Reliving the Glory Days: College Graduates and Alma Mater Nostalgia Tourism

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Reliving the Glory Days: College Graduates and Alma Mater Tourism

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Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, scholars have sought to build empirical understanding of tourists’ motivations (Cohen, 1974). Tourists seek destinations to escape from the drudgery of work, to relax on a beach, to learn about a new culture or place, to pay homage to a holy place, or to experience one’s whole and authentic self (Wang, 1999). Even though a university is not an entirely new place, may not have a beach or theme park, and is not a place of religious significance, we still observe a strong pattern of alumni returning to their collegiate campus. What is special about one’s alma mater that keeps attracting alumni back to campus? This study aims to understand the motivations and experience of alumni travel back to a university campus through a qualitative study of the alumni of The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State).

Best known as the home of Penn State, Centre County’s tourism industry relies heavily on the university’s alumni. The university’s sense of communal, almost cult-like pride can be summarized by one phrase, the siren song of any true Nittany Lion, “We Are!” To many who have visited its quintessential college campus, roared in the crowd at the third-largest stadium in the world, and graced the stage in its navy-blue graduation robes, Penn State is more than just a university degree. It is a part of who they are. To better understand this phenomenon, the authors conducted qualitative interviews of Penn State alumni tourists to Centre County, examining their motivations and experiences during and prior to visiting the county.

The current investigation identified nostalgia as a strong motive for alma mater tourism. A survey of related literature revealed that research on nostalgia has mostly focused on sports and heritage (e.g., Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Cho, Ramshaw, & Norman, 2014). Limited research was found on motivations for college alma mater tourism, including the role of nostalgia; yet here, nostalgia was found to play a large role in attracting alumni to make return trips to the
university. This study bridges a gap in understanding by developing a conceptual framework that incorporates push and pull theory to explain the motivations of alma mater tourists, specifically addressing how nostalgia for the memories and identity formed during one’s collegiate period functions as a motivating force to return to one’s alma mater as a tourist.

**Related Literature**

First, we seek to understand the connection between tourism and nostalgia. Researchers have extensively investigated the role of nostalgia as a motive to travel in various contexts, including sporting events and themed restaurants (e.g., Fairley, 2003; Chen, Yeh, & Huan, 2014). In contrast, this study examines nostalgia as motivation to travel back to one’s collegiate alma mater.

Definitions of nostalgia vary over time and across disciplines (Angé & Berliner, 2014). The definition of nostalgia used in this study is adopted from Pickering and Keightley (2006):

…longing for what is lacking in a changed present… a yearning for what is now not attainable, simply because of irreversibility of time…and the desire not to return but to recognize the aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future. (p. 920)

This definition considers nostalgia as both yearning for the past and a stepping-stone for a better future. Nostalgia for one’s collegiate alma mater is a strong longing for the places resided, the people encountered, and the identity formed during one’s life as a college student. Yet nostalgia is not only the desire to return; it also serves as a place to replenish, to move forward (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). Revisiting people and places helps individuals relive their past collegiate life and build new memories that are interconnected with the past, providing gratification and satisfaction.
Previous studies on nostalgia-based tourism have primarily focused on heritage (e.g., Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Bauman, 1996; Chen et al., 2014; Lee, Mun, & Jeong, 2018; Nilnoppakun & Ampavat, 2015; Ray & McCain, 2012; Robertson, 1995; Vesey & Dimanche, 2003) and sports (e.g., Cho et al., 2014; Cho, Lee, Moore, Norman, & Ramshaw, 2017; Fairley, 2003; Green & Chalip, 1998; Gordon, 2013; Kulczycki & Hyatt, 2013; Rode, 2015; Xue & Gao, 2018). Cho et al. (2014) classified nostalgia in sports tourism into four categories, based on its structure and purpose: experience, socialization, personal identity, and group identity (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
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<td>Object-based</td>
<td>Nostalgia as experience</td>
<td>Nostalgia as personal identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship-based</td>
<td>Nostalgia as socialization</td>
<td>Nostalgia as group identity</td>
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Table 1. Classification of nostalgia by Cho et al. (2014)

Our central concept, alma mater nostalgia, covers all four categories of nostalgia presented by Cho et al. (2014). One’s college experience includes objects (e.g., people, places, things), as well as relationships formed within the college community. These experiences create memories and affect identity formation, individually and collectively (Feldman, 1972; Kaufman, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Previous research has shown that university plays a key role in individual identity formation among college students (Feldman, 1972; Kaufman, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). University is also a social environment where students build their social identity (Feldman, 1972; Kaufman, 2014; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students form their social identity by understanding themselves in a social context, embracing the attitudes and attributions of others toward them (Kaufman, 2014), and
sharing collective memories (Fairley, 2003). Accordingly, the authors predict that visits to one’s alma mater serve as a form of post-graduation identity affirmation for alumni.

One’s memories and identity are inextricably linked to nostalgia, which can serve as a motivation to travel (Fairley, 2003). Motivation to travel, according to push and pull theory, includes both factors that drive people to leave home and those that attract people to a destination (Dann, 1977). Leong, Yeh, Hsiao, and Huan (2015) described nostalgia as a push motive, whereby individuals seek objects such as places and things to fulfill their yearning for the past. However, in this study context, the authors argue that alma mater nostalgia can be better explained as a pull motive. The opportunity to revisit places and things on or near campus with people from one’s college time attracts alumni to visit one’s college campus. In other words, alumni tourists are drawn to revisit their past college life. The current study contributes to the literature by examining the role of nostalgia in alumni tourism and by investigating nostalgia as a pull factor that motivates travel.

**Methods**

This exploratory case study was designed and implemented by a team of graduate students at Penn State. This research stemmed from local tourism stakeholders’ need for empirical data to inform their marketing efforts to increase tourism in the off-season (i.e., winter). Tasked with developing an understanding of tourists’ motivations for visiting the destination outside of the seasonal draws of football games in the fall and special events in the summer, the research team focused on the university’s alumni. The researchers used the understudied concept of nostalgia tourism as a lens for qualitatively addressing questions about what makes alumni refer to Penn State as a “home away from home”, making Centre County such a popular place to visit for this group.
Location and Study Population

Centre County, named for its location as the geographic center of the state, is the most visited tourism destination in the Alleghenies Region of Pennsylvania (Tourism Economics, 2016). Three-in-five visitors to Centre County cite Penn State as being the key driver of visitation to the destination (Longwoods International, 2015). Thus, an alumni base of nearly 700,000 Penn State graduates serves as a viable target market for the destination.

Data Collection

In spring 2018, the research team conducted semi-structured key informant interviews with Penn State graduates (n = 14). Interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes in length. Participants ranged from ages 25 to 62 and had graduated from Penn State between the mid-1970s and 2015. Consistency among the data was maintained through the use of a detailed interview guide on which all research team members were trained (see appendix). All study participants met the following inclusion criteria: earned an undergraduate degree from Penn State; spent a minimum of 2 semesters in residence at the main University Park campus during their time as Penn State students; currently reside outside of Centre County, PA; have visited Centre County within the 4 months prior to the interview date; were 18 years of age or older; spoke English. Informants were recruited through multiple channels, including personal relationships with study team members, the Penn State Alumni Association, the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, and Facebook groups. Utilizing chain referral sampling techniques, interviewees were also asked to recommend additional interview subjects through their own networks.

Interviews were conducted on the phone and audio recorded. The interviews focused primarily on the most recent trip to Centre County. These interviews sought to identify activities, objects, and places attracting informants back to campus, in order to understand the meaning that
Penn State and the destination hold to these alumni. In addition to reviewing the return trip in question, interviews also touched on different stages of the interviewees’ lives, including upbringing, motivations for attending Penn State, traditions and memories from college, and life experiences after graduation.

**Data Analysis**

Each interview was transcribed into written text by the same research team member who conducted the interview. Preliminary coding was conducted on the individual transcripts by the team member who led the interview. During this process, structural coding was applied based on an initial codebook created collaboratively among the full research team. Used as a basic categorization technique, structural coding organized the data to allow for easy retrieval of text (e.g., responses to individual interview questions) (Saldaña, 2015). During this preliminary coding process, the coders also made note of primary themes within each interview.

In subsequent coding passes, two members of the research team utilized open-coding to inductively assess the data, allowing themes and understanding to emerge from the text itself (Bernard et al., 2016). This iterative process began with aggregating and condensing the primary themes identified by the full research team during structural coding of individual interviews. When analyzing the full body of text, techniques including repetition, similarities and differences, theory-related material (e.g., identity formation during college), and indigenous categories unique to the setting (e.g., “the Skeller”) were employed to further refine and add to these initial themes (Bernard et al., 2016). The first author conducted the first full-cycle coding pass on the entire dataset and developed an initial codebook (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998). The research team then worked jointly to collapse these first-pass coding labels into broader thematic categories and perform a second-cycle coding pass. Given the team’s
intimate familiarity with the small body of text, formal inter-coder reliability assessments were not conducted. Instead, any coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively.

**Preliminary Results and Ongoing Work**

In ongoing analysis, bottom-up, thematic coding is being used to derive both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations from this research. Initial review of the data shows clear evidence that Penn State alumni form strong attachments to people and places during their time as students. Initial emergent themes are organized into the following four categories: 1) the *overall* meaning of Penn State, 2) personal meaning/impacts of Penn State, 3) motivations to visit, and 4) changes to the area over time. In the full-length manuscript (in progress), exemplar quotes for these themes will be presented to further support and describe them.

In an iterative process, the authors’ predictions—inform ed by past literature—and findings—derived from initial thematic coding—have resulted in the formation of the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1. Notably, our analysis identifies recurring topics pulling alumni to visit State College that align with all four quadrants of Cho et al. (2014)’s structure and purpose-based classification of nostalgia.

![Figure 1. Conceptual framework for alma mater nostalgia tourism](image-url)
Participating in nostalgia as experience, alumni return to State College for specific events and activities associated with fond memories from their college days, like Penn State football games and the annual Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts. Experiencing nostalgia as personal identity, alumni reflect upon the lifelong relationships, individual transformations, and professional development that stemmed from their time at Penn State. At the same time, experiencing nostalgia as group identity, many alumni consider themselves members of one big family, and State College to be their home. Finally, living nostalgia through socialization, Penn State represents the one place that all of one’s friends from college days have in common. For some, a visit to Penn State is not about the place or any experiences at all, but about the people whose lives intersect there.

Pulled to revisit Penn State by individual and group-based identity and to relive memories originally formed during their time as college students, these alumni create new memories that intertwine with their new identities as adults with families, careers, and different priorities. In this way, nostalgia can be seen as poised in the center of a cyclical process, ignited by one’s time in college, but fueled by ongoing experiences, relationships, and identities. The cyclical link is enhanced to the extent that the authenticity of the places and people are kept, and the quality of experience is high. The importance of authenticity in one’s nostalgic tourist trips will be further explored in future discussion of these data.

This study seeks to contribute to the body of literature on nostalgia in tourism by understanding nostalgia as a pull motivation created and sustained by memory and identity. Exploratory, qualitative work has led to the initial conceptual model presented herein, providing ample basis for future mixed methods work to refine and confirm these findings. Furthermore, the study provides practical insights on how to mobilize the university’s strong alumni base to
increase visitation and revenue for alumni-dependent destinations, such as Centre County. Centre County suffers from low visitation during winter and spring due to a lack of events and unattractive weather. It is thus a challenge for the local Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) to attract visitors during the off-season. Understanding nostalgia as a travel motivation can help CVBs in college towns build strategies to attract alumni during slow seasons and contribute to the successful development of their tourism industry.
Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Interviewer: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________2018

Location: __________

Interview #__________

I. Trip Details

1. When was your most recent trip to State College?
   A. If talking about a recent past trip:
      i. When did you travel? How long were you in town?
         a. If an overnight trip, where did you stay?
      ii. What mode of transportation did you use for your trip to/from State College?
      iii. With whom did you travel to State College?
         a. Family? Spouse? Any friends?
         b. If friends – were they friends you met while a Penn State student, or after?
      iv. Did you meet up with anyone else, or visit anyone in State College?
   B. If talking about a trip they are currently on:
      i. What day did you arrive? What day will you depart?
         a. If an overnight trip, where are you staying?
      ii. What mode of transportation did you use for your trip to/from State College?
      iii. With whom are you traveling?
      iv. Are you visiting anyone or meeting up with anyone else during your trip?
         a. Family? Spouse? Any friends?
         b. If friends – were they friends you met while a Penn State student, or after?

2. The previous questions referred specifically to your most recent trip. Now, we have a few general questions about visiting State College.
   A. In general, how often do you come back to State College? (Number of times per month/per year/etc.)
   B. In the years since you graduated from Penn State, have your trips to State College changed?
      i. For example, do you travel more or less often than in the first few years after graduating?
      ii. Have your reasons for visiting or the activities you do here changed over time?
      iii. How? Why?
   C. When you visit State College, who do you generally or usually travel with?
      i. Is there anyone else you have traveled with to State College in the
past?
  D. When you visit State College, where do you usually stay the night?
    i. Is there anywhere else you have stayed in the past?

II. Pre-trip Decision Making
1. Thinking again about your most recent trip to State College, why did you decide to make this trip? Or, what was the purpose of this trip?
2. How did you go about planning this trip?
   A. Did you ask anyone for information? If yes, who?
   B. Did you search for information online? If yes, where did you search?
      i. What sites did you use?
      ii. Were there any key words or phrases you used as search terms?
      iii. Did you use social media?
   C. Did you refer any paper materials (e.g. brochures, newspapers, books, magazines, flyers, etc.)?
      i. If so, which?
3. Are you familiar with the Central Pennsylvania Convention and Visitors Bureau?
4. Have you ever been to the visitpennstate.org website?

III. Personal Experiences during Trip
1. What places/locations did you visit?
   A. For each question: probe for more. Why? What did you do there? Had you been there / done that before? What other places did you visit?
2. What activities did you do?
   A. Did you go out for any food or drink?
   B. Did you purchase any memorabilia?
   C. Did you make any other purchases?
   D. What activities met your expectations and/or satisfied your needs during your trip?
3. What else did you want to see or do that you didn’t have a chance to see or do?
   A. Why didn’t you have the chance to see/do that?
4. Was there anything about this trip that you did not enjoy?
   A. Why? What could have improved that?
5. On this trip, did you notice anything new or different about State College?
   A. If yes, what?
   B. How did you feel about this change?
6. On this trip, did you see or experience anything unexpected?
   A. What?
   B. How did you feel about it?
7. Why was this trip important to you? Did it have any special meanings to you?
8. What emotions did you experience on this trip? What feelings stood out to you?
9. Did your most recent trip to State College change anything about your life?
10. Is there anything else you’d like to say about this particular trip? Anything else about this experience that stood out to you?

IV. Expectations and experience about nostalgia tourism in State College;
1. What is State College lacking that could draw you back? What would make you more eager to visit, or cause you to visit State College more frequently?
2. What memories do you have from your undergraduate years?
3. What activities / groups / clubs were you involved in as an undergraduate?
4. Did you attend University Park campus for four years? If not, what other schools or branch campuses did you attend? How many years were you at the University Park campus?
5. Where did you live when you attended the University Park campus? (Dorms, Greek life house, off-campus house or apartment, at home with parents, other place, etc.)
6. What about your most recent trip reminded you of your undergraduate years?
7. Are there any traditions from your undergraduate years that you still keep up?
8. After you graduated from Penn State, what did you do next?
   A. Where did you move?
   B. What was your first job after college?

V. Background and Demographic Information
1. Where did you grow up? Or, where did you live prior to attending Penn State?
2. Why did you choose to go to college at Penn State?
3. What year did you graduate from Penn State?
4. Which department were you in at Penn State, or what was your major?
5. What is the highest degree you have earned from Penn State?
6. Did you attend any other school or pursue any other education after Penn State?
7. What do you currently do for a living?
8. Where do you currently reside?
9. How old are you?
10. Do you have any family members who attended Penn State?
11. Are you a member of the Penn State Alumni Association?
12. Do you plan to visit State College again in the future?
   A. Why?
   B. When? Do you have any specific plans made?

Final Question: If you had to sum it up in a few sentences, what does Penn State mean to you? Is there anything else that you would like to say about Penn State or your time there?
References


