Backpackers are worried about using mobile devices in Ghana
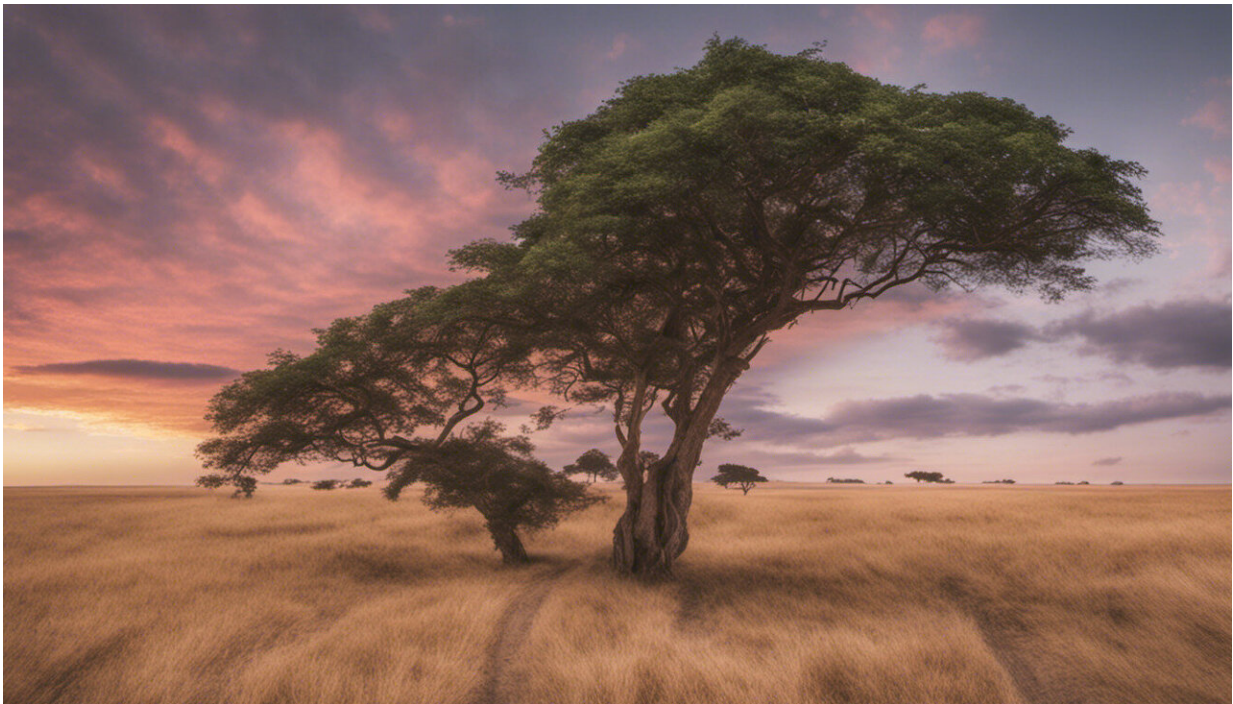
April 9 2019, by Albert N. Kimbu And Frederick Dayour

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Backpacking emerged in the 1970s as a low cost form of travel that allowed particularly young people to explore the world without spending too much money.

Today, backpacking has become an important part of the travel market.

That's especially true for developing countries, since backpackers tend to seek out local products and services, which is a boon for poorer economies. Studies have shown that backpackers are more likely than conventional travellers to interact with local communities in the places they visit.

Increasingly, mobile technology offers the quickest and easiest way for backpackers to get in touch with locals, and find locally run hotels, restaurants and sites of interest. But devices like phones and tablets can also put backpackers at risk. They might be robbed, or their devices might be hacked.

We wanted to know how backpackers visiting Ghana perceive the risks involved with using mobile technology while in the country. Understanding and addressing these concerns could be a useful way for Ghana and other West African nations to actively attract more backpackers. This research was motivated by the fact that backpackers are becoming increasingly risk averse. It's important to understand their concerns so they don't entirely avoid particular countries or regions.

Our study found that four areas of concern related to mobile smart phones. These were linked to the security of the device (that is, might it be targeted by cyber criminals); backpackers' own psychological and social concerns (would their phones be a distraction from the trip, or see them judged by others for being too preoccupied with their phones); and destination or physical risks. This last was related to whether they might be targeted by thieves and their safety put at risk in because of their phones.

There are a number of ways that Ghanaian authorities and tourism bodies can help to address these perceived risks. This will help backpackers feel safer about freely using their mobile devices in the country.

The study

For our study, we surveyed 567 international backpackers and interviewed 15 of them who had visited Ghana between September 2016 and February 2017.

In the interviews, we asked people about their risk reduction strategies while they were in Ghana. The survey questions revolved around how backpackers perceived their mobile phones and whether they feared these devices put them at risk in any number of ways.

Of course, travellers worried about using their mobile devices in many countries. But they were especially concerned in places that were perceived as digitally unsafe. Ghana is among these places: the [US Embassy in Ghana](#) has identified the country as having particularly weak Internet security and a high risk of [phone](#) snatching.

This reputation may deter potential backpackers from visiting the country, and they may choose another in the region or on the continent instead.

Possible solutions

Luckily, there are several steps Ghana and other African countries in a similar situation could take to allay backpackers' fears.

Some of these are technological. They could use [third-party assurance seals](#), which reassure consumers about a service's safety; as well as [encryptions](#), [authentications](#) and [firewalls](#) to prevent users from being susceptible to potential fraud and identity theft.

We also found that some backpackers worried about looking foolish if

they didn't understand how local mobile services worked. Ghana could offer free samples or trials on local networks, with the appropriate technological support, to help allay these fears.

On the safety front, CCTV cameras and an increased police presence around tourist facilities would help [backpackers](#) – and, of course, other travellers – to feel less vulnerable to perceived physical risks.

Finally, the country must ensure that it informs prospective travellers of these interventions and assures them that every effort has been made to keep they and their mobile devices safe.

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