. The majority of the travel is conducted together and social media posts celebrate and depict group bonds, such as when commenting on each other’s photographs. *“I’m currently going through your photos writing silly little comments to make me feel better about the fact I’ll never be as good as you but in all seriousness these are just incredible. Your photos tell a better story of our journey than words ever could. You truly have an exceptional talent”* (A). Online networks are additionally engaged with throughout. Participants are hence reassured and supported by wider groups at all times, concurring with Smith (2010) who describes how generation Y are permanently interconnected and never

alone. This connection includes family who contribute extensively to online dialogues. W's mother joins for a three week period, illustrating how inclusive and tolerant generation Y may be of their parents and vice-versa. *"My mum is actually the coolest. She has spent the last 3 weeks backpacking around Cambodia: riding around on scooters, swimming in fluorescent plankton seas, drinking so much beer, exploring jungles and ancient temples. Mum you are so adventurous and so fantastic and I can't wait to travel and see the world with you again. I love you with all my heart"* (W). Peer support is observable throughout this holiday, reiterating the focus upon, loyalty to, and importance of community, to generation Y (Howe & Strauss, 2009).

5.0 Conclusion

This article has outlined an exploratory netnographic study looking at generation Y backpackers. In doing so it has highlighted the advantages of netnography for leisure studies. This is a responsive method which can react to interesting phenomenon. At a time of restricted funding for many areas and types of research the internet as a tool for studying leisure activities appears to be an at least partial solution (Stebbins, 2010). It takes advantage of the growing involvement leisure consumers have in online words, giving access in particular to emerging generations. The netnographic process outlined in this paper complements other recent leisure research (i.e. Jong & Murray, 2016; Li & Wood, 2016), and aims to apply a contemporary approach conscious of past criticisms of the methodology (Kozinets, 2016). This is ethnographic research conducted within and upon the new cultural coordinates mediated by contemporary networked communications, such as the internet, and the variety of devices that humans use to access it (Kozinets, 2015).

Findings of netnography are limited in terms of their generalizability, but they do offer some interesting inputs into otherwise sparse understanding of generation Y leisure. The members of generation Y analysed in this research are shown to be shaped by familiar influences (Pendergast, 2010). Technological embedment is evidenced by immersion in the online communities which facilitated netnography. Globalisation is revealed in the extensive travelling of participants. Close parenting is suggested by the online and even physical presence of family. Together these shape a complex cohort who exhibit similarly complex leisure and tourism consumption. Participants are shown to be ambitious, adventurous travellers who participate in often challenging experiences in the pursuit of self-actualisation and collective bonding. They also value familiarity, seek hedonism, and are firmly embedded

within layers of community on and offline. Although this is a small sample of a specific type of tourists, findings add to previous research within leisure studies urging representations of young consumers as multifaceted; individualistic and collective, hedonistic and reflexive (Wheaton, 2007).

Additionally highlighted by this study is the importance of travel to members of generation Y who here have invested significant resources in an extended period of leisure and tourism. Findings begin to illustrate the reasons for this dedication. Netnography reveals the importance of freedom both from responsibility and a lack of responsibility that travel enables. This is an important insight, in that it begins to add richness to representations and understandings of a cohort on the cusp of (an often delayed) adulthood. It seems that the responsibilities that adulthood, implicitly and explicitly associated with work and home domains, heralds, are not always welcomed nor are they always available. The leisure domain may be significant to generation Y because it can offer opportunities for self-indulgence (see Wheeler, 1993) or respite from these difficult positions (as per Canavan, 2011). If however this side of generation Y seems rather hedonistic (a familiar characterisation of the cohort; Howe & Strauss, 2009), research also highlighted the importance placed on deeper experiences and encounters associated with personal and collective learning, growth, bonding and reflexivity. This reiterates descriptions of a self-aware and globally-conscious generation (Pew Research Centre, 2016). Enabling self-indulgence yet also self-actualisation, travel can facilitate a sense of freedom from responsibility, but also offer avenues for personal and collective development and fulfilment that are perhaps not being met elsewhere.

Overall these findings help to enrich understanding and improve representation of generation Y within leisure studies where they have been overly neglected. In supporting and building upon prevailing descriptions of generation Y as simultaneously empowered and disempowered by formative influences (i.e. Giovannini *et al.*, 2015; Gardiner & Kwek, 2016), and consequently complex and contradictory (i.e. Bucic *et al.*, 2012; Leask *et al.*, 2013; Boztug *et al.*, 2015), this study helps to further coalesce a sense of what makes generation Y unique; their diversity and multiplicity. In turn results add to understanding of ways in which this complexity finds expression through leisure. Leisure activities such as backpacking, at least in the form adopted by these participants which involved many small leisures (Roberts, 2011) as part of an overall more serious leisure (Stebbins, 2011), with both eudemonic and hedonic orientations (Sørensen, 2003), has the apparent breadth and depth to accommodate the complexity, contradictions and ongoing self-explorations of generation Y. This and other such varied forms of leisure may be of a priority to members of the cohort.

The ability to generalise from these results is limited by sample size, specific tourist segment reviewed, and this being a network sample. Qualitative research in general does not facilitate generalisation and this paper does not attempt to do so. Further research investigating and representing this cohort and its on-going evolution will be necessary to build the deeper understanding that generation Y deserves.

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