

# Portrayal of spring break excess may be stereotypes gone wild

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The popular perception that college students are reaching new levels of self-indulgence and risky behavior during spring break excursions may be based on media coverage and scholarship that oversimplifies what has become an annual rite for many young adults, according to researchers. The researchers, who analyzed studies on spring break from 1980 to 2010, concluded that scholars are divided on whether college students actually increase extreme behaviors during the break. In fact, activities at most spring break destinations may not differ significantly from typical weekend behavior on campuses.

"The more you are part of the party atmosphere in the university, the more likely you are to engage those behaviors during spring break," said Benjamin Hickerson, assistant professor of recreation, park and tourism management, Penn State. "You probably won't completely deviate from your campus behaviors, and those behaviors are a very good predictor of how you'll behave on spring break."

Hickerson, who worked with Nuno Ribeiro, who recently received his doctorate in recreation, park and tourism management at Penn State, said that the media portrayal of spring break, and most current scholarship on the subject, may not give the complete picture of the experience.

Ribeiro, who focused his doctoral work on spring break culture and is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre, University of Regina, Saskatchewan, said that while

some studies show that substance abuse and promiscuity increase during spring break, other reports indicate that there is little change between behaviors on spring break and [behavior](#) on campus.

The researchers, who reported their findings in the current issue of *Tourism Review International*, said that since much of the research is based on data derived from self-reporting surveys, students may skew their actual behaviors.

"Most of the data in the studies were self-reported, which could lead to a certain pressure for the subjects to conform," said Ribeiro. "In males, for example, that means they may overstate and, for females, they tend to underestimate those behaviors." Researchers should conduct more objective and quantitative studies, as well as qualitative studies, on spring break participants to add more depth to the findings, according to Ribeiro.

"There is little agreement between scholars currently," said Ribeiro. "This leaves a great deal of room for future research."

Studies that focus on certain party spots may also over-emphasize the amount of self-indulgence, according to the researchers. Ribeiro added that most research on the spring break phenomenon ignores alternative spring trips for [college students](#), such as mission work, service trips and study abroad programs. The spring break experience also changes over time for students. [Risky behaviors](#) tend to peak in the first year as students experiment with drugs, alcohol and sex, and then decrease as students find their limits in subsequent years. The behaviors rise again in the last year of school for the students, which Ribeiro calls the last hurrah effect.

"The variety of spring break experiences is huge," said Ribeiro. "In certain spots and in certain cases, the stereotypes of spring break

excesses are correct, but in other areas it's not as extreme as the media seem to present."

Hickerson said that while the spring break phenomenon is relatively new, researchers have focused considerable attention on student motivation and behaviors during these trips over the last few decades.

For the systematic review of the literature, the researchers reviewed 29 articles on spring break tourism, as well as [media coverage](#), conference presentations, book chapters and dissertations.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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