

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