

## Open Trip and Backpacker Tourism Trends in the Digital Era: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Travel Businesses

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of digital technology and social media has fundamentally changed the landscape of the tourism industry, particularly in facilitating community-based collective travel practices such as open trips and backpacker tourism. This research aims to map the latest trends, characteristics of tourists, and business implications of this phenomenon through a scoping review approach based on the PRISMA-ScR framework. A total of 30 internationally indexed scientific articles (2020–2024) were systematically analyzed to explore the interaction between digital communities, online travel platforms, and the influence of travel influencers on the behavior of Millennial and Gen Z travelers. On the other hand, the existence of conventional travel agents faces the challenge of disintermediation but, at the same time, opens up opportunities for strategic collaboration with online communities and micro-influencers to develop narrative-based and community-based tour packages. The results of the research provide a conceptual contribution to the digital tourism literature and offer practical implications for industry players to adopt hybrid business models that are adaptive, inclusive, and relevant to today's digital tourism dynamics. Advanced research suggestions include an in-depth exploration of community business model design as well as the integration of artificial intelligence in personalized travel planning and recommendations.

**Keywords:** digital backpacker, open trip, scoping review, travel agent, travel influencer

### INTRODUCTION

Global tourism has undergone a major transformation in the last decade, triggered by advances in digital technology, changes in tourist behavior, and the growing expansion of online platform-based communities. One of the most striking trends is the rise of *open trips* and backpacker tourism facilitated by social media, travel platforms, and virtual communities. This concept has disrupted the dominance of the conventional tour package system, which was previously dominated by travel agencies or travel agents (Nguyen et al., 2023; Rahjasa et al., 2024).

*Open trips* are a form of open group travel where participants, who generally do not know each other beforehand, join an itinerary promoted through social media, community forums, or digital platforms. On the other hand, backpacker tourism has evolved from the classic image of low-cost adventurers to digital-savvy travelers who rely on travel apps, information from influencers, and online community networks in designing their travel plans (Chen & Huang, 2020; O'Regan, 2021). This phenomenon has become increasingly relevant in the post-pandemic era, where travelers seek flexibility, connectivity, and authentic experiences curated by fellow travelers (Campos et al., 2018; Xiang & Gretzel, 2025). In Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, the concept of *open trips* is growing rapidly alongside the increasing use of social media as a travel promotion tool and the emergence of new actors such as travel influencers and micro-travel organizers (Widiyanti & Budiarta, 2022; Rahjasa et al., 2024).

However, a comprehensive academic study of the development, characteristics, and implications of this trend is still limited, both in terms of theoretical frameworks, methodology, and literature mapping (Paris & Teye, 2010; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Previous studies have tended to focus on traditional backpacker behavior or destination promotion through social media in general, without delving deeper into the relationship between digital platforms, the tourism community, and their impact on travel business actors. Furthermore, the literature on the impact of digital transformation on travel agents remains fragmented, especially in the context of the integration of *open trips* with formal travel business systems (Gao et al., 2023; Kim & Park, 2022). In fact, the digitalization of tourism and the emergence of informal agents

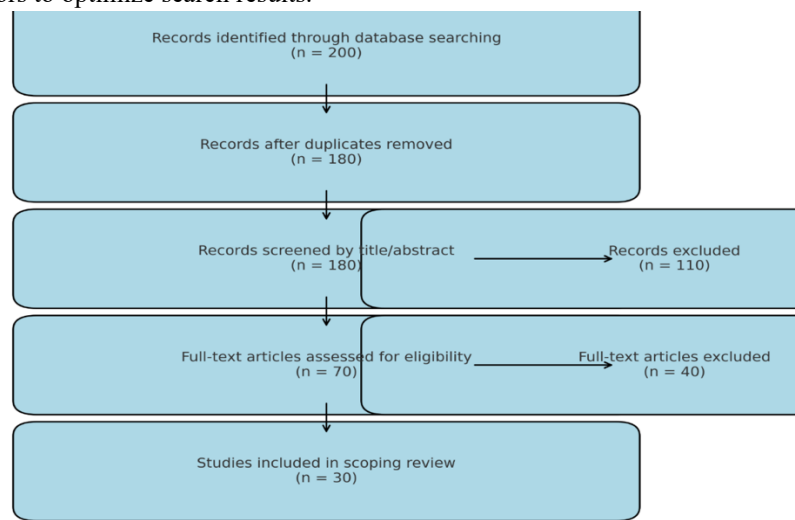
through social media have created structural disruptions to the conventional business model of travel agents (Zhu et al., 2022; Pham & Nguyen, 2024).

Through a scoping review approach, this article aims to map and analyze the trends and characteristics of *open trip* and backpacker tourism practices in today's digital tourism landscape. This research also examines in depth how online communities and social media play a role in shaping tourist behavior, both in the planning stages, decision-making, and interactions during the trip. In addition, this article critically evaluates the strategic implications of this transformation on the sustainability and adaptation of travel agent business models, particularly in the face of disintermediation challenges, changing digital consumer preferences, and collaboration opportunities with community-based and technology-based tourism actors. By mapping and synthesizing findings from literature published between 2020 and 2024, this article is expected to enrich academic discourse on innovation in tourism and provide practical insights for travel industry players to respond to digital consumer dynamics and new community-based tourism ecosystems.

## METHODOLOGY

This research uses a scoping review approach to map and analyze the literature that discusses open trip trends, backpacker tourism, digital communities in tourism, and implications for travel agent businesses in the digital era. This approach was chosen because of its exploratory and flexible nature in identifying the breadth of themes, key concepts, and research gaps in emerging fields. This method is considered suitable for examining topics that have not been systematically discussed in the scientific literature before (Munn et al., 2018). The implementation of this study follows the PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews) guidelines as developed by Tricco et al. (2018), which emphasizes the transparency and traceability of the scientific literature synthesis process.

This study begins with the formulation of research questions that focus on three main aspects: the development and characteristics of open trip and backpacker tourism in a digital context; the influence of online communities and social media on tourist behavior and decision-making; and the implications of this transformation on the sustainability and adaptation of travel agency business models. To answer this question, literature search is carried out systematically through scientific databases. Additional sources are also obtained from Google Scholar to reach relevant Indonesian articles. The search process was carried out in July 2025 using a combination of keywords such as "open trip", "backpacker tourism", "digital travel community", "travel influencer", and "travel agency disruption", which were coupled with Boolean operators to optimize search results.



**Figure 1. Prism Diagram**  
Source: Author's analysis (2025)

Each article that passed the selection was recorded in a charting data format that included information about the author, year of publication, study objectives, study area, methodological approach, and relevant key findings. Data synthesis was carried out qualitative-descriptive to identify patterns, thematic relationships, and conceptual gaps that emerged from the overall literature. A PRISMA flowchart will be presented to visually illustrate the number of articles screened and analyzed, supporting methodological transparency in this study.

**Table 1. Charting Scoping Review**

| <b>No.</b> | <b>Author &amp; Year</b>        | <b>Study Objectives</b>                                                                            | <b>Context</b> | <b>Method</b>          | <b>Key Findings</b>                                                             |
|------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1          | Audrezet et al. (2020)          | Perception of social media followers' authenticity and the implications of endorsements in tourism | International  | Content analysis       | Authenticity influences consumer trust and travel decisions.                    |
| 2          | Chen & Huang (2020)             | Perspective of the article on the evolution of backpacker tourism                                  | Global         | Conceptual article     | Modern backpackers are more digital and peer-driven.                            |
| 3          | Women-Serra & Gretzel (2020)    | The effectiveness of influencer tourism: a review of the literature and case studies               | Global         | Systematic review      | Influencers are effective in promoting global destinations.                     |
| 4          | Kapitan et al. (2020).          | Fitness of influencers and desire to travel                                                        | Global         | Quantitative surveys   | The influencer-destination alignment affects the desire to travel.              |
| 5          | Paris & Teye (2020)             | Backpacker motivation through a travel career model                                                | Global         | Survey                 | Flexibility & cultural values as long-term motivators.                          |
| 6          | Breves et al. (2021)            | A fit between the influencer and the destination brand                                             | Global         | Meta analysis          | Fit influencer-strong destinations increase engagement and conversion.          |
| 7          | O'Regan (2021)                  | The evolution of backpacking towards future tourism                                                | Global         | Theoretical review     | Emphasizing the development of technology and digital nomads.                   |
| 8          | Palaniswamy (2021)              | Social media marketing as a strategic tool for tourism businesses                                  | International  | Purposive survey       | Digital marketing effectively increases branding and engagement reach.          |
| 9          | Reichenberger & Iaquinto (2021) | Exploration of backpacker experience literature and future research agenda                         | Global         | Literature review      | Backpacking is related to the search for existence and social experience.       |
| 10         | Gao et al. (2022)               | Perception of destination authenticity through ethnic influencers                                  | Global         | Surveys & statistics   | Ethnic content increases the perception of the authenticity of the destination. |
| 11         | Han & Chen (2022)               | The influence of influencer credibility on millennials' travel intentions                          | Global         | Cross-sectional survey | Credibility and following behavior reinforce travel intentions.                 |
| 12         | Karadeniz et al. (2022)         | Travel influencer advertising in Turkey and its effect on consumer perception                      | Turkey         | Quantitative studies   | Influencer content influences the perception and intent of visits.              |
| 13         | Latif et al. (2022)             | Influencer content on Instagram and                                                                | International  | Quantitative surveys   | Envy emotions trigger the intention                                             |

| No. | Author & Year               | Study Objectives                                                                   | Context         | Method                    | Key Findings                                                                         |
|-----|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|     |                             | 'wanderlust' triggers & impact mitigation                                          |                 |                           | to travel, mitigated by an awareness of cultural values.                             |
| 14  | Nolte et al. (2022)         | The effect of influencer content on backpackers' decisions                         | Global          | Surveys and interviews    | Detailed content and community influence backpackers' decisions on open trips.       |
| 15  | Study Gen Z (2022)          | Characteristics of influencer content that influence Gen Z to choose a destination | Global          | Survey                    | Destination details and budget tips are the main factors of Gen Z's inspiration.     |
| 16  | Iswanto et al. (2023)       | The role of influencers in destination digital marketing post-COVID-19             | Global          | Literature review         | Lack of post-pandemic influencer articles; Further research exploration is needed.   |
| 17  | Maghsoudi et al. (2023)     | Analysis of social networks of tourism site user behavior                          | Iran            | Social network analysis   | Digital community structure in tour planning and booking.                            |
| 18  | Nguyen et al. (2023)        | Credibility of travel vlogs' sources and inspiration for travel planning           | International   | Survey (PLS-SEM)          | Influencers increase inspiration and credibility in travel planning.                 |
| 19  | Sustainability (2023)       | The effect of influencers on tourism sustainability perspectives                   | International   | Literature review         | Influencers are helping to shape the narrative of sustainable tourism post-COVID-19. |
| 20  | Widiyanti & Budiarta (2023) | Digital marketing strategy for open trips in Indonesia                             | Bali, Indonesia | Field studies             | Digital micro-agencies are increasing; Tourist participation is increasingly open.   |
| 21  | Xiang & Gretzel (2023)      | Open trips and digital nomad tourism as peer community trends                      | Global          | Literature review         | Co-creation and peer networking support the growth of modern open trips.             |
| 22  | Zhu et al. (2023)           | Celebrity engagement on TikTok on travel intent                                    | Australia       | Mixed-method (fsQCA, SEM) | Informativeness and persuasion influence destination decisions.                      |
| 23  | Lan et al. (2024)           | LLM model for destination expectation extraction from UGC                          | Global          | Computational analysis    | Social/leisure expectations guide engagement and travel planning.                    |
| 24  | Nakhon & Assenov (2024)     | Social media influencer travel content strategy in Thailand                        | Thailand        | Qualitative interviews    | Random and interactive photo/video based posts and follower connections.             |
| 25  | Pham & Nguyen (2024)        | Bibliometric analysis of digital nomads and open trips in Southeast Asia           | Southeast Asia  | Bibliometric review       | Trends are rising and the digital community is growing rapidly.                      |

| No. | Author & Year            | Study Objectives                                                          | Context         | Method                 | Key Findings                                                                         |
|-----|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 26  | Rahjasa et al. (2024)    | The influence of travel influencers and e-WOM on travel decisions to Ubud | Bali, Indonesia | Qualitative interviews | Local influencers shape the image of the destination and the intention of the visit. |
| 27  | Xu & Pratt (2024)        | Travel influencers and self-congruence towards travel intentions          | Global          | Survey                 | Self-congruence strengthens travel intentions after exposure to travel content.      |
| 28  | Illicic & Webster (2024) | Attachment to influencers and purchase intent in the context of tourism   | Global          | Quantitative surveys   | Emotional attachment drives purchase decisions and destination visits.               |
| 29  | Campos et al. (2024)     | Co-creation in travel experiences                                         | Global          | Literature review      | Tourists actively create travel experiences with providers and others.               |
| 30  | Cohen (2024)             | Backpackers as an existential lifestyle and tourists                      | Global          | Literature review      | Backpacking is positioned as a lifestyle, not just a form of travel.                 |

Source: Author's analysis (2025)

The articles included in this study are limited to scientific publications published between 2020 and 2024 and discuss aspects of digitalization in tourism related to the main themes of the study. Articles that are editorial, opinionary, or irrelevant to the focus of the study are excluded from the analysis process. The selection was carried out in three stages: initial screening based on titles and abstracts, evaluation of the full text of the selected articles, and final selection based on contribution to the focus of the study. This process produces a number of main articles that are then analyzed thematically.

## RESULTS

### Findings & Discussion

#### The Evolution of Open Trips in the Digital Era

The concept of open trips began as a form of group travel that was open to anyone through informal promotional platforms—generally on social media or forums—local channels. In the latest digital developments, this concept is increasingly digitized and spread through platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. Open trips differ from traditional tour packages in that they are more flexible, with participants from different backgrounds who did not know each other before.

The role of social media is very central. Influencers or travel community owners often promote destinations through inspirational visual uploads on Instagram, WhatsApp groups, and even short videos on TikTok. The content features package itineraries as well as real-time testimonials, thus triggering travel aspirations (Latif et al., 2022). TikTok in particular is accelerating the spread of destination appeal through viral effects, especially among young digital-savvy audiences.

In open trips, important actors appear: ranging from travel community organizers, micro-travel agents, to travel influencers. Travel communities play a role in initiating group planning and coordination, while micro-travel agents are often responsible for managing simple logistics. Meanwhile, local influencers or online communities act as narrative and visual connectors that shape the image of destinations (Rahjasa et al., 2024).

#### The Influence of Digital Influencers on Travel Intention

The results of the scoping review show that travel influencer content on social media platforms, especially Instagram, plays a crucial role in shaping tourist intentions through the mechanism of benign envy, which is a feeling of envy that motivates and inspires the act of visiting a destination (Latif et al., 2022). The study revealed that exposure to destination images and videos by influencers not only increases travel desire, but also triggers healthy social comparisons that reinforce travel decisions. Furthermore, Han and Chen (2022) emphasize the importance of influencer credibility as

a key factor in strengthening tourists' attitudes towards advertised destinations. They found that the level of trust, expertise, and suitability of influencers' imagery significantly increased the intention of tourist visits, especially among millennials who are very active on social media.

Xu and Pratt (2018) propose the concept of self-congruence, which is the compatibility between consumers' self-values and the image conveyed by influencers. This study shows that when followers feel their image is in line with the influencer's, the intention to travel increases significantly after exposure to influencer content. This combination of trust and identity compatibility strengthens the process of meaning and motivation for departure.

Research by Rahjasa et. al. (2024) provides further empirical confirmation in the context of the Ubud, Bali area that tourists tend to rely on social media reviews and travel influencer recommendations when planning their visits. Through interviews with 17 tourists, the results of the study found that most respondents felt motivated to visit Ubud after being exposed to influencer content that triggered the phenomenon of travel envy (Rahjasa et al., 2024). These findings show that local influencers not only create travel aspirations, but also shape the image of destinations through visual and narrative experiences that are trusted by their audiences.

### **Characteristics of Backpacker Tourism Modern**

Backpackers in the digital age—especially Gen Z and Millennials—tend to have a digital-savvy profile: they rely on online information, mobile apps, and peer recommendations to plan trips. They love off-the-beaten-track destinations and authentic local experiences. The planning is flexible and often self-booked (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

Backpackers' digital consumption behaviors highlight self-booking strategies, schedule flexibility, and the search for authentic experiences such as homestays, street food, or local communities. They often join open trips because they allow for peer-to-peer interaction and social connectedness during the trip (Campos et al., 2018; Xiang & Gretzel, 2023).

The low-budget tourism phenomenon is growing with peer-to-peer recommendations. Travelers share cost-effective tips, cheap accommodations, and creative itineraries through online communities. This model of recommendation partially replaces the role of traditional agents, reinforcing backpackers' motivation to be more independent and collaborative (Pham & Nguyen, 2024).

### **Customer Journey and Travel Decision Dynamics**

Fuller et al. (2023) systematically describe a customer journey model that covers all stages of traveler decision, from awareness, consideration, to evaluation and purchase decision. They highlight how influencers play a role at each of these points: for example, inspirational content at the beginning forms awareness, reviews by influencers drive the consideration stage, and post-trip testimonials reinforce purchasing decisions.

Guerreiro et al. (2024) reinforce this finding by explaining that parasocial relationships between influencers and followers can increase emotional engagement at each touchpoint. Viewers often permeate the narrative of influencers as if they came from a personal relationship, strengthening the process of identifying, considering, and evaluating the destination.

Thus, both studies highlight that influencers are not just a visual promotional tool, but a "digital travel guide" that facilitates the consumer's transition from passive viewers to active decision agents. The modern open trip and backpacker tourism model leverages this strategy to build a more authentic and interactive destination narrative.

### **Co-creation and the Role of Digital Communities**

Campos et al. (2018) stated that tourists now play an active role in the process of creating tourist experiences (co-creation), not just passive consumers. This model includes community interaction, contribution to itinerary development, and participation in destination evaluation, resulting in a more personalized and meaningful experience.

Xiang and Gretzel (2023) outline that peer-to-peer digital communities facilitate open trips and backpacker tourism as a collective movement. In this context, tourists share information, recommendations, and logistical support informally, so that the role of traditional travel agents becomes decentralized but still provides community value.

As a result, tourism business models have become more flexible and collaborative. Digital communities not only simplify access to information, but also create a collective identity, based on experience. This confirms that modern open trips are not only an alternative to tourism, but part of a digital tourism ecosystem that prioritizes participation, openness, and co-creation.

### **Implications for Travel Agents: Opportunities and Challenges**

A study by Widiyanti and Budiarta (2022) shows that traditional travel agents are facing significant disruption due to the increasing practice of open trips organized by digital communities. With lower costs and high flexibility, open trip targets market segments previously reached by conventional travel agent packages.

However, there are adaptive opportunities for agents adopting hybrid business models. For example, Pham and Nguyen (2024) propose the integration of influencer marketing as well as an open trip platform, where agents collaborate with influencers to craft a transparent and community-based package. This can increase competitiveness and expand the reach of the digital market.

Furthermore, Latif et al. (2022) added that agents who adopt sustainability narratives integratively—both in influencer content and product storytelling—can create strategic differentiation and attract tourists who have a pro-environmental orientation. The combination of influencer credibility and sustainability narrative has proven effective in strengthening the image of the destination.

### Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

Although open trips and backpacker tourism are growing massively in practice, there is **an academic gap** related to in-depth scientific studies around open trips specifically—particularly in the context of hybrid business models, digital community interactions, and the integration of AI in personal itineraries (Pham & Nguyen, 2024).

Further research is very potential in three domains: (1) **new business models** that combine travel agents with digital communities; (2) **travelers' digital** behaviors, such as personalization preferences and community interactions; and (3) **the role of artificial intelligence (AI)** in the creation of custom itineraries that are responsive to individual profiles.

### CONCLUSION

This study has explored the dynamics of the development of open trip and backpacker tourism in the context of the digital era through a scoping review approach of the latest 30 scientific articles (2020–2024). The findings show that the practice of open trips has undergone significant transformation through the integration of digital technology, social media, and online communities. This travel model not only offers cost efficiency and flexibility, but also opens up a wide space for social participation, especially for Millennials and Gen Z who have a preference for authentic, spontaneous, and socially connected travel experiences. The characteristics of the modern backpacker tourist reinforce the paradigm shift from traditional tour packages to community-based systems and digital networks. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp Group, and online community forums act as spaces for social interaction and information exchange that help shape travel preferences and decisions. Meanwhile, digital reviews and itinerary sharing provide a new dimension to destination perception and social validation between tourists. The role of influencers has also been shown to be significant in shaping travel aspirations, creating destination images, and strengthening travel purchasing decisions, as reinforced in the study by Rahjasa et al. (2024). For academics, this study enriches the literature on the transformation of digital traveller behavior and offers a conceptual basis for further studies of new forms of community-based tourism intermediaries. For industry practitioners, especially travel agents, these findings underscore the importance of adopting a hybrid approach that combines the flexibility of open trips with service professionalism. Travel agents are encouraged to collaborate with the travel community, utilize the power of influencer narratives, and integrate digital technology in the preparation and promotion of tour packages. Practical recommendations for business actors include: (1) developing a community-based open trip package model with a flexible and transparent scheme; (2) strategic partnerships with travel influencers and micro-community leaders; and (3) digitization of reservation systems and customer interaction to be more responsive to the needs of the new generation of travelers. As for the next research, it is recommended to conduct an in-depth exploration of community-based business models in the tourism sector, the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on itinerary personalization, and an empirical study on the influence of digital peer recommendations on the conversion of travel intent. In addition, longitudinal research on the transformation of the role of travel agents in facing digital disintermediation is also an important agenda in the context of tourism business sustainability.

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