

Residents' Perceptions of Spring Break Tourism: The *Involvement/Empowerment* Perspective

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Abstract

This study examined the attitudes towards Spring Break niche tourism that has developed over the past 40 years in the United States, especially given popular perceptions and associations. Insights from numerous tourism studies concerned with local attitudes imply that residents' interest in travel and tourism is likely to moderate their attitudes toward niche tourism in their own community. In reference to both conventional and niche tourism markets, several scholars have recognized shifts in community perceptions of tourism benefits/costs in relation to their own potential authority or power in tourism matters. However, as research on niche tourism products and markets is limited, equally limited is the understanding of the role of residents' general interest with tourism/travel and empowerment in tourism decision-making. An important contribution of this paper to the body of literature on tourism attitudes is that it brings to attention the importance of residents' Involvement with travel/tourism in perceptions of niche markets. To enrich the findings, this study examined differences in attitudes toward Spring Break tourism associated with perceived empowerment.

Keywords: *Spring Break, Youth Tourism, Niche Tourism, Involvement, Empowerment in Tourism Decision-Making, Perceptions of Community Residents, South Padre Island-USA.*

Introduction

The extant literature supports the assertion that tourism has a high-impact on host communities' economics, environmental and social/cultural dynamics. Positive economic changes may take the form of infrastructure development, job creation, diversification of business opportunities, or tax revenue (Gursoy et al., 2002; Jurowski et al., 1997; King, Pizam, & Milman, 1993; Lankford & Howard, 1994; Liu & Var, 1986; Milman & Pizam, 1988; Ross, 1992). Social and environmental benefits may include a clean community appearance, preservation of local fauna, flora and habitats, more community events, shopping opportunities, and better preservation of cultural assets (e.g. Ap, 1990, 1992a; Gursoy et al., 2002; Jurowski et al., 1997; Madrigal, 1995; McCool & Martin, 1994; Perdue et al., 1990; Ross, 1992).

While tourism may promote higher quality of life that evokes positive attitudes among residents, planners have a tendency to overlook the adverse signs of tourism effect on community wellbeing. Nevertheless, the development that happens with little control may increase the economic gap between stakeholder groups, degrade the quality of local nature, and introduce undesirable social activities such as an increased crime and prostitution (Jurowski et al., 1997). Numerous studies have demonstrated a link between perceived tourism benefits/costs and the degree of local support for tourism development (Ap., 1992a,

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1992b; Deccio & Baloglu, 2002; Gursoy et al., 2002). Likewise, research demonstrated that the concurrent occurrence of benefits and costs of tourism generates conflicting attitudes that fluctuate over time (e.g. Pizam, 1978; King, Pizam & Milman, 1993)

An insight from numerous tourism studies concerned with local attitudes indicates that residents' interest in travel and tourism is likely to moderate their attitudes toward niche tourism. The concept of 'niche tourism' is derived from the concept of 'niche marketing' that refers to how a specific product can be tailored to meet the needs of a particular market segment (Novelli, 2005). The Spring Break niche has developed over the past 40 years (Josiam, Hobson, Dietrich & Smeaton, 1998), and has accumulated many negative associations. Residents of different Spring Break destinations have reported an increase in crowding, frequent traffic jams, pollution and a general lack of good behaviour. The last category includes, but is not limited to copious consumption of drugs and alcohol, increased criminal activity, and prostitution (Josiam et al., 1998; Harrill, 2004). Only a few researchers in the United States have recognized that the excessive behaviour of students may have an adverse impact on residential attitudes towards Spring Break tourism (Josiam, et al., 1998; Sönmez et al., 2006).

Objectives

Research on niche tourism products and markets (such as Spring Break tourism) is limited and so is the understanding of the role of *Involvement* in tourism/travel. An important contribution of this paper to the body of literature on tourism attitudes is that it brings to the attention the importance of residents' *Involvement* with travel/tourism in perceptions of niche markets. Hence, the first objective is as follows:

Objective 1: To assess the role of Involvement with Travel/Tourism in predicting attitudes towards Spring Break tourism

In reference to both conventional and niche tourism markets, several scholars have recognized shifts in community perceptions of tourism benefits/costs in relation to their own potential authority or power in tourism matters (Choi & Murray, 2010). Murphy (1985) provided an elegant summary of the residents' power to shape the quality of the tourism experience: "If residents resent or fear tourism, their resistance and hostility can destroy the local industry's potential" (p. 153).

In this course of reasoning, residents are legitimate participants in the tourism planning and development process (e.g. Murphy 1985; Jamal & Getz 1995). A subsequent step towards better destination management is to understand the socio-political factors that shape local attitudes (Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010). This research examined differences in the attitudes toward Spring Break tourism associated with perceived empowerment in Spring Break tourism. Thus, the second objective is as follows:

Objective 2: To assess the potential association between empowerment in Spring Break tourism and perceived Spring Break tourism impacts.

Literature Review

Attitudes

Attitudes may be defined as lasting predispositions toward elements of one's environment (Getz, 1994). Attitudes reflect individual views and influence peoples' behaviours toward these objects (Monterrubio & Andriotis, 2014). Researchers have identified that favourable perceptions of tourism translate into greater support for more tourism (Ap., 1990, 1992; Gursoy, et al, 2002; Dietrich & García-Buades, 2008). Getz (1994) noted that people's attitudes are strengthened by their experience, and have strong associations with their values and personality. Though attitudes toward tourism will start to diminish if the irritation with tourists increases (Ryan et al., 1998). Doxey (1975) proposed that community resistance to tourism becomes stronger as the number of visitors increase and the perceived quality of life diminishes. Against this common concern, Dyer et al. (2006) found that in a well-developed tourist destination, locals may still express a positive attitude towards tourism development.

Ap. (1990 & 1992) identified that tourism is tolerated as long as the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. However, researchers generally agree that attitudes toward tourism change as the costs related to tourism increase or become more evident. A number of studies have explored how the personal benefits of tourism or tourism dependence relate to residents' attitudes (Perdue et al., 1990; Liu & Var, 1986; Lankford & Howard, 1994). Within the framework of social exchange theory, multiple studies have verified that perception of greater economic benefits from tourism, and tourism dependency are linked to more positive views of tourism impacts (Bruno & Courtney, 1999; Jurowski et al., 1997; Sirakaya et

al., 2002; McGehee & Andereck 2004; Josiam et al., 2015 – add Spears & Boger, 2003).

The literature identifies that residents' perception of tourism is influenced by the frequency of their contacts with visitors (Thomason, Crompton & Kamp, 1979; Harrill & Potts, 2003; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Andereck, et al., 2005; Andereck & McGehee, 2008). Likewise, demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, occupation (employment in tourism industry), and proximity to the main tourist zones, values and sub-segments of population appear to be good predictors of tourism attitudes (Jurowski et al., 1997; Carmichael, 2006; McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Ryan & Cooper, 2004; Waitt, 2003 – add Spears & Boger, 2003). In summary, residents' attitudes toward different forms of tourism activity are usually studied within the framework of social-exchange theory, Doxey's Irridex, or within the tourism dependency framework.

Involvement with Travel/Tourism

Since its emergence in 1964 Zaichkowsky's (1985), *Involvement* construct has been widely used in consumer behaviour research. In social psychology *Involvement* is defined as a useful tool to explain a wide range of behavioural and decision processes (Havitz, 1997). Rothschild (1983) conceptualized involvement as a process resulting from the convergence of current external variables facing the consumer (the product, activity, or situation), and "past internal variables" that are enduring such as values or ego. Also, Decrop (2006) drew a distinction between enduring and situational involvement. While the latter is connected to situation-specific stimuli (Antil, 1984), the former, which is the subject of this research, emerges through continued interest over an extended period of time. For this study, involvement was defined as a person's perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values and interests' (Zaichkowsky, 1985) and it measures the core concept of residents' perceived interest in travel/tourism in general.

In consumer research, the degree of one's involvement affects their decision-making and responses to advertising (Broderick & Mueller, 1999). This concept is especially useful at all levels of tourism operations when understanding the needs, wants, and interests of consumers (Josiam, et al., 2005). Zaichkowsky (1985) proposed that involvement is an important moderating variable in attitude changes. While there is some literature

on the involvement in the leisure activities of the tourist (Hwang, Lee & Chen, 2005), specific tourism involvement studies are sporadic, and focused mainly on grouped touristic activities (Hwang et al., 2005); tourists to Turkey (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003); opinion leadership (Jamrozy et al., 1996) and travel motivation and destination selection (Josiam et al., 1999; Cai, Feng & Breiter, 2004). Only a few studies considered the link between the residents' *Involvement* with travel/tourism and attitudes towards tourism (Hwang, Lee & Chen, 2005). The value of this research to the existing body of literature concerned with tourism attitudes, focusing on the power of involvement with tourism in predicting niche tourism attitude utilizing the example of Spring Break vacation. In other words, we propose that *Involvement* with tourism/travel will be associated with more positive attitudes, as people who have "committed (the sin of) tourism" are more likely to 'forgive' uncivil activity by Spring Breakers in their communities.

Empowerment in Tourism Decision-Making

Lankford and Howard (1994) and Ap (1992) suggested that the level of influence in decision-making and control of the development process might affect the outcomes of planning and behavioural controls for future tourism. Understood either as a process of acquiring control and the capability of successful action or as an outcome of the social and political processes, empowerment is the ability of individuals and communities to act (Staples, 1990). The concept of empowerment integrates two components: a) perception of socio-political control, and b) a critical understanding of individual and political systems with a proactive approach to solving personal and social problems. Empowered individuals believe that they are able to achieve the desired outcomes. These individuals are aware of the resources that are available and factors that influence their efforts (Zimmerman, 1995).

Several tourism studies have concluded that residents should be involved in tourism decision-making and planning (e.g. Ap, 1992a; Gunn, 1994; Haywood, 1988; Keogh, 1990; Lankford & Howard, 1994; Madrigal, 1993; Murphy, 1985; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010, add Spears & Boger, 2002). The notion of empowerment through participation in tourism decision-making has been studied mostly within the framework of sustainable development (Tosun, 2000; Cole, 2006; Trejos, Chiang, & Huang, 2008; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010; Boley & McGehee, 2014; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015).

Empowering stakeholders by including their voice in tourism planning is a relatively new approach that has been brought up mostly in the context of community-based tourism (Tosun, 1998; Armitage, 2005; Saarinen, 2006).

Advocates of residents' inclusion in planning for tourism emphasize the importance of distributing power among primary users of local resources (Scheyvens 1999; Zanetell & Knuth, 2002; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010). These studies contend that while economic benefits may lead to more robust local economies, residents' involvement in destination management may lead to greater local cohesion (Li, 2006).

Several studies have used social exchange theory (SET) (you introduced SET earlier so, just abbreviate from here on out...) to examine the direct and indirect relationships between resident attitudes toward tourism and the components of sustainability (Jurovski et al., 1997; Deccio & Baloglu, 2002; Gursoy, Jurovski, & Uysal, 2002;). Choi and Murray (2010) examined two sustainability-related socio-political variables added to the SET framework: planning activity, and community participation. Several researchers have identified shifts in community attitudes toward tourism in relation to their own potential authority or power. For instance, Madrigal (1993) recognized that a host population with a perceived influence over tourism development is more likely to have a positive attitude toward tourism.

Spring Break Tourism by American College Students

Spring Break (SB) is one of the major vacation periods in the college calendar that typically occurs between late February and early April each year. It is understood to be a ritual that engages thousands of North American college students migrating to spring break 'enclaves' (Smeaton, Josiam & Dietrich, 1998). The influx of thousands of students boosts economic activity in the destination and brings in millions of dollars to hotels, restaurants, bar owners, and shopkeepers. These economic benefits often times accrue to a small section of the community yet leave many residents at the destination facing huge crowds, traffic jams, rowdy behaviours, and pollution (Josiam, Hobson, Dietrich & Smeaton, 1998).

The growth of spring break tourism in many destinations has become problematic, predominantly due to the behaviour of college students. The research about the 'college spring

break phenomenon' in United States has recognized that the excessive behaviour of students involves enormous consumption of alcohol, drugs, increased sexual activity, and other hedonic conduct (Josiam, et al, 1998; Sönmez et al., 2006). Research has found that young tourists tend to adopt a range of negative behaviours while visiting various destinations (Carr, 2002). Such cases include young British travelling to Greek resorts (Andriotis, 2010) as well as spring breakers to USA, Mexican and Caribbean destinations (Josiam, et al., 1998). As a result, Fort Lauderdale, where the spring break phenomenon emerged, is no longer a preferred SB destination due to the social and environmental implications of the tourist activity (Josiam et al., 1998). This situation has gone so far as to enter the local political scene in some destinations leading to the further debate on the issue.

This study contributes to the existing body of research on empowerment and community participation in tourism. It demonstrates differences of perceived Spring Break tourism costs and benefits between those who feel included and empowered in tourism decision making or feel they have an impact on Spring Break tourism in their community and residents who do not report such empowerment and inclusion in the tourism development processes.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

The Spring Break Tourism Attitude Survey was administered in August 2013 to residents of communities located near South Padre Island, Texas, USA. Respondents (n = 216) were a convenience sample was taken from shopping mall to measure perceived impacts of Spring Break tourism on local communities (Personal Costs/Benefits, Community Costs/Benefits, Involvement). The questionnaires were self-administered and the responses were immediately collected from residents at a local area mall. Due to time and financial constraints, it was impossible to administer the survey in all the towns around South Padre Island that were initially selected as desirable data collection sites. However, this purposive sampling procedure collected a sufficient number of responses to draw conclusions about perceived Spring Break tourism costs/benefits. The demographics of the sample (Table 1) differ from the demographics of the United States, Texas, and South Padre Islands a whole, which limits generalizability of the findings.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Descriptive		N	%
Gender (N=196)	Female	116	59.2
	Male	80	40.8
Marital Status (N=215)	Single	103	47.9
	Married or Partnership without children	37	17.2
	Married or Partnership with children	75	34.9
Employment status (N= 211)	Employed	169	79.7
	Unemployed	42	19.8
Ethnicity (N= 212)	Hispanic/Latino American	136	
	Others	76	
Family Income in US\$ (N= 205)	50,000 or less	90	43.9
	50,000 to 75,000	54	26.3
	75,000 to 100,000	24	11.7
	100,000 to 125,000	13	6.3
	125,000 to 150,000	11	5.4
	150, 000 and more	13	6.3
Education (N=211)	High School	47	22.3
	Some College	88	41.7
	Associate Degree	22	10.4
	Bachelors Degree	33	15.6
	Some Grad School	5	2.4
	Master's Degree	14	6.6
	Doctorate	2	0.9

Note: Differences are Due to Number of Valid Responses.

Measures

The attitude survey items were derived from previous studies on attitudes toward tourism and perception of tourist impact on communities. These items were discussed amongst experts and the items considered to be relevant were selected for the questionnaire's final version. All items were worded positively. Past research has shown that respondents tend to answer negatively worded items in a different manner than the positively worded items, which might undermine the reliability of measurement scales (Herche & Engelland, 1996).

Involvement with Travel and Tourism. Involvement with travel and tourism functioned as a predictor variable. A10-item bipolar-type scale was used based on the items originally developed by Zaichowsky (1986). The current scale measured the following: importance, interest, meaning, value, how beneficial, relevant, exciting, appealing,

essential, and wanted is travel and tourism to each respondent. Reliability of the measure was strong ($\alpha = .964$).

Spring Break Tourism Attitudes. Items were derived from previously used instruments after extensive literature review of tourism attitudes literature. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted in order to assess the core factors that comprise the multidimensionality of residents' attitudes toward Spring Break tourism (for details see: Strzelecka et al, 2015). The adapted scale (a Likert-type scale where 1=not important, 5=very important) was comprised of items asking about Personal Benefits ($\alpha = .910$), Personal Costs ($\alpha = .828$), Community Benefits ($\alpha = .912$), Community Costs ($\alpha = .936$), and View of future SBT ($\alpha = .809$).

Empowerment- In this study empowerment was measured with Yes/No items derived from the concept of psychological empowerment originally

developed by community psychology scholars (e.g. Zimmerman, 1995) and later highlighted as principles of sustainable tourism (e.g. Saarinen, 2006; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015). (*I feel that I am a part of the tourism development process in the community; I participate in the tourism decision-making process in my community; I think I can impact decisions about Spring Break in my community*).

Findings

The role of Involvement with Travel/Tourism in

predicting attitudes toward Spring Break tourism

- Involvement with travel/tourism is a significant predictor of perceived Personal Benefits

Involvement in travel/tourism was a significant predictor of perceived *Personal Benefits* from Spring Break tourism ($\beta = .154$; $p = .005$). Involvement in travel and tourism explains 3.8% of variance in perceived Personal Benefits.

- Involvement with tourism is a significant predictor of perceived Community Benefits.

Table 3: Regression Analysis – Involvement (IDV)

Benefits	Personal Costs	Personal Benefits	Community View SB	Community Future
Beta	.154*	-.133*	.213**	-.111*
R	0.194	0.207	0.320	0.202
Adjusted R ²	0.033	0.038	0.098	0.041
Std. Error of the Estimate	1.029	0.997	0.835	1.005

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Involvement with travel/tourism is a significant predictor of perceived *Community Benefits* from Spring Break tourism ($\beta = .213$; $p = .000$). It explained 10.3 % of variance in perceived Community Benefits.

- Involvement with travel/tourism is a significant predictor of perceived Personal Costs.

Involvement in travel/tourism is a significant predictor of perceived *Personal Costs* from spring break tourism ($\beta = -.159$; $p = .003$). It explained 4.3 % of variance in perceived Personal Costs.

- Involvement with travel/tourism is a significant predictor of perceived Community Costs.

Involvement in travel/tourism is a significant predictor of perceived *Community Costs* from Spring Break tourism ($\beta = -.133$; $p = .003$). It explained 4.1 % of variance in perceived Community Costs.

- Involvement with travel/tourism is a significant predictor of View of future Spring Break Tourism (SBT).

Involvement with travel/tourism is a significant predictor of perceived *View of Future SBT* ($\beta = -.111$; $p = .036$). Involvement with travel/tourism explains 2.1 % of variance in View of Future SBT.

Community Empowerment in Tourism Decision-making and Attitudes toward Spring Break Tourism

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the role of empowerment in residents' perception of costs and benefits of Spring Break tourism, a series of ANOVA analyses were conducted (Table 5a, 5b, 5c).

A significant difference was found in terms of perceived Personal Benefits, Community Benefits, and the view of future Spring Break tourism between those who felt a part of the tourism development process and those who did not reported being a part of this process. Respondents who felt a part of *Spring Break Decision-Making* reported more positive attitudes towards Spring Break tourism (Table 5a).

A significant difference was found between those who participated in the tourism decision-making process and those who did not in how they perceived Personal Benefits, Community Benefits, Community Costs, and Community View of Future Spring Break tourism. Respondents who participated in Spring Break decision-making reported perceived lower Community Costs and higher Personal/Community Benefits. They also reported more positive view of Future Spring Break tourism (Table 5b).

Table 5a: ANOVA- Part of Decision-Making/Perceived SB Impacts

1. I feel part of tourism development decision-making		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig
Personal Benefits	Yes	80	3.53	0.980	13.094	.000
	No	127	3.05	0.903		
Community Benefits	Yes	80	3.78	0.737	21.559	.000
	No	127	3.28	0.762		
Community View of Future SB Tourism	Yes	80	3.67	1.018	7.231	.008
	No	127	3.28	0.998		

A statistically significant difference was found between those who reported ability to impact decisions about Spring Break tourism and those who reported that they weren't able to impact decisions about Spring Break tourism in terms of

perceived Personal Benefits, Personal Costs, Community Benefits, and Community View of Future Spring Break tourism. Respondents who thought they could impact decisions about Spring

Table 5b: ANOVA-Participation in Decision-Making/Perceived SB Impacts

2. I participate in tourism decision-making		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig
Personal Benefits	Yes	54	3.68	0.914	16.216	.000
	No	158	3.09	0.939		
Community Benefits	Yes	54	3.99	0.653	32.838	.000
	No	158	3.31	0.775		
Community Costs	Yes	54	2.59	0.925	7.263	.008
	No	158	2.95	0.818		
Community View of Future SB Tourism	Yes	54	3.71	1.070	5.325	.022
	No	158	3.34	0.986		

Break reported Personal Costs and higher Personal/Community benefits. They also reported more positive view of Future Spring Break Tourism (Table 5c)

Differences of *Involvement* levels in travel/tourism in terms of their empowerment were examined in a series of ANOVA analyses. Significant differences in levels of *Involvement* exist between those who felt part of tourism development

decision-making and those who did not, with the first group having lower average score. Further, those who reported that they participated in tourism decision-making reported a lower average score for *Involvement* with tourism/travel than those who did not. Finally, a lower average score of *Involvement* with tourism/travel was recorded for those, who believed they can impact decisions regarding Spring Break in their community than those who do not believe so (Table 6).

Table 5c: ANOVA-Impact on Decisions/Perceived SB Impacts

3. I think I can impact decisions regarding Spring Break in my community		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig
Personal Benefits	Yes	93	3.53	0.925	16.088	.000
	No	120	3.02	0.935		
Personal Cost	Yes	93	2.35	0.953	4.122	.044
	No	120	2.62	0.972		
Community Benefits	Yes	93	3.76	0.726	20.925	.000
	No	120	3.28	0.792		
View of Future SB Tourism	Yes	93	3.81	0.974	24.438	.000
	No	120	3.15	0.957		

Table 6: ANOVA Involvement/Empowerment

Involvement		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig
1. I feel part of tourism development decision-making	Yes	124	4.05	1.296	9.982	.002
	No	83	4.63	1.303		
2. I participate in tourism decision-making	Yes	153	4.82	0.104	11.195	.001
	No	52	4.13	0.179		
3. I think I can impact decisions regarding Spring Break in my community	Yes	116	4.00	1.318	13.637	.000
	No	92	4.66	1.243		

Discussion and Conclusions

The nature of niche tourism destinations highlights the importance of understanding a wide range of factors that affect residents’ perceptions of niche tourism. Past research has demonstrated that these perceptions may vary as different factors affect the attitudes among residents. The goal of this study was to examine how *Involvement with tourism/travel* and aspects of *Empowerment in Tourism Decision-Making* alter perceptions of Spring Break tourism. We found that both factors need to be taken into consideration in niche tourism planning and development as they play important roles in residents’ attitudes. The findings suggest that residents’ higher *Involvement* with tourism/travel may generate more positive perceptions of niche tourism in their community. Thusly, it can be postulated that the more involved

the respondent is with tourism the more favourably they perceive it in relation to impacts/costs to community. One plausible explanation is that those who travel and in general are engaged in ‘committing tourism’ will be more forgiving of tourism in their own community. Similarly, respondents who are involved with SB tourism as vendors, suppliers, hotel/restaurant employees tend to more tolerant of what typically is considered “inappropriate” SB behaviour.

Residents’ participation in tourism decision-making and feeling that they can have an impact on Spring Break tourism development may moderate attitudes toward Spring Break tourism (Table 5a, Table 5b). Being involved in decision-making is not a goal in itself. Rather it is away to ensure local communities understand costs and acknowledge the benefits of tourism. Through

perceived control to placate negative connotations often associated with this niche market, residents' attitudes extend beyond mere tolerance.

Indeed, perceived influence in decision-making and control of the development process provided a more positive view of future Spring Break tourism in the community. A proactive approach to problem solving has been indicated as a component of *Empowerment*. Negative associations of SBT viewed as a problem, empowerment of community residents to influence tourism decisions within their community, thus indicated a sense of control, leads to greater positive perceptions of continued tourism.

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