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Spring Break: Pulling in the Student Market

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Introduction

Spring Break, a North American tradition, can trace its roots to the College Swim Forum 1935, a swim competition of approximately 300 students in Ft. Lauderdale, FL (Hobson & Josiam, 1992). Since that landmark event, Spring Break has become a progressively larger draw for students and can be an economic boon for some travel destinations if they choose to overlook the negative aspects that are part of the revelry. While not all locations welcome the revelers with open arms, this group of travelers can have an enormous impact on a local economy. Although little empirical data is available to provide the overall economic impact of this travel phenomenon, media sources estimate the industry to be well over \$1 billion per year (Morrison, 2004) with the Student Monitor LLC, a research firm, indicating that 2.14 million students traveled for Spring Break in 2005 (as cited in Reynolds, 2004). With the competitive climate in the current economy, understanding what pulls students to a destination is important to locales who want to draw the Spring Break travel market. This study sheds light on the issue and can help destinations with planning.

Literature Review

Trip Decision Making Process

Travel behaviors and motivations have been the topic of a great deal of previous research. Some of the earlier, often cited, analytical frameworks came from Dann (1977, 1981) and Crompton (1979). Dann and Crompton both studied the impact of push attributes on leisure travel; whether to travel and why. Crompton also identified attributes used to choose destinations and/or determine purpose of travel, pull attributes. Additional leisure travel research was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s. The focus was on the relationship between push and pull attributes (Klenosky, 2002). During this period, researchers began to see the relationship between push and pull attributes as being inclusive rather than exclusive. Fesenmaier and Jeng (2000) stated:

The travel destination is not the only decision that a tourist needs to make before taking a trip but includes decisions concerning members of the travel group, timing (date of travel and length of trip), transportation mode, route, budget, destinations, and activities. (p. 14)

Yuan and McDonald (1990), Uysal and Jurowski (1994), and Turnball and Uysal (1995) all sought to identify the core push and pull factors by conducting factor analyses of individual attributes. Although there was similarity between the attributes identified, the same attributes were not used in all studies.

Also, different core factors were identified, but some core factors were common to each of the studies. “Escape” and “relationship building” as core push factors were found in all three studies. Pull factors found in all three involved “budget”, “culture” and “nature.” In related studies, Oh, Uysal and Weaver (1995) and Baloglu and Uysal (1996) evaluated the relationships between specific push and pull attributes. Four market segments were identified by Baloglu and Uysal (1996) from their canonical correlation analysis: “sports/activity seekers”, “novelty seekers”, “urban-life seekers”, and “beach/resort seekers”.

Another area of travel research conducted has examined both travel patterns and prediction of travel behaviors. Crompton (1992) created a conceptual framework for destination choice motives while both Crompton and Fesenmaier (1988) investigated the attributes and number of destinations considered. Fesenmaier and Jeng (2000) evaluated the decision making process and changes that occurred while the process evolved. While all of the previous research has implications on leisure travel decisions as a whole, relatively little research has been conducted to specifically examine the Spring Break student traveler.

Spring Break Travel

While some studies look at the student traveler demographic as a population of interest, only a few studies have focused on the Spring Break leisure traveler, and specifically the domestic (USA) student traveler. This lack of research could be due to the excessive cost and difficulty in achieving a cross sectional sample and the lack of compiled Spring Break quantitative data. Most reporting of financial impacts is at the community level or reported by non-scientific sources.

Some of the earliest research on Spring Break travel was conducted by Hobson and Josiam (1992, 1996). They sought to identify the characteristics of the Spring Break student market longitudinally at a single university. They looked at the travelers from the perspective of demographics, travel patterns and activity participation while on Spring Break.

Later, factor analysis began to be used to determine core push and pull factors. Kim, Oh and Jogaratnam (2007) found seven core push motivation factors: “knowledge”, “sports”, “adventure”, “relax”, “lifestyle”, “travel bragging” and “family.” Butts, Salazar, Sapio and Thomas (1996) evaluated marketing factors for pull motivation and found that sunny climate, nature, a wide choice of accommodations, price of accommodations, the destination’s nightlife reputation, and recommendation of others were most important to students. Sirakaya and McLellan (1997) identified eight core pull factors: “local hospitality and services,” “trip cost and convenience,” “perceptions of safe/secure environment,” “change in daily life environment,” “recreation and sporting

activities,” “entertainment and drinking opportunities,” “personal and historical link” and “cultural and shopping services.”

Much of the research looked at Spring Break from more of an international perspective, either by studying international students traveling or domestic students traveling internationally. Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi (2001) studied U.S. students’ perceptions of Turkey as a destination choice. Field (1999) compared domestic and international students’ Spring Break travel decision patterns, while Hsu and Sung (1996, 1997) and Kim, Jogaratnam and Noh (2006) looked at Spring Break travel in terms of international students’ travel specifically.

Many changes have occurred since much of the research was conducted. Two important changes are that the economy is impacting all facets of the tourism industry and that students today are more connected and informed due to things like cell phones, the Internet, and social media being an accepted and expected part of the students’ lives.

Purpose of the Study

No current research could be identified that specifically looked at domestic U.S. Spring Break travelers, based on both individual demographic and behavioral characteristics, and the pull motivational attributes in their Spring Break destination choice. Therefore this study seeks to fill this gap. The purpose of the study is to determine the core decision making factors used in students’ destination choices for Spring Break 2010 and determine if significant differences exist between the groups based on specific demographic, behavioral or psychographic characteristics. Toward this endeavor, three research questions have been identified.

- Research Question 1 - What factors are most important to college students when making Spring Break destination choices?
- Research Question 2 - What are the core decision making factors in students’ Spring Break destination choices?
- Research Question 3 – Do demographic, behavioral or psychographic characteristics influence the core Spring Break decision making factors?

Methodology

The target population of the study was undergraduate students at Oklahoma State University who traveled for vacation purpose during Spring Break 2010. A survey questionnaire, consisting of three sections, was the instrument for data collection. Section One asked the students questions regarding specific 2010 Spring Break travel behaviors. The questions included number of times traveled, time spent

planning the trip, travel destination, method of arrangement, travel companion(s), mode of transportation, and overall trip expense. Section Two consisted of 24 attributes considered when making their 2010 Spring Break decision. These attributes were compiled from a cross-section of previous research pull attributes from Yuan and McDonald (1990), Uysal and Jurowski (1994), as well as Turnbull and Uysal (1995). Participants were asked to indicate the importance of the attributes in their decision making process, utilizing a 7-point Likert-type scale. Section Three included questions regarding the demographic profile of students. The questions included gender, age, ethnicity, and classification. The questionnaires were distributed during the Spring and Fall 2010 semesters, using convenience sampling, to undergraduate students who volunteered to take the survey. A total of 251 questionnaires were distributed, all 251 were returned with 143 questionnaires deemed useable for a 56.97% response rate. One hundred and five questionnaires were unusable as these students did not travel for pleasure over Spring Break 2010, three questionnaires were eliminated for incomplete information.

Analysis

Respondent Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the student sample. In terms of gender, 60.14% of the sample was female and 39.86% was male. Half of the respondents are 21 years of age, with 89.11% 21 years of age or older. Since over 22 years of age was a category, the mean age could not be calculated. Caucasian was the primary ethnicity represented with, 88.10% of the sample indicating so. Approximately 75% of sample were fourth or fifth year seniors.

Table 1: Student Demographic Profiles

Profile	n	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	57	39.86
Female	86	60.14
<i>Age</i>		
18 years old	1	.07
19 years old	7	4.90
20 years old	9	6.29
21 years old	71	49.65
22 years old	43	30.06
23 years old or older	12	8.40
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Caucasian	126	88.10
African – American	3	2.10
Hispanic	3	2.10
Native American	10	7.00
<i>Classification</i>		
Freshman	4	2.80
Sophomore	12	8.39
Junior	20	13.99
Senior	107	74.82

Spring Break Behaviors and Characteristics

Table 2 shows the students' Spring Break behaviors and characteristics. The majority of students were repeat Spring Break travelers, 41.95% had traveled for Spring Break four times or more and 24.48% had traveled three times. A slightly larger percentage, 28.67% of the students, were last minute planners indicating that they started planning their trips within one to two weeks of travel; 25.17% planned three to four weeks in advance. Trip planning and arrangements were predominately done by the students themselves, with 61.54 % of students arranged their trips directly with the destinations. The largest percentage of students, 37.76 %, traveled to Florida for their trip, with Texas (20.98%) and Colorado (12.59%) the next most popular destinations indicated. As for trip companions, 68.53% of the students travelled with friends and 17.48% indicated that they travelled with family or relatives. The majority of the students, 77.62%, used a car or van as the mode of transportation.

In term of expenses, 48.25% of the students spent \$0 - \$499 on their Spring Break trip, with 37.76% spending between \$500 and \$999 and 13.99% spent over \$1000. Although a variable regarding income level could possibly be

indicative of travel decision patterns, it was decided to omit due to several constraints. These include but are not limited to: the funding source of Spring Break (self, parent or joint support) and the overall financial support level provided by the parents to the students.

Table 2: Spring Break Trip Behaviors

	n	%
Spring Break Travel History		
First time	15	10.49
2 times	32	22.38
3 times	35	24.48
4 times or more	60	41.95
Advance Planning		
1 – 2 weeks	41	28.67
3 – 4 weeks	36	25.17
5 – 6 weeks	18	12.59
7 – 8 weeks	25	17.48
More than 8 weeks	22	15.39
Travel Arrangement		
Directly with the destination	88	61.54
Through travel intermediaries	17	11.89
Others (online booking, family/friends, church)	38	26.57
Destination		
Florida	54	37.76
Texas	30	20.98
Colorado	18	12.59
Travel Companion		
Individual	6	4.20
Family/relatives	25	17.48
Friends	98	68.53
Other (family/relatives and friends, chaperones)	14	9.79
Mode of Transportation		
Plane	27	18.88
Car/van	111	77.62
Cruise	3	2.10
Other (plane and car/van)	2	1.40
Expenses		
\$ 0 - \$ 499	69	48.25
\$ 500 - \$999	54	37.76
\$ 1,000 and over	20	13.99

Pull Attribute Ranking

Table 3 presents the 24 pull decision making attributes that students were asked to rate for importance in choosing their Spring Break destination in order of importance. The results indicate that most of the attributes were considered important to the students. All but three attributes had a mean score greater than the midpoint of 4.0. The attributes rated the highest in destination choice were geographic location (6.15), followed by positive attitude towards destination (5.90), and total trip expenses (5.71) respectfully. The attributes which the student indicated as being the least important, and lower than the midpoint of 4.0, were short travel time (3.91), familiar geographic area (3.65) and fixed travel itinerary (3.48).

Table 3: Importance of Attributes for Spring Break Trip Decision

Attributes of Spring Break Trip Decision	Mean	SD
	(Scale of 1 to 7)	
Geographic location	6.15	1.07
Positive attitude towards destination	5.90	1.21
Total trip expenses	5.71	1.28
Provides convenient accommodations	5.54	1.20
Reasonable price as compare to other destinations	5.51	1.29
Offers variety of activities	5.50	1.28
Provides convenient facilities	5.45	1.91
Location of the accommodations	5.37	1.30
Offers variety of attractions	5.33	1.40
Great place for relaxation	5.23	1.66
Appropriate destination length of stay requirement	5.19	1.38
Safety of the destination	5.18	1.66
Visual appearance of accommodations	5.17	1.49
Ease of travel arrangement	5.06	1.23
Recommended by friends/family	5.03	1.38
Detailed information about destination prior to travel	4.94	1.48
Well reputed as a tourist destination	4.68	1.68
Length of trip planning time	4.66	1.53
Ease of accessibility	4.58	1.51
Student discount or promotion	4.48	1.84
Previous experience at destination	4.46	1.71
Short traveling time	3.91	1.52
Familiar geographical area	3.65	1.62

Core Pull Factors

Table 4 represents an exploratory factor analysis, employing principal component analysis with varimax rotation used to reduce the original 24 pull attributes into four meaningful core Spring Break destination making factors. The four factors yielded, explaining 61.91% of the variance, were used to identify the core pull factors used in Spring Break trip decisions by the sample. Four of the original 24 attributes were eliminated due to non-loading at the .50 level. These were “safety of the destination,” “detailed information prior to travel,” “length of trip planning time” and “fixed travel itinerary.” The elimination had a negligible effect on the explained variance. A factor with an eigenvalue greater than one was the basis for determining which attributes were retained.

The four factors identified were: “Destination Attributes,” “Financial,” “Accessibility,” and “Uncertainty Avoidance.” The first factor, Destination Attributes, explained 26.529% of the total variance, with a reliability coefficient of 0.891. The second factor, Financial, explained 13.262% of the total variance with reliability coefficient of 0.756. The third factor, Accessibility, explained 11.798% of the total variance with a reliability coefficient of 0.724 and the fourth factor, Uncertainty Avoidance, explained 10.321% of the variance with a reliability coefficient of 0.809. Bartlett’s was significant at $p < .001$ and KMO was .818 indicating that the sample was adequate to conduct the factor analysis.

Table 4: Principle Component Analysis

Factors	F1	F2	F3	F4
Factor 1: Destination Attributes				
Convenient Facilities	.782			
Variety of Attractions	.752			
Convenient Accommodations	.734			
Appearance of Accommodations	.729			
Variety of Activities	.697			
Location of Accommodations	.679			
Reputation of Locale	.643			
Appropriate Stay Length	.594			
Relaxing Location	.579			
Factor 2: Financial				
Comparative Reasonable Price to Other		.842		
Trip Expenses		.831		
Discount or Promotion		.618		
Positive Attitude Toward Destination		.526		
Factor 3: Accessibility				
Ease of Access			.832	
Short Travel Time			.790	
Ease of Arrangement			.624	
Factor 4: Uncertainty Avoidance				
Previous Experience at Destination				.869
Friend/Family Recommendation				.781
Familiar Area				.500
Eigenvalue	7.070	1.733	1.645	1.314
Variance (%)	26.529	13.262	11.798	10.321
Cumulative Variance(%)	26.529	39.791	51.589	61.909
Cronbach's Alpha	.891	.756	.724	.809

Findings

One-way between groups ANOVA were used to determine if specific demographic, behavioral, or psychographic characteristics were related to the core pull decision making factors. Because ANOVA requires a spectrum of possible responses, an independent samples t-test was used to analyze the influence of gender.

Relatively few statistically significant differences were found between the groups. In the travel companion characteristic, there was a statistically significant between groups difference at the $p < .05$ for Factor 1 “Destination Attributes”

[$F(3,138)=3.563, p=.016$]. The effect size was moderate to large with eta squared at 7.2%. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD identified the group difference to be between those travelling alone and those traveling with family. This difference could be due to compromise that might be involved with family travel or an ultimate decision maker, where traveling alone would have none of these type of restrictions.

In the travel planning behavior, a statistically significant between groups difference was found at the $p<.05$ Factor 1 “Destination Attributes” [$F(2,140)=3.882, p=.023$]. The effect size was small with eta squared at 4.7%. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD identified the group difference to be between those who made their plans directly with the destination and those who used a travel intermediary, significant at $p=.017$. This could indicate the influence a travel intermediary has on destination choice. It might also indicate that those who used travel intermediaries are more undecided and those who make their own arrangements have a clear knowledge of their desired location and facilities.

In the travel expenditure category, a statistical significance between groups difference at the $p<.01$ level was found. Significance was discovered in both “Destination Attributes” [$F(2,139)=4.565, p=.012$] and “Financial” [$F(2,139)=5.100, p=.007$]. The effect size was moderate with eta squared ranging from 6.2 to 6.8%. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD identified the group difference to be between those who spent less than \$500 and those who spent more than \$1000. These results are not unexpected since there are destination options are often limited when budget is a factor. Also, comparison shopping for the best deal and discounts or promotions would logically be more of a factor to those who are budget-conscious.

Using an independent-samples *t*-test, one demographic variable was found to have statistically significant differences between groups ($t(141)= -5.679, p<.001$). The mean difference was discovered for gender in Factor 3 “Accessibility.” The mean of females ($m=.350, SD=.803$) was significantly higher than males ($m=-.528, SD=1.042$). This might indicate that the male students were less concerned with relative ease in the travel plan and were more flexible in order to reach their desired destination. No other differences were identified based on demographic characteristics. This lack of difference may have been due to the sample being relatively homogenous.

Discussion

Interestingly, the percentage of students who traveled in Hobson and Josiam’s (1992, 1996) study was relatively close to the findings in the current study. In their longitudinal study, they found a range of 43.9-47.3% of students surveyed who traveled for leisure purposes during Spring Break, our study found 56.9%

traveled for leisure purposes. Research Question 1 - *What factors are most important to college students when making Spring Break destination choices?* was answered by the discovery of the top five pull attributes: Geographic Location, Positive Attitude Toward Destination, Total Trip Expenses, Provides Convenient Accommodations, and Reasonable Price Compared to Other Destinations. This agrees with Butts, Salazar, Sapio and Thomas' (1996) who found price to be a factor important to students. However, in the current study recommendations was ranked very low whereas was found to be one of Butts et al.'s most important factors.

Our study found similar core Spring Break pull decision making factors, although the loading was not always identical. Additionally, we chose not to look at specific types of activities and therefore could not have had identical core factors. Therefore, to answer Research Question 2 - *What are the core decision making factors in students' Spring Break destination choices?*, our attributes loaded into: Destination Attributes, Financial, Accessibility, and Uncertainty Avoidance.

For Research Question 3 – *Do demographic, behavioral or psychographic characteristics influence the core Spring Break decision making factors?*, this study did not find previous research to compare it with for the domestic Spring Break traveler. Our findings indicated that travel companions, trip expenditures, trip arrangements and gender influenced the Spring Break trip decisions of students

Limitations

Several limitations need to be addressed regarding the study. The results of this study may not be generalizable to the general population of domestic college student Spring Break participants. This is due to the convenience sample being recruited from a single Midwestern university and that the students who chose to participate may not be representative of the population. Additionally, other attributes may have contributed to destination decisions that were not included in the study and the amount and individual(s) responsible for funding the travel may have also influenced the choice although support provided by parents may not be consistent with income level of parents.

Conclusion, Implications and Future Research

While it is assumed that the final Spring Break trip destination decisions were made including multiple sub-decisions, the purpose of this study was not to determine the order or pattern of the trip decision making process, but to determine the factors that influenced the decisions, the importance of those factors

in the travelers' decisions, and if other extraneous variables influenced the decision.

Several industry implications might be considered in the importance of the study. While location is the most important factor, creating a favorable impression, with a reasonable price point, is the best marketing strategy to attract students for Spring Break. With almost half spending less than \$500, the students are shopping for the best deal while still having the desired Spring Break experience. Destinations should emphasize their value for the dollar. Also, booking with travel intermediaries impacts the destination choice of student travelers, this may indicate an opportunity for destinations to reach out to intermediaries regarding Spring Break opportunities

Although the attributes of destinations, accounting for the biggest variance, has the most impact in Spring Break trip decisions, highly rated secondary quantitative factors such as costs and value for their dollar are also considered. Additionally, the sample indicated that they avoid uncertainty by seeking our referrals and recommendations, and desire destinations that are easily accessible.

Further research is needed to determine the cause of differences between groups, this study sought only to determine if differences existed. We can only speculate why individuals traveling alone make their decision differently than those traveling with family. Further research could be conducted to assess who in the family is most influential in travel destination choice and focus marketing on that group. Additionally, research should be conducted including a broader sample in varied geographic locations including those with more diverse populations. A broad-based study across the country could possibly be a valuable tool for destinations seeking to attract the Spring Break crowd.

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