Perceived Leisure Constraints of Students Attending Christian Colleges

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Abstract

Leisure research has historically addressed constraint theory as well as the relationship between spirituality and leisure. This study focused on the behavior codes for students and faculty at Christian universities. A qualitative approach addressed students' awareness of these codes, whether they felt constrained in their leisure by the codes, and whether they adhered to the codes. Findings indicated that the students did not feel constrained by the behavior codes. They felt like campus culture and programming insulated them from inappropriate behavior. Students reported that they generally followed the codes, especially on campus. Finally, subjects identified groups of students on campus that they felt were less likely to exhibit the codified leisure behaviors.

Keywords: leisure, spirituality, constraints, moral codes, Christian universities

Introduction

Conceptual inquiries analyzing the relationship between religion, spirituality, and leisure originated about five decades ago (Brightbill, 1965; Pieper, 1963); however, empirical investigations exploring this relationship are beginning to emerge within leisure scholarship. One of the main areas of inquiry focused on the spirituality of natural outdoor environments. Authors suggested that being in natural spaces helps one connect to his or her personal spirituality (Frederickson & Anderson, 1999; Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004). Additionally, scholars have documented a positive relationship between spirituality and well-being (Heintzman & Mannell, 2003; Ragheb, 1993). A major gap within the developing research on spirituality is the perception of leisure constraints and constraints negotiation among faith-based communities.

This study investigates leisure in the lives of college students attending Christian universities. Many Protestant Christian universities in the United States require students and faculty to adhere to a specific behavior code. These codes are referred to as lifestyle statements or covenants, and require students and faculty to act in accordance with the Christian faith. Certain activities are encouraged and required of campus members, for example, creating a welcoming spiritual environment, doing good for those who are less fortunate, and participating in campus worship activities (Greenville College, 2017; Wheaton College, n.d.) Additionally, students and faculty are required to refrain from unacceptable activities, such as consuming alcohol, smoking, visiting bars, pre-marital sex, and pornography. Moreover, these codes require students and faculty to uphold this standard of behavior both on and off campus, which requires a substantial commitment from those associated with a Christian university. Little is known regarding the influence of spirituality on perceived leisure constraints; therefore, investigating the leisure behavior of Christian college students can contribute to the literature regarding the complex relationship between spirituality and leisure.

Both symbolic interactionism and the leisure constraints frameworks guided this investigation. The symbolic interactionist framework suggests that individuals live within a symbolic social environment (Patton, 1990). Within this symbolic setting, one must understand the meanings of symbols to successfully understand and function within the environment. Symbolic interaction theory also maintains that researchers can understand participants' symbolic reality and understand their behavior within a particular context (Patton, 1990). The researchers in this study consider constraints to be symbolically constructed within one's environment, which is consistent with the research by Samdahl, Hutchinson, and Jacobson (1999) who suggested that leisure constraints are a symbolic product of the social environment. Understanding leisure constraints is a well-established sub-field within leisure scholarship (Jackson, 2005). Inaugural research regarding leisure constraints suggested that constraints led to non-participation. Further analysis maintained that leisure constraints were not insurmountable and one could negotiate the specific constraint and participate in leisure (Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991). As the research on leisure constraints continued, a conceptual model of constraints (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991) and specific constraints negotiation strategies (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993; Jackson & Rucks, 1995) emerged. Further investigations focused on the interaction between constraints, preferences, and leisure participation (Henderson & Bialeschki, 1993) as well as perceived constraints of many populations, such as women, people with disabilities, Muslim immigrants, and Christians (Auster, 2002; Henderson, Bedini, Hecht, & Schuler, 1995; Livengood, 2006; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004).

The analysis of the leisure behavior of students attending Christian colleges contributes a unique perspective to leisure scholarship. Specifically, with the exception of research conducted by Livengood in 2006 and Livengood and Stodolska in 2004, very few scholars have investigated the perception of leisure constraints within faith-based communities. In Heintzman's critique of leisure studies and spirituality, he suggested that scholars should "emphasize both the transcendent and communal dimensions of Christian spirituality" (2010, p. 27). Transcendent and community behaviors were at the heart of this study. The objectives of this study were two-fold: (1) to explore whether college students perceived their college's lifestyle statement to be constraining to their leisure participation and (2) to determine whether college students uphold the lifestyle statements required at their particular college.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was utilized to collect the information in this investigation. The qualitative approach of using interviews was selected due to its emphasis on description/perception rather than measurement of this social phenomenon. Two major Christian universities were chosen through the researchers' associations and professional connections. The first university (Site A) was associated with the Free Methodist Church and enrolled approximately 4,000 students. The second university (Site B) site chosen for data collection was a Baptist-affiliated university of approximately 14,000 students. Universities were selected based on primary investigator's contacts and participants were selected using a specific recruitment script on a voluntary basis. Many of the students who volunteered were students of the contact person at the university selected. Semi-

structured interviews were conducted with all participants. All interviewees were asked the same questions (see Appendix); however, the questions were ordered differently based upon the natural conversations during the interview. Additionally, probing and clarifying questions were asked to gain more detailed perspectives. Questions regarding the students' perception of the university's lifestyle statement/covenant, whether they felt their leisure was constrained because of their association with the university, and if students' abided by the codes of conduct of their university were asked.

Interviewees were chosen through a key informant at each university. The informant selected participants and an outside researcher interviewed the students. The interviewing was divided between two researchers. Each investigator visited one university and conducted interviews with students identified by the key informant. Interviews were completed with 18 undergraduate students (7 from Site A and 11 from Site B). Participants included 7 males and 11 females, with ages ranging from 18 to late 20s. A majority of the students were recreation majors; however, other majors, such as general studies, health sciences, and family studies, were also represented. Interviews, which lasted between 15-60 minutes, were conducted over two semesters. All but one interview were fully recorded. All 17 recordings were later transcribed. A technical error occurred in one interview and a partial recording was captured. In this specific case, detailed notes were taken immediately after the interview. Glaser and Strauss' (1967) method for analyzing qualitative data was employed in this investigation. Emergent categories, such as perceptions of the university's lifestyle statement or covenant, perception of constraints, and desire to uphold the universities policies were developed and analyzed amongst all three researchers. Each transcript was read many times by each researcher and then compared between investigators to increase the accuracy and dependability of themes and sub-themes. These themes consisted of students that felt the rules were not/were constraining, students who felt rules were easier to follow on the campus "bubble", and those students who felt there was a difference in adherence by on campus/off campus students.

Findings

The first objective of the study was to determine students' perception of their university's policies related to student conduct, and whether these rules were deemed as constraining. Additionally, this investigation also focused on whether students upheld the lifestyle statement mandated by their university. Four major themes emerged from this investigation. First, many students did not consider the rules for conduct on their campus to be constraining to their personal leisure. For instance, a 21-year-old female university student reported that she grew up in a Christian environment and considered her university experience similar to her previous educational and family experiences. She specifically commented: "growing up in a Christian family for so long…I guess you mold to it [the Christian lifestyle]." When asked if his leisure was constrained, a 20-year-old male noted: "No because I think anything in terms of leisure that I would want to do I could pretty much do and I've never been in a situation where I've been like, 'I want to do that and I can't because I'm Christian.'"

A 20-year-old female especially appreciated the accountability of the behavior code. She remarked, "I did want to go to a Christian school. I could not take the non-Christian environment at a junior college. They [tenets of the code) are in line with my personal values." A 26-year-old male also noted the contract with non-sectarian schools: "I don't do them anyways [activities that break the code]. I came here for the Christian environment, wanted a Christian college… went to a public high school and wanted something different." A number of interviewees maintained that the student code of conduct was consistent with their personal leisure preferences.

Different to those participants, some participants perceived the lifestyle statements to be somewhat constraining and restrictive; however, in most cases, they abided by the university rules. A 22-year-old female recreation student described her particular situation: "I had a lot more freedom growing up at home than I do here, and I never got in trouble in high school ever. I didn't even drink in high school, but when I came here [the university] and I was told you can't do this and can't do that, kind of like makes you want to do stuff [inappropriate leisure] …." A 21-year-old male noted "Most do uphold. Always going to have some that do things just because you're supposed to not do them. Figure about 5% do not uphold them, especially [for] those that live on campus." A 20-year-old female noted that entrance into social organizations made it easier for her to follow the codes. Describing her freshman year: "basically if you want to get into a sorority you can't be seen drinking or at parties or doing anything that would give you a questionable reputation." .

Second, participants suggested that a well-known "bubble" existed on-campus, and they found it relatively easy to follow the university regulations while on campus. Interviewees mentioned that the campus community provided opportunities on campus, such as intramural sports, special events, and spiritual activities, which contributed to a Christian-centered environment. A 21-year-old female noted that the school does well at offering activities, "Every weekend they have something planned, might not be something everyone enjoys but it's there for people to participate in."

Conversely, the "bubble" effect also created problems for a few students. Specifically, participants described that they themselves and their friends created two distinct identities: the on-campus and off-campus identities. For example, a 21-year-old male student commented: "…but when it comes down to having to go to chapel and stuff, it's like they are trying to force you to do things you don't want to do … It's like a bubble … [you] kind of want to pop that bubble and get out." Another student thought the codes kept students from maturing. A 22-year-old student said, "I think that's a huge problem here, a lot of kids don't know how to grow up, because of all the rules." Generally, students' on-campus identities and resulting behaviors were consistent with the university's code of conduct. The off-campus behaviors, in some cases, were not consistent with the college's code of conduct. Other students reported that groups on their campuses were not necessarily as aligned with the behavior codes

Third, interviewees suggested that a specific type of student (e.g. athletes, fraternity or sorority members, or students who chose to live off-campus) more often participated in leisure

that was considered as inappropriate in the lifestyle statement. For example, a 22-year-old female described the leisure of athletes at her college: "a lot of athletes party, a lot comes from athletes." In many cases, the research participants identified the student group to which he or she belonged as occasionally straying from the behavior codes. Moreover, several participants discussed non-approved, off-campus parties they had actually attended where alcohol was served. According to a male in his early 20s: "Everything [this university] sponsored is dry, there's no alcohol at any student events. Even if it's a fraternity or sorority event that's off-campus if it's sponsored or approved by [the University] there can't be any alcohol. But I don't think that necessarily means that students don't drink or keeps them from drinking. I just think it's kind of a way of trying to keep students in line but I mean there's always going to be people when they want to drink they are going to find a way to do so."

Limitations

The research study had as its broad aim to explore the perception of leisure constraints among universities who are subject to a code of conduct. The main objective of this study has been accomplished, although there are apparent limitations. Clearly this project could be duplicated to include more universities of other faith based groups as well as non-faith based universities which also include a code of student conduct. Additionally, the number of participants provided by the university contact person was limited but adequate for an introductory look at this research question. Inherent in qualitative interview research is the concepts of bias being introduced into any human interaction as well as social desirability where the participant may lean towards presenting the most socially desirable response. However, the participant may also be more willing to provide responses they would not provide in a quantitative survey.

Conclusions

This investigation adds a much-needed perspective to the established sub-field of leisure constraints negotiation. First, many of the college students interviewed in this study indicated that they were not constrained by the lifestyle statements required by their university. This finding is consistent with findings by Deci and Ryan (2000) that suggested individuals may internalize social norms of the larger group. Deci and Ryan (2000) examine the self-determination theory as it relates to human motivation and the psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Moreover, this research supports the findings of Livengood's (2006) study, which maintained that New Paradigm Christians did not perceive their personal spirituality to be constraining to their leisure participation. Second, this study gives further support that spirituality may affect one's perception of leisure constraints and the negotiation process. It is also possible that internal negotiations may have guided the tenor of the responses as individuals positively described their own behaviors. Very little scholarship exists regarding spiritual influences on leisure behavior, and even less is known about how spirituality may influence one's leisure choices. In light of the current study it would be

interesting to investigate the impact of the lifestyle codes on faculty members at similar Christian universities. In general, future empirical investigations regarding the spiritual influences on perceived leisure constraints and the constraints negotiation process are needed within leisure scholarship.

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Appendix

Interview Schedule

The leisure behavior of students attending Christian universities

1. **Demographic Questions**
   a. What is your age or age range?
   b. What is your religious affiliation?
   c. How long have you been attending this university?
   d. What is the denomination of the Church that you most frequently attend?
      i. How long have you been a member/attendee of this Church?
      ii. If applicable, what were your previous denomination affiliations?
2. **General Leisure Behavior**
   a. What do you do for leisure and recreation?
   b. How long have you been participating in these activities?
   c. Do your friends and family participate in these leisure and recreation activities?
   d. How much time to you estimate that you have for leisure each week during the semester?
   e. What leisure and recreation do you participate in between semesters?
      i. Do you visit your hometown during the breaks?
   f. Are there any leisure and recreation activities that you consider as inappropriate?
      i. If so, why?
   g. Do you consider leisure as a spiritual experience?
3. **Student Leisure Behavior**
   a. What types of leisure and recreation activities are available on campus?
   b. Do you participate in these activities?
   c. Are there leisure and recreation activities outside of campus that students of this particular campus attend?
   d. During the semester, is campus recreation encouraged over non-campus recreation?
   e. Are there certain restrictions for on-campus leisure and recreation?
4. **Lifestyle statements**
   a. Are you familiar with the student codes of conduct for this campus? (copy of the codes are attached to this schedule)
      i. If so, what is your opinion of these requirements?
      ii. If not, what do you think after reading these requirements?
   b. In your opinion, do the students on this campus uphold these requirements?
   c. Are these requirements constraining to your personal leisure and recreation participation?
   d. Are these requirements in line with your personal leisure and recreation preferences?
   e. Did you have to modify your leisure and recreation behavior as a student of this University?
   f. Did you examine your leisure and recreation behavior after reading these college requirements?

5. Faith Development
    a. In your opinion, do you perceive that there are services available to encourage each other?
    b. Do you believe that the community covenant/lifestyle statement assists with your personal faith development?