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Amy Gregory, Xiaoxiao Fu,

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Examining family cohesion's influence on resort vacation satisfaction

Amy Gregory and Xiaoxiao Fu
*Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida,
Orlando, Florida, USA*

Abstract

Purpose – Although much satisfaction research examines the role of demographics, few examine the phenomena of family cohesion or travel party composition and the role they play in influencing satisfaction. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to leverage the two to further understand satisfaction.

Design/methodology/approach – Data from 400 vacationing families were analyzed to examine the factors of family cohesion, activity satisfaction and overall vacation satisfaction.

Findings – Contrary to previous research, the results suggest that family cohesion is comprised of two primary factors: emotional bonding and decision making, family boundaries and coalitions. The findings suggest that family cohesion and activity satisfaction contributed to overall vacation satisfaction. However, as an addition to extant research, the findings demonstrate that travel party size moderated this relationship.

Research limitations/implications – This research challenges findings of extant research on family cohesion and extends satisfaction research by introducing the effect of family cohesion and travel party composition. Both suggest and offer opportunities for future academic research. Practically speaking, this research also provides insight for practitioners as to why “travel party composition” should be regarded as an operative, rather than a descriptive term.

Practical implications – Practically speaking, this research also provides insight for practitioners as to why “travel party composition” should be regarded as an operative, rather than a descriptive term. Given the results of this research, the moderating effect of travel party composition is an interesting academic finding. Operationalizing this component in practice is challenging. However, practitioners can take the knowledge of the positive relationships between family cohesion, participation in activities, and overall vacation satisfaction, as well as the moderating effect of travel party composition, into account when evaluating guest satisfaction scores, programming activities, and resolving guest issues.

Originality/value – In addition to challenging findings of prior research, this research utilizes data gathered during family vacations; therefore not relying on recall or issues with memory effect. In addition, it extends existing research through the exploration of moderating variables. Finally, the research has practical implications for practitioners to attend to satisfaction of the increasing global family leisure market.

Keywords Satisfaction, Activities, Family cohesion, Family leisure, Lodging management, Resort operations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

According to the American Automobile Association (AAA), family vacations remain a priority for millions of families in the USA. These vacations include Spring Break, summer vacations and long holiday weekends throughout the 2017 calendar year for more than one third (35 percent) of American families; numbers consistent with 2016 and indicative that family vacations are not wavering. AAA reports that 70 percent of American families will take one or two family vacations, but also points out that 38 percent of American families plan to take three or more vacations this year; a 13 point increase from 2016. AAA's Vice President of Travel and Publishing attributes the popularity of family vacations to the fact that “families continue to see the value of traveling as a way to bond and reconnect in today's busy world.” Road trips with the family, as well as visits to national parks and theme parks remain the most popular domestic vacations, flooding hotel accommodations with millions of room nights annually. According to the American Hotel & Lodging Association, more than \$250 billion is spent by family leisure travelers annually on lodging accommodations.



Family leisure travel continues to be a sizeable segment within the USA. However, it is unclear whether current product positioning and marketing strategies are correctly focused on this enduring target market.

Popular trade news suggests that evolutions in leisure travel are focused on experiences as a way to differentiate resort accommodations. More commonly resorts seek to create a unique experience by leveraging the unique aspects of the local environment. Guests are immersed in scents, menus, excursions, and activities that are representative of the local area and that incorporate local communities and cultures (e.g. Hayward, 2005; Hotel News Now, 2016, p. 52).

Market segmentation approaches have typically grouped individuals according to age, marital status, affiliation, travel purpose, and so on. However, recent research suggests that travelers within age groups have different needs and make different choices in vacation activity selection (Torres, 2015). Families, comprised of individuals of varying ages, are the primary visitors to resorts and due to the extended nature of resort vacations, individuals look to the resort to entertain their family and to provide experiences that reflect the local environment (Mill, 2011). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the resort to provide activities that are enjoyable and varied throughout the duration of the guests' stays.

Activities enhance vacations and satisfaction (Kim *et al.*, 2012), however, the guest composition, as well as the strength of the guests' interrelationships, may provide an alternate explanation for vacation satisfaction (Lehto *et al.*, 2009) through family system theory. In addition, the cohesiveness of the various travel parties may be enhanced by activities; thereby leading to improvements in the overall guest experience, and by extending findings of prior research, perhaps improvements in societal outcomes. The phenomenon of family cohesion has been investigated in a variety of sociological contexts, with recent extension into the experiential context of family vacations (Lehto *et al.*, 2009). However, current literature is limited in that it describes the factors of family cohesion and relates that to overall vacation satisfaction, but does not delve further into cause or explanation. To that end, this research examines the phenomena of family cohesion and its effect on overall vacation satisfaction. In addition, as an extension of existing research, this study delves into the moderating effect that travel party size may have on the aforementioned variables. Current research on family cohesion, leisure activity participation, and overall vacation satisfaction are devoid of investigation into travel party; despite identifying stronger relationships among larger travel parties (Lehto *et al.*, 2012). In fact, on a larger scale, research appears to apply travel party as a descriptive term rather than an operative variable that when investigated may further inform academic inquiry and practical application.

Literature review

Family has been considered as a system in social and behavioral science (Broderick, 1993). It is "a system focusing on general dimensions of family interaction and taking into account all family members" (Kreppner and Lerner, 1989, p. 6). Probably one of the most widely used paradigms in family research is the family system theory (Orthner and Mancini, 1990). It holds that families are comprised of multiple members that work as interconnected systems which are goal directed, self-correcting, dynamic, and both affect and are affected by their environment (White *et al.*, 2002). As one of the most widely utilized models developed based on family system paradigm, Olson's (1986, 1989) Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems postulates that family functioning is contingent upon two dimensions, family cohesion, and family adaptability. Family cohesion is characterized as "the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another" (Olson, 1993, p. 105). Referring to the closeness, affection, support, and caring among family members (Barber and Buehler, 1996), this dimension "balances the importance of independence or differentiation with the mutuality of being a member of a family system" (Zabriskie and McCormick, 2001, p. 281).

Since families always entail a series of intrapersonal interactions and family connection is important for a healthy family, family cohesion has been viewed as an important domain for understanding family functioning.

Family cohesion has been studied in a variety of contexts including peer victimization (Jiang *et al.*, 2016), caregiving (e.g. Deusivania Vieira da Silva *et al.*, 2016; Koutra *et al.*, 2016), child development (e.g. Jaggars *et al.*, 2015; Mitchell *et al.*, 2016; Rabinowitz *et al.*, 2016; Shekera Stubbs, 2015). The findings suggest that low (or lack of) family cohesion is positively related to negative sociological or developmental outcomes. However, few studies have investigated the phenomena of family cohesion in experiential contexts; despite the strong connection between families and leisure, as well as the evidence that suggests that leisure time positively benefits individual's and families' physical and emotional well-being (Buswell *et al.*, 2012; Orthner and Mancini, 1990).

Family leisure can be an important resource for family cohesion since "family strength or cohesiveness is related to the family's use of leisure time" (Hawkes, 1991, p. 424). The scale of Family Function and Leisure Travel, adopted from FACES II (Olson, 1993), has been used to measure family functioning in the travel context using a five-point scale (1 = almost never, 2 = once in a while, 3 = sometimes, 4 = frequently, and 5 = almost always). The original FACES II contains 30 items, 16 of which pertain to cohesion and 14 to adaptation. The 16 items related to family cohesion have been adopted in research related to family leisure. The specific measurement of family cohesion consists of emotional bonding, family boundaries, coalitions, time, space, decision making, and interests and recreation. Lehto *et al.* (2009) explored the dimensionality of family cohesion and uncovered three factors: emotional bonding, family boundaries, and coalitions and decision making/functional bonding. Family boundaries, unlike the other two dimensions, address the separateness of family during vacation. Through investigation of these three factors, Lehto identified families that were separated or connected in an effort to inform family leisure behaviors.

The involvement in family leisure activities can provide companionship for family members, strengthen family bonds, and consolidate family values and traditions (Shaw, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2008). The shared leisure activities can be organized for the benefit of certain family members such as children and for the entire family. Family leisure activity has been investigated in terms of its relationship with family cohesion among other factors, and although researchers find relationships, there are issues in finding an acceptable scale that resolves relations among other family measures, including family cohesion (Melton *et al.*, 2016). It is, thus, reasonable to speculate that family leisure participation is a valuable contributor to family cohesion. A satisfying and unifying shared family leisure or vacation experience could enhance the family members' togetherness. In addition to the role of shared family activities in promoting family connectedness and cohesiveness, it also can be assumed that family cohesion contributes positively to satisfying family vacation experiences, a proposition rarely tested in the existing literature.

Although previous studies have demonstrated the impact of family cohesion on children's development and marital satisfaction (e.g. Lindahl and Malik, 2011), such importance is largely limited in the family vacation context. It is likely that the cohesiveness and collective identity developed through family vacations enhances the overall satisfaction with family vacations. Therefore, this research aims to understand the relationship between resort activities, vacation satisfaction, and family cohesion. More specifically, this research seeks to investigate the following hypotheses as a basis of comparative evaluation with existing research:

- H1. Satisfaction with vacation activities contributes positively to the overall satisfaction with the vacation.
- H2. Family emotional bonding and decision making contributes positively to the overall satisfaction with family vacation.

In addition, due to nature of family boundaries, which addresses the separateness of family during leisure activities, we propose that:

H3. The establishment of family boundaries contributes negatively to the overall satisfaction with family vacation.

Finally, it is likely that travel party is important for the overall satisfaction, since it has been found that the social interaction plays an important role in lodging experiences (Cetin and Walls, 2015). However, the effect of travel party size has not been investigated as an operative variable, this research also seeks to understand the interactions among travel party size, resort activity satisfaction, and overall resort vacation satisfaction:

H4. Travel party size moderates the relationship between resort activity satisfaction and overall satisfaction with resort vacation.

Methodology

To respond to the foundational research question that investigates the phenomena of family cohesion and its effect on overall vacation satisfaction, a survey instrument containing 26 items was created. The survey contained 16 items related to family cohesion, 6 items related to demographics, and 4 items related to activity choices and satisfaction. The operational definition used in this study for family is extended family, which means relationships extending beyond the nuclear family, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles, etc. Seven resorts in the Orlando, Florida area were selected for inclusion in the research project. As one of the top tourist destinations in the world, Orlando is a suitable location from which to gather information from a variety of leisure travelers. The seven resorts were chosen based on physical location, size, and affiliation with a local trade association assisting with the data collection. The resorts are each located in the various tourist geographic tracts as identified by Smith Travel Research; thereby adding to the generalizability of the study findings. Resorts, rather than hotels, were selected in order to increase the likelihood of reaching families, including extended families, during their leisure travel. Qualifying questions were included at the beginning of the survey to ensure that participants were at the resort for leisure purposes and traveling with other family members. Paper surveys were distributed at the mid-point of guests' stays by resort staff, while electronic surveys were collected by the research team at various locations within each of the resorts. Resort staff assisted the researchers by providing schedules of events, identifying high-traffic locations on the resort property and by introducing the survey opportunity to the guests. Guests over 18 years of age were invited to participate in the survey and more than one survey could be completed by each traveling party.

Scales for family cohesion were adopted from Lehto *et al.* (2009) and Lehto *et al.* (2012). Satisfaction was assessed using three questions: "Please indicate how satisfied you are overall with the activities currently offered by this resort," "Overall, I am satisfied with my vacation," and "I am glad I took this vacation." All questions were measured on a five-point Likert scale. Demographic questions related to age, gender, length of vacation, and travel party sizes were also included. Travel party size measured with a text response to the question "How many individuals in total are/were you vacationing with on this vacation?" was recoded into 0 ("small," 1-5) and 1 ("large," above 5). Length of vacation was measured with a five-point scale: 1 ("1 night"), 2 ("2 - 4 nights"), 3 ("5 - 7 nights"), 4 ("8 - 10 nights"), and 5 ("more than 10 nights").

Data analysis

The survey was initiated by 412 individuals. Of those, 38 surveys were eliminated as non-qualified due to missing responses to travel party size and travel purpose, or lack of

participation in activities while on that vacation. An additional 14 surveys were initiated but not completed, leaving 360 usable survey responses for analysis. Of the 360 respondents, the majority (62 percent) were female. From an age perspective, the bulk (34 percent) were aged 36-50, the remainder 51-65 (28 percent), 26-35 (14 percent), 18-25 (12 percent), and 66-87 (12 percent). The majority (74 percent) are domestic visitors from the USA. About 76 percent of guests stayed in the resorts for more than five nights and 60 percent traveled with five or more companions.

IBM SPSS 22.0 was used to conduct descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression. Exploratory factor analysis using principal components analysis was used to examine the dimensions of the family cohesion construct. Multiple regression analysis was run on the overall vacation satisfaction, satisfaction with resort activities, family cohesion (using Lehto's measures), with demographic and visit-related information (age, gender, country of origin, guest type, length of vacation, and travel party size) as independent variables. Assumptions for multiple regression analysis were met, including correlations among the variables revealing no issues or need to exclude variables from the analysis. Potential moderation effects of travel party size were also tested.

Results

Dimensions of family cohesion

Factor analysis was conducted to assess the dimensionality of the 16-item family cohesion scale (Lehto *et al.*, 2012). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.892, exceeding the recommended level of 0.6 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was found to be statistically significant, which supports the factorability of the correlation matrix (Pallant, 2013). Principal component analysis using varimax as the method of rotation suggested two components with eigenvalues great than 1. Together, the two factors explained about 62.4 percent of variances. All factors demonstrated reasonable factor loadings (> 0.40).

While these results produced a stronger variance explained than the Lehto *et al.*'s (2009, 2012) studies of 55.75 percent, a two- instead of three-factor solution emerged. Of the four factors from the "Coalitions and decision making" factor of Lehto *et al.*'s (2009, 2012) studies, two loaded on "Emotional bonding" and two loaded "Family boundaries." As a result the factors were renamed as "Emotional bonding and decision making" and "Family boundaries and coalitions" as illustrated in Table I. Compared to the Lehto *et al.*'s (2009, 2012) studies, the results revealed higher loadings than the previous studies.

As an exploratory test, we investigated the interactions of emotional bonding and family boundaries with activity satisfaction. As mentioned previously, the existing literature has established the factors of family cohesion and overall vacation satisfaction, yet further research has yet to be conducted in relation to moderators, such as travel party size, and interactions of the factors with components of the vacation. As this study investigates activity satisfaction, we were curious to see what the data would reveal in terms of interactions of our two identified family cohesion factors (emotional bonding and family boundaries). Checks for reasonableness of the data and insignificant results of the Levene's test, then progressed to examination for interaction effects. However, this resulted in insignificant interaction effects indicating that there is no difference in the effects on activity satisfaction $F(7, 263) = 1.939, p = 0.064$. However, there was a significant main effect for emotional bonding $F(4, 263) = 2.024, p = 0.092$ and activity satisfaction (small according to Cohen's criteria), but not for family boundaries $F(3, 263) = 3.099, p = 0.052$. *Post hoc* comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for activity satisfaction for greater emotional bonding was significantly different from lower family bonding values.

Factors	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	Variance explained (%)
<i>Factor 1: emotional bonding and decision making</i>			
Family members are supportive of each other during leisure trips	0.888	7.24	45.25
Traveling together as a family makes us closer to each other	0.867		
Family members feel close to each other while traveling together	0.858		
While traveling, family members share interests and experiences with each other	0.836		
Our family travels together well	0.814		
Traveling with family members is quality time well spent	0.796		
Traveling together makes our family ties stronger	0.780		
While traveling together, family members respect each other's personal time and space	0.761		
While traveling, family members go along with what the family decides to do	0.713		
Tension within my family is more relaxed while traveling together	0.702		
While traveling together, my family enjoys participating in the same activities	0.627		
When planning a trip, family members consult other family members on personal decisions	0.561		
<i>Factor 2: family boundaries and coalitions</i>			
It is easier to plan a trip with people outside the family than with my family members	0.891	2.14	17.12
It is easier to travel with people outside the family than with my family members	0.871		
In our family, everyone goes his/her own way when it comes to leisure travel	0.780		
While traveling, family members pair up rather than do things as a total family	0.684		

Table I.
Dimensions of
family cohesion

Relationship between overall vacation satisfaction and potential predictors

To examine the relationship between overall vacation satisfaction and proposed predictors, multiple regression analysis was used. Besides the major constructs, six control variables (age, gender, country of origin, guest type, length of vacation, and travel party size) were included in the model. The results from the multiple regression analysis are shown in Table II. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = 0.328$, $F(9, 362) = 4.839$, $p < 0.00$). This suggests that satisfaction with resort activities and family cohesion explained a significant amount of the variation in overall vacation satisfaction. An examination of the regression coefficients

Variables	<i>B</i> (SE)	β
(Constant)	4.068** (0.146)	
Ownership	0.007 (0.041)	0.009
Length	-0.029 (0.021)	-0.073
Country of origin	0.000 (0.001)	0.016
Gender	0.022 (0.041)	0.027
Travel party size	0.017 (0.019)	0.043
Age	0.012 (0.013)	0.049
Satisfaction with resort activities	0.102** (0.020)	0.263
Emotional bonding and decision making	0.059* (0.022)	0.136
Family boundaries and coalitions	0.008 (0.022)	0.019

Notes: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$

Table II.
Multiple regression
analysis results

indicated that among the three variables, two had a positive influence on overall vacation satisfaction (satisfaction with resort activities: $\beta = 0.263$; emotional bonding and decision making: $\beta = 0.136$), thus *H1* and *H2* were supported. The results further indicated that satisfaction with resort activities was the stronger predictor of overall vacation satisfaction, followed by emotional bonding and decision making. As expected, family boundaries and coalitions did not have a strong relationship with overall vacation satisfaction ($\beta = 0.019$, $p = 0.714$), thus *H3* was also supported.

A regression-based moderation analysis was also performed to test the proposed moderating effect of travel party size. Using the continuous variables of travel party size revealed no moderation effect. For further investigation, the variable was recoded to differentiate between small (fewer than five persons) and large (five or more persons) travel party sizes. Specifically, our analysis followed Hayes' PROCESS procedure (Hayes, 2013) with satisfaction with resort activities specified as the independent variable, travel party size specified as the moderator, and overall vacation satisfaction as the dependent variable. The model was significant ($R^2 = 0.28$, $F(5, 362) = 9.21$, $p < 0.00$). That is, travel party size (small or big) moderates the relationship between activity satisfaction and overall satisfaction. Therefore, *H4* was supported.

Discussion and implications

A closer look at the results of the current study reveals interesting insights. The study is somewhat, though not completely consistent with existing literature. First, the factor analysis yielded two factors, namely "Emotional Bonding and Decision Making" and "Family Boundaries and Coalitions." While the former emphasizes the togetherness of family during the resort vacation, the latter addresses the separateness of family with negative connotations. Overall, the family cohesion scale produced a stronger variance of 62.4 percent than previous studies by Lehto *et al.* (2009, 2012) at 55.75 percent. A comparison in the data collection method may suggest a delay or memory effect since the Lehto *et al.*'s (2012) studies relied upon studies that were completed by family travelers upon completion of their vacation, while this survey was completed during the respondents' vacation experience. A departure from the previous studies was the reduction of one factor in the family cohesion construct, which also produced higher loadings than the previous studies with the exception of one coalition factor. While this study represents a pioneering effort in validating the applicability of the family cohesion scale in a resort setting, future research can examine if conducting the survey while on vacation repeatedly produces a stronger explained variance.

Second, consistent with literature, the regression model revealed that emotional bonding and decision making was a predictor of overall vacation satisfaction. This finding provides empirical support to previous literature such as Lehto *et al.* (2009, 2012) and Gram (2005) that family functioning during vacation contributes to a meaningful family vacation experience. In addition, satisfaction with resort activities was the stronger predictor of overall vacation satisfaction, which also attests to Lehto *et al.* (2009) that activity programs would enhance family vacation satisfaction. Further, the emotional bonding component of family cohesion was seen to have an effect on activity satisfaction. The importance of doing activities together sheds light on managerial decisions as practitioners evaluate their resort activities programs and understand the implications of family-oriented resort activities for the overall satisfaction of their guests' vacation experiences. Though Torres (2015) suggests, the individual members of a vacation party likely have different needs, this research suggests that families as a unit and the connections among those family members, may influence satisfaction. While resorts are accustomed to attracting families as a market segment, attention should be paid to the family unit when it comes to activities programming and evaluation. Creating activities that evoke positive emotional bonding may have immediate

and long lasting positive effects (Depue and Morrone-Strupinsky, 2005). Psychologists suggest activities where family members play together and there is physical closeness, enjoyment, and communication may strengthen family bonding. Such activities at a resort could include board games, demonstrative and interactive cooking lessons, or family identity creation, i.e., a flag, poem, song, vacation scrapbook. Instructing staff to use appropriate terminology that refers to closeness, enjoyment, communication, and recognition of the family unit when initiating and moderating family activities may also have a subliminal effect in enhancing positive bonds.

Third and a unique contribution of the study, there was support for the moderating effect of travel party size on the relationship between activity satisfaction and overall satisfaction. This suggests that for small-size families, the impact of activity satisfaction on overall resort vacation satisfaction would be stronger. Interestingly enough, the study of travel party size or composition is typically utilized as a descriptive variable in hospitality literature, i.e., Rashidi and Koo (2016), and So and Lehto (2006). However, psychological research suggests a link to family size and happiness, e.g., Knox and Wilson (1978), and Dolińska (2014), with smaller families experiencing greater happiness; an inverse relationship between size and happiness. One could compare the inverse impact of family size and activity satisfaction/vacation satisfaction with psychological studies to suggest similarities. Without question, this effect requires further investigation.

As a pioneering study to investigate family functioning and family vacation experience in resort settings, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by extending the reach of family cohesion as a theoretical concept in relation to resort activities and overall vacation satisfaction. The findings indicate a modification to the family cohesion scale that warrants further study. The confirmation of significant relationships between family cohesion, resort activities satisfaction, and overall vacation satisfaction highlights the importance of family togetherness as a useful means to a successful family vacation. Moreover, the moderating effect of travel party size is an interesting academic finding. Operationalizing this component in practice is challenging, if not unreasonable. However, practitioners can take the knowledge of the positive relationships between family cohesion, participation in activities, and overall vacation satisfaction, as well as the moderating effect of travel party size, into account when evaluating guest satisfaction scores, programming activities, and resolving guest issues. Therefore, practitioners may want to capture travel party size as a data point, in addition to length of stay and purpose of travel.

Limitations and future research

The research focused on the three factors of family cohesion established in the literature. Though the study investigates the factors in a leisure context, it does not examine the factors before or after leisure activities. It may be worthwhile for researchers to examine the various factors of family cohesion before, during, and after leisure activities to understand if any variation can be identified.

Though the study involved resorts in multiple geographic tracts, there is a limitation to the study being conducted only at resorts in Orlando, Florida. While this limitation may result in the study not being broadly generalizable, it also suggests that further research should be conducted within other resort destination markets. Further research in other family vacation destinations, as well as types of vacations, i.e., cruises, guided tours, etc., would be recommended to extend the findings.

In addition to a single destination, the research was also conducted over a singular, albeit popular, family vacation time period. Additional limitations may occur around the timing of the study occurring during Spring Break with further research recommended during the summer family vacation season. Further, Spring Break vacations are typically one week in duration, much like summer vacations. Additional research could be conducted on shorter

term vacations to determine if there are any variations in findings. Moreover, future studies can investigate diverse types of family and different forms of travel parties, including alternatives other than families.

Lastly, this study utilized existing scales for family cohesion. Given the variations in findings for family cohesion, as well as the unique contribution related to travel party size or composition, future research should delve further into the interactions among variables not included in this study. With limited research in this area, in the hospitality sector and beyond, qualitative research delves into the phenomena that exist within family size and travel party composition is warranted.

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Corresponding author

Amy Gregory can be contacted at: Amy.Gregory@UCF.edu