



## Research Paper

## A multinational comparative study highlighting students' travel motivations and touristic trends

Catarina Marques<sup>a,\*</sup>, Asad Mohsin<sup>b</sup>, Jorge Lengler<sup>c,2</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Quantitative Methods for Management and Economics, ISCTE Business School Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Business Research Unit (BRU-IUL), Av. Forças Armadas, Lisboa 1649-026, Portugal<sup>b</sup> School of Management and Marketing The University of Waikato Management School, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240, New Zealand<sup>c</sup> Durham University Business School, Durham University, Mill Hill Lane Office 535, Durham DH1 3HB, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to assess differences and commonalities in the student travel market across different countries and to determine typologies based on touristic attractions/activities. The study generates groups based on travel motivations largely drawn from the Leisure Motivation Scale and other relevant tourism literature. To achieve the aim, data is obtained from a sample of 3431 respondents from eight countries, i.e. Brazil, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Portugal, Spain, Thailand, and the USA. The data are analysed using two principal component analyses (PCAs), a combination of two clustering methods: the Ward method, and an optimal solution method, the K-Means method. Seven clusters based on touristic attractions/activities emerged. The findings from the current study suggest that perceptions of touristic attractions/activities are different by country although some similarities do exist. Besides providing important new insights for theory, this large comparative study also suggests synergies that could be generated from the information for both destination marketers and managers.

## 1. Introduction

The significance of youth travel, including the student segment, has been noted right from the start of the current century. A joint report by the UNWTO and the WYSE Travel Confederation (2011) stated that the commercial significance and growth of this segment is evident in the fact that between 2000 and 2010, international arrivals rose from 136 million to 187 million, representing 20% of global travel. Furthermore, whilst the youth population may not significantly increase in the coming years, youth travel will do so, as young people gain access to more disposable income and travel becomes increasingly affordable. The report also suggested that the traditional age of the market, 18–24, has expanded at both ends of the spectrum to encompass people of 15–30 years plus, and that the average youth traveller spends US\$1000 to US\$6000 per trip and stays longer (over 50 days) than the average tourist (US\$1450). Higher Education has been shown to be the best performing sector, not having lost any of its attraction during the economic downturn.

The student travel market continues to attract researchers due to its

multidimensional and unique characteristics in terms of activities preferences, interest in natural and cultural attractions, and what motivates them to travel. This appeal is further enhanced due to limited research and the promising potential evident from receipts reaching US \$165 billion in 2010 (Chen, 2012; Kim, Hallab, & Kim, 2012; Limanond, Butsingkorn, & Chermkhunthod, 2011; UNWTO and WYSE, 2011; Xiao, So, & Wang, 2015). Other studies suggest that even short study trips could influence their attitudes towards and perceptions of travel (Bywater, 1993; Carr, 2005; Eom, Stone, & Ghosh, 2009; Hobson & Josiam, 1992; Peggy, 2011). The growing trend of international student exchange programmes, international internships, ease of travel due to reduced fares and flight connections, have all added to an increase in student travel.

Several studies suggest that perceptions and previous travel experiences influence travel motives to a destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Bonn, Joseph, & Mo, 2005; Chon, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Xiao et al., 2015). Hence, assessing perceptions about destinations, touristic attractions/activities, trends and specific interests of student travellers is of both literal and commercial benefit. Furthermore,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Catarina.Marques@iscte.pt](mailto:Catarina.Marques@iscte.pt) (C. Marques), [asad.mohsin@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:asad.mohsin@waikato.ac.nz) (A. Mohsin), [Jorge.lengler@durham.ac.uk](mailto:Jorge.lengler@durham.ac.uk) (J. Lengler).URL: <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/> (A. Mohsin).<sup>1</sup> [www.ibs.iscte-iul.pt](http://www.ibs.iscte-iul.pt).<sup>2</sup> [www.durham.ac.uk/business](http://www.durham.ac.uk/business).

establishing commonalities in tourists' characteristics leads to the establishment of commonalities in tourist markets. One way to create meaningful commonalities is through comparative studies. Commonalities help to achieve economies of scale by forming the basis for an appropriate segmentation of the market. Subsequently, such commonalities enable the development of customised promotions, and touristic activities, thereby generating memorable experiences and satisfaction from a vacation. Previous research to determine commonalities in cross-national studies has largely either been overlooked or mostly limited to two or three countries for the study. Hence, it is an area still under exploration (Li, 2014; Shoham, Schrage, & van Eeden, 2004).

In studying the travel behaviour of undergraduate students of two nationalities, i.e. the UK and China, Xu, Morgan, and Song (2009) found similarities between the two groups as they both enjoyed beach holidays, and placed importance on having fun and relaxation after their studies; but in other ways the two groups showed significant differences. The Chinese students considered seeing famous sights and learning about other cultures and history to be more important whereas the British students considered having fun, socialising and outdoor adventure more important (Xu et al., 2009). Wang and Walker (2010) also stated in their study that despite the importance of student travel as a global phenomenon, few cross-cultural studies have examined this topic. They compared similarities and differences in travel motivations, the role of gender, and culture between Canadian and Chinese university students. Another example of a study exploring differences or commonalities is that conducted by Kozak (2002), who studied motivational differences between tourists from the same country visiting two different geographical destinations, and those from two countries visiting the same destination. Kozak (2002) concluded that the literature suffers from a lack of empirical work addressing differences in tourists' interest in activities/attraction and motives.

Despite the impact of such lack of insight into this important area of tourist motivation, little headway has been made in that field in respect of comparative studies involving the student travel market, and by implication, the tourists of the future. According to a meta-analysis undertaken by Li (2014), between 1988 (when the first paper on comparative studies in tourism management was published) and 2011, only 91 articles reported comparative investigations: these covered a range of eight topics, one of which was travel motivation (represented by only nine studies, thereby reflecting a dearth of comparative research focusing on travel motivation). Moreover, of those with a travel motivation focus, none involved more than three countries; hence there is no information in the literature regarding large-scale multinational studies.

The current study attempts to help fill the gap identified and to bring new insights to the tourism literature through a comparative study that explores the travel motives of students from eight countries, i.e. Brazil, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Portugal, Spain, Thailand and the USA. The eight countries were selected based on their representativeness of different parts of the globe and ethnicities. A sample of 3431 students is obtained, and considered valuable as students are regarded as tourists of the future in the current study.

The three main research objectives and questions proposed by the current study are:

- 1) The literature at present, on one hand suggests that commonalities of interests and motives in tourism generates synergies for planning (Li, 2014; Shoham et al., 2004; Wang & Walker, 2010; Xu et al., 2009), on the other hand, study of such commonalities is limited to 2–3 countries representing typically an Asian and a Western nation (Bicikova, 2014; Shan, Shah, & Suat, 2013; Wang & Davidson, 2008; Wiers-Jensses, 2003; Xiao et al., 2015). To address this limitation in the literature, the current study investigates at a multinational level and poses the following question

*Are there any commonalities and differences in travel motivations*

*between the Asian, North and Latin Americans and the European university students?*

- 2) Touristic activities/interests offered by different destinations to enhance the experience of visitors have been widely studied (Bicikova, 2014; Bentley, Page, and Laird, 2003; Correia, Valle, & Moco, 2007; Crompton, 1979; Dotson, Clark, & Dave, 2008; Heung & Leong, 2006; Jonsson & Devonish, 2008; Kim, 2007; Loundsbury and Hoopes, 1988; Meng & Uysal, 2008; Newlands, 2004; Pizam, Jeong, Reichel, and van Boemmel, 2004; Ryan & Glendon, 1998; Trunfio, Petruzzellis, and Nigro, 2006; William and Soutar, 2000; Xu et al., 2009). However, one objective of this study is to extend the current literature by trying to find out what commonalities/differences in interests in touristic activities/attractions exist around the globe? Hence the following question is raised

*What are the commonalities and differences in contemporary trends/interests in selection of touristic activities by the Asian, North and Latin American and the European University Students?*

- 3) Though several studies have investigated tourist typologies and generated findings that highlight how tourists could be grouped based on common characteristics (Ballantyne, Gannon, Berret, & Wells, 2012; Bicikova, 2014; Chhabra, 2012; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Hallab, Price, & Fournier, 2006; Li, 2014; Shoham et al., 2004; Wang & Walker, 2010), the current literature lacks a large scale multinational information to determine what typologies might emerge if touristic characteristics are investigated using absolutely the same tool in different countries representing different continents. Following research question is raised to seek some answer

*What are the typologies of University Students based on interests in touristic activities/attractions, originating as potential tourists from Asia, the North and Latin America and the Europe?*

Consequently, the study focuses on both the psychographics (interest in touristic activities/interests) and travel motivation based on national origins.

## 2. Literature review and theoretical background

### 2.1. Student traveller market

Today's student traveller is looking to experience a unique memorable holiday based on social interactions (Morgan & Xu, 2009). Studies also suggest that student travellers are more prepared to take risks and seek thrills (Pizam, Jeong, Reichel, & van Boemmel, 2004). This adventure-seeking or longing to discover new experiences as part of travel motives is growing (Bentley, Page, & Laird, 2003; Bicikova, 2014; Heung & Leong, 2006; Morgan & Xu, 2009; Pearce & Lee, 2005; Xu et al., 2009). The travel motivations and attractions/activities debate has been relevant in the tourism management subject area for the last 20 years, yet all of the studies conducted by scholars have predominantly included samples limited to one or a few countries (Li, 2014). This limits the current literature about information derived from a large scale multinational study to help tourism destination planning and policy implications. Consequently, recent studies have advocated the need for more studies comparing samples from different nationalities and countries (Ballantyne et al., 2012; Bicikova, 2014; Chhabra, 2012; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Hallab et al., 2006; Li, 2014; Shoham et al., 2004; Wang & Walker, 2010).

The fact that research on youth tourism is scarce, according to Gherrissi-Labben and Johnson (2004), Grigolon, Kemperman, and Timmermans (2012), is likely to be linked to two major reasons: stakeholders in the industry may perceive the youth market to be unimportant due to its low spending power and stereotyped image of behaving badly, and choosing only budget accommodation. However, the growth of this market segment in both developed and developing

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