

From fun to nightmare: Measuring students' **senior trip** experiences through a mixed-method approach

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Objectives | In recent years, it has become an established practice to hold a final trip for students who finish high school. In Portugal, as for many other countries, thousands of students travel each year to far away destinations. Whether looking for Sun and the Beach or Skiing in the Mountains, those students, still adolescents once they average eighteen or even seventeen years old, somehow 'departure to paradise,' looking for some 'unique,' 'crazy' and 'unforgettable' experience, aiming to celebrate the end of high school studies. Whereas this is a time to travel to have 'great time and fun,' the senior trip can easily end up in 'a nightmare,' as accidents happen and students face hazard contexts or engage in unforeseen behaviors or attitudes.

In this research, we specifically focus on both representations and practices on student senior trip experiences. The minor attention devoted to this issue, until now, by scientific literature, as well as recent public and noticed concerns from parents and society in general about the behavior of young people during this period, strongly justify the relevance of a specific study on the subject. Theoretically, we draw upon the conceptualization of the students' senior trip as a rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1967; 1969; Segalen, 1998; Graburn, 1989; 2001), and we argue that it is experienced as a liminal time span period, characterized by ephemeral excessive behavior, far from the structure, roles and routines of everyday life. Empirically, we prosecute a mixed-method approach aiming a theoretical discussion upon triangulation of multidimensional data. Our main goal is to contrast and compare representations and practices around the senior trip performed by students, discussing it in the view of a contemporary rite of passage at the end of high school. Specifically, we aim at: (1) To characterize the high school students' senior trip practices (Destinations; Motivations; Organization; Travel and Stay; Main Experiences, Activities and Benefits; Risky Behaviors; Unforeseen and Disrupting Events); (2) To characterize the ways in which senior trips are advertised to students; (3) To identify the main themes worked by the media in the written press; (4) To characterize the experiences reported by students as most significant in terms of Facts, Contexts, Meanings and Emotions surrounding the students' senior trip at the end of high school.

Methodology | Methodologically, we rely on an exploratory mixed-method study, developed in the academic year 2010/2011, by a set of undergraduate students enrolled in the subject 'Data Processing and Analysis' (TAD), of the tourism

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degree course at the University of Évora (Portugal), under the teacher supervision. For the purposes of this study, four different convenience data samples were collected: (I) Self-administered survey applied to university students about their high school senior trip (N=83); (II) Corpus of students' senior trip billboards directed to high school final year (N=8); (iii) Corpus of news reports related with students' senior trip published in Portuguese periodic general written press (N=7); (iv) Corpus of face-to-face semi-structured interviews carried out to university students about their experiences in high school senior trip (N=11). Collected data were then analyzed through statistical and qualitative content analysis techniques. Since our approach is quanti-qualitative, the data discussion aims not only a description, rather, a deeper look and understanding of the multiple and complex dynamics underpinning students' senior trip experiences.

Main results and contributions | This study adds greater scientific knowledge about the high school students' senior trip experiences through a mixed-method approach. Reporting to the outlined main goal, empirical findings underline contrasts between practices and representations around the senior trip performed by students.

As far as the survey's results are concerned, data lead us to conclude for a high percentage of students holding the senior trip at the end of high school, and an overall positive evaluation of that experience. Surveyed students traveled mainly abroad, specifically to tourism areas in the Mediterranean Spain. The Algarve region is the principal inbound destination. Students' travel first motivation is to have fun with friends and colleagues, followed by the purpose to celebrate the end of high school. While the activities include walking and beach during the day, and going out at night to attend bars and discos, a low occurrence of both visits to theme parks or heritage sites is perceived through data. Students recognize to engage in risk behaviors during their senior trip, namely alcohol consumption in excess, drug use and other unsafe conduct in the field of sexuality (e.g. having unprotected sex or sex with strangers). Finally, personal or group injuries are the main unforeseen situations reported as disrupting the travel.

The qualitative analysis on the advertisement billboards emphasizes the representations around exotic destinations, aiming full amusement and exciting experiences. These representations are explicitly verbatim disclosed through the slogans and tag lines, as well as visually, by the appealing embedding of partying peoples' images into colorful environments, which seduce the consumer mixing the blue waters, the yellow sunset and diverse other inviting scenic and musical attractions. Emergent categories in advertising billboards combine ideas of spring break, sun and sea fun, consistent with the view of a unique and extraordinary time, unable to experience in daily life.

The analysis of the news reports brings out two main issues worked with the media: first, an attention to tour operators' business and action regarding the destinations, the provision of travel arrangements and misleading advertising; secondly, issues related to traveling and stay experiences of students. 'Fun,' 'Crazy,' 'Excessive Behavior,' 'Alcohol,' 'Drugs Abuse,' 'Accidents,' and 'Death' are some of the chosen words to entitle the news reporting the 'dark side' of the students' senior trip experiences. The media always put those risky behaviors and accidents in such an environment of 'euphoria' where young people, in transition to adulthood, are 'allowed' to experiment and to exceed, for a small period of time, 'inappropriate' and 'dangerous' social practices, which often begins during the journey. Thus, alcohol abuse, situations of rape or even the death of students is somehow reported as 'natural' and 'unavoidable'.

Finally, regarding face-to-face interviews carried out with students, major emergent categories relating the meanings of the senior trip at the end of high school come to be 'freedom,' (e.g. from adults, both the parents and teachers' physical and powerful presence) and 'independence', since this travel puts adolescents in front of new experiences or situations, which require decision-making, fresh and sometimes never experienced patterns of behavior, on the one hand; and the autonomous capacity of decision or statement on the other. Collected data also allow the identification of three types of experiences considered by students as the most striking: (1) The perception of deviant and risky behaviors, with prevalence of alcohol consumption, and reporting of accidents resulting in death; (2) The participation in collective activities, which enable to strength and to experience the sense of the group cohesion; (3) Individual experiences, mainly the enjoyment of the journey and the self-enrichment resulting from a better knowledge of the visited places.

Summing up, the experience of traveling with a group of school colleagues and stay in a non-ordinary setting is not only strongly anticipated but also experienced with pleasure, bringing the special feeling and close bonding of *communitas* (Turner, 1967; 1969; Graburn, 1989; 2001). Whereas advertisement billboards emphasize students' senior trip as a liminal time for fun and amusement in the framework of a fully planned and organized experience; practices described through survey, news reports and self-reported accounts collected in face-to-face interviews emphasize plural experiences of both fun but also excessive behaviors and unforeseen risks. This dual experience stresses the bounded liminal experience of

the students' senior trip as a kind of rite of passage in contemporary society; at the same time it also gives us empirical evidence on the need for a better travel arrangement and planning before departure.

Limitations | We developed an exploratory and small-scale mixed-method study aiming a better knowledge and understanding of high school students' senior trip experiences. Combining a quanti-qualitative approach, empirical findings allow us to unveil the richness of data and a strong economic and social engagement of students' senior trips, worth to further and deeper research.

Conclusions | The outputs of this study address both innovative and fruitful gazes on the students' senior trip regarding youth travel in times of change. Firstly, this study allows us to think how academic and researchers might come to create new research lines and teaching agendas by recognizing the added value of mixed-methods and quanti-qualitative approaches in the analysis of data related with leisure, travel and tourism issues. Secondly, the importance of the students' senior trip as an autonomous travel experience for students (adolescents without adults nearby), points to unexplored ways of enhancing these trips besides only 'great time' advertisement, namely the ones related with the exploitation of such tourism opportunities by students. Finally, also the enterprises in the sector can have competitive advantages in the field of organization, anticipation and resolution of problems, once this know-how might help them to differentiate and to succeed in a time of change as the one we are living today.

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