Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights

The motivation and experience of alma mater tourists

Bing Pan [a,*], Lucy Harbor [b], Soyoung Park [c], Rui Li [d], Ashley Schroeder [e], Yaqi Gong [a]

[a] *Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management, School of Health and Human Development, The Pennsylvania State University, 704M Ford Building, University Park, PA 16801, United States of America*
[b] *RRC Associates, 4770 Baseline Road, Suite 355, Boulder, CO 80303, United States of America*
[c] *Hospitality and Tourism Management Program, Department of Marketing, College of Business, Florida Atlantic University, Fleming Hall 314, Boca Raton, FL 33431, United States of America*
[d] *Red Cube Production Inc., 1338 Old Bayshore Hwy, Burlingame, CA 94010, United States of America*
[e] *Future Partners, 1728 Union St #310, San Francisco, California 94123, United States of America*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study investigates alma mater tourists' motivation and experience through semi-structured interviews. We propose that one's tertiary educational institution serves as a Home of Exploration between one's Home of Origin and Home of Procreation. This Home of Exploration occupies a liminal stage in life when one can be truly free. Alma mater tourists revisit their places of higher education to reminisce about the days when they were authentic to themselves and experience a unique blend of happiness, nostalgia, and other emotions. This experience is explained herein with sociological concepts including authenticity, spiritual center, push and pull factors, and life course theory.

1. Introduction

Why does an adult come back to visit their collegiate alma mater? The place is not necessarily *new,* since this person lived and studied in this place for several years in the past. At first glance, a college town holds little *strangeness* and *otherness* (Cohen, 1988). The place might even seem dull —a few new and old college buildings, dormitories, and bars and restaurants that cater to students, faculty, and residents alike. However, a visit to a collegiate alma mater holds the power to evoke a range of emotions, such as excitement, happiness, nostalgia, and sadness, to which anyone who has visited their alma mater can attest. This study intends to understand and dissect the motivation and experience of these alma mater tourists.

In this research, we define an alma mater tourist as someone who temporarily returns to their tertiary education institution for pleasure or work. Alma mater tourists represent a sizable tourism market. In the United States, 45% of the population aged 18 and older (i.e., more than 110 million people) hold the equivalent of an associate's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Further, tertiary education attainment is on the rise: across OECD countries, 48% of adults aged 25–34 held an associate's or higher degree in 2021, an increase of 21

percentage points from 2000. Across these countries, this education level will soon be the most common among working-age adults (OECD, 2022).

For college towns and cities, the spending and consumption by alma mater tourists constitute a major proportion of the local tourism economy (Schroeder, Pan, & Naylor, 2020). These towns or cities may rely, to various degrees, on this tourist market for their livelihood. During the 2020 global pandemic, many of these places faced "existential losses" in their income, jobs, and permanent populations (Hubler, 2020). Thus, understanding the experience and motivation of alma mater tourists and enhancing their experience is crucial to helping attract more alumni visits, nudge a higher level of spending, and facilitate a synergistic relationship between the local tourism industry and higher education institutions.

However, catering to this population poses challenges: alumni revisiting their colleges are not visiting new places, *per se.* Many may not even venture out beyond the college campus and neighboring downtown, and their spending may be limited. In addition, many of these tourists may not conduct advanced trip planning due to their familiarity with the destination (Schroeder et al., 2020). Thus, traditional marketing strategies may not attract them effectively or encourage more

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: bingpan@psu.edu (B. Pan), lucy@rrcassociates.com (L. Harbor), soyoungpark@fau.edu (S. Park), ashley@futurepartners.com (A. Schroeder), ymg5161@psu.edu (Y. Gong).

spending. What motivates college alumni to visit, sometimes repeatedly, their alma maters? What are their experiences visiting these places where they lived and studied for several years during their early adulthood? This research adopts a semi-structured interview and in-depth analysis to dissect alma mater tourists' motivations and experiences.

2. Literature review

Since the mid-20th century, scholars have sought to build an empirical understanding of tourists' motivations and experiences, from sociological, behavioral, and psychological approaches (Cohen, 1979). Tourists seek destinations to escape from the drudgery of work, relax on a beach, learn about a new culture or place, pay homage to a holy place, or experience their whole and authentic selves (Wang, 1999). This section reviews the major frameworks and concepts explaining tourists' motivations and experiences and how they relate to alma mater tourists. Tourism scholars have investigated the motivation for traveling from a sociological approach. Seeking centers or authenticity, enticed by pull factors at the destinations or pushed by factors in the origin places, are a few conceptualizations of tourists' motivations. In addition, place attachment, nostalgia tourism, and the life course framework are discussed as they pertain to the unique nature of alma mater travel.

2.1. The quest for center

Scholars separate the "sacred world" from the "mundane world" in understanding human beings' quest for other places (Cohen, 1992; Turner, 1973). From the traditions of Christianity, predominant myths state that human beings are expelled from the sacred realm (the Garden of Eden) due to their original sins. Travelers embark on pilgrimages to return to these sacred zones and religious centers where the world of deities overlaps with that of humans; that place represents the spiritual center for which its followers crave.

These sacred centers are typically separated from the sociopolitical centers of the mundane world, demanding grueling, albeit fulfilling, journeys when their followers travel there to pay homage (Sharma & Timothy, 2023). Even the wilderness can be viewed as a holistic center, unspoiled from human activities. One can also seek the true center of self during outdoor trips, when modern society's noise dissipates in the wilderness (Taylor, 2012).

2.2. Authenticity as a motivation for travel

Since MacCannell (1976, 2013) first proposed authenticity as a significant tourism motivator, the tourism research community has relentlessly contested the concept of authenticity (Rickly, 2022). MacCannell (1976) interpreted the pursuit of authenticity in tourism as a response to the alienated existence in modernity, in which the industrialized society is increasingly differentiated and fragmented. A prominent modern concern is that the industrialized and capitalized society suppresses the authentic essence of one's being, allowing rationality to dominate while subduing emotional self (Moore, Buchmann, Månsson, & Fisher, 2021). Many studies have investigated authenticity as a motivation for leisure travel (Waller & Lea, 1999), heritage tourism (Lin & Liu, 2018), volunteer tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017), etc.

More recently, through a Lacanian perspective, Knudsen, Rickly, and Vidon (2016) argued that alienation is not just the result of capitalism or modernity, but an inescapable by-product of being a "Subject", an "I" who can be separated from the "other". Hence, alienation is unavoidable in the social world in which human beings function as Subjects with free minds. Utilizing a psychoanalytic approach, Vidon, Rickly, and Knudsen (2018) argued that alienation creates a void that the fantasy of authenticity promises to fill, and thereby encourages the desire to travel.

2.3. Push and pull motivations

In general, push factors are the psychological conditions that motivate a potential tourist to leave their usual residence and affect whether people travel (Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003). Previous studies have identified escaping from everyday surroundings, seeking novelty, nostalgia, social interaction, and health and fitness needs as relevant push motivations (Goossens, 2000; Kim et al., 2003; Meng et al., 2019; Nikjoo & Ketabi, 2015). The pull factors refer to the elements in the destination that attract tourists: for example, sand and sea, cultural attractions, or recreation activities (Cohen, 1979), which affect where, when, and how people travel (Kim et al., 2003). Destination marketers can link the push and pull factors to attract potential tourists to their destinations (Wu & Pearce, 2014).

2.4. Visitation experience

Researchers investigate the tourist experience using either a social science approach, a cognitive approach, or an affective approach (Volo, 2009). With the social science approach, the tourist experience is co-created by both tourism objects and tourists themselves. This approach explores tourists' subjective experiences, including motivations, activities, meanings, and attitudes (Quan & Wang, 2004; Uriely, 2005). The cognitive approach assesses the quality of travel experience, antecedents of tourist satisfaction, and the effects of satisfaction on re-visitation intention, loyalty (Yoon & Uysal, 2005), and word-of-mouth behavior (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). The affective approach views a destination as a place that invokes many emotions from a large amount of sensory stimulation in a foreign place. Emotions may change from time to time, i.e., moment-to-moment lived experience, and are also an outcome of the whole trip, i.e., evaluative experience. This emotion may affect satisfaction and loyalty somehow independently (Highmore, 2002; Hosany, 2011).

2.5. Place attachment

Scholars have attempted to investigate alumni who revisit their home universities. Zhang, Huang, Green, and Qiu (2018) explore alumni attendees' experiences during a homecoming festival. Their findings indicate that the alumni's experience influences their event satisfaction through place attachment. Destination products, natural environments, and event program information are positively linked to alumni's place dependence and university identity.

In environmental psychology studies, scholar argue that throughout life, people inhabit and engage with various locations, forming profound emotional attachments to "meaningful locations", as well as associated objects, relationships, and institutions within those locations (Lewicka, 2011; Relph, 1976). A two-dimensional construct is frequently used to measure place attachment, which entails place dependence (the instrumental significance of a place for supporting certain goals) and place identity (the symbolic significance of a place in one's self-identity formation) (Lewicka, 2011; Stokols & Shumaker, 1981; Williams & Vaske, 2003). Diener and Hagen (2022) argue that place attachment manifests much broader themes besides love, security, and belonging. Departure, loss, exile, longing, nostalgia, and return are also parts of place attachment.

As students appropriate their transitions from home to a college, establish and maintain social relationships, participate in school activities, and complete their four years of study, they gradually develop place attachment to their college (Chow & Healey, 2008; Rioux, Scrima, & Werner, 2017; Xu, de Bakker, Strijker, & Wu, 2015). After they graduate and physically depart from the campus, their emotional attachment to the college campus can endure and evolve due to the distance, along with their attachment to the associated institutions (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). Many tourism studies have extensively examined the positive effects of place attachment on visit

intention (Stylos, Bellou, Andronikidis, & Vassiliadis, 2017) and intention to recommend (Hosany, Prayag, Van Der Veen, Huang, & Deesilatham, 2017). A college graduate's place attachment to the campus is likely to motivate them to revisit their alma mater.

2.6. Nostalgia tourism

Alma mater is a place from the past that tends to make people feel nostalgic (Oxfeld & Long, 2004). Researchers have investigated a tourist's yearning for the past as nostalgia tourism. Definitions of nostalgia vary over time and across disciplines (Angé & Berliner, 2014). Pickering and Keightley (2006) have defined nostalgia as:

> ...longing for what is lacking in a changed present... a yearning for what is now not attainable, simply because of irreversibility of time...and the desire not to return but to recognize the aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future. (p. 920).

One's nostalgic feelings are inextricably linked to their memories and identity, which can serve as a motivation to travel (Fairley, 2003). Leong, Yeh, Hsiao, and Huan (2015) described nostalgia as a push motive, whereby individuals seek objects such as places and things to fulfill their yearning for the past. The explication of nostalgia tourists provides a useful cue for untangling alma mater tourists. A college plays a key role in social identity formation among college students (Feldman, 1972; Kaufman, 2014; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students construct their social identity by understanding themselves in a social context, sharing collective memories (Fairley, 2003), and embracing others' attitudes and attributions toward them (Kaufman, 2014). Thus, an investigation of alma mater tourists has to include the examination of their past living experiences on college campuses, their current living experiences, and how that experience shaped their current travel.

Travel and Life Course Developmental psychologists defined life course as "a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time" (Giele & Elder, 1998, p. 22). They believe that one's life course trajectories are affected by expected and continuous changes (Kuh, Ben-Shlomo, Lynch, Hallqvist, & Power, 2003; Moody & Sasser, 2020).

Erikson (1950) first introduced eight developmental life course stages: infancy (1–2), early childhood (2–4), play age (4–5), school age (6–10), adolescence (11–20), young adulthood (21–39), adulthood (40–64), and maturity (65+). Erikson (1963) suggested that adolescence explores different possibilities before deciding what they want to do in their life and establishing their self-identity. Fu, Kirillova, and Lehto (2022) utilized Erikson's framework to explore tourists' patterns and meaning-making of travel in different life course stages. They found that travel in the adolescence stage entails self-identity searching and independence forming, while travel in the young adulthood stage embodies extensions of adolescence in self-identity commitment and establishments of intimacy. Based on Erikson's (1950) definitions, people typically spend their late adolescence and early adulthood at a college as students.

However, Arnett (2000) argued that Erikson's categorization of adolescence and young adulthood is no longer compatible with the normative patterns of industrialized society. In modern developed countries, college education is increasingly accessible; the average age of marriage is postponed; and many choices are given to young adults before they settle down for long-term adult roles. Arnett (2000) proposed that emerging adulthood (18–25) should be a distinct life course stage. Life in this stage entails identity exploration, independence from family, instabilities, ambivalence, possibilities, and social bonds with peers (Arnett, 2014; Erikson, 1963). Many people spend their emerging adulthood stage in the higher education system. Tourists in this stage significantly prefer thrill-seeking, adventure, and the sun (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002). Based on the dual-cycle model of identity formation, Liu and Kirillova (2021) found that college students' graduation travel

positively influences identity exploration, impacting social fulfillment, self-esteem enhancement, and, subsequently, identity commitment through improved self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Building on Arnett's (2000) classifications, alma mater tourists are generally in the later stages of adulthood, making a nostalgic journey back to where they experienced their early adult years. Their life stages have evolved since, running in parallel with the changes that have happened at their old college during their time away. During a visit, these individuals, now mature adults, can't help but draw comparisons between their alma mater and their experiences within as it was during their studies and as it stands in the present day, all while reflecting on their younger selves. Therefore, when discussing the experience of visiting an alma mater, it's important to take into account the visitor's experiences during their college years and their emerging adulthood.

In summary, nostalgia can partially explain alma mater travel experience; however, the unique nature of visiting one's alma mater calls for investigating the experience from one's past life stages. This research plans to build on the life course approach and investigate possible motivations and experiences when visiting a collegiate alma mater and how the motivations are linked to the existing frameworks of motivation, experiences, and the life course framework. For example, considering an alma mater tourist, is this trip a journey to a center? If it is, what is the center the alma mater tourist is seeking? Which types of authenticity do alma mater tourists crave? Even if one's college town appears to be authentic and unchanged, it surely has evolved over the years since the visitor's graduation, with a younger cohort of students and newly constructed buildings and storefronts. It is authentic to the present place but inauthentic to an alma mater tourist's memory. In addition, tourists visiting their alma mater most likely will be affected by those push factors—the stress of their daily lives and the quest for recreation, etc. In addition, what are these intrinsic factors that push tourists to visit their alma mater? What are the specific pull factors attracting those tourists? A university's campus is not necessarily an exciting place that calls for adventure or exploration. Possibly, the evolution of one's life stage along with the changes in the alma mater, could explain the alma mater travel experience.

3. Study methods

In this study, we designed a semi-structured interview with collegiate alma mater tourists, including questions about their motivation and experiences for the past trip, and also about their personal history when growing up and attending college, and how these experiences shaped their current travel experience.

3.1. Location and study population

The study's location is a land-grant state institution (referred to as the University from hereon) situated in the northeast United States that has a large student population and a strong American football tradition. Most undergraduate students are residents of the state or adjacent ones. The college town is surrounded by a rural population and relatively distant from major metropolitan areas. The main campus and its surrounding community are referred to as the area in this study. The major source of tourists to the destination is the University's large alumni group and current students' parents and friends. A major part of the economy of the area originates from the University.

3.2. Data collection

In spring 2018, the research team conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with the University alumni. In collaboration and agreement with the local tourism bureau, we intended to recruit participants from diverse backgrounds within three months. The sample size of 14 was considered an appropriate sample since we reached saturation in emerged themes with those informants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The

interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min in length. Consistency among the data was maintained using a detailed interview guide on which all research team members were trained (see appendix I).

All study participants met the following inclusion criteria: earned an undergraduate degree from the University; spent a minimum of two semesters in residence at the main campus; currently reside outside of the area; have visited the area in the past four months from the interview date; were 18 years of age or older; and spoke English. They were recruited through multiple channels, including personal relationships with research team members, the University alumni association, recommendations from the researchers' colleagues, and the University's alumni Facebook groups. With chain referral sampling techniques, the interviewees were also asked to recommend additional participants through their own networks.

Interviews were conducted on the phone and audio-recorded. The interviews focused primarily on their most recent trip to the area. These interviews sought to identify activities, objects, and places attracting informants back to the University and understand the meaning of the place and the trip. In addition, interviews also touched on different stages of the interviewees' lives, including their upbringing, motivations for attending the University, memories from their college life, and life experiences after graduation.

3.3. Data analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the same researcher who conducted the interview. Preliminary coding was conducted on individual transcripts by the researcher who led the interview. The researchers first organized the responses to individual interview questions to allow for easy retrieval of text (Saldaña, 2015). The researcher conducted the first full-cycle coding pass on the entire dataset and developed an initial codebook (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998). In the first coding passes, two researchers utilized open-coding to assess the data inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the text (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016). This iterative process began with aggregating and condensing the full research team's primary themes during individual interviews' structural coding. The researchers analyzed the full body of text, using techniques including repetition, similarities and differences, theory-related material (e.g., identity formation during college), and indigenous categories unique to the setting (e.g., a specific restaurant downtown) were employed to refine further and add to these initial themes (Bernard et al., 2016). The research team then worked jointly to collapse these first-pass coding labels into broader thematic categories and perform a second-cycle coding pass. During this process, structural coding was applied based on an initial codebook created collaboratively among all research members.

Given the team's intimate familiarity with the small body of text, formal inter-coder reliability assessments were not conducted. Instead, any coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively.

3.4. Findings

In total, the 14 alumni included 7 females and 7 males; their ages ranged from 25 to 62, and their graduation years from 1977 to 2015. Thirteen of fourteen grew up in the state where the Univeristy is located; ten out of these thirteen were still residing in the same state. Their fields of study at the University included sciences, engineering, education, business, and health and human development. Their post-college careers varied greatly. There were three engineers, two homemakers, one consultant, one social worker, one park director, one real estate agent, one corporate trainer, one financial advisor, one hospital worker, one marketing manager, and one librarian. Thus, the interviewees represented a wide spectrum of age, year of graduation, study areas, and careers.

3.4.1. Motivation to travel to alma mater

No two interviewees articulated the exact same reasons, except two pairs: two informants came to visit for the closure of a bar with more than 80 years of history where they had spent some time during their college years; two others were a couple, both are alumni, but interviewed separately about a trip that they had taken together. Interviewees could also cite more than one reason. For example, one interviewee was on a business trip that included recreational activities. Seven mentioned visiting family and friends as one of their motivations. One was passing through; one was attending a sporting event; one came to work with student organizations on campus; one had come for his birthday celebration; the last one was attending a conference. Explicit connection to the university appeared in nine informants' travel motivations: either giving a lecture, meeting students, or attending a conference or sports event on campus.

Most interviewees traveled to the area with family and friends. Their trips ranged in length from a few hours to nine days. Everyone used their own car as the transportation mode. Most of them stayed in hotels, while some stayed with friends or family. Their activities included a wide range of dining, spectator sports, campus visits, recreation, shopping, gathering with family and friends, and business activities. Interestingly, most of the places they visited were places toward which they held nostalgic feelings—places that they used to visit when they were college students. These places included restaurants, bars, cigar dens, clothing stores, the LGBTQ center on campus, campus dining halls, an iconic statue of the University mascot, and the library.

Most participants indicated that they had done very little planning for their trip due to their frequent trips back and familiarity with the area. Five did not make a pre-trip plan at all. Many of the rest consulted social media or news sites while making plans, such as local newspapers and the University's social media channels. Others searched the internet and used online travel agency websites. These informants had been following those social media channels even after leaving the University.

3.4.2. Experience of traveling to alma mater

Almost every interviewee felt happy, joyful, fun, and sometimes nostalgic during their trip. The keywords they used include "excitement", "fun", "enjoyable", "happy", "joy", "nostalgia", and "enthusiasm". As some informants stated:

"Yeah, we try to go back a few times a year. It's just like our happy place, kind of."

"If anything, the emotions were happy and satisfied with enthusiasm we encountered at the meetings we held. It was very exciting."

These emotions were uniformly linked to the University and the alumni's memory: some keywords include "togetherness", "bittersweet", and "stuck in time". A sense of ownership, i.e., "our place", frequently appeared in the comments.

"I'm happy to see everybody. I was happy to be in the area*, to be there and see the things that I remembered."*

"We got married there so it's like our place. So I get this feeling of happiness."

"so I went to [a restaurant's name], *the breakfast place downtown, which is one of the places I went a lot as a student. I spent some time in the library just because I had some work to do and I knew that was a good spot to do, get work done. Um, I liked, I used to like studying up there so it was a nice kind of nostalgic place to be."*

"It's just like a conveyor belt through time. Um, and even though I changed and everything, it seems to me like in many ways I'm stuck in time when I go up there."

When asked about their dislikes of the trip, a few mentioned circumstances over which the service businesses have no control: having limited time, being cold, and rainy weather. For example:

"…that was the big deterrent that weekend, it was freezing cold."

Many also reacted negatively to what they observed as the overdevelopment of the downtown area, including new stores and high-rise apartment buildings. One interviewee reminisced:

It's lacking some of the personality it used to have. Cause a lot of these little businesses are being taken over by chain stores, and that was part of the personality of it - it wasn't a chain. It was, it was a mom-and-pop sort of situation… Those places like that are touchstones across the years, across the generations of people who've gone. And those places are disappearing."

A few informants felt sad or nostalgic about the changes in downtown businesses. For example:

"Some changes, I wish - really wish hadn't happened. Um, [a restaurant's name] *closing is one of them. That was not nec- well that was just stupid."*

However, all these critical comments did not appear to dampen their feeling of happiness and excitement. Instead, many felt that the changes were inevitable, given the growth of the University.

"But, um, but I mean some things - if there's gonna be more students, you need to - they need a place to live… There are some changes that are inevitable."

3.4.3. Meaning of alma mater

When describing the meaning of the University, the alumni used a variety of emotional keywords and metaphors. They believe the University offers a quality education that instilled great values in them. "Home", "family", and even "cult" are the metaphors the alumni used. Confirming past studies, the University was a source of identity formation during a time when informants transitioned from their teenage years to young adulthood (Kaufman, 2014). As some interviewees mentioned:

"I told you, I just need to go home, and make sure its still there! [laughing]."

"In my mind, the area *will always be home."*

"But during my time as a student getting involved in organizations on campus, having opportunities to go up for all U day or a leadership come through like the [University mascot] *ambassadors. You got a taste of what the area was like, um, that the pride started to… we laugh and call it the indoctrination of becoming the University, because it is like a cult."*

Specifically, one interviewee went through gender reassignment surgery during her college years. She began her university journey as a man but graduated as a woman, physically altering her external identity during her undergraduate years. Another alumnus commented:

"I think, I think the University is where stood out who I was. It helped me form my adult identity, probably, you know? It helped me shape my future, what I wanted to do as a career."

3.5. A model of alma mater visit to home of exploration

How do we interpret and make sense of these motivations and experiences? One emergent theme is the frequently mentioned concept of "home", "family", and even "cult". If the university experience is similar to a home or a family, what type of home is it?

Metaphorically, the concept of "home" transcends the confines of a physical dwelling, encompassing a place enriched with individuals' emotions, senses of self, and sense of belonging (Cresswell, 2014; Proshansky et al., 1983). The college is not the home one grew up with one's parents and siblings in one's early life stage; neither is it one's own adult family with a partner and children at later stages. In family studies, "Family of Origin" refers to the family in which one was raised and spent one's formative years (Whiston & Keller, 2004). "Family of Procreation" refers to a union of adult individuals to create a family, usually by sharing a household (Gerhardt, 2016). Therefore, a university is a different type of home, which we term "Home of Exploration". One's Home of Exploration is a liminal stage between one's Home of Origin and Home of Procreation. Fig. 1 depicts the relationship between the three homes. Here we adopted the term "Home" instead of "Family" to emphasize the physical space in addition to an emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

As Fig. 1 depicts, Home of Origin is where a person grows up until adulthood (normally around 18 years old) and spends their childhood and early teenage years. The family members are parents, possibly siblings, and other close family members (Whiston & Keller, 2004).
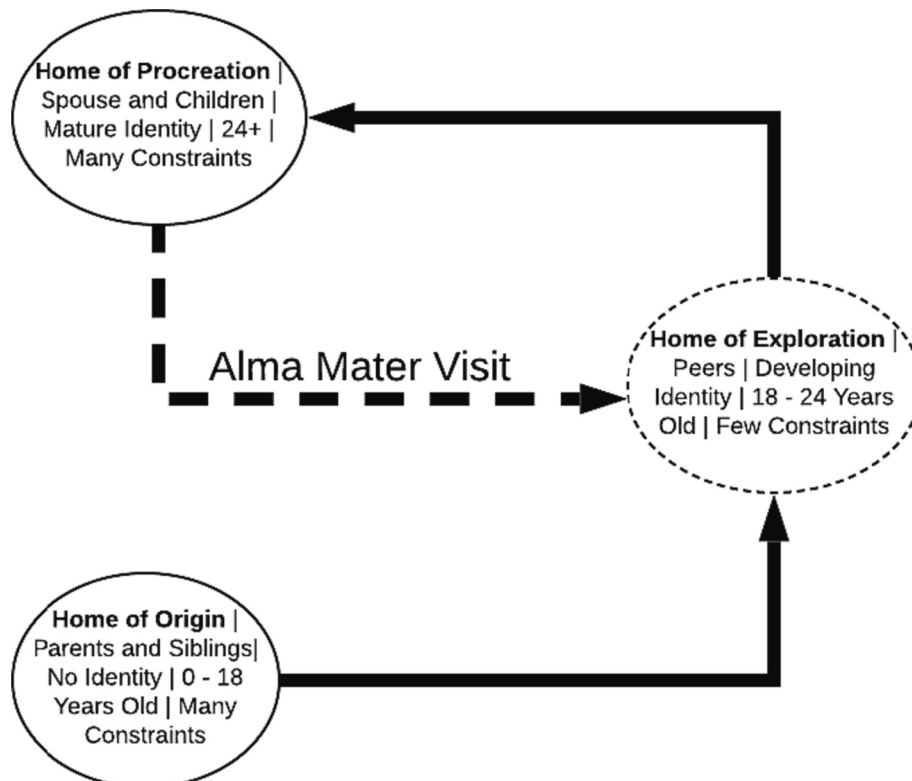

Fig. 1. Tertiary Educational Institution as Home of Exploration and Alma Mater Visits.

Someone in their Home of Origin typically does not possess a clear self-identity yet. Many constraints limit their freedom of choice and activities due to their immaturity in their physical and mental development and parental control and supervision. Family members in the Home of Origin largely influence one's activity choice, personal development, and romantic relationships (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2008; Whiston & Keller, 2004).

Home of Procreation refers to an adult's union with another adult when they grow up and form their own family (Gerhardt, 2016). This family could include one's partners and children with its own rules, limitations, norms, and practices (Gerhardt, 2016). The adults residing in their Home of Procreation have formed an identity as productive workers in society; they possibly play the role of spouse and parent in this home environment; they have learned to take adult responsibilities and make rational decisions (Erikson, 1963). This home environment fosters trust, intimacy, and authenticity. However, similar to the Home of Origin, the Home of Procreation limits the person's freedom of choice and activities due to their increased responsibility and the expectations of pooling economic resources and sharing them. People in middle and late adulthood, especially after forming a family and having children, often find themselves caught between their own independence and their responsibilities as spouses and parents (Fu et al., 2022).

Home of Exploration lies between the Home of Origin and the Home of Procreation. Many attend higher education institutions during this period, usually between the ages of 18 and 25. This period is consistent with the emerging adulthood stage proposed by Arnett (2000). People in this stage are legally adults in most countries; however, they are exploring various possibilities, attempting to form their own identity, and establishing social bonds with peers. They are learning to be an independent and responsible member of society. Although their decision-making can be unstable and immature, they are shielded in the higher education system. These young adults are away from their Home of Origin and, thus, are free of parental control and supervision. However, they do not yet bear the responsibilities and expectations of a full-fledged adult in the Home of Procreation. The constraints in Home of Origin and Home of Procreation are vacant in this stage. The Home of Exploration is this transient stage where one is in between two homes with more rigid rules and customs. Though there are certain constraints imposed by the higher education institution, the person is largely expected to experiment and explore; and trivial mistakes are often forgiven. Though punishment may exist, it is less harsh and damaging to one's life course. This Home of Exploration represents a liminal stage in one's life with its own culture and norms. Moffatt (1989) refers to this as a "coming of age" and "rite of passage". One informant expressed this sentiment:

"It means the place where I receive my college degree. It was where I, uh, became a more, somewhat more mature person from the person I was in high school."

College life can be viewed as an extended ritual period that shepherds the growing person from one life stage to the next. A similar viewpoint is shared by Liu and Kirillova (2021), who conceptualized college graduation travel as the final step of identity formation before moving to the next life stage. This period is not very different from the Australian Aboriginals' walkabout tradition when an adolescent boy undergoes a journey of a few months in the wilderness for the spiritual transition to adulthood (Prout, 2008). The significant difference between the two might be the collective nature and the lack of physical harshness in college life.

In this Home of Exploration, youth from diverse backgrounds interact without bounds, sharing lowliness, homogeneity, and comradery, forming an egalitarian relationship and almost a sacred bond (Nathan, 2006; Turner, 1969). In this Home, normal cultural classifications of social class, gender, religion, and the normal societal structure have been downplayed. In this sense, the college campus space is both a form of wilderness, a "playground" or "fairyland", and a non-real world where a person is seeking meaning and forming their own identity:

"it was my first taste of freedom, when I went to the University. And it was a time of discovering myself, but it was really being part of all - being in a huge family, but there was 32,000 of us…"

In this stage of their lives, college students get a glimpse of themselves and help liberate great potential in "human capacity of cognition, affect, volition, creativity" (Turner, 1982, pp. 44). In addition, the Home of Exploration might lead and extend to the Home of Procreation: the couple we interviewed for the study actually met each other on the same college campus and their sense of home and belongings are even stronger due to this reason.

3.6. Travel motivation and experience through the lenses of home of exploration

Hence, the University is a center, but not as a sacred place – rather, it might be the most secular one: the college campus is the place where one is free from many responsibilities and societal regulations of one's other Homes. If this place represents a certain sacredness, it is more akin to that of a tribe: the tribe of youth who share the same experience of liberation and exploration. Thus, the alma mater tourists' yearning to return to their college campus is different from but also similar to paying homage to a religious center, such as Muslims' visits to Mecca.

In addition, despite a college campus evolving over time and deviating from the original memories of alma mater tourists, it still harbors the utmost existential authenticity. They relieved themselves away from the obligations and constraints of society and others whilst in college. They were most unfettered in their choices of activities and expressions of their thoughts. This fairyland can be considered the most authentic stage of a life course where one is most authentic to oneself. The memory and the formed identity of this stage could intrigue their nostalgic feelings, eliciting a desire to travel back in time and revisit their alma mater (Davis, 1979; Fairley, 2003).

The results did not reveal interesting push factors that initiated the alma mater visits; the pull factors revolved around the college campus: a guest lecture on campus, meeting students, and a bar closure. The last case is especially revealing in its pure nostalgic nature. The physical object of the past will cease to exist soon; the nostalgic force is so powerful that it will attract an alumnus to drive many hours to pay a visit.

4. Conclusion

This exploratory study recruited 14 alumni of a public university to investigate the motivation and experience of alma mater tourists. Based on life course theory, the analysis provides a sociological analysis of this type of tourist and proposes a conceptual model of alma mater tourists. The visit to one's alma mater was viewed as one's return to the Home of Exploration. The model explains the motivations and experiences of alma mater tourists, their seeking of a center and authenticity, and the push and pull factors in this experience.

Though a seemingly limited sample, this group covers various age groups, majors, and post-college careers, representing a general alma mater travel experience. Alma mater tourists usually enjoy a good time and are happy with their visits; they feel happy, joyful, and nostalgic when traveling back. They witnessed continuous growth and urbanization in the area. They sometimes felt sad or nostalgic, but some felt it was inevitable. The tourists' devotion to the University can be compared to religious fervor: they symbolized the meaning of the University as "pride", "home," and "family" where they found themselves, formed their identity, and sometimes found their partners.

4.1. Theoretical contributions

Through systematic and thematic analysis of the interviews, we built on the life course theory and proposed a conceptual model of alma mater

visit: one's alma mater represents the Home of Exploration during their emerging adulthood years that draws their alumni back to visit their campus. This is a liminal time and space between a dependent child and an independent adult. In this space, one is truly free from societal constraints and most authentic in one's free will. This conceptualization helps to decipher the alma mater's visitation experience. The alma mater tourists are seeking authenticity – the authentic self in the year of walkabout and exploration. The place is not a religious center, but a different center in that it may be the most secular place but most authentic to oneself.

Alma mater tourism is consistent with other types of nostalgia tourism. Sport tourists develop nostalgic feelings toward their past trips to games, motivating them to revisit a sporting event (Fairley, 2003). Moreover, the self-identity of sport tourists is shaped by both their personal attachment to the sports team and their collective identity in the sports fan group. Diaspora tourists return to their home country to fulfill their longing for "home" and reconnect with their past (Huang, Hung, & Chen, 2018). The self-identity of diaspora tourists can be transmitted from generation to generation through traditions, memories, language, and cultural customs (Berg & Eckstein, 2009).

Likewise, one can claim part ownership of one's alma mater. College graduates often perceive themselves as an organic part of a group from which they derive their self-identify; such organizational identification drives their willingness to convert others, such as encouraging their offspring and acquaintances to attend the same college as themselves (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). However, the feeling of loss and the unstoppable clock of life is even more prominent due to the feeling of past ownership. The place in the past has changed, and the place is not *my* place anymore, with newer buildings and younger faces. However, the physical locations still bear traces of the past, preserving memories and stories that evoke a sense of nostalgia for their college years—a time when they truly felt free and liberated. Visits to one's alma mater serve as a form of identity affirmation for alumni, in that it reminds oneself of the way they found their identity. Thus, we argue that the alma mater tourist is a type of nostalgia tourism where one is not only seeking "the place", but also seeking their authentic self. The blend of the two creates a blurry but glamorized movie scene in which the visitor is the protagonist. Thus, place attachment may grow even stronger with each visit when they reenact that scene again and again.

4.2. Marketing and management implications

To market to alma mater tourists, marketers should focus on the constraints and opportunistic factors instead of the main motivation. The motivation will always be there for homecoming: the marketers should remind the alumni that it is a good time to do so, disregarding all the hassle in their own lives. To stimulate higher consumer spending and repeated visitation, marketers can promote activities beyond the college campus to downtown and the surrounding areas. The relationship between those areas and the University will help leverage this strong loyalty and interest to one's alma mater for the economic benefit of the greater area.

A nostalgic theme could be utilized more heavily in local tourism marketing and management for college towns. It is important to work more closely with the alumni association or office. For example, designing university-based tour activities during the off-season, and having past professors and current students give tours or lectures could also be a good way to bring the alumni back more frequently especially during low tourist seasons.

It seems that the alumni treasure the places, buildings, and environment during their college years. This attachment calls for increased preservation efforts for certain iconic buildings, bars, restaurants, or landscapes. If preservation is not possible, the salvation of artifacts, images, or videos could help secure part of the past. In addition, technologies could be used to present the past along with the present. For example, augmented reality applications can be developed when past images or text can be overlaid on current buildings, streets, and landscapes.

4.3. Limitations and future research

The specific institution in the study is located in the United States and may possess certain unique characteristics: its strong American football tradition, the public nature of the university recruiting undergraduate students mostly from the same state, and its rather isolated college town. All these factors may have contributed to a strong bonding of the student body, thus, creating a strong feeling of *home*. To generalize the results and the framework to other higher educational institutions, researchers need to conduct studies in different types of universities and colleges, in the United States and also other countries.

While the current study has identified the general motivations and experiences of alma mater travel after emerging adulthood, it has not explored the potential differences among age groups in different life stages. Future studies can investigate whether intentions and motivations for alma mater visits undergo changes throughout an individual's life course.

Appendix A. Semi-structured interview guide

Interviewer: _____ Location: _____
Date:_2018 Interview #_

I. **Trip Details**
  1. When was your most recent trip to the area?
      A. *If talking about a recent past trip:*
          i. When did you travel? How long were you in town?
            a. If an overnight trip, where did you stay?
          ii. What mode of transportation did you use for your trip to/ from the area?
          iii. With whom did you travel to the area?

a. Family? Spouse? Any friends?

b. If friends – were they friends you met while a university student, or after?

iv. Did you meet up with anyone else, or visit anyone in the area?

B. *If talking about a trip they are currently on:*

i. What day did you arrive? What day will you depart?

a. If an overnight trip, where are you staying?

ii. What mode of transportation did you use for your trip to/from the area?

iii. With whom are you traveling?

iv. Are you visiting anyone or meeting up with anyone else during your trip?

a. Family? Spouse? Any friends?

b. If friends – were they friends you met while a university student, or after?

2. The previous questions referred specifically to your most recent trip. Now, we have a few general questions about visiting the area.

A. In general, how often do you come back to the area? (Number of times per month/per year/etc.)

B. In the years since you graduated from the University, have your trips to the area changed?

i. For example, do you travel more or less often than in the first few years after graduating?

ii. Have your reasons for visiting or the activities you do here changed over time?

iii. How? Why?

C. When you visit the area, who do you generally or usually travel with?

i. Is there anyone else you have traveled with to the area in the past?

D. When you visit the area, where do you usually stay the night?

i. Is there anywhere else you have stayed in the past?

II. Pre-trip Decision Making

1. Thinking again about your most recent trip to the area, why did you decide to make this trip? Or, what was the purpose of this trip?

2. How did you go about planning this trip?

A. Did you ask anyone for information? If yes, who?

B. Did you search for information online? If yes, where did you search?

i. What sites did you use?

ii. Were there any key words or phrases you used as search terms?

iii. Did you use social media?

C. Did you refer any paper materials (e.g. brochures, newspapers, books, magazines, flyers, etc.)?

i. If so, which?

3. Are you familiar with the Convention and Visitors Bureau of the area?

4. Have you ever been to the tourism bureau's website?

III. Personal Experiences during Trip

1. What places/locations did you visit?

A. *For each question: probe for more. Why? What did you do there? Had you been there / done that before? What other places did you visit?*

2. What activities did you do?

A. Did you go out for any food or drink?

B. Did you purchase any memorabilia?

C. Did you make any other purchases?

D. What activities met your expectations and/or satisfied your needs during your trip?

3. What else did you want to see or do that you didn't have a chance to see or do?

A. Why didn't you have the chance to see/do that?

4. Was there anything about this trip that you did not enjoy?

A. Why? What could have improved that?

5. On this trip, did you notice anything new or different about the area?

A. If yes, what?

B. How did you feel about this change?

6. On this trip, did you see or experience anything unexpected?

A. What?

B. How did you feel about it?

7. Why was this trip important to you? Did it have any special meanings to you?

8. What emotions did you experience on this trip? What feelings stood out to you?

9. Did your most recent trip to the area change anything about your life?

10. Is there anything else you'd like to say about this particular trip? Anything else about this experience that stood out to you?

IV. Expectations and experience about nostalgia tourism in the area;

1. What is the area lacking that could draw you back? What would make you more eager to visit, or cause you to visit the area more frequently?

2. What memories do you have from your undergraduate years?

3. What activities / groups / clubs were you involved in as an undergraduate?

4. Did you attend the main campus for four years? If not, what other schools or branch campuses did you attend? How many years were you at the University Park campus?

5. Where did you live when you attended the main campus? (Dorms, Greek life house, off-campus house or apartment, at home with parents, other place, etc.)

6. What about your most recent trip reminded you of your undergraduate years?

7. Are there any traditions from your undergraduate years that you still keep up?

8. After you graduated from the University, what did you do next?

A. Where did you move?

B. What was your first job after college?

V. Background and Demographic Information

1. Where did you grow up? Or, where did you live prior to attending the University?

2. Why did you choose to go to college at the University?

3. What year did you graduate from the University?

4. Which department were you in at the University, or what was your major?

5. What is the highest degree you have earned from the University?

6. Did you attend any other school or pursue any other education after the University?

7. What do you currently do for a living?

8. Where do you currently reside?

9. How old are you?

10. Do you have any family members who attended the University?

11. Are you a member of the the University Alumni Association?

12. Do you plan to visit the area again in the future?

A. Why?

B. When? Do you have any specific plans made?

Final Question: If you had to sum it up in a few sentences, what does the University mean to you? Is there anything else that you would like to say about the University or your time there?

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Bing Pan is professor in Commercial Recreation and Tourism at Penn State University researching data analytics in tourism and parks.

Lucy Harbor is the Director of Outdoor Recreation Research in RRC Associates.

Soyoung Park is Assistant Professor at Florida Atlantic University.

Rui Li is marketing analyst at Red Cube Production Inc.

Ashley Schroeder is Director of Destination Analytics at Future Partners.

Yaqi Gong is a doctoral student at Penn State University.