Unveiling a Material Agent

An Anthropological study on how backpacks shape backpackers' journeys and identities

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to wider discussions within the discipline of anthropology regarding the social and material significance of backpackers' backpacks. Mainly, this paper examines how backpacks help construct backpacking identity and shape backpackers' journeys and experiences. To gain insight into these inquiries this paper adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically eight semi-structured interviews with people that defined themselves as backpackers. The gathered empirical data is analysed by applying and building upon the theoretical frameworks of Latour's Actor-network theory and Daniel Miller's concept of how material objects help construct identity. The main findings demonstrate that backpackers' performative practice of interacting with their backpacks helps produce and create a symbolic boundary for backpacking identity. Moreover, this paper's findings also illustrate how the agentic properties of backpacks help shape backpackers' travel experiences by determining how they can travel, initiate and influence social interactions and develop a sense of stability and comfort.

Keywords: *Anthropology*, *Backpacking*, *Backpacks, Identity Formation, Material Agency*

Introduction

To embark on a backpacking journey today has become a mainstream activity for many people across the world. By allowing people to explore the world outside their own societies, backpacking has transcended and become much more than a way of travelling. During my life, I've had the privilege of being able to talk to backpackers on multiple occasions. These conversations quickly made me realise that these journeys become transformative, forcing people into unfamiliar environments where they encounter foreign peoples and embrace new cultures.

However, before starting this project I found myself wondering what the significance was of the backpack during these backpacking journeys. I assumed that backpacks must be more significant than the convenience they offer as the bearers of personal possessions. Meaning that during these transformative journeys, backpacks must also transcend and gain a more profound significance than their functional purpose.

By adopting a qualitative methodological approach, this paper explores these very presumptions. Particularly focusing on how backpacks play a role in the formation of backpacking identity and how they come to shape backpackers' journeys and experiences. Through this investigation, I strive to unravel how backpacks, which on the surface seem to be mundane and insignificant, become influential agents in backpackers' personal narratives and symbolic of backpacking identity.

Defining backpackers

To be able to conduct a study on backpacking, I was forced to overcome the hurdle of defining what a backpacker is. O'Reilly (2006: 999- 1001) explains that a backpacker has to be seen as a socially constructed identity and not a fixed social category (a.a.). In this line of thought, backpacking can be argued to be an *essentially contested concept*. That is to say, the concept of backpacking does not have a single universal definition. Instead meaning is always filtered through contexts made up of distinct individuals with different backgrounds, experiences and expectations. Backpackers are therefore diverse and heterogeneous. As my informants also will demonstrate, there is no singular backpacker archetype. Backpackers consist of anybody from those who are looking for new cultural experiences to those seeking personal development. This diversity among backpackers is reflected in their travel durations, destinations and social interactions.

Nevertheless, upon reviewing the research that has been conducted on backpacking, it became evident that backpackers share notable commonalities. For instance, O'Reilly (2006: 999- 1001) identifies three attributes that are recognisable to most self-defined backpackers. The first attribute is that serendipity and openness are firmly held ideals. This means that backpackers often have flexible travel itineraries and no fixed timetables. Secondly, backpackers choose to travel on low budgets. And thirdly, backpackers' journeys are typically lengthier than a holiday, with their trips spanning months rather than weeks. Furthermore, O'Reilly continues to demonstrate the existence of an imagined community between backpackers, where backpackers share similar worldviews. Meaning that backpackers often recognise the commonalities they have with one another. Additionally, backpackers also often develop a feeling of *shared humanity*, as they also recognise the similarities between themselves and the people that come from the places they visit.

By continuing to review the research an additional characteristic became evident. Walsh and Tucker (2009: 234-235) explain that the backpack has become an essential part of the definition of a backpacker. It would be an overstatement to suggest that all backpackers must travel with a backpack or that all travellers that travel with backpacks are considered backpackers. However, as I will further discuss in this paper, there was a near-unanimous idea amongst my informants that travelling with a backpack along with the aforementioned characteristics is an important part of being a backpacker.

This paper's informants align with the characteristics of this set description of a backpacker. However, I understood that the definition of a backpacker is not just about conformity to a defined description, but also encompasses self-definition. Hence, it was important to seek out informants who identified themselves as backpackers in accordance with their own ideas of what a backpacker is.

Research questions

To accomplish this paper's main aim of contributing to wider discussions within the discipline of anthropology regarding the social and material significance of backpackers' backpacks, I developed the following two research questions:

- *What role does the backpack have in the identity formation of a backpacker?*
- *How does the backpack shape a backpacker's travel experience?*

Disposition

I have now outlined this paper's aim and my main research questions. The rest of this paper is organised as follows: first, the introductory chapter will continue with a description of the scientific publications that have been significant throughout the process of developing this paper. Concurrently with presenting the scientific publications, I will provide a short overview of this paper's positionality within current research on travel and backpacking. Thereafter, I will present

this paper's theoretical framework. Next, I will examine my methodological approach. The following chapter consists of a historical analysis where I investigate the historical evolution of backpacking. In the subsequent two chapters, I will relate the presented previous research and theoretical perspectives with my own empirical data. These two chapters will demonstrate how backpacks are crucial in the formation of backpacking identity, in addition to shaping backpackers' experiences during their journeys. Lastly, I will conclude this paper by discussing its contributions as well as suggesting future research on backpacking within the discipline of anthropology.

Previous research and theoretical framework

Below, I will present the prior research that has been influential in the development of this paper. In the hopes of fulfilling this paper's aims and establishing a theoretical framework, I have examined prior research that is both centred around different aspects of backpacking and different perspectives of material culture. The research that is illustrated below has been gathered by using the databases Google Scholar and LUBsearch, which is a database at Lund University's libraries.

There has been significant research on backpacking and travel conducted within the discipline of anthropology. As Nash and Smith (1991: 13) state, due to the fact that anthropology is concerned with the effects of cross-cultural contact, the study of tourism fits easily into the disciplinary framework. Moreover, Nash and Smith continue by explaining that the anthropological interest in tourism started in the 1970s with works such as *Host and Guest* edited by Valen Smith. Today the study of tourism is established within the discipline and only continues to grow (a.a.: 14-15, 22). Nevertheless, through my readings, it became apparent that the majority of research on travel and backpacking has been conducted in the multidisciplinary field of tourism studies. An example that has been useful in this paper is *Lifestyle Travellers- Backpacking as a Way of Life* (2011) by Scott A. Cohen, who talks about backpackers who extend their trips to become lifestyle travellers. Other examples include Camille Caprioglio O'Reillys publications *From Drifter to Gap Year Tourist- Mainstreaming Backpacker Travel*(2006) and *Tourist or Traveller? Narrareting Backpacker Identity* in *Discourse, Communication and Tourism*(2005). These two publications have been influential in contextualising backpacking as a cultural phenomenon, specifically in this paper's background chapter, where I present an understanding of the global processes that have made backpacking possible.

The substantial research on backpacking that has been used has focused on many different aspects, including the historical contextualisation of backpacking identity formation. However, in order to fulfil this paper's aims I have also drawn inspiration from previous research that has examined backpacking from a material perspective. Additionally, I have utilised research on material culture that originally didn't have backpacking in mind but that can be used to enrich this paper's theoretical framework.

The article *A backpacker habitus: the body and dress, embodiment and the self*(2016)*,* written by Micheal O'Regan is an article that helped me gain an understanding of how backpackers' dress is an integral part of the socialisation process of becoming a backpacker. O'Regan (2016: 332) demonstrates that backpackers' dress transforms the body, by engulfing backpackers into a social world with norms, logic and values. Put differently, the materiality of backpackers' dress help produce and reproduce backpackers' comprehension of the world, including the cultural patterns and norms that they embody. Furthermore, this transformation into a recognisable backpacker creates a boundary between self and others (a.a.: 342). O'Regan does not address backpacks directly. Nevertheless, applying this perspective to my research, assisted me in explaining how backpacks are also part of the dress that constructs social worlds that produce specific cultural patterns and norms which backpackers embody.

An article I have drawn considerable inspiration from is *Tourism 'things': The travelling performance of the backpack*(2009) by Neil Walsh and Hazel Tucker. In this article, Walsh and Tucker investigate the agentic properties of backpackers' backpacks; how they bring backpacking social realities into being. In order to answer this question they apply Bruno Latour's theoretical perspective of Actor-network theory (ANT) (a.a.). ANT is a theoretical perspective concerned with the ontological question of what constitutes social reality. In other words, ANT examines how social reality is formed by the embedment of human and non-human actors in relational networks (Walsh & Tucker 2009: 224- 225). The development of ANT comes from how Western philosophy and cultural vocabulary has traditionally described material objects as devoid of any significant social agency (Johnson 1988: 298, 305). Latour (1996: 369-370) argues that the only way of understanding the very nature of social reality is to focus on the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors. Social reality is co-constructed through

networks of these different entities. Therefore, we must assign agency to both humans and nonhumans (a.a.). From this perspective, material objects, such as backpacks, gain agency through what Latour calls *material performativity*. Material performativity refers to how the material can initiate and influence social actions and interactions. Meaning, that backpacks have agentic properties and can not be reduced to passive creations of human agency (Walsh & Tucker 2009: 230- 232).

Walsh and Tucker's application of ANT on backpackers' backpacks helped me grasp that different entities, such as humans or material objects, gain their characteristics through their relations to other entities. Put simply, entities create the conditions of the social world around them by both socialising and being socialised by connected entities (Walsh & Tucker 2009: 234). Therefore, it would be impossible to study backpackers or their backpacks, without examining their connectedness.

Another source of inspiration for my research was Daniel Miller's theoretical perspective in his publication *Stuff*(2010). His theoretical perspective is best understood as explaining how material culture, such as objects and artefacts, help shape identities, social interactions and practices (a.a.). He emphasises that the material world has a deeper significance than what Western semiotics makes us believe. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, examines how the material creates and communicates meaning through representation. Miller argues this is an oversimplification based upon a false dichotomy between a human's "true" inner self and outer representation (Miller 2010: 12-17). Miller questions where this true inner self exists, and what would make it more authentic than the material exterior. Within this framework, we can only understand how humans construct themselves, through investigating the relation between humans and the material world (a.a.: 4, 22). This reasoning is derived from the philosophical works of structuralists, such as Bourdieu and Levi-Stráuss, who mean that individual entities or elements acquire meaning through their relations to other entities. Thus, insights about humans or the material world can only be gained by understanding the relationship between them (a.a.: 51-53)

Miller (2010) does not directly discuss backpackers or backpacks. However, Miller's theoretical framework aided me in explaining how backpacks are crucial both in symbolically representing backpackers' identities, and also their importance in the creation of these identities. Put differently, through the *performative practice* of the routine usage of a backpack, backpackers both construct and embody their backpacking identities, in addition to creating a naturalised boundary from other travellers.

Method

This paper's empirical data was collected intermittently over a three-month period from February to May 2023. Initially, I had an idea of gathering my empirical data by travelling to a major city, such as Berlin. I saw a possibility of hostels assisting me in finding travellers that defined themselves as backpackers, thus providing me with an entry point into different backpackers' lifeworlds and experiences. However, due to personal reasons and lack of time, I decided that travelling wasn't viable. This forced me to revise my methodological approach in order to find feasible alternatives.

Instead of travelling, I settled on finding my informants through snowball sampling individuals within my immediate surroundings. Snowball sampling is an approach to sampling that is often utilised within qualitative research. Put simply, because qualitative researchers are often looking for distinctive informants, the researcher can use already established informants to find additional ones (Bryman 2017: 188). Regarding my research, talking to people in my surroundings allowed me to find informants who either were backpacking or had been backpacking. I started by interviewing my friend who was at the time backpacking in Southeast Asia. Through her, I was able to conduct two further interviews. At first, I was sceptical that digital interviews could give me enough insights into the social life of a physical object such as a backpack. However, it became clear after the first interview that this assumption was incorrect.

The interviews were conducted through the digital platform Zoom and lasted approximately 35 minutes each. I defined the interviews as semi-structured. A semi-structured interview entails that the interviewer has predetermined questions and themes that they want to discuss, while at the same time leaving room for the conversation to flow in new and alternative directions (Trost 2010: 71). I conceptually perceived my questions and themes as *anchoring point*s, which could help me ground the conversation in topics I thought would be relevant. As Davies (2008: 106-109) explains, interviews should be understood as a process in which both the interviewer and interviewee are involved in the construction of knowledge and insights. Thus, semi-structured interviews gave me the possibility to give my informants leeway to direct the conversation in new directions and touch upon themes that they themselves deemed as important (a.a.).

After these interviews, I tried contacting backpackers through different Facebook groups made specifically for people that were travelling. Unfortunately, my progress came to a temporary halt due to the fact that I had a hard time finding people that had time to speak with me. Consequently, I redirected my focus back to people in my surroundings that have been backpacking. I conducted five interviews with people that had been on trips that they themselves defined as backpacking trips. These interviews took place in different places, such as libraries and cafés, and lasted about 30 minutes each. As with the digital interviews, these interviews were also semistructured. But in addition, because they were face-to-face, I had the opportunity to gather insights from the informal encounters and conversations that took place before and after the interviews.

Throughout all my interviews, I encountered various reasons that prevented me from recording them. During my digital interviews, the internet connection was unstable, requiring me to put on headphones, ultimately making it impossible to record our conversations. On the other hand, during the face-to-face interviews, I had various reasons not to record. This being said, the main reason why I didn't record the interviews came from a trial interview that I conducted at the very beginning of my research process. This experience made me realise that the dynamic of an interview changes when you start recording. I felt that this decision would help me build rapport with my informants. I didn't want the recording of our conversations to constrain our

discussions. Thus, I decided not to record in order to make the interviews feel more like free-flowing and informal conversations. Other reasons why I didn't record had more to do with the context of where the interviews were conducted. For example, it felt strange recording in the confined space of a café, where people tend to have deep conversations.

The decision not to record my conversations created a few challenges that I had to navigate through. In particular, this decision made writing precise quotations a difficult task. There were occasions when I had to ask my informants to slow down because they said a lot that I found interesting and wanted to cite. This left me with transcriptions of my interviews that sometimes lacked structure. Consequently, when revisiting my empirical data, I found myself at times questioning whether my quotations actually were the precise words of my informants. Nevertheless, by remembering that I reviewed all my notes with my informants at the end of each interview, I felt comfortable using their quotes in this paper. In the final chapter of this paper, I will further discuss methodological limitations and potential improvements.

In order to construct my empirical data, I took notes on my computer during the interviews. These notes took various forms, some being keywords and simple sentences, while others were full quotes of what my informants had said. After each individual interview, I sat down and refined my notes, while at the same time adding additional reflections.

Informants

This paper's empirical data was gathered by interviewing a total of eight informants. Five female and three male backpackers participated in the study, all aged between 22 and 27. The informants had different national backgrounds and ventured on backpacking journeys across various regions, including Europe, South and Central America, Oceania and Southeast Asia. Their journeys typically spanned at least a month, with the exception of one informant who also had been on a shorter trip lasting only three weeks. Furthermore, the informants had diverse motivations for their journeys and varying levels of backpacking experience. Some informants could be regarded as seasoned travellers who had been on extensive or multiple backpacking trips, while others were relatively inexperienced backpackers.

By interviewing informants with diverse backgrounds, travel destinations and levels of backpacking experience, I aimed to gain a vast array of perspectives on the multifaceted nature of backpacking. In doing so, I sought to gain valuable insights into the significance of the backpack in the backpacking identity formation process and how backpacks shape backpackers' experiences.

Below I will present a brief introduction of each of the informants who participated in this study. This presentation aims to shed light on the diverse backgrounds and characteristics of the informants involved in the research. In order to protect their identities I have assigned each informant a pseudonym. These aliases will provide a convenient way to refer to each informant throughout the rest of the paper.

Alexa, a 23-year-old from Sweden, has been on three backpacking trips. Her first two trips were to Europe and Australia, lasting one month each. At the time of our interview, she was in the middle of her third trip. This trip was planned to last three months in Southeast Asia, where she wanted to visit Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. Alexa embarked on these journeys in order to see the world and gain new experiences. Additionally, the motivation for her third journey was to take a break from university. A backpack was her choice of luggage for all three trips.

Anna is a university student from Germany in her early 20s. During our interview, she was about halfway through a one-month-long trip to Thailand. Her motivation for this trip stemmed from a desire to take a break from university and travel with friends.

James is in his early 20s and from Australia. Following a breakup, he decided to go on a backpacking trip. At the time of our interview, he was in Thailand and was about halfway through a six-month backpacking trip in Southeast Asia. James used a backpack during his trip. Unfortunately, after leaving his backpack on the back of a parked scooter, his backpack was stolen, resulting in him acquiring a new one.

Leo**,** a 25-year-old university student from Sweden, had been on one backpacking trip to South and Central America which lasted around three months. The motivation for his journey was twofold. Firstly, he wanted to take a break from university in order to experience something different. Secondly, he wanted to explore cultural and geographical contexts that were different from his own. Leo travelled with a large backpack and a smaller backpack for daylong excursions.

Brian, a 27-year-old university student from Sweden, commenced his backpacking journey after an almost two-month-long church trip in Bali, Indonesia. This initial church trip exposed him to alternative cultures and ways of living, which ultimately propelled him to extend his trip into a backpacking journey that lasted an additional three and a half months. During these three and a half months Brian continued to explore Southeast Asia, visiting countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam. Brian was the only informant that travelled with a suitcase and not a backpack.

Maya is a 23-year-old university student from Sweden. Her backpacking journey lasted about two months, during which she visited Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia. The motivation for her trip came from her father who had himself travelled to these destinations. Additionally, Maya wanted to visit countries with cultures and natural environments that were distinct from her own. During her trip, she used the same backpack that her father had used 30 years before her.

Eva, a university student from Sweden in her mid-20s, explained that she had been on two backpacking trips. One in Eastern Europe which lasted three weeks and a trip to Australia where she combined backpacking with a working visa, spanning five months. During both of her journeys, Eva opted to use a backpack.

Sofia, a Swedish university student in her mid-20s, was largely influenced to go on a backpacking trip by her friends. She combined her backpacking journey to Panama and Costa Rica with her participation in a surf camp. Due to her use of disposable contact lenses, she initially planned on travelling for two months. However, Sofia's journey ended up lasting for an additional month. Sofia used a backpack during her entire trip.

Analysis

After the construction of my empirical data, I decided to code the data using an inductive thematic approach. Ahrne and Svensson (2015: 244) explain that coding one's data offers the possibility to isolate and specify relevant data to help in the analytical process (a.a.). I coded the data by continuously reading and relating my interview transcriptions with my secondary data, which consisted of different publications. Via a process of consciously reducing my empirical material, I could use my informant's narratives to assemble different themes in relation to this paper's aims. I concentrated my empirical data into two major themes that were subsequently subdivided into smaller themes. The first major theme was categorised as *Constructing backpacking identity* and was divided into *Construction of self* and *Collective identity formation.* The second major theme was categorised as *Shaping the journey* and was in turn divided into *Practicality of backpacking*, *Forming social relations* and *Emotional state of backpacking*.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are an essential part of qualitative research. Thus, I approached this project and my informants in a reflexive manner. As Davies quotes, "Reflexivity [...] is the means through which knowledge of a social reality outside ourselves can be approached" (Davies 2008: 265). In other words, my project involved personal interactions where I was studying my informants' experiences and relations to their material surroundings. Therefore, I had to carefully and reflexively consider the ethical implications of my research.

Regarding the interviews I conducted, I started each interview by informing my informants about the Swedish Research Council´s four fundamental ethical principles for scientific research within the humanities and social sciences. These four principles imply that I as a researcher have to fulfil the following responsibilities: 1) ensure that my informants comprehend the purpose of the project; 2) disclose the potential risks of their participation; 3) inform my informants that their participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw their participation; and 4) protect the confidentiality of my informants and ensure the gathered data is only used for research purposes (Göransson 2019: 46- 47).

An ethical issue I encountered was how I would inform my informants about adjustments in my research process. This issue arose from the fact that I didn't start my project with precise research questions or an established focus. In other words, anthropological research is to a high degree inductive. Meaning that the researcher uses the gathered empirical data to generate new insights to develop a hypothesis or theory that later helps explain the data (Ervin 2005: 35). Hence, the issue I faced was how I could collect informed consent when my informants didn't know the full extent of my project. To circumvent this issue, I followed Davies's (2008: 55-56) notion the researcher should explain to their informants that research is a process. This implied that I discussed with my informants that the focus area of my project could change. However, since I presented the project's general focus area and that it is not very politically sensitive, I determined that these potential changes would not need me to renegotiate my informant's consent.

Background

Historical context of backpacking

In order to understand this paper's setting, it is crucial to shed light upon the historical context of backpacking as a cultural phenomenon. The historical roots of backpacking can be traced back to early European colonial exploration. During this period influential tropes and ideas of travel developed that would be fundamental for the travel imagination of modern-day backpacking (O'Reilly 2006: 1003). Nonetheless, this paper's historical contextualisation begins with *drifters*, which O'Reilly describes as a cultural movement that is a direct predecessor to contemporary backpacking (a.a.: 1005). The concept of drifters can be linked to the counter-cultural hippie movements of the 1960s and 1970s. During this time the act of drifting was a way of engaging the world in new noninstitutional ways (Cohen 2011: 1536; O'Regan 2016: 330). Drifting gave people a way of accessing and exploring different ways of life, spatial and social organisation and ideologies (O'Regan 2016: 330). Put differently, drifting gave people a way of physically and symbolically breaking free from mainstream culture, in order to see the world outside the confines of their own societies. This way of travel was often connected to characteristics that can be seen in backpackers today, such as independence, adaptability, resourcefulness and openmindedness (a.a.).

The act of drifting experienced a decline during the 1980s when the tensions of the Cold War were at their highest. Travelling became more challenging and dangerous, exacerbated by the growing prevalence of economic recession and high degrees of unemployment in many Western countries (O'Reilly 2006: 1005). It wasn't until the late 1980s and early 1990s that what we call backpacking today started to gain momentum but under new institutional forms (Cohen 2011: 1536; O'Reilly 2006: 1005). O´Reilly (2005: 151) depicts how the anarchistic and hippie characteristics of drifting no longer were accurate in describing the new wave of travellers (a.a.). Backpacking became a more mainstream and commonplace way of travelling by young, white, middle-class northern European citizens. In addition, during this time backpackers established generalisable characteristics, namely openness in their travel itinerary, time spent travelling and low levels of planning (O´Reilly 2005: 155; 2006: 999-1008).

By channelling backpackers' experiences and determining how they can travel, the backpack has come to shape the travel imagination of contemporary backpacking. For example, Walsh and Tucker (2009: 234-235) explain that the backpack has become essential in the organisation of this new institutionalised way of travelling. Consequently, the backpack has become symbolic of the act of backpacking (a.a.: 229).

The steady development and acceleration of globalisation across the world have continued to make backpacking a possibility for a large number of people. O'Reilly (2005: 152- 153) illustrates that the multifaceted processes of globalisation have enabled people to travel to large parts of the globe with relative ease. Put simply, economic and political processes have led to the phenomena which some researchers call *time-space compression*. Time-space compression refers to how in the contemporary world travellers are no longer as constrained by time. Meaning that backpackers have the ability to move through space at a faster pace (a.a.).

O'Reilly (2006: 1007- 1009) also explains that there are additional global cultural processes that have fed into the travel imagination of modern-day backpacking. Thus, creating incentives for people to embark on backpacking journeys. These cultural processes can be divided into five different dimensions: *mediascapes, technoscapes, ethnoscapes, financescapes,* and *ideoscapes* (a.a.). Mediascapes are the structures in the contemporary world that create an inclination to go backpacking by providing information, narratives and images. Technoscapes denote the things that enable travel by providing the necessary communication. Ethnoscapes encompasses different groups and individuals such as travellers and backpackers, and refers to how these groups have become commonplace all over the globe. The final dimension, ideoscapes, pertains to the modern and postmodern ideas and values that create the political framework that makes backpacking possible. Examples of these ideas are the concepts of freedom and the right to travel. Others can be traced back to colonial exploration, e.g. the idea of having the right to obtain knowledge about other cultures by visiting (a.a.).

Constructing Backpacking Identity

As described by multiple authors, such as O'Regan (2016) and O'Reilly (2006), the use of a backpack is not the only means by which the sociocultural identity of a backpacker is constructed. For instance, O'Reilly (2006: 999- 1000) discusses in her research on the popularisation of backpacking, how the act of travelling on a budget and wanting to gain new experiences through flexible travel itineraries and timetables, are integral parts of being a backpacker (a.a.). This could also be seen in my own interviews. All my informants spoke about how they as backpackers want to travel on a budget and acquire new experiences, by for example staying in hostels, suggesting that backpacks are not the only means by which the backpacking identity is created. But this begs the question, what role does the backpack have in the formation of backpacking identity? In order to answer this question I have coded my empirical data into two categories, which will be presented below.

Construction of self

The first theme was constructed in relation to Walsh and Tucker's (2009) article, where they address the very question of what role backpacks have in the formation of backpacking identity. However, they are also aware that backpacks are not always the only key element in the production of backpacking identity. To illustrate they explain that backpackers can be seen using different types of luggage, an example being trolly cases (a.a.: 226). This line of thought is something that also became apparent through a reading of my own empirical data. In several cases, my informants spoke about how one can be a backpacker without needing a backpack. Brian, the 27-year-old university student from Sweden, went as far as saying "Most backpackers use a backpack- just because" (my translation). Interestingly, all the informants that doubted the significance of having a backpack quickly came to realise the importance of a backpack in their own definition of a backpacker. For example, Brian who started off by expressing that using a backpack was just a thing people do, promptly recognized that backpacks must therefore be seen as a symbolic feature of what constitutes a backpacker. This being said, by the end of my interviews, all my informants articulated a strong link between having a backpack and being a

backpacker. So as the name suggests, backpacks should be seen as an integral part of being a backpacker.

The observed pattern that some of my informants initially did not recognize the significance of a backpack, but later come to realise its role in defining their identity as backpackers, is insightful because it can be paralleled with Miller's idea of *the humility of things* (Miller 2010: 50- 51). Miller suggests that our material surroundings are the framework of our understanding of the world. Even if we might not always acknowledge the presence of the material, it still affects us into accepting its influence. Meaning, the less we know about the influence the material world has on our perception of reality, the more power it has to shape those perceptions (Miller 2010: 50- 51). To exemplify, towards the end of my interview with Leo, when I asked if he thought backpacks were important in being a backpacker, he responded by saying "[...] backpacks are so common amongst backpackers, you don't even think about them" (my translation). This indicated that he started to understand the silent but affective nature of backpacks in the performance of being a backpacker.

To enhance my understanding of the significance of backpacks in being a backpacker, I continued applying Miller's theoretical perspective. Miller (2010: 23-26) states that humans use the material world in order to construct themselves. In his publication, he exemplifies this process by investigating the garment called Sari, which Indian women traditionally wear. Miller explains that the performative practice of using a Sari produces and reproduces the identities of Indian women (a.a.).

Millers' understanding of the relationship between identity formation and the material world can be directly translated into my own empirical data. Put simply, the performative practice of backpackers carrying and interacting with the materiality of a backpack is a crucial dimension in the construction of backpacking identity. To exemplify, Maya who had been backpacking in Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia, stated "A large part of being a backpacker is to learn how to live through your backpack" (my translation). The same informant continued by expressing that she did not see herself as a backpacker during the first part of her trip because she didn't know how to pack all her belongings. It wasn't until she figured out how to live with only her backpack, that she developed the sensation of being a backpacker. This example illustrates a general theme expressed by the majority of my interviewees; the everyday practice of interacting with their backpacks made them backpackers.

To gain further comprehension of the backpack's role in the process of becoming a backpacker, I combined Miller's (2010) theoretical perspective with O'Regan's (2016) publication. O'Regan (2016: 333) describes the existence of backpacking social worlds that are embedded within specific temporal, spatial and social contexts. These social worlds in turn have their own regulative logic, values and norms. O'Regan (2016: 332- 336) further elaborates on this by stating backpackers' dress is important in both producing and reproducing these backpacking social worlds. Put differently, by being bodily exposed to the world, backpackers both embody the cultural patterns and norms of being a backpacker while at the same time reproducing these structures. O'Regans' main conclusion is that backpackers' dress is essential in socialising backpackers into social worlds that provide new ways of thinking and acting (a.a.: 442).

Contrary to O'Regan, who does not mention backpacks, my empirical data shows that the backpack is also an important part of backpackers' dress, thus important in socialising people into backpackers. To highlight this, James who had his backpack stolen during his trip, described backpacks as "part of the backpacking uniform". He elaborated on this when he spoke about how the experience of not having a backpack made him realise how crucial it is in being a backpacker. He illustrated by explaining that not having a backpack made him lose an aspect of being a backpacker. It wasn't until when he bought a new one, that he started to feel like a backpacker again. He could feel himself consciously embracing different cultural patterns associated with being a backpacker, such as being minimalistic and living on a budget. This indicates that backpacks are crucial in the embodiment and construction of self as a backpacker.

By applying Miller's and O'Regan's perspectives to my empirical data it became clear that backpacks play a crucial role in how backpackers construct themselves. As previously mentioned, my informants identified themselves as backpackers in accordance with ideals such as having a backpack, travelling on a budget, having flexible itineraries and wanting to gain new experiences. However, it was in the everyday practice and the process of learning how to pack and live out of their backpacks that my informants really started to embody and construct themselves as backpackers.

Collective identity formation

The second theme I constructed was an additional way of thinking about backpacks' importance in backpacking identity formation. Namely how backpacks also create a collective identity amongst backpackers, a subject matter that is also touched upon by O'Regan (2016). The construction of a collective backpacking identity can conceptually be divided into two intertwined processes. The first process is directly tied to O'Regan's (2016: 332- 336) idea of backpackers' dress being a part of the creation of social worlds that produce specific cultural patterns and norms. In simple terms, backpackers' dress is thus vital in creating shared understandings and norms that can be seen as the building blocks of collective backpacking identity. In regard to my own collected data, I saw that my informants spoke about the existence of a backpacking culture. Maya elaborated on this by stating:

> There is like a shared culture among backpackers. People are open-minded,
> everybody is curious and open towards one another. There is a shared feeling that
> everyone is curious- they want to learn about the place and are looking for the
> local. (my translation)

So by combining the significance of this quote, that there is a backpacking culture with shared cultural patterns and norms, with the example of my informant explaining that her backpack helped him to embrace this culture, a clear realisation emerged. It became evident that backpacks must therefore be crucial in creating the idea of backpackers being an imagined community or distinct and defined social group. Put differently, my data supported O'Regan's point of view that backpackers' dress is important in creating a shared identity amongst backpackers.

This brings me to the second process of group identity formation. The second process is most easily described as backpacks being essential in drawing the border of the backpacking identity. This is an interesting train of thought because it shows that just because material objects, such as backpacks, are essential in how humans construct themselves, the semiotic perspective does not lose its legitimacy. In O'Regan's (2016: 339- 342) article, he concludes that dress, by creating collective and recognisable bodies, marks a symbolic boundary between self and other. To illustrate, his informants explained that you assume things about people depending on how they dress. The way people dressed determined what kind of travellers they were, and therefore if his informants were willing to have a conversation with them or not (a.a.). In regard to what my own informants discussed, I observed an identical pattern. For example, James when on to say:

> Seeing others with backpacks, they're like part of the backpacking uniform.
> Everybody tends to look the same, everybody has a backpack. They create
> communality- common ground. People with backpacks are more approachable,
> you know they have similar experiences. It's easier to have interesting
> discussions, they are easier to talk to. You know they have been through the same
> struggles.

By this quote, James empirically demonstrates the importance of the backpack in both processes of creating a shared backpacking identity. Firstly, it shows how backpacks create ideas of shared experiences and commonality. Secondly, it also illustrates how backpacks symbolically represent backpackers, drawing an identificational boundary.

An additional pattern in my empirical data that further emphasizes how backpacks both create and symbolically represent a shared backpacking identity, is that all my informants discussed travellers with different kinds of luggage. Significantly, most people discussed the difference between travelling with a backpack or a suitcase. There was a widespread concurrence that suitcases represent people on luxury or family holidays. Sofia, who combined a backpacking trip with a surf camp in Costa Rica, said that "Suitcases are too luxury for backpackers, they show that you're not travelling like a backpacker - it becomes silly. You're not embracing the [backpacking] identity" (my translation). That is to say, she believed one needed to have a backpack in order to be able to embrace backpacking characteristics, such as living on a budget, meeting new people and acquiring new experiences. Other informants spoke about when they saw people with suitcases they automatically assumed that they belonged to a different group of travellers, that were not backpackers. To conclude, backpacks must therefore be seen as creating a symbolic boundary between backpackers and other types of travellers. To phrase this differently, backpacks help create a feeling of belonging by differentiating self from other. Backpacks represent and remind people of a collective backpacking identity, where backpackers embody specific cultural patterns and norms. A different informant, Alexa, illustrated this way of thinking when she initially stated that one could be a backpacker with a suitcase, but then immediately retracted this statement by discussing that it would be strange and one wouldn't feel like a proper backpacker.

Shaping the journey

Backpacking journeys today have become a mainstream and commonplace movement for a large number of people, predominantly for young middle-class northern European citizens. O'Reilly stating "From a broader social perspective it is clear that backpacking has become more common and more a part of the mainstream" (O'Reilly 2006: 1006). The processes by which these trips are shaped are numerous and varied. This being said a reading of my empirical data shows that backpacks play a crucial role in both the formation of backpackers' identities and experiences. In the previous chapter, I empirically supported these speculations by exploring how backpacks play a part in creating backpacking identity. In this chapter, I will adjust my conceptual lens in order to gain insight into how backpacks come to shape backpackers' journeys and experiences.

To accomplish the aim of understanding how backpacks shape the journeys and experiences of backpackers, I began by relating my empirical data to Latour's theoretical perspective, ANT. Latour (1996: 369-370) argues that the interconnectedness of both humans and material entities creates the conditions of social reality. This ontological understanding of how reality is co-constructed is best understood by defining the world as a hybrid. In a hybrid world, the social and natural phenomena that construct reality are seen as entangled and co-constituted, ultimately dissolving the dichotomy between the social and the material (Latour 1990: 6-14). Therefore, backpackers' backpacks must be seen as *hybrid objects*, inscribed with both material and social qualities. Meaning, through tangibly existing in the material plane while at the same time having material performative agency, backpacks help realise backpackers' social realities and consequently organise backpackers' journeys and experiences.

To support this theoretical understanding, I related my own data to Walsh and Tucker's empirical examples. One of Walsh and Tucker's (2009: 234- 235) main conclusions is that backpacks determine backpackers' journeys by modifying and channelling experience. Consequently, backpacks become more than their function as a bag, but become performative and thus play a crucial role in initiating and influencing social actions and interactions (a.a.). This was a recurring theme that also emerged in my own data. In the following section, I will categorise my informant's discussions of how their backpacks affected their journeys and experiences.

Practicality of a backpack

The first theme I constructed by coding my data was, how my informant's backpacks physically determined how they could travel. The majority of my informants spoke about how backpacking journeys are practically made possible by their backpacks. There was a general consensus that backpackers normally are within spatial contexts where their backpack becomes essential in their movements. As an example, Leo stated that he didn't want to spend a lot of time in the centre of cities, hence why he opted to use a backpack. He added that backpacks are important because other bags would not have made his backpacking journey possible. Because he would be moving on rougher terrain, he needed to be able to have his luggage on his back and having a suitcase for instance would not give him enough mobility. Other informants mentioned that backpacks made them more flexible in where they could travel. When discussing this with Maya, she commented: "I'm happy I brought a backpack [...] backpackers travel to smaller rural areas, therefore I needed a backpack"(my translation).

An additional aspect of how my informant's backpacks influenced how they could travel was in their backpack's material properties. As earlier mentioned, two held ideals of being a backpacker is being minimalistic and staying in hostels. Through my analysis, I saw that my informants meant that these ideals of how backpackers should travel are created in relation to their backpack's properties. For example, both Leo and Maya meant that the design of their backpacks helped ease their travels. Leo said because his backpack could both open from the top and bottom, he was able to travel in a flexible and time-effective manner. Moreover, Maya spoke about how backpackers often live with other people in hostels, thus their backpacks were important in forcing people to be mindful and minimalistic of how and what they pack. Hence, backpacks determined how my informants could travel, by influencing how they could pack and where they could stay during their trip.

Forming social relations

By applying Latour's theoretical understanding of how material objects can initiate and influence social actions through material performativity, I identified a second theme. The second theme which I identified was how backpacks are performative in establishing backpackers' experiences through inciting and organising different social relations. A reading of my empirical data showed that backpacks' agentic properties caused my informants to end up in different situations because of how their backpacks defined them as backpackers. This can be strongly linked to the previous chapter, where I discussed how backpacks both create and symbolically represent backpacking identity by producing a boundary between backpackers and other types of travellers. This boundary is important in shaping backpackers' journeys and experiences. Like O'Regan (2016: 339) also exemplifies, in several cases my informants explained how their conversations were shaped by the existence of backpacks. The idea of a shared backpacking identity was created by the act of having a backpack or seeing others with backpacks, and as a result, my informants felt they could physically engage with others by striking up a conversation. During the conversation about this topic with Maya, she stated:

> I met some people that were travelling with suitcases. They were cool people, but I always felt that I couldn't really connect with them, they were kind of out of place in a way. It was when meeting people that had backpacks that I had a feeling of being able to connect [with them]. [...] backpackers were easier to talk to, you help each other. (my translation)

An additional quote, that I have previously presented, also shows how backpacks created the conditions for social interactions:

Seeing others with backpacks, they're like part of the backpacking uniform. Everybody tends to look the same, everybody has a backpack. They create communality- common ground. People with backpacks are more approachable, you know they have similar experiences. It's easier to have interesting discussions, they are easier to talk to. You know they have been through the same struggles.

These quotes empirically support the idea that backpacks are performative in shaping backpackers' social interactions and experiences. The presence of backpacks during backpacking trips contributes to the consolidation of backpackers' social realities. In other words, by applying Latour's understanding of social reality as co-constructed through an interconnected network of human and non-human actors, backpacks become one of many crucial nodes. Meaning that backpackers' social relations and experiences are therefore only understood through the interconnectedness and influence of backpacks, and without this junction in the network people's journeys and experiences would not be those of a backpacker.

Emotional state of backpacking

The third and final theme I identified was how backpacks shape backpackers' journeys and experiences by affecting their sense of comfort. This theme was developed by modifying an idea from Walsh and Tucker's article. Walsh and Tucker (2009: 233) argue that backpacks influence experience by becoming important in backpackers' own bodily performance. Backpacks allow certain movements while obstructing others. Meaning that backpacks provide people with freedom and flexibility in their travels, while at the same time imposing bodily restrictions, e.g. changing backpackers' posture (a.a.). Contrary to Walsh and Tucker, this was not mentioned by my informants. Nevertheless, modifying this notion helped me to notice that my informants implied that their backpacks provided them with comfort and stability while simultaneously imposing mental and emotional restrictions.

Through multiple readings of my interviews, it became apparent that my informant's backpacks created emotional conditions for them to travel in a comfortable and stable way. Many of my informants spoke about how backpacking is characterised by people in constant movement between social and spatial environments. This continuous motion creates what one of my informants, Alexa, called "uncertain travelling conditions" (my translation). Therefore, by carrying all their belongings in their backpacks, their backpacks produced an emotional state that multiple informants called *stability* or *peace of mind*. Put simply, backpacks became a constant during periods of uncertainty. Anna said jokingly "Home is where the backpack is". When asked to elaborate on this quote, she stated:

> When you are backpacking you don't have a home, you are everywhere. Your backpack is a constant, it's everything you rely on. You have to learn how to be responsible for it- to take care of it. [...] it's the only thing that is present for the whole trip. It gives stability, providing a sense of security- it's always there.

Another informant, Sofia, suggested that her backpack created stable conditions for her to travel by explaining that she started to panic when she didn't know exactly where her backpack was. She went as far as saying "If it goes missing, everything goes missing- you are totally screwed" (my translation).

This brings me to a different way backpacks created a sense of stability and comfort in my informant's journeys. A large number of my informants discussed how the act of wearing their backpacks on their backs resulted in them feeling at ease. One dimension of this was that the physical contact with their backpack on their backs meant that they knew exactly where their belongings were. Another dimension was that some of my informants felt that when wearing their backpacks, their bags became a natural extension of themselves. Through this analysis, I could identify that the act of wearing their backpacks affected their state of mind and therefore shaped their travel experiences.

The idea of how my informants gained a sense of stability and comfort through their backpacks, marks a natural transition to the other aspect of how backpacks simultaneously create mental and emotional constraints. In simple terms, the existence of a sense of peace of mind and comfort meant that my informants at the same time could lose this comfort. Maya commented on this when she explained that she often lost her sense of comfort when taking off her backpack in some hostels, due to the fact that it was a new environment where she didn't know anybody. She continued by saying "I couldn't sleep very deeply- you can't trust people" (my translation). Another informant, Leo, described that he always consciously had to think about where he left his bag. He implied it wasn't very often he would leave it in settings or places that didn't feel safe. To solidify the point of how my informants lost their feeling of stability and comfort, I will illustrate with the extreme case of the previously mentioned informant, James, who had his backpack stolen. He stated:

> When my bag was stolen, I could keep travelling but I needed to feel my bag on my back- you need to know where your things are. [...] It gives you structure in organising yourself. [...] It was until I bought a new bag that I could have some peace of mind.

These examples empirically illustrate how even if the backpack's material performativity provided my informants with peace of mind during their journey, they simultaneously imposed emotional constraints. Meaning that my informant's experiences were determined by the emotional state their backpacks induced, e.g. not being able to sleep or frequently looking for safe places to leave their backpack.

Summary & conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I will highlight and discuss significant themes that emerged in my analysis in order to summarise the main findings of my qualitative inquiry. By using a qualitative research methodology, I interviewed people that defined themselves as backpackers. Subsequently, uncovering valuable insights into how their backpacks help construct their identity and shape their journeys. In this chapter, I will also further discuss this paper's limitations. By acknowledging and being transparent in my limitations, I hope to better contextualise my findings. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the implications of my discoveries in relation to the discipline of anthropology. In doing so, I will suggest potential directions for future research that could generate further anthropological insights into backpackers and their backpacks.

My research findings were produced in relation to the following research questions: *What role does the backpack have in the identity formation of a backpacker?* And, *How does the backpack shape a backpacker's travel experience?*

In addressing the inquiry on the role of the backpack in the identity formation of a backpacker, I constructed two themes during the course of my analysis. The first theme was the backpack's role in the creation of self. Here I utilised Millers' theoretical perspective from his publication *Stuff* to demonstrate how the performative practice of using a backpack creates the conditions for the creation and embodiment of a backpacking identity. Backpacks are humble objects that are part of the framework through which backpackers understand the world. By embarking on backpacking journeys with preconceived ideas and norms such as travelling on a budget and having flexible itineraries, my informants saw themselves as backpackers. Nonetheless, through a process of learning how to use their backpacks in the day-to-day, they came to truly embrace this identity. Thus, through the presence of the backpack's materiality, the backpacking identity comes into being.

To strengthen my understanding of the backpack's role in the creation of self, I also incorporated O'Regan's perspective from the article *A backpacker habitus: the body and dress, embodiment and the self.* This perspective helped illustrate how the performative practice of using a backpack produces and constantly reproduces the regulative logic, values and norms of backpackers' social worlds. That is to say, the embodiment and construction of the backpacking self comes from backpackers being bodily exposed to the materiality of a backpack.

The second theme that I constructed in relation to the backpack's role in the identity formation of a backpacker, was the creation of a collective identity. By continuing to apply Miller's and O'Regan's perspectives it became noticeable how backpacks help create a shared backpacking identity through two interwoven processes. The first process of how a shared identity is created is through how the performative practice of using a backpack produces shared understandings and norms amongst backpackers. Consequently, the embodiment of this shared culture creates the idea of backpackers being a distinct and defined social group. The second process was how backpacks help draw a symbolic boundary between backpackers and other types of travellers. Meaning that the luggage that you travel with symbolically represents what type of traveller you are. Put simply, backpacks create distinguishable bodies that represent and remind people of the specific cultural patterns and norms that construct the collective backpacking identity.

In addressing the question of how backpacks shape backpackers' travel experiences, I identified three themes. These themes were constructed by applying Latour's Actor-Network theory. This perspective aided me in comprehending that backpackers' social realities are realised and constituted by networks of both humans and material entities, such as backpacks. Through this understanding that backpacks are crucial nodes, they come to organise the backpacking phenomena as a whole, and are therefore crucial in organising backpackers' journeys and experiences.

The first theme of how backpacks organise backpackers' experiences are how they determine how backpackers can travel. During their journeys backpackers normally move within spatial contexts where the practicality of a backpack becomes essential. Meaning that being able to carry their backpacks on their backs creates the possibility for backpackers to travel in a mobile and flexible way. Additionally, a backpack's material properties also play a crucial role in determining how backpackers can travel. For example, the way backpacks are designed forces backpackers to be mindful and minimalistic of how and what they pack. Subsequently, reproducing backpacking ideals and helping to determine where they stay during their journeys.

The second theme is how backpacks' agentic properties channel backpackers' experiences by creating the conditions for their social interactions. By creating an identificatory boundary, backpacks determine the social situations backpackers end up in. Backpacks help create the idea of backpackers being an imagined group with a shared identity, and therefore backpacks create the conditions of how backpackers converse with each other and others.

The third and final theme of how backpacks shape backpackers' travel experiences was how backpacks affect backpackers' sense of comfort. The material performativity of backpacks channels experience by creating comfort and stability in a backpacker's journey, while simultaneously imposing mental and emotional restrictions. Backpacks become a constant during a backpacker's uncertain travelling conditions, where the spatial and social context is in a constant state of flux. Therefore, the fact that backpackers store all their belongings in their backpacks together with the fact that they can feel its very presence on their backs, backpackers develop a sense of peace of mind. However, because of the creation of a sense of comfort and stability, there was an accompanying risk of losing this state of mind. Consequently, backpackers always consider where they sleep and leave their backpacks during their travels, to make sure that their belongings don't get stolen. Meaning that backpacks shape a backpacker's travel experiences by inducing a sense of comfort while at the same time imposing emotional restrictions.

To conclude, I have now summarised my findings and hope to have fulfilled this paper's main aim of contributing to wider discussions within the discipline of anthropology regarding the social and material significance of backpackers' backpacks.

Limitations and future development

As the author of this paper, I had a central role in its production and therefore my influence and bias has to be acknowledged. This meant that I had to be reflexive and transparent throughout the entire process of creating this paper. As a consequence, I reflected tremendously on the limitations of my methodological approach. Due to a lack of time and convenience, I couldn't travel and meet backpackers. Thus, I didn't have the possibility to employ a participant observation as a research method. Consequently, I revised my methodological approach and conducted interviews instead. However, this meant I had to acknowledge the limitations that this entailed.

In total, I conducted eight interviews, two digital and five face-to-face. With a limited number of informants, it was important for me to acknowledge the potential limitations of this paper's overall conclusions. I had to interpret my findings within the context of this sample size. Meaning that I had to recognize that I potentially missed out on important nuances and perspectives within my research.

Another limitation I reflected on was the fact that interviews predominantly provide verbal accounts from interviewees. This potentially hindered me from gaining deeper insight into the contextual understanding of backpacking or the backpacks role of backpacking. In other words, only conducting interviews might have made me miss contextual details and important perspectives that would become evident during ethnographic observations. An additional limitation to reflect upon is the potential of biased responses during interviews. These biases could take on different forms. One example is that my informants might have given responses they believed to be desirable. For instance, my friend that I interviewed was familiar with Daniel Miller's theoretical perspective, which could have influenced her answers.

This brings me to how my research can be built on and developed in the future. As earlier touched upon, a research method such as participant observation could generate further insights into the findings of this paper. By allowing the researcher to observe in real-time, a participant observation would open up the possibility to gain a more holistic perspective on how backpackers interact with their backpacks. Meaning that the researcher would become part of the field and gain a deeper understanding of backpackers' lifeworlds and experiences. Therefore, using the "traditional" anthropological method of participant observation over a longer period would strengthen the overall credibility of the research findings.

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