



That's what friends are for: Emotional solidarity, friendship and social interactions between first-generation immigrants and their visiting friends



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the social interactions between immigrant-hosts and visiting friends (VFs). Through a qualitative approach, the study considers the personal meanings attached to VF visits by first-generation Filipino immigrant households in New Zealand (the hosts) and their respective VFs from the Philippines (the guests). The notion of friendship is largely absent from tourism scholarship, a surprise since tourism revolves around social interactions. Friendship is a special relationship to which people attach great importance. This study contributes to knowledge by utilising the theory of emotional solidarity in a specific cultural context to interpret host-guest interactions oriented around friendship. Emotional solidarity is applied and adapted to situations where travel supports the maintenance of friendship over great distances. Within the growing VFR travel literature, this study is the first to explore the perspectives of both the hosts and visiting friends with respect to social interactions that underpin friendship.

1. Introduction

Families and friends are more widely dispersed than ever. Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel is one form of travel that brings family and friends together for the purpose of (re)connection. The growth of permanent migrant communities as a global phenomenon generates a major source of tourists as a result of immigrants developing and extending international friendship and kinship ties (Schänzel, Brocx, & Sadaraka, 2014; Yousuf & Backer, 2015). Examining VFR travel within the tourism and migration nexus could include tourism-related experiences that involve prior personal relationships (Griffin, 2013, 2017; Palovic, Kam, Janta, Cohen, & Williams, 2014) between hosts and guests. Most of the previous research in VFR travel that analyses the relationship between tourism and migration addresses macro-level flows (Dwyer, Seetaram, Forsyth, & King, 2014; Io, 2015; King & Dwyer, 2015; Massidda, Etzo, & Piras, 2014) and has not considered the micro-level, interpersonal ties responsible for shaping the bonds that exist between people. A study that foregrounds the importance of personal relationships and culture has not yet been undertaken.

Friendship is a special relationship to which people attach great personal and cultural importance not only providing one with a sense of identity, but also confirming social worth (Allan, 1989). Currently, interpretations of friendship in the context of VFR travel research are rare (Backer & King, 2015; Yousuf & Backer, 2017). This study explores

social interactions between first-generation Filipino immigrant households as hosts in New Zealand and their respective VFs from the Philippines as guests. First-generation immigrants, according to the literature, typically have stronger attachments to their former homeland than succeeding generations (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Only VFs from the Philippines – along with their hosts – were chosen as participants; the VFs were interviewed after returning home from their visit to New Zealand. The rationale is that the cultural identity of first-generation immigrants in New Zealand is still evolving while their visitors who reside in the Philippines are still completely rooted in their homeland. This seemingly small but important difference between VFs and their hosts facilitated exchanges that extended beyond travel and friendship to discussions about cultural practices during the course of the research.

Culture is an essential element for understanding the activities of any social group, including VF travel. Although immigrant-hosts and VFs may have the same ethnic background, these groups may have had very different cultural experiences as the former could have been influenced by New Zealand culture. Researchers have signalled the need for studies of visiting friends and relatives that address matters related to culture and ethnicity (Griffin, 2017; Huang, King, & Suntikul, 2017; Schänzel et al., 2014; Yousuf & Backer, 2015). The overall question that guides this research is: How are social interactions between immigrant-hosts and their VFs understood and interpreted by them? The main contribution of this research is its theoretically-informed exploration of

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visits made by friends as well as the hosting practices in support of these visits within a particular cultural context.

VFR is the second largest visitor group in New Zealand after holiday visitors and over the last decade VFR numbers have shown a dramatic increase, up from 412,000 in 1999 to 743,000 in 2008 (an increase of approximately 80%). The number of VFR visitors as a proportion of total arrivals has increased from 26% to 30% over the same period (Ministry of Economic Development, 2009). A recent forecast from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2017) showed that untapped Asian markets are growing strongly despite the smaller visitor base compared to the more dominant Chinese market. For the year ending September 2017, more than 23,000 Filipinos visited New Zealand with holidaymakers staying an average of 14.9 days – the longest duration of stay across Tourism New Zealand's South and Southeast Asian markets (Tourism New Zealand, 2017). Smaller travel markets such as the Philippines have an important role to play within New Zealand's broadening portfolio of international markets. They help to prevent an overreliance on a small number of large travel markets.

Although the Filipino travel market is not an especially large one for New Zealand, Filipinos are a sizeable group of migrants to the country. The Philippines has ranked fifth as a source country for permanent residency approvals and fourth under the skilled migrant category (Department of Labour, 2011). The trend has continued; the Philippines has consistently been in the top five of these categories in New Zealand together with the United Kingdom, China, India and South Africa (Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment, 2016). Filipino residents and skilled migrants in New Zealand can act as hosts for their friends from the Philippines. These hosts are an untapped resource in New Zealand's tourism industry that could significantly increase international visitation. The Filipino community in New Zealand is part of a wider Filipino diaspora (Licuanan, Mahmoud, & Steinmayr, 2015). This New Zealand-based community could be seen as a microcosm; the invitations extended by Filipino hosts in New Zealand to friends who reside in the Philippines no doubt resemble invitations extended by Filipino hosts based in other countries. These invitations, in larger numbers and if encouraged in some fashion, have the potential to boost visitation.

The VF market is a segment within the VFR market worthy of attention for reasons related to scholarly enquiry (due to the scarcity of friendship-related research in tourism studies) and commercial importance (as suggested by the aforementioned statistics). The scholarly contribution of this paper is that it is a theoretically- and culturally-informed exploration of meaning-rich trips involving two distinct but connected groups of friends: immigrant-hosts and their visitors. The paper explores the perspectives of hosts and guests rather than simply one group or the other (e.g., Dutt & Ninov, 2017; Hung, Xiao, & Yang, 2013; Schänzel et al., 2014; Shani, 2013). Travel emerges as an activity that sustains host-guest friendships that are transnational in nature. The theory of emotional solidarity, in conjunction with concepts that speak to aspects of Filipino culture, provide the analytical architecture for this paper. This theory, in its enhanced form, can be used to access the emotional realm that defines the relationship between friends. Research that addresses VFR-related travel in a cultural context is only starting to emerge (Griffin, 2017; Huang et al., 2017). In practical terms, the implication of this study may be beneficial for the tourism industry and immigration policies in immigrant-receiving countries such as New Zealand.

2. Literature review

This study, in broad terms, represents an effort to advance academic discourse related to VFR travel. In particular, the research draws upon scholarly works in a variety of domains: VFR travel research, friendship and social interaction as well as cultural perspectives with respect to hospitality and emotional solidarity. Scholarship across these domains serves as an appropriate foundation for a study of VF travel that

addresses culture and hosting practices. This study requires an understanding of the significance of interpersonal relationships – in this case, the hosts and their VFs.

2.1. VFR travel

The study of VFR travel has experienced a resurgence in recent years. Early work by Jackson (1990) established its significance and set an agenda for subsequent research that is starting to reflect the richness of VFR travel. The growing volume of VFR research has prompted some scholars to prepare comprehensive, article-length reviews (Griffin, 2012; Yousuf & Backer, 2015). These reviews, as well as other studies, have noted a number of patterns. VFR is usually informed by positivist approaches (Griffin, 2012). In addition, some studies of VFR travel are seen to have a marketing- or business-oriented thrust (Backer & Ritchie, 2017; Backer, Leisch, & Dolnicar, 2017; Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007); social interactions between hosts and their visitors are underexplored.

A more holistic approach to studying VFR travel is warranted. At present, hosts and guests are typically studied in isolation. Either the perspectives of the hosts (Dutt & Ninov, 2017; Griffin, 2013; Schänzel et al., 2014; Shani & Urieli, 2011) or the guests (Hung et al., 2013; Shani, 2013) are addressed. Research that combines the two perspectives with respect to VF travel would be a novel and arguably much-needed contribution to the VFR literature.

2.2. Friendship and social interaction

Friendship involves affective, micro-level ties between people that produce positive feeling; concern and care are shown for one's friends (Rawlins, 2017). People make and unmake friendships of their own choosing and according to their own standards; there is mutual involvement or collaboration between two or more individuals constructing a shared social reality. A major and distinctive aspect of friendship is the absence of formal bonds. The relationship is voluntary (Wiseman, 1986) as compared with more institutionalized relationships, such as kinship. People select their friends and, as well, make choices regarding friendships as they either extend (as hosts) or accept/reject (as guests) invitations.

Previous studies of friendship are usually found in social psychology (Derlega & Winstead, 1986), sociology (Moody, 2001), anthropology (Bell & Coleman, 1999) and human resource management (Mao, 2006). Within tourism studies, the notion of friendship remains understudied (Backer & King, 2015; Yousuf & Backer, 2017). For instance, Foley and Hayllar (2007) address friendship in the context of caravan park holidays and found that an important element of the appeal of the parks was the friendships that were created. Overall, however, the personal meanings of friendship in the context of VFR travel research are starkly absent from tourism scholarship considering that tourism revolves around social interactions (Moyle, Croy, & Weiler, 2010; Papathanassis, 2012; White & White, 2008). The study of friendship has yet to consider the maintenance of friendship across great distances. This research proceeded on the assumption that both hosts and guests have meaningful views to share regarding hospitality and friendship within the context of sustaining relationships that are international in scope. Time, money, effort and emotion are invested into staying close to those who are far away. Through visiting friends, there is co-presence and social interaction that sustain familiarity (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007).

Studies of social interaction within tourism typically involve research participants who have not met prior to the trip – for example, backpackers (Murphy, 2001) as well as other types of international visitors (Reichenberger, 2017). What separates the social interactions between hosts and guests in the context of VFR travel from the traditional host-guest relationship (Smith & Brent, 2001) is that it does not involve strangers, but people known to each other through friendship and kinship. VF trips are typically part of previously established,

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