Deconstructing backpackers' identity projects

The role of experiences for identity construction

by

Mariana Cañavera Herrera & Antje Katrin Dieckhoff

May 2020

Master's Programme in International Marketing & Brand Management

"I am not who you think I am; I am not who I think I am;

I am who I think you think I am"

Thomas Cooley, 1992

Abstract

Title: Deconstructing backpackers' identity projects – the role of experiences for identity construction

Date of the Seminar: June 5th, 2020

Course: MSc International Marketing and Brand Management

Authors: Mariana Cañavera Herrera & Antje Katrin Dieckhoff

Supervisor: Carys Egan-Wyer

Keywords: Backpackers, Consumer Identity Projects, Deconstruction, Extraordinary Experiences, Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Thesis Purpose: The aim of this research project was to uncover the meaning of extraordinary experiences for consumers' identity projects and to understand how extraordinary experiences, rather than brands and possessions, can be used for self-presentation and self-extension.

Methodology: Following Van Manen's method for hermeneutic phenomenological research combined with Derrida's notion of deconstruction, we examined "lessons learned"-type blog posts of ten backpackers.

Theoretical Perspective: Informed by the theoretical lenses of postmodern consumption and Bourdieu's habitus, this study investigated backpackers' identity projects, using the analytical tools of hermeneutic phenomenology combined with Derrida's deconstruction.

Findings: The analysis revealed that backpackers engage in an infinite process of deconstructing and (re-)constructing their identity projects, randomly cycling back and forth between the different stages. The deconstruction process is characterized by (1) dispossession of material possessions, (2) living extraordinary experiences, and (3) negotiating the experienced-self. In the (re-)construction process, backpackers acknowledge (1) the role of their experiences, (2) the role of their own self, and (3) the role of the world.

Conclusion: The present study makes an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge on consumer identity projects as we suggest that experiences can fulfill self-presentation and self-extension purposes that were traditionally assumed to be fulfilled by brands and possessions. For some consumers, extraordinary experiences may be more meaningful in terms of their self-presentation and self-extension potential than material possessions, especially in an online context. Further, we add to the current understanding of backpacking as a postmodern consumption phenomenon.

Practical Implications: The present research project offers suggestions on how extraordinary experiences can be used for marketing strategy as another way for brands to participate in the construction of consumers' identity projects.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1   Introduction

Take a moment and imagine yourself walking barefoot in the sand of a beach you just discovered at the time of the sunset. Nothing else matters: it is you, the warm feeling of the sun, the wind kissing your skin and the water of the sea coming and going beneath your feet. Sounds good, right? Well, in this high-paced world, where life is a race, competition is key, and you can buy anything you want anytime you want it, it is difficult to feel a persistent sense of satisfaction. Instead, uncertainty exists all along the journey, stability seems unthinkable, and taking a moment to reflect sounds impossible… Still, there are some people who take the risk of living in the moment. They seek one thing nobody could ever take from them: Experiences. This group of people chooses – at least temporarily – to renounce most of their material possessions and exchange them for something that has more lasting value to them… We are talking about backpackers.

Backpackers travel around the world in a lightweight way, not only in terms of objects but in mindset, as they are open to whatever they will encounter. However, sometimes, disposing of things is hard. We have objects that have an emotional significance to us because of what they mean, but also, we have some clothes or accessories we love because they help us to perform who we are. In other words, we use our material possessions as an extension of ourselves in order to demonstrate our identity to others (Belk, 1988). According to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) this is part of *consumer identity project*s (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The importance of our material possessions is not only what they convey to others about ourselves, but that they also allow us to recognize others and become part of a collective. Therefore, branded goods take an important role in consumer identity projects as the meanings, values, and symbols they represent may reflect and construct our identity in the marketplace (Schau, 2018). Nevertheless, the impact of experiences for consumers' identity has received little attention so far. In addition, the role of the Internet for consumers' self-presentation (Schau & Gilly, 2003) and self-extension (Belk, 2013) has been identified but has been understudied as of yet. Thinking about backpackers' life decisions, where experiences have a more significant value, we assume that they take only their most necessary possessions with them and place more emphasis on experiences over material goods. Therefore, we investigated which role backpackers' experiences play in the construction of their identity projects and how they use experiences for self-presentation and self-extension purposes online.

As such, we hope to illuminate our readers on the value of experiences rather than branded items for consumers' identity projects. By investigating experiences, the aim of this research was to explore new ways that consumers create or build their identity. This means for marketing purposes that market players can focus on creating memorable experiential marketing strategies to impact the consumers' identity projects. Furthermore, we encourage you as our reader to question the importance you attach to your material possessions and think about how experiences also have as significant an impact on your identity as the goods you purchase.

In order to achieve the previously-stated aims, we invite you to navigate through the different paths of this journey of deconstructing backpackers' identity projects. First, we prepare you with the knowledge required for this experience by synthesizing the previous studies related to our research topic. Thus, the literature review is divided into three themes: (1) Backpackers' Identity Projects, (2) Self-Presentation & Self-Extension, and (3) Experiences & Possessions in Postmodernism. Secondly, you will enter the land where theories are exposed and explained in order to understand how we deconstructed or decompounded the layers of backpackers' identity projects through the narratives of their experiences. Therefore, the theoretical framework is divided into theoretical lenses, composed of (1) Postmodern Consumption, and (2) Habitus & Cultural Capital, and analytical tools, which are (3) Hermeneutic phenomenology, and (4) Deconstruction. Through this familiarization with the background of this research, we hope that you will understand the methodology we followed to identify, process, and analyze the identity narratives backpackers tell on their blogs.

Finally, at the end of this journey, you will explore the analysis and findings where we explain the process of deconstruction and (re-)construction of backpackers' identity projects. Subsequently, in the discussion, we contrast our findings to previous research and delineate our contribution to the existing body of knowledge. In addition, we reveal the implications, the limitations, and future recommendations of our study for academic and business communities' purposes. In the end, we conclude by summarizing the research project.

2   Literature Review

In order to be able to classify our research, it is first necessary to give an account of the status quo in the literature concerning research on backpackers, relevant concepts from the context of CCT, and the role of experiences versus possessions for identity construction.

2.1   Backpackers' Identity Projects

To aid the understanding of backpackers' identity projects, it is expedient to reflect on the development of the backpacker movement and its treatment in academic literature. In their review of backpacker literature, Ateljevic and Doorne (2004) determine that the first research on backpacking as a phenomenon emerged at the beginning of the 1970s with Cohen's (1973) seminal work on drifters. Cohen (2003, p. 96) describes drifters as "alienated individuals roaming the world alone," young Western travellers driven by a desire to fend for themselves and cope with the alienation from their societies of origin. Ateljevic and Doorne (2004) cite Vogt (1976) as another influential early work investigating backpackers, which describes the travelers as "wandering." According to the authors, Cohen's (1973) and Vogt's (1976) characterizations concur insofar that these travelers seek novel experiences off the beaten tourist track and, yet, as more people engage in this kind of travel, activities become more standardized. According to Cohen (1982), this standardization of activities leads to less counterculturally-motivated backpackers characterized by more traditional tourist features. Riley (1988) rejects Cohen's (1973) definition of drifters as negatively connotated and claims that these young travelers are "likely to be middle class, at a juncture in life, somewhat older than the earlier travelers on average, college educated, and not aimless drifters" (Riley, 1988, p. 326). Ateljevic and Doorne (2004) delineate that the term "backpacker" entered academic literature with Pearce's (1990) investigation of the phenomenon and claim that this change in terminology signified a shift from backpacking's marginal position in society towards the center due to its usefulness as a marketing tool. The authors go on to show that the features, behaviors, and motivations of backpackers were studied extensively in the 1990s, with most research focusing on European travelers' expeditions to Australasia (see Ateljevic & Doorne, 2004 for a review).

Motivations for backpacker travel are as diverse as the people embarking on these adventures and, thus, it is difficult to offer a general definition of backpackers. Motivations range from a desire to escape everyday life and responsibilities to a search for freedom, a pursuit of higher social status, and even to partaking in a rite of passage from youth into adulthood, as backpackers are predominantly young (Ooi & Laing, 2010). It used to be relatively common to define backpackers in terms of their demographic and behavioral characteristics (Richards &

Wilson, eds 2004). Accordingly, backpackers were often described as being 20 to 30-year-old budget-conscious individuals, mainly from Western countries, traveling for extended periods of time, often covering multiple countries in one trip, relying mainly on public transport, preferring budget accommodation and having a flexible itinerary. Destinations most often lie in the global South or "exotic" places. In fact, travelers to Australasia presented the highest proportion of self-defined backpackers (Richards & Wilson, eds 2004). However, in his ethnography of backpackers traveling in East Africa, India, the Middle East, North Africa, South-East Asia, and Europe, Sørensen (2003) argues that backpackers are heterogeneous and should be defined in terms of their culture rather than their demographic characteristics. He suggests that backpacker culture can be observed in various aspects, such as appearance and practices. For instance, backpackers communicate their road status to other members of the culture through their appearance, which hints at the existence of a hierarchy of more seasoned backpackers versus newcomers. Other studies corroborate this as well (Cohen, 2011; Elsrud, 2001; O'Regan, 2016).

Hence, due to the socio-demographic heterogeneity of backpackers, we adopt the characterization of backpackers proposed by Sørensen (2003). As such, we view backpackers as identifiable by their road status, or in Bourdieu's (1979) terms, their habitus, which becomes apparent in the more or less knowledgeable recreation of what backpackers deem to be authentic style and behavior (O'Regan, 2016). More importantly, we consider backpackers to engage in characteristic practices, such as extended travel to remote locations, contact with local communities and other backpackers as well as relying on the Internet to stay in touch with family and friends back home and to get information about the next destination (Sørensen, 2003). In addition, we acknowledge the existence of certain subgroups, such as short-term backpackers (Sørensen, 2003) and lifestyle travelers (Cohen, 2011). Moreover, as proposed by Richards and Wilson (eds. 2004), it is expedient to recognize backpackers by means of self-definition. In other words, we recognize people as backpackers if they self-identify as such.

Identity construction is a recurring topic in backpacker literature (Cohen, 2003; Cohen, 2011; Desforges, 2000; Maoz, 2007; Noy, 2004; O'Regan, 2016; Zhang, Tucker, Morrison & Wu, 2017). Cohen (2003) suggests that backpackers' experiences abroad may influence their view on and behavior in their home culture, indicating that upon their return home this may lead them to adopt a postmodern hybrid identity between their home culture and their former host culture. According to Desforges (2000), long-distance travel serves as a useful tool for identity construction as it provides experiences that can be used to "renarrate and represent self-identity" (Desforges, 2000, p. 942). Noy (2004) investigates from a linguistic perspective how backpackers construct their identities by performing narratives of their travel experiences, finding that backpackers achieve self-change intersubjectively by telling others about their experiences. Prompted by Sørenson's (2003) call for research on subgroups of backpackers, Cohen (2011) explores the subgroup of lifestyle travelers, who embark on recurring extended backpacking travels over the course of several years and are marked by a common ideology, work behaviors, and future aspirations. O'Regan (2016) studies the backpacker habitus, indicating that clothing is central for backpackers' identity and has various meanings in backpacker culture. Studies on the identity construction of backpackers from certain

nationalities also exist (Maoz, 2007; Zhang, Tucker, Morrison & Wu, 2017). All in all, while scholars agree upon a common backpacker culture, research on backpacker identity seems to be limited to the perspective of tourism studies, and research from the point of view of CCT seems to be lacking.

Moreover, research evaluating the usefulness of travel narratives for backpackers' identity construction is also sparse. We were only able to locate two studies that explicitly address this topic (Andersson Cederholm, 2004; Elsrud, 2001). Andersson Cederholm (2004) uses pictures taken by backpackers to prompt them to talk about their travel experiences. She investigates how backpacking is socially constructed as an extraordinary experience, centering the narratives backpackers tell about the act of photographing what they encounter on their journeys rather than about their travel experiences as such. Thus, she finds that backpackers must balance their need for individuality with their need to conform to backpacker culture. However, her approach differs from our research in that she utilizes photographs as a tool for inquiry and analysis of backpackers' oral narratives, whereas we focused on existing accounts of backpackers' travel experiences online and pictures played no role in our analysis. More similar to our research, Elsrud (2001) examines backpackers' narratives about their travel experiences, focusing on how notions of risk and adventure are used to construct backpackers' identity. In certain ways, her research is different from our study as well, as she conducts in-depth interviews and focuses on narratives of risk and adventure rather than examining the narratives in general to determine the range of themes that emerge when backpackers tell stories about how their travel experiences shaped their identities. In addition, she gives priority to female narratives as she criticizes that Western travel culture is male-dominated, whereas we attempted to investigate a breadth of backpackers who have a variety of different backgrounds.

Nevertheless, we believe it is worthwhile to recount her findings in more detail as we expected some similar themes to emerge from our own research. Elsrud (2001) discerns five themes related to backpackers' narratives of risk and adventure. To begin with, traveling is seen as a time and place for identity work as it occurs outside of normal life and is characterized by freedom, thus providing "a spatial and temporal frame to be filled with identity narratives" (Elsrud, 2001, p. 605). Secondly, a notion of novelty and difference exists, which makes encountering new experiences in new places appear riskier. Thirdly, stories about places are a tool for identity construction, e.g. stories about visiting or not visiting places that are deemed to be dangerous tell others something about the backpackers' willingness to take risks. Fourthly, another theme concerns narratives about the body, and stories related to health or illness, eating habits, bodily threats, or practices are closely linked to experiences of risk and serve as identity narratives. For instance, getting diarrhea under adverse circumstances is constructed as a character-building experience. Finally, as illustrated also by Sørensen (2003), appearance is identified as a recurring topic, and clothes are said to tell a story as well, e.g. rugged clothing is perceived as a sign of being adventurous. Accordingly, Elsrud (2001) concludes that backpackers use these narratives to position themselves in the backpacker hierarchy, where more risk-embracing and adventurous backpackers are at the top. Furthermore, she suggests that risk narratives may serve as markers of identity even after coming home and that a retelling of these travel narratives, for instance through pictures and written texts, may carry out

additional identity work. This leads us to assume that retelling their travel encounters in their blogs serves as a means of self-presentation and self-extension for backpackers.

2.2 Self-Presentation & Self-Extension

To comprehend the implications of self-presentation and self-extension for backpackers' identity construction, it is necessary to, first of all, take a closer look at the notion of identity in CCT. According to Schau (2018), identity encompasses four dimensions: (1) personality, a set of peculiarities that defines a person's character and is supported by genetic traits; (2) self-concept, the beliefs one holds about oneself; (3) identity project, the arrangement of objects, symbols, arguments, and practices that are used to postulate a certain identity position; and (4) self-presentation, an identity project demonstrated within a social context. Hence, in terms of consumers' identity projects, the focus is mediated by how the marketplace serves as a foundation for the self-presentation of people's identity projects. This means, according to Anderson (1997, p. 189), that "consumption is now inseparable from identity," where consumers use material possessions as extensions of the self with the aim of communicating their beliefs and values and to identify within collectives (Belk, 1988). In other words, consumer identity projects, according to Arnould and Thompson (2005), are social arrangements mediated through the marketplace where people use symbolic resources to create meanings and construct narratives of identity. This helps consumers to take on a specific identity and project their sense of self outwards.

Thus, identity projects are made visible through consumers' self-presentation (Schau, 2018). Self-presentation is a concept developed by Goffman (1959), according to which people strive to control how others perceive them. In his sociological analysis of theater performances, Goffman (1959) finds that performers engage in impression management to ensure that their audience perceives them in a favorable manner, closely monitoring the audience's reactions. He extends this to everyday interactions and suggests that even in the context of daily life, settings consist of frontstage and backstage, and people can choose to display or to refrain from displaying certain details. Accordingly, people perform in a way that presents them in a positive light and encourages others to accept their desired self-presentation. A commonly-held view in CCT is that consumers use brands for self-presentation purposes (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Using certain brands reveals how consumers perceive themselves and want to be perceived by others. As such, brands act as symbolic resources for identity construction for consumers who face postmodern threats such as fragmentation and uncertainty (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) propose a model to conceptualize the relationship between self-identity and social-identity as well as self-symbolism and social-symbolism and argue that the cultural meaning of brands prescribed by advertising must be negotiated with consumers' real-life experiences. In addition, brands that rely on social-symbolism must validate their

meanings through discursive elaboration, or collective sense-making. Accordingly, brands can act as a tool for negotiating postmodern threats to self as they offer consistency to counteract fragmentation, deep meaning to mediate impending insignificance, and the potential for individual interpretation to protect individuality.

As consumers spend more and more time online, the use of brands for self-presentation on the Internet has received some attention as well (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Schau & Gilly, 2003). In their netnography of personal web pages, Schau and Gilly (2003) confirm that consumers use brands online for their symbolic meanings and, despite infinite possibilities for digital appropriation, informants display brands that reflect their current material realities. In addition, informants often use brands to create oppositional self-presentations, linking brands that they deem to not reflect their identity and positioning them as "not me." In the context of Facebook, Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) find slightly different results. According to their study, consumers do not necessarily use brands that present their actual selves on Facebook, but rather integrate their actual and ideal selves or choose to present one of them exclusively if they conflict. Other studies on online self-presentation span a wide range of platforms (Azariah, 2016; Bortree, 2005; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010; Smith & Sanderson, 2015) but are less focused on the implications of online self-presentation strategies for individual consumers' identity projects. However, we think it is interesting to examine what happens if consumers communicate their identities online when they are not using brands for self-presentation.

Apart from self-presentation, another important notion in CCT is self-extension as this provides another means for consumers to project their sense of self to the outside. The traditional view is that consumers use their possessions for self-extension (Belk, 1988). In fact, the importance of possessions is not only to present one's own identity – who we are – but to express collective identities – where we belong. Thus, Belk (1988) suggests consumers are not just individuals but also part of collectivities, where they "define family, group, subculture, nation, and human selves through various consumption objects" (Belk, 1988, p. 152) by the acknowledgment of common symbols and meanings. In his theoretical conceptualization of the role of possessions for consumers' sense of self, Belk (1988) finds that possessions extend the self by awarding consumers a sense of being, having, and doing. He argues that there are different processes that explain how possessions extend the self and that the extended self is not limited to personal possessions but also includes people, places, experiences, group possessions, and even special categories such as pets, money, and body parts. Likewise, Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) observe that objects with emotional affiliation and associations carry personal symbolic meanings of lived experiences that help the possessor express their abstract essence into a concrete socio-material world.

So what happens if consumers cannot rely on possessions to extend their sense of self? Belk (2013) offers some explanations for that. Taking into account the technological advances that occurred in the 25 years since his initial conceptualization, he proposes five changes that need to be made to his framework to accurately reflect the impact digital consumption has on self-extension. Accordingly, digitization induces dematerialization as possessions are increasingly

stored virtually and have no physical form. People also lose their physical form online, which necessitates re-embodiment as avatars that consumers configure and therefore identify with. Moreover, digital possibilities facilitate sharing, for instance of thoughts, activities, music, or links, with a broader audience. This often leads to people being more open and revealing details about themselves that they would abstain from discussing offline. As being online is primarily a social activity, the self is co-constructed with others. Finally, digital technologies provide additional, intangible ways of storing consumers' memories and therefore contribute to what Belk (2013) terms distributed memory. We believe that the context of backpacking provides fruitful grounds for examining self-extension that is based on means other than possessions as backpackers go without most of their possessions for extended periods of time, while still posting about their experiences online. As such, we assume backpackers can use their blogs as a repository of their memories and extend their sense of self via their written text, which helps them to present their identity to others.

Consumers' self-presentation on the Internet and specifically on personal blogs has received some attention, whereas self-extension through blogs remains understudied. While several authors have studied self-presentation on blogs (Azariah, 2016; Bortree, 2005; Bosangit, McCabe & Hibbert, 2009; Chen, 2010; Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Zhao & Belk, 2007), many of them have focused on adolescents (Bortree, 2005; Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010), the Chinese context (Chen, 2010; Zhao & Belk, 2007) and/or have engaged in quantitative content analysis (Chen, 2010; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005;) or netnographic practices (Bortree, 2005; Zhao & Belk, 2007) rather than examining the narratives told by consumers.

Bosangit, McCabe and Hibbert (2009) conduct a narrative analysis of travel blogs, concentrating on the style of writing and narrative structures while just shortly discussing the meaning of the narratives. The authors conclude that "travel blogs can contribute to the process of identity management of the 21st century consumers" (Bosangit, McCabe & Hibbert, 2009, p. 70). Azariah (2016) is the only study that we are aware of that has explored self-presentation practices of backpackers on their blogs by examining their narratives. However, the author focuses on identity tensions arising from publishing the travel blog as a book and how being a published author is used for self-presentation purposes to gain more credibility in the eyes of the blog readers while contradicting the claim of authenticity that backpackers usually strive for with their peers.

Regarding self-extension, Zhao and Belk (2007) provide one of the few studies that address how consumers extend their sense of self online. The authors note that consumers use blogs for aspirational purposes and discuss brands that they are unable to afford in real life, creating identity narratives around imagined possessions and thereby extending their sense of self. Apart from that, we were only able to locate one other study on self-extension online, which was published recently and focuses on the use of avatars (Messinger, Ge, Smirnov, Stroulia & Lyons, 2019). To our knowledge, so far there are no studies that examine the role of experiences

for consumers' online self-extension practices. From that, we conclude that further research on consumers' self-presentation and especially self-extension on blogs is needed.

2.3   Experiences & Possessions in Postmodernism

Although the origins of the contemporary backpacker can be traced back to the drifters of the 1960s, backpacking is, in essence, a postmodern phenomenon (Richards & Wilson, eds 2004). As experiences are at the core of the postmodern consumer's lifeworld (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), it is necessary to examine how understandings of experiences have developed in consumer research. Many agree that research on experiential consumption originated with Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) influential paper on the impact of experiential factors on consumption, where they developed a conceptual framework of variables that affect consumer behavior. Prior to their work, research had focused on a more rational information processing perspective, whereas the authors suggest an approach to consumption based on emotions. Carù and Cova (2003) criticize that the notion of "experience" is not very well-defined in the field of consumption and offer a conceptual update to Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) article. According to Carù and Cova (2003), it is important to distinguish between *consumer experiences*, which are planned by market players and are mainly associated with the purchase of goods and services, and *consumption experiences*, which are experiences of consumption that take place outside of the market, such as gift-giving. The authors also note that the primary goal of marketing seems to be to construct extraordinary consumer experiences and suggest that ordinary experiences must receive attention as well since they act as a balancing force. Concurring with this view, in their critical review of the experience literature, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2013) show that academia has focused extensively on extraordinary experiences. So what characterizes these extraordinary experiences?

Extraordinary experiences are defined as "a special class of hedonic consumption activities—intense, positive, intrinsically enjoyable experiences" (Arnould & Price, 1993, p. 25) that are driven by interaction between consumers. In their study of multi-day white water rafting trips, Arnould and Price (1993) find three themes that are linked to the extraordinary character of the experience: connection with nature, connection with others or *communitas*, and personal growth and self-renewal. Further studies about extraordinary experiences that are worth mentioning include Belk and Costa's (1998) ethnography of the Mountain Men who reenact old-fashioned consumption practices, Kozinets's (2002a) ethnography of the Burning Man festival community, and Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) ethnography of Harley Davidson owners. All these studies share their positioning in liminal and sacred spaces that are characterized by communitas, positive social contact, and sacred experiences (Tumbat & Belk, 2011). Tumbat and Belk (2011) use Turner's (1969) conceptualization of structure and antistructure, which is based on the opposition of everyday life and occurrences outside of daily life, to show that extraordinary experiences are not necessarily centered around communitas but can also be individualistic and even competitive. In their study of commercial climbing expeditions on

Mount Everest, the authors find that despite having a common goal, climbers view their trip as an individual experience rather than a community effort. Other scholars have investigated extraordinary experiences using the Turnerian structure/antistructure dichotomy as well (Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017; Skandalis, Byrom & Banister, 2019; Watson, Morgan & Hemmington, 2008).

It is precisely its liminal positioning in the antistructural realm of extended travel abroad (Cohen, 2003) that prompts us to categorize backpacking as an extraordinary experience. In other words, backpackers go abroad to escape the ordinary and find respite in experiences that are outside of their usual lifeworld. In fact, experiences are a central driver for engaging in backpacking, and backpackers can even be seen as collectors of experiences (Richards & Wilson, eds 2004). In their study of Australian foodies, Watson, Morgan and Hemmington (2008) have previously categorized extraordinary experiences as a postmodern condition. We conform with this standpoint and, in line with Richards and Wilson (eds 2004), consider backpacking to be a postmodern phenomenon. Despite the existing argument that contemporary consumer culture is moving towards post-postmodernism, which allows for extraordinary experiences to exist within the structure of ordinary life (Skandalis, Byrom & Banister, 2019), we believe our approach of viewing backpacking as a postmodern phenomenon is still justified as backpacking explicitly takes place within the antistructural context of travel abroad. Skandalis, Byrom and Banister (2019) allow for this as well, admitting that some consumers may seek out extraordinary experiences specifically to escape the structure of their daily lives.

Moreover, Husemann and Eckhardt's (2019) findings from their study of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage suggest that extraordinary experiences may serve to slow down consumers' fast-paced lives. As contemporary pilgrims are similar to backpackers in that both groups embark on journeys away from their homes and travel lightly, it stands to reason that backpackers, just like the pilgrims in Husemann and Eckhardt's (2019) study, use their travel experiences as a means of slowing down their lives. Additionally, in their ethnography of Tough Mudder, Scott, Kayla and Cova (2017) determine that extraordinary experiences provide consumers an opportunity for momentarily escaping the constant work of creating a sense of self by allowing them to focus on the body. As such, extraordinary experiences may offer some respite from postmodern identity tensions.

Previous studies have investigated the implications of experiences for consumers' sense of self (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Hornik & Diesendruck, 2017; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Compared with material possessions, consumers value experiences more highly as they evoke greater and more persistent happiness due to their ephemeral character that allows for reinterpretation over time (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). In addition, consumers believe that their experiential purchases tell others more about themselves than their material purchases. They also attach greater importance to memories of experiential purchases, which indicates that experiences are more central to consumers' self-concept than possessions (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). However, consumers pursue experiences for their intrinsic value, that is because they are enjoyable, instead of their extrinsic value, that is because they hope to impress others (Van Boven, Campbell & Gilovich, 2010). In their comparison of the identity

value of ordinary and extraordinary experiences, Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014) find that the value of ordinary experiences increases with consumers' age, becoming more central to their sense of self over time. Conversely, extraordinary experiences provide higher identity value while consumers are young and have not yet formed a stable self-concept. Hornik and Diesendruck (2017) investigate whether extraordinary experiences promote self-extension and suggest that they indeed extend consumers' self-concept. Hence, we believe it is fair to assume that extraordinary experiences have a greater potential for extending backpackers' sense of self and constructing their identity projects than material possessions.

What role exactly do possessions play for the postmodern consumer? According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995), material goods are containers for symbols and meanings and, thus, possessions help consumers to send messages to others about who they are. In the past, consumer research has been focused on how possessions enable consumers to make sense of their fragmented realities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, more recently, research around the implications of the absence of possessions has emerged (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould, 2012; Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Figueiredo & Uncles, 2015; Nixon, 2020). While Cherrier and Murray (2007) investigate the stages associated with disposing of possessions, Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012), Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017), Figueiredo and Uncles (2015), and Nixon (2020) propose different strategies to negotiate the absence of possessions in a postmodern society. Nixon (2020) scrutinizes consumers' motives for voluntary non-possession, identifying three types of consumers, each characterized by different motivations. Figueiredo and Uncles (2015) investigate how professionals who have relocated internationally for work manage their possessions in a temporal framework, for example by delaying purchases of objects in the present to an unknown point in time in the future. Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) and Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) contemplate the notion of liquid consumption by investigating the possession practices of global nomads, who share some characteristics with backpackers.

Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) show that global nomads have a liquid relationship to their possessions. In other words, the global elites that frequently relocate between countries and are deterritorialized in the sense that their socio-cultural practices are independent of physical places, have a flexible and detached relationship with their belongings. The authors find that global nomads value possessions in specific situations, for their utilitarian characteristics, and for their immateriality. This means that for consumers who move around often, possessions have lower identity value than for consumers who stay in one place for years. Due to the similar characteristics of global nomads and backpackers – both groups share the extended stays in countries other than their place of origin and frequent moves between countries – we assume that backpackers may have a similar relationship to possessions. However, we also acknowledge that there are crucial differences between global nomads and backpackers. Global nomads perform skilled labor, most often with the help of digital technologies that allow them to work remotely, in order to finance their geographically unbound lifestyle (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould, 2012). As such, they are perpetually on the move rather than eventually returning to a home base. In contrast, backpackers mostly travel for leisure reasons, living off of their savings or engaging in unskilled manual labor in their host countries

to finance their travels. While there are discrepancies in the duration of backpackers' trips, ranging from a few weeks to several months or even years, most of them will eventually return home (Richards & Wilson, eds 2004). As backpackers temporarily forego the availability of their possessions, we assume that experiences are more important for constructing their identity projects.

2.4   Research Problem

All in all, several gaps in the existing body of literature become apparent. To begin with, from a standpoint of research on postmodern consumption, it seems like the role of possessions has received more attention than the role of experiences, revealing a potential to examine the role of experiences more closely. Especially using the theoretical lens of CCT, the usefulness of exploring how experiences shape consumers' identity projects becomes apparent, as most research on self-presentation in CCT so far has emphasized the role of brands (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Schau & Gilly, 2003). While the self-extension power of material possessions (Belk, 1988) is a commonly-accepted notion in CCT and the implications of digital technologies for consumers' sense of self have been acknowledged (Belk, 2013), to date, few studies have explored this explicitly. Moreover, due to the high identity value of extraordinary experiences for young consumers (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014), it can be particularly worthwhile to examine their implications for consumers' sense of self, and the findings of a first study on the self-extension potential of extraordinary experiences (Hornik & Diesendruck, 2017) corroborate this assumption. In addition, while some studies on extraordinary experiences exist, few use textual artifacts posted online (Arsel & Zhao, 2013). In our opinion, backpackers constitute a suitable focal point as they are a prime example of the postmodern consumer and extensively post about their experiences online. Moreover, as backpackers are predominantly young, it is likely that they attribute substantial identity value to their travel adventures. Furthermore, backpackers have not yet received much attention in CCT. Hence, using the context of backpackers we investigate the following research question:

What is the meaning of extraordinary experiences for consumers' identity projects?

As such, we identify several contributions that our research can make to the literature: 1) extending the knowledge about the usefulness of extraordinary experiences for consumers' self-presentation and self-extension purposes, especially in an online context, 2) offering insight into backpackers as consumers, and 3) enhancing the understanding of backpacking as a postmodern phenomenon.

3 Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the purpose of this research, it is pertinent to acknowledge the theory behind the construction of identity in a consumer society. Hence, in this section, we aim to give an overview of the theories and concepts that support our analysis. Through this, we hope that the outcomes of our research will be more easily comprehensible.

3.1 Theoretical Lenses

The theories described in this section aim to give the reader an understanding of the theories that support our perspective through which we comprehended our research. We thereby acknowledge that throughout history the perspectives of understanding the world have changed and so have the methods of seeking "the truth."

3.1.1 Postmodern Consumption

To understand how consumers create value through the marketplace, and how they shape their identity accordingly, we follow the principles of *postmodern consumption*. Regarding consumer culture, postmodernism gained traction in the 1990s as a critique of modernism's inability to accurately capture human experience due to its focus on rationality and oversimplification of consumers' lifeworld (Firat & Shultz, 1997; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Venkatesh, Sherry & Firat, 1993). Goulding (2003) gives an account of the two-sided debate that characterized early scholarly work on postmodern consumer culture. This debate centered around the role of consumption as compensating for an alienating dystopian society (Baudrillard, 1988) versus consumption as liberation, helping consumers construct their identities and experience fragmented realities (Firat & Shultz, 1997; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Venkatesh, Sherry & Firat, 1993). Goulding (2003) argues that this debate should not be seen as opposing views but instead suggests that alienation and liberation can co-exist and should be examined within the specific contexts in which they occur in order to understand the postmodern consumer experience. We agree with this standpoint as we acknowledge that human experience is multi-faceted and it is important to take context into consideration. However, we lean towards the liberatory definition conceived by Firat and Venkatesh (1995) as we concur with their view that experiences are produced through language and discourse and we believe that this allows for the most accurate representation of context.

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) developed the notion of *liberatory postmodernism* in response to the shortcomings of modernism and other existing definitions of postmodernism. According to

the authors, postmodernism needs to "reenchant" (p. 240) consumers, offering respite from tensions arising from the modern market system which values functionality, rationality, and universality. In contrast to other definitions of postmodernism, which either celebrate the end of modernism or are critical of its indulgences, liberatory postmodernism is a "radical extension and maturing" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 244) of modernism. As such, it acknowledges the dichotomies that exist according to modernism. However, rather than viewing these dichotomies as absolute truths, liberatory postmodernism recognizes them as partial truths that need to be deconstructed in order to understand their full scope. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) suggest that the dichotomy of production/consumption is obsolete because consumption produces something as well – symbols, meanings, identities, for instance. In other words, production and consumption occur simultaneously. Since consumers understand the world through symbols, meanings, and experiences, they will make consumption choices based on a desire for producing something, e.g. a self-image or a lifestyle that is linked to these symbols and meanings. Thus, the postmodern consumer is characterized by fragmentation and multiplicity, and their experiences must be examined through language and discourse to understand what is true for them.

Taking into account everything described above, we depart on the statement that production and consumption in postmodernism is an act of constant creation of value and meanings over time. This is possible through consumers' experiences regarding their consumption choices and how they express these choices, which takes us to the construction of narratives, or stories, mediated by language and discourse, or the way that words allow us to understand the world around us. Therefore, postmodernism permits us to examine how identity is constructed through experiences by recognizing the multiple truths expressed in consumers' narratives, and in this case the narratives of backpackers.

3.1.2   Habitus & Cultural Capital

To analyze how backpackers shape their identity, we consider Bourdieu's (1979) concept of *habitus*, where life experiences explain the physical embodiment of cultural capital, habits, skills, and dispositions that someone possesses, to understand the construction of identity projects from experiences. Simply put, one's preconceived experiences may nurture the way someone expresses and identifies oneself. For example, a person may consider themselves a fan of a certain sports team because as a child that team was the first live game they observed. Therefore, this person learned about the sport, team traditions, and its members. This experience molded the person by becoming part of them and so they identify with it. In addition, this may affect their perception of any other future experience.

Concurringly, these experiences may shape the symbolic asset of *cultural capital*, defined by Bourdieu (1979) as the social asset that promotes social mobility and status in a stratified society. Furthermore, as explained by Henry and Caldwell (2018), cultural capital is defined by the knowledge and skills acquired through primary socialization as a child and young adult – via family, peers, educational institutions, and media – and then through personal experiences

and interests. This means that cultural capital comprises internalized manners, e.g. the way someone speaks and expresses themself, and more formal skills, e.g. being able to write an essay or to solve a mathematical problem. Additionally, Bourdieu (1979) proposes three ways in which cultural capital is materialized: (1) embodied cultural capital, i.e. how a person constitutes and manifests their mindset (way of thinking), and physical expression (body language and skills) – for instance, dialects express where a person is from; (2) objectified cultural capital, i.e. how through objects someone's taste, skills or knowledge can be recognizable – for instance, collections of paintings show a person's interest in arts; (3) institutionalized cultural capital, i.e. the credentials that demonstrate one's level of education – for instance, a university degree indicates a person's profession. Bourdieu's concepts are pertinent to comprehend how the pre-conceived habitus that characterizes backpackers prior to their travels is transformed by their traveling experiences. As their habitus changes, backpackers' cultural capital is transformed as well. However, we want to point out that while our analytical approach was informed by these concepts, their use remains implicit. In other words, while our analysis was guided by the notion of habitus, we refrain from discussing Bourdieu's concepts in much detail with respect to our findings.

3.2   Analytical Tools

Now that the point of view of our research is clear, in this section we aim to explain the theories that will allow us to analyze the information. This provides context for the methodology section.

3.2.1   Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Identity can be related to self-awareness or consciousness of the self, i.e. how a person intentionally recognizes and judges their own feelings, thoughts, motives, and desires (Northoff & Heinzel, 2003). In order to understand the construction of identity, it is necessary to investigate the phenomena as such through particular concepts, ideas, thoughts, symbols, etc. that create meanings of a given experience; in other words, how backpackers experience their travels. For this reason, we will focus our study on a phenomenological dimension to understand identity through a *conscious experience* where according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Smith, 2003, n.p.), these types of experiences

> have a unique feature: we *experience* them, we live through them or perform them. Other things in the world we may observe and engage. But we do not experience them, in the sense of living through or performing them. This experiential or first-person feature—that of being experienced—is an essential part of the nature or structure of conscious experience: as we say, 'I see / think / desire / do …' This feature is both a phenomenological and an ontological feature of each experience: it is part of what it is

for the experience to be experienced (phenomenological) and part of what it is for the experience to be (ontological).

For our research, phenomenology implies studying backpackers' subjective experience of traveling with the aim to understand the way they shape their identity and self-present to others. Due to that, we intend to understand backpackers' experiences through their narratives. According to Czarniawska (2004, p. 27), "a narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected," where in a postmodern society, narratives are applied to a social reflection that pays attention to language as a tool of reality construction. Therefore, language plays an important role in the interpretation of a phenomenon or experience as it is conditioned by the meanings and interpretations of the person sharing their experiences. This means that people interpret their experiences and express them through language but their language is also influenced by their experiences. For that reason, *hermeneutics* is indispensable in this research paper, as it focuses on the interpretation of language, attempting to understand the parts with respect to the whole and the whole with respect to the parts. As Schleiermacher (1998, p. xx) expressed, hermeneutics is "the art of understanding the meaning of discourse."

Furthermore, as we are looking into the narratives of the backpackers' experiences, the concept of *hermeneutic phenomenology* appears. Hermeneutic phenomenology concerns human experiences as they are lived, with an emphasis on creating meanings and understanding the trivial aspects of life's experiences (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger (1927) states that understanding is part of our human existence, meaning that the reflexive action of comprehending something is not a way of knowing the world outside, but a way of understanding who we are. This, according to him, is related to one's historical background, including culture as a presentation of one's own understanding of the world. Therefore, narratives open up the interpretation of experiences by understanding the phenomena through language (Annells, 1996). Hence, adopting Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology as a starting point, this research aims to understand the backpackers' interpretations of meanings of life experiences through their discursive narratives.

3.2.2   Deconstruction

To follow up with the sense of the construction of identity through experiences and the understanding of these meanings, we will use the concept of *deconstruction* that comes from Jacques Derrida (1967). Deconstruction, in essence, focuses on how the analysis of interpretation between the usage of language in a given text and language as a whole creates ambiguities. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that deconstruction has its roots in Heidegger's concept *Destruktion*, which does not mean to destroy or demolish but to decompose or break down the object of study to find its origin. On the contrary, Derrida's concept of deconstruction aims to look into the traces of the object of study, meaning there is no origin at all. Thus, deconstruction is not a complete method or system, but rather an unfinished and unclosed one; it is not definitive (Lurcza, 2017). The same holds true for identity – it is not

definitive and is constructed over and over. Therefore, deconstruction is not a way of finding the "truth," seeing as the only truth is that there is no truth. This means that we were not looking to determine the unique way of being a backpacker, but instead our aim was to find out how it is possible for backpackers to negotiate and understand their identity through their experiences.

In other words, deconstruction allows us to decompose, or analyze, the backpackers' narratives mediated by the language of travel experiences, in layers or small pieces, in order to understand the meanings of these experiences. It also enables us to determine how these meanings are presented through their personal blogs. Our goal was not to create a dialectic discussion where two opposite arguments are meant to reduce contradictions to produce a synthesis. Instead, we acknowledge that there is no one way of interpreting the identity of backpackers, and rather the cycle of deconstruction and construction of identity implies a never-ending negotiation.

All in all, we conducted our analysis of backpackers' consumer identity projects through a postmodern understanding of production/consumption as value creation, informed by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital. To do so, we analyzed backpackers experiences from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, i.e. by examining their experience, presented in their online narratives on their blogs, and therefore, we deconstructed the meanings of the narrative into categories and sub-themes that feature predominately in these stories.

4   Methodology

After having given an account of the relevant literature and delineating our theoretical lenses as well as our analytical tools, we will now explain the procedure that we followed in order to investigate how consumers of extraordinary experiences construct and communicate their identity projects online. Disclosing our methodology is intended to clarify for the reader how we conducted our research and will help them understand how we arrived at our conclusions. In order to ensure the transparency of our methodology, we will first elucidate our philosophical paradigm and explicate our research design. Next, we will describe and justify our data collection process, after which we will address matters of reflexivity to enhance trustworthiness and reveal our strategies for data analysis. Finally, we will present limitations and ethical concerns of our methodology.

But first, we want you to stop and think about any trip you have had and ask yourself: How has that trip changed the way you see the world? Were the places you visited different from what you imagined? Was there anything surprising? What do you remember the most: the experiences or the possessions you took with you? Have you ever dreamt about escaping for a while to an extraordinary place? If pondering these questions is perhaps making you consider becoming a backpacker for a month or more, what would you carry in your backpack? Only the essentials, we would say. Why? Because what backpackers are seeking is to collect experiences, not objects. This questioning process explains why we decided to choose backpackers to answer our research question. Now, as previously presented in the theoretical framework section, our research approach emphasizes consumer experiences from the perspective of liberatory postmodernism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), where individuals interpret and create their own reality. This means that the consumer moves away from a rational world, as it is characteristic of the modernist approach, to an emotional world constructed socially. Therefore, reality is mediated through the "culture, language, aesthetics, narratives, symbolic modes, and literary expressions" (Goulding 2003, p. 156) that allow individuals to self-express and construct their own identity, meaning there are multiple possible realities displayed by personal narratives from different individuals (Watson, Morgan & Hemmington, 2008). As such, we believe that a qualitative approach is suitable in order to most accurately capture the postmodern consumer's lifeworld.

4.1   Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical paradigm that we follow is that of social constructionism. More specifically, as we assume that facts are man-made and there is no single truth, we tend towards a nominalist ontology. In line with this, epistemologically, we lean towards a strong constructionist stance

since we believe that there are multiple realities as people construct meanings and their understanding of the world through language and discourse (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Further, we acknowledge our own role in the construction of the empirical material rather than following an interpretive approach and simply interpreting collected material. In addition, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015, p. 55) suggest that in strong constructionism, "the observer can never be separated from the sense-making process" and, hence, the assumption that individuals make sense of their environment through language and discourse also applies to us as researchers. According to Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), there are several methodological implications of adopting a strong constructionist position. Thus, the starting point of such studies is critique, with the aim of understanding how individuals invent structures that enable meaning creation. Through engagement and reflexivity, researchers analyze and interpret discourse and experiences to make sense of and understand individuals' lifeworlds. Rather than confirming, testing, or generating theories, outcomes of strong constructionist studies include new insights and courses of action.

Since our goal was to understand how consumers' experiences shape their sense of self, we believe that it is appropriate to assume that everyone's reality is influenced by their values, beliefs, and experiences. In addition, rather than trying to find the universal truth that is accepted by all backpackers, we aspired to understand their respective experiences and see the unique in order to generate new insights. According to Arnould and Thompson (2005), adopting a strong constructionist standpoint is common among CCT researchers, with some of them specifically devoted to deconstructing identities. Burr (2015) categorizes deconstruction as a social constructionist approach and, similarly, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) point out that postmodernism is a school of thought that belongs to the realm of social constructionism. One study that is similar to ours in that it investigates consumer experiences by examining blogs is Watson, Morgan and Hemmington's (2008) netnography of foodies. These authors use a postmodern approach as well, indicating that this allows researchers to gauge the full spectrum of consumers' identity construction "rather than forcing them into pre-conceived, modernist moulds" (Watson, Morgan & Hemmington, 2008, p. 292). Accordingly, by adopting a postmodern stance, we acknowledge the complexity of the consumer identity construction process.

4.2   Research Design

To understand how consumers navigate their identity construction online, we used the research design of hermeneutic phenomenology. More specifically, this means that we investigated public blog posts of backpackers giving an account of the lessons learned from their backpacking experiences. As explained in our theoretical framework chapter, we regard hermeneutic phenomenology as an appropriate tool to investigate how backpackers interpret and attach meaning to their experiences and express them in their narratives, while the language they use in these narratives is, in turn, shaped by their experiences. Studying consumer

experiences from a phenomenological standpoint has a long tradition. Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) introduced existential-phenomenology as a viable tool for understanding consumer experiences. According to the authors, this paradigm aims at gaining insight into consumers' lived experiences from a first-person perspective, taking into consideration contextual influences. However, the authors adopt an interpretive stance, whereas we follow a social constructionist approach. Although both approaches share historical roots and both attempt to understand participants' lived experiences, the main difference between them is that interpretivism attempts to capture the essence of participants' interpretations of their experiences, whereas social constructionism takes the view that "our perceptions and experience are never a direct reflection of the world where we live but the products of our active construction" through language (Chen, Shek & Bu, 2011, p. 131). Thus, social constructionism opens up the potential for the deconstruction of meanings, which is a central element of our research project. In other words, in interpretivist research, language is merely a tool for description, while in constructionist research, language is an essential constituent of the experience (Chen, Shek & Bu, 2011).

In addition, Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) emphasize interviews as an appropriate method for existential-phenomenological inquiry. While the authors concede that written statements can be used for existential-phenomenological research, they argue that interviews are better suited for gaining a deep understanding of consumer experiences. As such, the authors devote a significant portion of their article to explicating how to conduct and interpret phenomenological interviews. Although they briefly acknowledge Heidegger's formative role with respect to phenomenology, their approach seems to be influenced more heavily by other scholars. This is somewhat confusing as Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is often seen as synonymous with existential-phenomenology (Kafle, 2013; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010), whereas Thompson, Locander and Pollio's (1989) definition of existential-phenomenology reflects Husserlian assumptions. This becomes apparent in the methodological criteria they propose for phenomenological interpretation: defining themes in the informants' own words, treating the empirical material as an autonomous account of the informants' lived experiences, and bracketing "preconceived theoretical notions about the phenomena" (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989, p. 140). However, we concur with Heidegger's (1927) assessment that bracketing one's own biases is neither possible nor even desirable. Instead, we admit that our analysis and interpretation process was informed by our own preconceptions and place emphasis on disclosing our underlying assumptions later in this chapter.

Hermeneutic phenomenology has also received some attention in the context of tourism and hospitality. However, scholars argue that phenomenology has not been used to its full potential in hospitality research, as most studies in the field of tourism and hospitality that have struggled to accurately utilize phenomenology as a methodology (Kirillova, 2018; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). Kirillova (2018) distinguishes between Husserl's descriptive phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology in terms of methodology and suggests that three main sub-types of methods exist: Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology, Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, and interpretive phenomenological analysis, each characterized by distinct assumptions and guidelines. According to Kirillova (2018), most studies in hospitality research

have failed to adequately address the existence of the various types of phenomenological methods and, thus, neglected to argue for and justify the chosen method. To preempt such objections with respect to our research, we want to explicitly state that our research design is guided by Heidegger's (1927) methodology and Van Manen's (1990) method, the latter being heavily influenced by a Heideggerian understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology himself. Van Manen (1990) offers four principles to guide the research process: First, researchers must engage in self-reflexivity as their background is vital to the research process. Second, the focus on lived experiences should be reflected in the data collection process. Third, the themes emerging from the data analysis should be grounded in the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon under study rather than in the respondents' own words, which is common in descriptive phenomenology. Finally, language and interpretation are intricately linked, rendering writing down the phenomenological account a vital step in the analysis process rather than just the endpoint (Kirillova, 2018). We indicate how we followed these guidelines in the respective sections. However, we also want to emphasize that our method slightly differed from Van Manen's (1990) approach in that we extended it by Derrida's (1967) notion of deconstruction. This is in line with earlier work that views deconstruction as an extension of Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology (Desilet, 1991; Rajan, 2002; Van Manen, 2014). Van Manen (2014) even devotes a subsection of his book to what he calls "deconstruction phenomenology," where he recounts Derrida's approach to and influence on phenomenology. Hence, we feel vindicated in following Van Manen's (1990) guidelines in our analysis of online narratives of backpackers' experiences and extending them by deconstructing the meaning of backpackers' experiences for their identity projects.

The benefits of using this approach to answer our research question are diverse. First, hermeneutic phenomenology helped us understand the meaning of the lived experience of backpackers from a first-person perspective, "illuminating details and seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). As such, these accounts were not valuable to us because we were interested in the biographies of the individual backpackers and wanted to understand their life circumstances, but because it is likely that these narratives reflect possible experiences of other backpackers (Van Manen, 1990). Second, hermeneutic phenomenology accounts for the fact that someone's background, or historicality, influences their experiences, even if this background remains implicit. Historicality can be regarded as one's socio-cultural background that shapes how someone comprehends their reality (Laverty, 2003). This is beneficial for our research as it allowed us to recognize that backpackers' experiences prior to their travels influenced how they perceived and made sense of the things they encountered during their backpacking trips. Third, and related to the previous point, hermeneutic phenomenology allowed us to understand experiences in context, in relation to backpackers' entire lifeworld rather than as fragmented and isolated instances. Accordingly, we assume that the synergies of their experiences make backpackers who they are. In other words, the sum of backpackers' experiences is greater than the individual experiences they encounter (Van Manen, 1990). Finally, adding the notion of deconstruction helped us to gain direct insight into backpackers' lifeworld. Deconstruction has its historical roots in the analysis of literary texts, and since our empirical material was text-based, we expected that incorporating deconstruction would enable us to gain a deeper understanding of

backpackers' lived experiences. However, our analysis was based on deconstructing the layers of backpackers' identity projects rather than the meaning of the language in the narratives.

Critics may object, however, that our approach had several shortcomings. To begin with, the point can be raised that we failed to co-construct our data with our informants, which is a common characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenological interviews (Kirillova, 2018; Pernecky & Jamal, 2010). While we concede that the process of co-construction was not possible in the traditional sense with our approach of scrutinizing existing textual material, we would propose that the main ambition of co-construction is to encourage informants to recount their experiences in a more reflective rather than descriptive manner. Hence, we would suggest that while writing the blog posts, the backpackers were not purely descriptive but instead reflected on their experiences and, thus, their narratives already feature some degree of interpretation. Another objection might be that it is impossible to accurately capture the full interpretation of lived experiences as the human lifeworld is too complex to be grasped and reproduced entirely (Van Manen, 1990). We are aware that this is an unattainable feat and want to emphasize that our goal was to capture backpackers' lived experiences as accurately as possible within the scope of this research while recognizing that complete accuracy is beyond reach. Lastly, hermeneutic phenomenological writing is often seen as elusive and difficult to understand, and some even suggest that less experienced scholars occasionally try to obfuscate their lack of insights by phrasing their findings in an overly ornate and unnecessarily embellished way (Van Manen, 1990). We reply to these concerns that we attempted to express ourselves as clearly and unambiguously as possible in the presentation and discussion of our findings.

Of course, the objection might be raised that we could have employed different methods to investigate how consumers construct and communicate their identity projects online. We could have, for instance, engaged in phenomenological interviews, as suggested by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989). However, we believe that directly scrutinizing the narratives posted online had the advantage of allowing us more immediate insights into backpackers' identity projects as they are perceived by other readers of the blog. Accordingly, we think that studying the self-presentation and self-extension implications directly in the context in which they are exhibited enabled us to relate to readers as well as writers of the respective blog posts. Hence, by utilizing existing textual data rather than interviewing backpackers' about how they want to be perceived online, we ensured that we kept a balance between readers' and writers' perceptions of self-presentation and self-extension instead of attaching greater importance to rationalizations of backpackers' online identities. Therefore, we believe that our approach of examining narratives on blogs is most pertinent for answering our research question.

Moreover, our choice of method has some practical advantages as well. As noted by Watson, Morgan and Hemmington (2008), methods that are more commonly used to investigate experiences, such as interviews, focus groups, and diaries, can impede the research process due to participant inhibition, self-censorship bias, and researcher influence. The authors suggest that using blogs is not only more cost-efficient and expeditious than the previously mentioned methods but is "less obtrusive and provides a window into naturally occurring behaviours in a

context that is not fabricated by the researcher" (Watson, Morgan & Hemmington, 2008, p. 293). In addition, Van Manen (1990, p. 73) points out that diaries, journals, and logs "may contain reflective accounts of human experiences that are of phenomenological value." As blogs can be seen as web logs (Bortree, 2005) or online diaries (Arsel & Zhao, 2013), we feel justified in assuming that Van Manen's (1990) suggestion also applies to our choice of method. To conclude, we want to mention Silverman's (2013) argument in favor of using naturally occurring data. He criticizes the primacy of interviews as data collection methods in qualitative research and suggests that alternative data sources such as conversations and documents can provide fruitful grounds for analysis. We followed his call for scrutinizing naturally occurring data by collecting our empirical material from blog posts that were written for purposes other than analysis within the context of a research project. Next, we will describe our data collection process and provide justification for our decisions.

4.3 Data Collection

As mentioned above, we focused on naturally occurring textual data for this study. Accordingly, the empirical material existed autonomously from the research context. Nevertheless, we would refrain from suggesting that we merely collected the data as if they had just been "out there" waiting for us to gather them like flowers. Instead, through sampling and selecting the blog posts and subsequently processing them for analysis, we crafted our data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We focused on posts about lessons learned from backpacking which were published on backpackers' personal blogs and provided a summary of their experiences. We chose to focus on these types of posts instead of posts about certain experiences, such as specific trips or destinations, as our aim was to examine narratives of transformation, which we believed would be most easily visible in these "lessons learned" type posts. We assumed that prior to or while writing these posts, backpackers had reflected extensively on their experiences and wanted to give an account of how the totality of their travel experiences shaped their identity. As such, we expected this interpretation of their own experiences to be especially potent for backpackers' self-presentation and self-extension.

In order to select informants that offered sufficient potential for analysis according to our research question, we used a purposive sampling strategy. This is a common approach in hermeneutic phenomenology as the aim is to investigate lived experiences, which requires the researcher to hand-pick participants to ascertain that they actually possess the kind of experiences under scrutiny as well as to ensure adequate variety in the accounts of experiences (Laverty, 2003). Through this, we followed Van Manen's (1990) guiding principle that the lived experiences should be reflected in the data collection process. Hence, we searched for "backpacker life lessons," "backpacker lessons learned," and "lessons learned from backpacking" via the Google and Bing search engines. As our goal was to examine the online identity projects of private individuals who refrain from using brands for self-presentation and self-extension purposes, we excluded blogs that were obviously partnered with brands or whose

primary purpose was to promote the blogger's own personal brands or products. We also excluded posts published on websites of travel agencies or online magazines as our focus was on the implications of backpackers' narratives in the context of their blogs as digital extensions of self (Belk, 2013). Additionally, we excluded posts published on blogs that were run by two or more individuals as we assumed that the self-extension and self-presentation properties of blogs are stronger if the blog is used as a repository of memories of one person. Our search also brought up numerous posts about backcountry hiking, which we excluded as well as this pertains to a different kind of backpacking. Moreover, in order to ensure sufficient richness of accounts, we included only those posts that incorporated personal anecdotes and offered on average at least two sentences of continuous text per bullet point if the post encompassed a bulleted list. Posts that consisted of bulleted lists with less than two sentences of text per bullet point on average were excluded. Moreover, we aimed at achieving a good variety in genders and travel duration to "enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (Laverty, 2003, p. 29).

In the end, we selected a total of ten posts that met all of our criteria from the first ten pages of each search query. *Table 4.1* below shows some demographic characteristics of our informants. Even though we define backpackers mainly in terms of their shared culture, a look at their demographic background may provide a deeper understanding of their context. We deem this important as context is a crucial constituent of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen, 1990). As can be seen in *Table 4.1* below, the gender ratio of our informants was almost balanced, although there were slightly more male than female respondents. Destinations span countries all over the globe, however, none of our informants traveled to North America. This might be due to most respondents originating from there. In fact, most of our participants were US-American, and all except for one seemed to be native speakers of English. All informants, except for one, have either studied or worked prior to their backpacking trips. Travel duration ranged from 2.5 weeks to 10 years, with most informants having traveled approximately one to two years, the represented subcultures thus ranging from short-term backpackers (Sørensen, 2003) to lifestyle travelers (Cohen, 2011). Despite some backpackers not explicitly stating their age on their blogs, judging from their pictures, all informants seemed to be between 20 and 40 years of age. All of the above is in line with Richards and Wilson's (eds 2004) findings in their review of studies on the demographic characteristics of backpackers. Travels were mostly financed by savings, however, some informants earned money from placing banner advertisements on their blogs or working remotely. One informant volunteered while backpacking to reduce costs. Some of our informants have returned to their old lives after traveling, while others have stayed on the road, considering themselves digital nomads nowadays.

Table 4.1 Demographic information of informants

Name (gender)	Nationality	Travel duration	Destinations
Amanda (f)	US-American	2.5 weeks	Europe
Chris (m)	British	10 years	South-East Asia, Australia, Africa, Latin America
Eli (m)	US-American	2 years	Latin America, South-East Asia, Europe
Jamie (m)	British	Several years	South-East Asia, Europe
Marek (m)	Dutch	2 years	South-East Asia, Latin America
Silvia (f)	US-American	4 months	South-East Asia
Steve (m)	US-American	8 years	South-East Asia, Latin America, Africa
Susanne (f)	Canadian	11 months	South-East Asia, Australia
Tello (m)	US-American	1 year	Europe, South-East Asia
Yari (f)	US-American	1 year	South-East Asia, Latin America

4.4 Reflexivity & Quality Concerns

To ensure the quality of our research, we will give a reflexive account of why our empirical material is appropriate to answer our research question and how our background and assumptions affected our research process. We will also introduce criteria that can be used for assessing the quality of hermeneutic phenomenological texts. First of all, we believe that our empirical material is relevant as it allows us insight into the online self-presentation and self-extension strategies of consumers who have the lived experience that is pertinent for examining how extraordinary experiences, rather than brands or possessions, are used to construct and communicate identity projects online. As such, we followed Van Manen's (2014, p. 352) recommendation to view sampling in hermeneutic phenomenological research as an "attempt to gain 'examples' of experientially rich descriptions." Further, Van Manen (2014) suggests

that the number of informants is of minor importance as the goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to capture unique experiences rather than repetitive patterns. He cautions against using too many data sources as this will make it more unlikely that the researcher engages deeply with the individual accounts. Accordingly, he rejects the relevance of data saturation for hermeneutic phenomenology.

A review of the method literature of three types of qualitative research (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg & McKibbon, 2015) revealed that scholars of hermeneutic phenomenology agree that data saturation is of no concern in this particular mode of inquiry. Additionally, according to Bowen (2008), the concept of data saturation, or theoretical saturation, originated in Grounded Theory and later became applied to qualitative research in general. Yet, most researchers fail to show how they determine that they have reached saturation. As such, it is a rather vague concept that we do not see as very meaningful with respect to our own research project. If the reader must insist on demanding a justification for the number of posts we selected, we would like to point out that previous hermeneutic phenomenological studies in a variety of fields, such as education, healthcare, and hospitality, have commonly examined between ten and twelve informants (Chen, 2017; De Gagne & Walters, 2010; Miles, Chapman & Francis, 2015). Thus, we view our number of informants as appropriate to answer our research question.

Another important notion that is commonly addressed in research projects is bias. Bias is more or less detrimental to the results of a research project depending on the researchers' ontological and epistemological stance. Since our research is rooted in the philosophical paradigm of social constructionism, we assume that humans understand the world from their own subjective standpoints. As such, we admit that our own background and biases shape not only our understanding of the world but also the way in which we conducted our research. In fact, as we mentioned earlier, in hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher's historicality is seen as a crucial input into the research project. To ensure the quality of the study, it is necessary for researchers to disclose their background and underlying assumptions and how this affects their research (Laverty, 2003). Self-reflexivity is also one of Van Manen's (1990) guiding principles. Hence, we will be open about the influential factors relevant to this study.

Our research project started with an interest in CCT that was raised during our Master's studies as we became familiar with notions of habitus and consumer identity projects. To us, this offered a refreshing change in perspective from the usual business narrative. Both of us have a background in business and marketing but have privately devoted significant time and energy to feminist studies over the course of several years, through which we became acquainted with the concept of deconstructing one's identity. In fact, in the process of becoming feminists ourselves, we deconstructed our own identities and, thus, have lived experience of the process of identity deconstruction. Hence, our research project started out with an interest in deconstructing consumer identity projects.

As we were aware that, according to CCT, brands and possessions have identity value for consumers (Belk, 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), we were curious as to how consumers construct and communicate their identities if they refrain from using material goods. After some

thought, we realized that backpackers fit this requirement well. With the growing importance of the Internet for self-presentation (Schau & Gilly, 2003) and self-extension (Belk, 2013), especially for ephemeral phenomena such as experiences, investigating blogs seemed like an obvious choice. We have never backpacked ourselves and, thus, our knowledge is limited to accounts we heard from friends or acquaintances who have backpacked before and to the literature that we have read, academic as well as non-academic. As such, we have taken an outside-in look at what it means to be a backpacker. Yet, both of us have moved abroad in order to pursue our Master's degree and, hence, can empathize with backpackers to a certain extent when it comes to changes in identity that occur after going abroad and encountering different cultures. Prior to this research project, we conducted a small pilot study to test the feasibility of our intended research. This pilot study heavily shaped the knowledge and assumptions that we entered the present research project with, especially with respect to inclusion criteria, theoretical background, and preliminary themes. Three of the four posts that we examined as part of the pilot study were also included in the present research.

With respect to quality criteria, some scholars suggest adapting the concepts commonly used in quantitative research, such as validity and reliability, to qualitative research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Alternative concepts for ensuring trustworthiness have also emerged, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, Van Manen (2014) argues that neither of these concepts may be applicable to hermeneutic phenomenology. Instead, he proposes seven criteria that can aid in evaluating the quality of hermeneutic phenomenological texts, which we have taken into consideration while writing our analysis chapter. Subsequently, we will reproduce verbatim Van Manen's (2014) quality criteria, so the reader can assess the quality of our following analysis:

> **Heuristic questioning**: Does the text induce a sense of contemplative wonder and questioning attentiveness – *ti estin* (the wonder what this is) and *hoti estin* (the wonder that something exists at all)?
> **Descriptive richness:** Does the text contain rich and recognizable experiential material?
> **Interpretive depth:** Does the text offer reflective insights that go beyond the taken-for-granted understandings of everyday life?
> **Distinctive rigor:** Does the text remain constantly guided by a self-critical question of distinct meaning of the phenomenon or event?
> **Strong and addressive meaning:** Does the text "speak" to and address our sense of embodied being?
> **Experiential awakening:** Does the text awaken prereflective or primal experience through vocative and presentative language?
> **Inceptual epiphany:** Does the study offer us the possibility of deeper and original insight, and perhaps, an intuitive or inspired grasp of the ethics and ethos of life commitments and practices? (Van Manen, 2014, pp. 355-356)

4.5 Data Analysis

Our data analysis process was iterative and non-linear. After selecting the informants, we extracted their blog posts and inserted them into NVivo to aid our analysis. Once we had familiarized ourselves with the research material, we independently engaged in initial coding to allow for the emergence of as many codes as possible. Although the initial coding was heavily influenced by the findings of our pilot study, we discovered additional codes. Guided by Rennstam and Wästerfors's (2018) recommendations for analyzing qualitative research, after the initial coding where we sorted the data we subsequently reduced themes by discarding some of the less relevant codes and merging similar codes. Through this process of categorical and illustrative reduction, we decided on which excerpts to include as they highlighted unique experiences that we wanted to represent in our findings. In line with Laverty's (2003) account of the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis process, we followed this sorting and reducing procedure several times. Finally, we used stories as a means for reduction, meaning that we decided to focus mainly on excerpts where our informants told a story, excluding those accounts that were merely statements, thereby addressing the challenge that we cannot adequately represent our entire empirical material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Although our initial themes were tinged by informants' own language, in line with Van Manen's (1990) guiding principles, we moved away from these themes as our interpretation of the phenomenon evolved. Further, we followed Van Manen's (1990) guideline by letting the analysis evolve through writing. In fact, continuously re-writing is a necessary part of the analysis process in hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). Thereby, we gained a deeper understanding of our informants' lived experience as we moved "from the parts of experience, to the whole of experience and back and forth again and again" (Laverty, 2003, p. 24). This might sound like a straightforward undertaking, however, it was highly erratic. We engaged in hermeneutic circles (Heidegger, 1927; Laverty, 2003), rigorously re-reading, re-writing, and re-interpreting our material. Even though this process might appear rather linear through the way we present it here, in reality we randomly cycled back and forth between reading our empirical material, interpreting and writing about it, delving deeper into the analysis of the phenomenon under study each time we directed our attention to either of the constituents of the hermeneutic circle. It is also necessary to note that our analysis approach was rather asynchronous, meaning that the both of us devoted our attention to different steps of the analysis process and discussed our respective evaluations later on instead of turning our attention to the same matters simultaneously and discussing our understanding of the material instantly. Through this, we cultivated a deep understanding of the meaning of backpackers' experiences for their self-presentation and self-extension online.

4.6   Limitations & Ethical Concerns

Of course, our research faces some limitations and ethical considerations, which we want to address in the following. One could raise the concern that our data collection method has several shortcomings. First of all, we only reach backpackers who have the resources – time, money, and knowledge – to post about their experiences online. However, we would suggest that this is more of a prerequisite than a limitation as we are interested specifically in online self-presentation and self-extension of backpackers. Moreover, we are aware that we relied on search algorithms to find suitable informants. We tried to mitigate that by using not only Google but also Bing search engines. Yet, both showed similar results, which hints at the fact that our informants were engaged in and rather skilled at search engine optimization (SEO). This excluded individuals with inferior SEO skills. Conversely, we would suggest that ranking on the first ten pages in Google and Bing search results may hint at our informants having a desire to showcase their blogs, which in turn may mean that their blogs have strong self-presentation and self-extension potential. In addition, as also noted by Mkono and Markwell (2014), our search was influenced by our own ability to enter appropriate search terms. Thus, it is possible that we would have found other suitable informants if we had entered different search terms. Furthermore, we cannot be sure whether our informants actually have lived experience of backpacking. Still, we have skimmed several of their posts and for most of our informants, backpacking is the only topic they address in their blogs. While we cannot verify the truth content of their posts, we would suggest that significant time and energy seems to have gone into cultivating the blogs and we cannot see the benefit of intentionally misleading their readers.

Finally, by focusing our research on people who post in English, we excluded individuals with insufficient command of the language. In fact, most of our informants were native speakers of English, with most of them being US-American. Hence, it is likely that our informants share a common cultural background, and identity construction may vary across cultures. We would like to point out, however, that our aim is giving an account of the unique experiences of these specific individuals rather than claiming generalizability. A cynical reader might point out that the claim to examine the unique experiences of backpackers is absurd as guide books like the Lonely Planet have standardized the backpacking experience to a certain extent and many backpackers plan their travels according to the suggestions in these guide books. Additionally, as previously suggested by some scholars (Cohen, 2011; Elsrud, 2001; O'Regan, 2016; Sørensen, 2003), individuals on the road adhere to a common backpacker culture and, thus, follow the same rules and norms during their travels. While we acknowledge these objections, we believe that backpackers' experiences are nevertheless individualized and unique to them since their previous experiences inform their current realities. In other words, while backpackers may follow standardized routes and share cultural norms on the road, their experiences are still unique to them as no two people will experience their backpacking travels in exactly the same way due to their previous knowledge and experiences.

Moreover, we are aware that ethical concerns can be raised about our research. To our knowledge, no prior studies have investigated blog posts from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. However, we would suggest that we can look to the literature on ethical considerations around netnography to evaluate potential ethical concerns with regard to our own study as netnography occurs in a virtual environment as well. Kozinets (2002b), the originator of netnography, proposed some principles for ethical behavior. According to him, ethical netnography requires researchers to reveal their intentions to the community they are studying. Further, researchers should ensure anonymity and confidentiality and should obtain informed consent when planning to use verbatim quotes. Langer and Beckmann (2005) dissent and suggest instead that covert netnographic research is ethical, and sometimes even necessary when investigating sensitive topics, as participants' behavior can change if they are aware that they are being studied. As such, the authors suggest that ethical principles for publicly accessible websites are similar to those used when analyzing traditional forms of media like newspapers. We lean towards their assessment, especially since we used archival data, which for Watson, Morgan and Hemmington (2008) is a way to entirely avoid researcher influence on informants' behavior.

Additionally, Kozinets (2002b) believes that researchers should seek and incorporate feedback from community members into their interpretation. However, we are not convinced of the necessity of member checks when it comes to hermeneutic phenomenology. Here, we concur with Van Manen (2014, p. 348), who believes that while it is "methodologically and ethically commendable" to verify researchers' interpretation with the informants, this is not necessary. Instead, he suggests that member checks can only ascertain whether the researcher has adequately reproduced informants' experiences whereas the quality of the entire study cannot be assessed through member checks. In fact, we would even go so far as to suggest that it would be odd to conduct covert research, only to reveal ourselves to our informants and verify with them if our interpretation resonates with their experiences. Hence, while we acknowledge Kozinets' (2002b) concerns, we hope the reader can follow our reasoning for rejecting these reservations. Indeed, Tuikka, Nguyen and Kimppa (2017) indicate that, over time, Kozinets has departed from his initial conviction of the lacking ethicality of covert online research. Instead, the authors suggest that researcher disclosure should be contingent on whether the content is publicly available or requires registration to access. As the empirical material that we used can easily be found online via search engines and is publicly accessible, we feel justified in assuming that our research is ethical even though it was conducted covertly.

Moreover, we have contemplated how to behave ethically with respect to safeguarding our informants' anonymity and ensuring confidentiality. Initially, we considered pseudonymizing informants' names and changing the names of places to ensure anonymity. Yet, we soon realized that we cannot guarantee anonymity as reverse-searching direct quotes can still reveal the informants' identities. We have also considered avoiding direct quotes altogether, however, reproducing informants' accounts verbatim is necessary in hermeneutic phenomenology as paraphrasing or summarizing will conceal the original meaning (Van Manen, 2014). In their review of research ethics in netnography in the field of information systems, Tuikka, Nguyen and Kimppa (2017) give an account of how previous scholars have handled the issue of using

direct quotes and determined that while some have avoided direct quotes entirely, others have reproduced quotes verbatim, explaining that informants must have been aware of strangers reading what they post. Hence, some scholars refrained from using pseudonyms for their informants, specifically because of the possibility of reverse-searching the quotes. We agree with this evaluation. In addition, Tuikka, Nguyen and Kimppa (2017) suggest that respondents belonging to a marginalized or vulnerable group would need special protection. Moreover, confidential information should be excluded from direct quotes. However, our informants neither belong to a marginalized or vulnerable group nor disclose confidential information. Hence, we feel comfortable refraining from the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, we would suggest that since these posts can easily be found via search engines, our informants are likely aware that strangers can read their posts and this may even be desirable for them. In fact, we have placed the URLs of the blog posts that we scrutinized in Appendix A, so the reader can understand the context of the quotes that we have extracted in our analysis.

All in all, in this chapter we have provided an explanation for using a hermeneutic phenomenological research design informed by the philosophical assumptions of social constructionism. We have delineated and justified our data collection and analysis processes as well as attempted to ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis through reflexivity and specification of quality criteria. Finally, we have addressed limitations and ethical concerns of our research method. Through this, we hope the reader is well-equipped to appreciate the findings of our analysis.

5   Analysis & Findings

In this chapter, we present the analysis and results of how backpackers' construct and communicate their identity projects online by deconstructing the lessons from their travel experiences on their blogs. But first, it is important for the reader to know how we understand the construction of identity projects. *Figure 5.1* shows a heuristic that we hope makes our understanding of the construction of identity projects more accessible for you as the reader. According to our understanding, identity projects consist of three axes: (a) a symbolic meaning, which has a socio-culturally pre-negotiated value, (b) a consumer, who embodies the identity project, and (c) the society as co-creator, which recognizes and mirrors the identity project. All three axes depend on each other and are interconnected: The symbolic meaning is negotiated between the consumer and society. As such, the symbolic meaning gives the consumer a way to be recognized and to simultaneously recognize society, while the society mirrors some symbolic meanings to the consumer. In other words, a consumer utilizes symbolic meanings to communicate their identity project to other participants of society in order to be recognized, but the other participants of society demand the consumer to embody certain symbolic meanings in order to allow them to be part of the collective. In short, one's identity project depends on how one communicates it and how others recognize it.
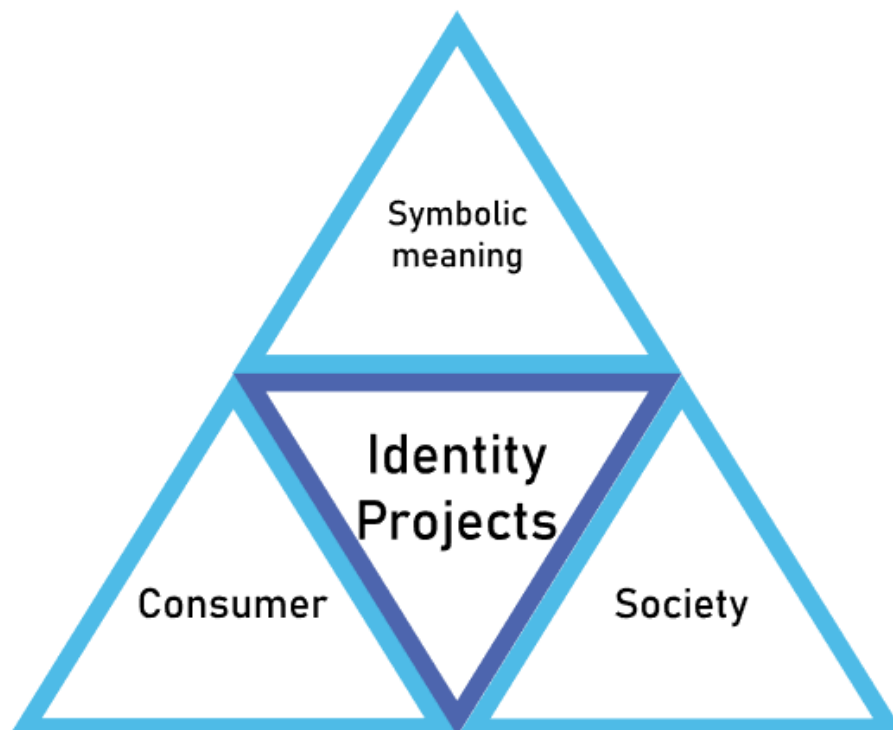

Figure 5.1 The three axes of consumer identity projects

Therefore, in the first part, we will present how backpackers deconstruct the layers of their identity projects, following the steps of (1) Dispossessing of material possessions, (2) Living extraordinary experiences, and (3) Negotiating the experienced self. In the second part, we will outline the roles that constitute the construction of the backpackers' identity projects: (1) The role of backpackers' experiences, (2) The role of backpackers' self, and (3) The role of the world. In order to understand our analysis, it is important to acknowledge that identity is constructed and reconstructed by deconstructing the layers that constitute it.

5.1   Deconstruction of Backpackers' Identity Projects

Before we begin to break down the layers of backpackers' identity projects, it is relevant to recognize that before becoming backpackers these people had already constructed their identities. These identities were created through socio-cultural tools, such as signs, symbols, and meanings, and were communicated through self-presentation in a certain context, namely the world as they knew it and perceived it. We could call that their bubble of reality. Not satisfied with being in this bubble, this group of people decided one thing that would change their lives and in consequence their identity: to travel around the world. And how did this change come about? They adapted their consumption decisions to fit their purpose: living extraordinary experiences by meeting new places, new people, and new challenges.

Accordingly, we identify three layers that explain the process through which backpackers deconstruct their identity, meaning they pass through a personal, or phenomenological, understanding of their previous self and consumption decisions, and how this influences their identity projects and who they are. It should be added that the deconstruction process is continuous and the different steps can occur simultaneously or in a different order than they are presented here. What we intended to do in this part of the analysis was to understand the implications for backpackers' identity projects from the moment the backpackers decided to embark on the backpacking adventure.

5.1.1   Dispossessing of Material Possessions

First lesson: the value of material possessions changes. To travel the world with a backpack means to seek into the essential. Similar to Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould's (2012) findings in their study of global nomads, backpackers start to appreciate objects for their utilitarian characteristics rather than for their linking value. Since backpackers have to carry their belongings when they travel between destinations, it becomes more important for them to consider which possession are really necessary for them, as illustrated by Amanda's comment:

> Pack light. And by this I mean whatever you consider to be light, pack half of that. Only bring what you truly need. Once you see how hard it is to carry it all on your back, you

will understand. I tried to pack super light and still grossly overpacked on my Euro trip. I was so miserable with all the weight on my back that I begged a departing friend to take some of my stuff in her suitcase and mail it to me when she got back home. I will never make that mistake again. When you backpack you do not need a new outfit every day. (...) I can sacrifice being as stylish and glamorous as I'd normally prefer to be for the sake of my poor back carrying the burden.

As becomes apparent in that quote, relying on the same amount of possessions during their travels as at home becomes burdensome for the backpackers as their possessions start to weigh them down quite literally. Backpackers realize that they can get by without most of their material possessions and, in fact, freeing themselves from objects takes away the power of meaning and symbols that they held before. In other words, the value of brands decreases for backpackers. By removing the lenses of meanings, the objects regain their primitive nature and emphasis is placed on their purpose of being: solving a basic need. Nonessential possessions are now discarded as they fail to add value to the experience of backpacking.

As backpackers realize the utilitarian value of goods, they become aware of the overreliance on material goods in their Western countries of origin. They start questioning whether they are justified in giving their belongings such a pivotal role in their identity construction. This can be seen in the following excerpt from Jamie's blog post, where he lists reasons for going backpacking, one of them being

> To move away from materialism. In the West, we have become so attached to the material possessions in our lives that we let them define us as people. But when we're backpacking, we realise that none of that matters (at least, not as much as we thought it did).

Jamie's quote shows a departure from preconceived notions of identity construction, meaning that one's belongings may not be as important for one's sense of self as previously thought. Furthermore, this dispossession of material goods happens in a context where the backpackers have to do it in order to accomplish their goal of traveling. In other words, disposing of some possessions is necessary, on the one hand because of the physical limitations of carrying heavy luggage and, on the other, because it is seen as a possibility for trying out how it is to live with less and "move away from materialism," as Jamie puts it. However, after foregoing the availability of most of their possessions, backpackers realize that objects no longer carry the same meaning and value as before but, instead, experiences are becoming more important. Thus, in line with Cherrier and Murray's (2007) findings, the process of dispossession becomes a conscious decision that sparks a "complex process of identity negotiation" (Cherrier & Murray, 2007, p. 25). This awareness of the growing role of experiences over possessions becomes apparent in Eli's post:

> Material Things Are Pretty Overrated (...) I'm not saying that my way is the only right way but for me, I've learned that I've come to value experiences significantly more than the material things I've owned (...) In short, I've been happier living off $20 a day while

backpacking than I ever was when I could buy anything I wanted. Everyone's priorities are different but I do think everyone needs to try to discover what will give them long-lasting happiness as opposed to just quick bursts of retail therapy.

Similarly, after returning from her one-year backpacking trip, Yari evaluates the status of her possessions and expresses a comparable consciousness of her changed relationships to material goods:

> After living with so little on the road, you suddenly realise how much $hit [sic] you own. I've only picked up half of my things out of storage and there's already so much I want to toss out. Seriously, why do I own five running tops and three neon-coloured water bottles? Suddenly, all this stuff feels so extravagant - and honestly, rather wasteful. With regards to both my money and the planet. So I spent my very first weekend watching the "Minimalism" documentary on Netflix and figuring out how to apply some of these principles to my post-backpacker life. I've filled multiple bags with things I plan to donate and I've already made big plans to take a "capsule wardrobe" approach to my future fashion choices.

Both Eli and Yari make an important point with respect to the changing role of possessions. While Eli shuns the use of "retail therapy" – trying to buy happiness by purchasing nonessential goods – and emphasizes how his happiness has become detached from material objects, Yari seems to have engaged in her fair share of retail therapy prior to her backpacking trip. Now that she is back, she wonders why she has ever needed so many material possessions, finding her past antics "extravagant - and honestly, rather wasteful." As a result, she plans on disposing of a substantial amount of her possessions and living with less, even after her backpacking adventure has ended. This implies that her identity has shifted as a result of going backpacking and possessions no longer have the identity value they used to have for her.

Interestingly enough, we noticed that backpackers refrain from discussing their personal possessions as something significant during their trips. Instead, they only mentioned in passing a few specific objects they took on their travels. Similar to the objects valued by the global nomads in Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould's (2012) study, the objects valued by backpackers are mainly the backpack, clothes and technological gear like cameras and smartphones that helped them to hold memories and plan their travels. Marek recounts:

> Living out of a backpack brings everything down to their essentials, and I haven't really missed much. (...) You shouldn't live your journey through a camera lens (...) But photographing with intent can enrich your travels. I love to go into a busy street or market just with the goal of taking pictures of interesting things from unusual angles. I end up noticing details that would have otherwise passed me.

Hence, for Marek, his camera becomes a crucial part of the experience as it allows him to elevate individual incidents and become aware of aspects of the experience that were not within his immediate scope of attention. This is relevant in terms of questioning the role that material

possessions have in backpackers' identity as they intentionally or rationally choose those objects who will allow them to live experiences indefinitely and to create or save memories. In line with Elsrud's (2001) suggestion that retelling travel narratives through pictures and written accounts may serve as a means for additional identity work, we believe that backpackers relive their experiences through their photos and blogs. Consequently, these materializations of their ephemeral experiences help them display their identity to the outside. Therefore, it is possible to acknowledge that backpackers not only detach from objects but from the symbolic meanings they have. Then, backpackers question their identity, along with their preconceived values and meanings, while a new process of construction of identity projects starts, in which meanings are conceived through experiences. As such, memories linked to traveling experiences replace possessions as an extension of the self.

Finally, it is interesting to note that backpackers place special emphasis on experiences rather than material possessions, and this is evident as they only superficially address the topic of possessions in their blog posts. Hence, through this relative absence of narratives around possessions compared to the relative abundance of narratives around experiences, it is obvious how experiences obtain higher significance than material goods. And then, by questioning the symbolic meanings of the objects through focusing on their utilitarian purpose rather than their self-presentation implications, the identity of those people is broken down as they become backpackers.

5.1.2   Living Extraordinary Experiences

Second lesson: experiences are as unique and personal as everyone's identity. Now that we understand the process of dispossession of material goods and their meanings, we aim to seek into the backpackers' experiences from their own personal point of view in order to understand the transformation of the self they undergo by questioning who they were before and who they are now. But first, we want to remind you that extraordinary experiences mean enjoyable moments, exciting challenges and being amazed by new events (Arnould & Price, 1993), and this is exactly what constitutes backpackers' life on the road. Then, in this deconstruction process of identity, how do their experiences make backpackers question their preconceived reality?

Simple. It all boils down to one thing: leaving one's comfort zone. This means that at the moment the backpackers decided to travel, they began a process of exploration and openness to an unknown world, where they broke the bubble of certainty and predictability. Eli recounts a few experiences he encountered on his trip to Latin America and how they forced him out of his comfort zone:

> As soon as I hopped off the plane in Cartagena, I ordered an Uber. Little did I know that Uber was illegal and the drivers brave enough to do it anyway had to improvise. My car came, a random person hopped out of the backseat, started hugging me and yelling at me in Spanish before putting my luggage in the car.

What the f*ck [sic] just happened? The driver explained to me that since there were police and security around, they had to make it seem like they were picking up a good friend and not a paying customer. Comfort zones. Get rid of them. A week later, I was waltzing through Medellin's most dangerous neighborhood all by myself. I ended up befriending a few locals and joining a pickup soccer match before sharing a drink with them before having to leave. Comfort zones. Get rid of them. Two weeks later, my fat ass made it to Machu Picchu after 5 days of trekking and being completely unprepared. Comfort zones. You get the point.

Here, it becomes apparent that backpacking allowed Eli to encounter experiences that are outside of his usual lifeworld. He would have foregone all these experiences if he had decided to stay inside his comfort zone. However, with the decision to go backpacking, he chose to be open towards new, unexpected occurrences. Through this openness, backpackers begin a process of going beyond their personal limits. Then, an interesting fact arises – backpacking is so far outside of society's expectations that most of the time those who decide to travel the world with a backpack become solo travelers. Amanda gives her reasoning for this as follows:

[t]hree years ago, I decided I needed to go for it [and I did]. As a gift to myself for finishing my Master's, I booked a trip to Europe and began planning an epic journey to explore five cities across four countries. And since I didn't know anyone brave (or crazy) enough to join me, I did a majority of it all by myself.

According to Amanda, the decision to go to a different continent is an act of courage and might even require some degree of craziness. As such, no one in her immediate circle of friends back home is willing to embark on such an adventure. Similarly, Susanne believes that "by traveling solo you are much more open to new experiences and trying new things," addressing again the topic of openness. Hence, openness can be seen as a prerequisite for and a side effect of backpacking. Nevertheless, embarking on their backpacking adventures on their own does not mean being alone during the whole duration of the trip. Instead, backpackers usually meet others and travel together with them, as can be seen from this comment by Chris:

Honestly even as a solo traveller you'll very rarely travel alone. In fact probably the only point you will is to and from the airport! And that's the great thing about travelling – you'll meet so many amazing people, people you'd never have met otherwise. (...) Travelling solo is merely leaving on a plane on your own with your own plans. As soon as you start travelling you'll quickly realise how easy it is to meet new people and enjoy the world with them.

Chris delineates that deciding to go backpacking by yourself means "leaving on a plane on your own with your own plans" rather than being doomed to be lonely throughout the journey. During their trip, backpackers will meet other like-minded individuals and share experiences with them. As such, the necessity of staying open becomes apparent once again, especially since backpackers move between destinations frequently and, thus, need to get in touch with new

people every time they go somewhere else. In addition, backpackers rarely spend the entire duration of their travels with the same individuals they meet on the road and can travel by themselves for shorter periods of time before meeting new people. Thus, traveling by themselves creates an atmosphere of self-analysis, where the backpackers challenge their fears and embrace uncertainty while discovering unknown parts of themselves, which will subsequently become part of the process of constructing their identity projects. However, keeping in mind the process of deconstruction, backpackers confront the experience in an authentic way by being open and flexible to the experiences that may come. Backpackers travel seeking adventure, wanting to immerse themselves in new places, new cultures, and new people to discover the reality of their backpacking destinations beyond the touristic expectations of travelers. This can be seen from Amanda's definition of backpackers:

> [Backpackers] are the nomads and wanderers of society always thirsty for adventure who can backpack for months at a time and who crave authentic cultural experiences rather than lavish vacations on resorts.

Talking about his own motivations for backpacking, Steve explains,

> Initially, my motivation to backpack was so I could see the world as cheaply as possibly [sic]. The world is such a big place and I want to see it all. Of course, seeing the world and meeting the local people there is still the biggest motivator for me to travel.

As such, Steve and Amanda concur in that backpackers have a desire to experience the world in an authentic way. Openness is a big factor that allows backpackers to compare their life as it was before they traveled to how it is during their travels, enabling them to break down paradigms and learn something new. Hence, in this learning process, the experiences become valuable and meaningful for backpackers' identity, as these experiences will help the backpackers to shape and construct their identity projects, thereby allowing them to enter a process of who they are becoming. The significance of the learning process can be seen in Tello's account of arriving someplace new, where he cites a quote by Bill Bryson:

> When you arrive in a brand-new city for the first time, it is impossible not [to] learn something new because you know absolutely nothing to begin with. Every step you take from the moment you arrive to the moment you leave is a learning opportunity - it's unavoidable. There is a quote by Bill Bryson that summarizes this point wonderfully:
>
> *"But that's the glory of foreign travel, as far as I am concerned... I can't think of anything that excites a greater sense of childlike wonder than to be in a country where you are ignorant of almost everything. Suddenly you are five years old again. You can't read anything, you have only the most rudimentary sense of how things work, and you can't even reliably cross a street without endangering your life. Your whole existence becomes a series of interesting guesses."*

Here, Tello emphasizes that learning something is inevitable if you encounter something for the first time. He uses the quote to emphasize the necessity of being open, or in Bill Bryson's words, conjuring a "sense of childlike wonder." As such, being open becomes necessary in order to fully appreciate the experiences encountered while backpacking. However, it is relevant to acknowledge that not every experience will be exciting and challenges present themselves during the travels. Uncertainty comes not only with difficulties but also great lessons. Backpackers sacrifice some amenities that they took for granted at home and sometimes uncomfortable experiences appear on the road that will help them to react and become more resilient. Similar to Elsrud's (2001) findings in her study of risk and adventure narratives of backpackers, the backpackers in our study recount how experiences of discomfort lead them to recognize some aspects of their life they took for granted. Through these experiences, they start a process of self-consciousness. This can be seen in simple statements like "You'll miss the comfort of your own bed at times," as Jamie puts it, but also in anecdotes like that of Silvia:

> Discomfort makes you feel nostalgic. When I first got to the Comoros I needed a shower, but the manager of my Airbnb told me that there was something wrong with the water pump, so I'd have to take a bucket shower, and since it was nighttime the water in the bucket would be cold. And I left my shower with the biggest grin on my face – not because I was happy to be clean, but because I felt like I had just poured my youth back over myself in that bucket.

Steve compares the travel experiences from his childhood with his impressions from backpacking:

> One of the things I first learned about backpacking was how different the accommodations would be. I was used to fancy hotels with big swimming pools and big TVs in giant rooms. After all, this is how my family traveled when I was young so that was my image of what traveling was supposed to be like. So when I was told that many of the places would be hostels that focused on being cheap and simple, I was a little concerned. It took some getting used to, but I found traveling cheaply doesn't have to be bad. Most hostels don't have many extras, but that doesn't bother me. Personally I like the rough accommodations of many of the hostels I've stayed in.

These excerpts show that through backpacking, our informants became aware of the amenities they once took for granted. This can either be their previous default mode of traveling, as in Steve's case, or as simple as sleeping in the same bed at night, as in Jamie's case. Silvia's quote shows the other side of the same coin. Once the backpacker has returned to their life of comfort, exposing oneself to discomfort can invoke a feeling of nostalgia. This implies that discomfort can also be a pleasant sensation.

Moreover, during the travel period money becomes a critical aspect. The purpose of backpacking is to encounter as many experiences as possible with as little money as possible. Thus, the meaning of money changes and every decision of spending that money will have an

implication for the experiences of the backpackers. Hence, the backpackers see money in a cost-opportunity sense, to gain the most benefit of the situation. And because the meaning of money changes, backpackers change their consumer behaviors and their consumption decision-making. Regarding the meaning of money, Amanda comments,

> One of the best aspects of backpacking is how inexpensive it is. Backpackers generally stay in hostels for rates as low as a few dollars a day in order to save money for all their bouncing around to different places. Typically there is a very tight budget to stretch and sometimes even no real itinerary - just wandering to wherever they end up. Traveling for weeks or months on end doesn't have to break the bank as much as people may assume it does if it's well planned ahead of time and if the backpacker is disciplined in being frugal.

For Silvia, money is mainly valuable for her insofar as it allows her to extend her trip:

> You become really good with money. Sure, people always say travel teaches you important life skills, like flexibility and communication, but I'd say one of the most useful lessons comes from learning how to live on $5 a day, while traveling. Because when you're backpacking on limited savings and spending more money means having to go home sooner, you realize how little you can actually get by with.

Interestingly, Susanne seems to not attach so much value to being frugal:

> All in all, I spent roughly $14,000 USD during my 11 months away, including airfare, which also included a trip back to Canada to be a bridesmaid at my best friend's wedding! I consider myself to be a "moderate" budgeter. For example, I was somewhere between the backpackers who don't blink an eye at spending $6 USD on a fancy eggs benny breakfast in Bali and those who chose to eat boiled potatoes instead to save a few bucks! I didn't completely deprive myself of certain luxuries, but I definitely didn't go all out either. The most influencing factor in how much I spent on my travels wasn't the country I was in, but the amount of volunteer work I did in each country. Eliminating daily expenses such as accommodation and food through volunteering saves you a ton of money for long term travel.

Both Amanda and Silvia emphasize that frugality is an important skill that backpackers must master in order to make the most of their trips. The ability to stick to a budget thus becomes important. While all three agree that backpacking can be rather inexpensive, Susanne took a different approach to reducing her spending. Instead of abstaining entirely from costly expenses, she chose to volunteer while backpacking. Thus, she received room and board instead of having to spend her savings on basic necessities.

All in all, living the experience is the only way for backpackers to internalize the outcomes of the experience and become able to break the pre-constructed layers of what forms identity and the self. As some of the backpackers mentioned, they first had an idea of what backpacking

means and how much people can learn from it, but only in the precise moment they decided to embark on the adventure themselves did those lessons became a reality and, thus, initiate a unique and personal transformation.

5.1.3   Negotiating the Experienced-Self

Third lesson: it is not only about the experiences but about the way one approaches them. When one puts oneself in an unknown situation, the first reaction is to search for something familiar in order to feel secure. However, as previously mentioned, backpackers decide to get out of their comfort zones in order to open up for new experiences. This open-minded approach is significant as backpackers are not going to impose themselves on the experience, rather they will expose themselves to it. In other words, let go of control of the situation because they cannot know what will happen as they have never encountered this experience before. Thus, to understand how backpackers present themselves with the help of their travel experiences it is relevant to recognize that this process allowed them to question themselves and the identity they had developed prior to going on this adventure. Hence, in this part of the analysis, we aim to comprehend the steps they took in order to transform themselves into what they became after traveling.

First, backpackers get rid of stereotypes. It is difficult to avoid creating some ideas of what places or people can be like, by means of prior knowledge of the country the places are in or the culture people belong to. Some backpackers expressed that they had some preconceptions of their destination and the local people, but then they became aware that the reality is completely different. Information is everywhere, but one has to be critical to it and be open to what one encounters. During their travels, backpackers acknowledged the need for openness and they also realized that other people had created some stereotypes about them as well. However, the process of sharing experiences with each other helped them to understand and break down stereotypes. Chris, for instance, comments that "[e]xperiencing new cultures and people will make you more open minded," while Marek notes, "The world is not nearly as dangerous as you might think." The impact backpacking has on stereotypes becomes most obvious in Eli's comment:

> All too often, we hear the stereotypes about people from different countries. When we travel and meet people from all over the world, we can debunk negative stereotypes and reinforce positive stereotypes of our country. I can show the world that not all Americans are loud and ignorant and that all Filipinos love karaoke more than life itself.

Hence, it is possible to see how backpackers learn to appreciate the individual differences of the people they meet on their travels and understand that the world is less hostile than they previously thought. Preconceptions about other places and other cultures informed their travel but it is necessary for the backpackers to stay open-minded and allow themselves to get in contact with others in order to overcome previously held prejudices. By questioning stereotypes, backpackers not only recognize their own biases, but also identify how the external

world sees them. This process of self-recognition from others' perception allows backpackers to clarify who they are and who they want to become, but also how they want to be perceived.

Second, backpackers immerse themselves in different cultures and appreciate diversity. They exhibit their interest in knowing the places and the culture as they seek to see more in detail. This becomes apparent when they explain the aims of their travels. They travel not because they want to accomplish a bucket list of places to visit, but because they want to become immersed in the experiences that await in the places they visit. Furthermore, it is notable that they are concerned about learning and respecting the culture. Backpackers realize and accept that they are the outsiders and therefore if they want to really appreciate the experience they must negotiate some parts of themselves in order to be more receptive to what they are encountering. This is evident in Jamie's comment:

> Nothing teaches you more about other cultures than experiencing them first hand. Nothing helps you understand people better than meeting them from all over the place. (...) None of us is expected to know everything about the culture of the country we're visiting, nor should we. But, that doesn't give us the excuse to know nothing at all. And while it's okay to make mistakes (understanding locals will likely forgive us for doing so), it's still our responsibility to first, be open to new cultures and different ways of living and, second, to learn what we can so we don't come across as ignorant and disrespectful.

Here, Jamie relates that other cultures are best experienced in person. Nevertheless, he thinks it is important to show common courtesy and adapt to the local customs. While locals will likely be tolerant if any mishaps happen, it is still best to avoid any faux-pas by being open and receptive to the practices locals engage in. Sometimes, this means negotiating parts of oneself in order to be perceived as acceptable, as illustrated by Marek's comment:

> Telling people you're atheist/agnostic can be awkward. This is particularly the case in countries where people are very devout. I've had some pretty confused looks, which of course is understandable in places where there's virtually no atheists. To skip the awkwardness and/or questioning, I've sometimes resorted to saying "my family is catholic", which is only sort-of true.

This is one example of how backpackers cope with pressures to adapt to local customs. In this case, Marek avoids stepping on the toes of religious locals by resorting to a white lie about his family being catholic. He realizes that religiosity is important in this context, while it seems to be a non-factor for him back home and, thus, to avoid an awkward situation, he negotiates a part of himself and presents himself as more devout than he actually is. Susanne has also encountered this necessity to behave differently abroad than at home:

> Entering a new country can be overwhelming, particularly if even the language is different. People look at us and treat us differently. We are now considered, 'the outsider'. All of these new experiences, caused by being in a completely new

environment can influence our perspective and way of thinking. Why is this important? We live in a multicultural world. Returning home we might be more understanding of certain problems other 'outsiders' might face upon arrival in Canada. Learning to sit on toilets rather than squat on them. The proper way to use a fork. Spitting (or not spitting) in public. Traveling forces us to open our eyes and realize the sheer amount of nuances unique to each culture, as well as emphasize [sic] with those forced to adapt to our own. It promotes tolerance and understanding of others.

In this excerpt, Susanne realizes that backpackers are viewed as "the outsider" by the local population and recounts how this realization impacts her mindset. As such, she starts to appreciate the unique differences between cultures and is better able to feel empathy towards people she considers "outsiders" in her home country. For that reason, the process of being conscious about themselves and others brings an outstanding comprehension of the self for backpackers. Thus, identity can be negotiated through different experiences according to what a person expects and what the society requests. Therefore, the way a person presents themselves in a certain culture will impact the exchange of certain values and meanings. In other words, someone's decision to conform to or to oppose local customs will affect if they adopt the values and meanings that are present in the local culture. This acceptance or rejection of these values and meanings will have an effect on backpackers' identity.

Finally, backpackers identify with the essential self, or basic human nature. Something that caught our attention was that backpackers made a reflection on what connects them to the people they met during their travel. Differences were notable within each culture; language, food, clothes, music, the environment is totally different in every country, in every city, in every place. However, backpackers expressed that despite our differences we are all humans driven by the same emotions of love, happiness, and compassion. This can best be appreciated from Eli's comment:

> Kindness is the universal human language and I've found this to be true from Cuba to Thailand to Norway. When traveling, you find yourself constantly in unfamiliar territory. The languages, the environments, and the cultures may be difficult to adapt to at first. However, the people will always be there to lend a helping hand to the traveler who needs it. I'm not saying that you should take advantage of the kindness of people. Trust me, it is a lot easier than you think to tell whether someone has a good heart or not. Treat people with kindness and you will get kindness in return. This has been one of the truths that I've found to be universal.

Here, Eli recounts how, no matter where he goes, he can always count on the kindness and hospitality of the local population. This kindness seems to be an essential factor for him which he can rely on to make his travels easier and more pleasant. Marek also notes the common humanity across the globe when he writes, "People around the world all want the same things: Work, family, love, laughs, etc. There's common ground everywhere." It becomes apparent that people have more in common than backpackers thought before.

Therefore, the final step in the deconstruction process of identity is to search into the foundations of the self – what are my values, my dreams, my goals which make me human. This helps backpackers understand how their lived experiences (in other words, their context and social circumstances) transformed the self into what it is now.

5.2 (Re-)Construction of Backpackers' Identity Projects

In this part we aim to explain the spheres where identity projects are constructed. Thus, in line with *Figure 5.1* above, the role of experiences is to represent symbolic meanings co-created by the backpackers and the outside world, while the backpackers' role is to represent the meanings of the experiences, and the role of the world is to co-create and demand experiential meaning with and from the backpackers. These relationships are shown next. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognize that, in line with our hermeneutic phenomenological method, the outcomes presented in this section are interpreted according to the self-reflection at the moment the backpackers wrote their blog and cannot make any claim about any identity construction that happened outside of the blogs or after the writing of the respective posts. We, thus, want to emphasize that the outcomes are not static and identity projects are constantly under construction.

5.2.1 The Role of Backpackers' Experiences

Backpackers have a main objective: to live life as fully as they can, having as many experiences on their travels as possible. With this determination in mind, as presented in the deconstruction section, they started a process of dispossession of material goods. Because of that, they also detach from some symbolic meanings in order to acquire new ones. Then, experiences begin to have the role of symbolic meanings in the construction of their identity projects. These experiences are transformed into memories, as something more concrete, more tangible. Therefore, just as some people collect objects because they have a symbolic meaning, backpackers collect memories of their experiences because of their symbolic value. This increased importance of experiences over material possessions can be seen from Marek's quote:

> Experiences are much more valuable than belongings. I find that experiences stay with me in my memories, and become a part of my story and identity in ways that possessions never will.

Marek emphasizes the significance of experiences for his identity, claiming that the identity value of his possessions is much lower. Similarly, Eli states, "I've learned that I've come to value experiences significantly more than the material things I've owned." This is in line with Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) findings that consumers attach more value to their experiences and receive more happiness from them than from material goods. It is possible that

the memories created from these experiences may have a stronger impact on backpackers' identity compared to material possessions as their experiences have a unique meaning to the backpacker. Experiences are unique, even if backpackers may plan their trips according to recommendations in guide books such as Lonely Planet or follow advice on other backpacker blogs. However, no two people can have exactly the same experience as they come from different contexts, even if they share cultural norms and follow the same rules that are characteristic of backpacker culture. As such, experiences have a direct effect on the person who lived them, whereas objects can be replicated and are thus easier for others to obtain, allowing for a direct comparison, which is impossible when it comes to experiences. Therefore, backpackers seek more experiences. Additionally, as experiences are so valuable to them, they aim to enjoy them for a prolonged period of time. As some of the backpackers expressed, the purpose is not to go to a lot of different places but to immerse themselves in the new place, so they recommend to explore and feel the experience in a decelerated way. Jamie laments:

> I hate when I hear travellers (it's mainly backpackers) compete over who's been to more places and visited more countries. These people are completely missing the point of what backpacking is really about. I don't care if I visit one country in a year or if I pull a Chris Guillebeau and visit every single one on the planet. The point of travel is to make the most of your experiences.

Chris addresses this deceleration even more explicitly:

> I admit that for some people time is tight and they don't have the luxury of a year long gap year – but if you do, please please please slow your travels down! You'll not only have a much more immerse [sic] experience but you'll avoid backpacker burn out [...]

Both excerpts show that it is more important to slow down and truly immerse oneself in the destination's circumstances rather than trying to cram as many destinations into the trip as possible. While Jamie focuses on the downsides of some backpackers' competitive mentality of striving to visit as many places as possible, Chris is more concerned with the fact that some backpackers rush to experience as many destinations as possible as they may have limited time available for their travels. Both agree that by focusing on the quality of the experiences rather than the quantity, backpacking becomes more enjoyable.

Furthermore, it is notable that backpackers not only separated themselves from the symbolic meanings of their possessions but of possessions in general. As they focus on the experiences, a sense of practicality and sacrifice will escort them through their travels. In other words, the travel experience also changed the value of things like money and time. This change in value will change the backpackers' perceptions. For example, when it comes to money, backpackers experience its value in a sense of cost and future benefit. As most of them depend on personal savings to finance their travels, they recognize there is a limit, and in order for them to be able to enjoy the experiences for a longer period, they have to be cautious. Thus, backpackers may sacrifice some luxury in terms of accommodation or food, yet balance is what makes the experience enjoyable and so they allow themselves to splurge from time to time. To make the

most of their experiences, backpackers attach higher importance to time rather than money, as becomes apparent in this comment by Chris:

> The saying goes "travel is the only thing you buy that makes you richer" – it's super cliche but it does have a point! I am far from rich (seriously being a travel blogger is not the way to go if you fancy being a millionaire!) but I've been living the life most people couldn't put a price tag on. For the most part you can always make more money – but what you can't get back is time. Travel and enjoy yourself, do the things you love and return having experienced heaps of new things and having had heaps of adventures.

Here, Chris explains that backpackers are rich, not in the traditional monetary sense but instead in experiences. Hence, time becomes more important than money as it is possible to travel rather inexpensively, whereas time is often the limiting factor that determines how many things backpackers can experience. In addition, backpackers' perception of distance and time shifts, similar to the pilgrims in Husemann and Eckhardt's (2019) study. This can be appreciated from Marek's comment:

> Travel changes your perception of distances. I used to think going all the way north to south in my home country of The Netherlands took a long time (about 3 hours). This seems like a cakewalk now compared to some of the 20+ hour journeys I've taken. (...) Space-time is warped in Latin America. 30 minutes means 3 hours. "Muy cerca" is still 15 blocks away.

According to Marek, traveling made him realize that the world is bigger than he thought before and that distances and time become less important when you travel. We can only speculate how this impacted his life after traveling as he does not go into more detail on this, but it is likely that this realization has had long-term consequences for the way he perceives time and distance. Another aspect that is valuable when it comes to symbolic meanings is the link they have with emotions. Therefore, experiences have the role of connecting people with their emotions, which allows them to create meanings towards the experiences and the memories. Furthermore, backpackers' experiences and memories are linked to the places they visited, the people they met and the activities they participated in. Thus, the main role of the experiences and memories thereof is to remind backpackers how they felt in that exact moment and to take them back to those emotional moments in their minds. Then, backpackers link their experiences with happiness and freedom. The notion of freedom becomes especially apparent in Steve's post:

> To me, backpacking gives a feeling of independence and freedom that I've struggled to really find in any other place. Having independence like that can be a relaxing, addictive feeling. It's just great to know that you're in control of what you want to do. I like to think of that [sic] independent feeling makes a contribution to what makes me continue to travel. Of course, seeing the world and interacting with cultures from around the world will always be the biggest part. But there is a small part of me that sees a lot of value in roughing it in hostels and being included in a larger community. I'm looking forward to the memorable experiences this hobby has awaiting me.

For Steve, the independence and freedom experienced through backpacking are unparalleled by anything he has encountered during his life at home. He even goes as far as to claim that it is precisely this feeling which fosters his desire to stay on the road. As becomes even more obvious in this excerpt from Tello's blog, the uncomfortable parts of the experience are a fundamental factor in what makes backpacking an extraordinary experience:

> Looking back at my sixth-month anniversary post from Istanbul, I realize I made a mistake. In the entry, I write that, *"Happiness does not lie in tangible possessions - it lies in experiences. Do not confuse the two."* The statement isn't entirely incorrect, but anything external (be it tangible or experiential) is not the source of one's happiness. Many people find this statement counterintuitive seeing as how I gave up my life in NYC to *"live the dream,"* but just because I'm traveling the world doesn't mean I'm always happy. In fact, there are many days where I'm tremendously uncomfortable, in pain, scared, or generally suffering.
>
> *I dare anyone to happily deal with an explosive (and spicy) stomachache in a piss-soaked squat bathroom on a moving train in India without toilet paper! It can't be done!*
>
> I've met people who live in abject poverty with barely enough to survive from day to day, yet somehow they manage to be happy. By all indications they should be the most miserable people in the world, yet oddly they seem more satisfied with life than many Americans I know who have everything. How is this possible? The answer is unbelievably simple, and while it sounds cheesy, the truth is you are the source of your happiness. We spend our lives scouring the external world for happiness thinking it lies in the next vacation, the next job, the next love interest, etc. but we are looking everywhere except for the one place where happiness arises - inside. The fundamental truth is that you allow things in the external world to make you happy, but they are not the source of your happiness - you are. While it sounds a bit patronizing, it's as easy as this: just be happy. There are no external conditions for happiness.

Retracting his initial statement that "Happiness does not lie in tangible possessions - it lies in experiences," Tello emphasizes how the uncomfortable aspects of backpacking shape the experience. He acknowledges that simply engaging in the act of backpacking does not guarantee happiness. Thereby, it becomes apparent that happiness is not inherent in the backpacking experience but it is rather an outcome of it and depends on the attitude of the backpacker. The identity changes backpackers undergo as a result of their travels are facilitated by the uncomfortable situations they encounter but then, looking back on their experiences, backpackers derive happiness from the hardships and challenges they confronted on the road. As such, "roughing it," as Steve puts it, and being inspired by the local people who are happy despite living in less comfortable circumstances than the backpackers, as Tello suggests, can prompt a feeling of happiness for the backpackers. This is similar to Elsrud's (2001) finding that narratives of hardships serve an important purpose for building backpackers' identity, for

instance she found that suffering from diarrhea under adverse conditions while backpacking is narrated as character-building.

Additionally, the importance of the experiences is reflected in backpackers' blogs as they use their blogs and journals as a way of keeping these memories safe. Then, by the process of writing, backpackers transformed the experiences into something tangible. This allows them to create a link to their memories and their value, and with these blogs they are also capable of sharing their memories with others. As noted by Noy (2004), backpackers achieve self-change intersubjectively by telling others about their experiences and, thus, we would suggest that writing about their experiences in their blogs may serve the same purpose. The importance of writing about one's experiences can be seen from Marek's recommendation that "[o]n a long journey you need to keep a journal, even if it's really basic." Amanda goes into more detail:

> Whether you write it on your phone or in a small notebook, it's so awesome to jot down your experiences to remember later on. After traveling among many different places, sometimes the details can all blur together. So I highly recommend taking a moment at the end of each day to reflect and document your experiences.

Here, the importance of transforming the memories of their experiences into something more tangible and lasting becomes evident. It is crucial for the backpackers to capture their experiences by writing them down, thus keeping them distinct to avoid that they "blur together." In fact, even though none of our informants explicitly address the role of their blog as a repository of their memories, we would suggest that blogging about their encounters fulfills the same function of converting their experiences into something tangible. In addition, writing about their experiences online for the world to see instead of only keeping a journal for themselves may serve as a means for additional identity work, as suggested by Noy (2004), as backpackers perform their identity narratives for an audience and, thus, create circumstances under which self-change can be achieved intersubjectively.

Overall, experiences replace material possessions in terms of symbolic meanings. Thus, even when experiences seem to be ephemeral, they have a perpetual meaning through the backpackers' life as this meaning is something that will be inherent to them and they will carry forever. However, it is relevant to recognize that the nature of every experience is so unique, it would be impossible to experience something twice. Thus, no two individuals can have the exact same experiences and the experience of the respective destinations and activities will be different for everyone. Additionally, your previous attitudes and preferences can shape your current experiences. For example, if you love surfing and you visit an amazing new beach, your previously held positive attitude towards surfing will intensify the experience of being at that beach. Hence, it is not the experience that will be more valuable per se but the feeling and emotions that result from that experience. As such, the value of the experience will be measured through the feelings and emotions that the experience will be linked to.

5.2.2 The Role of Backpackers' Self

Who am I? It is a question everyone has asked themselves at least once in their life. The answer can be hard to find as the definition of the self is mediated by external forces such as language, culture, collectives, and personal experiences. The role of the self is to acknowledge those factors that make us who we are, to accept and to reject meanings, and to co-create and negotiate those meanings to provide value. This value will be represented in symbolic meanings that will allow individuals to construct a sense of self to answer the questions of who I want to be and how I want to be recognized. Therefore, the role of the backpackers' self is to recognize the preconceived factors that make them who they are and how new factors – in this case, their experiences – transform their identity projects. Thus, in this part of the analysis, we aim to explore the transformation of the backpackers' identity understood through backpackers' blogs as an auto-evaluation of themselves.

Traveling permitted the backpackers to be more conscious about themselves and the reality they were immersed in before going into the adventure. This consciousness is reflected in words of appreciation of what they had, but also appreciation of the present moment. Being outside of their bubble, as previously expressed, allowed them to change perspectives. And this is only possible if we remember the background of the group of backpackers studied in this research – young, fairly privileged travelers from North America and Europe. Our informants reflect on their previous knowledge from their personal view of the world they knew versus the new knowledge of the world they got to know through traveling. The result of this auto-analysis allows them to determine or to identify what they now want to become, how they want to be transformed, and this will have an impact on their identity projects. Marek, for example, notes,

> Travel can be introspective. Sometimes it's nice to just quietly enjoy a beautiful view. (...) You have to appreciate the little things. It's nice getting in the zone and immersing yourself. Travel is a great time to try and be more mindful.

Going more in detail, Tello ponders,

> Being alone helps to quiet the mind and allows you to be aware of the world you exist in (both external and internal). I've spent entire days of my life where all I do is sit on a beach by myself; I don't read, play games, or check Facebook, I just sit still for hours at a time endlessly mesmerized by the world around me. It is only by removing the distractions of life that you can fully appreciate the sound of the crashing waves, the smell of the salty air, the touch of the cool breeze, and the sight of a vast ocean. For a moment really, truly be aware of life all around you and I promise you too will find being alone wildly fascinating.

Both excerpts show that traveling offers backpackers the opportunity to be mindful and become aware of their surroundings in a way that they usually are not. Thus, backpacking allows them to become more introspective. Tello describes this in more detail, referring to an awareness of sensations that are out of the ordinary for him. This appreciation and change of perceptions

brings out an openness with which the backpackers now approach the world. This means backpackers become more open-minded to life and everything that it will come with. Hence, they are more prepared to acknowledge and seize opportunities presented in their trips. Thereby, they start to challenge themselves and find themselves learning and developing new skills. These new skills have a meaningful value for them as they may determine their future choices. This could be in terms of finding new hobbies and even new professions, but also basic daily skills like saving money or learning the vocabulary of a different language. Chris phrases it as follows:

> Embrace The Opportunities. Sure I've said have a plan when you travel, but also remember that that plan is disposable! One of the epic things about travelling is the amount of opportunities that will appear on a day to day basis. The trick is to recognise them and not be afraid to embrace them – it may totally change your life! I've met hundreds of people who have completely changed careers and found their calling in life whilst they've been travelling. Some have become divemasters and now live on islands in Thailand, other [sic] are surf coaches now season hopping around the globe. Travel open [sic] up a whole world of people and opportunities you can tap into. But it's not alway as big as a life changing career move – it's the small things you should embrace too. Take up that offer to have a beer with that fellow traveller in the hostel – who knows who you might meet or what adventures you might have as a result. Don't be afraid to sack of [sic] your plans and travel a while longer with that absolute legend you've spent the last week enjoying life with in Bangkok – you could find yourself on a crazy adventure in Cambodia as a result! Embrace the unexpected, go with the flow and grasp all the amazing opportunities that might pop up – travel is a melting pot of life and you never know where it could lead!

Here, Chris emphasizes the need to stay flexible and open to new opportunities, big or small. In his opinion, if you stay open and seize the opportunities that you are presented with, your life can change in unexpected ways. For Jamie, an abundance of soft skills can emerge from backpacking:

> You learn to become more adaptable, to overcome your fears (like the fear of being alone) and to be more tolerable of others. You also become more confident, outgoing and understanding of other cultures and the world in general.

Silvia focuses more on the budgeting skills that she developed thanks to her backpacking experience:

> And while I'm of course much less strict with my spending these days, the budgeting skills I learned backpacking do seem to have stuck around, helping me move to Norway and run a business without like, losing all of my money.

In addition, backpackers experience a feeling of freedom that amplifies their sense of flexibility. To travel as a backpacker is to travel smart and as being economical with money is key to having more experiences, backpackers plan their travels. However, that does not mean they are restricted. On the contrary, the experience is about being free, free to go wherever whenever they want, free to do whatever they want, free to choose without limitations. Nevertheless, situations appear on the road and, thus, the need for flexibility arises. This characteristic becomes relevant in the construction of backpackers' identity as resilience becomes part of their lives. As a result, they reinforce the idea of experiences as the goal, and that everything that is presented in their journey can add value to their experience of traveling. This can be seen from Amanda's comment:

> The main reason people love to backpack is not because it's cheap but because it's the true definition of freedom and adventure. As I learned myself, the excitement of visiting so many destinations in one trip cannot be beat. If I am going to journey halfway across the world, I want to see as much as possible.

Similarly, Yari writes:

> Naturally, all the anticipation and excitement about your round the world trip is about the "going away" bit. The unknown adventures, the freedom (good riddance, morning alarm!) and all those fascinating people you'll meet as you navigate the globe with your backpack as your newfound bestie.

Both Amanda and Yari mention freedom and adventures, and their excerpts evoke a sense of exaltation at the thought of the true purpose of backpacking. Consequently, the sense of freedom is combined with a sense of curiosity towards the world. Now, the backpackers' approach towards the world, the places and cultures they want to get involved with, is dominated by a feeling of exploring and finding new aspects they were not capable of seeing in their bubble at home. Then, during the exploration of different bubbles, they start a process of introspection, and more aspects of the self arise above the surface as self-recognition. Accordingly, backpackers start to build trust in themselves that they are able to tackle any challenge that they will come across during their travels and in their lives afterward. In that sense, the construction of their identity projects is driven by the presence of self-confidence and self-reliance. Marek describes this as similar to leveling up in a video game:

> The more you travel, the more you want to travel. And you'll never be done in a lifetime. (...) There's nothing like that buzz from arriving in a new place. It's like unlocking a new level in a video game and being presented with all new possibilities to explore.

However, becoming too self-confident can have adverse effects. Tello cautions against becoming over-confident as this can limit one's ability to fully appreciate the world:

Holding expectations in life suggests that we somehow know what's best, know what's right, or can predict the future. We become so sure of ourselves that we take on a narrow-minded view of the world and assume we know what should happen – we expect it. While we use the past to predict the future, do not forget that your projections are not in fact reality. As much as you might like to think you are in total control of your life, it's merely an illusion and is why holding expectations invariably leads to disappointment.

For Tello, it is important to acknowledge that being in control of one's life is "merely an illusion" and, conversely, it is necessary to stay open to new possibilities and avoid getting stuck on one's expectations.

Moreover, personal growth is possible in the sense that backpackers travel alone most of the time. This loneliness permits reflection and the opportunity to become more confident and independent. Then, the external experience of travel is transformed into an internal journey as well. This can be seen mostly in Tello's post, where he emphasizes his backpacking lessons in a trascendental way by analyzing his experiences in a meditative perspective of himself. However, it is also possible to appreciate it from the other blogs, for instance from this excerpt from Yari's post:

A newfound confidence / trust in myself: Having survived countless months on the road as a solo female traveller, as well as countless travel mishaps (e.g. dealing with a drunk driver on my tour through Uyuni, surviving a stomach bug in the middle of nowhere, having my funds stolen in Brazil, avoiding taxi scams in Hanoi, shall I go on?) you start to realise that you really are capable of surviving anything. And suddenly all the things you doubted about yourself in the past seem rather insignificant. (...) A realisation that now is a good time to pat yourself on the back: It's not often that I stop and reflect on where I'm at or how far I've come. Normally it's just onto the next goal. But something about coming home, and looking back on quite possibly the most intense year of my life, has forced me to get a bit reflective. And the truth is, you can't help but suddenly feel a swell of pride. Around the fact that you've been brave enough to quit your job and go on this crazy adventure. Or that you've managed to country hop and survive new language barriers, borders and scams time and time again. Or truly bond with people who barely speak your own language. Or conquer countless fears…

Here, Yari recounts how traveling by herself has prompted her to grow as a person through the challenges she encountered. She realizes that she is more resilient than she thought before, and feels a sense of pride at the thought of the hardships she has overcome during her travels.

Finally, the effects of their travel experiences for backpackers' identity can be concluded with the following excerpt from Silvia's post, where she describes how traveling makes people question their status quo because of the new impressions they are exposed to:

Your sense of self is a little broken, but maybe in a good way. People always talk about traveling to find themselves, but in the process you'll likely lose a lot of what you thought you knew about yourself. When we travel we see so many different ways of living, which can challenge any ideas we might previously have had about how we wanted to live our lives. So if you plan a backpacking trip as a minor detour on your carefully paved life path, don't be surprised if you return home to find that path a bit more bumpy, overgrown, or split in twelve.

All in all, the role of the backpackers' self is determined when an exploratory action of themselves creates values or meanings regarding the experiences. The backpackers' preconceived way of living and attitude towards their context will be questioned and results in a (re)construction of their identity projects after being exposed to the new experiences. Therefore, the self will be transformed due to self-reflection and evaluation by comparing previous beliefs with the actual acquired thoughts and ideas. Furthermore, when the self is separated from its original source or base of knowledge, the person is more open to analyze and be critical regarding expectations and stereotypes. Then, being alone helps the process of internalizing the external experiences and exploring the internal world. In consequence, the present self becomes unlinked from the past self.

5.2.3   The Role of the World

As our boundaries expand, our identity expands. Our perception of the world depends on our ability to explore it – the farther we can explore, the wider our perception is. Then, the more we know about the world, the more we will want to explore about ourselves. Consequently, the role of the world, which we understand as the bubble a person is capable of seeing and experiencing, is to help to construct and accept the identity projects of individuals. In other words, the world is a two-way channel where individuals give and receive symbolic meanings that allow them to create and communicate their identity. In the case of the backpackers, their boundaries are expanded through the traveling experience. This causes an effect on their identity projects as the world they perceive now gives them more and different meanings that will transform and impact their identities. These meanings are mediated through people, culture, and language. In this way, backpackers feel more connected to the world they explore and open their minds to others' perception of the world.

Jamie claims, "Nothing teaches you more about other cultures than experiencing them first hand. Nothing helps you understand people better than meeting them from all over the place." Thus, he highlights how he believes that personally getting in contact with people from other cultures fosters an understanding of the individual differences. Similarly, Marek states, "I like that travel has made me feel just a little bit more connected to the world, and not only to Western countries." This reiterates the point we made above of travel evoking a sense of connection to the world and of broadening one's horizon.

Furthermore, when backpackers expand their boundaries by immersing themselves in new places and cultures, the process of questioning their own perceptions begins. Then, they are more open to learning from the culture of the place, but also they learn from other backpackers' experiences. By doing that, backpackers also exchange their culture with others. The process of co-creating new symbolic meanings starts to be more evident when the backpackers transform these social connections and perceptions into their way of perceiving life and who they are. Additionally, during the process of (re)constructing their identity projects, backpackers will appropriate some values of the new world they are now perceiving. Tello expresses this as follows:

> Travel, no matter how small, exposes a person to different cultures, lifestyles, and ways of thinking. The moment a person experiences this difference for themselves and sees that other people can happily live a life very different from their own, the process of questioning begins. (...) After experiencing cultures where people hold drastically different values than my own, I realized it's impossible to determine if someone or something is objectively "right" or "wrong" (or "good" or "bad" for that matter). We usually determine what's "right" from a moral/ethical perspective, but in all cases a human mind is required to pass judgment; without it there is no right and no wrong – simply put, "it is what it is."

According to Tello, traveling broadens one's horizons and, thus, triggers a "process of questioning." After having gotten in contact with people from other cultures who follow a different moral compass he realizes that the world is not black or white and, most importantly, that one way of thinking is not superior to another. Susanne also acknowledges how context shapes people's understanding of the world:

> I believe that we are mainly a product of our environments. Our perspective on the world is primarily shaped by the people who surround us, our income levels, the newspaper we read (or don't read), etc. And although living in one place for a longer period of time gives us a chance to build something bigger, to form lasting connections with the people around us, and create a comfortable lifestyle, it can also remove our ability to emphasize [sic] with people coming from a different background than ourselves.

For Susanne, traveling allows her to appreciate the different perspectives people across the globe hold. She recognizes that attitudes and perceptions are mainly a result of one's individual context and circumstances. While she notes that there are advantages to staying in one place for a longer period of time, she thinks it is important to cultivate empathy towards people with different realities of life than her.

Moreover, the creation of identity projects is possible thanks to the connection between individuals. This connection reinforces and creates the symbolic meanings that allow individuals to feel that they are part of a collective. This collectivism is important in order to create value, given by the transaction of interaction. Simply put, the way I express myself should be the reason someone recognizes me. A person's value is therefore created and

60

manifested in the social contexts of the world. When backpackers decide to break their local social bubble to encounter a new and global bubble, their values are changed, and therefore they express those values differently. Thus, backpackers' identity projects become more global, more open, and more resilient. A sense of appreciation towards the global collective can be seen from Eli's post:

> However, once you graduate college and are able to experience true freedom with what you want to do, that's when you truly discover who you are and who you want to be friends with. I've discovered my true loves for traveling, photography, storytelling, and all things creative. By doing more of what I love, I've stumbled into more and more people that love doing the same thing. People that I can truly say understand me and accept me.

Here, Eli recounts how for the first time in his life, he is truly free to choose for himself which people he wants to spend time with. As such, he decided to focus on people who share his interests. As a result, he feels understood and accepted by these people.

Marek shares a different occasion where he felt connected to his fellow travellers from around the globe:

> Some developing countries regularly experience power cuts. This is unquestionably a shitty thing for the people who live there and whose lives are disrupted, but it's not too bad a situation if you're a traveller. Candles are lit, people huddle up, and they'll tell each other stories. If you're lucky, someone has a guitar. My favorite power-out: in the Philippines during a storm with lots of thunder and lightning. Amazing atmosphere.

As such, a situation that Marek thinks is unfortunate for the local population becomes an opportunity for backpackers to connect. The way he describes the experience conjures up connotations of ancient hunter-gatherers assembling around a campfire to share stories. Through this, an image of coziness and connection comes up. An incident that is disruptive for the local population is experienced as a unifying encounter for the backpackers. However, despite this feeling of connection, the contacts backpackers establish are only temporary as they usually merely last as long as backpackers stay in the same location. Sometimes, backpackers may decide to join others for excursions or travel together to the next destination. Still, sooner or later they will part ways. This becomes apparent in the following excerpt from Jamie's post:

> You'll always be needing to say goodbye. The backpacking experience can be many things but permanent is not one of them. Many of the friendships you make will be temporary, although you will keep in touch with a lot of them.

Here, Jamie describes how backpacking for him is characterized by a sense of impermanence as farewells are the order of the day. The temporariness of the relationships and connections made by backpackers during their traveling is evident, but what will remain are the learnings of those who were part of their travel experience. Culture, people and language are established

again in the memories of the backpackers. Being at home at their place of origin feels different as the sensation of going back into the world and the adventures will be part of themselves. And the process of backpacking as the construction of the identity projects will start over and over again. Susanne lays out how backpacking can shock people out of their routines and, thereby, have a lasting impact on their identity:

> It's easy to become caught up in your day-to-day routine. Your morning coffee, followed by the same car ride (or bus ride) to work, followed by the same meetings, coworkers, and office gossip, before returning home, rushing to make dinner, then slumping down on the couch to watch your favorite Netflix T.V. series. And repeat. By repeating the same tasks over and over again through a period of days, months, and years, our brain quickly turns onto [sic] autopilot. The days, months and years, then all merge together in one big 'blurb', with the only things really sticking out in our memory being certain milestones, such as our first day at school, that promotion, the day we quit our job… And then, bam. Entering a new country can be overwhelming, particularly if even the language is different. People look at us and treat us differently. We are now considered, 'the outsider'. All of these new experiences, caused by being in a completely new environment can influence our perspective and way of thinking.

Susanne describes how the endless repetition of tasks can put the brain into autopilot. As all days are similar, few demarcations exist that allow people to realize that time is passing. By embarking on a backpacking adventure, people experience something that is so far out of their ordinary routines that it affects their world view.

Additionally, it is relevant to acknowledge that the backpackers' blog as a channel to communicate and express their thoughts, experiences, and ideas has an importance for the role of the world. This is due to the fact that the blogs permit the backpackers to become part of a global world and community through the Internet. Then, the blogs and other internet tools are a place where backpackers interact with others and co-create their identity projects. On the one hand, this can occur while preparing their travels or help them travel in a more well-informed way, as showcased by Silvia's comment:

> These days we're much more prepared for backpacking adventures – we have apps to help us navigate and communicate, Facebook groups dedicated to travel in different regions (I even help run one!), and travel blogs.

On the other, it can also give backpackers something meaningful to do on their travels, as illustrated by Susanne:

> For me, my blog soon became my sense of purpose while I was away. I set goals for myself, connected with other bloggers, and worked on it like I would a full time job (when I could, which wasn't always easy).

In both excerpts, the usefulness of the blog for connecting with other backpackers becomes apparent. As such, this again hints at the importance of telling others about one's experiences that was also found by Noy (2004). Through telling stories about their travel experiences, backpackers achieve self-change intersubjectively and integrate their experiences into their identity projects.

Overall, the role of the world, or the social context, has an impact on the construction of the identity projects. As shown through the backpackers' experiences, when meeting new cultures and societies, the influence of the context plays a determinant role in the individuals as the society will impose or persuade meanings and values that the individual has to choose or reject to be accepted in a collective. At the same time, the individual will create meanings and values that will be identified and recognized by others. Furthermore, this will be translated into the online world, where backpackers and other communities communicate and express their ideas and thoughts.

All in all, through our analysis it becomes apparent that deconstruction and (re-)construction of backpackers' identity projects occurs simultaneously and infinitely. This also serves as an explanation for the fact that some elements in both parts of the process can appear rather similar to the reader. Hence, as backpackers' identity projects are perpetually deconstructed and (re-)constructed at the same time, their identity is not fixed but instead it is in constant change as presented in *Figure 5.2*.
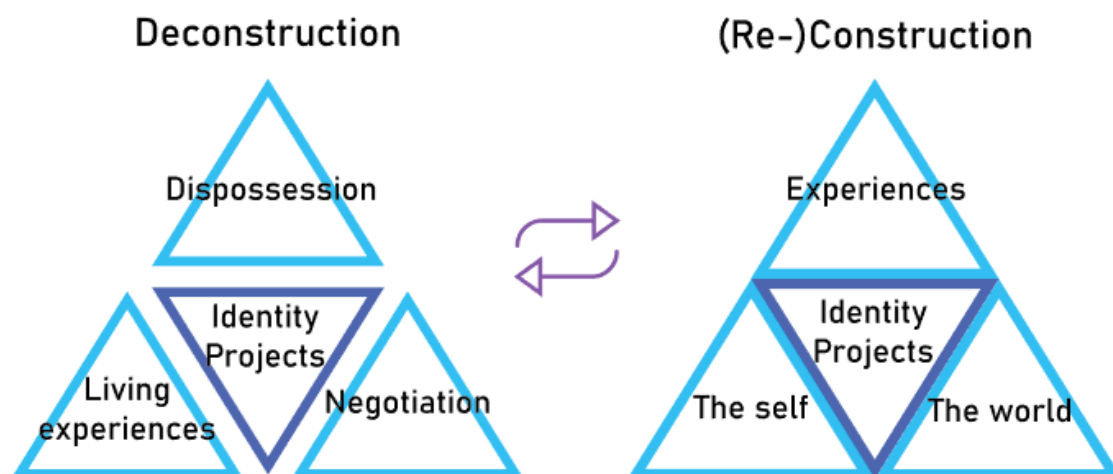

Figure 5.2 The infinite process of deconstructing and (re-)constructing identity projects

6   Discussion & Implications

In the following, we will discuss our findings by summarizing our results and comparing them to previous research. As such, we will follow the structure of our literature review, first contrasting our findings to previous research on backpackers' identity projects, then comparing them to previous studies on self-presentation and self-extension and, finally, to the previous research on the role of experiences and possessions. In addition, we will address theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of our research project as well as limitations and recommendations for future research.

6.1   Discussion

With our research project, we attempted to find out the meaning of extraordinary experiences for consumers' identity projects. In the following, we will provide a summary of our findings and then compare our findings to previous research. Through this, we will discuss how successful our study was at answering our research question. But first, we want to remind the reader of our understanding of the composition of identity projects and our comprehension of the process of deconstructing and (re-)constructing identity projects. According to our understanding, identity projects are composed of symbolic meanings which are negotiated between a consumer and society. Here, the consumer is the constituent which embodies the identity project and society is the constituent which recognizes and mirrors the consumer's identity project. In the specific case of backpackers, the process of deconstruction of the identity project consists of dispossessing of material possessions, living extraordinary experiences and negotiating the experienced-self. (Re-)construction of backpackers' identity projects occurs as backpackers acknowledge the role of their experiences, the role of their own self, and the role of the world. One should keep in mind that this process is rather erratic and the steps can occur simultaneously and in any arbitrary order. We presented it in the way that we did for reasons of clarity and comprehensibility. Next, we will give an overview over our most important findings.

6.1.1   Deconstruction of Backpackers' Identity Projects

To put our findings in a nutshell, the deconstruction of backpackers' identity project occurs in three stages. First, backpackers pass a period of dispossession where they reject materialism and turn towards utilitarianism as they start questioning how they define themselves by their possessions. As a result of becoming aware of the meaning that they had attached to their belongings, backpackers realize that most of their material possessions have less value to them than before. Conversely, the value of experiences increases. Objects are now valued for their

potential to make their backpacking trips more comfortable and for their ability to capture the experience and create memories. Hence, the symbolic meanings that were once attached to material possessions become detached from objects and subsequently re-attached to experiences.

Second, living extraordinary experiences prompts backpackers to question their current reality. As they exchange the certainty and predictability of their routines back home for exploration and openness on the road, backpackers leave their comfort zones and broaden their horizons. An atmosphere of self-analysis is created as they are shocked out of the known and spend time by themselves, even if traveling solo offers an abundance of possibilities to meet others. Through this atmosphere of self-analysis, backpackers reflect about their pre-backpacking life and start to realize that their experiences on the road are lessons that teach them something important about their life. In addition, the role of money changes and money becomes merely a means for accessing more experiences. Hence, it is possible to say that backpacking must be experienced in person in order to be able to appreciate its meaning for identity construction as all experiences are unique to the individual. Thus, backpackers start defining themselves more by their experiences.

Finally, backpackers negotiate their experienced-self. As they establish contact with locals at their destinations and with backpackers from other countries, they begin to dismantle and oppose stereotypes. They become more aware of how others perceive them and start to question how they want to be perceived. Through this, they start to appreciate cultural diversity and accept their position as outsiders during their trips. Consequently, their consciousness of self increases and they begin to appreciate a common humanity. Thereby, they begin an investigation into the foundations of their sense of self. In other words, they experience an identity crisis in which they start questioning who they are and who they want to be. Through this, they start to (re-)construct their identity projects.

6.1.2   (Re-)Construction of Backpackers' Identity Projects

The process of (re-)constructing backpackers' identity projects occurs in three phases as well. First, backpackers acknowledge the role of their experiences and accept that experiences now have higher value for them than material possessions. Not depending on something that is already created, they begin to reinvent themselves. As experiences replace material possessions in terms of identity construction, backpackers place emphasis on immersion and deceleration rather than simply ticking boxes and visiting as many destinations as possible. Hence, time becomes more valuable than money. In addition, experiences act as a repository of emotions such as freedom and happiness and writing about these experiences makes them more tangible. As a result, despite their ephemeral nature, experiences have a lasting effect on backpackers' identity as backpackers will revisit the memories of their experiences again and again.

Second, backpackers acknowledge the role of their own self as they move out of their identity crisis and realize who they are after backpacking. As such, backpackers realize how their

experiences have changed their values. Their perspective changes after they reflect on previously taken-for-granted assumptions about reality. Since they become more open, they take more opportunities, which allows them to develop new skills, which, in turn, influence future opportunities. Additionally, backpackers feel freedom from restrictions, even though they have little money, and become aware of their own resilience. They develop curiosity towards the world and, through a process of introspection, become more self-reliant. Consequently, they realize their personal growth as the external journey becomes an internal journey. In other words, they explore their identity by being outside of their comfort zones while traveling. Thus, backpackers will transform their sense of self with the help of their experiences through a process of self-reflection and exploration of their self and the world.

Finally, backpackers acknowledge the role of the world, or the social context, for identity construction. As backpackers' horizons are broadened through traveling, previously held symbolic meanings are changed through connection with others. The desire to fit in and belong to a collective changes backpackers' values. As they ponder how they present themselves and how others recognize them, the identity project is affected. In addition, connections are characterized by a sense of impermanence which also impacts backpackers' identity construction. Instead of living their lives on autopilot like before, backpackers are shocked out of their routines, which again has implications for their identity project. In addition, their blogs allow backpackers to co-create their identity in a geographically unbound way. Hence, it is possible to appreciate how social context affects identity construction as backpackers will have to adopt or reject values in order to be part of a community. In other words, it is necessary for backpackers to negotiate their identity projects by adapting to the local culture as well as to backpacker culture. Some parts of this newly-adopted identity may persist after returning home, and thereby, backpackers' identity projects will be changed forever. In the following, we will contrast our findings to previous research.

6.1.3   Backpackers' Identity Projects

As mentioned in the literature review, we studied and recognized backpackers as those who defined themselves as backpackers (Richard & Wilson, eds 2004) and not by specific demographic characteristics. Accordingly, Sørensen (2003) described backpackers as a heterogeneous group defined in terms of culture. This means, backpackers are characterized by a certain habitus (Bourdieu, 1979), or socially inherent habits, skills, and dispositions, which becomes notable during our analysis of the deconstruction of backpackers' identity projects. As such, in our analysis, we presented how this habitus is questioned by backpackers and is transformed during their travel experiences as they learn and appropriate new habits, skills, and dispositions that will affect their identity projects. Furthermore, as presented by Cohen (2003), backpackers adopt a hybrid postmodern identity between their culture of origin and the culture abroad as the experiences they lived during their travels have an influence on their perspective and behavior, as we also identified. Accordingly, the postmodern character of the backpacker phenomenon becomes apparent again as backpackers must negotiate their fragmented realities (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Then, how are the identity projects constructed?

According to Desforges (2000), the long-distance travel experience is useful for identity construction as backpackers can communicate and represent the self-identity through their narratives. Additionally, Noy (2004) argues backpackers achieve self-change intersubjectively by telling others about their experiences. Similarly, in our study, backpackers experience the (re-)construction of their identity projects through narratives of their travel experiences published in their blogs. However, there is one author that focused his study on backpackers' habitus in terms of clothing as the main means for backpackers' identity construction and culture (O'Regan, 2016). This is different from our study as we identified that backpackers' identity projects are not defined in terms of clothing but experiences. In the posts we examined, none of our informants emphasized clothes as a way of differentiation and recognition towards others. However, one aspect our study has in common with O'Regan (2016) is the fact that all backpackers valued comfort and therefore they disposed of some clothing at home or during their travel. This fact for O'Regan has a meaning in the construction of identity as clothes embody backpackers' "new identity," while for our study the fact of disposing of material goods becomes part of the experience of backpacking and the deconstruction and (re-)construction of backpackers' identity projects.

Moreover, Elsrud (2001) analyzed female backpackers' narratives of their travel experiences regarding how notions of risk and adventure shaped their identity projects. During her research, Elsrud (2001) identified five themes related to the backpackers' narratives, (1) time and place for identity work, (2) narratives of novelty and difference, (3) place narratives, (4) body narratives, and (5) appearance narratives. In our research, we also found two of the themes. On the one hand, body narratives became apparent when one of the backpackers' recounted how experiencing diarrhea during his trip caused him to acknowledge how backpacking built his character. On the other, narratives of backpacking as time and place for identity work were visible as well, as most of the backpackers expressed in their blogs that traveling brings up the meaning of freedom as they are not attached to place or time. However, it is relevant to recognize that Elsrud's (2001) research focused on risk and adventure narratives from female backpackers' perspective, while our research has a broader approach by focusing on the entire experience of backpacker travel. In our research we focused on narratives of backpacking lessons from female and male backpackers' perspectives, but without any intention of gender-centered analysis and discussion. Therefore, while Elsrud (2001) evaluates how female backpackers' choices and narratives of exploring places and activities that are perceived as risky and adventurous for women can tell about female backpackers' identity, we studied and analyzed how backpackers' experience of traveling as a whole can shape their identity projects.

All in all, our study differs from the different authors that have studied the identity of backpackers as we analyzed backpackers' identity from a CCT perspective, where we understand and interpret the identity projects according to the consumption of experiences. In addition, our research focused on how the decision of investing time and money in experiences rather than material goods can shape the identity projects of consumers.

6.1.4 Backpackers' Self-Presentation & Self-Extension

As addressed in the literature review, self-presentation is the visible component of consumer identity projects, and self-extension is another way for consumers to display their sense of self to the outside, most obviously by means of possessions. In their study of consumers' online self-presentation, Schau and Gilly (2003) determined that consumers use brands on their personal web pages to present their sense of self to other Internet users. Conversely, our research project has shown that backpackers use experiences as the main tool for self-presentation online. In fact, brands seem to play no role for our informants's online self-presentation as only one of them mentions a brand in passing while all the others refrain entirely from talking about brands in their posts.

As expressed by Belk (1988), possessions are crucial contributors to and reflections of consumers' identity and, thus, a loss of possessions would be considered a loss of the self. However, backpackers changed this paradigm as they learned to detach from possessions and give more value to the experiences and memories of traveling. Although our findings are in line with Belk's (1988) proposition that consumers belong to collectives which share symbols and meanings of consumption objects, we would suggest that the role of experiences rather than possessions as consumption objects has been underestimated, at least for some groups of consumers. In his article, Belk (1988) also mentions that experiences can be used to extend the self and, hence, our findings might shine more light on his original suggestion. The meaning, the significance, the value is given to experiences and not to possessions, which is in line with Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998, p. 132) suggestion that "the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from products' utilities but also from their symbolic meanings." Accordingly, it is possible to say that backpackers' consumption choices shift from the symbolic meaning of products – as backpackers begin to value material goods mainly for their utilitarian characteristics – to the symbolic meaning of experiences and their possibility to create memories, e.g. photos and blog posts that have a symbolic meaning to them with regard to the travel experience. Thus, the symbolic meanings are given by the experience and are made tangible through the pictures and blogs created by the backpacker.

Our research project also offers interesting insights concerning digital self-extension. Extending his initial conceptualization, Belk (2013) proposed five changes to account for the impact of the Internet for consumers' self-extension – (1) dematerialization, (2) reembodiment, (3) sharing, (4) co-construction of self, and (5) distributed memory. Two of these topics were addressed by our research, sharing and co-construction of self. We noted that backpackers share their thoughts rather openly on their blogs, possibly being more open than they would be toward strangers in real life. Through this process of sharing by writing about their experiences online for others to read and comment on, backpackers co-construct their sense of self together with others. In addition, our findings support our initial assumption that blogs may serve as repositories of backpackers' memories as they extend their sense of self by means of written text published online.

With our research project we make an important contribution to the sparse body of literature on the implications of consumers' online narratives for their self-presentation and self-extension on the Internet. Different from previous research on self-presentation of adolescents (Bortree, 2005; Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010), our study focused on adults. Instead of using quantitative content analysis for investigating online self-presentation like other scholars before (Chen, 2010; Mazur & Kozarian, 2010; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005;) or engaging in netnographic practices (Bortree, 2005; Zhao & Belk, 2007), we examined consumers' narratives used for self-presentation purposes through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Bosangit, McCabe and Hibbert (2009) conducted a narrative analysis of travel blogs focused on the style of writing whereas we focused on the meanings of the narratives. Nevertheless, we concur with their judgment that "travel blogs can contribute to the process of identity management of the 21st century consumers" (Bosangit, McCabe & Hibbert, 2009, p. 70).

Moreover, in one of the few studies on online self-extension, Zhao and Belk (2007) suggested that on their blogs, consumers use brands for aspirational purposes and create identity narratives around imagined possessions. While brands seem to play no role for the online self-extension of our informants, it may be possible that by writing about their travel experiences online, backpackers "spread consumer culture in cyberspace" (Zhao & Belk, 2007, p. 131) as the backpacking experience consists of different elements that can be purchased, such as flights, accommodations, and excursions.

To conclude, what we contribute to the existing body of knowledge is a new perspective that illustrates that experiences can fulfill self-presentation and self-extension purposes online that were previously assumed to be fulfilled by brands and possessions. In other words, whereas previous research gave primacy to brands and possessions as a means for the construction of identity projects, we showed that experiences can serve the same purpose. As such, we added to the body of knowledge surrounding consumer identity projects in the digital era.

6.1.5   Backpackers' Experiences vs. Material Possessions

Our research focused on the consumption of extraordinary experiences, defined by Arnould and Price (1993) as enjoyable hedonic consumption activities, rather than material possessions as repositories for symbolic value which give meaning to consumers' identity projects. Arnould and Price (1993) studied the extraordinary experience of rafting trips, where they found three themes linked to the core of what makes the experience extraordinary: connection with nature, connection with others or *communitas*, and personal growth and self-renewal. Similar to those themes, in our research, we identified that what makes backpacking an extraordinary experience is the connection the backpacker has with the travel experience, the connection the backpacker made with others (local and other backpackers), and the personal development encouraged by the travel experience. Furthermore, studies by Belk and Costa (1998), Kozinets (2002a), Schouten and McAlexander (1995), and Tumbat and Belk (2011) based the extraordinary experiences into specific frame spaces characterized by positive social interaction and

experiences. However, in our research, in line with Tumbat and Belk (2011), we found that extraordinary experiences are not merely focused on *communitas* and can also be individualistic. This is shown in our analysis where backpackers expressed that the travel experience can be enjoyed with others but most of the time the decisions they make are personal, while they also recognize the impermanence of the relationships through the backpacking experience as they aim to achieve positive outcomes for themselves as individuals.

Additionally, similar to Husemann and Eckhardt's (2019) findings of the Camino de Santiago pilgrims, we noticed that backpackers aim to travel at a slow pace, however, the reasons differ for both groups. For pilgrims, traveling slow has the meaning of slowing their lives in a world that demands to be fast, while for backpackers, traveling in slow pace signifies to enjoy and to immerse more into the experiences they value. Moreover, Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) stated consumers value experiences due to their effects on happiness where experiences allow for reinterpretations over time, are meaningful to the self-identity, and evoke greater social relationships. This is also noticeable in our research, where backpackers utilize experiences as a way to create symbolic value. In addition, the act of sharing their memories and stories will have an effect on the construction of their identity projects, and happiness is part of the journey. Furthermore, we found, like Van Boven, Campbell and Gilovich (2010), that backpackers search for experiences because of the intrinsic value of enjoyment rather than the extrinsic value of impressing others. Experiences are personal and unique, and as Hornik and Diesendruck (2017) explained, experiences are a source of self-extension as they also serve to help understand the concept of one's self.

According to the above, experiences help consumers to express to others who they are because of the symbolic meanings they create. Therefore, we added to the knowledge around the construction of identity projects by suggesting that experiences play a role as containers of meanings and symbols, and not only to material goods as proposed by Firat and Venkatesh (1995). Furthermore, different studies on the absence of possessions have been conducted (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould, 2012; Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Figueiredo & Uncles, 2015; Nixon, 2020), where the authors focused on the type of relationship consumers who decided to abstain from material goods have with their possessions. Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) and Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) explored the concept of liquid consumption with global nomads, who are similar to backpackers in that they stay in countries other than their place of origin for extended periods of time and frequently move between countries.

Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) suggested that global nomads value possessions in certain situations, for utilitarian purposes and only temporarily as they will have to dispose of them when they move. Similarly, backpackers see possessions in their utilitarian essence looking for comfort and lightweight to enhance their travel experience. While the backpackers in our study appear to be less attached to their material possessions and to value immaterial objects such as photos during their travels, it is uncertain what their relationship to their possessions looked like after their return home. In that sense, Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould's (2012) findings are

different from ours as global nomads are perpetually on the move, whereas backpackers eventually return home to their belongings. Although some informants indicated a desire to own less and dispose of some of their belongings after returning home, it is unclear whether they actually did so. Hence, we would suggest that the possession practices of global nomads and backpackers are different in that backpackers place more emphasis on their experiences rather than their possessions.

To sum up, our research project presents a new approach to the significance of extraordinary experiences in the construction of identity projects. As we demonstrated through the analysis and discussion, experiences also create symbolic meanings for consumers that helps them communicate their identities to others. Consequently, we believe that through the combination of material possessions and extraordinary experiences, identity projects are co-created between the consumer and the marketplace.

6.2   Implications

In this section, we aim to explain the impact our research has regarding theory, methodology and practice in marketing and consumer culture.

6.2.1   Theoretical Implications

As explained from the beginning of this research, the theory behind identity projects focuses on the consumption of material possessions, or physical products, and limits the creation of symbolic meanings to tangibles that help consumers communicate those meanings. However, we questioned the theory from a perspective in which consumers' consumption decisions are motivated toward experiences (intangibles) rather than products (tangibles). From this perspective we aimed to understand how symbolic meanings are created from extraordinary experiences and how these symbolic meanings are communicated as a presentation of the self in the process of construction of identity projects. Therefore, this research adds a novel approach towards identity projects and Consumer Culture Theory by exploring the consumption of experiences and its effects.

In this way, we contributed to clarifying the role played by experiences, the individual, and the society in the construction process of identity projects. Then, we identified that experiences with symbolic meanings become tangible because of the individuals' participation in creating or transforming the memories of the experiences into something visible for society in order to communicate and present themselves. Therefore, the individual produces tangibles that can be narratives (e.g. blogs, journals, or stories shared with a group of people), photographs they take, or handmade craft objects such as photo albums. Thereby, we extend previous knowledge about symbolic meanings and show that rather than simply purchasing objects for their symbolic

meanings, consumers may participate directly in creating a tangible form of the symbolic meanings of their experiences by writing about their experiences on their blogs.

6.2.2 Methodological Implications

Although the research methods used in this research were not new, they were combined in a way that, to our knowledge, had not been done before in the field of CCT. Specifically, for our analysis we combined a hermeneutic phenomenological approach with deconstruction of identity projects. As such, we used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the phenomena from the backpackers' perception of their experiences. We combined this with deconstruction, as the primary focus of the study is regarding the analysis of language and discourses created in texts. Through this, we developed the analysis where we separated the layers that compound identity projects. This analysis process is new in the way we focus on the narratives to understand the personal process of constructing identity projects but we do not focus essentially on the deconstruction of the text. In other words, we deconstructed the phenomena of identity through narratives rather than just analyzing the text as a literary tool.

This combination of methodologies allows us to understand what is behind a person's identity project, enabling us to analyze its layers, and also how the process of deconstruction is personal and constantly changing. Furthermore, this method also explicitly exposed that the layers of identity projects depend on each other in order to successfully create the identity. Therefore, the deconstruction of each layer showed how it is implicated with the other layers. In other words, the stages of the deconstruction and (re-)construction process are intricately linked and cannot exist on their own. As explained, the analysis of the identity projects is an ongoing, never-ending process as every time phenomena are interpreted new values are created and new understandings of symbolic meanings flourish.

6.2.3 Practical Implications

Our study is focused on the value of experiences from the perspective of backpackers. However, our overarching aim was to provide evidence on how experiences are also part of the construction of consumers' identity projects. From this point of view, our research can be implemented as an experiential marketing strategy to engage consumers with brands. Even though we demonstrated that our group of backpackers dispossesses from material goods and therefore some brands, it is possible to argue that they become attached to place brands, traveling accessories brands, and other branded goods that allowed them to live the experience. Especially with respect to place brands, a trend is noticeable that some places seem to intentionally brand themselves as backpacker destinations, offering extraordinary experiences such as bungee jumping and white water rafting with the express purpose of attracting backpackers. While these might not necessarily be experiences that all backpackers want to construct their identities around, our findings could nevertheless be relevant for those working

with place branding. Still, it is relevant to recognize that the experiences overlap the value of the objects as such, and this is where producers of branded goods have to implement the experiential strategy because consumers will participate and co-create value with the branded goods when an experience is part of the consumption process. Furthermore, this not only applies to tangible goods, i.e. products, but also to intangible goods, i.e. services.

Services become more valuable due to experiences because both imply action from the consumer as receiver and the provider in order to co-create value. Therefore, as explained in the analysis and findings of this study, the importance of experiences are the memories, or symbolic meanings, created from the consumer's perception of an activity they are involved in. An example can be the experience of going to Tomorrowland, a famous Belgian electronic dance music festival. There, the value proposition is negotiated between the people who attend the festival and those who planned the event. The experience promises to be the best electronic music festival connecting people over the world with the best electronic music artists for two weekends. Then, the experience transforms and shapes the identity projects of the attendants. Before being involved in the experience, they had previous assumptions of how the festival will be, then they participate in the event and unexpected but joyful experiences – extraordinary experiences – happen around them, they meet new people and share the experience with tens of thousands of others. As a result, their perception of life changes, and their identity projects change. Now, Tomorrowland's experience has a symbolic meaning, it is not tangible for them to express it, but it is co-created as memories through pictures, online posts, bought or created merchandising that allows them to self-present that part of the self to others, and to identify themselves with the thousands of people who also lived the experience. As Skandalis, Byrom and Banister (2019) showed, the role of extraordinary experiences happening within the structures of ordinary life, such as festivals, are gaining importance. We believe our study offers thought-provoking impulses as to the role of extraordinary experiences for identity construction.

In addition, our research also has an impact on the creation of brand communities. As shown before, people will gather together to live common experiences that will have an impact on their identity projects. In this way, brands can use the knowledge of how experiences create value for consumers in order to create a community around the brand by offering extraordinary experiences for their members. Furthermore, this will create more engagement and loyalty from customers towards the brand and will let brands co-create new symbolic meanings with their buyers.

All in all, our research is useful in order to understand the dynamics between experiences, consumers, society, and the marketplace in the creation of identity projects. As a result, this research can help marketers to recognize and understand how a group of people makes consumption choices and how those decisions have an implication towards the buyer, the society, the brands, and everything in between. Co-creating symbolic meanings is valuable to the person, to the society, and to businesses as it allows an interdependent connection and action where all get benefits from the trades that happen in the marketplace.

6.3   Limitations & Future Research

As our research is novel when it comes to experiences as repositories of symbolic meanings in the construction of identity projects, the first limitation we want to address is regarding our group of informants. We chose backpackers due to their decision of dispossessing from material goods to focus on experiences. Therefore, our analysis and findings are mainly related to backpackers' experiences and we wonder about what other groups of people who seek more for experiences rather than for possessions have in common or not with backpackers' construction of identity projects. Accordingly, we recommend researchers to analyze our outcomes from other types of consumers who focus their consumption on experiences. An example can be to examine other extraordinary experiences, those with short duration such as music festivals and those with a longer duration like meditation retreats, and see if that has an effect on the construction of identity projects and what differences become apparent. Additionally, during our research project, we understood that extraordinary experiences have an effect on personal development. Hence, it would be interesting to study people who have a focus on personal development and how this affects their consumption decision if it is towards material possessions or experiences, and how it can affect the co-creation of symbolic meanings within the marketplace. An example can be to study those who live according to the philosophy of minimalism.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the backpackers' blogs we studied were written in English and our informants were from Western European and North American countries. Their life experiences can be related to first world countries where they do not have the same difficulties as in developing countries regarding the economy, education, healthcare, and opportunities. Therefore, it would be interesting to repeat our study with backpackers from developing countries who write blogs in languages other than English, to compare how different backgrounds can affect the identity construction process. As such, it would be interesting to investigate the value placed on possessions in different cultures. It might be easier to divest possessions when you have an abundance of them and are reasonably confident that you will be able to replace them. In cultures where people own much less, possessions might have a different value for identity construction, compared to experiences.

Taking into account the previous statement, another limitation in our study can be our lack of knowledge of backpackers' previous experiences that were not mentioned by them in the blog. In this way, it would be interesting to do a long-term study of the process of backpacking, from the initial decision of going traveling, through the backpacking experience and after backpacking to understand the process of identity construction in a longitudinal way. Also, it would be interesting to analyze the relationship backpackers have with their material possessions at home after they return from their travels, how do they encounter them, how do they interact with them, if the meanings have changed and how they now act in the marketplace towards brands.

7   Conclusion

Every journey has an end; backpackers know this well. We hope you as the reader enjoyed this research work as much as we did, questioning the backpackers' identity projects and furthermore your own through the meanings of experiences. As every travel experience is an opportunity to learn something new, we believe this research brings new knowledge and new questions to identity projects and CCT. Therefore, in the following chapter, we recap the best memories of this journey.

In this research project, we set out to examine the meaning of extraordinary experiences for consumers' identity projects online. For this purpose, we first represented the current state of the literature on backpackers' identity projects, self-presentation and self-extension as well as the role of experiences and material possessions for the postmodern consumer. As such, we delineated the development of the backpacker movement and its treatment in academic literature and observed that it is difficult to offer a definition of backpackers in socio-demographic terms. Instead, we defined backpackers in terms of a shared culture. Turning toward the standpoint of CCT, we explained the notion of consumer identity projects, which are made visible through self-presentation, traditionally with the help of brands. Moreover, a common view in CCT is that consumers use their material possessions to extend their sense of self. With the growing importance of the Internet, the implications of digital means for self-extension have received some attention as well. Looking at the role of experiences and possessions in postmodernism, we characterized backpacking as a postmodern phenomenon. For the postmodern consumer, experiences play a major role for their identity construction. Especially extraordinary experiences provide high identity value, and since backpacking occurs in the antistructural realm of extended travel abroad, we categorized backpacking as an extraordinary experience. We subsequently pointed out several gaps in the existing body of research and delineated how we would attempt to fill these gaps with our research project.

Our analysis was informed by the theoretical lenses of postmodern consumption and Bourdieu's (1979) habitus and we used the analytical tools of hermeneutic phenomenology and Derrida's (1967) deconstruction to investigate the meaning of extraordinary experiences for consumers' identity projects online. In our methodology, we explained that our philosophical assumption was social constructionism and our research design was guided by a Heideggerian understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology. We described our data collection process and gave an overview over our informants. In addition, we addressed matters of reflexivity and quality concerns, disclosing our own background and offering quality criteria to increase the trustworthiness of our research. Subsequently we gave insight into our data analysis process and delineated limitations and ethical concerns associated with our research design.

Following this, we presented our analysis and findings, proposing a heuristic to illustrate how we understand the construction of consumer identity projects. Our analysis and findings were

divided into two parts. First, we presented how backpackers deconstructed their identity projects, passing through the stages of dispossession of material goods, living extraordinary experiences and negotiating the experienced-self. As such, in the deconstruction stage, backpackers begin questioning the role of possessions for their identity projects as well as the role of their experiences. They enter a mode of identity crisis in which they question who they are and who they want to be. Then, we presented how backpackers (re-)constructed their identity projects as they acknowledged the role of their experiences, the role of their own self as well as the role of the world. Accordingly, backpackers accept that experiences are now more valuable to them than possessions. They come out of their identity crisis and acknowledge the role of their social context for identity construction.

In our discussion, we summarized our findings and subsequently compared them to previous research. We alluded that habitus is paramount in the identity deconstruction and (re-)construction process of the backpackers in our study. Further, we suggested that our findings differ from previous research on backpacker identity construction in some ways, while some aspects were similar. In addition, we proposed that experiences may well be used for purposes of self-presentation and self-extension online and may offer an alternative repository of symbolic meanings for consumers. Moreover, we indicated that backpacking as an extraordinary experience has similarities to previously examined types of extraordinary experiences. As such, we extended the current knowledge about backpackers' identity projects, self-presentation and self-extension as well as the role of experiences versus possessions in postmodernism. Altogether, we showed that extraordinary experiences can be used by consumers for online self-presentation and self-extension through scrutinizing backpackers' blog posts.

All in all, we wanted to find out the meaning of extraordinary experiences for consumers' identity projects online, using the example of backpackers' blog posts. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach combined with deconstruction, we found that backpackers use their extraordinary experiences for self-presentation and self-extension purposes in their blog posts. Hence, our research indicates the usefulness of experiences for consumers' identity construction. Still, backpacking is only one type of extraordinary experience, and our informants were from developed countries in Europe and North America. Therefore, we invite future researchers to explore more about the relevance of extraordinary experiences for the construction of identity projects by studying backpackers with different backgrounds or by investigating the implications of short-term and long-term extraordinary experiences for identity construction.

Finally, we want to end this journey by leaving our reader with the following key takeaway. For some consumers such as the backpackers in our study, extraordinary experiences may be more meaningful in terms of their self-presentation and self-extension potential than material possessions. In other words, for some consumers, the value of their possessions is lower than the value of their experiences. As such, the next time you plan to buy a product, ask yourself: Do you want to just get a quick hit of retail therapy or would you rather invest in something that has lasting value for you?

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Appendix A

Blog posts examined as part of this research project:

Amanda	http://www.bohemiansoultravel.com/traveldiaries/lessons-learned-backpacking/
Chris	http://www.backpackerbanter.com/blog/10-lessons-from-10-years-of-travel
Eli	https://thepartyingtraveler.com/2018/10/29/what-the-last-2-years-of-backpacking-have-taught-me/
Jamie	https://gaijincrew.com/backpacking-life/
Marek	https://www.indietraveller.co/lessons-learned-from-2-years-of-travel/
Silvia	https://www.heartmybackpack.com/blog/life-after-backpacking/
Steve	http://dosomethingcool.net/love-backpacking-experience/
Susanne	http://www.woolyventures.com/life-lessons-backpacking/
Tello	http://www.tellostravels.com/blog/10-lessons-from-my-first-year-of-backpacking
Yari	https://thebeautybackpacker.co.uk/blog/2018/8/16/coming-home-lessons-from-a-year-of-backpacking-round-the-world