Keeping Up with the Joneses: Emergence of Travel as a Form of Social Comparison Among Millennials

ABSTRACT

The idea of "Keeping Up with the Joneses" was developed as a phenomenon wherein people want to own the same objects and do the same things as their peers in order to keep up with them socially. Along with the combined rise of globalization, mobile technology and the millennial mindset of valuing experiences over material possessions, this research qualitatively examines how travel has become a marker of status among certain subpopulations of the millennial cohort, along with identifying idiosyncrasies of their social networking habits in conjunction with their travel behaviors. Ascending opportunities for travel and tourism marketing practitioners are denoted.

Keywords: socialization; travel motivations; experience economy; millennial cohort; social networking sites; tourism; peer influence

1. Introduction

People in general, regardless of age or generation, are predisposed to track their progress or assess their self-worth compared to others. The capability to do so relies on the availability of information about the lives of others or on the visibility of alternative lifestyles (Sabatini & Sarracino, 2016).

Throughout different periods in history, a range of measures have been used as markers of social status, and there has been much variation in the tangibility of these markers, as well as the basis on which the markers emerge. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a major shift in the cultural climate in the United States, which was stimulated by the availability and widespread distribution of the first mass marketing materials in the form of the new mail order catalogs for emerging department stores. During this time, the term "keeping up with the Joneses" developed in reference to newly displayed behaviors whereby

the envy provoked by more marketing availability to a larger audience resulted in the expansion of the consumer economy of the period (Matt, 2003).

In time, the theory became more widespread and was applied to varying products and consumers. When General Motors introduced the yearly car model upgrade, people were encouraged to covet the latest models in order to "keep up" with production (History of American Consumerism, n.d.). In the 1920s, consumerism was fueled by the emergence of the first movie stars of the silent movies of the time. By the 1950s, widespread household televisions had ushered in an entirely new "golden age" (Lule, 2014), bringing with it mass social influence. As televisions became more popular in households, more advertisements aired in the form of commercials, thus providing opportunities to show more consumer goods and define what kinds of things one could be expected to have in order to "keep up" with societal norms. Television advertisements resulted in the increasing visibility of product images associated with social prestige and radically altered the communication of conspicuous consumption preferences (Galbraith, 1987).

We now live in the digital age and are barraged not only by more mass marketing than ever before (Twenge, 2014), but also by the seemingly everyday activities of our peers through social media. Media itself is becoming increasingly social, and digital communication has created an information revolution that has inevitably spawned social change (Lule, 2014). Media is a powerful vehicle for imparting cultural values in a mass way (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010); as the availability of media has increased over the years, so has the visibility of social status.

As we are living in an increasingly globalized world, people are also traveling more frequently and further than they ever have before due to the rise in technology and smartphone usage (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005; Wang, Park & Fesenmaier, 2012; Wang, Xiang & Fesenmaier, 2016). External cultural factors decide what a specific marker of social

status will become during a definitive time period; the mainstream adaptation of technology, combined with the trend of globalization and the tendency of those in the millennial cohort to choose experiences over possessions, are the three factors that are shaping the possibility to reevaluate what it means to "keep up" with one's peers in the present age.

A marker of social status may no longer be material or physical in nature; as someone at the turn of the century might have shown their social status by purchasing a piano for their home, or someone in the 1950s might have installed a swimming pool for their suburban neighbors to envy, today's millennial consumers represent their social status by posting photos of themselves in Thailand or other "exotic" locations to Facebook.

Social comparison has not been explored specifically using travel as an indicator of status and, furthermore, while it has been confirmed in literature that smartphone usage, globalization and the experience economy are influential factors among millennial travelers, deeper inquiry is necessary to adequately understand the subsequent idiosyncrasies these factors have on today's millennial travelers that are active on social networking sites (SNS). Furthermore, young peoples' experience of social relationships, information gathering, and interaction with the world is increasingly being shaped through the use of social media (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zuniga, 2010). In fact, many millennials are never without their mobile devices, and live in a state of constant peer comparison.

To market tourism services and destinations successfully, marketers must understand the motivating factors that lead to travel decisions and consumption behavior (Gee et al., 1984). Since millennials are the first generation to grow up surrounded by social media (Raines, 2003), and currently represent the largest and most influential group of consumers (Fromm & Garton, 2013), members of the millennial cohort will be the focus of this study.

The purpose of this study is to conduct qualitative research to reveal the underlying influence that peer comparison has on the travel motivations of certain members of the millennial cohort.

The objectives of this research are:

- To examine the embodied experiences of millennials who actively review and post travel-related content on social networking sites (SNS); and

- To analyze how pressure exerted upon the millennial cohort to "keep up" with the travel experiences of their peers affects their travel decision processes, and how peer comparison affects or changes one's travel motivations.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Evolution of Peer Visibility and Social Comparison

As department store catalogs were once the form of mass marketing used to spread advertising, the availability of the internet and smartphones are now the impetus for people to compare themselves to their peers and self-evaluate their status in society. The internet provides an unprecedented opportunity for individuals to access a larger, worldwide audience (Lule, 2014). Consequently, social media, such as social networking sites and user-generated services, have emerged into mass use rather recently, basically from 2003 onward (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), and play an important role in shaping the national and regional articulations of consumer modernities (Martin, Lewis, &Sinclair, 2013).

Mass media has long been a means to create new consumer demand (Lule, 2014). When televisions gained popularity in the mid-20th century, an entirely new medium of advertising became available, which further drove consumer envy as a wide range of products gained visibility in everyday households. The physical visibility of the product being used as a marker of status is extremely important, because if you are not able to 'show off' the item, then it would not serve the intended sociological purpose towards your peers.

The concept of conspicuous consumption was developed at the turn of the century by Veblen (1912) in an effort to explain the psychological mechanics of the rising consumer society of the time. Conspicuous consumption is the act or practice of spending money on expensive things that are not necessary in order to impress other people (Veblen, 1912), and it focuses on the visual display or overt usage of products in the presence of others in order to put wealth or position in evidence (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004).

Similarly, Social Comparison Theory was developed, albeit later on, as a social-psychological concept wherein individuals compare their possessions with those owned by others to determine their relative social standing (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010), and because conspicuous goods are easy to spot, they serve as the best markers of status. Of course, those with the most markers, or indicators, can effectually claim the highest social standing in their peer group. The social hierarchy is highly significant, as there is usually always someone who has more or less status than someone else, thus creating a range within which to place oneself. Also, if a person considers someone too divergent from herself or himself, there is then a tendency for the comparison not to be made (Festinger, 1954).

Keinan and Kivetz (2010) researched experiences as objects of collectible consumption to build one's "experiential CV". Collecting memorable (intangible) experiences can increase one's self-worth and accomplishment in much the same way that collecting material goods can. The act of "ticking" off one's experiential checklist can also further one's sense of self-progress. In Keinan and Kivetz's study, consumers went so far as to choose a less pleasurable trip than one they were more likely to enjoy solely to potentially collect a more memorable experience and add it to their personal résumé. As those in the millennial cohort tend to prefer to spend their disposable income on experiences over possessions (Twenge et al., 2010), this research will seek to explore the replacement by travel experiences of the physical possessions that marked the social status of populations of the during the time period when

the concept of conspicuous consumption was developed and, whether such tendencies have now morphed into the desire to experience something for the sake of posting to SNS.

2.2 Millennial Cohort

Much research has been conducted on the millennial cohort (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010) given their enormous population size. Marketers see great value in understanding the psychographics and behavior of this cohort (Swinarski, Parente, & Noce, 2010), born between 1982-2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

These digital natives are often described as technologically savvy and the most visually sophisticated of any generation (Bolton et al., 2013). This technological and visual sophistication lends itself to the increasing importance of visual posts on social media and engenders natural associations between socialization and technology.

Narcissism is prevalent among the millennial generation, and this cohort is more self-focused than other previous cohorts (Twenge, 2014). They see great importance in their personal experiences and feel that others should and will care about seeing what those experiences are, and social networking sites serve as their way to show off these experiences. Since peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on the self are features of SNS, they serve as prime sources of social self-esteem and well-being (Valkenburg, Jochen, & Schouten, 2006). Many seek validation from their peers when posting to SNS, and a user profile is used as a means to present oneself to peers. Valkenberg et al. (2006) found a direct connection to self-esteem and the feedback received on SNS profiles. It has been consistently demonstrated in the literature that in online social networks, user characteristics and behavior tend to cluster both in space and in time, with users generally being of similar backgrounds and expressing similar interests as their online friends (Aral & Walker, 2011).

Technology makes it easy for millennials to communicate with large groups of people all over the world (Sutherland, 2007), and the rise in social networks provides opportunities

for like-minded individuals to come together (Bacon, 2015). There is an unprecedented amount of opportunities for individuals to quickly and frequently compare themselves to their peers, and a millennial's power to influence others is exponentially higher today than it would have been in the past (Fromm & Garton, 2013).

2.3 Amplification of Tourism as a Commodity by the Millennial Cohort
The travel habits of millennials are quite different than the preceding generations (Glover, 2010). The new generation can access real-time videos from all around the world via SNS services such as Snapchat and Instagram, which helps them become familiar with more destinations than they would have years ago, as well as piquing their interest in visiting places that might not have been known of or considered without exposure to social media (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Furthermore, more frequent and inexpensive flights are available than ever before, making travel easier and more affordable, and giving members of Generation Y greater opportunities to travel than previous generations; consequently, millennials are better traveled than many of their parents (Valentine & Powers, 2013).

Interest in travel has seen an uptick and there is a desire for the remote, that is shared not by a few, wealthy adventurers, as before, but by increasing masses of ordinary people. Many millennials quest to achieve and relay images of a variety of experiences, much like keeping a scorecard (Fromm & Garton, 2013). Subsequently, attitudes derived from travel experiences are packages of information that are traded in daily life (Pearce & Packer, 2013), and travel is increasingly treated as a commodity. As modern consumer culture is shaped by the essential logic of capitalism, tourism is now pursued through experience-as-commodities (Watson & Kopachevsky, 1994), thus these commodities eventually come to represent visual markers of social status.

Social influence is an important factor influencing travel intentions. That is to say if a traveler enjoys a destination, they will provide positive word-of-mouth to other future

travelers within their network (Lam & Hsu, 2006). Furthermore, one's network on SNS will usually not only consist of close friends and family, but a much larger network of acquaintances and soft connections, who create an opportunity for travel inspiration, ideas and advice for those reviewing their posts (Tham, Croy & Mair, 2013).

Social-class membership can be closely related to one's choice in recreational activities, with a growing trend toward more spending on experiences and less spending on things (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). Tourism can be considered an extension of the commodification of modern social life. As modern consumer culture is shaped by the essential logic of capitalism, tourism is now pursued through experience-as-commodities (Watson & Kopachevsky, 1994). Foreign trips hold a social visibility for the vacationer, and anecdotes and experiences brought back from a foreign vacation are capable of conferring prestige upon the participant (Schul & Crompton, 1983).

The internet brought a useful technology to society, but also expanded the opportunity for instant fame, thus further engendering a 'Look at me!' mentality (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Online photography has become the tool for modern peer visibility, and SNS have propelled the viability of self-presentation in recent years. Social networking sites have provided travelers with a quick and convenient means of sharing their travel experiences (Huang, Basu, & Hsu, 2010; Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016;) and have become the most popular medium for sharing travel photographs (Lo et al., 2011); however, before the present phenomena took shape, Lo and McKercher (2015) studied online tourist photography and impression management and their study reiterated the notion that social media and photography facilitate social comparison. It is inevitable that Facebook and other social media websites will play a growing role in travel-related behavior and decisions, and online travelers' use of social networks to share their travel experiences is expanding (Nusair, Erdem, Okumus, & Bilgihan, 2012).

Taking photos of oneself to display on SNS for strategic self-presentation is no longer just a fad (Lyu, 2016), and because tourism is so closely related with visual experiences (Pan, Lee, & Tsai, 2014; Scarles, 2009), one now goes hand in hand with the other. Millennials also care deeply about their personal brand and are more likely to broadcast their thoughts and experiences and contribute user-generated content to their peers (Fromm & Garton, 2013).

Before social media became a phenomenal catalyst as a tool for comparison, Currie, Wesley and Sutherland (2006) studied how the opinions and activities of others influence travel decision-making. The majority of the survey respondents reported becoming curious after hearing about peers' travels, which then motivated them to pursue the same experiences. Currie, Wesley and Sutherland focused the source of this "peer influence" on direct suggestions from peers and whether or not students would choose the same holiday destinations as their friends; however, since their study was conducted, social media has become an essential part of life and the conditions identified as peer influence in their study have now evolved towards a lifestyle of status consumption.

3. Methodology

This investigation was a qualitative study that adopted an ethnographic approach. Commonly used in social sciences, ethnography is a tailored approach used to observe people's behavior on their terms and not that of the researcher (Anderson, 2009). Online ethnography was applied to this research, as social networking sites were used for analyzation. Online ethnography adapts the ethnographic method to the study of communities through computer-mediated social interaction (Markham, 2005). This particular method was chosen because of its potential to focus on the interactivity of millennials' travels on social networking sites. Virtual snowball sampling and purposive sampling were used.

3.1 Data Collection

Insert Figure 1 Here

There were three phases of the study, illustrated in Figure 1. The first phase was exploratory, seeking to gain initial insights regarding the research objectives, and was conducted using an online survey. The second phase was conducted for the purpose of identifying homologous travel patterns within the peer subgroups of survey participants, and the third phase was aimed at gaining in-depth insights for the research via one-on-one interviews with selected informants.

In the first phase, a survey, which consisted of ten open-ended questions to further the qualitative nature of the study, was distributed to the researcher's Facebook connections via the use of virtual snowball sampling, and it targeted specific sets of peer groups that would be further analyzed in the second phase of the study. The questions were aimed at acquiring more in-depth information about the habits of those who actively review and post about their travels on SNS. Conducting a survey with open-ended questions requires a lower number of participants to provide rich data (Farrell, 2016).

The second phase of the research was conducted using the same sample as the first phase, and the specific timelines of the participants' travels over the preceding three years were tracked using social media platforms to identify any patterns within a predetermined subgroup of peer influence (see Figure 2). Specifically, Facebook and Instagram were the primary SNS used to manually record dates and destinations traveled of each participant by the researcher.

The third phase employed purposive sampling to conduct more in-depth interviews concerning the motivation of "keeping up" with the travel experiences of peers. Based on the results from the second phase, including the level of elaboration in response to

the exploratory survey and whether there was overlap with the travel timelines of their SNS connections as determined in phase two, selected informants were chosen to participate in an elongated video interview with the researcher. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

3.2 Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data obtained through the research. Commonly used in qualitative research (Elo et al., 2014), as well as to address cultural relationships (Weber, 1990), qualitative content analysis facilitates the measurement of patterns of frequency and regularity in a large number of texts (Morse, 2004). Similar ideas were grouped together to identify patterns among participant responses, and words or phrases were monitored for frequency of use so that unexpected instances and/or categories could be broken down and identified to determine themes among the data.

3.3 Participants

The research aimed for participants who were a part of the millennial cohort, have disposable income available to travel frequently for leisure, and have regular access to social networking sites where they routinely review and post travel-related content. Since people tend to compare themselves only to those who are not too divergent from themselves (Festinger, 1954), the sample included those with similar economic backgrounds and sociological conditions, as determined by the researcher during virtual snowball sampling.

The initial open-ended survey questionnaire was sent to and completed by 32 participants; however, one of the responses was eliminated because the participant was not born within the millennial cohort. The survey participants were 77% female, which was to be expected, as women have been found to be more typically active on SNS (Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012).

While the participants were nationals from a range of global countries, including Indonesia, Korea, China, Canada, Austria and Germany, 70% of the participants were from the United States. The mean age of the participants was 29.4, with the youngest participant at 21 years old and the oldest at 33 years old, so there was a wide variance within the millennial cohort. The full list of informants' profiles can be found in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 and Table 2 Here

The findings from the survey (Table 2) will be combined with the other study findings and further analyzed later in the study.

In the second phase of the study, the researcher sought to confirm peer influence among the "network" of friends on SNS. The participants were broken into subgroups (Figure 2) based on their bridged connections to the researcher and each other on SNS, and the timelines of each informant's travels were tracked over the three years prior to the study. The results were analyzed for similarities and to identify travel patterns within the peer subgroups to determine whether any relationships could support the hypothesis of an individual traveling to keep up with one's peers.

Insert Figure 2 Here

The participants were divided into two main subgroups with 21 participants in the first subgroup and 7 in the second subgroup, with three outliers from the initial sample that did not fit into either subgroup; however, because they had provided useful information during the survey phase of the study, their responses were included among those findings, but their travel timelines were not tracked.

Since the informants were chosen using the virtual snowball sampling method, the informants were either connected to the researcher based on residence in the Northeast United States, and were within the same social circle as the researcher, or in Hong Kong, where the researcher was studying and conducting research and were connected through their mutual academic institution. Members of both groups were all connected to one another within their subgroup on SNS; i.e., the informants in the Northeast US subgroup were all "friends" with one another on SNS, as were all the Hong Kong informants with one another.

The second phase of the study revealed many correlations among the travels within both subgroups 1 and 2. The destinations that had the highest overlap between participants are outlined in the timelines below. The travel timelines were organized by destination, and the month that the participant traveled to each destination is indicated, followed by the subsequent participants who then traveled to the same destinations. For example, on the first timeline, travel to Costa Rica for subgroup 1, informant #9 was the first to travel in May of 2015, followed 11 months later by informant #16 in May of 2016, and lastly followed by informant #17, who traveled to Costa Rica in March of 2017. This is important because either directly or indirectly, the first travelers to each destination could have influenced the subsequent travelers to visit that destination. Because subgroup 1 is made up of participants based out of the Northeast region of the United States, their domestic travels also showed many overlaps and are included in the breakdown.

Insert Table 3.1, Table 3.2, Table 3.3 Here

Overlaps within peer groups are also outlined in Figure 3. As other factors are taken into account, such as originating destination, the overlaps found in destinations that are more obscure for each subgroup tend to prove that peer influence does play a role. It is believed by

the researcher that the second and third most frequently travelled destinations, Italy and Greece, were chosen as the result of peer influence.

Insert Figure 3 Here

Although tracking the overlaps in the travel timelines of the participants does not wholly confirm that socialization was the motivation for traveling to each destination, the significant amount of overlap between the subgroups shows that socialization does play a role in their travels and there is a significant indication that members of a particular peer group travel to homologous destinations. In many instances, there was significant congruence in travel to the same destinations among the participants. In subgroup 1, Italy, Greece, England and Spain were the most popular international destinations, and California, Texas and Florida were the most popular domestic destinations. China and Thailand had the most travel overlap among subgroup 2.

In some cases, there was empirical reasoning for the travel overlaps within both subgroups. For example, in April 2015, many of the members of subgroup 1 attended a destination wedding in Florida together. It is also worth noting that some of the destinations, such as Florida and California, are inherently popular destinations for travelers originating in the Northeast United States due to ease of travel, cheap flights, and package deals; however, because there was such a high representation of travel overlaps found within each subgroup, socialization was still determined to be a primary factor in travel motivation. Demonstrating so many instances in which one of the participants had traveled to the same place to which another participant had previously traveled, when both are connected on SNS, shows the potential for the second traveler to have seen travel-related posts from the first traveler and felt a subconscious need to "keep up" and travel to the same destinations. It is also worth noting that the travel overlaps found were only those between members of each subgroup,

and the extensive scope of connections that each participant has on SNS was not taken into account. The possibility for the same travel overlaps would increase exponentially if the full range of the participants' SNS connections had been accessible.

In the last phase of the research, more intimate knowledge was sought by conducting in-depth one-on-one interviews with selected participants. Ten informants, selected after conducting the first two phases of the research, were interviewed before the theoretical saturation point was reached, and no new information was yielded from the participants (Brotherton, 2015). Further themes were identified during the interviews.

4. Findings

4.1 Embodied Peer Visibility through Travel on SNS

In the first phase of the research, the participants were asked if their SNS connections had ever inspired them to travel to a place they had not known about before, and 90% of the respondents replied positively (Table 2, Question 11). This suggests that the visibility of one's peers is an important factor in the travel process, made more so by the presence of travel-related content on SNS. Also, in their responses, all of the informants indicated familiarity with the travels of their SNS connections, and when asked, 100% of the respondents knew someone who had already traveled to a locale where they had also traveled themselves (Table 2, Question 4). By citing an awareness of the similarity in their travels, an indirect form of social comparison was enumerated by the participants which confirms the visibility of travel as a commodity among the participants. Furthermore, when asked, the study participants indicated that there were certain destinations that were popular among their peer groups. Through their admissions of trending places, indirect acknowledgement of the inherent visibility of the travels of their SNS connections is again present.

Although the visibility of the travels of one's peers through SNS was a confirmed factor in this study to motivate members of the millennial cohort to travel, there are also the posts from travel and tourism companies visibly available on SNS that should be taken into consideration. However, when asked about this during the in-depth interviews in phase three, many of the informants noted that they are much more likely to notice or pay attention to the posts from their friends or connections over those of bloggers/influencers, or travel and tourism companies or brands. Informant #18 said, *"I think when looking for travel suggestions, the younger generation especially, they're not following where Delta thinks they should travel. They're following where one of their friends has just been, something else that feels a lot more authentic."* Informant #23 was straightforward when she admitted, *"My friends tend to travel a lot and are always sharing beautiful imagery and giving me recommendations. I will admit that I am more likely to go somewhere that my friends have been before rather than somewhere that just looks beautiful online and I don't have a close connection to."*

4.1.1 Travel Frequency as Self-Presentation

When asked about the destinations visited in the last three years (Table 2, Question 1), a majority of the respondents not only answered with the destinations, but also spontaneously (without prompting from the researcher) added the number of times they had traveled to each place, especially if they had traveled there frequently. This was inferred as the respondent wanting to convey the frequency of their travels as a means of status. More specifically, if they had only listed the destination once, their overall list of places traveled would thereby appear to be shorter, and their actual rates of travel might be understated. This behavior is therefore linked to the prestige associated with traveling and wanting to indicate frequency. As the survey was open-ended and the respondents could curate their individual responses, many of the respondents responded with very specific destinations such as nearby cities, etc.

when asked about the destinations they had visited in the last three years. This can also be seen as a means of increasing the frequency of their travels to convey prestige.

4.2 Millennial Mindset

To best understand the phenomenon whereby travel has become a marker of social status among the millennial cohort, the intricacies of their online habits needed to be explored in more depth.

This research supports that Generation Y is an acutely visual generation. As Informant #5 said, *"The millennial generation is so much more visual than generations in the past. We're bombarded with way more images than our parents were for sure."* This gives us clues into the millennial mentality that led to the phenomenon of using travel experiences as a means of social comparison.

Visibility is an ever-present factor for the millennial cohort. Informant #6 said: *"I think in this day and age, everything is in your face all the time. As long as you have your phone in front of you and you're jumping on a social media site, you're bound to see someone who has some sort of experience that you may then fear missing out on."* In regard to SNS and travel in particular, Informant #6 said: *"If you have 500 friends on Facebook, chances are a number of them are going on trips every month, so you're seeing a lot."* Informant #11 said:

> *Before social media, let's say you saw a printed picture of somebody's vacation, or you saw the vacation on their 1x1 inch screen of their digital camera. It's a little bit difficult to place yourself there. With things like Instagram and Snapchat and the rest, it's really easy to imagine yourself there, and these people just like you are there, so why shouldn't you be there?*

The millennial palate of images has evolved beyond that of previous generational cohorts. Informant #7 said:

> *The older generation like 40-50+ that use Instagram, they don't really know anything about editing pictures or filters, so they just upload something, and it might even be*

blurry, or the lighting will be horrible. So, I don't think they're doing it to show off. I think they're just doing it to actually share, but I think the millennials are doing it to impress.

Furthermore, five of the survey participants cited 'general wanderlust' as a motivation for traveling (Table 2, Question 3). This mentality indicates cultural connotations whereby a globetrotting lifestyle is becoming more of a mainstream concept, especially for members of the millennial cohort.

One aspect of the millennial mindset on which this study is based is that millennials are more likely to choose experiences over possessions, versus past generational cohorts. When asked, all of the informants indicated that they would prefer to use their disposable income on experiences rather than on material goods or possessions. As Informant #6 explains: *"In my opinion, you get a lot more out of experiences than you do out of things. You learn from experiences. You create long-lasting memories from experiences. Things are things. They come and go. They could be taken from you, or you could lose them. An experience stays within you forever or until you lose your memory, I guess."* Informant #18 added: *"I don't spend any money on clothes. I really don't. I love going to places. I most definitely always put money towards the experience. I don't really care about stuff."*

This reaffirms the mindset on which this study is based, as well as the research questions, wherein if millennials are more likely to spend their disposable income on experiences, instead of possessions as past generational cohorts have done, then the marker of social status that indicates what it means to "keep up" with your peers has changed in a parallel way.

4.3 SNS Behaviors

One of the goals of the research was to observe the embodied experiences of millennials who actively review and post travel-related photos on social networking sites (SNS), including further exploration into the SNS behaviors of the millennial cohort. The resulting findings are

important to more thoroughly understand the process by which travel is used as a modern form of conspicuous consumption.

In the first phase of the research, Instagram was the most popular SNS by far, with all 31 participants reporting its use for travel-related content (Table 2, Question 9). The second most popular method was Facebook, with the least used being Twitter. The reason for this was due to the highly visual aspect of Instagram's platform versus the lack of visibility on Twitter. Table 4 has more feedback about the uses of Instagram and visibility in travel-related content.

However, an important correlation was found between the visual appeal of Instagram and its uses for posting travel-related content, which is an established essential facet of travel (Scarles, 2009), but also contributes to the viability of "showing off" one's experiences as a means of social status. This visibility of travel-related imagery also contributes as an enticement to feel as if one should be traveling more in order to keep up with one's peers.

Insert Table 4 Here

4.4 Social Comparison

Schiffman and Kanuk (2010) defined social comparison orientation (SCO) as having a range within which to place oneself. This research found a measured range within the travel experiences of certain peer groups and therefore affirmed the existence of SCO among them. In the first phase, some of the informants expressed that they were among the most traveled of their peers, while other informants felt that their peers traveled much more frequently and farther than they did (Table 2, Question 10). Regardless of where they felt they were on the spectrum, all of the respondents indicated that a hierarchy was present.

In the third phase of the study, more in-depth knowledge was sought on the topic of social comparison in travel. Informant #5 felt that she was in the higher echelon, saying: *"I*

have one friend that just loves every Caribbean island. I don't care, because I've been to several, and I just find that that's not in my interests right now. That's not what gives me the most culture shock. If I deem the person kind of basic, then I won't take their travel advice because I feel like they don't travel like me. They don't think like me." This informant was inferring that she believes she travels more frequently and to more exotic locations than some of her peers, and therefore made a negative comparison. Informant #30 similarly said: *"If you're going to travel, then you might as well really experience another culture, rather than just go to Bermuda or Sandals in Jamaica."*

When examining the topic of social comparison, financial means is a factor, and some of the interview participants commented on the appearance of their peers' financial statuses. Informant #19 said: *"I wonder how they have the resources to travel so much,"* and Informant #13 said: *"Sometimes I wonder how these people afford to travel so frequently and do they work?!"* Comments on the financial burden of frequent travel have direct connections to conspicuous consumption and to treating travel as a commodity. Citing the financial burden of travel may also serve as an indirect way of admitting that one's peers may travel more frequently because of these reasons.

In the first phase of the study, the participants were asked about motivations to share travel photos to social networking sites. The second most popular response, after sharing with family/friends, was to brag or show off. Informant #31 said, *"I like to think that I'm sharing something that people would want to see, but in a way, it might be to boost my own ego at the same time and sort of say 'look at me'."* Informant #12 said, *"Showing off, to make everyone jealous,"* and Informant #1 said, *"To brag about where I've been and the cool things I'm doing!"* As the visual display or overt usage of a commodity to put wealth or position in evidence is a fundamental aspect of conspicuous consumption ((O'Cass & McEwen, 2004) the clear intention to share travel experiences as a means of self-presentation, these findings

confirm the use of travel experiences as a 'marker of status' among subpopulations of the millennial cohort.

5. Conclusion & Implications

This study used SNS to analyze the social relationships of millennials within the context of their travel decisions and experiences, and entrenched that while economics like value deals and time constraints certainly drive decision making, social influence and peer comparison are also major driving forces behind their travel processes. This study found that the evolved peer visibility on SNS, combined with the intricacies of the millennial mindset, forms a substantiated means for both travel motivations and social comparison among this subpopulation. Additionally, insight was obtained into the online behaviors of the millennial cohort in their travel-related motivations and decision processes.

It was found that the ways in which millennials convey their social status are not material and, consequently, the visual dimension was a major theme in this research, deeply linking traveling with posting to social networking sites, just as the visibility of social status indicators was once a key aspect of material possessions as social status indicators.

The current research confirms that online photo sharing has become a prolific aspect of online social networking, and in this environment, self-image is sought out to the degree that it is replacing previous markers of status consumption. The increased visibility of the experiences of one's peers is tantamount to envying those experiences and wanting to imitate them. Past research predicted that online photography would play a decisive role in travel-related behaviour and decisions (Lo & McKercher, 2011; Lo et al., 2011); this study not only confirms those theories, but also contributes important knowledge towards understanding the motivations of today's millennial travelers and keys to the travel habits of future generations.

This research demonstrates that marketing campaigns that make use of socialization will be more effective towards the millennial cohort. By identifying this market segment and

their travel behaviors and preferences, a tailored approach can be developed (Schewe & Meredith, 2004). No longer willing to be passive consumers, this generation wants to actively participate, co-create, and most importantly, be included as partners in the brands they choose (Fromm & Garton, 2013). More subtle marketing approaches would be effective that utilize the experiences of all travelers with the cognition that their peers will see their travel posts and that encourage specialized hashtags and as much "sharing" via SNS as possible. A significant byproduct is that this type of marketing is free to a tourism organization. Understanding the semantics of consumer decision-making is a cornerstone of marketing strategy, and tourist organizations can benefit from a better understanding of tourist choices and behaviors (Cohen, Prayag, & Moital, 2013).

Companies well begin to emerge that cater to this mentality, including tour companies that focus on photography for the purpose of online presentation, and it will become increasingly important for existing hospitality providers and operators to follow suit. Campaigns in which travelers are encouraged to share their experiences via social media with specialized hashtags will continue to be a valuable strategy for tourism practitioners.

This research has also demonstrated that among those who are not active on social media and are more difficult for marketers to reach, many still have some sort of connection with their peer group. Therefore, there is still a way to target this demographic via soft marketing techniques.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the traveler, by acknowledging this phenomenon and better understanding their own personal travel motivations, perhaps millennial travelers can reevaluate their intentions and choose more sustainable, mindful and purposeful travel behaviors. It is also possible for travelers to manage their travel expectations better, knowing that many people are posting a façade of their journeys, which may not represent their true experience.

6. Limitations & Future Studies

Common limitations in the interview process for qualitative research are that the information is filtered through the views of the informants, that the information is provided in a designated place rather than the natural setting, that the researcher's presence may bias responses, and that not all people are equally articulate and perceptive (Creswell, 2009).

The diversity of the results may well have been limited by the small size of the sample, although that size is considered adequate for qualitative research. A larger scale investigation with similar goals can be conducted to quantitatively measure the degree of travel inspiration that SNS might provide as a result of peer influence as outlined in this study.

While social comparison remains constant, the social networking idiosyncrasies of Generation Y will inevitably undergo a metamorphosis due to the ever-changing nature of technology and social networking.

The findings of this investigation have implications for future academic research. While there have been abundant studies done on the millennial cohort, research is lacking that examines the millennial trend of choosing experiences instead of material possessions. Furthermore, while there has been a great deal of research done on the online behaviors of millennials, up-to-date research is lacking on the effects of smartphone use and social networking sites, which can be particularly effective for the travel sector.

The same research can be applied both across various generational cohorts and to various cultures, as their social networking habits will most likely have wide variance. Research can be conducted to compare and contrast their social networking habits and travel behaviors.

As more regions of the world develop socially and economically, there are more international tourists than ever before. China is a prime example of a place where the deregulation of the previously abundant and stringent travel restrictions, combined with an emerging middle class that feels a growing need to display their social status (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010), has led to an explosion in Chinese tourists throughout the world. China is the next region to watch for this phenomenon as it continues to spread to new and varying regions throughout the world.

In this investigation, Instagram was found to be the most popular form of social media for sharing posts about travel. There is a valuable opportunity to conduct further research into the use of varying SNS in the travel planning process, particularly the use of Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Because the dominant social media platforms can vary by country and by region, similar regional studies can be done in places where other SNS, such as Weibo, Wechat, Taringa and VK, may be more popular. The criterion for inclusion should remain a social networking platform on which travel photos are common.

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