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Ribeiro, Nuno, "Using Concomitant Freelisting to Analyze Perceptions of a Spring Break Experience" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 23.
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Using Concomitant Freelisting to Analyze Perceptions of a Spring Break Experience

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INTRODUCTION

Freelisting is a qualitative data gathering technique used to elicit elements or members of a *cultural domain*, defined as a “set of items that are all of the same type” (Borgatti, 1997). The purpose of freelisting is to “*identify, measure, and describe variation in cultural knowledge between groups*” (Schrauf & Sanchez, 2008, p. 3). Freelisting’s main assumption is that the understanding of cultural domains is not idiosyncratic, i.e. people share something in common about a certain cultural domain. Freelisting is particularly useful when analyzing perceptions about a given phenomenon, such as Spring Break (SB).

THE SPRING BREAK CONTEXT

Existing SB research has focused mainly on spring breakers’ behavior and motivations, which have both been equated with extreme types of activities, such as binge drinking, casual and unprotected sex, and drug-taking (e.g. Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1998; Smeaton et al., 1998). Extensive media interest and coverage of extreme types of SB behavior has reinforced and perpetuated the notion of SB as a “Spring Bacchanal” (Marsh, 2006). Media outlets such as MTV have sustained the image of SB as a rite of passage, contributing to the formation of a SB stereotype, revolving around the notion of “tiny bikinis, sweaty muscles, and beer” (Russell, 2004, p. 303). A closer look at the SB literature reveals substantial disagreement among researchers in regard to spring breakers’ motivations, levels of involvement, previous intentions, and factors affecting actual SB behavior (Ribeiro, 2008). Recent research has challenged the widespread notion of SB as a “Spring Bacchanal”, and posited that a much wider range of SB experiences exist (Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008).

METHODS

In the spring of 2007, two sets of freelists were obtained from a convenience sample of 14 undergraduate students (8 females, 6 males; 13 freshmen, 1 senior) of a large Mid-Atlantic university, known for its “party reputation”. The first set of 14 freelists was obtained 2 weeks before participants were due to leave for SB and the second set of 14 freelists was obtained 1 week after SB. Freelists were obtained in the context of in-depth interviews (Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008, forthcoming). Participants were asked to list as many words and/or expressions they could think of concerning “Spring Break.” No time limit was given for this task.

We labeled this procedure of obtaining repeated diachronic freelists from the same sample “concomitant freelisting”, to distinguish it from “successive freelisting” (i.e. freelisting different samples within the same population) (Ryan et al., 2000). Items were coded following basic freelisting procedures (Smith, 1993) and two separate analyses (one for each set of freelists) were conducted using the statistical software program ANTHROPAC[®] version 4.983/X (Borgatti, 2002). Saliency of items was computed using Smith’s S (Smith & Borgatti, 1997).

$$S = ((\sum(L - R_j + 1))/L)/N.$$

, where

L= number of items in a freelist
R_j= rank of item j in the freelist (1st = 1)
N= number of freelists in the sample

Fig. 1 – Formula for Smith’s S Saliency Index

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results (Figs. 1 and 2) show remarkable consistency among participants’ perceptions of the SB phenomenon, which are aligned with the SB stereotype propagated by MTV and other media outlets (Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008). It is interesting to note that for these participants, their pre and post-SB perceptions of SB, whilst consistent, are at odds with their actual SB behavior, which has been studied and described elsewhere (Ribeiro, 2008; Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008). Participants’ perceptions of Spring Break, both before and after Spring Break, were in consonance with the media-propagated image of this phenomenon, and were defined by words such as “drinking”, “crazy”, “girls”, “beach”, “bikinis”, and “party”. The majority of the participants’ own Spring Break experiences, however, had little in common with this stereotype. The “typical” Spring Break for these participants, revolved around rest, relaxation and escape from school’s responsibilities (Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008).

ITEM	FREQUENCY	RESP PCT	AVG RANK	Smith's S	
1	BEACH	10	71	5.600	0.430
2	FRIENDS	9	64	5.000	0.408
3	WARM WEATHER	6	43	2.500	0.365
4	TAN	6	43	10.333	0.120
5	SUN	6	43	5.333	0.280
6	FUN	6	43	5.833	0.249
7	PARTY	5	36	5.600	0.213
8	FLORIDA	5	36	6.000	0.173
9	NO SCHOOL	5	36	8.800	0.125
10	ALCOHOL	5	36	4.400	0.268
11	MTV	4	29	8.000	0.126
12	GIRLS	4	29	3.250	0.235
13	RELAX	3	21	3.333	0.147
14	BARS	3	21	4.333	0.163
15	BIKINIS	3	21	7.000	0.108
16	MEXICO	3	21	5.333	0.120
17	FAMILY	3	21	8.000	0.099
18	CRAZY	2	14	2.000	0.125
19	TRAVEL	2	14	6.000	0.083
20	EXPENSIVE	2	14	9.500	0.042
21	BREAK	2	14	8.000	0.063
22	SAND	2	14	7.000	0.081
23	ROAD TRIP	2	14	7.500	0.083
24	GOOD TIMES	2	14	10.000	0.045

Table 1 – Frequency and Saliency Analysis (Before Spring Break)

ITEM	FREQUENCY	RESP PCT	AVG RANK	Smith's S	
1	FRIENDS	10	71	4.600	0.448
2	BEACH	8	57	3.250	0.440
3	RELAX	7	50	3.714	0.364
4	WARM WEATHER	6	43	4.167	0.323
5	FUN	5	36	4.400	0.251
6	SUN	5	36	6.400	0.209
7	GIRLS	4	29	5.500	0.162
8	PARTY	4	29	7.250	0.127
9	ALCOHOL	4	29	8.000	0.127
10	NEW PEOPLE	4	29	9.000	0.140
11	FAMILY	3	21	11.333	0.062
12	SLEEP	3	21	12.333	0.055
13	CLUBS	3	21	6.333	0.142
14	BARS	2	14	3.500	0.121
15	LAUGHING	2	14	15.500	0.028
16	BIKINIS	2	14	12.000	0.023
17	SAND	2	14	6.500	0.094
18	EXPENSIVE	2	14	3.000	0.124
19	TAN	2	14	11.000	0.077
20	SUNBURN	2	14	7.500	0.079
21	DANCING	2	14	7.500	0.021
22	ROAD TRIP	2	14	7.000	0.072
23	NO SCHOOL	2	14	6.000	0.052

Table 2 – Frequency and Saliency Analysis (After Spring Break)

Lastly, substantial disagreement among the participants themselves as to their knowledge of Spring Break's cognitive domain appears to exist. That is to say, some participants are simply more knowledgeable than others in regard to SB. As previous studies have shown (Ribeiro, 2008; Ribeiro & Schrauf, 2009; Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2008), this is not a qualitative difference – there seems to be a fairly cohesive cognitive/cultural domain concerning SB – but merely a quantitative difference, and it would be most interesting to find out why that occurs.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study point to a curious occurrence of cultural dissonance (Ribeiro & Chick, 2009), which warrants further research. The fact that participants' perceptions of SB suffered virtually no alteration with participation in the SB experience, leads us to suggest that the media may have been successful in creating a SB stereotype but that such stereotype and/or cultural prescriptions and prescriptions of behavior does not necessarily translate into actual SB behavior.

Furthermore, this study showed the benefits that can be accrued by using a common technique in anthropology – freelisting – but less common in the tourism scholarship. Much can be learned from its use, particularly in regard to emic perceptions of a given social group and/or culture, as well as how cultural norms translate into actual behavior, which should be of interest to tourism scholars, particularly those with an interest in tourism behavior. The findings of this study are also relevant for the body of literature that has looked into predicting and ultimately influencing college students' dangerous and/or health threatening behaviors, such as social norms theory (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). The results suggest that there may be limitations to the applicability of social norms theory to SB-like phenomena, as participants' misconceptions about SB seemed to have had little or no effect on SB behavior.

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