Mobile Sociality

Backpacker Interaction in A Digital World

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Abstract

The rise of the internet, social networking sites, and mobile devices have transformed the way backpackers experience travel. Social sphere of traveling is not merely a physical space but is now extended through digital social media in which backpackers can interact, post, share, and present their corporeal travel activities online. This study aims to explore social affordances of digital technologies including mobile devices, social networking sites, and the internet as means of extended social interaction, and how it affects the way backpackers experience travel. The affordances perspective assumes that the linkage between human and technology is relational, meaning that it creates the possibilities for human actions as well as constrains depending on the context of the user and the capacity of technological artefact. One of the largest Indonesian backpacker community is selected as the research site. The community is managed both online and offline through an online forum and conducting routine gatherings for its members. An approach in qualitative research known as netnography combined with interviews were employed to collect research materials. Analysis was performed to identify patterns of backpacker interaction afforded by digital technologies. The findings indicated that the presence of digital technologies was seen beneficial for the creation of network capital, presentation of identity, and performing mobile social interactions demonstrating a form of network sociality. Furthermore, digital mobile interactions increasingly became a central element in the making of the backpacking experience. The use of digital technologies among backpackers reflected the convergence of corporeal mobility and digitally mediated communication which can help explain patterns of sociality and interaction on the move.

Keyword

Affordance, backpacker, digital, identity, interaction, mobility, network, sociality, technology, travel
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Introduction

Background

The Rise of the Backpacker Phenomenon

Backpacking as a form of independent travel has become a global phenomenon (Richard and Wilson, 2004; Elsrud, 2004; Hannam and Ataljevic, 2008). Today, people carrying a backpack for travelling can be found around the world; we can see their presence everywhere from remote villages in Borneo to a big city like New York or Paris. The backpackers or travellers generally are frequently thought of people coming from the West travelling to the East or the Global South. However, the rise of the backpacker phenomenon globally can be seen by the presence of round-the-world travellers coming from various countries including Indonesia. Among them, there is an emerging trend towards the budget side of backpacking (Schonhardt, 2015).

According to Cohen (2003), the backpacker phenomenon has its origin in the types of “non-institutionalized travellers” which emerged in the pre-modern West. Early types of independent travellers often characterized by low-budget, long-term period, a flexible itinerary, and off the beaten track has been labelled by researchers and writers with various names such as “drifter” (Cohen, 1972), “wanderer” (Vogt, 1976), “budget traveller” (Riley, 1988), “alternative travel” (Westerhausen, 2002), “vagabond” (Potts, 2003), and “global nomad” (Richard and Wilson, 2004). The term “backpacker” has been used in travel literature since the 1970s. Nevertheless, backpacker as a social and cultural phenomenon has not been widely discussed by academic researchers until recently (Richard and Wilson, 2004). Locker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) argued that the origins of the backpacker phenomenon can be linked to a broader history of tourism in Europe. Travel behaviour among wealthy social elites, middle class, well-educated youth in the late Victorian age who took educational and

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1 The term “backpacker” stems from its name, but it should not only be understood literally as a physical bag but cultural as well (see Richard and Wilson, 2004) such as backpackers’ orientation on budget, independence, freedom, and their identity construction to differentiate themselves from ordinary tourists.
adventurous trips to the hidden, strange, exotic places or countries is believed to still give important influence on the contemporary backpacker phenomenon.

The spread of the backpacker phenomenon globally can be conceived of a symptom of the increasing mobilities of people, things, services and information in the contemporary digital societies. The mobile form of life practiced by tech-savvy backpackers or travellers shows a way of life characterized by movement and nomadism in the increasingly digital world. Mobilities become an important social trend in modern societies (Urry, 1995), and backpackers are “one of the cultural symbols of this increasingly mobile world” (Richard and Wilson, 2004, p. 3). Thus, studying backpackers is a way of understanding mobilities in the contemporary digital world.

**Backpacking in the Digital Age**

Since the emergence of ‘drifter’ (Cohen, 1972) to more recent group of ‘global nomad’, traveling the world is often associated with an expression of individual freedom, escapism, and liberation (Richard and Wilson, 2004). Backpackers are often motivated to travel in order to be free, to liberate oneself from home. Being far away from home, on the road, on the move, living a nomadic life, is important for backpackers in relation to express this idealized freedom of movement and experience cultural differences (Richard and Wilson, 2004; Bui et al., 2014). Travellers’ journey to unfamiliar lands, going away from the beaten track, immersing with the different culture, and indulging in a complete strangeness are the way travellers used to be socially isolated (Cohen, 1972).

However, in the increasingly digital world, being away from home doesn’t always mean being totally disconnected from everyday routines. Backpackers are now capable of maintaining a constant connection with home, fellow travellers, and others while on the road (Mascheroni, 2007). The use of digital technologies is an integral part of contemporary backpacker’s trips. Some scholars argue that the rise of digital technology, social networking sites, and mobile devices has changed the backpacking culture (Mascheroni, 2007; Molz, 2012; Paris, 2012). Backpackers use digital technologies to meet their needs in pre-, during, and post-trip such as searching for information, arranging itineraries, booking tickets, finding routes, sharing pictures, stories and experiences (Paris, 2010). It seems no longer suitable to view them as a socially isolated since they can easily connect and interact with others while on the road. Mobile devices equipped with internet access has made it possible to be ‘always connected’
while on the move. Backpackers are thus entering a new way of communication and interaction (Paris and Molz, 2015).

Digital technology has transformed the way backpackers experience travel (Paris and Molz, 2015). The convergence of digital technology and the internet in the backpacker phenomenon obscures boundaries between presence and absence, home and away, distance and proximity, friends and strangers (Molz, 2012). The social sphere of traveling is not merely a physical space but is now possibly extended through digital social media in which backpackers can present, post, share, interact and exhibit their corporeal travel activities online. Mobility of backpackers is virtualized through digital media (Pariz, 2010), through adoption of online platform as an area of social interaction. Virtualization of backpacking mobility can be found in the emergence of social digital phenomenon relating to backpacker such as online travel communities, travel blogs, backpacker digital apps, online tour guide, online maps, websites providing accommodation search and so forth. These have all changed backpacking culture in many ways such as the way travel information exchanged, social networks sustained, and social interactions mediated (Molz, 2012).

In my research, I intend to explore backpacker interaction in a digital world. My research site is one of the largest Indonesian backpacker communities. Indonesia has long been one of the most famous backpacker destinations in the world. Regions such as Bali and Yogyakarta were two among favourite backpacker spots in Indonesia. It would be interesting to know how a group of backpackers emerged in this country. I joined the community in 2015, and have been involved in interactive discussions in the forum. The community is unique in the sense that it is exclusively inhabited by Indonesians who have a ‘passion’ for backpacking abroad. Following posts, reading comments, joining the discussions rose my interest to know more about people in this group and the pattern of social interactions enacted by these backpackers online. This interaction may reflect the convergence of digital technology and backpacker’s physical mobilities in the Indonesian context. In this study, the backpackers’ uses of digital technology is investigated to understand how it shapes their social interaction and affects their making of backpacking experiences. According to Molz (2012), studying backpackers’ social interaction in the digital age requires an investigation on how the presence of digital technology affects physical practices, in this case, actual corporeal mobility of backpackers.
Purpose and Significance of Study

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand social affordances of digital technology for backpackers by analyzing their use of mobile digital devices and digital social media as sites for social interaction. Affordances can be understood as the capacity of digital technology to create possibilities for human social actions (Hutchby, 2001). Academic research exploring social interaction of backpackers in relation to the use of mobile technology has been conducted by some scholars from across disciplines (Murphy, 2001; Adkind and Grant, 2007; Mascheroni, 2007; Molz, 2012; Berger and Paris, 2014). There has been a growing academic interest in backpacker research. Yet, most research is predominantly focused on studying the phenomenon in the context of leisure and tourism in the Western world or the backpacking experienced by Western travellers (Teas, 1988; Riley, 1988; Westerhausen, 2002; Sørensen, 2003; Elsrud, 2004). Academic research on backpacker undertaken in regions like Southeast Asia, for example, is predominantly contextualized as merely a popular place for backpacker destination (Richard and Wilson, 2004). Some studies explore experience of Southeast Asian or Asian backpackers generally, through analysis covering backpackers’ strategies of ‘looking local’ (Muzaini, 2006), their stereotypical experiences (Teo and Leong, 2006), or their cultural differences (Paris et al, 2014). Yet, none of these studies touch upon issues of digital technologies used among them or how it affects their travel behaviour and experience. This research will focus on studying social interactions of Indonesian backpackers that appear in the way they use digital technology in travel. With a population over 250 million people, Indonesia has often been considered as one of largest countries with the highest number of social media and mobile users in the world. Backpacking culture is a social phenomenon that has recently been growing in the country.

Research Questions

This study addresses two main research questions. The first one is followed by a set of sub questions and the second one is a single question involving a theoretical reflection:

a) How does the use of digital technology, as described by the participants, shape social interaction of backpackers?
   • How do they perceive the rise of digital technology in travel?
   • What are their motives to participate in backpacker community?
   • How does the use of digital technology afford their social interaction?
b) How do social interactions in online spaces shape the way backpackers experience travel?

Theory and Research Review

Who are the Backpackers?

It is important to first identify who the backpackers are in order to get initial understanding of this travel-related cultural group. Backpackers are often considered as one type of tourists or travellers who organize themselves to indulge in cultural tourism. Sørensen (2003, p. 851) identifies them as “self-organized pleasure tourists on a prolonged multiple destination journey with a flexible itinerary”. Welk (2004) argues that the construction of backpacker identities can be identified through looking at the ‘pillars’ underpinning its ideology such as low budget, locality, freedom, independence, and oriented to long-term travel. In terms of identity, there is an emphasis on an ideological interest to define themselves as anti-tourist. However, cultural identification of backpacker should not ignore their contextual background such as nationalities or regions (Cohen, 2003). For example, Paris, Musa and Thirumoorthi (2014) found that Southeast Asian backpackers are more consciously budget-oriented, less flexible in planning trip itineraries, prefer to follow the beaten track, and travel in short-term holiday, compared at least to those of Australasian.

The term ‘backpacker’ that has become popular in travel does not emerge as something authentically new. Some socio-psychological characteristics attributed to early independent travellers has been identified by Georg Simmel in 1908 in his article “The Stranger” (1971[1858-1918]). Simmel calls a group of this mobile individuals as ‘the stranger’. The stranger intensively moved from one unfamiliar place to another, lived in foreign lands, performing nomadism. The feelings of being near as well as remote endowed by the stranger characterized their mobilities. Their nature of movement defines them as a nomadic group who consequently lived in a state of detachment from local culture and society where they sojourned (Simmel, 1971[1858-1918]). Cultural experience of being the stranger can be seen more or less similar with that of contemporary independent travellers. One fundamental difference is that the underlining purposes of contemporary travellers are oriented to culture,
education, or pleasure in the frame of travel or tourism. This creates a more privileged status of travellers with preference to at least any forms of forced or involuntary mobilities both in the past and present.

Cohen’s (1972) typology of tourism suggests a term for a form of independent traveller whose cultural characters oppose those of “mass-organized tourist” as “drifter”. A ‘drifter’ style of travel which was popular during 1960s seemed to present a sense of freedom obtained by a few of typically western individual elites through taking a long-road-journey to unfamiliar lands. Riley (1988) criticizes the relevance of drifter to describe nomadic group of contemporary international budget travellers. The term ‘drifter’ seems no longer relevant to be used since, as Riley (1988) emphasizes, it allows traveller to potentially be seen as “deviant” within the notion of freedom as portrayed in its earlier description. For example, the greater emphasis on consuming drugs, begging, selling blood and free sex. Nor are modern budget travellers seen as the “hero” like the explorer, soldier or scientist in the past. However, budget travellers share more characteristics with drifters than ordinary tourists. Different with tourist, backpackers as more independent form of travellers, seek to experience the ‘real life’ of others deeper by immersing with local culture, or sometimes, staying with the locals and trying to live the way the people they visit live. Through this way, ‘authentic’ experience pursued by backpackers are arguably deeper compared to that of tourist. MacCannel (1989 [1976]) argues that the pursuit of ‘authenticity’ is important part of the making of touristic experience. Drawn from Goffman’s (1990[1959]) idea of front and back region, MacCannel (1989 [1976]) developed the concept of ‘staged authenticity’ in which touristic experience is in fact socially situated. By socially situated, it means a certain social setting is intentionally designed for the tourist to be experienced. Therefore, the ‘real life’ of locals or others claimed to be ‘authentic’ can never really be actually authentic. Cohen (1979, p. 188) instead argued that it is in fact “primary aesthetic, owing its vicarious nature”.

In terms of traits, Riley (1988) emphasizes that such travellers typically prefer to travel solo, obsess with budget, and they are usually single, middle-class Westerners travelling to unknown, adventurous, exotic lands in different part of the world. The same traits Vogt (1976) have attributed to his “wanderer”. However, Riley’s (1988) characterization of international budget travellers has been criticized by Elsrud (2004). It is a focus on Western backpackers which creates the presumption that backpackers are Westerners traveling to the East. In fact, that only Westerners who travel is a myth underpinned with bias tradition. In
terms of budget, Elsrud (2004) adds that backpackers’ obsession with low budget is better seen as preference of choice rather than a defining condition of backpackers (Elsrud, 2004). As a community of travellers, shared cultural understandings of backpacker function as cultural bounds of the community. One way backpackers express their shared cultures is through what researchers called a road status which can be obtained in many ways. Experiencing ‘locality’ such as paying “local price”, staying with local people, immersing with local culture are few examples of how the road status is expressed (Riley, 1988; Sorensen, 2002). Altejcvic and Doorne (2004) identified backpackers as not merely in terms of alternative version of tourists, but also representative of travel style and expression of identity.

**Digital Technology and the Backpacking Experience**

As our everyday world is going digital, backpacker and backpacking practices are one that is under influence. Some previous studies have shown the implication of the rise of digital technology for backpacker’s practices and how it influences the way backpackers perceive the meaning of travel and also the way they experience it (Mascheroni, 2007; Paris, 2010; Molz, 2012; Molz and Paris, 2015). Backpackers are now often seen carrying gadget with them in their travels. They use gadgets to go online, seek information, connect with others while on the move. The capacity of digital technologies to connect people at a distance facilitates backpackers’ mobile sociality and interaction. Studies specifically focusing on the backpackers’ use of digital technology for social interaction has been conducted by some scholars (Murphy, 2001; Adkins and Grant, 2007; Mascheroni, 2007; Molz 2002; Berger and Paris, 2014). A more recent study by Berger and Paris (2014) focusing on exploring the role of social networking sites like Facebook in shaping backpacker interaction found that Facebook is seen by backpackers as a provider of opportunity to increase social engagement with their networks.

Backpackers view Facebook as an extremely positive social enabler that allows them greater access to their network with the potential for significant opportunities for increased engagement through both synchronous and asynchronous social interaction. (Berger and Paris, 2014, p. 310)

Digital devices and the internet have increasingly become part of backpacker’s practices and experiences. Paris and Molz (2015) argue that digital technologies which include things such as mobile devices, social networking sites and the internet have not only become entrenched in backpacking culture but also to some extent changed the way backpackers experience travel. Backpackers, just like other tourists, are often motivated to make a journey in order to
gain new, different, novel, ‘authentic’ experiences which can never be obtained in the place they call home.

For backpackers, the quest for ‘authenticity’ is closely related to the pursuit of ‘locality’ (Riley, 1988; Sørensen, 2003). It is arguably due to backpackers’ travel style, identity, ideology, that backpackers pursue ‘locality’ more seriously than those of tourists. ‘Going local’ is, therefore, a key in obtaining the road status and digital technology is central to this process. Today, backpackers almost always utilise digital technologies for arranging their strategies of ‘going local’ such as finding the local host, knowing the local price, and learning the local culture. Online connection becomes crucial in backpackers’ seeking for ‘authentic’ travel experiences (Paris and Molz, 2015).

As digital technologies and the internet proliferate, the backpacking experience is not merely located in the corporeal travel of backpackers. Online spaces have become a new place where the backpacker experiences are presented and shared with a wider audience. Travel blogs and travel forums are examples of these new places. It is there backpackers extend their travel experiences in a form of pictures, texts, voices, and videos shared in the weblogs or social networking sites. The act of sharing experience in the blogosphere or the statusphere has created a space where cultural norms and values of the backpacking can be experienced by others.

The statusphere becomes a site of virtual mooring, not just for individual backpackers but for a backpacking community. These virtualized cultural spaces of backpacking provide a hybrid space for cultural norms and community values to be experienced without the need of corporeal travel. (Paris and Molz, 2015, p. 182)

Online space is not only a place where backpackers share their experiences online, but also a site where information is usually gathered prior to travel. In online space, backpackers can obtain information, gain knowledge, and experience of others. Access of information is utilized to make pre-trip preparation better. According to Paris (2010) the greater access to information allows backpackers to enhance mobilities, increase freedom, independence, and autonomy while on the road.

**Community in the Network Society**

The internet has facilitated the creation of communities in which the individuals can connect, interact, communicate, exchange ideas and information, create togetherness regardless their
time and place. It has facilitated people with the same passion and interest to connect to each other and build their own community. Backpacker communities are on the rise across the globe. They typically emerge as a community using online platforms such as mailing list, websites, social networking sites as an area of social connection among members. Backpacker communities are online community whose members share common interest in backpacking and travelling (Adkins and Grant, 2007; Berger and Paris, 2014).

Online community is characterized with significant distinctions from offline or traditional community. In traditional sense, the term ‘community’ is often associated with physical proximity, embeddedness and strong sense of belonging among its members. Tightly-bounded groups and shared ‘narratives’-based social interactions are a few of the main characters of community as idealized in Gemeinschaft (Wittel, 2001). However, online community has different traits compared to the offline one. The rise of digital technologies contributes to the creation of new social patterns of interaction in the community. Castells (2010[1996]) proposes the notion of the ‘network society’ to characterize a form of global society in the information age. In the network society, social structure is more open and dynamics, social relations and interactions in the community are moving out from physical proximity to network connections. It is also because of an emphasis on the importance of networking technologies, online community is often identified with the network connections. Through network connections, social interactions in the community are characterized as fluid, liquid, flexible, ephemeral but intense. Kozinets (2010) points out that social connections in online community are typically weak, ephemeral, and temporary; in stark contrast to offline community.

A platform of online community is embedded in the materiality of new technology. It means that the platform contributes to the creation of opportunity for extended social interactions. According to Castells (2001), the opportunity of extended social interaction always presents in online sphere since its online platforms support to engage people in virtual conversation. In terms of practice, online interaction can be synchronous or asynchronous, depending on the degree of similarity with face-to-face interaction or interaction in traditional community. It is synchronous when mediated-interactions happen in real-time between actors such as that via video call, voice call, etc. It is asynchronous when the exchange of messages does not occur in real time (Rettie, 2009).
In online community, system of interaction is not physically and timely constrained. Therefore, the creation and maintenance of social relations are always possible all the time. It is due to the nature of online technology so that individuals are always possible to create and maintain their social relations, even when they are at a distance or in different time zones. Instant and constant connections with distanced others means the decline of physical proximity in determining the presence of social interactions. ‘Placelessness’ and ‘timelessness’ become significant features shaping the structure of interactions. As identified by Castells (2001), the pattern of social interaction in the network society is more personalized, individualized, and decentralized. Wellman (2001) further argues that in the rise of personalized networking, online space is more complement with physical place, rather against it.

Cyberspace fights against physical space less than it complements it. Cyberspace is the medium by which people arrange things and fill the gaps between meetings. Cyberspace also presents options: people will vigorously communicate with who they want to in preference to dealing with irrelevant neighbours. (Wellman, 2001, p. 274)

Cyberspace facilitates individuals to engage with their social relations. allows them to produce and increase the social capital. However, the development of new technologies complemented by ability of people to highly mobile has given rise to a new form of power called by Elliot and Urry (2014) the ‘network capital’. The increasing individuals’ capacity to create and sustain their social relations through practical usage of networking technology and physical mobilities empowers them in obtaining the ‘network capital’. The network capital is conceived of the individuals’ capacity to create and sustain relations with others regardless of geographical proximity in order to generate benefits in terms of practical, emotional, financial, with frequent help of mobile digital technologies. What is most important from the network capital is the social consequences mobilities produce, that is, ability to create and maintain networks with distanced others and also to visit specific places far away from home. Efforts to gain network capital is embedded in the capacity of individuals’ mobilities and availability of networking technologies. In the network society, online community can be a space that facilitates the creation of the network capital (Elliot and Urry, 2014).

Communications taken place in online community are primarily based on the need to gain information and data. Individuals are largely tied by data exchange, rather than on shared ‘narratives’ or historical backgrounds. This type of bond entails the less vital role of individuals’ ascribed identities in determining the social relations and interactions on one side
and more important role of individuals’ interest and passion on the other side. Interactions that are more informational produce new pattern of sociality; individuals’ tendency to associate with social groups through interaction, in the network society. Wittel (2001) calls this new pattern as the ‘network sociality’. In network sociality, social relations are informational, rather than ‘narrational’ and social interactions are primarily based on data exchange, rather than common experience and shared history (Wittel, 2001). Community in the network society is composed of networks that shape the pattern of social relations, interactions, and communications.

What can be created and sustained through the presence of online technology is not only social relations, but also individuals’ identity that are inherent in those relations. Constant availability of online connections facilitates users to present their identity online. The concept of identity is crucial to understand human social actions. According to Castells (2010[1997], p. 7), identity is “a symbolic identification that define the purpose of individuals’ action” in which its formation involves “self-construction and individuation so that it serves as stronger source of meaning”. The internet provides possibility for the individuals to be always presence and available in online sphere. More than an area for identity construction, online space becomes a new place where constructed identity can be sustained and constantly presented to the intended audiences. Goffman (1990[1959]) has earlier argued that social interaction is not simply about the transmission of information, but more than that, it is an important social encounter through which the process of social identity is established.

Community in the network society is structured by the presence of social actors and the connections between them. Interactions facilitated by online technologies is built up in a form of networks in which the emphasis is on individuals. It is the individuals that becomes ‘central’ for social interaction. Wellman (2001) indicates that the rise of the network society is parallel to the development of new technologies which gives rise to a personalized networking. In the personalized networking, interaction patterns are shaped by person-to-person connections. Individuals have more freedom in regard with who and when to connect depending on their needs or preferences. This sort of customized interaction raises a freedom of choice regarding whom and why social relations are created and sustained. The networked interaction also increases the individuals’ capacity to present their identity constantly through online technology.
Social Affordances of Digital Technology

The rising interest in the link between technology and the social has produced a variety of theoretical assumptions, the debate has been between constructivist and determinist views. Hutchby (2001) underlines the problem as a matter of finding theoretical linkage between two extremely different views: the technological shaping of the social and the social shaping of technology. A view of the technological shaping of the social presupposes the existence of technologies as external entities which could govern, shape, or influence the social organizational change. Meanwhile, the social shaping of technology viewpoint sees technology as a product of social processes that requires human interpretation in order to exist.

Faraj and Azad (2013) argue that the central concern of this theoretical debate lies on the problem of technology’s materiality. Deterministic logic confirms the materiality of technology, but neglect human’s ability to interpret and reinterpret initial function of technological artefacts. Technologies as seen by constructivist view are merely products of social processes taking place in a certain social context, and its meaning is nothing without human interpretations. This view at the extreme level totally neglects the materiality of technology as co-presence of human actions. Amid this theoretical debate, a relational approach has been developed to find the possibility of theoretical reconciliation. The concept of affordance, inspired by Gibson (1979) is developed as relational approach in analysing the relation between humans and technology. This approach is often labelled “the middle way” perspective (Hutchby, 2001). The concept of affordance assumes that the linkage between human and technology is relational, meaning that technology is meaningless without human interpretation, but at the same time recognizing material artefacts of technology that in certain ways determine human actions (Faraj and Azad, 2013). It implies that technology in relation to human society is liberating as well as constraining. The use of technology very much depends on human interpretation which is deeply related to the context and knowledge of the interpreter or user.

Convergence of digital technology and the internet as a mean of communication has generated conflicting claims related to alteration of the nature of human social interaction. There has been a long debate concerning whether new technology such as the internet generates a new form of social interaction or is merely an extension of human interaction. Castells (2001)
argues that in fact, it is difficult to claim that digital technology has totally replaced the traditional space for social interaction. People engage in social conversations with more various means without totally neglecting opportunity to meet people. Development of new technologies has provided facilities for multiple interactions with quicker information transmission. The internet, in other words, helps extended social interactions. The extension of social interaction in online spaces implies a less significant role of place for social interaction. Wellman (2001) argues that the rise of network individualism afforded by digital mobile technologies such as mobile phones signifies less significant role of place for social interaction. Individuals become more independent of place, mobile, nomad, and placeless.

Mobile phones afford fundamental liberation from place, […] The shift to a personalized, wireless world affords truly personal communities that supply support, sociability, information, and a sense of belonging separately to each individual. It is the individual, […] the primary unit of connectivity. (Wellman, 2001, p. 238)

Wellman, et al. (2003) further identifies how the internet can create social affordances and affect social interaction in everyday life. Five aspects are identified: broader bandwidth, constant connection, personalization, wireless portability, and globalized connectivity. Broadband as a material artefact facilitates the exchange of data. Development of the internet has created broader bandwidth which affords rapid exchange of large amount of information and data in a form of texts, images, audios, videos, and graphics. In other words, the broader bandwidth, the more rapid and larger data transmitted. The broadband also affords individuals to always keep in touch with others regardless time and space. Connectivity with others can also made multiple. Individuals can talk to their networks at one time while in different places. This further leads to de-privilege physical proximity in social interaction.

Another important aspect related to advancement of new technology is the internet is developing towards personalization. By personalization, individuals, not groups, gain more control over the sources of information. The individuals take more control over what kind of messages they want to receive, when, and from what kind of people. Capacity of new technology to select, filter, and delete data and information received displays this shift of ‘power’ towards individuals. The exchange of data and information in this form of communication is based on individual needs and preferences. An individualized way of interacting creates fluid networks of partial commitment. Social polarization and coalition are easily shaped to fulfil what becomes the need of networked individuals. Personalization generates a form of networked individualism in social interaction (Wellman et al., 2003).
Personalization is also supported by wireless connectivity and portability. Internet access and mobile devices are available anywhere and on the go. This makes personalized networking possible regardless place and time. Interaction becomes specific from person-to-person, no longer a household or office. Communication itself becomes more mobile. With portability, social interaction can merge with mobility as people take mobile devices with them on the move. Besides personalized, connectivity also becomes globalized. Globalized connectivity is not only identified by shrinking gap of the so-called digital divide particularly in the developed world, but also increasing transnational connectivity such as people abroad keeping in touch with their homeland (Wellman et al., 2003).

For backpackers, the presence of digital technology opens possibility to be always in constant connection while on the move. Backpackers’ ability to produce and maintain relations with home reflects the process of unity between proximity and distance, home and away. According to Mascheroni (2007), this conflation shapes social interactions of ‘the global nomad’ that generates a new form of sociality. The rise of the internet has been responded differently by different users. Beyond its positive and negatives responses, the presence of the internet has changed the way backpackers engage in travel practices. Backpacker’s practices can include phases from before, during, to after trips. These phases incorporate areas of both offline and online.

Methods

Methodology

A Qualitative Approach

This research applies a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was chosen based on the formulation of research questions which emphasized on inquiry of digital technology use in shaping the social interaction of backpackers. Creswell (2013, p. 48) argues that the choice of qualitative approach is appropriate for study about certain communities or groups of people or phenomenon that cannot be easily measured.
Choosing a qualitative research design means that the researcher is required to make certain philosophical assumptions consisting of ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions (Creswell, 2013). Ontological assumption of this research was mainly characterized by emphasis on subjectivity and diversity of reality as seen by the research subjects including me as a research instrument. This way of understanding reality is often called interpretivism. Epistemological assumption of this research was characterized by my attempts, as a researcher, to lessen distance with the community being studied. Axiological assumption in this research was started from my acknowledgement of presence of biases and that all research was value-laden (Creswell, 2013).

Online interactions in the backpacker community was approached using netnography\(^2\). Backpacker community studied is an online community. Kozinets (2010, p. 63) suggests that research on online community must “focus on the phenomena related to online community and online culture itself”. Social activities such as conversation and sharing stories which intermittently takes place in online forum can be viewed as social phenomenon in online community. In this increasingly mobile digital world, backpacker community incorporates the corporeal or physical with virtual and informational mobilities of people, things, information, messages. Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006) suggest that in studying contemporary mobilities, it is necessary to put emphasis on exploring not merely corporeal but also virtual and informational mobilities of its members on the internet. As this study wishes to investigate backpacker interaction in the digital age, it is important to also look at sites of virtual mobilities and moorings of this ‘global nomad’.

Netnography as an approach in qualitative research is a method for cultural analysis of online community through inquiry of data available in online social spaces (Kozinets, 2010). As a technique of inquiry, netnography has been developed “in relation to analogous procedures in ethnography” (Kozinets et al, 2014). Through ‘ethnographic communicating’, netnography allows communications in online spheres to be experienced, processed, and understood by the researcher exactly as cultural members of community experience them (Kozinets et al, 2014). I found the practical application of netnography as explained by Kozinets interesting as my research questions relate to cultural phenomenon that exist in both online and offline. As

\(^2\) Its name stems from a combination of ‘internet’ and ‘ethnography’ (Kozinet, 2010)
social interaction of backpackers today involves the internet as its pivotal platform, netnography is seen as a more or less relevant technique of inquiry in this research. Kozinets (2010) further emphasizes that

[Social scientists are increasingly reaching the conclusion that they can no longer adequately understand many of the most important facets of social and cultural life without incorporating the Internet and computer-mediated communications into their studies. (Kozinets, 2010, p. 2)]

**Use of Theory**

This research employed both a deductive and inductive approach. A deductive approach works from the particular to the general, drawn from theory. Inductive approach means that the logic of analysis is characterized as ground-up from researcher’s experience in collecting and analysing data, rather than top-down entirely from a theory or from the perspectives of researcher (Creswell, 2013, p. 22). By employing both approaches together, I use my pre-understanding of theory to approach my research problems. Understanding of existing theory helped me design the initial research questions and the interview guide. The process of collecting and analysing empirical data lead me to reflect on the initial research questions and re-approach my research problems. This approach implies a process of inductive reasoning aimed to analyse the digital technology use and social interaction of backpackers in online spaces. From empirical data, I generated themes that could possibly answer my research questions. Themes generated are related to my pre-understanding of the research problems; this process is deductive. At the end, it is a dialectical process between deductive and inductive approach to theory that produce the results in this research.

**Data Collection**

**Online Observation**

Online observation is a pivotal technique for qualitative research applying netnography. An online backpacker community adopting online forum as its platform was selected as the research site. The community is one of the largest online backpacker communities in Indonesia. I joined the forum two years ago after my friend, an old member of the community, found me as a wannabe backpacker. My request to join the forum was approved by a group administrator shortly after I sent a request. Observation on the forum was ‘formally’ conducted during data collection period, lasting for two months, from January to February 2017. The content of postings, comments, and conversations were carefully observed. The
contents which were considered important in relation to the research problems were screenshot and archived. Data gathered through online observation helped me not only to find potential participants but also obtain initial information about them. The online materials they shared in the forum were useful to approach participants for interviews.

Online observation is also meant to collect secondary data. The source of secondary data includes media reports and personal documents. Personal documents collected online include travel books and articles written by community members. I used a personal contact to access those documents. I also searched for free online documents archived in the forum. Some participants documented their travel stories in their personal blogs. Some others chose to share their thoughts and experiences by creating regular post or photo album in their social media accounts such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. I followed, observed, and reviewed these online documents. It should be noted that online observation was intended to gather elementary data, instead of being the main source of empirical materials.

Viewing the community of backpackers as a global phenomenon requires recognition of the fact that this phenomenon has spread all over the world. Backpackers come from a variety of places to travel the world. However, this research only involved backpackers from Indonesia. The online forum researched was created and administered by Indonesians. Members of the forum are Indonesians. Thus, participants of this research are all Indonesian.

**Interviews**

Mobility of backpackers is considered one of the main reasons why research on backpackers might be difficult (Sørensen, 2003). Conducting ‘face-to-face’ interview with backpackers is thus challenging. Some interviews in this research were successfully conducted via online media. This might influence quality of data collected through the interviews. All the interviewees were reached through online forum. This implies the participants’ commitment on the use of online technology. Thus, backpackers who do not participate in the forum or generally refuse to use digital technology — if they existed — were not part of this study.

The type of interview in this research is semi-structured interview. It was aimed to explore data that were not captured by online observation such as the motives to join backpacker community and the use of digital technology among backpackers. Semi-structured interviews let participants respond more freely to questions and provides ‘stories’ in the way they answer
the questions. According to Bryman (2012, p. 471) semi-structured interview allows the research participants have “a great deal of leeway in how to reply”, although the researcher provided a list of topics covered in the interview guide.

The interviews were conducted in February 2017 either online or face-to-face, in English or Bahasa Indonesia based on participants’ preference. Online interviews were undertaken via video call, chat or email. Face-to-face interviews were sometimes performed in a form of focus groups as in most cases, the participants especially those who are coordinators of the community preferred to invite their members to join the interview. I interviewed with 15 Indonesian backpackers, consisted of 1 founder, 3 coordinators, and 11 regular members of the community. There were 9 participants interviewed face-to-face, 3 interviewed via video calls, 2 via instant messaging, and 1 via email. Video call interviews produced transcript narratives more extensive than interviews through instant messaging and email. It could be because of video call’s features that afford synchronous mediated interaction as explained by Rettie (2009). However, real-time video call interviews relied heavily on the availability and quality of internet connection. I once got disconnected in the middle of the interview due to poor internet connection. After getting a better connection, I asked the interviewees whether they were willing to repeat their answers. Non-real-time online interviews such as via instant messaging and email generated shorter answers. Yet, contained deeper reflections. Text-based interviews via chat room or email provided time-space flexibility for the participants to respond the questions. It also had the advantages in terms of cost and time efficiency (Creswell, 2013). Chat or email interviews were performed in a form of correspondence.

I designed the interview guide consisting of several topics drawn from the research questions. Pre-understanding of theory concerning research problems helped me to create the topics listed in the interview guide. These topics included the initiation of or participation in backpacker community, travel experience and behaviour, meaning of travel, digital social media use, social interaction, other travel-related information, and the profile of interviewee. A test indicated that the participant felt more excited to start the interview by talking about their travel experience. Therefore, questions about travel experience, meaning and behaviour were put in early section of the interviews. As the interview started out, very often the participants quickly dominated the process of interview. In this case, I used a ‘check list’ method to make sure all topics were covered.
All face-to-face or video call interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards. I sent file transcriptions back to the participants to reduce mistakes in transcriptions and enable them to check the quotes. Considering time availability, not all transcriptions written in Bahasa Indonesia were translated into English. Only those sections which were important for analysis were translated. Throughout translation process one or two words might be lost. I am myself a native Indonesian, and more or less fluent in English. This could potentially minimize such losses. The fact that I was born in Indonesia, living there for years, and speaking the language helped me to understand the research setting and the participants.

**Sampling**

Sampling technique to obtain participants for interviews applied a combination of purposeful and snowballing technique. By purposeful sampling participants were selected based on the greater possibility to provide an understanding of research problems reflected on research questions. The political or structural role of participants in the community was one of the most important criteria.

In the first place, I created a classification based on the need to find participants who potentially had important stories to share regarding research focus. As suggested by Creswell (2013) the classification could be labelled as ‘important’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘marginal’. Only those who were ‘important’ were contacted for interviews. Important participants in this research were those who held relatively strong structural or cultural position within the community such as the founder, coordinators, authors of travel blogs and most importantly active members of the community who create interesting postings which were considered important in relation to research problems. Referring to Fetterman, Creswell (2013) adds that by this type of sampling, the process of selection of the potential participants is relied on the researcher’s judgement based on research questions.

In addition to purposeful sampling, this research also used snowballing technique. As a community which members’ social ties were based on shared cultural identity and knowledge, social networks of backpackers were considered an important feature for sampling process. Snowballing was performed when coordinators invited their active members to join the interview. As I also used snowballing technique, I couldn’t control characteristics of participants with respect to gender, age, and education. Purposeful sampling was indeed helpful in finding participants who had important political and cultural role in the community.
However, the coded themes might have looked different if I had found different representative of the community.

After conducting 15 interviews with participants, I saw that the data has reached maturity. According to Creswell (2013, p. 157), data maturity in the study of single culture-sharing group can be reached when “the workings of the cultural group are clear”. I found the collective stories of the individuals in the community studied were clear. I believe I had sufficient materials for the research and didn’t find any greater value to conduct more interviews with more people.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was started by arranging and organizing the data. Data collected from online media were scanned, screenshot, copy-pasted and then collected into a database. Data from interviews were all transcribed and then printed out. To be able to reach a deep understanding of the data and to reflect it better for analysis, I stayed away for a while from the research site. I decided not to attend the meetings and involve in group conversations. However, my effort to leave the field was always challenging since I regularly received notifications whenever there were updated activities in the forum. In this case, I chose to check the notification to know what was it about without further involving in the conversation. According to Bengtsson (2014), creating a distance to people and culture being studied, that has long been a core aspect in ethnographic method, is still central to analysis in ethnography online.

All empirical material was organized into a database for coding and interpreting. I carefully read and re-read data before entering into the process of coding. Coding and Interpreting processes were conducted manually using inductive approach. According to Creswell (2013), coding process in qualitative research, although through reflexive processes, should move from something particular to general. I tried to follow this suggestion. In the first step, I re-organized the transcripts following interview guide or protocol. Secondly, I reflected on general ideas presented in them. Thirdly, I went to the re-organized transcripts and conducted an inductive coding.

There is always a risk of bias in qualitative analysis. I tried to minimize biases by putting much work into the coding process. I made judgement on themes identification as clear as
possible by reading through all transcriptions and going back and forth among them. I looked for themes that could possibly answer my research questions and themes that were related to my pre-understanding of research problems. In the process of coding I found themes that were beyond my thoughts and some expressed by only a single person. These themes were considered uncommon.

At the end, there were four sections presented in results including major themes arising from field data. Theme identification were undertaken in a flexible way rather than fixed one, meaning that it relied heavily on field data. The themes were organized based on the need to understand the research problems and answer the research questions. Organizing, reading, coding, and interpreting were all interconnected processes in this data analysis.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are at least three important ethical issues I dealt with: dividing between public and private in the context of online media, the informed consent, understanding the ownership of data. My position as a researcher is first of all to review the community I study. I sent a message to the founder to introduce myself and my research. Approval from the founder was a starting point to this research. In addition to that, I created a public post in my blog to explain in detail what my research is all about. Each interview request sent enclosed a link to my blog post so that it could obtain informed consent. Observation in online forum was conducted covertly with priority of protection members’ privacy and identity. The online forum being studied is accessible publicly. Nevertheless, what was being discussed in the forum might not be expected to share out of the forum because it might create possible harm for members. According to Buchanan (2011), in such situation, protection of members’ online identity should be prioritized. In addition to protect members’ identity and privacy I decided not to mention the name of the forum throughout this thesis. Observation in travel blogs was conducted under blog authors’ consent. This was done to eliminate conflictual issue regarding ownership of data. Throughout the thesis, I used name initials for subjects’ identity in order to let participants remain anonymous. The process of translation and transcription were all done by me. I also sent the transcriptions back to each participant before coding in order to minimize mistakes in using quotations. By so doing, I gave a chance to the readers to see what goes beyond major coded themes. This might also reduce power issue that might arise in this research.
Results

The Backpacker Community

The community studied is one of the largest backpacker community in Indonesia. It was initiated in 2009 adopting a platform of Facebook Group. The total member count of the community reaches approximately 102,000, and is still increasing. It is an online forum, open for public but requires admin approval for membership. The forum, as described in its profile; dedicated to those (Indonesians) who have a ‘passion’ for travelling the world. As an online forum, member interactions are computer-mediated. Yet, the community’s activities are also managed ‘offline’. For example, through regularly organizing a kopdar\(^3\) (routine ‘offline’ gathering) for their members usually held once every 1-2 months. The first gathering was initiated in Jakarta. Then followed by meetings in other cities and countries. The gatherings held in other cities are usually considered the initiation of a regional chapter. The initiator of a community’s regional chapter is regarded as the coordinator. During this study, this community had 17 chapters located in 17 provinces in Indonesia. There are also a few chapters representing countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, and a continent in Europe. Initially, the forum was created to promote and discuss a travel book written by the founder. But then it did not evolve as it was initially intentioned since the group discussions evolved to broader travel-related issues. The concept was further developed to be a ‘community’ followed by the proliferation of its regional chapters. The founder of the forum explains:

I decided to develop the concept of this community, to become a space for Indonesian backpackers who have a passion for travel the world on a budget. This community then became a sort of “home” for backpackers to exchange stories, information, and seeking information about: how to create travel itineraries, find a cheap or even free accommodations around the world […], also about how to find a cheap or free air tickets, how to survive abroad. This community became a site for sharing for those who like backpacking abroad.

As the community grew, conversations in the group become more interactive, the flow of information runs faster, sometimes considered too fast so that it requires more serious management. The founder along with coordinators and group administrators manage the

\[^3\] An acronym for ‘kopi darat’. It is a local term commonly used to describe a gathering or meeting of people initially connected though online media.
community both online and offline. A set of rules govern the forum’s activities. These rules are displayed in the group’s pinned post so that all members, especially those who newly joined can get informed on what is allowed and not allowed to do in the group. As excerpted from the post, these rules are as follows: (1) Questions of information posted in the group are about travelling abroad (international trips), (2) no selling stuff, including selling tour packages since it against the purpose of this group, (3) no posting out of topic (travel-related), (4) always include a reference for posting images or articles that are not your own work, (5) be ‘ethical’ in the discussion such as not using abusive words, attacking one’s personality, mocking other countries, (6) in the discussion, write the name of our country properly, such as “Indonesia”, not in short “Indo” or “Indon”, (7) when creating a thread post for sharing, use hashtag with the name of the country or city so that it can easily be traced, (8) for travel bloggers, if you want to share your writing, copy-paste the content of your blog in your post, not only posting a weblog-link, otherwise it equals promotions, and (9) do not post or share referral codes including codes for taxi, hotel, ojek (motorbike taxi), etc.

According to the founder, applying such rules is part of strategies to effectively manage online discussion in the group. “It is how we manage this group. Everyone is free to exchange or share their travel experience or information in the group. With those rules the members of this community know what is allowed, what is not. As long as the discussion goes well, effective, cooperative, I do not intervene”, said the founder. The group admins are given authority to delete posts or block accounts who break the rules or disrupt the discussion. These rules generated diverse responses from members. It sometimes created a confusion for members, for example, when they found out their posts were suddenly deleted. As one member once posted in the group “where is my post? I have posted my picture here yesterday. Hi admin, what is wrong with my post?”. However, some argue the community is well-managed through enforcing these rules. The discussion might not be effective, proper, and focus on travel without the presence of regulation. One member appreciated; “there is a proper admin so in other words, are not junks. So, it is really for travel, it is not for selling stuff and some random things”. Despite different views, the presence of the rules has afforded proper interactive interactions among members of the community.

The group facilitated the exchange of travel related information online. The participants saw the presence of the forum was helpful for them not only to obtain needed information but also to connect with like-minded others who shared passion and interest in backpacking. They
believed online backpacker forum could help them obtain information important for backpacking such as prices and destinations. As backpackers were commonly focus on budget, information about the price of foods, accommodations, and transportations, became crucial. Backpacker community also facilitated to get to know people who possess a great deal of needed travel information and experiences. These were often mentioned as the main reason why people join the backpacker community. As one of them told me in the interview:

A: I decided to join this community to find information about travel because I was so inexperienced. I wanted to travel to Singapore but didn’t know how. I wanted to go alone and I didn’t know what to prepare. So, information for those things were really needed. I can browse on the internet but getting information from those who have experience is much better, I mean, I can meet and talk to them.

Access of information was important for the participants. This was even more pronounced for those who were first-time solo travellers. The online backpacker community played its role as a medium of interactions and provided opportunity for members to meet and talk to fellow travellers.

The community was also seen as a resourceful site where the participants could share their travel experience and feel more motivated to travel. It was an alternative social space in which the backpackers are afforded to express their travel stories, experiences, memories in a form of texts, pictures, or videos. It was there they can receive feedbacks, comments, ‘likes’, and most importantly, having interactive interactions with fellow travellers. Online togetherness and routine gatherings facilitated by the community created a social atmosphere where backpackers often felt motivated to travel. “I was triggered to think of, like ‘I have to go, I have to go’, because we always talk about trips, cheap air tickets,” said one of them when asked why it was so motivating.

*Kopdar* or ‘offline’ gathering as a formal regular event organized by the community is also seen as another important pull factor for them to join. Meeting face-to-face with other travellers in *kopdar* is also believed to increase motivation of travelling. Formal gathering is usually filled with sharing sessions in which the speakers, more experienced travellers, are invited to share their stories to others. *Kopdar* is also sometimes conducted informally, without formal session of sharing, typically once a week in a coffee shop, food court, or public park. To just come together and talk has become a typical cultural expression of many
community gatherings in Indonesia. The formal sharing session is mainly utilized to inspire and encourage the participants to afford themselves to travel. Travel the world might often be seen as ‘expensive’, ‘luxury’, ‘prestigious’ for most Indonesians. The community, as described by a participant, “intends to remove those ‘myths’ through convincingly informing them that travelling doesn’t have to be expensive”. It is emphasized that the key is on knowing how to manage a limited budget to travel.

To sum up, motives to participate in backpacker community vary among members. The motives revolve around the need to obtain information, sharing experience and social networking. The participants often described multiple benefits they got from becoming a member of the community. However, these various motives should not be seen as separated from one another. As mentioned above, they are somewhat interrelated.

**The Backpacker Profile**

A backpacker is often simply defined as an independent traveller. This definition, however, is debatable. There is always a question that might follow such as, “independent from what?” In answering this question, it is common for the participants to say: “backpackers arrange their own itineraries for their own journeys, not dependent on travel agents, trips organizers or generally any form of organized tourism”. This definition also implies backpackers’ self-identification to differentiate themselves from ordinary tourists. When asked whether they are a traveller or tourist, my informants prefer to be called traveller. The community of backpacker studied explicitly describe backpackers as *pejalan mandiri* (independent traveller).

Backpackers are more focus on budget than ordinary tourists (Welk, 2004). Orientation to low budget can be seen as cultural or ideological expression, rather than defining socio-economic condition (Elsrud, 2004). The participants’ commitment to low cost can be identified, for example, when they say that their destination choice is frequently determined by availability of cheap flights, as one participant said “we travel to wherever promo air tickets take us”.

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4 The activity is famously termed in Indonesia as ‘nongkrong’. Oxford Dictionary simply translates it as ‘hangout’. Culturally it includes activities to come together, meet and talk about anything. Activities in ‘Nongkrong’ is also often associated with ‘doing nothing’, ‘wasting time’, yet ‘fun’.
There is no standard technique to define what is ‘low’ or ‘cheap’. This sometimes creates a confusion even among the participants. For instance, when I followed the discussion in online forum, I frequently noticed a public post about the price of flight tickets with a text: “Hi fellow members, is this a low cost?” However, not all backpackers mind that their travel should be a ‘low’ cost. Rather, they emphasize that the point is not in ‘low’ or ‘high’, but how to manage the budget smartly. Thus, in terms of budget, a backpacker in this study is also a smart’ traveller, “I am a backpacker, I am also a smart traveller” as one of them said.

It is not uncommon to identify a cultural group of backpackers based on their economic and demographic attributes. Riley (1988), for example, identifies that long-time international travellers are mostly young, usually in their late 20s or early 30s. Sørensen’s (2004) ethnographic study of backpacking explains that 20s are the most common age group of backpackers. It is parallel with a gap year period for many backpackers namely between completing an education and embarking on work. The majority of backpackers in my research are also in their 20s. A few of them are above 30s or 40s but many had their first backpacking experience in their 20s. In terms of education, the vast majority of backpackers are college or undergraduate educated. Almost all are employed, either full-time or part-time. Few others are self-employed. The status of employment correlate to ability of backpackers to travel mostly in short-time, ranging from 2 weeks to 2 months, rather than a year as characterized for example by Riley (1988) and Welk (2004). Their self-identification as backpackers explains that Indonesian backpackers differ from the Western backpackers. The term of backpacker is adopted, even though they do not conform to the Western stereotype of what backpacker is.

The numbers of international trips backpackers make vary. Paris (2012) defines 7 or more international trips to indicate ‘high’ experience of backpacking. Lower than that is considered ‘low’ (Paris, 2012). Although it is problematic to use number to measure experience, the vast majority of backpackers I interviewed said they had done more than 7 international trips. When asked how many countries they had visited, most of them often suddenly went silent trying hardly to remember. I could tell that the number of countries were many, or probably, it was not their concern. Here, I do not use the number of countries visited as measurement of experience. However, there is a common pattern regarding how they made their first-time backpacking experience. The majority of them chose to visit Singapore. This neighbouring country is perceived as geographically close but culturally and economically very different from Indonesia or other Southeast Asian countries. Other often-mentioned factors such as
low-cost airlines and free visa policy for Indonesians also make this country a ‘perfect’ place, as said by a participant, “to ‘test drive’” for most Indonesian first-time backpackers”.

The most participants I interviewed travel solo, rather than together in a group with friends or families. Common reasons for this is that travelling alone provides more freedom, more time for self-reflection, and more chance to find new friends. One participant argued:

M: I have more time for self-reflection. And also, solo travel always give me a chance to find new friends. So, it is like personal development. I am always encouraged to talk to strangers. If we travel together with friends, we don't have the same chance. We only talk to our friends, keep being close to them. Travel alone provides more freedom.

As characterized by previous researchers, freedom is an essential element in backpacking (Riley, 1988; Teas, 1988; Welk, 2004). Making new friends while on the road is an important aspect in backpacker experience. Solo travel is perceived to give more chance to these. However, it is also common among backpackers to go alone but then to meet with friends or families in destination countries. Visiting the familiar such as families and friends is sometimes integral for their journeys. This is seen beneficial especially for strengthening social relations and pressing a budget accommodation. “I have relatives living there, it is silaturahim (to connect with relatives) and also backpacking”, said one of them.

Today, many backpackers carry digital devices such as smartphone, digital camera, laptop, tablet, powerbank, hardisk, etc, with them on the road. The development of new technologies is often commented positively by backpackers I interviewed. The older backpackers, as they have experience travelling with and without digital technologies, are able to make comparison. As one of them compares backpacking today with that of some years ago:

E: Technology and digital media help backpackers prepare their journey. Information is easily searched, cross checked, inquired, etc. That makes backpackers today are information-rich compared to those 24 years ago when I started my backpacking, where […] there was no mobile phone, internet, Google, etc. Now the development is remarkable. Backpackers are able to make a contact or phone call with family cheaply, be in touch using call features via Facebook, Whatsapp, Line, Skype, etc, although being far away from Indonesia.

Capacity of digital technologies to make backpackers information-rich is seen as a positive impact on one side. On the other side, it can negatively affect their travel experience, especially when searching information causes them to ‘know everything’ before the trip. As narrated by a participant: “For me personally, I feel less excited if I have already known everything before”. This is probably because ‘knowing everything before’ might reduce a
chance of experiencing ‘novelty’. The participant’s preference of spontaneity in travel is challenged by ubiquitous information that can be accessed easily. Getting informed about everything before is also believed to increase a chance of experiencing a gap between expectation and reality in travel. Sometimes, a picture on the internet looks so nice, but when they get there, it ruins their expectation, imagination, and mood.

Like two faces of a coin, digital technologies are seen by backpackers can implicate their travel experience either positively or negatively. It can create the possibilities or constrains for travellers as the users. It depends on how backpackers perceive, use and relate the presence of these technologies with their needs or preferences. Variation on how the participants use digital technology is identified in the interviews. When they were talking about their use of digital technology, a variety of expressions were revealed such as they use them for searching for information, arranging itineraries, creating social relations, interacting with home, fellow travellers, locals, sharing travel experience, and telling loved ones when they themselves are in risk or danger which is a common perception for backpackers’ family at home.

All backpackers I interviewed brings their smartphone with them on their trips. Smartphones are easy to carry and it was often perceived that “today, it can do everything”. Its portability seems to fit their travel activities. Built-in features and apps in smartphone are seen really useful. Other digital devices they carry are powerbanks, a portable charger for smartphones. Some brings digital or pocket cameras, selfie sticks, laptops, tablets, depending on their needs. These devices can somewhat explain about their style or preference in travel. What can be explained by the presence of digital devices in backpacker travel is their engagement with online connections. They are registered in social media or digital media apps. Most are active on Facebook, Whatsapp, and Instagram. Others active on Twitter or Path. All participants go online to meet their needs before, during, and after travel such as searching for information, connect with friends, and sharing travel stories. Digital technologies was an integral part of their journeys.
Backpacker Interaction in the Digital Age

The Creation of Network Capital

Identification of mobile form of life as practiced by backpackers shows a complex mobility system arising from the convergence of highly physical movement and intermittent flow of information, messages and images afforded by digital technologies. This form of convergence is composed of multiplying mobile interactions that depends largely upon the digital platforms and devices. In practice, the way backpackers use mobile digital devices vary considerably. However, it is evident that aspect of creating and sustaining social relations is central to the backpacker interaction.

Backpackers I interviewed tend to see the presence of digital mobile devices, social networking sites and the internet positively, particularly in the creation and maintenance of their social relations. Through digital technologies, it is possible to obtain what Elliot and Urry (2010) term the ‘network capital’ through finding, connecting, and further hold connections with people, either friends or strangers, while on the road. The increased engagement with networks, and thus increasing network capital, is not only afforded by constant interactions through online media but also through corporeal travel and meeting which allow them to physically engage with others. Most participants view digital technology and online media as a vital tool for affording the creation and maintenance of social relations. This is even more pronounced when they are traveling alone. As expressed by one of them:

A: Online or social media actually help travellers to connect better because it is easier for us if we are travelling alone, to make new friends on travel or plan to travel together and we can just go on social media either on Facebook, Couchsurfing, or other sites, and then we can just meet up. Another thing is that they can find another host that can host them or they can meet the locals.

To have a ‘person-to-person connection’, to use a term by Wellman (2001) is increasingly central for backpackers, especially if they travel solo. Meeting with the familiar such as friends, family or with strangers is seen as a way to create as well as sustain networks for travellers. Digital technology equipped by broadband and broader bandwidth has a material quality and capacity to process the exchange of data and information that can allow possibilities for the creation of network capital.

Backpacker interaction as exemplified in the online forum is composed of individuals and their relations among them regardless time and place they live. The social interaction is more
driven by personal interest to obtain needed information. In other words, it is personalized, information-based. This might be related to the pattern of social relation in Castells’ (2010[1996]) ‘network society’ in which the process of communication is largely shaped by the networked individualism. In the networked individualism, interaction is largely based on networked relation, conducted primarily to obtain information, grounded in the use of networking technologies. The following quote shows a pattern of networked individualism:

R: When I planned to go to India, I had difficulty to find Indian Rupee. […] I posted to a Facebook Group, asking whether anyone knows how to get Indian Rupee. Then, someone in the group sent me a message, she said could help me […] Also during travel, I could rent a car with a cheap price. I got that information from someone on Facebook.

Wellman (2001, p. 247) elaborates the capacity of digital technology in affording the rise of networked individualism, to create the “greater involvement in communities of shared interest”. Backpacker interaction is primarily based on the shared passion among its members. This shared passion plays a role as cultural bond among their members. “It’s such a motivating if we have friends with the same passion, we could enjoy, that’s why I decided to join this group, I got surprisingly a lot of new friends here”, said one of the participant. It further illustrated how network capital is also created through membership in the backpacking group.

**The Presentation of Identity**

As presented earlier, commitment to low budget, locality, freedom, and independence are main ‘pillars’ profiling the backpacker ideology. Backpacking practices are more or less derived from such pillars shaping the construction of identity that today can appear both on the road and on the screen. Drawn from data interviews, the participants prefer to identify themselves as independent or smart traveller. At the extreme level, they claim to be anti-tourist. Therefore, they attempt to fulfil their travelling in different manners from those of organized tourists. This identification did not start while depart to, or end up while return from, the journey but is extended through constant interaction afforded by digital technologies. In other words, traveller’s identity as backpacker is no longer merely apparent when they are away, but at home as well. In this case, the use of digital technologies play a great role in the extension of backpacker culture identity.

Murphy (2001, p. 63) exploring social interaction of backpacker states that backpacker identities as opposed to that of tourist “influence the manner in which they interact with one
another, indicating that interactions would be different, or perhaps even non-existent, if they were not backpacking”. Identity presentation is therefore integral to backpacker interaction. In the online forum and travel blogs as well as social media homepages, backpackers’ identity is constantly showed off. From my observations, the presentation of identity online becomes more intense when backpackers are on the road. This could explain the capacity of mobile devices, social media and the internet which afford them to have more interactive, intense, ‘real time’ interaction with the intended audience; backpacker networks while on the move.

The presentation of backpacker identity can be seen in many places from their profile pages to online contents they post. In presenting their identity, they involve a description relating to who they are or who they want people to think they are. For example, my observations found that many of the participants described themselves in their blog or social media profile with traveller’s identity such as “global nomad”, “hijab traveller”, “travel addict” and so forth. Self-presentation online is important for them in relation to construct self-identity as a backpacker or independent traveller. This is further related to the nature of virtual world in which identity is characterized as more fluid, flexible, and above all, virtual (Turkle, 1997). The social status of backpackers in the community is obtained on how they construct their backpacker identity online. Donath (1999, p. 56) identified the characters of virtual identity in which “balancing privacy and accountability, reliability and self-expression, security and accessibility requires a set of compromises and trade-offs whose value is very dependent on the goals of the group and of the individuals that comprise it”. What special in this case is perhaps corporeal travel of backpacker that provide influence on intensification of backpackers’ identity presentation.

Presentation of identity while on the move is central for contemporary backpackers. Adventurous trips, paying lower or local price, non-mainstream or extreme destination choices made and shared by backpackers, for example, creates narratives of what it means to backpack or to be a ‘real’ backpacker. A participant while on the road posted stories presenting a traveller identity as pejalan kacau (disorganized traveller) to describe the adventurous type of travel and flexible itineraries characterizing the backpacker identity. As expressed in the following quote:

T: My friend calls my traveling style as disorganized travel for I never arrange fixed itinerary prior to travel. I prefer not to arrange itinerary in detail such as which places I want to visit, how to get there, [… ] I once stayed in a dorm in China, I met a traveller telling me that there is an interesting place in
Shinjuan, in Southern China. Then, in the following day, I went there. It is typical of my travel style, that is, for adventure.

The identity presented is more or less aimed to tell others what kind of travel style they perform. Thus, it defines what ‘categories’ of traveller they fit into. Sharing backpacking journey, either through posting in online forum or travel blogs marks backpackers’ attempt to self-present for backpackers’ networks or a wider online audience. Inviting the notion of management impression form Goffman (1990[1959]) this attempt involves a ‘front stage management’ enacted by backpackers, not as a mere traveller but dramaturgically speaking as a stage performer. Backpacker interaction as demonstrated in a form of sharing stories and experiences online show the presentation of identity as an inherent performance of backpacker interaction.

A Network Sociality

Travel information such as routes, promo tickets, destinations, accommodations, currency rates, travel documents are common to share among members of backpacker community. In doing so, backpackers rely heavily on new technological infrastructures such as digital devices and internet connection to make mobile social connections possible. Mobile phone, for example, because of its communicative affordances: portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality (Schrock, 2015), enhance the chance for quick, wide, complex and intense social interaction on the move. With the help of digital technologies, individuals gain a chance to directly connect to others, create a personal connectivity to their networks. This instantaneity and personal connectivity give rise to a new pattern of social interaction termed by Castells (2010[1996]) as the ‘network individualism’.

This increasing independency of places is evident in backpacker’s mobilities. Backpackers carrying a mobile phone with them can easily access information they need on the road. Backpackers have a chance to always interact with home, fellow travellers, or the local host while being far away. Wherever they go, in so far as there is a material support for mobile connectivity, the sense of independence of place increases. Backpackers’ mobile sociality and interaction with home explains that digital technological affordances help backpackers to be ‘present’ while ‘absent’, to be at ‘home’ while ‘away’, to feel ‘familiar’ while in ‘unfamiliar’ place.
Backpacker’s mobile interaction presents a form of networked individualism on the move. Interaction in backpacker forum I observed illustrates interactive form of interaction with backpackers’ networks at a distance. For example, a post informing other members their current location in case anyone nearby is willing to meet up, such as “Hi fellow members, I am in Singapore right now, anyone to meet up?” This interaction characterizes dominant form of backpacker’s sociality that based on individuality, personalized networking and constructed in the ground of digital information and technology which defined by Wittel (2001) as form of ‘network sociality’. Wittel (2001, p. 71) further argues that in the network sociality, “social relations are not ‘narrational but informational; they are not based on mutual experience or common history, but primarily on an exchange of data and on ‘catching up’”. Backpacker community bases its social bound more on the shared cultural interest and less in common historical experience. This is evident on the motives expressed by most participants when they were asked about willingness to participate in the community: “because I love travelling”, “it is nice to make friends who share the same passion”, and so forth. Shared passion and interest ties members’ social connectivity. This is afforded by personalized networking deeply embedded in digital technologies. One participant expressed: “when travelling, I constantly check my Whatsapp if there is some news from home or work in case I am supposed to be fast response”. To connect to home in order to get some news displays a form of personalized networking in a mobile sociality.

Personalized networking move centre of interaction from ‘home’ or ‘office’ to person. According to Castells (2001), the increased chance of personalized networking enhances individuals’ capacity to restructure a form of sociality from the ground up. Network sociality practiced by backpacker interaction on the move neglect hierarchical order in information exchange. Togetherness, either virtual or corporeal is bounded up by shared interest in travel. Information exchange largely motivating backpackers’ use of digital technologies shapes a form of network sociality as dominant pattern of backpacker mobile interaction.

**The Digitally Making of Backpacking Experience**

**Virtual Mobilities and Moorings**

Online social interaction has become an integral part of the backpacking experience (Murphy, 2001; Adkins and Grant, 2007; Mascheroni, 2007; Molz, 2012; Berger and Paris, 2014; Paris
and Molz, 2015). Although physical meetings, gatherings, and having face-to-face interactions with fellow travellers are still important things for backpackers, social interactions in online spaces are increasingly become routine activity for them either when they are on the road or at home (Berger and Paris, 2014). Checking in, posting, status updating, commenting, publishing about travel-related things are integral for contemporary travellers’ activities. The participants expressed the importance of social media for them, such as “I like to post nice pics, writing review and such things, it’s really important for traveller like me”, or “today is all about social media, right? when we arrived we have to ‘check in’”. Posting on social media has become part of contemporary travellers’ activity. Through this way, they tell others what they experience, their whereabouts, and thus allow others to follow their trips online. Sharing travel stories and experiences after returning from the journey are no longer typical since they are now able to interactively communicate, share information, messages, images, videos, while on the journey. Through interactive communication and interaction, the audiences can follow travellers’ mobilities as if they are corporeally together with them. For travellers, this creates a sense of co-presence with people who are physically at-a-distance but virtually present. For example, talking to families at home while finding something interesting on the road.

A feeling of being ‘the stranger’ in mobility, that is, in the synthesis of nearness and remoteness from locality as elaborated by Simmel (1908) seems to be replaced by the ‘presence’ of the familiar in an unfamiliar place. Travellers’ virtual mobilities and moorings as appearing in the statusphere, blogosphere, and other online spheres creates a new way in which travellers experience their travel. Virtual mobilities and moorings imply a form of ‘interactive travel’ which reflect a convergence between home and away, presence and absence, familiarity and strangeness in travel (Molz, 2012). A participant narrated: “Sometimes, when I find interesting things while on the road, I send a picture to my family at home, they say “search for things like these ones, if any”. And then I search for those things. It is not always a souvenir, but something that is interesting”. This shows a form of interactive interaction in travel.

Furthermore, the gift is no longer a surprise since they are so constantly connected to those at home while on the road. Paris and Molz (2015) further argues that interactive form of backpacker interaction generates the co-presence between the road culture and their home culture through, for example, keep connecting to the familiar such as family at home while on
the road. This co-presence displays mobile sociality and interaction that influence the way backpackers experience travel. The backpacking experience is no longer circumscribed by merely physical location, but also extended through online social spaces such as those appear in the statusphere and blogosphere. As a participant said: “writing travel experience down in the blog can help others who need the information, and to follow my travel tips and trips easily”.

For some participants, digital technologies are not merely seen as a tool to be used, it can be a ‘friend’ or ‘companion’ of a trip. Digital technologies which are easy to carry such as mobile phone and pocket camera almost always accompany their trips.

P: I bring my smartphone and camera with me wherever I go. A phone with internet connection can help me find places when I get lost, suggest where to find good foods and the routes of the places I visit. My smartphone can also help me when an unwanted situation happens […] also can entertain me when I am bored […] There’s a moment when you really don’t know what to do. So, online social media can be a source of consolation.

The presence of online forum and community provides a new space for virtual mobilities and moorings, which afford backpackers to strengthen their relationship with fellow members, interpersonal feelings of belonging, obtaining resources and having a shared interest and cultural identity. These online spheres might be evolved to be what Wellman (2001) calls ‘cyberplace’. Online sphere becomes a ‘place’, not just merely a space. Virtual mobilities and moorings practiced through sharing information, experiences, pictures online have converged in corporeal travel of backpackers. Backpacker interaction in online spaces has enhanced the chance of how the contemporary corporeal travel may be best experienced.

**Re-Enchantment of Authenticity**

Quest for ‘authentic’ experience is one of the most common reasons why people claim to travel. Backpackers, as individual form of travel, are often found to have vision of experiencing ‘real life’ of others, ‘authenticity’, through making a journey, deeper than ordinary tourists (Cohen, 2016). MacCannel (1989 [1976]) argues that tourist’s quest for authenticity can be analysed by placing it in a broader historical perspective of the ‘consequences’ of life in modernity. Modernization, as he mentioned, has transformed industrial life into more fabricated version on solidarity, work relations, history, nature, and production of fetish of life in the city, rural village, and domesticity. The ‘production’ of these fabricated versions of ‘everyday life’ has unattached modern man for his relations to work,
family, neighbour, and town. At the same time, the modern man rose interest in the ‘real life’ of others. It is in the interest to ‘real life’ of others, social categories of ‘the authentic’ or ‘the truth’ found its place in the modern age. Travel, as enacted by a group of tourists, is a form of way out of modern disruption of real life. In this point, the notion of freedom, escapism, unplugged from modernity often attributed to tourists or other travellers finds its relevance.

Backpackers arguably prefer to meet the locals, even stay or live with them in their relatively long-term travel. Immersing with the host culture is central to the backpacking experience. Immersion with the locals, whether to its culture, people, price, and so on, is pronounced in backpackers’ identity construction to differentiate themselves from those of ordinary tourist. One participant narrated:

M: What I like most from travelling is the lesson and experience from meeting with people. To learn how to be more open-minded, understand other people’s way of life. Sometimes when I want to travel, I don't know much about what is interesting from the place I am going to visit, I just think that there is my local host living there, working for something, those really interest me. I like meeting new people, making new friends, learning, being open-minded, no discrimination, everyone is equal. Well I think here is the difference: a tourist is never willing to immerse with the locals, a backpacker is.

Immersion with the host culture through meeting, staying, and interacting with locals is crucial in the making of backpacking experience. The impact of new technological development to the creation of this locality experience is so far presence in enabling backpackers or travellers to make new distant acquaintance prior to travel. Websites providing hospitality exchange such as Couchsurfing, Hospitality Club and, of course, online backpacker communities are a couple of good examples for this. Backpackers are now capable to find potential local host or to find friends of a friend in their destination countries. To engage with the locals, stay with them, live in the way they live and sustain social interaction with distanced locals are seen as a way of obtaining meaningful ‘authentic’ travel experience.

However, the role of digital technologies is not merely enabling in terms of seeking ‘authenticity’, but also constraining. The presence of digital technologies can be a barrier to obtain ‘authentic’ experience. This view is evident in travellers’ behaviour to occasionally disconnect or disable online connections while on the road. To disconnect sometimes also means to socially connect with nearby others. Disconnection gives them more chance to engage with the locals. As expressed by a participant: “when I travel I try my best to talk to the locals or meet with the locals, and that what makes my travel meaningful”. Disconnected
from the ‘world out there’ is seen as an act of avoiding potential lost in search of meaningful ‘authentic’ experience. The act of disconnecting was also practiced since pre-trip arrangement. For example, a backpacker I interviewed chose to “stop researching too much about destination places online” because they are worried about experiencing the gap between expectations and realities, the contrast between online picture and actual presence.

**Toward Greater Mobilities**

Pre-trip arrangement becomes vital to contemporary backpacking. The participants often use digital technologies especially smartphone and social networking sites for this purpose. Trip preparation mostly includes searching for information and creating itineraries. They see digital technologies as useful tools that give much benefits for them. They browse Google, travel blogs, travel forum, asking someone in the forum regarding what they need to prepare. Online spheres have become a fundamental part of their journey.

When backpackers deal with digital technologies to book tickets, download online maps, e-dictionary, and find a local host prior to departure, they see new technology development has given an ease for trip preparation. In this case, the role of digital technologies seems to replace ‘traditional’ role of early modern technologies such as compass and guidebooks. One widely known impact entailed by the presence of digital technologies, however, is the intermittent flow of information and ideas in the digital space.

Mobile people are commonly lacking of knowledge and experience of the host culture. Therefore, jet lag or the feeling of disorientation is usually experienced by backpackers or travellers in early days of their arrival (Westerhausen, 2002). The fact that digital information is now everywhere increases backpackers’ chance to gather proper information and knowledge prior to travel. This increasing chance enhances backpacker’s capacity to know and imagine what destination place look like before they set foot there. This act of knowledge and information gathering can be seen as an effort to familiarize themselves with unfamiliar settings they will likely encounter. Information, knowledge, and imagination made up in advance can, thus, be seen as a way of minimizing the degree of difference between home and host culture, to reduce unexpected ‘shock’ at the destination place.
Backpackers consider pre-trip preparation not merely as a single phase before travel, but rather crucial part of backpacking itself. Hence, it is not surprise that some of them spent a couple of days, weeks, even months on this phase. As narrated by one participant:

L: Before traveling, I prepare everything. I print out routes from Google Map, I download Google Translate, screenshot some words and phrases because you know, sometime there is some local terms of the places we visit. I mean we must know that. I even learn the local language. Before I travelled to China, I spent 2 months learning Chinese, I joined a Facebook Group for specific reason: learning Chinese.

Time spent in front of the screen in search of information, travel buddies, local host, to arrange meeting, learn foreign language, and sustain interaction, sociality in cyberspace are part of the whole processes the contemporary backpackers undertake. A trip planning becomes much easier, as expressed by one participant: “Now it is getting easier because of those digital things, […] It is a huge influence. It seems like, we can no longer go anywhere without online technology”.

Backpackers move toward what Paris (2010) calls ‘greater mobilities’ as they can prepare more flexible itinerary, have more options to choose low cost travel, and conduct interactive mobile interaction. As well, access of available information prior to departure facilitates intensification of ‘life on the road’. Backpackers also possess more control in terms of time and duration. Pre-trip preparation increases the chance for backpackers to experience greater mobilities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand social affordances of digital technology for backpackers by analyzing their use of mobile digital devices and social media as sites for social interaction. To fulfil the aim of this research, two main research questions were posed: the first one, how does the use of digital technology shape social interaction of backpackers? This was followed by a subset of the following, more specific, research questions: as described by the participants, how do they perceive the rise of digital technology in travel? What are their motives to participate in backpacker community? How does the use...
of digital technology afford their social interaction? The second one, how do social interactions in online spaces shape the way backpackers experience travel?

Backpackers in this study responded differently to the affordances of digital technology in travel. The use of mobile devices, social media, and the internet increases backpackers’ opportunity to exchange information, stories, experience, present identities, create and sustain social relations, conduct mobile interaction and sociality. The development of new technologies has produced a new social space used by backpackers to connect, communicate, interact as a single community tied by shared passion in backpacker travel. Results show that social interaction in the backpacker community displays a form of network sociality in which interaction become less dependent from time and distance and more based on opportunity to obtain information. For the backpackers, social interaction afforded by digital technologies shape a pattern of mobile sociality in which their corporeal mobilities converges with online communications.

How does the use of digital technology shape their social interaction? The use of digital technologies in backpackers’ mobilities shapes a mobile form of interaction enacted by backpackers in the creation of network capital. The network capital is created as well as accumulated through practicing intense online interaction with their social relations complemented by attending physical meeting, gathering, and staying together with them within their corporeal mobilities. Backpacker interaction in online spaces also display a construction and presentation of identity. As stated earlier, identity of backpackers is not only constructed on the road through, for example, obtaining a road status (Riley, 1988; Sørensen, 2003) but also on the screen as well. The road status backpackers gain while on the move is presented online though narratives which can reinforce their identity as backpacker, not tourist. Backpacker interaction in the backpacker community presents a form of network sociality in which social interaction is primarily based on shared interest and the need to exchange data or information.

How do social interactions in online spaces shape the way backpackers experience travel? Studies have shown that digital social interactions affect the way backpackers experience travel and also the meaning they put on it (Mascheroni, 2007; Paris, 2010; Molz, 2012; Molz and Paris, 2015). Digital technology, as presented in the findings, has increasingly become an integral part of backpacker practices and experiences. Gathering and sharing information
online as practiced by backpackers through the act of interacting in the statusphere or blogosphere and online forum present a form of virtual mobilities and moorings in backpacker interaction. Backpackers’ travel motives to experience ‘real-life’ of others and ‘authenticity’ are pursued by utilising the capacity of digital technologies such as through connecting them with local hosts or gathering information about the ‘local’ price. However, the act of disconnecting while on the road, which means staying away from digital devices and internet connection is sometimes still an important element in their pursuit of ‘meaningful’ travel experience. Access of information has increased backpackers’ opportunity to gain greater experience in mobilities as they can prepare better, arrange more flexible itineraries and choose cheaper alternatives for their travel.

In relation to the literature, the findings of my research support the arguments that the greater access of information increases backpackers’ chance of experiencing the greater mobility (Paris, 2010). Backpackers spent plenty of time online for pre-trip arrangement. However, getting too much informed about destinations prior to departure also increases travellers’ fear of being disappointed. The nature of technology that affords backpackers to constantly stay connected can also make them miss out on a sense of ‘locality’. In this sense, this prevents them from experiencing ‘authenticity’. Quest for ‘authentic’ meaningful experience is evidenced in backpackers’ travel motivation. Digital technology is utilized to fulfil their hope on travel but at the same time they deal with the risk of losing what is hoped for. This supports the argument that pursuing ‘authentic’ experience still characterizes motivation of modern travellers (Cohen, 2003) as expressed by backpackers in this study.

This study contributes to furthering our knowledge on mobile social interaction afforded by digital technology from the perspective of Indonesian backpackers. Backpacker interaction and sociality on the move as identified through conversation in online forum and social media homepages reflect on the social aspects of affordances in digital technologies. Social interaction on the move practiced by backpackers through their use of digital technology displays a form of mobile sociality in the network society. Backpacker’s commitment to a long-term journey, as demonstrated by Western backpackers in Riley (1988) and Welk (2004), for example, is not suitable to describe backpackers and their backpacking experiences in this study. This study shows how the presence of digital technology increases their chance to travel in shorter time with greater mobility experiences.
The nature of the online world which allows the backpackers to constantly access the forum makes it easier for the researcher using netnography to collect data, but makes it harder to exit the field in order to create ‘an ethnographic distance’ after data collection since the distance between the researcher and the research site is only a click away. The possibility of the researcher to always connect to the forum presents the same affordances that allow backpackers to access it constantly. It is, therefore, hard to draw a line between being ‘presence’ or ‘absence’ in the forum, as the group’s activities online are almost always reachable from any physical locations (Bengtsson, 2014). Online connection allows the researcher using netnography to reach ‘proximity’ to the research site at a distance.

Backpackers participated in this study were all active in online forum, and thus digital technology use was an integral part of their social interaction, especially with fellow Indonesian backpackers. This was further related to their views on digital technology use in travel that were likely positive. However, their perception and evaluation of digital technology and online travel forum might have looked different if I found different communities of backpackers with different national contexts or online travel forum based on different aspects such as gender or destination choice, for example. The investigations on those different aspects and contexts were not covered by this study and provides chances for further research.

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