

## Traveling without money: deserving ‘drifters’ or panhandling 2.0?

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### ABSTRACT

The controversial phenomenon of travelling without money, known as ‘beg-packing’, challenges conventional notions of travel. Our study explores the evolving landscape of beg-packing, including its digital manifestation as ‘e-beg-packing’. We explore the connection between drifters and beg-packers, emphasizing strategies like selling photos, staying with locals, and eliciting sympathy. To do so, we delve into how beg-packers construct narratives on crowdfunding platforms like GoFundMe and the public perception of the practice on Instagram. The study indicates that beg-packers face stigma akin to drifters, with comments favouring working and saving for travel, raising questions about deservingness and privilege. Gratitude plays a role in donor perception, with an expectation of continuous updates fostering social media relationships. However, the potential for exploitation and vulnerability in e-beg-packing requires further exploration, especially concerning the limits of reciprocity and boundary-setting. In conclusion, this study embraces a multifaceted approach to dissect beg-packing, revealing its diverse nature and offering new insights into the relationship between reciprocity and travel. We present insights into trends, motivations, financial needs, and public sentiment, shedding light on the complexities of this phenomenon. By understanding the complexities of this practice, we aim to foster a more grounded and effective response to this evolving travel phenomenon.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 September 2023  
Accepted 28 November 2023

### KEYWORDS

Beg-packing; e-beg-packing; reciprocity; netnography

### Introduction

‘Travel is never a matter of money, but of courage’ (Coelho, 2010, p. 10). This rings true regarding the phenomenon of beg-packing; and, more specifically, the courage (for some) or cheek (for others) to solicit donations to fund one’s travels. ‘Beg-packing’ is a *port-manteau* of ‘begging’ and ‘backpacking’. It refers to individuals who beg (directly or indirectly), perform, busk, or sell items in public spaces to fund or extend their trip (Bernstein, 2019). These individuals are assumed to be young Westerners holding signs with messages resembling ‘Please help fund my travel’ (Tolkach et al., 2019, p. 17). More recently, this solicitation of funds to travel has found an online outlet through GoFundMe, a crowdfunding platform that usually allows people to raise money for events and charitable causes and includes a specific ‘Travel’ section where individuals ask others to fund their travels. Tomazos (2022, p. 263) uses the term Panhandling 2.0 to describe individuals using social media and websites such as GoFundMe to raise funds online for travelling. It represents a new e-manifestation of beg-

packing. Any individual engaging in this is hereby referred to as an ‘e-beg-packer’.

In the limited literature, there is consensus that beg-packers are portrayed negatively as wealthy white Westerners exercising privileges of race, class, and nationality (Bernstein, 2019; Tolkach et al., 2019), acting destructively within communities, and being ‘shameless and disrespectful’ (Bernstein, 2019, p. 262). This is evident by comments on a YouTube video about beg-packers; ‘Just scumbags who are like cry-babies. Why should I pay for someone with no financial plan and a general sense of planning?’ (Tolkach & Pratt, 2021, p. 5). Nevertheless, despite media portrayals, Bernstein (2019) and Tolkach et al. (2019) found beg-packers are primarily Eastern Europeans, lacking the required resources or skills for a ‘typical expat’ position. Thus, the media’s assumption that beg-packers are mostly Westerners is flawed, and all beg-packers should not be tarred with the same brush. Furthermore, many beg-packers come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are not white, and are escaping conflict and danger (Tolkach et al., 2019).

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Only two journal articles specifically address beg-packing (Bernstein, 2019; Tolkach et al., 2019), and both are set within Asia. Both beg-packing articles call for extensions to their research. Bernstein (2019) notes a need for further research into moral and ethical issues relating to beg-packing, push-pull factors for beg-packers, beg-packer demographics, and a better understanding of online platforms' role in beg-packing. Tolkach et al. (2019) focused on Hong Kong, so they request further research into beg-packing elsewhere, specifically poorer areas, where beg-packers 'may be viewed differently' (Tolkach et al., 2019, p. 31), and the impact of perceived equitable exchanges and sympathy on beg-packer donations.

## Reviewing motivators of beg-packing

### *Drivers and key trends: nothing new under the sun*

Tolkach et al. (2019) propose that beg-packing awareness is generated through WOM on travel forums, blogs and social media. In addition, while some intend to beg-pack, others become aware of beg-packing whilst abroad, subsequently trying it to extend their trip. This is unsurprising as one-third of Instagram users are 18–29 (Dumas et al., 2017), aligning with beg-packers age demographics. Some travel influencers who are unsuccessful financially (Tomazos, 2022) share GoFundMe links where they expect their followers to contribute to their travels. This new means of funding a trip may differ in its context, but there is a long tradition of travelling without funds. Adler (1985) notes how, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, young American and European working-class groups known as 'tramps', 'vagabonds', 'travellers', and 'hobos' travelled regularly searching for temporary employment without a permanent residence. Some of them had to walk 20 kilometres a day to find shelter and food at a workhouse ('spike') since they were not allowed to stay in the same place more than once a month (Orwell, 1933, p. 253). At about the same time, other travellers were motivated by wanderlust, sight-seeing, adventure, and exploring new countries (Gray, 1931). Cohen (2004) links tramps to backpackers, as many reluctantly took temporary work or had no desire to work and sold photos to fund their trip. Contemporary work advised how to tramp on a budget using strategies such as fraternising, living with locals, and wearing 'shabby' clothing to elicit sympathy (Meriwether, 1887; Taylor, 1848). Over time, tramping became romanticised as they disturbed and titillated the establishment with their otherness and social

identity through travel. Enthralled by this, young middle-class people began taking advantage of the travel institutions and practices of low-income people (Adler, 1985), which gave birth to the phenomena of backpacking and, more recently, beg-packing.

Previously outlined associations between backpackers and 'drifters' have been tied to beg-packers (Tolkach et al., 2019), with drifters known for begging, scavenging, and sharing food and lodging with acquaintances (Cohen, 1973). Most drifters were young Westerners feeling alienated within their societies, travelling to gain a new perspective on life (Cohen, 2004). This can be partially attributed to the media and romanticisation of backpacking (Zhang et al., 2017) and its eventual proliferation and alignment with the blueprinting principles of mass tourism (Cohen, 2003; O'Reilly, 2006; Tomazos, 2016). However, some of the strategies employed by beg-packers have alienated and stigmatised this practice. Some beg-packers use local facilities for people without housing, run scams or push the locals' hospitality to its limits (Tolkach et al., 2019; Tomazos, 2020).

Like drifters in the past, beg-packers are stigmatised and often abused online (Tomazos, 2020). Goffman (1963) describes stigma as individuals being disqualified from full social acceptance. Social stigma is linked to a trait deviating from social norms (Elliott et al., 1982). Contemporary 'drifters' are stigmatised for being 'lazy' and 'not wanting to work', with some disowned by their families (Bader & Baker, 2019; Giazitzoglu, 2014). This theme rings true for beg-packers, with the added element of privilege and deservingness.

### *Privilege and deservingness*

Arneson (2008) notes that individual deservingness is irrelevant to justice and immeasurable. However, van Oorschot (2000) argues that assessing deservingness is based upon five criteria: (a) level and severity of need, (b) level of control over neediness (if responsible for their own situation, individuals are less deserving); (c) the criteria of identity (those with familial or friendship ties or similar nationalities, are perceived as more deserving); (d) reciprocity, if the donor receives something in return; and (e) attitude such as gratefulness. Whilst these dimensions are typically applied to social welfare, they are relevant to this study as they reflect the dynamic between prospective donors and beg-packers to some extent.

McCabe and Diekmann (2015) outline that not everyone has simple access to travel, and due to widening inequality gaps, tourism is a social right rather than a fundamental human right that is dictated by relative privilege. The minimum amount of money a beg-packer

could leave their country with is a travel fare (Tolkach et al., 2019), unless hitchhiking, and depending on the distance or opportunity cost of travel (e.g. leaving a stable job), this can be unattainable for many. Therefore, beg-packing requires some economic or leisure time privilege (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Duffy, 2019; Waller & Lea, 1999).

Under relative privilege, whilst regular travel can be the norm in one country, it could be considered a luxury in other countries, emphasising links between economic privilege and travel (Rodriguez, 2022). The prosperity and privilege are reflected in the priority setting and choices of privileged Westerners compared to impoverished people with little choice. To critics, 'finding oneself' is a luxury only attainable for the affluent, supporting arguments around white privilege and class (Bernstein, 2019; Tomazos, 2020). However, there is evidence that some beg-packers seek safety through beg-packing to escape from war-torn areas back home (Tolkach et al., 2019). War refugees aside, this narrative of choice and privilege is integral to the interaction between beg-packers and others.

## Reviewing relationships and controversies surrounding beg-packing

### *Theorising beggar-donor relations in a beg-packing context*

Despite significant literature concerning beggar-donor relations (Henry, 2009; Lynch, 2005), Bernstein (2019) calls for further research surrounding beg-packer-donor relations. In most tourist settings, beggars are considered a nuisance (Henry, 2009; Smith, 2005; Swanson, 2007). This could be linked to media portrayals of beggars and their stereotypical associations with substance and alcohol abuse (Kennedy & Fitzpatrick, 2001; Lynch, 2005; Moen, 2014; Muñoz & Potter, 2014). However, local beggars asking relatively wealthy tourists for money is the norm, and often the focus of the academic literature, with the local beggars employing various strategies to evoke sympathy and donations from the tourists (Muñoz & Potter, 2014). The success of these beggars creates the phenomenon of beggarism, where begging is no longer a survival activity but a rather lucrative endeavour in places like London, Paris, San Francisco and Athens (Andriotis, 2016), but also Pakistan, China, Nigeria and India (Bukoye, 2015; Chockalingam & Ganesh, 2010; Pathirana & Gnanapala, 2015).

According to the dominant liberal humanist perspective, failing to care about those in need demonstrates a deficiency of moral character. This is understood by the

beggars who engage in different forms of begging to make the tourists part with their change: passive begging (e.g. seated or down on knees holding a cup), irritating begging (e.g. following tourists until they relent); amusing begging (e.g. children trying to amuse tourists) (Brito, 2013); table-to-table beggars (e.g. in cafes and restaurants) (Andriotis, 2016); performing beggars (e.g. playing an instrument or singing) (Christiana & Wesnawa, 2017); helper-beggars (e.g. offering some service) (Lu, 1999), and fraudulent beggars (e.g. shamming disabilities to evoke pity) (Erskine & McIntosh, 1999). This proliferation of begging and beggars has turned beggarism into a form of tourist attraction, where tourists seek to interact and take pictures of them in the name of authenticity and to find the 'other' (Andriotis, 2016; Brito, 2013; Bukoye, 2015), but also a source of irritation and harassment, especially in the case of aggressive begging (Andriotis, 2016; Ishida et al., 2016).

Hardin's (1990) theory of beggar-donor interactions highlights that the donor should lose less than what the beggar benefits from their beneficence, raising issues around reciprocity and the donor's means relative to the beggar (McIntosh & Erskine, 2000; Simmel, 1971). Erlandsson et al. (2019) find beggars in Sweden selling magazines and busking to provide a service for passers-by for a more equitable exchange. While this paper does not offer an in-depth explanation into Social Exchange Theory, it is useful to note that individuals conduct a cost-benefit analysis regarding their input to an exchange versus what they receive in return (van den Bos, 2001; Woosnam & Norman, 2010). Yet, it can be argued that it is preposterous to frame begging encounters in monetary terms, given the small amounts of change that beggars receive from individuals (Wardhaugh & Jones, 1999). While fair, it applies to begging in London; in a tourism context, though, one dollar in the streets of Phnom Penh would go much further, never mind tens of dollars collected daily in places where the wages are much lower. In a similar context, beg-packing (with the exception of places like Hong Kong or Singapore) stands as a paradox where the begging Westerners are soliciting donations in countries where the locals' relative income would be lower than that of the average Westerner and, therefore, inequitable. Does this make these beggars abhorrent to the locals? Not in relatively affluent destinations like Hong Kong. Tolkach et al. (2019) show that most Hong Kong locals feel guilty for being unable to donate or feel sorry for beg-packers. Given the historical inertia and the concept of 'face', it could be argued that they perceive beg-packing as the act of desperate and humiliated people. Sympathy can

be interpreted differently depending on culture (Qiao et al., 2016; Shara et al., 2020). For example, in many religions, giving alms to strangers indicates a donor's goodness (David, 2011; Jordan, 1999). This links to Henry's (2009) point that begging is a performance exploiting critical cultural scripts and anxieties.

Besides passive begging, beg-packers also employ performative strategies, like busking. Tolkach et al. (2019) found that locals viewed buskers as more trustworthy and deserving of donations as they contribute to the atmosphere. Thus, good quality music in return for a small donation could be perceived as equitable. However, one newspaper article tells of noise complaints and native buskers suffering at the hands of beg-packers (De Luce, 2019). Tyler (2008) proposes that when donors perceive an exchange as unfair, they resort to neutralisation techniques, like sharing the story via WOM or social media.

### **Controversy and responses to beg-packing**

As discussed earlier, beg-backing is problematic in market economy terms as it is viewed as asking something for nothing (Gouldner, 1973). Tolkach et al. (2019) found that there is an expectation that beg-packers should not just take, but they should give back to local communities somehow, either through performance, philanthropic activities, or a smile. However, beg-packing research is still far from capable of answering questions about what local communities think of the beg-packers. While biased, multiple news articles often tell of beg-packers infuriating locals, behaving poorly, and using facilities for the poor, such as showers and soup kitchens (Bernstein, 2019; Tolkach et al., 2019; Tomazos, 2020). This negative portrayal and some bad actors on the part of the beg-packers have led to a backlash. Countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Hong Kong (De Luce, 2019; Gibson, 2019) have banned or discouraged beg-packers on the grounds of not contributing sufficiently to the economy or gross national happiness (Berto, 2018).

### **GoFundMe and panhandling 2.0**

GoFundMe is the largest online crowdfunding platform, generating over \$140 Million in monthly donations (GoFundMe, 2023). The platform is recognised as a very effective way to mobilise an army of donors, especially when there is a narrative that people can get behind (Solomon et al., 2016). What is key in this process is for the person asking for help to appear worthy of support or deserving of the support of others. As Paulus and Roberts (2018) put it, those who

ask for donations use '*discursive tactics to manage identity and present the person in need, and situation as worthy of support*' (2018, p.67). This narrative is usually woven in the platform's 'Tell your Story' section, where potential donors can become aware of the cause or the person who needs their support. GoFundMe is recognised as an effective way to crowdfund travel. Initially used for school trips and volunteer travel (Craw, 2019), what is particularly interesting is how requests have shifted away from good causes and a humanitarian narrative and have gravitated towards personal travel experiences, or what can be understood as exercising selfhood and finding meaning through 'projects of the self', inspired by a culture of narcissism (Lambert et al., 2014; Lasch, 2018).

## **Method**

### **Research design**

Existing beg-packing studies involve field research in Asia (Bernstein, 2019; Tolkach et al., 2019) and netnography (Tolkach & Pratt, 2021; Tomazos, 2020). Taking a social constructivist approach, this study combines interpretivist and constructivist philosophies to examine individual interpretation and the impact of social, cultural, and political institutions on this interpretation, considering the multiple emerging locally-specific realities (Chapman & McNeill, 2005). Given that the setting for the study is virtual, netnography is deemed the most appropriate interpretivist method (Lang et al., 2014) to collect and analyse online user-generated content (UGC).

Netnography is a form of qualitative research studying interactions within online cultures and communities, such as social media, as distinct social phenomena. Netnography has three fundamental elements: investigation, interaction, and immersion. It partly resembles ethnography's focus on understanding the world as a cultural matter. However, it is unique in studying digital traces. Whilst researchers often view netnography sceptically due to unfamiliarity with the method and a lack of confidence in its use (Mkono & Markwell, 2014), it is widely used across various disciplines, including computer science, psychology, nursing, and hospitality and tourism studies (Kozinets, 2019).

The netnographic method involves six steps: research planning, entrée, data collection, data analysis, ethical standards, and research representation (Kozinets, 2019). Whilst limiting netnography to passive monitoring of online communities threatens its depth and immersion (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2019; Tavakoli & Mura, 2018), this study uses passive netnography and

open content as it fits the objective of delivering insight to understand the meanings and reasoning behind beg-packer and donor behaviour. Netnographers must determine the communities and sources that will provide relevant information for their research (Cherif & Miled, 2013; Holsti, 1969). Sampling is a critical aspect of UGC research. Compared to other traditional research methods, UGC analysis has several advantages, from data availability to data collection speed and simplicity (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015).

As such, the purpose of this netnographic study is two-fold: (1) to explore how 'beg-packers' create a narrative around their potential travel when crowdfunding, and (2) to understand the public perception of 'beg-packers'. Using a combination of GoFundMe and Instagram provides a well-rounded perspective on the phenomenon of beg-packing. GoFundMe provides perspective on personal narratives, motivations, and the financial needs of beg-packers related to their specific circumstances. On the other hand, reviewing Instagram posts through hashtags allows for aggregating a wide range of UGC, allowing us to examine trends, patterns, and sentiments around beg-packing in a more organic and unfiltered way. By combining the visual content and wider views expressed on Instagram with the textual narratives from GoFundMe, we can bridge the gap between the perception of beg-packing and the underlying motivations, resulting in a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

GoFundMe was deemed appropriate for evaluation as it is often used by individuals rather than businesses (Kim, 2018), allowing them to request funds for specific events (Radu & McManus, 2018). While GoFundMe is relatively new, some studies have used netnography to analyse the platform's content and the profile of those who post on it (Klein et al., 2020; Tsimalis et al., 2022). Previous studies have qualitatively evaluated GoFundMe requests for a variety of contexts, for example, disaster relief (Radu & McManus, 2018), domestic violence (Radu & McManus, 2018), illness (Tanner et al., 2019), and car purchases (Klein et al., 2020). There has been little consideration of such in the context of tourism, where there is a growing interest in the use of crowdfunding from the supply side (Kim et al., 2020). This study undertakes a qualitative analysis of GoFundMe requests from potential travellers.

In line with promotion from GoFundMe, Instagram is recommended to share these funding requests with a larger audience (GoFundMe, 2023), but it also provides a more holistic perspective. Several scholars note the merits of using Instagram in contemporary tourism research. Silva et al. (2013) suggest that cultural behaviours can be traced through temporal photo-sharing

patterns, and others consider Instagram the most representative visual-oriented social networking site (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Yang, 2021). Providing vast data, UGC helps identify emerging niche markets and trends in tourist experiences and behaviour (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). Almost 80% of 12–24-year-olds use Instagram globally (Huang & Su, 2018; McGrath, 2022), and over half of Instagram users are 34 or younger (Dixon, 2022). This aligns with the needs of this study as it reflects the beg-packers' age demographics (Bernstein, 2019).

### Data collection

The data was collected in early 2023 using GoFundMe and Instagram. On the GoFundMe platform, the study accessed all the posts in the travel section to understand travel-related donations and donors. In that section, there are over 500 fundraisers exchanging thousands of posts. Their majority are mission-related, schools, and what are described as bucket-list trips. After an initial analysis, the 587 most relevant posts to this study emerged as the themes of 'backpack', 'backpacking', and 'backpacker' (see Table 1). Not surprisingly, beg-packing was not mentioned on the platform, but it is clear that the posters using backpack-related themes are engaging in what can only be described as panhandling 2.0.

In relation to Instagram, specific beg-packing-related hashtags were used as prompts. The results of this search are illustrated in Table 1. These posts were captured and transferred to a database for analysis. From the hashtags #beg-packing, #beg-packers, and #beg-packer, 3,436 posts were collected and analysed. It must be noted that the study excluded hashtags with a bias in their title, like #beg-packingsucks or #loser-beg-packers. The data collection provided insightful images, captions and comments analysed to deliver insight into public perceptions of beg-packers.

While random or probability sampling is often preferred for a representative sample (Chapman & McNeill, 2005), this is not possible on Instagram as its' algorithm determines which images users see based on image popularity and previous activity (Kumar, 2018). Therefore, this study uses purposive sampling to

**Table 1.** Data search terms.

	Search term	Posts returned
Instagram	#begpacking	356
	#begpackers	2200
	#begpacker	880
GoFundMe	'backpacker'	219
	'backpacking'	171
	'backpack'	197

select UGC data addressing the research questions (Lu & Stephenkova, 2015). This approach also allows researchers to reach otherwise hard-to-reach groups (Kozinets, 2019).

## Analysis and findings

The analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) widely-referenced six-step approach to thematic analysis and King and Brooks's (2018) approach to defining themes and organising them into a structure illustrating their conceptual relationships.

Two Excel documents were used for coding – one for GoFundMe and another for Instagram. The generated codes, subthemes, and themes identified patterns and trends, creating an overall review of the raw data and its components. The first stage drew 74 codes and 26 sub-themes dictated from the exact text within the captured posts. Following the coding of sub-themes, the literature was cross-compared to link the theory to the data presented through coded analysis organically (axial coding) (Blair, 2015). Using axial coding, selected quotes with significant importance are used to illustrate the 10 key themes (including subthemes) (see Table 2).

## Motivation

Is travel a luxury or a right? Regardless of where one stands, beg-packers and e-beg-packers feel they will benefit from travelling, posting about personal development growth, and fulfilling their wanderlust.

This trip is an investment in our personal development and growth. (GoFundMe#57)

We should probably all start living. Every day on this earth is a gift (Instagram#363)

I am going to do something that I want to do - make memories, learn about myself, reconnect with nature, and refocus my direction in life. (GoFundMe#39)

Help me heighten my self-growth to become the best me I can be. (Instagram#139)

**Table 2.** Key themes and subthemes.

Key themes	Sub-themes
Motivation	Personal growth, wanderlust
Sympathy	Illness, difficult circumstances, bucket list
Reciprocity	Exchange for donation, selling
Privilege	Self-awareness, luxury, perspective
Stigma	Raising awareness, bias, abuse, sarcasm
Exploitation	hospitality, displacing local beggars
Culture	Language, immersion
Gratitude	Grateful to donors, cosmopolitanism
Budgeting	Lack of planning, accommodation, risks
Narrative	Social media, local backlash, local economy

Choices like these are essential for my growth. (GoFundMe#58)

## Sympathy

Narratives such as escaping war and travelling for necessity may elicit sympathy and perceived deservingness of donations. Given the timing of the study, some posts linked the war in Ukraine to people stranded and trying to beg-pack to continue to travel, as going home would mean facing devastation or being conscripted to fight.

maybe the situation of their home country forced them to make the move there - war, lack of opportunity. (Instagram#23)

These boys have no choice? I'm in Cambodia and the Russian beg-packers are trying to stay here cause they do not want to fight. (Instagram#43).

Other posts demonstrate a more philosophical attitude that concedes that people simply do what they must do, while some distinguish between undeserving beg-packers and deserving refugees. Interestingly, post 263 is comfortable with the mistreatment of beg-packers.

people go through conditions that make them do what they gotta do to stay alive. (Instagram#38)

it's a shame to equate migrants to beg-packers. Beg-packers have good reason to be mistreated, migrants don't. (Instagram#263)

On the GoFundMe platform, the findings show that a range of narratives were used to elicit or express sympathy. Below are examples of different narratives and a sample table put together by the author to show a single-day snapshot of how worthy or deserving circumstances may contribute to the donation of travel support (see Table 3). While there are a range of deserving reasons for people to ask for donations to travel as part of their bucket-list or fulfilling a dream of a life that is cut short by illness. Working on or volunteering for a sustainability or climate emergency cause is a

**Table 3.** Examples of narrative and money raised.

Narrative	Fundraiser Rank.	Amount Raised/Goal
Cancer/terminal illness	#1	\$1,850/\$15,000
	#37	\$6,615/\$12,500
	#65	\$36,152/\$20,000
	#4	\$2,380/\$10,000
Sustainability	#10	\$350/\$10,000
	#57	\$570/\$3,000
	#59	\$1,665/\$1,000
Religious Travel	#68	\$3,980/\$7,000
	#7	\$750/\$3,000
	#14	\$225/\$1,750
	#31	\$2,370/\$4,500
	#64	\$1,360/\$2,000

very successful narrative to elicit donations, while religion and religious travel is also a very potent narrative with donors.

### *Gratitude and reciprocity*

This was another theme that emerged from the analysis of the data. Despite controversies around privilege and exploitation (outlined in the theory section), gratitude was prominent on Instagram posts, messages and signs saying 'thank you!' and on the GoFundMe platform, with recipients eager to reciprocate with letters of thank you.

I will include each of you in a personal thank you letter. (GoFundMe#13)

Thank you for helping me achieve this goal and make memories of a lifetime. (GoFundMe#18)

Thank you for your understanding and support of this epic adventure. (GoFundMe#29)

What stands out is that the donors and the recipients embark on a kind of Instagram relationship, with the recipient promising to provide frequent updates and content to the donor-turned-follower or the follower-turned-donor. Reciprocity was also expressed through little tokens or small gifts donors received in return for their donation or by sending a postcard from their travel. The posts below stand out, with recipients attempting to incentivise donations by creating competition among people on the platform.

we're offering a little incentive for your generosity: cookies and other tasty goodies! \$10=a dozen cookies! \$20=brownies! \$30+=cookies and brownies! (GoFundMe#31)

The first person to identify where the pic is taken will receive \$5 back from their donation. (GoFundMe#51)

with your donation of \$25 or more, I will send you a photograph or art print, a pen and ink illustration, or a painting. (GoFundMe#40)

There is also evidence that beg-packers strive to reciprocate by offering hugs, playing music, or offering small token gifts in return for donations (see [Figure 1](#)).

Another interesting finding that can be linked to privilege is how some people asking for the funds feel entitled to the support as they are willing to forfeit their birthday and Christmas presents. This is further evidence of the relatively 'charmed life' of people in the West.

I will be using this gofundme as an option for all my birthday, Christmas, and graduation gifts. (GoFundMe#44)

I just turned 21 and my birthday present is one created by all of you! (GoFundMe#58)

### *Privilege*

The posts examined allude to how local beggars in some countries lose out to beg-packers. While the general public ignores the local needy, foreigners are given aid as they are perceived as worthy and desperate:

There are many homeless people in Korea and nationals don't look out for them. However when a foreigner (beg-packer) does it then people help. They see it as a proud person's last resort ... so they help. (Instagram#423)

As poverty is global, regardless of where the beg-packer sits, they are often surrounded by those begging for survival, whilst they beg for 'a luxury'. Multiple comments and posts demonstrate their outrage at this hypocrisy:

They need to gain some perspective to the true poverty that's surrounding them. (Instagram#39)

While they're begging money local beggars such as children Go hungry because money is not given to them but given to these worthless free loaders. (Instagram#643)

Saw the guy in Taiwan, literally getting tips a few (metres) away from an actual homeless man. (Instagram#280)

What compounds the irritation in the posts is that many backpackers wear jewellery and brands such as Adidas and Vans and have expensive equipment such as amps, MacBooks, iPhones, and Apple Watches. This is incompatible with them holding cardboard signs and a cup for donations or sitting on the ground cross-legged, as a regular beggar would.

They beg for money, but they're not genuinely poor (Instagram#104)

Many just pretend to be poor and may have a platinum card in a pouch somewhere. (Instagram#228)

Some e-beg-packers' comments suggest their awareness of this dissonance. They accept that travel is a luxury for many, and they are privileged to be able to travel:

Travelling is a privilege. I am aware that my many trips and experiences living abroad, as well as my round-the-world backpacking trip, is possible in large part thanks to the privileges I was born with. (GoFundMe#122)

I had the privilege of growing up in a country as good as Switzerland (GoFundMe#224)



**Figure 1.** Reciprocity.

I have been both fortunate and optimistic enough to decline job-offers for now, using this time I have to travel before settling down (GoFundMe#361)

Others, on the other hand, appear rather tone-deaf, arguing that travel is something everyone should have the opportunity to do to escape societal norms as if escaping should somehow be a priority for everyone:

The world should be seen by everyone who wants to explore it. (GoFundMe#104)

Please fund my travel adventures across Europe as I try to recover from Capitalism burnout (GoFundMe#15)

I don't want to bend to societal norms, to settle, to work myself into a position of boredom (GoFundMe#23)

Most interestingly, this attitude of escapism sometimes finds also support in Instagram posts that advocate living life to its fullest:

these people want to get out of the hamster rad and try such jobs ... why must he act according to the rest of the world? (Instagram#32)

### Stigma

Instagram comments likened beg-packers to other historical groups, suggesting that travelling the world

relying on others' donations isn't new but has recently been relabelled:

This is nothing new, it's like Bukowski used to say when he would see hippie hitchhikers in the 60s; begging for money and a ride while they're wearing \$200 boots.(Instagram#441)

Begging on a pilgrimage has a traditional place and is regarded as penance from crime and sin. Are today's backpackers the modern day version of pilgrims? (Instagram#48)

People have been travelling the world selling things and singing a tune for money for thousands of years. This is not beg-packing. Its capitalism. (Instagram#149)

Still, drifters often face stigma around 'not wanting to work' and 'being lazy'. Several Instagram comments reflected this attitude, and the message appears simple: Travel is a luxury earned from hard work. If one cannot afford foreign travel, they should stay at home:

If you want to travel then work!! I traveled the world for a whole year in my late twenties and worked my backside off to pay for it! (Instagram#267)

Travel is not the first necessity (like food), it's just as stupid as asking for a Louis Vuitton bag. Secondly, if you want to see the world, then find a job, earn money, save (Instagram#533)

I work hard for my travels. It makes them more rewarding (Instagram#144)

Stay home if you are too lazy to work for your trip (Instagram#48)

### Narrative

One of the key strategies for dealing with the stigma associated with beg-packing is to control the narrative and soften the image of the privileged, lazy individual. The most common strategy is to dissociate themselves from the image of the beggar. The posts illustrate that people soliciting donations online view their activity as 'traveling without money' and not begging. Others try to associate their travel with contributing to a good cause of helping others. For example, on the GoFundMe platform, several e-beg-packers highlight how surplus donations would go to disaster relief or youth charities in the communities they visit, while others mention volunteering, offering free yoga lessons, and engaging with locals.

I travel without money but I do not beg. Travelling without money is above all a human endeavour through hitchhiking, overnight stays with locals and ecological travel (Instagram#347)

exchanging our abilities, knowledge and skills for other peoples knowledge and a place to sleep and eat (GoFundMe#110)

I have been predominantly living with local communities and only spending \$10 a day (GoFundMe#14)

it is my goal to immerse myself into the cultures and communities of every place I go by doing homestays, volunteering ... (GoFundMe#38)

The comments on engaging with locals, volunteering and doing homestays can be linked to reciprocity and what is described in the literature as equitable exchange (Erlandsson et al., 2019). Is volunteering the price they pay for free hospitality? Is that enough, or should they give back more for the free accommodation? Can one put a price on these exchanges? The posts find it acceptable to seek free hospitality, but some reciprocity is key:

Taking advantage of someone else's hospitality is not a sin. On the other hand, it is in good taste to offer your hosts something from yourself. (Instagram#57)

Of course, seeking free accommodation and staying in cheap hostels are all described in detail on the crowd-funding platform. To be a worthy traveller, you must not seek luxuries and should be prepared to stay in hostels and tents:

We will use the funds to pay for flights, food, hostels, and any other necessities (GoFundMe#16)

They are asking for some contributions for their hostel (Instagram#9)

These two were camping in a park (Instagram#42)

However, others added in their funding requests that they may seek upgrades at times:

spend a few more days in hostels rather than camping (GoFundMe#61)

once in a while splurging on a hotel for a fresh shower and a comfy bed. (GoFundMe#67)

People soliciting donations appear to follow a narrative of travelling for the lowest cost possible, relying on donations and stretching these as far as possible. However, this stretching of available resources and the procurement of new ones sometimes draw the ire of local people and the authorities. The Instagram data implies beg-packers breaking laws by beg-packing and earning money on a tourist visa, which is illegal in several countries, including South Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia (and Bali), Thailand, Japan, and Singapore, and that is reflected in the posts:

A Russian family has been deported for busking in Lombok. (Instagram#238)

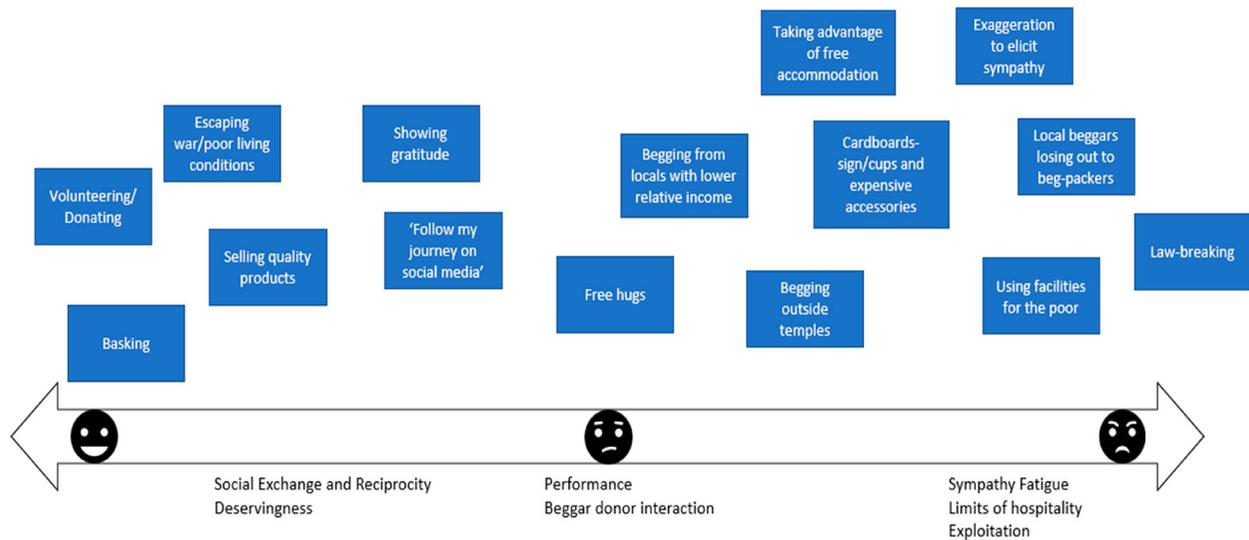
in japan about these beg-packers who were kicked out for begging in front of a poor elderly house (Instagram#563)

In the comments section for similar posts, there is a consensus that locals should report beg-packers to immigration authorities, with several agreeing that they should be deported and fined.

## Discussion

### Motivation and stigma

The findings support the link between tramping, vagabonds, drifters, and beg-packers. Contrastingly, while tramps did not wander for their own amusement and had limited funds, similarly to beg-packers they often sold photos to extend their trip (Gray, 1931), stayed with locals and adopted sympathy-eliciting strategies (Cohen, 1973). Quotes found beg-packers staying with locals to save money, whilst images showed cardboard signs and cups for donations to elicit sympathy. The study also shows that the drifter typology resonates with 'beg-packers' (Cohen, 2004). Drifters enjoy going 'off the beaten track', engaging with locals or raising money to help their community, and comments mention donating leftover funds to charities and staying with locals. Albeit comments about beg-packers exploiting locals' hospitality to save money question the authenticity of these actions, as supported by Tolkach et al. (2019) and Tomazos (2020).



**Figure 2.** A theoretical framework of beg-packer actions.

On GoFundMe, e-beg-packers said donations would allow them to learn about themselves and achieve their dreams. While some consider travel a privilege (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Duffy, 2019), beg-packing resonates with self-actualisation, inducing self-fulfilment. However, as Neher (1991) describes self-actualisation as unattainable for the less privileged, can travel without money contribute towards democratising self-actualisation?

This notion of travelling without money brings mixed reactions based on the findings of this paper. However, this study illustrates the tightrope beg-packers have to walk as they make choices and take action to 'travel without money'. Figure 2 shows a very subjective outlook on what is considered travelling without money and what is perceived as exploitation. Using theory, we can lay out how beg-packing may be viewed more positively or negatively based on the posts examined in this paper.

### *Privilege and deservingness*

This study shows that beg-packers face similar stigma to drifters (Bader & Baker, 2019; Giazitzoglu, 2014), with comments stating that working and saving is the acceptable way to fund one's travel (Li & Yu, 2020). This links to van Oorschot's (2000) 'level of control over neediness' dimension of deservingness, as working reduces neediness, and many of those 'begging' have the opportunity to not be at the mercy of others. Some of the GoFundMe requests show that those asking for funds are willing or are espousing that they will forego any birthday, Christmas, or graduation presents in exchange for travel donations. This is in line with supporting Peetz and Wilson (2013) and Tu and Soman (2014) in that temporal landmarks create perceived

deservingness for travel. It also supports arguments that view such requests as a mark of privilege and a complete lack of perspective (Tomazos, 2020).

If one must rely on donations to afford travel, do temporal landmarks or the fact that it is someone's birthday make the request worthy or deserving? There are people in the global South who, no matter how hard they work, will never be able to travel (Duffy, 2019; McCabe & Diekmann, 2015). So where does that leave the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Right to Travel (UN, 2022)? There appears to be a two-tier system of relative privilege where, for the majority, international travel is a privilege associated with disposable income and a minority that view travel as their birthright.

### *Gratitude and reciprocity*

Gratitude was a prominent theme on GoFundMe, but not on Instagram. According to van Oorschot's (2000) fifth dimension of deservingness, attitude, donors would consider beg-packers more deserving if they appear grateful. The study shows that there are set expectations from both sides. The e-beg-packers expect generous support, and the donors expect regular updates from the trip. This creates an amphidromous relationship that generates and sustains a continuous social media relationship. Updates are posted, and comments are made, and this could lead to people travelling and living vicariously through others (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The expectation for more content drives this possible infatuation with the observed (Dumas et al., 2017) traveller, and further soliciting for additional support could lead to demands for more risqué or a different type of content (Rouse & Salter, 2021). At the same time, there is ample evidence of such

relationships developing on other internet platforms through social media. Today men and women can take advantage of mechanisms that can facilitate the goal of obtaining gifts, money, and holidays from others using technology. With a new wave of self-empowerment, particularly for females, the term 'rinsing' has developed into something more acceptable through gift requests via virtual relationships (Tomazos, 2020, p. 232).

Further research is required to explore this exploitation and vulnerability in an e-beg-packer context. As previously outlined, we acknowledge that under Social Exchange Theory, individuals conduct a cost-benefit analysis regarding their input to an exchange versus what they receive in return (van den Bos, 2001; Woosnam & Norman, 2010). At what point of the 'relationship' the donor gets to revise their expectations regarding what they are getting in return for their donation? Or to turn the argument on its head, at what point does the e-beg-packer decide to use their other forms of capital (see Hakim, 2010) to become a fantentrepreneur (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019) and start soliciting premium donations? If we apply Social Exchange Theory to social media posts, they are bound to be perceived as good quality and value relative to the price paid. If people donate different amounts, the more generous donors should be expected to ask for more- as illustrated in the post about cookies and brownies. This is not too far-fetched given the popularity of other fanentrepreneur platforms (e.g. onlyfans, twitch, patreon). Setting boundaries to how far this reciprocal relationship goes will be challenging, and it will once more push the boundaries of what is considered reciprocity and what is considered exploitation.

## Conclusion

While an assessment of GoFundMe and Instagram has proven helpful in understanding the online discourse surrounding e-beg-packing, this work is not without limitations, based around potential selection bias, access to offline dynamics, and challenges in verifying the authenticity of online accounts and narratives exist (Casaló et al., 2020; Mainolfi et al., 2022). However, while relying solely on digital interactions might overlook the nuanced cultural, economic, and interpersonal aspects (Chapman & McNeill, 2005) inherent in the beg-packing phenomenon, it provides us with a clearer picture of the e-beg-packing trend.

In this study, the concept of deservingness emerges as a critical and complex factor in the assessment of travelling without money. This phenomenon cannot be fully understood without considering the societal perceptions and cultural norms shaping our judgments

about who deserves support. The interplay between traveller motivations, economic disparities, and local contexts further underscores the need to examine deservingness nuancedly to understand the intricate interplay of factors contributing to notions of deservingness, thereby enabling more compassionate and effective responses to this multifaceted issue.

In essence, the presence of reciprocity in the beg-packing phenomenon casts light on the intricate dynamics at play. While some travellers may indeed offer cultural exchanges or services as a form of reciprocity, it is crucial to avoid oversimplification. True reciprocity necessitates a deeper exploration of power dynamics, intentions, and the broader socio-economic context. Employing a lens of reciprocity reveals that simplistic judgments or assumptions fail to capture the complexity of these interactions. By delving into the nuances of how reciprocity operates within the broader beg-packing landscape, we can better appreciate the multifaceted nature of these encounters and work towards a more comprehensive understanding and response to this phenomenon.

Future research into beg-packing should consider the evolution of the practice into an electronic forum. This brings into question the role of authenticity, and the blurring of public and private spaces, and how online fora are becoming a safety net, or last resort, replacing other social structures like family or a circle of friends. Future studies should further consider the content posted by these travellers and how far reciprocity affects the personal nature of what is shared. Further qualitative studies would also be useful in exploring perceptions of the phenomenon and potential stigmatisation, including a better understanding of the cultural dynamics and power structures.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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