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Personal Factors Influencing US Travelers' Sentiments Toward Travel Policies to Cuba

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Personal factors influencing US Travelers' sentiments toward travel policies to Cuba

Introduction

Despite its proximity to the United States (US), Cuba is an enigmatic tourism destination for most US travelers. While international tourism is a crucial part of Cuba's economy, long standing political tension between the countries has resulted in policies that limit US travelers' access to Cuba. However, when policies changed in 2014 under the Obama Administration, many US travelers demonstrated their interest and willingness to travel to Cuba, resulting in 4.7 million US visits to the country in 2018 (Duffy and Kline, 2018; Feinberg and Newfarmer, 2016; Talty, 2019). Beyond spending generated by these visitors, increased access to Cuba also resulted in greater financial investment from multinational firms seeking to cater to US travelers such as JetBlue, Marriott, and Carnival Cruise Lines. This suggests that with greater access to Cuba, the US travel market could have considerable impacts on the country (Knollenberg, Kline, Jordan, and Boley, 2020).

The potential impacts, both positive and negative, that US travelers could have on Cuba were curtailed in 2018 when the Trump Administration reinstated limitations to most US travel to Cuba. Furthermore, a host of new policies, which prohibit US travelers' use of many hotels and the purchasing of Cuban rum and tobacco, have been recently implemented (Torres, 2020). These restrictions along with the long-term embargo are controversial, and shifts in political power and ideologies towards Cuba will continue in the US, fueled by public sentiment (Fullerton, Kendrick, and Broyles, 2017), and with them, the US's policies guiding access to Cuba may continue to fluctuate. Tourism planners and operators (both in Cuba and in the US) need to be able to anticipate such changes to address opportunities or challenges and to improve development strategies (Kubickova and Lee, 2018). Doing so will require a better understanding of US sentiment towards Cuba, particularly among travelers whose latent demand for Cuban travel experiences could play a role in changing access policies.

Being able to anticipate US travelers' sentiments towards access to Cuba is even more crucial during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As cases in the US continue to climb (Centers for Disease Control, 2020) but interest in travel remains (Destination Analysts, 2020), there is evidence that the prevalence of this disease will not fully halt travel. With the potential for COVID-19 to remain active in the US population long term (Scudellari, 2020), the appeal of the US travel market may be reduced. As other Caribbean destinations have witnessed, opening their doors to US travelers during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased infection rates (Burleigh, 2020). Therefore, any changes in policy

that would allow US travelers greater access to Cuba may not be welcomed. With myriad impacts to consider, it will be beneficial for tourism planners and operators to have an improved understanding of US travelers' sentiment towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba. Thus, this study aimed to address the research question: which factors play a role in determining US travelers' sentiment towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba?

Factors Influencing Sentiments about Travel Access to Cuba

The research question focused on how the individual characteristics of American travelers relate to their feelings about the trade embargo and travel to Cuba. The characteristics include political leanings, knowledge about Cuba, previous travel behavior, Spanish-speaking ability, and demographics to determine the profile/groups of Americans who would be inclined to travel to Cuba after pandemic restrictions are eased. These factors were selected for investigation based on evidence of their influence on perceptions of US policies towards Cuba or perceptions of travel destinations. For example, demographics (e.g., age, gender, education level) have been previously shown to influence support for the US trade embargo with Cuba (Pew Research Center, 2016).

For US travelers, access to Cuba as a destination has shifted dramatically since the early 20th century (Salinas, Mundet, and Salinas, 2018). At that time Cuba was a popular tourism destination for US travelers due to its proximity and the appeal of its natural and cultural resources (Rutty and Richardson, 2019). Global events, political power, and public sentiment contributed to the US embargo of Cuba which limits nearly all US travel to Cuba. While the embargo has been sustained, the Obama Administration began to ease travel restrictions to Cuba in 2014. While support for this policy change was not universal (LeoGrande and Kornbluh, 2015), public sentiment which promoted improved relations with Cuba contributed to the shift (de Bahl, 2018). Additionally, the increased leisure travel between the US and Cuba illustrated US travelers' positive sentiments towards Cuba as a travel destination (Duffy and Kline, 2018). Public sentiment again played a role in the policy changes implemented by the Trump Administration which reinstated restrictions on leisure travel to Cuba (Ting, 2019). What these policy shifts reveal is the potential for continual fluctuations in travel access to Cuba, driven by political ideals and supported by public sentiment. With leisure travel as the target of the policy changes, there needs to be an improved understanding of what drives US travelers' sentiments towards travel to Cuba. Understanding this would allow for better anticipation of the policy changes that could impact destination planning, product development, and marketing.

Political affiliation

Public sentiment towards policies that define exchange between Cuba and the US may be influenced by opposition to the Cuban political regime or support for an isolationist approach to foreign affairs (de Bahl, 2018). Mossberg and Kleppe (2005) indicate that similar factors, as well as a country's culture and political actions, influence country image. Furthermore, Alvarez and Campo (2020) and Stepchenkova et al. (2020) have found that political animosity towards a country results in a direct negative impact on intention to visit. In the case of US travelers, it makes sense that Cuba's country image, in turn, influences destination image and intention to visit (Chaulagain, Wiitala, and Fu, 2019). Collectively, this suggests that factors akin to those that drive destination image may be relevant to understanding US travelers' sentiments towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba. Previous studies reveal that political affiliation plays a role in the formation of destination image and intention to visit a destination (Legg, Tang, and Slevitch, 2012; Severt and Hahm, 2020). Combined with the inherent nature of policymaking, political leanings may influence US travelers' sentiments towards regulations that allow travel access to Cuba. We therefore anticipate that the more liberal their political affiliation, the more likely the respondents will be to in favor of ending the trade embargo and allowing travel to Cuba.

Knowledge of Cuba

Knowledge of a destination is necessary to form an image of the destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999) and therefore, may also influence sentiments towards policies that allow travel access to a destination. Kerstetter and Cho (2004) identified the importance of destination knowledge in influencing destination search behavior. And Decrop (2010) revealed that the level of knowledge about a destination informs where a destination is categorized in a traveler's choice sets. Kendrick, Fullerton, and Broyles (2015) established that advertising campaigns focused on Cuba can increase US travelers' knowledge of Cuba, desire to travel to Cuba, and interest in the Cuban people and their government; however, there has been little focus on sentiments towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba. With this in mind, we report that the more knowledgeable one is of Cuba, the more likely they will be to in favor of ending the trade embargo and freely allowing U.S. citizens to travel.

Travel experience

Travel has long been lauded as tool for increased understanding of cultural differences and developing empathy for the destinations visited (Soldatenko and Backer, 2019; Tucker, 2016). Based on this understanding, one would assume that

the more travel experience one has, the more open that would be to pro-travel policies. Relatedly, previous travel behavior may impact sentiments towards policies that allow travel access, as this has been found to play a major role in destination image (Schofield et al., 2020). Prior experience through travel also positively influences the image of the destination and willingness to return (Tan and Wu, 2016). The positive sentiments towards a destination caused by travel could be mirrored in sentiments towards policies that allow travel access, but this relationship has not previously been established to the best of our knowledge. With these factors in mind, we posit that the more one travels, the more likely they will favor ending the trade embargo and allowing U.S. citizens to travel. This is tested for over three graduated variables that begin with general annual overnight travel and moves on to annual international travel, and finishes with previous travel to the Caribbean where Cuba is located. We believe that the influence of travel will become increasingly apparent as the scope of travel goes from domestic to international and eventually to Caribbean.

Demographic factors and cultural proximity

Studies from the Pew Research Center (2016) indicate that American's perceptions of Cuba differ based on demographic factors including education and age. These studies revealed that higher levels of education are associated with perceptions that Cuba will become more democratic in the next several years (Pew Research Center, 2016). Also, it was determined that younger Americans and a majority (at least 74%) of White, Black, and Hispanic Americans are more supportive of ending the trade embargo (Pew Research Center, 2016). Based upon these findings we anticipate that those who have higher education will have greater support for policies that increase access to Cuba as will younger respondents.

While not a demographic factor, cultural proximity (the tendency to prefer products from one's own culture or the most similar culture (Straubhaar, 2003), is an individual characteristic that may influence perceptions or preferences. Language has been found to be an important indicator of cultural proximity that can measure preferences and behaviors (Carvalho, 2021; Ksiazek and Webster, 2008). In the context of tourism cultural proximity has been shown to have a positive relationship with destination image (Huang, Chen, and Lin, 2013) suggesting there is a relationship between cultural proximity and interest in visiting the destination. Further, a study of Spanish-speakers (Shively, 2021) on study abroad confirmed the desire to use language abilities while traveling to engage with the local residents. Thus, we anticipate that those who have cultural proximity with Cuba, as expressed through Spanish language proficiency, will have greater support for increasing travel access to Cuba.

Methods

To address the research question, a cross-sectional study of U.S. residents was conducted in June 2016. Data were collected using an online panel provided by Issues and Answers, a global market research firm; the survey was made available to residents of the U.S. who are active travelers; respondents were screened by age (18 years or older), travel experience (had traveled at least 50 miles from home in the past year for business or pleasure), and income (household income of \$50,000 or more) to reflect the American Travel Market (Boley and Woosnam, 2021). Over one thousand (n=1,122) respondents began the survey, however over 300 were removed because they did not meet the above criteria or because of missing data. With removal of these responses, the viable sample included 803 respondents. The survey yielded data on socio-demographics, previous travel experience, general travel behavior and preferences, perceptions of Cuba and interest in travel to Cuba, and social media use. Additionally, we asked about respondents' political leanings, knowledge about Cuba, and Spanish-speaking ability; only a portion of the data is used in this current study.

During the analysis, each of the dependent and independent variables were converted to categorical variables as there was not equitable distribution of responses. For example, political leanings originally had seven response options: liberal, moderately liberal, independent, moderately conservative, conservative, Libertarian, and other, which were recoded into *liberal/moderately liberal*, *conservative/moderately conservative*, and *independent*, which reflects the conceptualization of political parties in the United States. Because there were so few responses of Libertarian and other, they were not used in the analysis. The 5-point Likert scale responses in *How knowledgeable do you consider yourself to be with Cuba?* were combined into three categories: *not very knowledgeable*, *moderately knowledgeable*, and *very knowledgeable*.

Three components comprised the construct of previous travel experience: number of overnights annually, number of international overnights annually, and previous travel experience within the Caribbean nations. Socio-demographic and personal variables explored were gender, age, education, and household income. Spanish-speaking ability was categorized into three levels of proficiency.

Two questions were used as the dependent variables to evaluate respondents' sentiments toward U.S.-Cuba relations: *Should the U.S. Government end its trade embargo on Cuba?* and *Should the U.S. Government allow U.S. citizens to freely travel to Cuba?* The response categories for these two independent variables were also collapsed. They originally both used a 5-point Likert scale of *Definitely not*, *Probably not*, *Neutral*, *Probably yes*, and *Definitely yes* which were combined to form categories of *Do not support*, *Neutral*, and *Support*. This categorization is similar to that used in longitudinal studies of

Cuban American's sentiments towards the embargo (FIU, 2020). A chi-square test of independence was performed in SPSS 25.0 to examine each of the relationships between the independent variables and these two dependent variables: support of U.S. trade embargo and support of allowing American travel to Cuba.

Results

Of the 803 respondents in the sample, 54.4% were female and 45.6% were male. The average age of respondents was 51 years old with the majority (44.5%) in their 50s and 60s. A majority of respondents (41.3%) indicated earning a bachelor's degree, 22.2% held a graduate degree, while 36.5% indicated they had some college, an associates or technical degree, a high school diploma or GED. About one third of respondents had an annual household income before taxes of less than \$70,000 or \$70,000 - \$99,999 (30.4% and 33.9% respectively), while one quarter (24.3%) earned \$100,000 - \$149,999 annually, and 11.5% had a household income greater than \$150,000.

Over half (54.9%) of respondents indicated they had no ability to speak Spanish, 36.5% identified themselves as novice/intermediate Spanish speakers, and 8.6% identified themselves as expert (native or non-native) Spanish speakers. In terms of political leanings, 31.9% identified as liberal/moderately liberal, 23.6% as independent, and 44.5% as conservative/moderately conservative. When asked to rate their knowledge about Cuba, 54.2% stated that they were slightly or not at all knowledgeable, while 29.4% considered themselves moderately knowledgeable, compared to 16.4% who were very/extremely knowledgeable.

In terms of previous travel experience, this was a well-traveled sample with 19.7% typically traveling 1-2 nights/year, while 59.0% 3 nights/year, and 21.3% 4 or more nights/year. Annual international travel occurred with 59.7% of the respondents one time/year, while 40.3% would take an international trip two or more times/year. In regards to previous Caribbean travel, 47.9% had never visited, while one third (33.4%) had visited one Caribbean country and 18.7% had visited two Caribbean countries. Only 14 respondents (>0.02%) previously visited Cuba.

Overall, 19.4% did not think we should end the Embargo, while 47.6% were in favor of ending it, and one third (33.0%) were neutral. Regarding travel to Cuba, 15.4% did not think we should allow it, while 62.8% would allow it and 21.8% were neutral.

Test results

Regarding the question *Should the U.S. Government end its trade embargo on Cuba?* the demographic variables of gender, age, education, and household

income all revealed statistically significant results. Spanish-speaking ability, knowledge about Cuba, political leaning, and all travel experience variables also yielded statistically significant results.

Men were more likely than expected to support *and* oppose the embargo, and less likely than expected to be neutral on the topic $X^2(2, N = 749) = 30.035, p = .000$; the responses were the same regarding travel to Cuba with stronger feelings on both ends $X^2(2, N = 768) = 12.206, p = .002$, while women were more likely than expected to be neutral on both topics (Table 1). Respondents in their 50s and 70s were more likely than expected to support the embargo, while respondents in their 30s, 40s, and 60s were more likely than expected to oppose the embargo, and 20s were more likely to be neutral $X^2(10, N = 750) = 19.196, p = .038$. Respondents in their 60s were more likely than expected to support travel to Cuba, those in their 50s were less likely to support travel to Cuba, while respondents in their 20s, 30s, and 40s were more likely to be neutral $X^2(10, N = 769) = 15.65, p = .110$. Those with the most education were more likely than expected to oppose the embargo $X^2(4, N = 764) = 22.056, p = .000$ and to support travel to Cuba $X^2(4, N = 783) = 9.616, p = .047$, while the group with less education were more likely than expected to be neutral. The higher income groups were more likely to support ending the embargo and travel to Cuba, while the lower income groups were more likely to be neutral $X^2(8, N = 767) = 24.119, p = .002$ and $X^2(8, N = 786) = 9.729, p = .285$ respectively.

Table 1. Chi-square analysis of socio-demographic variables and opinions about the U.S. Embargo/Travel to Cuba

Variable	Should the U.S. Government end its trade embargo on Cuba?			Should the U.S. Government allow U.S. citizens to freely travel to Cuba?		
	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes
Gender						
Female (n=409/419)	65 (44.8%)	169 (68.7%)	175 (48.9%)	54 (46.2%)	109 (65.7%)	256 (52.8%)
Male (n=340/349)	80 (55.2%)	77 (31.3%)	183 (51.1%)	63 (53.8%)	57 (34.3%)	229 (47.2%)
$\chi^2(df)$	30.035 (2)			12.206 (2)		
Sig.	.000			.002		
Age						
20's (n=51/51)	10 (6.8%)	26 (10.4%)	15 (4.2%)	10 (8.4%)	16 (9.5%)	25 (5.2%)
30's (n=146/148)	24 (16.4%)	48 (19.2%)	74 (20.9%)	17 (14.3%)	38 (22.6%)	93 (19.3%)
40's (n=148/153)	24 (16.4%)	51 (20.4%)	73 (20.6%)	20 (16.8%)	40 (23.8%)	93 (19.3%)

50's (n=174/178)	37 (25.3%)	62 (24.8%)	75 (21.2%)	32 (26.9%)	36 (21.4%)	110 (22.8%)
60's (n=160/163)	30 (20.5%)	47 (18.8%)	83 (23.4%)	27 (22.7%)	23 (13.7%)	113 (23.4%)
70+ (n=71/76)	21 (14.4%)	16 (6.4%)	34 (9.6%)	13 (10.9%)	15 (8.9%)	48 (10.0%)
$\chi^2 (df)$	19.196 (10)			15.65 (10)		
Sig.	.038			.110		
Education						
Some/no college (n=278/285)	31.8% (47)	46.2% (116)	31.5% (115)	37.2% (45)	42.7% (73)	34.0% (167)
Bachelor's degree (n=319/324)	43.2% (64)	40.2% (101)	42.2% (154)	39.7% (48)	43.3% (74)	41.1% (202)
Graduate degree (n=167/174)	25.0% (37)	13.5% (34)	26.3% (96)	23.1% (28)	14.0% (24)	24.8% (122)
$\chi^2 (df)$	22.056 (4)			9.616 (4)		
Sig.	0.000			0.047		
Household Income						
Less than \$70,000 (n=235/240)	39 (26.2%)	103 (40.7%)	93 (25.5%)	37 (30.6%)	64 (37.4%)	139 (28.1%)
\$70,000 - \$99,999 (n=260/265)	54 (36.2%)	83 (32.8%)	123 (33.7%)	42 (34.7%)	60 (35.1%)	163 (33.0%)
\$100,000 - \$149,999 (n=190/193)	36 (24.2%)	50 (19.8%)	104 (28.5%)	27 (22.3%)	34 (19.9%)	132 (26.7%)
\$150,000 - \$199,999 (n=47/49)	13 (8.7%)	10 (4.0%)	24 (6.6%)	7 (5.8%)	8 (4.7%)	34 (6.9%)
More than \$200,000 (n=35/39)	7 (4.7%)	7 (2.8%)	21 (5.8%)	8 (6.6%)	5 (2.9%)	26 (5.3%)
$\chi^2 (df)$	24.119 (8)			9.73 (8)		
Sig.	0.002			0.285		

Note: No = Definitely/probably not; Yes = Definitely/ probably yes

The greater the Spanish speaking ability, the more likely the respondent supported ending the embargo $X^2 (4, N = 765) = 29.281, p = .000$ and supported travel to Cuba $X^2 (4, N = 784) = 23.434, p = .000$ (Table 2). Likewise the more knowledgeable the respondent is about Cuba, the more likely they are to support ending the embargo $X^2 (4, N = 755) = 60.417, p = .000$ and allowing travel to Cuba $X^2 (4, N = 772) = 24.479, p = .000$, while the less knowledgeable were more neutral. In the case of both DVs, the respondents in the self-professed “moderate

knowledge" group were more likely than expected to support the embargo and be against travel. The more liberal leaning the respondents were much more likely to support the end of the embargo $X^2(4, N = 715) = 66.605, p = .000$ as well as travel to Cuba $X^2(4, N = 734) = 61.677, p = .000$, and the conservative leaning respondents were much more likely to oppose both travel and the embargo's end.

Table 2. Other individual characteristics and opinions about the U.S. Embargo/Travel to Cuba

Variable	Should the U.S. Government end its trade embargo on Cuba? n (%)			Should the U.S. Government allow U.S. citizens to freely travel to Cuba? n (%)		
	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes
Spanish speaking						
No ability (n=417/427)	91 (61.1%)	163 (64.9%)	163 (44.7%)	77 (63.6%)	112 (66.3%)	238 (48.2%)
Novice/Intermediate (n=283/288)	36 (29.8%)	50 (29.6%)	202 (40.9%)	36 (29.8%)	50 (29.6%)	202 (40.9%)
Expert/Native Speaker (n=65/69)	8 (6.6%)	7 (4.1%)	54 (10.9%)	8 (6.6%)	7 (4.1%)	8 (10.9%)
$\chi^2(df)$	29.281 (4)			23.434 (4)		
Sig.	.000			.000		
Knowledgeable about Cuba						
Slightly/Not at all (n=406/415)	73 (50.3%)	174 (69.3%)	159 (44.3%)	56 (47.1%)	107 (63.7%)	252 (52.0%)
Moderately (n=223/230)	48 (33.1%)	67 (26.7%)	108 (30.1%)	44 (37.0%)	52 (31.0%)	134 (27.6%)
Very/Extremely (n=12/127)	24 (16.6%)	10 (4.0%)	92 (25.6%)	119 (6.0%)	9 (5.4%)	99 (20.4%)
$\chi^2(df)$	60.417(4)			24.479 (2)		
Sig.	.000			.000		
Political Leanings						
Liberal/Moderate Liberal (n=229/233)	17 (12.1%)	62 (27.2%)	150 (43.2%)	10 (8.5%)	36 (24.0%)	187 (40.0%)
Independent (n=170/173)	25 (17.9%)	64 (28.1%)	81 (23.3%)	23 (19.7%)	39 (26.0%)	111 (23.8%)
Conservative/ Moderate Conservative (n=316/328)	98 (70.0%)	102 (44.7%)	116 (33.4%)	84 (71.8%)	75 (50.0%)	169 (36.2%)
$\chi^2(df)$	66.605 (2)			61.677 (2)		
Sig.	.000			.000		

The more overnight [$X^2(4, N = 766) = 9.518, p = .049$; $X^2(4, N = 785) = 7.574, p = .108$], international [$X^2(2, N = 762) = 17.949, p = .000$; $X^2(2, N = 781) = 39.006, p = .000$], and Caribbean travel [$X^2(4, N = 767) = 21.134, p = .000$; $X^2(4, N = 786) = 27.052, p = .000$] that respondents had made, the greater they

were likely to support ending the Trade Embargo as well as to support travel to Cuba, respectively (Table 3).

Table 3. Chi-square analysis of travel experience variables and opinions about the U.S. Embargo/Travel to Cuba

Variable	Should the U.S. Government end its trade embargo on Cuba? n (%)			Should the U.S. Government allow U.S. citizens to freely travel to Cuba? n (%)		
	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes
Annual Overnight Travel (n=766/785)						
1-2 nights/year (n=153/153)	27 (18.1%)	63 (24.9%)	63 (17.3%)	23 (19.0%)	45 (26.3%)	85 (17.2%)
3 nights/year (n=451/463)	90 (60.4%)	149 (58.9%)	212 (58.2%)	73 (60.3%)	96 (56.1%)	294 (59.6%)
4+ nights/year (n=162/169)	32 (21.5%)	41 (16.2%)	89 (24.5%)	25 (20.7%)	30 (17.5%)	114 (23.1%)
χ^2 (df)	9.518 (4)			7.574 (4)		
Sig.	.049			.108		
Annual International Travel (n=762/781)						
One trip/year (n=457/467)	101 (68.2%)	168 (66.4%)	188 (52.1%)	90 (74.4%)	126 (73.7%)	251 (51.3%)
Two or more trips/year (n=305/314)	47 (31.8%)	85 (33.6%)	173 (47.9%)	31 (25.6%)	45 (26.3%)	238 (48.7%)
χ^2 (df)	17.949 (2)			39.006 (2)		
Sig.	.000			.000		
Previous Caribbean Travel (n = 767/786)						
One country (n=257/265)	41 (27.5%)	73 (28.9%)	142 (39.2%)	30 (24.8%)	51 (29.8%)	184 (37.2%)
Two or more countries (n=142/147)	21 (14.1%)	43 (17.0%)	78 (21.4%)	17 (14.0%)	21 (12.3%)	109 (22.1%)
No countries (n=368/374)	87 (58.4%)	137 (54.2%)	144 (39.5%)	74 (61.2%)	99 (57.9%)	201 (40.7%)
χ^2 (df)	21.134 (4)			27.052 (4)		
Sig.	0.000			0.000		

Discussion

This study aimed to identify personal factors that play a role in determining sentiment towards travel access to Cuba. Knowledge of these factors is crucial to those who are planning and promoting US travel to Cuba as it will allow them to anticipate how changes in public sentiment could alter access to Cuba (Fullerton

et al., 2017). With the considerable impacts that US travelers could bring to Cuba (Knollenberg et al., 2020), the ability to determine intent of U.S. travelers to visit could give Cuban tourism leaders the opportunity to implement strategies to maximize the positive and minimize the negative impacts. This has never been more important than in the times of COVID-19. Should travel access to Cuba change under the Biden Administration and while the virus is still active in the US population, Cuban leaders will need to determine how to manage the potential influx of US travelers. As such, we began by investigating socio-demographic characteristics. Perhaps the most interesting findings were among gender and age.

Gender

Male respondents were more likely to have stronger opinions both for and against the embargo and for/against travel to Cuba. Women on the other hand were more likely to be neutral on both issues. These findings align with a 2015 study which found men more likely to support the re-establishment of US ties with Cuba (Pew Research Center, 2015). Furthermore, there is evidence that much of the marketing for travel to Cuba is designed to appeal to male travelers (Cabezas, 2004; Morgan & Pritchard, 2018), which may explain why male respondents are more likely to support travel to Cuba than women.

Age

Relative to age, it is understandable that various generations might view Cuba differently from one another. The Cuban Revolution which occurred from 1953-1959 affected the respondents who were older more since they grew up during the Revolution or who had a parent that grew up during that time period. So, while it seems predictable that respondents in their 50s and 70s supported the embargo, it is puzzling that respondents in their 60s did not. Additionally, respondents in their 60s support travel to Cuba, while those in their 50s did not; respondents in their 20s, 30s, and 40s were more likely to be neutral. These findings contrast a 2015 Harris Poll of US travelers which found moderate levels of interest in travel to Cuba among those in their 20s (Businesswire, 2015). Our findings also contradict those from the Pew Research Center (2016) which indicate older US citizens are less likely to support re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba or ending the trade embargo. Perhaps respondents to this study may have framed the embargo or access policies differently because of the emphasis used in this study on travel to Cuba.

Education and Income

Respondents of higher educational achievement and higher income earnings were more likely to oppose the embargo and support travel to Cuba. This aligns with evidence from other studies which indicate that those who attended some college or hold a college degree are more supportive of re-establishing diplomatic ties with Cuba and ending the embargo (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Political Affiliation

This study found evidence that political affiliation does influence sentiments towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba. The more liberal-leaning the respondents were, the stronger the likelihood they were to oppose the embargo and support travel to Cuba, while the conservative-leaning respondents were much more likely to feel the opposite. These findings are reflected in other polls of Americans, which indicate overall lower levels of support for ending the embargo among Republican respondents as compared to Democrats, but offers longitudinal evidence of growing support for ending the embargo among those with more conservative political views (Pew Research Center, 2015). Combined with previous findings focused on destination image and intention to visit a destination (Legg, Tang, and Slevitch, 2012; Severt and Hahm, 2020), these findings indicate that travelers' political affiliation is a crucial factor to consider when determining sentiment towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba. The findings also provide support the literature on political animosity and its influence on intention to visit a destination (Alvarez and Campo, 2020; Stephenkova et al., 2020).

Spanish Proficiency

Respondents with greater Spanish-speaking abilities were likely to support travel to Cuba and oppose the Embargo, which aligns with Carvalho's study (2019) involving tourists wishing to practice speaking a non-native tongue. While beyond the scope of this study, a common travel segment is language tourism whereby tourists visit a destination that allows them to practice their language skills (Shively, 2021).

Knowledge of Cuba

Knowledge of a destination and prior travel experiences were also influential factors in forming traveler's sentiment towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba. Not surprisingly, respondents who were more knowledgeable about Cuba,

or who were more well-traveled in general, were more likely to oppose the embargo and support travel to Cuba. Such findings mirror the understanding of how increased knowledge of a destination, like Cuba, increases interest in the destination (Kendrick et al., 2015) as does prior travel experiences (Tan and Wu, 2016). This extends the importance of destination knowledge and prior travel experience in determining not only travelers' intention to visit destinations, but also their willingness to support policy changes that facilitate their visitation.

Travel Experience

Current tourism research suggests that travelers appreciate the social status that comes from travel experiences posted on social media (Boley et al., 2018), revealing that travel experience can play into both one's social reward for travel as well as an incentive for additional trips to brag about. Further, travel expands one's world view, leading to more liberal views on diversity and intercultural exchange (Soulard, McGehee, & Stern, 2019). Relatedly, in line with previous studies (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; DeCrop 2010), the travel experience variables within this study supported the premise that more seasoned travelers were likely to support ending the Trade Embargo as well as to support travel to Cuba.

Conclusions

While our findings are valuable in that they provide insight into relationships between the individual characteristics of US travelers and their feelings about Cuba, additional analyses in future studies would do well to combine variables into ANOVA, MANOVA, or regression analysis. Unfortunately, our group sizes were not conducive to such analyses. Additionally, because of the rapidly changing nature of the US-Cuba political relations as well as the state of the pandemic, the findings only capture one point in time under one political administration. Longitudinal analysis of these relationships would provide greater explanation of changes brought on by shifts in political power. Future inquiry should focus on deeper profiles of Cuba travelers relative to other demographic and psychographic characteristics (Kendrick et al., 2015), including sustainable travel behaviors (Knollenberg et al, 2020) as well as Cuban reaction to various "types" of American visitors. Additionally, the individual's personal heritage/relationship with Cuba would likely influence their view of travel to Cuba positively or negatively. Given the large population of Cuban Americans within the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2019), it would be a substantive trajectory for examination. With myriad impacts to consider, in particular because of the pandemic and in light of shifting political dynamics within the US, it will be

beneficial for tourism planners and operators to have an improved understanding of US travelers' sentiment towards policies that allow travel access to Cuba. The trade embargo with Cuba continues to be a political issue that the Cuban and US tourism industries will need to address and anticipate. Knowledge of how the US public perceives the embargo and travel to Cuba will help these industries prepare for potential opportunities and challenges. This knowledge may help those responsible for planning and marketing US travel to Cuba to anticipate change in policy and maximize the positive and minimize the negative impacts of increased US travel to Cuba.

While this study provides evidence that assessing factors such as potential travelers' demographics, political affiliation, knowledge of the destination and their previous travel experience can shed light on whether US travelers will push for changes in policies that facilitate travel access to Cuba, it can additionally provide a beginning for addressing the ever-shifting travel dynamics between nations with opposing political aspirations during this post-COVID era.

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