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| Item Type     | event;event   |
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| Download date | 2024-12-04 21:23:40   |
| Link to Item  | <a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/48612">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/48612</a> |

## Resident Perceptions of a Controversial Annual Event

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### ABSTRACT

*A survey of 880 residents revealed diverse attitudes toward Gold Coast Schoolies Week, an annual high school-leaver celebration characterized by partying and drinking. 'Conditional supporters' (33%) or 'conditional opponents' (34%) provided complex assessments of costs and benefits, as per social exchange theory, that include considerations of 'noncosts' and 'non-benefits'. With regard to social representations, 'opponents' (18%) are more likely to be influenced by mass media, social circles and negative personal exposure, whilst 'supporters' (15%) are more likely to rely on their own and their children's schoolie experience. Balanced media coverage is one means for improving resident perceptions.*

**Keywords:** *Resident perceptions, Schoolies Week, students, events, social exchange theory, social representation theory.*

### INTRODUCTION

Gold Coast's Schoolies Week (GCSW) is a controversial annual event celebrated by many students to mark their completion of high school by descending *en masse* to the Surfers Paradise neighborhood for seven days of partying. Assessments of sustainability, beyond tangible impacts such as drunken and rowdy behavior, should consider the perceptions and attitudes of residents because of their influential reciprocal relationships with local tourism activity. Conflicted attitudes are expected and derive from an underlying paradox wherein authorities expect 'schoolies' to behave like responsible adults during an officially condoned rite of passage where peer pressure, fringe elements and an alcohol-tolerant culture conspire to encourage anti-social and high-risk behavior (Winchester, McGuirk, & Everett, 1999). Containment strategies are constrained by resource limitations and the Gold Coast's status as a hedonic liminal space. The experience of Daytona Beach may be indicative, where similarly sized groups (around 20%) were strongly supportive of or opposed to the similarly disruptive annual Spring Break, suggesting social exchange dynamics (Jackson, 2008).

### METHODOLOGY

This research identifies the perceptions held by Gold Coast adult residents toward GCSW and focuses on 14 propositions as conditionally informed by the literature as well as knowledge about the event and its setting (Table 1). An online questionnaire, using Qualtrics software, consisted of 31 GCSW Likert perception items, augmented by open-ended solicitations of perceptions. Principle components analysis was used to simplify and reduce the item array to meet acceptable standards of reliability and facilitate interpretation, in preparation for hierarchical cluster analysis, using Ward's method, on the final selection of original items. The clusters, representing different perceptions of GCSW, were then compared using comparison-of-means or chi-squared tests as appropriate against variables related to the propositions. After pilot testing, the main survey link was emailed to 28,000 randomly selected addresses. After three days, 880 valid responses were received.

## RESULTS

The average respondent age was 52 years, and the majority (69%) were Australian-born. The average residence time on the Gold Coast was 17.5 years, while 29.8% were employed currently or previously in the tourism industry and 29.3% reported at least having a Bachelor's degree. Principle components analysis yielded three factors – 'tolerance', 'impacts' and 'non-disruption' – that capture 21 of the 31 items. Cluster analysis performed on all 21 factored items resulted in a four-cluster solution. Cluster 1 'supporters' (n=132) are solidly positive on 'non-disruption' and 'tolerance', and weakly positive 'impacts'. Cluster 2 members (n=290) are '*conditional supporters*' positive on 'non-disruption' and 'tolerance', but ambivalent 'impacts'. Cluster 3 '*conditional opponents*' (n=296) have similar responses to the 'non-disruption' items but are more clearly ambivalent about the 'tolerance' items and negative on 'impacts'. Cluster 4 respondents (n=162) are '*opponents*' negative on most items.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Strongly supported propositions (Table 1) indicate the influence of social representations, so that those who had their own schoolies experience or learned about GCSW from their own children tended to have positive attitudes, while those who relied on media had negative attitudes. That residents have a generally positive attitude but recognize costs is partially supported. As per social exchange theory, acknowledgement of widespread social costs – associated by most residents with a fringe schoolie or outsider element – is balanced by recognition of economic benefits for the community. The dynamic, however, appears to be different at the individual scale, where a recognized *lack* of personal benefit is balanced by a *lack* of personal inconvenience. These respective 'non-benefits' and 'non-costs' may influence the more traditional modes of impact and social exchange analysis, accounting perhaps for more *tolerance* than *support* for GCSW, whereas tourism as a whole is strongly supported. It may also help to account for the two-thirds share of the sampled residents in the two conditional clusters. The unsupported propositions were mainly demographic. The lack of higher support among younger residents may show that the personal experience of having been a schoolie is more influential than merely being in proximate age cohorts. The higher female content of the ambivalent clusters is intriguing, seemingly indicating that females make more nuanced assessments of costs and benefits. Contrary to expectations (Korça, 1998; Madrigal, 1995), those presently or formerly employed in the tourism industry were no more likely to support GCSW. This may attest to the 'isolated' nature of this event, wherein activity is confined to narrow spatial and temporal frames that do not directly benefit a high portion of tourism workers. Contrary to most empirical studies (Allen et. al., 1988; Perdue, Long, & Kang, 1995; Weaver & Lawton, 2001), neither longer-term residency or residency in Surfers Paradise correlate clearly with opposition.

Further research into the new constructs of 'non-costs' and 'non-benefits', is warranted so that residents can make more informed judgements about the alleged trade-offs that could influence future decisions about the event's management and fate. Concurrently, managers need to aggressively target and curtail fringe schoolie and predator elements that are mostly implicated in these negative impacts and which drive influential but mostly negative coverage in the mainstream media.

**Table 1**  
**Proposition Assessments**

| Proposition  | Finding             |
|--|---------------------|
| <i>P<sub>2</sub> Residents who themselves were schoolies in the past have more positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>   | Strongly supported  |
| <i>P<sub>5</sub> Residents who obtain knowledge about GCSW from their children have more positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>   | Strongly supported  |
| <i>P<sub>7</sub> Residents who obtain knowledge about GCSW from mass media have less positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>   | Strongly supported  |
| <i>P<sub>11</sub> Foreign-born residents have a less positive attitude toward GCSW.</i>  | Strongly supported  |
| <i>P<sub>1</sub> Gold Coast residents have generally positive attitudes toward GCSW, but recognize the existence of negative impacts.</i>                                      | Partially supported |
| <i>P<sub>4</sub> Residents who were satisfied with their own schoolie experience have more positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>   | Partially supported |
| <i>P<sub>6</sub> Residents who obtain knowledge about GCSW from personal direct exposure have less positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>   | Partially supported |
| <i>P<sub>3</sub> Residents who themselves were schoolies on the Gold Coast in the past have more positive attitudes toward GCSW than residents who participated elsewhere.</i> | Unsupported         |
| <i>P<sub>8</sub> Residents of Surfers Paradise have a less positive attitude toward GCSW.</i>  | Unsupported         |
| <i>P<sub>9</sub> Residents employed in tourism currently or previously have a more positive attitude toward GCSW.</i>  | Unsupported         |
| <i>P<sub>10</sub> Longer-term residents have a less positive attitude toward GCSW.</i>   | Unsupported         |
| <i>P<sub>12</sub> Younger residents have more positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>  | Unsupported         |
| <i>P<sub>13</sub> Females have less positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>  | Unsupported         |
| <i>P<sub>14</sub> University-educated residents have less positive attitudes toward GCSW.</i>  | Unsupported         |

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