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# New perspectives on family tourism: Motivations, travel behavior and experiences of single-parent families

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## Introduction

Families are one of the fastest-growing segments of the tourism industry. Visa Inc. (2016) estimated that by 2025 more than 280 households around the world will take at least one international trip a year, a 35% increase from 2015. The concept of "family", however, is rapidly evolving, and the tourism industry must adapt to the profile, preferences, needs, and behavior of all types of families to provide a seamless, equitable, and respectful tourism experience. While the traditional family (two heterosexual adults and their children), dominates the travel scene, new families are becoming more visible and relevant for the tourism industry, among them, extended, blended, gay, and single-parent families.

The number of single-parent families is increasing due to socio-cultural factors like delayed motherhood, the changing role of women in society, a growing number of divorces, and the desire to have or adopt a child without or before finding a partner. In the United States, the percentage of single parents has doubled from 7% to 13% since 1968 and there are approximately 16 million parents with no spouse living with a child at home (Livingston, 2018), and 320 million worldwide (Bressler, 2018). Of all single parents, the same study estimates that 89% are mothers and 11% are fathers, their average age is 34 years, and 20% have at least a bachelor's degree. Contrary to common stereotypes, the majority of single parents are professionals, financially stable, and willing to travel and invest their money in tourism experiences (Bressler, 2018). However, very little is known about this market as most of the literature on family tourism has focused on traditional families.

Spousing Ball´s (2017) and Bressler´s (2018) argument that single-parent families travel differently from other families, have unique needs, and face challenges that affect their travel experience that the tourism industry has long ignored, the purpose of our study was to empirically explore single-parent family travel. To this end, we sought to answer the research questions: What are the travel motivations of single-parents? How do single-parent families plan their trips? What is the travel behavior of single-parent families? and What are the experiences and benefits of tourism for single-parent families? With our study, we hope to contribute to family tourism research by adding knowledge on non-traditional family travel.

## Literature

Research on family tourism has experienced an upsurge in the past few years, but most studies have focused on examining family travel decision-making and the behavior of traditional families in conventional tourism destinations (Li et al., 2020). The authors have highlighted a lack of depth and scope in family tourism research, and, only until recently, a few studies have begun to study gay-parents families (Lucena et al., 2015), families with children with disabilities (Kim & Lehto, 2013; Nyman et al., 2017; Tecău et al., 2019), non-resident fathers (Schänzel & Jenkins, 2017), and extended families (Camargo & Tamez, 2015) in relation to tourism. Only two studies have examined single-parent family travel: Lin et al (2007) examined Taiwanese single parents' preferences for group packages tours and, using secondary data from online travel blogs, Wei´s (2018) dissertation analyzed the perceived outcomes, experiences, and challenges of single mothers traveling with their children. Both studies shed some light on this segment but much more is needed to fully understand their tourism expectations, challenges, and experiences.

## Method

Following an interpretative approach and a snowball sampling technique, we conducted 18 semi-structured online interviews with Spanish-speaking single parents (fifteen single mothers and three single fathers). Three criteria guided the participant selection: not living with a partner, having at least one child under 18 living at home, and having taken at least one trip with them in the past year. Thirteen participants were from Mexico, three from Colombia, and two from Spain; their average age was 39.5 years, and they were all working professionals. Fourteen participants had one child at home, the rest two children.

The interview protocol was organized in four sessions. The first session focused on the reasons that motivate single parents to travel with their kids (push factors) and the characteristics or attributes they consider when choosing a destination (pull factors); the second and third sessions explored how single parents planned their trip and their travel behavior, and the fourth session was designed to obtain information about their experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of traveling as a family. The average length of the interview was 40 minutes. Their responses were coded and organized into a priori categories that reflected the research questions. The main results are summarized below.

**Findings**

The first objective of our study was to explore the **travel motivations** of single parents. The reasons why they travel with their children were grouped into four categories: *expose their children to new things, spend quality time with their children, build a sense of belonging,* and *relaxation.* The most important attributes that they seek in a destination were grouped into four categories: *kid-friendly environment, accessible transportation, good climate,* and *culture, nature, and entertainment options.*

The second objective was to explore the **planning** of single-parent family travel. With a couple of exceptions, most single parents plan their trips around school breaks, by themselves, using the internet and travel applications, and within short notice to avoid cancellations and last-minute changes for unexpected issues with their children or their work responsibilities. They see travel agencies as unnecessary and expensive, and only use them when they travel to a remote foreign destination. Children in single-parent families are actively involved in the planning stage; their preferences are more important when choosing a destination than the recommendations of other family members or friends. Regarding **travel behavior**, single-parent families travel between two and four times a year, mostly to domestic destinations, and for an average of one to two weeks, although some reported experimenting with weekend getaways. Single parents travel with close relatives to strengthen family ties, have fun with other family members, for security reasons, or to have someone to watch the kids while they do an activity alone. Participants reported traveling mostly by car and staying in hotels. The most common activities undertaken at the destination are visiting thematic parks, experiencing local culture, and interacting with nature. Parents with older children report going shopping, relaxing, and enjoying meals with other adults.

Finally, traveling is a mostly positive **experience** for single-parent families. It creates happiness and memories, helps to strengthen family bonds, allows children to meet new people and obtain new experiences, and increases a sense of independence. Good service, staff that knows how to interact with children, safe environments, and other children of the same age in the destination are key factors to have positive experiences at the destination. On the other hand, participants reported certain challenges that affected their travel experience, among them, lack of assistance, lack of knowledge about nontraditional families that led to unnecessary and uncomfortable questioning about their family status, and packages and promotions that are designed for traditional families (2 adults, 2 kids).

**Conclusion**

Family tourism research and practice must evolve with the diversity of family structures. Our results reveal that single parent families travel frequently, want to provide new experiences to their children and create memories with them, and are interested in engaging with the destination culture and nature, findings that are similar to other types of families; however, they have particular travel needs and face unique challenges; one critical finding is that they feel discriminated against by tourism staff and operators because of their family status. The tourism industry should be aware of this market and their needs to create positive experiences for them. This study is limited to mostly Latin American, Spanish-speaking single parents; research in other geographical and cultural contexts is needed to provide a more complete picture of this growing market segment.

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