

The Impact of Gender and Religion on College Students' Spring Break Behavior

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Abstract:

The authors investigated the influence of gender and religion on health-risk behavior potentials and destination-related expectations of college students on spring break vacation using a random sample of 534 students from two U.S. universities. Results indicated that gender and religion had a significant impact on students' potential to engage in health-risk behaviors during spring break as well as their choice of spring break destinations and their expectations for hospitality service quality and characteristics of the destinations. Important social marketing and public policy implications for the tourism and hospitality industry are discussed.

Article:

Knowledge regarding travel-related behavior, motivations, and preferences of major tourism markets is of utmost importance to the travel and tourism industry. Ongoing, relentless attempts to attract new traveler segments have prompted the travel and tourism industry to target their marketing efforts toward the college student market (Field 1999). In the United States, there were more than 14 million students enrolled in colleges in 1994, and the enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities is expected to grow to 16 million by 2007 (Kessler 1998). School vacations and extended holidays provide college students with many opportunities for travel, mainly during spring break and the summer. For example, in Field's (1999) study of Clemson University students, more than 70% of domestic students indicated that they were likely to travel over the break. Approximately 1 million U.S. students engage in some form of spring break vacation (Josiam, Clemons, and Hobson 1995). Therefore, the college student market represents a potentially viable and lucrative target for many hospitality service providers. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how gender and religion of students affect their spring break behavior.

The spring break environment has been characterized by college students as an atmosphere that provides opportunities to indulge in "unusual" activities, in which personal rules and codes "do not apply" or are "temporarily suspended" (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney 1998, p. 262). Focusing on having fun and engaging in hedonistic behavior in a non-routine, break-loose environment comes with a sense of freedom that unfortunately might lead to potentially risky behaviors by college students. A recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study suggested that college students in general were highly inclined to engage in risky behavior such as unprotected sex, substance abuse, and smoking (Selingo 1997). In particular, the potential for risky behavior of college students is exponentially magnified in a typical spring break environment conducive to unregulated alcohol consumption and casual sex. Prior studies have suggested that gender (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney 1998; Smeaton, Josiam, and Dietrich 1998; Corbin, McNair, and Carter 1996), religion (Slicker 1997; Engs, Diebold, and Hanson 1996), and other sociodemographic variables can significantly influence health risk behaviors of college students. This study empirically investigated the roles played by gender and religion in influencing alcohol consumption and risky sexual behavior among college students during spring break.

Considering the aforementioned public health ramifications of typical spring break vacations, this study also explored social marketing implications for providers of spring break-related services. Social marketing—defined as an effort to use effective marketing skills and techniques to influence individual behavior to improve the social welfare of the community by improving its members' physical and mental well-being (Andreasen

1995)—can be instrumental in enhancing the college students' spring break experience while increasing their awareness regarding the consequences of health risk behaviors.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Alcohol Consumption and Risky Sexual Behavior among U.S. College Students

According to past drinking surveys, the college student population had the largest proportion of drinkers in the United States as compared to other population groups in the country (Gonzalez 1986). Although more college students are saying no to alcohol, more of those who drink do so to get drunk (Reisberg 1998). In a 1997 study of 116 colleges, 19% of students abstained from drinking (Reisberg 1998). However, data from the 1993 Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study suggested that, on a national scale, one out of five college students was a frequent binge drinker (Wechsler et al. 1998, 1999). Binge drinking is generally defined as five or more drinks at a setting for men and four or more for women (Reisberg 1998). Smeaton, Josiam, and Dietrich (1998) reported that binge drinking was particularly common among spring break students. In their study at Panama City Beach, the average number of drinks consumed the previous day was 18 for men and 10 for women. Students who were motivated to visit the destination because of its party image consumed significantly more alcohol than students who had cited other motivations.

Research findings indicate that a vast majority of U.S. college students are sexually active. For instance, Douglas et al. (1997) found that 86% of college students had engaged in sexual intercourse and 34% of the respondents had had six or more sexual partners in the past. According to the latest University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Higher Education Research Institution annual survey, the number of students supporting casual sex is dropping; it reached an all time low of 40% in 1997 (Women in Higher Education 1999). Despite this decrease in favorable attitudes toward casual sex, the students' behavior might not be changing as rapidly. For example, Hawkins, Gray, and Hawkins's (1995) study suggested that a substantial number of students at a north-western university engaged in risky sexual practices. Furthermore, in their random sample of college students Hill et al. (1995) reported that a majority of heterosexual respondents had behaved in a way that placed them at risk for both sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unplanned pregnancy.

Religion and Risky Behaviors

Prior studies (Hawks and Bahr 1992; Cochran 1991; Burkett 1980) have determined that religiosity (especially among those affiliated to certain denominations) can have a deterrent and inhibitory influence on deviant and risky behaviors among youth. Results from a study conducted at a southern state university indicated that religious-moral taboos was the primary reason for abstaining from alcohol consumption; the abstinent group and light drinkers endorsed religious-moral reasons significantly more often than others (Slicker 1997). Studies examining the relationship between religiosity and drug use among European youth have suggested that religious affiliation was a significant predictor of attitudes toward drug use (Mullen and Francis 1995) and that youngsters with minimal or no church contact (attendance) demonstrated the most liberal attitudes toward substance use (Francis and Mullen 1997). Furthermore, the effects of religiosity have also been found to be fairly consistent across drug types (Cochran 1991).

Poulson et al.'s (1998) study of college students in a rural region of the southwestern United States concluded that women with strong religious beliefs consumed less alcohol and were less likely to engage in casual sex than women with weaker religious beliefs. Among men, religion was not significantly correlated with alcohol consumption or risky sexual behavior (Poulson et al. 1998). More than 50% of the females and 36% of the males who were abstaining from alcohol in Slicker's (1997) study chose religious beliefs as their main reason for avoiding alcohol consumption. Beeghley, Bock, and Cochran's (1990) U.S. study on alcohol behavior indicated that the strongly religious reported a high probability of alcohol nonuse compared to the weakly religious, who were more likely to misuse alcohol. Considering the relationship between religious affiliation and permissive attitudes toward drinking, alcohol consumption has been found to be highest among Jews, followed by Catholics, and lowest among Protestants (Engs, Diebold, and Hanson 1996; Carlucci et al. 1993). It can be inferred that strong religious messages (and moral messages proposed by the church) about alcohol

abstinence can have a major impact on personal rates of alcohol consumption (Poulson et al. 1998; Beeghley, Bock, and Cochran 1990; Burkett 1980).

Gender and Risky Behaviors

Consistent gender differences in alcohol consumption have been reported in recent as well as past studies (e.g., Humara and Sherman 1999; Zucker and Harford 1983)— male alcohol users outnumbered female alcohol users, and a greater preponderance of heavy alcohol consumption existed among males compared to females. Engs, Diebold, and Hanson's (1996) gender analysis of at-risk drinkers from a national sample of college students categorized about one out of three men as being at risk, compared to about one out of five for females. Men were also more likely to report that it was socially acceptable to be intoxicated occasionally (Svenson, Jarvis, and Campbell 1994). Variations in drinking behavior among men and women might be partially caused by differences in societal and cultural attitudes regarding the use of alcohol (Schall, Kemeny, and Maltzman 1992). Getting drunk may be viewed as permissible for men but inappropriate for women (Poulson et al. 1998). In addition, a heightened "concern for physical safety and well-being, recognition of potential dangers attributed to drug and alcohol use; and exclusion of sex and dating as activities done for fun" (p. 70) among women may be important factors in augmenting women's resistive attitudes toward alcohol and drug abuse (Doherty and Szalay 1996).

Studies have documented significant gender differences in risky sexual behavior patterns with men engaging in more risk-taking behavior relevant to partner choice and sexual practices than women (Jadack, Hyde, and Keller 1995; Poppen 1995). Furthermore, men are more likely to get aroused through unwanted, sudden, and involuntary sexually intrusive thoughts (Byers, Purdon, and Clark 1998) and are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse for "reasons of lust, pleasure, physical release, or being aroused" (Hill and Preston 1996, p. 29) compared to women. Gender differences in sexual behavior may be attributed to the influence of gender roles on beliefs and social behaviors. In addition, alcohol consumption is one of the predominant factors that has been repeatedly associated with unsafe sexual behavior and practices (Wechsler et al. 1994). In Desiderato and Crawford's (1995) study, alcohol consumption had preceded the latest occurrence of sexual activity for 66% of the men and 53% of the women.

To summarize, prior studies have documented strong relationships between risky behavior patterns, that is, alcohol consumption, substance abuse, and unsafe sexual practices and factors such as gender (Humara and Sherman 1999; Reisberg 1998; Smeaton, Josiam, and Dietrich 1998; Engs, Diebold, and Hanson 1996; Jadack, Hyde, and Keller 1995; Poppen 1995) and religiosity (Slicker 1997; Hawks and Bahr 1992; Cochran 1991; Burkett 1980) among college students. Although some studies have separately investigated gender differences in drinking patterns (Smeaton, Josiam, and Dietrich 1998) and casual sex (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney 1998) among college students, little theory-based research has been conducted to comprehensively examine the relationship between alcohol consumption and unsafe sexual practices and religion and gender among college students on spring break. The primary focus of this article is on gender- and religion-based differences in health-risk behavior among college students on spring break vacation.

METHOD

Data Collection

Self-administered surveys were distributed at one north-east and one southwest U.S. university between February and March 1999. To ensure that the sample would represent a cross-section of all students at each university, general education classes were used as the sampling frame. The targeted classes were selected from the universities' lists of general education classes using probability sampling proportionate to enrollment size. Once a class was selected, a research assistant verbally explained the purpose of the study to students and encouraged their participation in the study. A raffle for a free dinner for two at an on-campus restaurant was used as an incentive. A total of 534 students responded to questions regarding substance use and sexual intentions and behaviors while at home and while on spring break vacation. Since we were concerned about potential interaction effects between the two classification variables, gender and religion, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) method was used to analyze the data.

Measures

Since many of the scales were adapted to fit the specific context of spring break vacations, the measurement scales were first factor analyzed and then checked for their internal consistency and reliabilities.

An eight-item semantic differential scale was employed to capture the respondents' attitudes toward getting drunk, experimenting with drugs, fooling around, and using a condom when having sex with someone they just met. The adjective pairs were *fun-loving/serious*, *good/bad*, *exciting/dull*, *pleasant/unpleasant*, *adventuresome/ordinary*, *smart/stupid*, *good/bad*, and *responsible/irresponsible* (see Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney [1998] for the development of this scale). The internal reliabilities for these unidimensional scales were high, ranging from .90 to .93.

A 4-item scale was used to measure the students' frequency of impulse behavior regarding drinking, drugs, fooling around, and having sex with strangers during the vacation (Cronbach's alpha of .77). A social norm scale, composed of 4 items, was used to identify the influence of friends and people around on the student's behavior during the break (internal reliability coefficient of .89). Situational influences on one's likelihood of having sex were measured with 12 items reflecting typical spring break settings (break-loose mood, wet T-shirt contests, dirty dancing, being under the influence of alcohol, being picked up, etc.). A 4-point scale ranging from *never* to *frequent* was employed to capture the frequency with which participants expected to be involved in each of the experiences (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney 1998). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was .96. The respondents' opinions regarding negative health consequences of getting drunk, using drugs, and fooling around/having sex were separately examined using multiple-item (3- to 4-item) constructs that were measured via a 7-point scale. The Cronbach's internal consistency coefficients were .78 for drinking, .89 for drugs, and .96 for sexual activities.

Finally, the students' expectations for their upcoming spring break destination were measured with a nine-item scale. The factor analysis revealed a two-dimensional structure of marketing-related variables (price, service quality of the hotel, hotel facilities) and sex/drugs/drinking. The Cronbach's internal consistency coefficients were .72 and .69, respectively. Students were also asked to rate the importance of various items in choosing a spring break location. This scale was composed of three dimensions: destination image (Cronbach's alpha of .74), opportunities for sex/drugs/ alcohol (reliability coefficient of .73), and opportunities for relaxation and nonsex adventure (Cronbach's alpha of .63).¹

Sample Characteristics

Slightly more than 60% of the 534 respondents in this study were female. Ages ranged from 18 to 46 with an average of 21. Whites (84.3%) dominated the sample, with only 4.5% Hispanics, 3% African Americans, and 3.6% Asians. Furthermore, 3.4% of the respondents rated themselves to be multiethnic or multiracial. In terms of religious beliefs, 37.1 % of the students were Catholic, 13.1 % were Protestant, and 20.5% fell in the "other Christian" category. More than 17% of the respondents in the sample had no religious affiliation, 4.9% were Jews, and 6.2% indicated they had other religious affiliations.

Ninety-seven percent of the students identified them-selves as heterosexual and 1.9% as bisexual. Only one student self-identified as homosexual. In terms of the students' dating status, 38% rated themselves as not dating anyone, 32% said they were in a steady relationship with one person, 21% were casually dating, and 8% were engaged/married or living with partner.

RESULTS

The results of an ANOVA showed that none of the inter-action effects between gender and religion were significant, thus enabling us to focus on the main effects. The most important scale means and *F* values are summarized in Table 1. Please refer to scale anchors noted in Table 1 when interpreting the cell means.

Reasons for Taking Vacation during Spring Break

To gain insight into college students' reasons for taking vacations during spring break, the respondents were asked to rate items in terms of their importance in destination choice. Gender and religion main effects were present for the sex/drink/drug factor, $F(1, 449) = 31.66, p < .001$ for gender and $F(2, 449) = 3.97, p < .05$ for religion. Male students in this sample gave higher importance ratings for party-related factors ($M = 4.09$) than female students ($M = 5.26$). Non-Catholic Christians had the lowest ratings for the sex/drink/drug factor ($M_s = 5.06$ for this group, 4.56 for Catholics, and 4.41 for the no religious affiliation group). Only the gender main effect was also significant for the marketing factor, $F(1, 449) = 9.91, p < .01$. Female students gave higher importance ratings for the scale reflecting attractive prices and destination image than their male counterparts ($M_s = 3.1$ for women and 3.68 for men). Students seemed to want to have relaxation, adventure, and excitement during spring break regard-less of their gender or religion.

TABLE 1
GENDER AND RELIGIOSITY DIFFERENCES IN FACTORS AFFECTING DESTINATION CHOICE FOR SPRING BREAK AND HEALTH-RISK BEHAVIOR DURING SPRING BREAK

Scale	Gender			Religion			
	Male	Female	F Value	Non-Catholic	Catholic	No Religious Affiliation	F Value
1. Importance of attractive prices and destination image for destination choice ^a	3.10	3.68	9.91**	3.38	3.19	3.58	1.36 n.s.
2. Importance of sex/alcohol/drugs for destination choice ^a	4.09	5.26	31.66***	5.06	4.56	4.41	3.97*
3. Importance of opportunities for partying for destination choice ^a	3.71	4.73	29.45***	4.60	3.97	4.08	5.20**
4. Attitudes toward drinking during spring break ^b	34.24	38.74	18.02***	37.47	35.88	36.10	1.08 n.s.
5. Attitudes toward doing drugs during spring break ^b	43.00	46.73	12.33***	46.19	46.11	42.31	4.72**
6. Attitudes toward having sex with someone just met over spring break ^b	31.83	43.02	101.60***	38.47	38.05	35.76	1.89 n.s.
7. Influence of certain conditions on likelihood of drinking and doing drugs during spring break ^c	4.28	5.23	32.27***	4.92	4.65	4.71	1.27 n.s.
8. Influence of certain conditions on likelihood of sexual behavior during spring break ^c	3.74	5.31	86.65***	4.77	4.41	4.41	0.09 n.s.
9. Expectations for destination-related characteristics ^d	2.10	1.94	4.08*	1.96	2.31	2.13	1.73 n.s.
10. Expectations for sex, drinking, and doing drugs while at destination ^d	3.35	4.19	38.22***	3.99	3.67	3.64	2.98 n.s.

a. Seven-point scale where 1 = *very important*, 2 = *somewhat important*, 3 = *slightly important*, 4 = *neither important nor unimportant*, 5 = *slightly unimportant*, 6 = *somewhat important*, and 7 = *not at all important*.

b. Seven-point scale where 1 = *extremely positive*, 2 = *quite positive*, 3 = *slightly positive*, 4 = *neither positive nor negative*, 5 = *slightly negative*, 6 = *quite negative*, and 7 = *extremely negative*.

c. Seven-point scale where 1 = *extremely likely*, 2 = *quite likely*, 3 = *slightly likely*, 4 = *neither likely nor unlikely*, 5 = *slightly unlikely*, 6 = *quite unlikely*, and 7 = *extremely unlikely*.

d. Seven-point scale where 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *somewhat agree*, 3 = *slightly agree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *slightly disagree*, 6 = *somewhat disagree*, and 7 = *strongly disagree*.

*Significant at the .05 level. **Significant at the .01 level. ***Significant at the .001 level.

Attitudes and Intentions

The semantic differential scales used to capture the respondents' attitudes toward various behaviors during the spring break indicated the following. Gender main effect was significant for the students' attitudes toward getting drunk, experimenting with drugs, and having sex with someone they just met over the spring break: $F(1, 449) = 18.02, p < .001$; $F(1, 449) = 12.33, p < .001$; and $F(1, 449) = 101.60, p < .001$, respectively. As

expected, female students rated all of these behaviors in a more negative light. Religion seemed to influence the students' attitudes toward experimenting with drugs, $F(2, 449) = 4.72, p < .01$. Students with no religious affiliation gave more positive ratings toward drug use over the spring break than the other two groups ($M_s = 42.31$ for the no affiliation group, 46.11 for Catholics, and 46.19 for non-Catholic Christians). Only the gender main effect was significant for the students' attitudes toward using condoms, $F(1, 449) = 13.31, p < .01$. Females showed a more positive attitude toward condom use when having sex with someone you just met ($M = 24.53$) than males ($M = 20.16$).

Significant gender differences were found for the social norm scale, $F(1, 449) = 15.26, p < .05$. Male students agreed to the influence of friends on their spring break behavior to a greater extent than female students ($M_s = 5.42$ for men and 5.97 for women). Interestingly, women in this sample reported a higher likelihood of impulse behavior related to alcohol, sex, and drugs during the break, $F(1, 449) = 36.16, p < .01$. Regarding negative health consequences of certain activities, the gender difference was present for having sex with someone the student just met and for experimenting with drugs during the spring break, $F(1, 449) = 19.95, p < .01$ and $F(1, 449) = 4.34, p < .05$, respectively. Female students were more likely to indicate negative consequences ($M_s = 2.8$ for sex and 3.07 for drugs) than males ($M_s = 3.64$ for sex and 3.48 for drugs). The students' ratings reflecting negative consequences of drinking too much did not differ significantly among the two sexes or among the three religious groups.

The gender differences persisted when the respondents were asked to indicate the influence of certain conditions on their likely sexual behavior over the break. Being in a break-loose mood, wet T-shirt contests, dirty dancing, drinking, or having an impression that others were having sex had a higher impact on the male students' likelihood of fooling around ($M = 3.74$) than on females ($M = 5.31$), $F(1, 449) = 86.65, p < .001$. The main effect for religion was not significant (i.e., religion did not have a significant effect on fooling around). The same pattern of results was obtained when the conditions were related to the students' likelihood of drinking or using drugs, $F(1, 449) = 32.27, p < .001$ for the gender main effect.

Expectations

Gender had a significant effect on the students' expectations for their upcoming spring break destination, $F(1, 449) = 4.08, p < .05$. Female respondents had higher expectations for the scale composed of destination-related variables such as weather, hotel pricing, availability of nice restaurants, service quality offered by the hotel/motel, and exciting image ($M = 2.1$) than their male counterparts ($M = 1.94$). Similarly, the gender main effect was significant for the destination's reputation for sexual activity, drinking opportunities, and opportunities to experiment with drugs, $F(1, 449) = 38.22, p < .001$. As expected, male respondents' expectations for these party-reputation variables were significantly higher than their female counterparts' ($M_s = 3.35$ for males and 4.19 for females).

Behavior during Latest Spring Break

To get a better idea of the actual behavior among college students, the respondents were asked about their experiences during the latest spring break. More than half of the respondents reported that they got drunk during the vacation, 51.2% and 64.2% for females and males, respectively. Fooling around was also common among the male respondents (42.2%), whereas this figure was significantly lower for the female students (21.5%). Nearly 30% of the male respondents indicated that they used drugs during their latest spring break; this statistic was lower among the females (18.6%). Finally, more than 20% of the male students reported having had sex with someone they met during the spring break. Again, the corresponding number was lower for females (4.9%). Twenty-three percent (both female and male) of the respondents reported having taken along condoms during their past spring break vacation.

General Behavior

Eighteen percent of the respondents indicated that they did not drink alcohol, but of those who did drink, 42% indicated that when they went out they typically consumed five or more drinks. When asked how often they got drunk, 44% of those who consume alcohol stated they got drunk half the time or more. Male students reported

having suffered from the negative consequences of drinking (passing out, throwing up, hangovers) more often than female students ($M_s = 4.28$ for males and 5.23 for females). Of the respondents, 19.7% had been warned or arrested for alcohol use. Sixty percent of the students indicated that they had driven a motor vehicle within 2 hours of consuming alcoholic beverages. Slightly more than 2% of the sample population had been in medical counseling for drugs, and 5.2% had been warned or arrested for drugs. Of those who had had sex with someone they just met, nearly 70% said that they had used a condom.

DISCUSSION

During the past 40 years, spring break has turned into an American college ritual known for extreme behavior—casual sex, excessive drinking, and drug taking (Smeaton, Josiam, and Dietrich 1998). Popular spring break destinations are known for their perpetual party atmosphere, high alcohol consumption, and sexually suggestive contests or displays (Mewhinney and Maticka-Tyndale 1995). Activities on spring break are typically considered as exceptions to the everyday experience and hence personal norms can be temporarily suspended in that environment (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney 1998). An understanding of determinants of college students' spring break behavior can be beneficial in improving current tourism and hospitality marketing efforts toward college students. Essentially, strategies for attracting college students through innovative, targeted advertising and marketing strategies should be adopted by spring break marketers, in conjunction with health education and social marketing skills and techniques, to provide college students with the knowledge to make informed and healthy decisions during the spring break.

Marketing Implications

Recent research suggests that hospitality marketers must take into consideration gender differences when constructing their marketing strategies (Iverson 1997; Sussman and Rashovsky 1997; Oppermann 1993). Many beachfront properties are currently being advertised as “sun, surf, and fun” destinations, yet our findings suggest that developing gender-specific positioning and promotional strategies might produce additional benefits to hospitality service providers aiming at college students. Men in this study reported significantly more favorable attitudes toward party-related behaviors such as drinking, drugs, and casual sex than women did. Furthermore, consistent with past research (e.g. Smeaton, Josiam, and Dietrich 1998), students' actual behavior during the latest spring break indicated similar gender differences in an individual's propensity to engage in risky behavior. Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney (1998) have previously reported this clustering effect for casual sex among college students during spring break. In consequence, promoting the reputation of party image of a spring break location might be an effective way to attract male college students. For instance, an advertising campaign that emphasizes partying in a nonroutine environment associated with a destination could be developed to appeal to the male student segment.

Conversely, female students' attitudes, intentions, and expectations tend to be less supportive of drinking, drug taking, and casual sex. This target segment might be more effectively reached by appealing to the destination's fun but nonsex image. Moreover, female students in this study had higher expectations for lodging facilities, including the level of service provided by the hotel/motel. Advertising attractive prices for good quality services might thus be an efficient way to communicate with female students looking for spring break destinations. Since today's college students tend to be heavy “Web surfers,” using the Internet as a promotional vehicle might truly improve the efficiency and profitability of marketing activities aimed at spring break travelers.

As an additional segmentation variable, hospitality marketers might want to consider college students' religious beliefs. The findings of this investigation as well as past research (Engs, Diebold, and Hanson 1996; Carlucci et al. 1993) suggest that college students' attitudes toward drinking, drugs, and casual sex vary significantly depending on their religion and religious beliefs; students identifying themselves with certain religions exhibit widely liberal (or conservative) attitudes compared to others. Hence, their destination choices might be influenced accordingly.

Social Marketing Implications

Advocates of social marketing suggest that marketing theories and methods should be applied to improve the health of individuals (Andreason 1995; Manoff 1985). The implications of the present study are limited to substance abuse and risky sexual behavior among college students during spring break. Unfortunately, knowledge of risk factors such as casual sex does not necessarily change people's behavior (Baldwin, Whitley, and Baldwin 1990; Francis and Chin 1987). The population of college students continues to be at risk (Bush, Ortinau, and Bush 1994).

According to the Health Belief Model (Kirsch and Joseph 1989), healthy behavior is determined by perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, and perceived barriers. Most college students have an unrealistic, self-serving bias that minimizes their perceptions of STDs as a personal threat (Hansen, Hahn, and Wolkenstein 1990). Personal-level risk refers to the individual's vulnerability (i.e., How likely am I to suffer from the negative consequences of risky behavior?) (Basil and Brown 1994), whereas societal risk examines the individual's estimate of the generalized risk to the rest of the population (i.e., How likely are others to suffer ...?). Since an individual's own risk perceptions seem to be most influential in changing behavior (Yep 1993), the question, How can students' risk perceptions be effectively changed? is a crucial one. The results obtained in this study suggest that female students might be more aware of the negative consequences of casual sex and drug use than male college students.

From a public policy intervention standpoint, using the "one size fits all" approach might not be effective, since behavioral norms for alcohol consumption, for example, vary widely among students (Wechsler et al. 1999). The results of this study suggest that college students exhibit varying levels of risky behavior depending on their gender. In consequence, segmenting the audience based on sex might result in a more focused and hence more effective intervention strategy. Targeting of materials should increase the effectiveness of intervention efforts by directing the appropriate intervention to the most receptive audience (Rose, Bearden, and Manning 1996). The findings of this study indicate that male students might be more heavily influenced by peer pressure during vacations than female students. This finding is congruent with past research suggesting that men's intentions toward casual sex might be more heavily influenced by peer pressure than women's (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, and Mewhinney 1998). Hence, intervention programs that are intended to reduce conformity might be effective in changing male students' drinking and casual sex behaviors. Since students easily overestimate the acceptability and the actual drinking behavior of their peers (e.g., Wechsler et al. 1999), norm correction strategies might be effective in reducing risky behaviors among college students during spring break. Maybe the stakeholders in the travel and tourism industry could act in a socially responsible manner by developing campaigns that create contrasts with expectations regarding sexual behavior and alcohol and drug use at popular spring break destinations. Presenting actual norms for risky behavior can send a message that, contrary to common beliefs, most students are not fooling around, getting drunk, or experimenting with drugs during the vacation. Manipulating the actual environment might be another way to change college students' behaviors. For example, campaigns against public drinking at popular destinations might deter excessive alcohol consumption among college students. Or maybe hotels and motels, in conjunction with local communities, could develop attractive and affordable activity programs with a nonalcohol, nondrug focus.

Most important, all sectors of the travel and tourism industry have to exercise a high degree of self-regulation and social responsibility by discouraging risky behavior among the college student travel segment. For example, regulations that limit or control situational variables such as wet T-shirt contests, dirty dancing, and so on at tourist destinations are likely to reduce the potential of risky behavior among college students during spring break.

CONCLUSIONS

A close look at the findings of this study reveals an alarming propensity of college students to engage in health-risk behaviors during spring break. Results indicate obvious gender and religiosity differences in college students' potential for alcohol consumption, drug use, and unsafe sex during spring break. Gender differences were found to have a significant impact on students' expectations for hospitality service quality and tourism

destination (e.g., party image). Differences in gender and religiosity were also apparent on examination of the students' attitudes toward alcohol consumption, drug use, and casual sex during spring break as well as their intentions to engage in health-risk behaviors while at the spring break destination. Differences in general behavior and health-risk behavior among college students on spring break need to be carefully addressed by tourism and hospitality service providers and marketers. Understanding these differences would assist the tourism and hospitality industry in minimizing the unfavorable consequences arising from college students' spring break behaviors by increasing college students' awareness of these consequences. This would facilitate the provision of a safe, risk-free, high-quality spring break vacation environment that would potentially enhance college students' spring break experience while allowing tourism and hospitality service providers to gain a marketing edge over competitors targeting the spring break market segment.

Limitations

The student population surveyed in this study does not necessarily represent the general college student population. Hence, the generalizability of the findings of this study pertaining to college students' health-risk behaviors during spring break needs to be treated with due consideration, caution, and thought until further investigation has been conducted. Also, our data were based on self-reports; hence, the potential for social desirability bias exists. Prior research suggests that if report bias does occur, it is more likely to result from underreporting rather than overreporting the frequency of problematic behavior (Midanik 1988). Furthermore, owing to the exploratory nature of this study, the survey instrument used in this study was lengthy and would have taken the respondent approximately 25 to 30 minutes to complete. Study participants could have been prone to responding to some of the questionnaire items in haste due to stress and lack of time associated with the intense schedule of midterm exams just before the spring break vacation. Finally, the survey instruments were administered to students enrolled in general education classes. The student composition of these classes tends to lean heavily toward the freshmen population. Such students may be more inclined to engage in health-risk behaviors compared to sophomores, juniors, and seniors owing to the "first time away from home" mindset, which may be highly prevalent among the freshmen student population. This necessitates the need for future inquiry to understand the influence of academic standing on the potential for health-risk behaviors among college students on spring break.

NOTE

1. One decision rule for using measurement scales is that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients must exceed .60 to be considered a reasonable construct for research purposes (Cohen and Cohen 1983, p. 412). Given the large sample sizes here, the .60 level seemed unlikely to result in a Type 1 error.

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