

A Conceptual Framework of Visiting Friends and Relatives

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Abstract

Because of long working hours and the perplexity brought about by city life, individuals have less time to devote to their family and friends. This means that they want to spend their leisure time with them. Individuals visit their friends and relatives as a means of socio-cultural life. As a result, new travel / tourism types such as “Visiting Friends and Relatives” have been formed due to such interactions. Although VFR travel has been known for many years, it is a newly discovered phenomenon. Also, as a category of travel / tourism it is difficult to get enough information about it. Given the fact that there are a significant number of travelers in the world visiting families and friends, it is important, that VFR travel / tourism potential should be taken into consideration. For this purpose, this study will try to draw a comprehensive framework by focusing on VFR travel / tourism concept.

Keywords

Visiting friends and relatives • VFR Travel • Visiting • Hosting • Migration

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During the 20th century, social mobility became more frequent and spatial changes were more visible. When they reach adulthood, children gradually leave their parents and find training or job opportunities in a distant location. In addition, personal property and car ownership have steadily increased, while income has generally risen faster than the cost of running a car. These social changes became an important factor in increasing distances in the 1990s (Cohen & Harris, 1998, pp. 43-44). Tourism is one of the results of these social changes. For most tourists, a tourism activity is a chance to create a feeling of unity for themselves or their family and to establish an authentic relationship (Wang, 1999, p. 364). Briefly, tourism is especially important for family unity, because family members provide an opportunity to spend quality time together (Backer & Lynch, 2017, p. 452).

Thus, a new question arises as to how mobile individuals maintain ties with family, friends and loved ones. The answer is “visiting friends and relatives” (VFR) mobility. The changing parameters and dynamics of these mobility flows have transformed not only the needs and opportunities for VFR travel, but also their meanings (Palovic et al., 2014, p. 265). With global liberalization people travel more in general, and they also visit their friends and relatives more often. Growth in new trip patterns (e.g. the combination of business, leisure, and VFR travel in one trip) has been recognized as yet another source of VFR travel/tourism (Stepchenkova et al., 2015, p. 235). Considering that the ratio of people visiting relatives and friends consists of approximately 37% of total tourism trips in Europe (Eurostat, 2017), more attention should be given to VFR.

VFR-related travel has had a prominent role in tourism literature. Although the excess of VFR travel mobility is not surprising, it is essential to question why it is so important (Hibbert et al., 2013, p. 34).

Conceptual Framework

VFR Travel/Tourism

With the expanding volume of global travel, the characteristics of passengers are also changing. Not just travelling for holiday purposes, people also travel for other reasons, such as VFR. VFR is an important component of family tourism. Families often struggle with the stress of travelling, especially when their children are young. Many families with children at primary school travel to see friends and family as a way of having a break with the support available to ensure some form of leisure can be achieved by the parents (Backer, 2012a, p. 82). In this sense, a family vacation is a unique type of tourism that contributes to the interaction of the family and provides leisure time together (Lehto et al., 2009, p. 463).

Most studies in the tourism and hospitality marketing area have assessed family needs and behavior as if they were the same as for individuals travelling alone and have rarely attempted to understand family travel behavior as a whole (Lehto et al., 2012, p. 837). In the tourism literature, little is known as to which activities are frequently pursued by family vacationers and which vacation activities are perceived as more beneficial for developing healthier family relationships (Lehto et al., 2012, p. 836). In the decision of VFR, it is important to understand the role of family or group interactions. Determining how plans and decisions are made, the roles played by family members, and how conflicts are resolved is significant (Kim et al., 2010, p. 309). The holiday decision-making process can be described in three phases. These include searching for travel and destination information, preparing a holiday plan, and choosing holiday-related facilities (transportation, accommodation, etc.) (Hyde, 2008, p. 713). From a broader perspective Zalatan, (1998, p. 893) states that a holiday trip involves several decision phases. First is an initial trip task: collection of information about the destination, selection and determining the date. Second is financing: arranging financing (e.g., bank loan), purchasing travelers cheques, purchasing services from travel agencies and tour operators, and purchasing tickets. Third is pre-departure: transportation, accommodation, luggage, and other pre-departure tasks arrangements such as medical and insurance. The fourth is the destination: the decisions that tourists take when they are at the destination such as deciding which sites to go, choosing places to spend time and eat at, adjusting the shopping budget, and determining tours and adventures. The decision-making process for a family holiday depends on the interaction of family members. Briefly, mutual interactions between mother, father and children play a decisive role in decision-making (Kozak, 2010, p. 490).

It is important to be able to define VFR travel / tourism in order to understand the decision-making processes of the families and see how it affects tourism activities. With no common description, VFR traveler refers to “first and second-generation immigrants, most commonly ethnically different from the majority population of the country of residence who return to their countries to visit their friends and relatives” (Ma et al., 2015, p. 286). According to Yuan et al. (1995, p. 19) a VFR can be described as one “who reported visiting friends and relatives as the major purpose for the trip”. VFRs include immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, students or displaced persons for any reason (Behrens & Leder, 2012, p. 297). The goal of VFR travelers is to maintain social or cultural ties with the country in which their ancestors are located. It is difficult to determine why VFRs travel. These may be for historical, cultural, or religious reasons, or for the purpose of interactions with people who live in the country of origin for any reason (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013, p. 413). In summary, VFR travelers include people who go to another city or country other than their current citizenship or residence for family reasons or to establish other social

links (Hendel-Paterson & Swanson, 2011, p. 193).

In general, the purpose of the VFR travelers may be to visit their friends or relatives. However, what is not generally considered is that VFR travelers do not necessarily have to stay with friends or relatives. So, it can be stated that there is a small but important group of visitors whose motivation is VFR but who choose to stay in commercial places for various reasons. More explicitly, VFR travelers may choose to stay at the house of a friend or relative but it may not be their friends or relatives who are the main reason for choosing a location. The underlying intention may be to take the holiday, but they are actually VFR travelers (Backer, 2007, p. 369).

Backer & Ritchie (2017, p. 4) state that three different types of VFRs are relevant to understanding potential market categories for destinations. The first is 'pure' VFRs, who are "staying with friends/relatives" and have stated a VFR intention of visit. The second type of VFR traveler is one who stays in commercial accommodation and stated that VFR was their intention of visit. The third VFR type is 'exploitative' VFRs which include those stay with friends/relatives but they do not comment that their intention of visit is VFR. Such VFRs do not classify themselves as VFRs because they often see themselves as being on holiday and are enjoying a break for leisure purposes.

Another issue that should be addressed alongside all of these definitions is whether VFR is a tourism activity or not. According to Backer (2012b, p. 74) it is clear that tourism and travel do not have the same meaning. Although many scientific studies in the field of VFR usually use the term 'VFR tourism', it can be specified that the concept also covers some non-tourist travelers. Some definitions include parameters such as travel distance, duration of stay, or visit intention. For this reason, it is due to the content of the definition to say whether a tourist is a VFR tourist or a traveler.

VFR travel/tourism is one of the most important motivational sources or categories in tourism (Asiedu, 2008, p. 609). Other purposes of travel can be business, convention or meetings, health, education, religion or sport (Chan et al., 2005, p. 459; Tagg & Seaton, 1995, p. 7). As stated by Backer (2007, p. 369) "VFR travel is a form of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives". Along with that according to Josiam & Frazier (2008, p. 39), VFR is not only visiting loved ones who are alive but also visiting those who have died. For this type of tourism, family cemeteries, judicial buildings, libraries, historical societies, newspaper archives, publisher repositories and examples from foreign countries can be given. Additionally, there are five defining features of VFR; "sector, scope, effort, accommodation used, and the focus of the visit" (Pearce & Moscardo, 2006, p. 49):

- (i) *Sector*: VFR can be seen as the main reason for tourism travel, or alternatively it can be one of many holiday motives.
- (ii) *Scope*: Whether the trip is domestic or international.
- (iii) *Effort*: The difference between short and long trips. For small countries, most travel is defined as short travel if it is less than four hours, but it can significantly affect costs of travel between states or regional destinations in major countries.
- (iv) *Accommodation*: The difference between AFR (only with your friends and relatives) and NAFR (not only with your friends and relatives), where the second term refers to travelers who spent at least one night in commercial accommodation as part of their travels.
- (v) *Focus of Visit*: The difference between visiting relatives or friends. This factor may depend on socio-economic and behavioral criteria, such as the difference between a quiet weekend spent with grandparents or a fun event with school friends.

VFR Travel/Tourism in Literature

The academic interest in VFR is fairly new, even though it is a form of tourism/travel that has been around for a long time (Backer, 2012b, p. 74). With the understanding of the benefits of VFR to many countries (Backer, 2010, p. 336), interest in this issue also increased in the literature towards the mid-2000s (Rogerson, 2015, p. 152). The potential for VFR has been recognized for this reason: research on this area has continued to increase (Duval, 2003, p. 267).

One of the most important issues which has been rarely been considered in the literature about VFR is how to define this category. In many studies, the definition of the VFR traveler is determined by a number of criterion questions. When the question “What was the main purpose of your trip?” is asked; the ones who answer ‘to visit a friend or relative’ are defined as VFR’s (Seaton & Palmer, 1997, p. 353). This causes the definition of VFR to be weaker.

There is limited literature on VFR travel/tourism, but it is possible to state that this type of travel is an important travel market for many countries. Further research and information may help to understand VFR travelers’ wishes and needs, which will make sense of VFR tourism’s place in international tourism (Yuan et al., 1995, pp. 20-21). Research on VFR has recently focused on the heterogeneity of the market. Determining VFR as a main objective of an activity or travel, accommodation products used by travelers and national or international travel options are the factors which effect segmentation of VFR (Pennington-Gray, 2003, p. 355).

VFR is categorized as a form of travel that allows participants to feel at home while staying in a foreign place and to get away from the conditions that create the feeling of being away (Uriely, 2010, p. 855). In addition, the VFR literature addresses the impact of homeowners on tourism activities and emphasizing the contribution they make to the economic prosperity of the destination visited, when ignoring the prosperity of the hosts (Shani & Uriely, 2012, p. 422).

Many researchers state that VFR travel is the result of family and friendship relationship. Therefore, VFR is conceptualized in an uncertain way. Although this is partially true, obligations related to family and friends should be considered separately (Janta et al., 2015, p. 585).

Why Is It Underestimated?

Although VFR is a subject that has been on the rise in recent years, many tourism operators and marketing practitioners still misunderstand and overlook this area (Backer, 2008, p. 61). The tourism industry generally considers VFR as a low value market due to their use of unpaid accommodations, as well as the assumption that their personal motivations override any influence marketing efforts may have (Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016, p. 90). The point that should be considered is that VFR passengers are not only tourists who visit friends or relatives, they also use the services provided by the tourism industry (Backer, 2008, p. 60).

VFR is generally assumed to be outside the scope of traditional marketing techniques in travel and tourism. Reasons given for this are (Duval, 2003, p. 270):

- (i) VFR is generally placed in the “other” category by national tourism organizations,
- (ii) Economic impact of VFR is unimportant
- (iii) Social and psychological motivation of VFR travel is not marketable.

A lot of research shows that the VFR market has made an imperative improvement to tourism in many destinations. It has also been noticed that the importance of VFR to Destination Marketing Organizations is increasing (Lee et al., 2005, p. 343).

Although VFR segment of the travel market is not necessarily the most beneficial segment, it provides a strong basis for tourism to be formed within a destination. More importantly, it often leads to the establishment of trade ties that will provide a steady flow of travelers and create other forms of economic development (Ritchie & Crouch, 2011, p. 332). VFR has the capability to atone for the seasonality of other tourism forms and is more resistant during periods of economic recession (Fernandez-Morales et al., 2016, p. 180).

In tourism reports focusing on average daily spending, the economic contribution of VFR travel seems to be minimal. However, since VFR travelers stay in a place for a long time, their spending will take a longer time, so the effect will become more significant (Backer, 2007, p. 374).

Researchers who study in this area have not paid much attention to VFR's since the market is small and difficult to monitor. It is also assumed that VFR travelers stay in the houses of friends or relatives instead of using hotels, restaurants, or visiting tourist areas (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995, p. 38). Similarly, Morrison et al., (1995, p. 49) indicate that VFRs' economic impact is not important as travelers do not benefit from accommodation, restaurants, tourist attraction, etc. However, most statistical studies do not include travelers who visit friends or relatives as they pass through visiting friends and relatives on their way to a primary destination. Therefore, the effects of the expenditures of these travelers are also ignored (Meis et al., 1995, p. 34). In the study conducted by Thrane & Farstad (2011, pp. 48-50) VFR is the most popular travel type of Norwegians who spend at least one night away from home during summer holidays. The results show that travelers spend less than other tourists for this purpose.

Since the activities and statistics on behalf of VFR tourism and travel are not clear, tourism operators have also tended to ignore this category (Backer, 2008, p. 61). The VFR travel and tourism categories require attention, when considering the need to develop and sustain marketing links with the country of origin (Ayikoru, 2015, p. 152). The size and significant contribution to domestic tourism activities and revenues make it necessary to better understand this segment. This kind of perspective gives the opportunity for tourism regions and tourism businesses to understand the needs of this segment and increase their revenues from services therein (Backer et al., 2017, p. 56). Tourism operators and DMOs can influence VFR travelers by advertising local attractions and activities to the residents who can then in turn make recommendations to their visiting friends and relatives (Yousuf & Backer, 2015, p. 1). By way of example, Australia's official tourist data divide VFR into two types: purpose of visit and type of accommodation. When the data based on the purpose of the visit is taken into consideration instead of the data based on the accommodation, tourists' overnight rate is decreasing (Backer, 2010, p. 334). Nevertheless, VFR is seen as a suitable opportunity to reduce the major fluctuations in Australia's tourism flow and to maintain market imbalance in tourism shocks. The most important reason for this is the relationship between VFR and migration. Australia's population is expected to grow up to 37.6 million by 2050. This growth is predicted to result from migration rather than increases in the Australian-born population. Tourism flows operate in both directions with VFR coming to Australia and migrants departing Australia for their home countries (Valadkhani et al., 2017, p. 35).

Briefly VFR has been given little attention because of statistical problems and unmeasurable spending. Furthermore, there are no good examples of success in this sector either (Backer, 2007, p. 368). Thus, VFR can be considered as a ‘Forgotten’ Phenomenon: But Why? Here are the seven major reasons (Backer, 2007, pp. 368-371):

- (i) *Absence of a general definition*: There is no clear definition of VFR travel in the literature. Although there are numerous definitions for tourism and subcategories, there is a lack of thought and analysis for VFR phenomenon.
- (ii) *Inconsistency with current data*: Accommodation does not have to be the main purpose. Therefore, ratios vary depending on which category the VFR enters.
- (iii) *Difficulties with measurement*: Collection of data from accommodation invoices is not efficient. In order to achieve more extensive results, it is important that the hosts and the visiting partners are involved.
- (iv) *Lack of lobbying*: Another important reason why VFR travel is neglected is that there is not a real success story in this sector.
- (v) *The small economic impact*: The perceived minimal economic impact in this segment.
- (vi) *Tourism text books*: Insufficient concern about this subject in tourism books.
- (vii) *VFR travelers are difficult to influence*: There is a lack of information about influencing VFR travelers. Since it is not considered in terms of marketing campaigns, it is implemented as a “natural” form of tourism.

In summary, VFR is often considered to be a low-yield market that is immune to marketing and is of less significance to tourism destinations than high-yield pleasure and business tourism. However, there is a growing awareness of the role personal relationships play in tourism decisions, and a discussion is evolving around the marketing opportunities and social development benefits that engaging this group may bring (Griffin, 2013, pp. 783-784).

VFR and Migration

The relationship between tourism and migration plays a pivotal role in conceptual exploration of VFR (Duval, 2003: 269). Migration is commonly defined as “a permanent or long-term change of residence which brings with it a fundamental decoupling of locality, kinship, friendship and way of life” (King & Lulle, 2015, p. 599). The ‘visiting friends and relatives’ type of travel is assumed to be a connection between tourism and migration, a sort of mobility that binds pleasure with social engagements and an experience that blurs the dichotomy of “home and away” (Unger et al., 2016, p. 143).

Previous researches have suggested that the amount and flow of incoming and outgoing VFR is intensely associated with the immigration past of the country (Hu & Morrison, 2002, p. 204). The stronger the culture of immigration, the larger the international VFR market is (Lehto et al., 2001, p. 202). VFR is a form of migration which has a two-way movement between the new destination and the old. Emigrants go back to old country and/or their relatives and friends come out to see them in the new one (Tagg & Seaton, 1995, p. 7). Some studies suggest that VFR is a journey of migration. The main point here is that temporary or permanent immigration activities mediate the establishment of a new friendship and kinship association, which can be explained in the context of “visit-friend-relationships” (Visser, 2003, p. 386).

The relationship between VFR travel and migration can also be explained by the fact that tourists prefer to go to the regions where the local people, with similar cultural characteristics, live. This preference is defined as “cultural proximity”. The reasons for cultural closeness can be various: a common language, the resemblance of architectural structures, the style of food or music, ethnicity etc. (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2013, p. 413). It can be seen from this that VFR travel is able to provide tourists with a strong connection with their past (Larsen et al., 2006, p. 272).

Immigrants who establish a new life for themselves in other countries create a two-way interaction when they visit friends or relatives in the country they are separated from. If a large number of immigrants live at a destination, there will be a larger community of friends / relatives living in the source country. This will create more incentives to visit. Immigrants who go to the source countries for VFR can make a “promotion” of the new countries they live in and also they can promote their new countries in the source country (Dwyer et al., 2014, p. 131). Therefore, encouraging VFR can increase immigrant mobility by helping immigrants improve their ability to connect with friends and families living abroad and feel better about the country they currently live in (Humbracht, 2016, p. 651).

Hosting VFR

VFR offers an opportunity to experience elements of familiarity within the hosts’ home at the visited destination (Shani, 2013, p. 7). There is a two-way link in VFR travel. However, much research has yet to be done on the causes and effects of this two-way relationship. Generally, familial obligations are the reason for visiting. In addition to this, factors such as socialization, relaxation and cultural interaction can be considered as the reasons (Koppenfels, 2015, p. 613).

Due to the fact that visiting friends and relatives is two-sided (visiting and hosting), it is important to look not just from the visitors’ point of view but also from the hosts’ side. From the perspective of the host, there are some impacts (costs-benefits) of hosting friends and relatives. These are summarized in the following table.

Table
Costs and Benefits of Hosting Friends and Relatives

| Impacts | Costs | Benefits |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Spatial Impacts | The restriction of private life, the necessity of sharing some special places in the house with incoming guests such as kitchen and bathroom. | Although it seems like a social necessity to welcome visitors, it is beneficial to be able to establish close relations with these people. |
| Economic Impacts | Shopping more than needed to serve guests; also spending when going out with guests to dinner or accompanying them to visit tourist attractions. | Expenditures can be an investment that would be financially beneficial when they return the visit. |
| Socio-psychological Impacts | Feeling the necessity to be "a good host" can be a source of stress and anxiety both before and during the visit. Homeowners may feel that they have been exploited by guests. | The pleasure of being together with friends and relatives |
| Physical Impacts | Activities such as house cleaning, shopping, food preparation when guests arrive. Activities such as preparing the rooms of incoming guests, Tidying their beds up. The physical tiredness of the hosts after a city tour with guests. | Give more prominence to home cooking and the happiness of being able to eat in the upscale restaurants with the guests |

Source: Shani & Uriely, 2012, pp. 428-431.

As can be seen in the table, there are various costs and benefits of being a host. Hosts feel a couple of obligations such as giving information about the places that their guests can visit and the activities they can attend (Young et al., 2007, p. 498). Briefly they are just like a travel guide. The aim is to please the guests as much as possible. The other important problem that hosts experience is the restriction of private life. They have to share their houses with their friends/relatives or hosts have to cancel some of their plans during this visit. A similar situation for the visitor can also be observed. When looking from the perspective of the visitor feeling the need of privacy at "friends and relatives" homes, this privacy is often weaker than in a paid hotel room. Additionally, being a non-commercial guest also involves dependency in the hosts' schedule and certain social obligations that undermine the ability of the VFRs to achieve situational control (Shani, 2013, p. 11).

Conclusion

Spatial changes have become more prominent with the increase of working hours and social mobility in the last century. Many young people are moving away from their family and friends to study or for business purposes. This distance causes the individuals to want to spend their leisure time with their family and friends. All this mobility has created a new concept, namely VFR travel / tourism.

Besides the change of travel features, the characteristics of passengers are also changing. Individuals do not only travel for the holiday purposes such as recreation, entertainment, culture etc. but also for purposes such as visiting family and friends. With this type of tourism / travel, called VFR, individuals have the chance to spend time with their family and friends, and they also realize their tourism activities.

The basis of VFR travel/tourism is family members and friendship associations. So the thoughts of these individuals are important in terms of understanding this type of travel/tourism. But few studies in the literature have evaluated family behavior and attempted to understand this travel pattern.

There are some implicit points about this type of travel/tourism. Firstly, it is hard to say that “it” is exactly a type of tourism. At this point, individual behavior during the visit is important. VFR in the case of a situation involving visiting relatives or friends only is what literature has so far mainly focused on. To consider it as a type of tourism, tourist consumption conditions should be met. It can be assumed that the literature is weak in this regard.

It is clear that VFR is a significant category for many countries, even though it does not take up much space in the literature. When the needs and requirements of VFR are understood, it will be easier to look at economic aspects. However, VFR travel is ignored because tourism reports generally focus on average daily spending.

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