

A COMPARISON OF STUDENT SPRING BREAK AND THEIR “NORMAL” BEHAVIORS: IS THE HYPE JUSTIFIED?

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Student spring break behaviors have been a topic that has received a fair amount of scrutiny in the academic literature. This research takes another look at the topic, with the main focus of the current study a comparison of student spring break behaviors with benchmarked student behaviors exhibited during the balance of the school year. The psychographic concept of sensation seeking is applied to help better understand these behaviors. The research suggests that student spring break behavior is substantially unchanged from their “normal” behavior, and that those who engage in risky spring break behaviors are the students the sensation-seeking literature would indicate are most likely to do so, regardless of their vacation setting.

Key words: Spring break; Sensation seeking; Student travel behavior

Introduction

The dollar amount spent by students in the US annually for travel seems an elusive number, with estimates noted that ranged from Harris Interactive’s (2002) “over \$4 billion” to StudentUniverse.com’s (2007) estimate of \$20 billion. Regardless of the number, student travel is a significant and important sector of the North American travel industry. No aspect of student travel has received more attention than has spring break, which, per Josiam, Clements, and Hobson (1994), encompasses approximately 1 million students annually and, per Weinbach (2000), accounts for \$1 billion in travel expenditures. The research that

follows provides a brief review of spring break literature, followed by an empirical study that explores, based upon a sample of students from a public southern US university, these students’ spring break behaviors.

Review of the Literature

Spring break travel beginnings are generally traced to the Fort Lauderdale College Swim Forums of the 1930s, as northern US college swim teams descended upon the destination for spring vacation week swim meets (Hobson & Josiam, 1992). From these beginnings, the following spring break history is recounted by Bai, Hu, Elsworth, and Countryman (2004):

During World War II spring break travel grew further with Ivy Leaguers going to Fort Lauderdale, Florida instead of Bermuda due to the fear of German submarine attacks. Over the next three decades, Fort Lauderdale became known as the top destination for spring break. Daytona Beach, Florida, became prominent in 1981 by attracting 300,000 students. . . . In 1982, South Padre Island, Texas, became a destination for spring break travelers from Midwestern states. Fort Lauderdale reached a record in April of 1985 with 350,000 students and \$140 million in spending. (p. 80)

Perhaps the first media glorification of spring break was Frankie Avalon's 1963 motion picture, *Beach Party*, tagged "The perfect summer when the urge meets the surge!" (Internet Movie Database, 2006). Twenty years later, the movie *Spring Break* (Cunningham, 1983) reflected spring break's continued trend toward a racier image: "Two college kids on spring break travel to Fort Lauderdale in search of fun. After they meet a Penthouse Pet, they have more fun than they ever thought possible" (Yahoo, 2006). Fast-forward to the 21st century and the trend continues, with a stream of movies, television shows, and Internet sites depicting increasingly higher levels of debauchery, brought into the living room via MTV's cable television program *Spring Break*, which depicts thousands of college-age students at the "hottest" spring break locations—Cancun, Panama City, San Padre Island, etc.—partying the day away to hip-hop and rap while clad in skimpy bikinis and colorful low-hung swim trunks.

This risqué side of spring break has received a good deal of attention by tourism academics. Studies have considered such issues as spring break casual sexual behaviors (e.g., Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, & Yu, 2002; Maticka-Tyndale & Herold, 1999; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998), binge drinking (e.g., Lee, Maggs, & Rankin, 2006; Smeaton, Josiam, & Dietrich, 1998), and dating infidelity (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999). These studies generally portray a view of an environment consistent with that characterized by Maticka-Tyndale et al. (1998), that is, one providing students with a time and place to indulge in "unusual" activities, in which personal rules and normal codes of conduct either "do not apply" or are "temporarily suspended" (p. 262).

Similarly, Mattila, Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, Yu, and Sasidharan (2001) noted that spring break finds students "having fun and engaging in hedonistic behavior in a non-routine, break-loose environment . . . with a sense of freedom that unfortunately might lead to potentially risky behaviors" (p. 193). A study by Williams and Burns (1994) reported, "49% of the informants felt that Spring Break was a way to escape and discover new and exciting things, and 40% felt that Spring Break was a deserving reward for their work and sacrifices leading up to it. Informants overwhelmingly indicated that their trip included self indulgent activities (91%)" (p. 99).

The above behavioral comments relate specifically to those students who had visited traditional spring break destinations. A further review of the literature, however, reveals that generalizing such behaviors across the broader student population may not necessarily hold true. For example, Josiam, Clements, and Hobson (1994), in a spring break travel study, found that their upper midwest US undergraduate sample had visited a variety of destinations including metropolitan cities, national parks, and small towns, and that less than 10% of their sample had visited what would be classified a spring break party destination. An earlier Hobson and Josiam (1992) study reported that less than half of their university student respondents even qualified as tourists during their spring break week. Thus, despite the stereotyped image, at least in these two studies, it was the minority of students that had visited MTV-type destinations, and would therefore be among those described in the behavioral work that dominates the literature.

As has much of the previous work, the current research followed-up on the question as to how many students visited typical spring break destinations and then explored their behaviors. Building upon the previous spring break research, the lacuna addressed herein is the differentiation between spring break week and "normal" student behavior. Is student behavior, as is often classified in the literature, significantly different during spring break than throughout the balance of the school year? With the significant amount of research and concern related to student risk-taking behaviors and sexually transmitted diseases, understanding

these findings should help focus attention where it is of most importance.

Incorporated in the analyses is the application of the psychological and marketing concept of “sensation seeking,” which helps explain and allows us to better understand the behavioral decisions made by students during their spring break.

Sensation Seeking

Sensation seeking is a personality trait that has been defined as one’s need for varied, novel, complex, and intense sensory stimulation; and the level of willingness to take physical, legal, and financial risks to satisfy the desire for such stimulation (Zuckerman, 1994). Sensation seekers have higher optimal levels of arousal and simply feel better when taking risks.

Various studies have linked sensation-seeking desire with participation in a variety of stimulating events. These have included viewing horror movies, breaking the law, unsafe sexual behavior, reckless automobile driving, as well as such recreation/tourism activities as parachuting, hang gliding, and whitewater rafting (Lissek et al., 2005). Other studies have established the relationship between sensation seeking and various classes of beliefs and behaviors. For example, sensation seeking has been found to positively correlate with a tendency to disclose personal thoughts and feelings, dislike of structured and formal situations, the tendency to avoid repetition, liking of intense experiences, proneness to boredom under restrained and repetitive situations, and a tendency towards disinhibition (Galloway & Lopez, 1999). Perhaps not surprisingly, it has also been demonstrated that individuals who enter occupations that place themselves or others at risk (e.g., airline pilots and air-traffic controllers) score significantly higher on sensation seeking than do the general population (Musolino & Hershenson, 1977).

The preponderance of sensation-seeking studies noted, however, have focused on behavioral issues related to drug and alcohol use and abuse, and sexual activities (e.g., Kumar, Pekala, & Cummings, 1993; Newcomb & McGee, 1991; Schafer, Blanchard, & Fals-Stewart, 1994; Zuckerman, 1994). These issues are considered within this study.

For applications of sensation seeking in general

tourism research, readers are referred to Pizam et al. (2004, p. 252), which lists a wide range of studies that have incorporated the construct. Among these are “evergreens” by Plog (1974), Smith (1990), and Um and Crompton (1990), each of which considered sensation seeking an influence of travel psychographics. Litvin (2008), in an article geared to the tourism research community, has recently validated a scale originally crafted by Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, and Donohew (2002) that allows for parsimonious application of the construct.

Research Method

Data for this research were collected by two undergraduate psychology majors supervised during the course of a for-credit tourism-related independent study project. Having students collect the data eliminated much of the discomfort that the sensitive nature of the questions may have otherwise created. The sample population was comprised of undergraduate students at a midsize public southern US university. Students were surveyed in the classroom and specifically informed verbally and again in writing on the survey form that their participation was voluntary, all responses were confidential, and they should leave unanswered any question that made them uncomfortable. No extra credit or other incentives were provided respondents.

A total of 203 students were surveyed (this excluded six freshmen—eliminated due to the small number of responses from the cohort). These comprised 16% sophomores, 29% juniors, and 55% seniors. By gender, 62% of respondents were female versus 38% male, approximating the university’s overall student body breakdown (64% female). The sample’s mean age was 21.6 years ($SD = 2.8$), with a range of 18 to 45 years and a median age of 21. When asked to identify the economic class of their families, 48% indicated middle class; another 48% indicating that they fell in the upper-middle to upper-class category; with the remaining 4% having indicated their economic class as lower to lower-middle class. These demographics are consistent with the overall characteristics of the university’s student body.

The survey instrument included several ques-

tions related to the student's spring break destination as well as the six questions below that focused on their spring break behaviors.

1. Did you drink alcoholic beverages during Spring Break?
2. How many nights did you "binge drink" during Spring Break?
3. How many nights did you smoke marijuana during Spring Break?
4. Did you take any drug other than marijuana during Spring Break?
5. Did you have sex during Spring Break with anyone other than your regular partner?
6. Did you have unprotected sex during Spring Break with someone who is not your regular partner?

The form also included the 40-question Zuckerman Sensation Seeking Scale Form V (SSS-V) (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978; as modified by Zuckerman, 1996). This scale, as noted by Hong and Jang, "has been so widely used in applied research that it can be regarded as the standard for measuring sensation seeking traits" (p. 398). The inclusion of several additional questions unrelated to the research reported herein resulted in a four-page instrument that took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Survey Results

First a caveat regarding generalization: As noted above, the sample of students surveyed, while not random, was representative of the test location university's student body (minus freshmen), and thus are reflective of the institution as a whole. It would be a leap, however, to have confidence that the reported behaviors of these students would necessarily reflect the attitudes and behaviors of students from other universities. Only replication of the study across a spectrum of campuses, US domestically, and in other countries with vacation traditions similar to the US spring break, would allow for such generalization with a degree of confidence.

Benchmarking of behaviors: As a part of the analysis that follows, a comparison is made between students' spring break behaviors and their

behaviors during the normal course of the school year. Benchmarked behaviors were based upon the results of the Southern Illinois University Core Alcohol and Drug Survey, a testing platform employed by universities across the US (see the SIU website <http://coreinst.siu.edu/> for additional information). The test institution's SIU results are made public through a posting on the university's website. It is recommended that readers compare their school's results with those reported herein to get a sense of how their students compare with the tested cohort.

Spring Break Destinations

The first and perhaps most interesting finding related to the destinations selected by the students. When visited spring break destinations were coded (done jointly with the help of the two independent study students), it was found that 31% of the students had visited "party destinations," 15% had visited "non-party destinations," and that the majority of students (54%) fell into the third category—either having gone home or remained in town over their spring break week. This was consistent with the previous discussed spring break studies that similarly reported that only a minority of their student had traveled to spring break party destinations.

Spring Break Behaviors

When the behaviors of the students were analyzed, it was noted that alcohol consumption, regardless of destination type, was not just pervasive . . . it was almost universal. Whether the student was over or under 21 years of age, and whether they vacationed at a party destination or stayed at home, just about every student reported having consumed alcohol over the break. Binge drinking was also extremely widespread. Two thirds of the students reported having binged at least once, with an average of 4.0 binges during the 1-week break. Furthermore, 33% of the students reported that they had smoked marijuana during spring break, with the average marijuana smoker indicating that he/she had done so 3.7 times. Far fewer, however, one in seven students, reported having used a recreational drug other than marijuana. Finally, sexual promiscuity was far from rampant. Sixteen

percent of students at “party destinations” reported having had sex with someone other than their regular partner. For the other two destination categories, less than half this number responded affirmatively to the question. Unprotected sex was even less prevalent, with only 4% of the total sample population having reported this behavior. Table 1 reflects these behaviors.

Beyond behaviors by destination, behaviors by gender were also considered. The sensation-seeking literature informs that males generally have a higher optimal level of arousal than do females (Zuckerman, 1994). As such, one would expect males to be more likely to partake in risky behaviors than their female counterparts during spring break. Such a finding has been noted in previous spring break research. For example, Mattila et al.’s (2001) study of students from two US universities found significant cross-gender spring break differences, with males the greater risk takers. Similarly, Josiam, Hobson, Dietrich, and Smeaton’s (1998) Panama City spring break study found males consistently engaged in higher risk behaviors.

As noted in Table 2, the data herein confirm this gender divide, as four of the six measured items found males significantly more likely than females to have engaged in risky behaviors. While there was no difference in the consumption of al-

cohol, for as noted above this has become so pervasive that there is no room left for differences, males were more likely to: binge-drink; smoke marijuana; take other drugs; and to engage in non-regular partner sex than were their female student counterparts. Perhaps the most interesting of these was the nonpartner sex result. As can be noted in Table 2, by a factor of four to one (16% vs. 4%), males answered the question affirmatively versus their female respondents. Josiam et al.’s (1998) spring break study noted the same skewed dichotomy, with theirs even more pronounced at males = 21% versus females = 4%. Several possible explanations for this pronounced discrepancy come to mind, including the possibility of overreporting by male respondents, and underreporting by females.

Sensation-Seeking Behavior and Spring Break

The question addressed herein was whether the sensation-seeking dimension was predictive of spring break behaviors. The results, as shown in Table 3, confirm the expected patterns. The decisions made by students during spring break week were consistent, for four of the five tested behaviors, with their sensation-seeking tendencies. The higher the respondent’s sensation-seeking score, the more likely he/she was to partake in risky behaviors over spring break.

Table 1
Spring Break Behaviors, by Destination and Comparison With Core Behaviors

Behavior	Party Destination (31%)	Non-party Destination (15%)	Went Home/ Stayed in Town (54%)	Spring Break Total	Core Behavior ^a
Drinking (<i>n</i> = 195)	95%	93%	85%	87%	87% ^b
Binge drinking (<i>n</i> = 194)	84%	63%	59%	67%	63% ^c
Marijuana (<i>n</i> = 194)	42%	30%	29%	33%	36% ^b
Other drugs (<i>n</i> = 194)	17%	7%	15%	15%	18% ^b
Sex ^d (<i>n</i> = 194)	16%	7%	6%	9%	NA ^d
Unprotected sex ^d (<i>n</i> = 195)	5%	0%	4%	4%	NA ^d

^aCore behavior reflects overall campus results (of university studied herein) per the Southern Illinois University Core Alcohol and Drug Survey, as posted on the university’s website.

^bHave engaged in the behavior within the past 30 days (metric used for this behavior in the core behavior report).

^cHave engaged in the behavior within the past 2 weeks (metric used for this behavior in the core behavior report).

^dBoth sexual behavior questions on the survey form related to sex with other than one’s regular partner. The SIU Core report indicated that 80% of the students had been sexually active within the past year, but as this does not specify number of partners, etc., these data are not comparable. The website Core report data include no mention of unprotected sex.

Table 2
Spring Break Behaviors, by Gender

Behavior	Males (38%)	Females (62%)	Spring Break Total	Cochran's Chi Square ^a
Drinking (<i>n</i> = 193)	88%	86%	87%	0.120
Binge drinking (<i>n</i> = 194)	75%	62%	67%	3.044*
Marijuana (<i>n</i> = 194)	55%	25%	33%	7.933*
Other drugs (<i>n</i> = 194)	24%	9%	14%	7.119*
Sex ^b (<i>n</i> =194)	16%	4%	9%	8.344*
Unprotected sex ^b (<i>n</i> = 195)	4%	3%	4%	0.014

^aCochran's chi square is the equivalent to a *t*-test for paired dichotomous variables.

^bBoth sexual behavior questions on the survey form related to sex with other than one's regular partner. The SIU Core report indicated that 80% of the students had been sexually active within the past year, but as this does not specify number of partners, etc., these data are not comparable. The website Core report data include no mention of unprotected sex.

*Test score significant at $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

The above brings us back to the key question of this research: How different were the students' spring break behaviors from those exhibited by the same student cohort during the balance of the school year? Included in Table 1 are the universi-

ty's campus-wide SIU/Core Alcohol and Drug Survey results (discussed previously). A review of the comparative scores indicates that the students' spring break behaviors were not very much different than were their "normal" behaviors. And while the tested behaviors were more prevalent at the "party destinations," these excesses were far less

Table 3
Spring Break Behaviors by Sensation Seeking Trait

	Sensation Seeking ^a	<i>t</i> -Test Result	<i>p</i> -Value
Drinkers (<i>n</i> = 169)	23.2		
Nondrinkers (<i>n</i> = 24)	18.5	3.303	0.001*
Binge drinkers (<i>n</i> = 64)	24.3		
Non-binge drinkers (<i>n</i> = 127)	19.2	5.391	0.000*
Marijuana smokers (<i>n</i> = 62)	25.8		
Non-marijuana smokers (<i>n</i> = 128)	21.2	4.545	0.000*
Other drugs (<i>n</i> = 28)	26.0		
No other drugs (<i>n</i> = 163)	22.2	2.751	0.007*
Sex with nonpartner (<i>n</i> = 17)	24.4		
No sex with nonpartner (<i>n</i> = 174)	22.4	1.225	0.222
Unprotected sex with nonpartner ^b (<i>n</i> = 7)	—		
NouUnprotected sex ^b (<i>n</i> = 185)	—	—	—

^aSensation-seeking scores were based on the results of the 40-item forced response SSS-V form (Zuckerman et al., 1978) for which low arousal responses = 0 and high arousal responses = 1. The instrument thus yields a possible range of scores from 0 to 40, with a higher score reflecting a higher degree of the sensation seeking trait. Scores reported are the category mean.

^bThe number of students reporting having had unprotected sex with a nonpartner was not of sufficient size to allow for meaningful analysis.

*Test score significant at $p < 0.01$.

pronounced than one might presume. Most students drank, often to excess, and some used drugs, but the data point to the fact these have become the normative behaviors of students, regardless of the influence of spring break. Further, as revealed by the SIU study, considering sexual proclivity as anything other than a routine behavior is passé, as 80% of the general student population reported being sexually active during the previous school year (as footnoted in Table 1). This is consistent with the findings of the Canadian study by Maticka-Tyndale et al. (1998) that reported 95% of male students and 92% of females reported having had sexual experiences before their first spring break. To point at spring break sex as a risky behavior worthy of measure, or to even consider the impact of spring break upon sexual behavior, appears anachronistic.

Furthermore, the sensation-seeking scores revealed that the decisions made by students during spring break week were consistent with their normal sensation-seeking tendencies. Sönmez et al. (2006), while exploring different behavioral characteristics, similarly noted that normative beliefs were effective indicators of student vacation behaviors. What does this imply? Simply, that spring break cannot be pointed to as a cause of risky behavior, as those students who acted most cavalierly during their spring break week were the students one would most expect to do so, given their higher optimal levels of arousal, regardless of their environment.

It is important to note that these findings do not coincide with the views of Williams and Burns (1994, p. 102). These authors conducted a study of students from a "large southern university" who had visited a beach destination for their spring break vacation and deduced from their findings that the tested students' "hedonistic" and "unconstrained" spring break behaviors were a function of the destination's lack of normal parental, teacher, and authority figure supervision. More saliently, Williams and Burns (1994) also concluded that the liberating nature of the destination encouraged behavior that these students would not normally embrace, allowing their "social-self" to behave in an "unfettered" manner. While Williams and Burns' (1994) psychological view is interesting, it is strongly contradicted by both the current

findings and the recent findings of Sönmez et al. (2006). As noted herein, yes, students acted in a somewhat more risky manner while at "party destinations" than the average student does while at school, but those students who behaved this way were the more sensation-seeking students in the first place, and thus those most likely to have acted hedonistically, regardless of their vacation setting. The data herein simply do not support a "*spring break made me do it*" explanation.

Limitations and Future Research

The research method employed herein utilized a convenience sample. While the data collection method used was deemed appropriate for the research, and the sample was demographically a good representation of the test institution's broader student body, as is the case with any research based upon convenience sampling, final judgment as to generalizability is left to the reader. Another concern was the potential for social desirability bias in the reported data, which, per Mattila et al. (2001), is more likely to have resulted in underreporting than overreporting the frequency of risky behaviors. Extension of the work to other university campuses would thus be very interesting. Questions related to the differences in behaviors between students of private versus public institutions, secular versus nonsecular colleges, and the consideration of regional differences, would all be worth exploring.

Another suggestion is a study that compares behaviors of individual students during the school year directly with their spring break behaviors. It was noted herein that collective spring break behaviors did not differ from the student body's "normal" behaviors. But do individuals act consistently, or do the more risky spring break behaviors of some offset the less risky spring break behaviors of others? Only a test that allows the linkage of these data for specifically identified subjects can answer this with any degree of certitude.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important finding herein was how students, in toto, act very similarly over spring break as they do during the balance of the school year. While the amount of alcohol and

drugs consumed by college-aged students and the number of sexually active students may be issues of concern, this study has found that during spring break students generally behave as they do during the balance of their school year. If we, as parents, educators, and/or members of the tourism industry are concerned about these behaviors, it would seem that spring break should not be the focus of our concern. How students act this 1 week of the year, as seen in this study, is not an anomaly, but rather a reflection of current student culture. And while the extreme images of risqué behaviors at party locales portrayed on MTV et al. may go well beyond the acceptable standards of many readers, it is important to note that these reflect the experiences of but a minority of our students.

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