

Perceptions of Spring Break and Spring Break Experiences: A Strange Dichotomy

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PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF SPRING BREAK1

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Perceptions of Spring Break and Spring Break Experiences: A Strange Dichotomy

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Introduction

Spring Break, a yearly week-long North American college vacation period, has its origins in the College Swim Forum held in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in 1935 (Josiam et al., 1998). Members of Colgate University's swimming team travelled south, to take advantage of Fort Lauderdale's warm weather and Olympic-size outdoor swimming pool (Josiam et al., 1998; Marsh, 2006). Since then, Spring Break has known exponential growth, and is now one of the most popular holiday activities amongst college students, with 2.4 million spring breakers reported in 2005 (Neuharth, 2005). What is more, the Spring Break phenomenon has pervaded American culture, notably through the influence of motion pictures (e.g. Pasternak & Levin, 1960) and television (Marsh, 2006). For example, Music Television's (MTV) popular program "MTV Spring Break", broadcasted live every year from popular Spring Break destinations such as South Padre Island, Texas, or Panama City Beach, Florida, has had a profound impact on Spring Break's image amongst college students (Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2006; Smith, 2005). Thanks to the media and the marketing efforts of a number of companies that quickly tapped into the Spring Break market (Butts et al., 1996), Spring Break is now firmly entrenched in the imaginary of both college students and the public at large as a "Spring Bacchanal" (Marsh, 2006, p. 1).

Scholarly interest in Spring Break has increased in recent years (e.g. Sönmez et al. 2006). Whereas earlier studies attempted to describe the (then) emerging SB travel market (e.g. Hobson & Josiam, 1992), scholars quickly turned their attention to spring breakers' behavior, which thus far has been equated with binge drinking, drug-taking, and increased and unprotected sexual activity (e.g. Apostolopoulos et al., 2002; Grekin et al., 2007). Furthermore, media interest in the Spring Break phenomenon, which has been considerable (e.g. Horovitz, 1994), has reinforced this stereotypical image of Spring Break as a "booze- and sex-fueled college rite" (Shevitz, 2002).

Interestingly, almost all existing scholarly research on Spring Break has been conducted from a quantitative perspective. Data has been collected primarily using surveys before, after, and/or during Spring Break (e.g. Mattila et al., 2001; Sönmez et al., 2006). Therefore, in an effort to bridge this gap in the literature, and to further our knowledge of the Spring Break phenomenon, a phenomenological study of Spring Break, based on in-depth interviews, was conducted in the spring of 2007. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the Spring Break phenomenon, by giving spring breakers a voice, allowing them to tell their Spring Break experiences on their own terms, and comparing their perceptions of the Spring Break phenomenon with their actual Spring Break experiences.

Methods

A convenience sample of fourteen undergraduate students (13 freshmen and 1 senior; 8 females and 6 males) from a Mid-Atlantic North American University, who were going on their first Spring Break experience, were selected (Creswell, 1998). 28 face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in the spring of 2007, with participants being interviewed both before and after their respective Spring Break vacations. Participants were college students, aged 18-24, with no previous Spring Break experience, that had declared their express intent to go on Spring Break. With one exception (for comparison purposes), only freshmen were selected, as they were less likely to have been on Spring Break before (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1998). Based on existing literature connecting college students' risky behaviours and their year in school

(Wechsler et al., 2000), it was hypothesized that the intensity of the Spring Break experience would be greater for freshmen than for sophomores, juniors, and/or seniors.

Recruitment of participants was made through on-campus advertisements and e-mail, in a similar fashion to Maticka-Tyndale et al.'s (1998) previous Spring Break study. Participants were interviewed before and after Spring Break, on campus. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the resulting transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative analysis software program NVivo[®] 7.0 (Bazeley, 2006). Open and axial coding were used to analyse both the interview transcripts and the authors' notes and analytical memos (Trochim, 2001), until a clear picture of the spring breakers' experiences emerged. Anonymity and confidentiality of personal data were stressed throughout the study. Personal information was kept to a minimum in the final manuscript, and was mentioned in such a way as to not permit identification of participants (e.g. all participants' names have been changed). Information given "off the record" was kept as such, unless participants gave their express and written consent that it could be used. Most importantly, participants were allowed to "tell their story" (Bernard, 2002), without interference or manipulation, and so that they would not incur in any harm or injury from doing so.

Findings and Discussion

The results revealed a stark contrast between the participants' perceptions of what Spring Break is and the reality of their own Spring Break experiences. When asked what images sprung to mind upon hearing the words "Spring Break", all participants, without exception, mentioned such things as "drinking", "crazy", "girls", "beach", "bikinis", and "party". The majority of participants' own Spring Break experiences, however, had little in common with this stereotype, as the following quote exemplifies: "it was a pretty relaxed atmosphere (...) There was some drinking, but we didn't really see a lot of it, at least on the beach. It wasn't like I talked before about the crazy parties and everything. It wasn't really like that at all" (Sean, 18).

The answer given by participants to the question: "Why did you go on Spring Break?" also had little in common with the Spring Break stereotype mentioned above. The "typical" Spring Break, as the majority of the participants described it, revolved around rest, relaxation and escape from school's duties and responsibilities. Spring Break was also an opportunity to be with family and friends in a stress-free environment, preferably in warm weather. Whilst all participants drank alcohol during Spring Break, only one of the participants experienced what could be described as the 'stereotypical' Spring Break, involving the consumption of large amounts of liquor, and participation in alcohol-laden beach parties involving public contests with a strong emphasis on (female) nudity. Above all else, for the participants in this study Spring Break was about getting away from school and associated duties and responsibilities: "Spring Break is about going away from college and doing different things and resting and having fun. Just forgetting about college(...) Just relaxing. Changing atmosphere, changing places" (Lisa, 18).

Surprisingly, participants' perceptions of Spring Break remained unchanged by their respective Spring Break experiences. That is to say, their perceptions of what Spring Break is (i.e. their image of Spring Break), suffered virtually no alteration upon their return from Spring Break, despite the fact that their own experiences contrasted heavily with such preconceived notions regarding this vacation period. Although their own experiences contradicted the Spring Break stereotype, the majority of participants maintained that the "real" or "typical" Spring Break still corresponded to the image

perpetuated by MTV – “women”, “drinking”, “beach”, “crazy”, “wet t-shirt”, “hangover”, and so forth.

Through media such as television (e.g. Colon et al., 2001), cinema (e.g. Francis, 1998), newspapers (e.g. Marsh, 2006), magazines (e.g. Horovitz, 1994), the internet (e.g. Ribeiro & Yarnal, 2006), or even clothing stores’ catalogues (e.g. Leland, 2008), college students are constantly exposed to a certain image of Spring Break, over and over again, until that image *becomes* Spring Break in their minds. Zengotita (2005) claims that the power of the media is such that “reality is becoming indistinguishable from representation in a qualitatively new way” (p. 19). That may very well be the case of Spring Break. Programs such as “MTV Spring Break” represent Spring Break as a yearly hedonistic, drunken, overly sexualized ritual (Rand, 2004), a fact well acknowledged by the participants in this study: “when I was in high school, I was brainwashed by MTV” (Karen, 19). It is possible that the influence of the media, with MTV at its forefront, is so prevalent that it creates an image of Spring Break able to overshadow the reality of the participants’ own Spring Break experiences. Despite the fact that their own experiences contradicted this media-fabricated image, for the majority of participants in this study such representation corresponded to what they thought Spring Break really was.

Conclusions

The dichotomy between the participants’ perceptions of Spring Break (which were consonant with the Spring Break stereotype of extreme behaviors) and their actual Spring Break experiences (which were not) points towards a powerful media influence in the construction of an artificial image of Spring Break (cf. Ribeiro & Yarnal, in press). Despite the fact that their own Spring Break experiences had little in common with the Spring Break stereotype propagated by the media, participants in this study seemed to believe that the “real” Spring Break was indeed akin to the one broadcasted by MTV every March (Colon et al., 2001), and that their own experiences had been the exception rather than the norm. Thus, the findings of this study challenge existing Spring Break literature (e.g. Apostolopulos et al., 2002; Smeaton et al., 1998), which portrays Spring Break as nothing more than “beer, beach, and bikinis” (Gerlach, 1989). Furthermore, the results obtained indicate that the reality of the Spring Break experience may be much more complex than researchers originally thought, and that, whilst perceptions of Spring Break are homogenous, Spring Break experiences are not. Consequently, tourism researchers would be well advised to adopt a more holistic perspective to the study of Spring Break and similar tourism phenomena, as other scholars have pointed out (Carr, 2002; Ribeiro & Yarnal, in press).

The present study, by highlighting spring breakers’ desire to “get away” as a primary travel motive, also add to the existing literature on travel motivations (Krippendorf, 1987), especially of the college student demographic (cf. Kim et al., 2007). Furthermore, this study supports and extends previous scholarly work on perceptions of tourism phenomena, particularly those of a short duration (Kim & Petrick, 2005). Finally, the findings of this study are of particular relevance for tourism destinations that have attempted to dissociate themselves from the Spring Break “party” image (Gianoulis, 2000). If tourism destinations wish to discard such image and attract a more diverse target market, then investing in media campaigns aimed at changing tourism perceptions might be more efficient and cost-effective than other types of behavior-curbing interventions.

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