



# The structure of joint leisure trips: analyzing two-person leisure trips of Dutch students

Dick Ettema\*, Danielle Zwartbol

Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, PO Box 80115, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the spatial structure of students' leisure trips and to what extent locational characteristics of social network partners influence decisions about their joint leisure activities and travel. To this end a survey was held among university students asking them about details of their last leisure trip made with a friend. Cluster analysis suggests that four typical leisure trip patterns can be derived. Three clusters seem to be determined by the residential locations of ego and alter. Depending on the residential distance between ego and alter, leisure trip distances are either short for ego and alter (if residential distance is very short), somewhat longer for both (if residential distance is slightly longer) or long for at least one partner (if residential distance is large). A fourth cluster includes cases with long leisure trips for both partners, independent of residential distance, representing cases where specific destinations are visited. A more detailed analysis of travel distance suggests that travel distance depends on size of the residential municipality, residential distance and objective and perceived quality of leisure facilities such as cafés, bars and restaurants. Overall, our study provides support for the idea that leisure trip decisions should be understood on the level of social network ties (i.e. ego and alter) rather than based on individual characteristics only. Also, it provides support for the idea that a focus on single ties, rather than on the structure of social networks as a whole, increases our insight in leisure trip decision making. **Keywords:** Social network links, Social-recreational travel, Spatial context, Students

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the transportation literature has witnessed an increased interest in the relationship between social and recreational (SR) activities and travel. In transportation science, the increased interest stems from the awareness that the increase in car mobility over the past decades, which has led to adverse effects such as congestion, pollution and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, is caused to a considerable extent by an increase in travel for SR purposes (Schad et al., 2009; Axhausen, 2008). In the Netherlands, for instance, the travel related with leisure activities (excluding holidays) made up 44% of the total distance travelled in passenger transport in 2005 (Harms, 2008). Much (48%) of this leisure-related travel is undertaken for social activities, i.e. to meet and spend time with friends, relatives and others. Ohnmacht et al. (2009) report similar figures for Switzerland. In the Netherlands, the distance travelled for leisure purposes has increased by one third in the period 1985–2003 (Harms, 2008). As this growth was similar to the overall increase in travel, leisure's share in total travel remained rather stable. Stauffacher et al. (2005) describe similar trends for Germany.

In contrast to their importance to mobility development, social and recreational trips have received less attention in the literature than for instance commute and shopping trips. Four decades ago Wheeler and Stutz (1971, page 376) already noted that “considering the depth of the research on social interaction, it is surprising that there are few studies of social travel within metropolitan areas” and this statement has considerable purchase even today, although there is a small literature on leisure travel which we will review below.

Various aspects of such activities and trips have been examined, including time spent on leisure pursuits (e.g. Ren and Kwan, 2009), the associated travel time (e.g. Cools et al., 2010) and the transport mode used to access leisure activities (e.g. Limtanakool et al., 2006). Yet, the aspect that has been investigated most frequently is the frequency of engagement in leisure. Descriptive information about the frequency with which people engage in various leisure activities has been provided for a representative sample of the Swiss population by Stauffacher et al. (2005), for samples from Germany and Sweden by Schlich et al. (2004), for a German sample by Tarigan and Kitamura (2009), and for a Dutch sample by Sharmeen and Ettema (2010). Although the studies cannot be compared easily, they all indicate that meeting friends, going out to restaurants and bars, visiting theatres and cinemas, active sports and club meetings are important types of leisure activities. Further, various

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 302532918.  
E-mail address: [d.f.ettema@uu.nl](mailto:d.f.ettema@uu.nl) (D. Ettema).

scholars have examined the factors influencing the frequency of engaging in leisure activity and travel (Bhat and Lockwood, 2004; Scheiner, 2006; Sener et al., 2008; Farber and Páez, 2009; Tarigan and Kitamura, 2009). All report that sociodemographic and life-cycle factors have a significant impact on individuals' propensity to engage in leisure activities and travel. Other factors that are found to influence leisure consumption are spatial setting (Bhat and Lockwood, 2004; Sener et al., 2008), seasonal effects (Bhat and Lockwood, 2004; Sener et al., 2008; Kemperman et al., 2000) and vehicle ownership (Scheiner, 2006; Tarigan and Kitamura, 2009; Farber and Páez, 2009).

The spatial variability in leisure travel has also attracted considerable attention and is known to be much larger than for commuting and shopping trips (Stauffacher et al., 2005; Schlich et al., 2004; Tarigan and Kitamura, 2009). In a study observing individuals' travel behaviour for six consecutive weeks, Schlich et al. (2004) show that participants keep visiting new locations for leisure activities throughout the study period. Although for most participants some eight locations accounted for about 80% of the leisure destinations visited, Schlich and colleagues demonstrated that location choice in leisure travel is more irregular and idiosyncratic than for other kinds of travel.

In short, the literature has delivered important insights in various aspects of leisure trips. The approach that is typically taken, however, is to analyze leisure trips as made by a single decision maker. Sharmeen and Ettema (2010), however, report that some 80% of SR trips are made in company of others, and that in about half of the cases, this concerns someone from outside the household. It is emphasized that such trips are fundamentally different from trips made alone or with household members, since the activity partners come from different locations and different households, which will influence the decision making process. Thus, the socio-demographic and locational characteristics of the other, as well as their lifestyle preferences and tastes, may influence decisions regarding the leisure trip. Insight into the influence of characteristics and preferences of leisure partners on their joint leisure activities and travel is however very limited, both in terms of descriptive knowledge and in terms of the underlying processes. Yet, this insight is very relevant given that a considerable share of leisure travel and overall travel consists of joint leisure trips made with non-household members. This relevance is even more prominent with the advance of agent-based models that aim at predicting travel based on social networks and the interactions within such networks.

Therefore, this paper aims at increasing the insight into the structure of joint leisure trips, based on a data set collected amongst Dutch students in 2011. While it is recognized that joint leisure trips often include three or more parties, our study is limited to two friends making a joint leisure trip. Focusing on this specific case allows us to gain first insights into the decision making mechanisms of joint trips made by members from different households. On a descriptive level, we will describe typical patterns of joint leisure trips in terms of travel distances, residential locations and travel modes. To increase the insight into travel considerations, we use multivariate statistics to investigate the impact of locational characteristics and personal characteristics on location choice decisions.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we summarize existing empirical and theoretical studies related to social interactions and travel and position our work in the context of this literature. Section 3 describes the data collection procedure. Section 4 gives the empirical results, which include descriptive statistics of students' joint leisure trips, a classification of joint leisure trips and an ordered logit model to understand the effect of spatial context on trip distance. Section 5 draws some general conclusions and addresses avenues for further research.

## 2. Joint decisions about social–recreational travel

While studies that address the detailed interaction between partners involved in joint leisure activities is largely lacking, the awareness that one's relationships with friends/family influence one's travel has steadily increased over the past decade. This has invoked a series of studies focusing on the relationship between the composition and structure of social networks and frequency of social or recreational trips. The main assumption underlying these studies is that social networks (SNs) play a role in control over and information about resources and influence cooperation and competition which facilitate or constrain certain opportunities and behaviours. Social activities, defined as joint recreational or support activities, stem from the propensity of different parties to provide or consume companionship or support, which may be influenced by person, tie or network characteristics. Although it is recognized (Carrasco and Miller, 2006) that actors in social networks may include various entities, such as nations, organisations, groups and individuals, the social networks in the context of travel and activities, are usually defined as consisting of friends and family members, elicited by name generator techniques. These could be named 'informal' SN, as opposed to 'formal' SN such as clubs and associations (Kwak and Campbell, 2010).

In this stream of research, Carrasco and Miller, (2006) found that engagement in social activities (e.g. hosting visitors and going to a bar/restaurant), controlled for socio-demographic characteristics, was dependent on the composition of a person's social network such as the number of family members, friends, and network members from social organisations. Also geographical aspects of the social network appeared to matter, to the extent that increased distance to social network members reduced frequency of engagement in social activities. In a later study, Carrasco and Miller (2009) found that apart from characteristics of the network as a whole (such as density, number of isolates and centrality), characteristics of the alter (age, gender, alter's position in his/her ego-network) and the tie (similarity, distance, frequency of ICT-interaction) also influenced the probability of engaging in social activities. In an early study, Ginsberg (1975) found that if more friends lived in the same neighbourhood, one is more likely to undertake leisure activities with friends rather than with the spouse. Although this relationship is mediated by gender, education and cultural background, it suggests that the social network of friends and family constitutes a resource for undertaking leisure activities which normally require company.

Other scholars have focussed in a more general way on the size and composition of the social network and the frequency of face-to-face contact between network members. Tillemans and Dijst (2007) found that the frequency of face-to-face contact correlated negatively with distance to the other network members and increased with the number of persons in the social network, the share of relatives in the social network, use of Internet and SMS and car availability. Mok et al. (2007) also found that frequency of face-to-face contact between social network members depends on geographical distance, and also on the type (kin, friends) and intensity (intimate, non-intimate) of the tie. Regarding the travel implications of face-to-face contacts between network members, Silvis et al. (2006) found that the length of social trips is positively related to the number of people in the social network, proportion and number of non-immediate kin, and the average age of the social network ties. The number of social trips correlated positively with social network size, household size and income.

In short, the literature on social and recreational travel has addressed various aspects of SR trip making such as trip frequency, travel mode, travel time and location choice. In addition, it is recognized that a large part of SR trips is made together with

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