

“I JUST WANTED TO GET AWAY”: AN ANALYSIS OF SPRING BREAKERS’ TRAVEL MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract.—Scholarly research on Spring Break has grown substantially and has often associated spring breakers’ motivations with a number of risky behaviors. Recent research, however, has challenged these assumptions. The purpose of this study was to examine spring breakers’ motivations for going on Spring Break. Unlike the media portrayal of Spring Break as a time of excess and risky behaviors, results showed that participants went on Spring Break primarily to “get away” from school and associated responsibilities. Other motivations included the search for rest and relaxation, spending time with friends and family, experiencing Spring Break for the first time, and simple necessity. Implications for existing leisure theory and future motivational research are discussed.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Spring Break—a contemporary North American phenomenon that includes the voluntary migration of thousands of college students toward warm weather and vacation during the early spring—has been the subject of much scholarly work (Ribeiro and Yarnal 2008). Analysis of the Spring Break literature reveals that motives for going on a Spring Break vacation have remained remarkably consistent through the years. The primary reasons for going on a Spring Break vacation are: to escape from school and school-related responsibilities (Gerlach 1989); to experience warmer climates (Josiam et al. 1999); for adventure (Apostolopoulos et al. 2002); to seek fun and enjoyment (Klenosky 2002); and, to a lesser

extent, to explore opportunities for drinking, sex, and drug-taking (Sönmez et al. 2006). Many spring breakers travel to be with their friends and/or family (Josiam et al. 1994, Josiam et al. 1998), and a small percentage also travel because going on Spring Break is “the thing to do” (Josiam et al. 1999).

In spite of this evidence, Spring Break vacation motivations are typically linked to participating in risky behaviors. The common portrayal by scholars, and the media is the college student going on Spring Break primarily to drink alcohol in large quantities; engage in frequent, casual, and unprotected sex; and behave in a raunchy and unruly manner (e.g., Apostolopoulos et al. 2002). Despite this traditional view, discrepancies in the literature exist, and scholars disagree about the reasons for Spring Break travel (cf. Mattil, 2001, Sönmez et al. 2006, Ribeiro and Yarnal 2008). We may hypothesize that such a fragmented view of Spring Break is the reason some scholars have posited that there is a direct relationship between motivations to go on Spring Break and Spring Break behavior(s) (Maticka-Tyndale et al. 1998, Sönmez et al. 2006). Consequently, many scholars, along with the majority of the media, maintain that the reasons undergraduate students go on Spring Break is primarily to engage in the aforementioned risky behaviors. Missing from the literature are studies that allow spring breakers to describe their Spring Break experiences, their primary motivations for going on Spring Break, and how such motivations relate to their actual Spring Break behavior. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine spring breakers’ travel motivations in their own words, and to portray the Spring Break experience as viewed by those that participate in it.

2.0 METHODS

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2002) were conducted pre- and post-Spring Break with 14 undergraduate students (eight females, six males; mean age 19) from a large mid-Atlantic university in 2007. The participants were selected via convenience sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994). Interviews were

Table 1.—Participants' Spring Break motivations (push factors)

Name ¹	Age	Reasons for going on Spring Break
Anna	18	"It was something to do with myself"
Donna	19	"My friends and I just put the plans together"
Jennifer	18	"To have fun and get away to Florida"
John	18	"To get away from everything"
Karen	19	"I think there was opportunity"
Lisa	18	"I had to leave"
Mary	18	"Just go out and have fun with my friends"
Michelle	18	"Because I wanted to see my boyfriend"
Mike	21	"Just the atmosphere"
Robert	18	"I just wanted to get away from dreary (...) for a little while"
Scott	21	"I just wanted to see what Spring Break was like"
Sean	18	"Relax for a week, not have to worry about anything"
Sharon	19	"I really wanted to see my family"
William	25	"Because I'd never been on a cruise before"

¹All names have been changed to protect participants' identities and to ensure confidentiality.

digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed by four independent researchers with the aid of the qualitative analysis software program NVivo® 7.0 (QSR International Pty Ltd., Doncaster, Australia). Distinct procedures were used to increase the internal validity of the findings, including triangulation, peer review, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, and thick description (Miles and Huberman 1994, Creswell 1998). Consistent with existing literature (Guest et al. 2006), data saturation was reached by the eighth set of interviews.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A wide variety of Spring Break experiences were reported; rest and relaxation was the norm, and only one participant had a Spring Break experience that focused on partying. Participants in this study went on Spring Break to get away, to be with friends and/or family, because they were curious about Spring Break, to escape boredom, to try something new, or because they had no other option but to go on Spring Break. A summary of participants' reasons for going away on Spring Break can be found in Table 1.

The main reason cited by participants for going on Spring Break was simply *to get away*. All participants mentioned "getting away" or "escape" as motivations for

their Spring Break trips. Furthermore, the participants' Spring Break vacations seldom corresponded to the stereotype of excessive behaviors. Instead, participants' descriptions of their Spring Break vacations varied greatly. As one participant put it: Spring Break is:

... a way to get away and relax from all the work of college. Not really as one big, huge party, like I saw before(...) I'd say the biggest thing is it's really what you want to make it, I guess. If you want to go out and party and have a good time you have every opportunity to do that. Just as if you just want to mosey around or relax, you can do that, too. (Sean, 18)

But what were participants escaping from? They were basically escaping routine, responsibilities, boredom, schoolwork, parents, cold weather, stress, social norms, and reality. One participant summarized it best when he said:

I think the main reason [to go on Spring Break] is to get away from everything... It was like, basically, it was really nice and relaxing just to get away, away from everything. Away from [what], I don't even know. Everything, basically. (John, 18)

The importance of “getting away” as a motivational factor has long been recognized in the travel and tourism literature (Krippendorf 1987, Carr 2002). In the seminal work *The Holidaymakers* (1987), Jost Krippendorf pointed out that “getting away” is the cornerstone of travel behavior: “Travel is motivated by ‘going away’ rather than ‘going towards’ something or somebody. To shake off the everyday situation is much more important than the interest in visiting new places and people” (p. 29). In the case of Spring Break, however, it is interesting to note that despite some evidence in the literature of “getting away” as a primary motivational factor (Josiam et al. 1994; Maticka-Tyndale and Herold 1997, 1999), its importance has either been downplayed by researchers or irrevocably associated with extreme types of behavior such as binge drinking and casual sex. Based on the findings of this study, no such relationship between motivation and extreme behavior could be established. It is hypothesized that these are two distinct processes in the case of Spring Break, and that no direct relationship can be established between them.

The second most common reason that propelled participants to go on Spring Break, *visiting friends and/or family*, stemmed from more than just a genuine emotional concern about loved ones. On one hand, participants felt guilty about neglecting their family and friends, and Spring Break presented itself as the perfect opportunity to visit them. Additionally, participants’ families may have exerted some pressure, which only exacerbated spring breakers’ feelings of guilt: “It is hard when I see that they care a lot and they kind of push you to come home” (Sharon, 19). On the other hand, there may have been a more prosaic reason behind these participants’ decision to spend Spring Break with their families and/or friends. Consonant with previous literature (Josiam et al. 1994, 1998), money was a determinant in the participants’ Spring Break experiences. Money affected spring breakers’ choices of destination, transportation, and activities while on Spring Break, and its importance should not be underestimated: “Money is a huge factor” during Spring Break” (William, 25). It is quite possible that, faced with insufficient funds to go on a Spring Break trip of their choice, some participants simply chose to go home.

The third most commonly mentioned reason that participants went on Spring Break (*something to do/opportunity/curiosity*) is closely tied to their individual personalities and attitudes towards Spring Break. Similar to what occurs during other college vacation periods (e.g., Christmas, summer), for some participants, personal preferences dictated their type of Spring Break trip, resulting in a number of different experiences. For Scott (21), it was above all else “a curiosity thing.” For Anna (18) and Donna (19), however, it was just “something to do.” Finally, for William (25), going on Spring Break allowed him to go on a cruise, which he had never done before. These responses represent a breakthrough for the Spring Break literature, which until now has failed to recognize the motivational importance of factors such as curiosity, opportunity, and interest, or a combination of these and other factors. In this regard, it should be reiterated that all of the aforementioned participants mentioned “getting away” as an additional reason to go on Spring Break.

Finally, some participants simply felt that going on Spring Break was “the thing to do” (Karen, 19). Particularly for those participants who live on campus in university-provided (dorms), the implications of their place of residence during Spring Break should be considered. First, students are not allowed to stay in dorms during Spring Break; they must find alternative accommodations on campus (usually quite difficult), go home, or go on Spring Break. Thus, students are almost “forced” to go on Spring Break, or at least to go away from school. Second, living in dorms provides a peculiar atmosphere, which is peppered with excitement during the weeks that precede Spring Break. Students were eager to get away from the cold, school, work, and the small confines of their dorm rooms: “We were just excited to go, excited to get away” (Michelle, 18). Therefore, it is possible that for a minority of spring breakers, these “structural constraints” (Crawford et al. 1991) have conditioned their decision to go on Spring Break. Partial support for this hypothesis can be found in the Josiam et al. (1994) study, in which the percentage of college students that mentioned Spring Break as “the thing to do” was approximately 5 percent (p. 325).

Previous Spring Break studies have focused mainly on spring breakers' behavior, paying little attention to their motivations for going on Spring Break (Maticka-Tyndale et al. 1998, Smeaton et al. 1998). Nevertheless, almost 15 years ago, Josiam et al. (1994) found that the four primary travel motivations (push factors—see Crompton 1979) of spring breakers were: “to get away” (45 percent), “to visit family” (13 percent), “sun, surf, sand” (12 percent), and the “need to relax” (10 percent). More recent research, however, has almost unanimously equated spring breakers' (extreme) behavior with their reasons for going on a Spring Break vacation (Russell 2004, Sönmez et al. 2006). As noted above, the prevalent opinion among researchers and the popular media is that college students go on Spring Break primarily to engage in binge drinking, drug-taking, and casual sex. Contrary to existing research (e.g., Gerlach 1989, Apostolopoulos et al. 2002), however, participants in this study did not go on Spring Break to engage in extreme types of behavior. Thus, the findings of the present study challenge previously held assumptions about Spring Break, and lend support to Josiam et al.'s (1994) findings.

4.0 LIMITATIONS

Because this study used a convenience sample, the findings apply to the participants in this study only, and further generalizations should be drawn with care. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the purpose of qualitative research is not to obtain generalizable results, but rather to provide deeper levels of meaning and suitable context, which are impossible to obtain otherwise. Furthermore, use of qualitative methods allowed participants to express their perspectives in their words, without being limited by extraneous assumptions.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study resonate with what is known about travel motivations in general (Cohen 1996) and the travel motivations of college students in particular (Kim et al. 2007). Most researchers concur that the desire to escape something, rather than going in search of something else, is at the root of travel and tourism (Krippendorff 1987). The present findings corroborate that claim, and add to the framework of push-pull travel motives (Dann 1979), lending support to the work of

previous scholars on Spring Break motivations (Klenosky 2002). Furthermore, due to the complexity of the travel decision-making process, one motivation may be dominant (e.g., “getting away”), but all other motives (e.g., friends and family, relaxation) must be considered as well; motivation is a multidimensional construct (Pyo et al. 1989). Finally, findings from this study suggest that researchers and practitioners alike should adopt a more holistic and multidimensional perspective in the study of complex phenomena such as Spring Break, and to the study of travel motivations in general.

6.0 CITATIONS

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