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Professional Aunt, No Kids: An unexplored segment of family tourism

Families are one of the most important markets for the tourism industry, yet research about family tourism is scant and, moreover, focuses on traditional nuclear families. Very few studies have embraced the diversity of family forms, which includes single parent, extended, same sex, or foster families, among others. The purpose of this study was to explore the travel and tourism potential of a new, growing, and lucrative market segment: the Professional Aunts with No Kids (PANK). This study found that PANKs represent an untapped tourism opportunity in family travel due to the strong bond between aunts and their nieces and nephews that extends to leisure activities, and travel and tourism.

Keywords: Family tourism, PANKs, extended families, travel behaviour

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Introduction

Families are and will continue to be one of the most important markets for the travel industry. For example, it is estimated that 25 percent and 26 percent of domestic leisure travel in the UK and the US, respectively, is undertaken by adults travelling with children (U.S. Travel Association, 2015; VisitBritain, 2011). Despite its importance, it is surprising that family travel has received scant attention in tourism research, and the studies currently available have mainly focused on the traditional nuclear family, which is declining in many countries – for instance, the number of nuclear households in the US dropped from 40.3 percent in 1970 to 19.6 percent in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Tourism scholars have yet to open avenues for research on tourism and non-traditional families: single parent, cross-generational, foster, blended, and same sex parent families, among others.

An important family member involved in family activities is the aunt or uncle. PANKs (Professional Aunt, No Kids) are adult professional women without children who have a strong and close relationship with their nieces and nephews (Euromonitor International, 2013), or with godchildren, a friend's children, or other children not their own (Webber Shandick, 2013). The defining characteristic of the PANK is the strength of the relationship with the children rather than geographical proximity or genes.

The PANK segment is expected to grow due to demographic changes, especially in developed countries. For instance, the 2010 US Census shows a growing trend of women living alone, from 11.5% of all households in 1980 to 15.2% in 2012 (US Census Bureau, 2013). The US Census Bureau (2014) also revealed that in 2014, 47% of American women between 15 and 44 years old did not have children. In fact, it is estimated that 48% of the world's population is experiencing below-replacement fertility rates (lower than 2.1 children per woman), and that this figure will reach 78% by 2050 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2011).

The term PANK is relatively new; it was introduced in 2012 by Melanie Notkin, whose study, *The Power of the PANK* (Savvy Auntie, 2012), highlighted the economic potential of this demographic in relation to the consumer and tourism industry. The study estimated that there were about 23 million PANKs in the United States who spend US\$ 9 billion dollars a year, an average of US\$ 387 per child per year, on material gifts for their nieces and nephews. They are also secondary caregivers and offer financial support to struggling parents: it is reported that 45% of PANKs have given gifts to parents to help provide for their kids and 34% even expect to help pay for a child's education (Weber Shandwick, 2013).

For the economic potential, toys, clothing and other children products companies have started to target PANKs (Vega, 2012), and a few travel and tourism companies are following this trend. For example, Lisa Bauer, senior vice president of global sales and marketing for the Royal Caribbean cruise line, mentioned that the company is directing a good portion of its advertising to single women, as they often make the most important decisions about a trip (World Travel Market, 2013). Intrepid Travel, and adventure travel site, is including aunts as well as uncles and grandparents in their family vacations packages (<http://www.intrepidtravel.com/theme/family>).

This market segment, one of the newest tourism trends (World Travel Market, 2013), is very relevant to the travel and tourism industry. Weber Shandwick (2013) found that almost 48% of PANKs enjoy travelling with their nieces and nephews, and 64 % are happy in this role as they enjoy the best stages of children without the responsibility of being their parents. According to the same study, in addition to representing a sizeable market segment, PANKs have important characteristics that are relevant for market segmentation: they are well-connected, avid info-sharers, ahead of the online media consumption curve, decision influencers, researchers, influence-able, devoted nesters but highly social, and, more important, receptive to programmes that bring them closer to the kids in their lives.

Euromonitor International (2013) mentions that the tourism industry has just begun to target this attractive and lucrative market segment and consequently generate more tourism income. As this market segment is growing in number and economic potential due to demographic changes in women's status and life choices, much more research is needed to capitalise on its market potential, especially in regards to their profile, travel preferences, behaviour, and experiences. However, as Schänzel and Yeoman (2014) point out, research about family tourism is scarce, and what there is does not account for the diversity of family forms, including single parent, multigenerational, same sex, and extended family forms.

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the characteristics and travel behaviour of PANKs in Monterrey (Mexico) in order to learn more about this market segment in relation to travel and tourism. In Mexico, according to the statistics from the National Institute of Statistical and Geography (INEGI, 2013), 65% of all women between 20 and 49 years old are single (INEGI, 2010b). As such statistics show, Mexican PANKs can be a valuable source for tourism, and destinations would be wise to entice this profitable niche.

Literature Review: Family Tourism

Even though families are one of the largest, more constant, and growing travel markets for the tourism industry, tourism research has not taken enough notice of their holiday experiences (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2014). The few available studies, including those in Schänzel, Yeoman and Backer's (2012) book on family tourism, have investigated topics related to family experiences during their holidays (e.g., Gram, 2005; Johns & Gyimothy, 2010; Kidron, 2013; Larsen, 2013; Lehto, Choi, Lin & MacDermid, 2009), family travel behaviour (e.g., Segumpan, Zahari & Jamaluddin, 2008), activity participation (e.g., Chen, Lehto & Cai, 2012), and gender relations and gender roles in family travel and decision making (e.g., Gram, 2007; Koc, 2004; Therkelsen, 2010; Zalatan, 1998). With a few exceptions (e.g., Hughes & Southall, 2012), the majority of family tourism studies focuses on

nuclear families; very little attention has been paid to non-traditional family tourism, and almost none to aunts and/or uncles and their involvement in this sector. It is also important to note that many of the studies, in particular those about gender relations and roles, are found outside the tourism literature, which reaffirms the lack of attention of tourism scholars to family tourism research.

Methodology

The present research is exploratory due to the recent and emerging nature of the topic and lack of previous academic research of PANKs in relation to travel and tourism. It follows a qualitative approach as the objective was to obtain preliminary information about this market segment and explore its travel preferences and behaviour. Data were collected in the spring of 2014 through face to face semi-structured interviews of a purposive sample of eight PANKs in Monterrey, Mexico, who were selected through a snowball sampling technique based on the following criteria: single or married females with no children and with at least undergraduate degree, medium to upper class, between 25 to 50 years old, and who were employed or were managing their own business at the time of the research. The interview followed a protocol that was designed to obtain information about their demographic and family characteristics, relationship with their nieces and nephews, and travel and tourism preferences.

More than half of the participants worked in education. Five participants were recruited in the university where one of the authors worked and three were friends of the second author. Four participants were college professors, one a private teacher, one worked in the international relations office of a private university, one in politics, and one as an executive assistant at a private firm. Of these PANKs, two held bachelor degrees, two who were pursuing and two had completed their master's degree, and two who held doctoral degrees. Their ages ranged from 25 to 60 years old and their income level ranged from US\$ 1,000 to

US\$ 5,000 monthly, which is somewhat higher compared to the national average for professional/working women in Mexico. Their nieces and nephews lived in the same city for most participants.

Results

The main purpose of the study was to explore the travel behaviour of PANKs, a new market segment consisting of professional aunts with no kids.

In general, all participants indicated, very enthusiastically, that they enjoy travelling to domestic and international destinations, with no specific preference for either one. Five out of the eight participants preferred visiting beach destinations and the other three preferred villages and archaeological sites. In regards to travel motivation, all eight participants stated that the main motivator is rest and relaxation; the second motivation to travel was exploring the destination and its culture, as one participant shared: "*... In fact, we always hire the best guides, anthropologists, experts, etc.... we spend a lot of money to get to know everything!*".

Our results indicate that PANKs tend to travel frequently: six out of the eight participants make three or more trips per year; one participant travels twice a year and the other only once a year. For the eight participants, their trips are for leisure purposes, although two of them also travel for business, which they dislike. As one of the participants, a college professor, expressed: "*If someone invites me on a study abroad trip, I will tell them no, I do not like business travel*".

The study also sought to explore PANKs' relationships with their nieces and nephews. All eight participants reported having a good relationship with them and, upon observing their responses, body language and tone of voice, it was noticed that for some, the relationship was very close. The type of relationship depended on the number and age of the kids. Participants who had a higher number of nieces and nephews, in this case, two participants (12 and 11 nephews and/or nieces each) reported having a closer relationship,

visiting and spending more time with them, than participants with fewer nieces and nephews, as the following quotes show: *"We see (each other)... depends on the age, almost daily or 2-3 times a week"; "We see each other and we frequent a lot, every week, sometimes every day, we go for something to eat or things like that"*. The other aunts with older nephews see each other on average once a week or once every two weeks.

When they see each other, aunts and their nieces and nephews engage in several leisure activities such as going to the movies, to the park, dining out, or getting an ice cream – a very popular leisure activity in Mexico. Two aunts try to engage their nieces and nephews in cultural activities so they can learn different and interesting things: *"I always take my four nieces to libraries and the book fair each year, also to the Ballet of Monterrey when they start the season, the Alfa Planetarium, to museums and cultural sites"*. Two participants, on the other hand, do not go out with their nieces and nephews, but they see each other at family get-togethers.

Six out of eight PANKs in this study travelled with their nieces and nephews and they enjoyed the experience. Two of them were very excited when answering the question. *"Yes, I love it!"*, stated two participants. On the other hand, one participant said that she has travelled with her nieces but she does not like to be with them for too long: *"What I do is take them to McAllen (USA) for shopping, but only two days at most because I can't stand them for more days... I'm not very tolerant, maximum two days."* The other aunt had not travelled with her nieces or nephews because, as she said, *"I would not (be able to) stand them."* The six aunts who mentioned having travelled with their nieces and nephews visited mainly domestic destinations like Puerto Vallarta, Cancun, and other Mexican beaches; Mexico City; and other smaller destinations in the country. Only two of the six aunts who had travelled with nieces and nephews mentioned visiting international destinations; in their case, Disney World in Orlando, Florida: *"We went to Disney in Orlando, one of the best trips of my life, I had fun and enjoyed it very much"*, one PANK said.

The last subject discussed in the interviews was the amount of money the participants spend on and with their nieces and nephews per year. Results show that most PANKs spend, on average, a higher amount of money on their nieces and nephews than what previous reports indicated. Six out of eight said they spend around US\$ 700 per year on each of their nephews and nieces; two aunts spend approximately US\$ 500; while another spends up to US\$ 2,200 per year.

From these results, we can separate PANKs into two groups according to their lifestyle, relationship with their nieces and nephews, and travel behaviour. The first group, the “engaged PANK”, represents those aunts who like to spend time and money on their nieces and nephews and engage in leisure and cultural activities with them. The second segment, the “casual PANK”, consists of aunts who do not spend much time with their nieces and nephews; seeing them mostly on special occasions such as birthdays or holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving, but they spend more money on them than the engaged PANK. The casual PANK prefers not to or does not like going on trips with their nieces and nephews, while the engaged PANKs love to take their nieces and nephews on trips and travel with them as much as possible.

Conclusion

As Yeoman (2008) points out, family holidays are no longer exclusively about nuclear families but reflect the changes in family structure. This study sought to explore the characteristics and travel and tourism preferences of an emerging market segment relevant to the tourism industry known as PANKs. In general, it was found that women in this segment do like to travel frequently for leisure to both domestic and international destinations, and dislike business travel. In addition, they have a close relationship with their nieces and nephews and reported doing several activities with them, including travelling domestically. ’

It is argued that PANKs are a profitable, attractive market segment in regards to consumer and travel expenditure because their lifestyle and life choices allow them to spoil their nieces and nephews and aid their parents financially. This study, confirming industry reports, found that PANKs spend a good amount of money on their nieces and nephews.

This study found two sub-segments of PANKs: those that are actively involved in the lives of their nieces and nephews (engaged PANKs), and those who like to maintain some distance and see them only on special occasions but shower them with gifts (casual PANKs). Both segments spend higher-than-average financial resources on their nieces and nephews but the better opportunity for the travel and tourism industry lies in targeting the engaged PANK, as she is the one who enjoys spending time and travelling with her nieces and nephews, in particular to domestic cultural destinations. Destinations and tourism businesses can work towards attracting this niche by offering products and services that foster this unique bond between the aunts and their nieces and nephews while getting good value for their money. Tourism should also capitalise on the internet and social media, and develop online campaigns, as previous research has found PANKs are digitally savvy and avid information-searchers and sharers.

Although exploratory in nature, this study is innovative and relevant to the industry because it provides useful preliminary information about an unexplored market segment and its travel behaviour; however, it has limitations due to its qualitative and exploratory nature. Much more research is needed about this market segment in respect to their demographic profile, travel decision-making processes, travel needs, travel preferences and behaviour, and economic impact at the destination, among others.

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