



Interactive mobilities: Conceptualising VFR tourism of international students

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between tourism and migration that has resulted from increasing global mobility is a complex phenomenon. As part of that phenomenon, research has shown a strong connection between international education, particularly at the tertiary level, and tourism. In particular, international students have been found to have a strong impact on the tourism industry of their study country. This paper investigates a specific form of tourism in which international students are involved: Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism. It details an initial conceptual understanding of the relationship between international students and VFR tourism. A conceptual framework is developed to help illustrate this relationship, highlight new avenues for research, and indicate how this relationship connects with the wider tourism–migration literature. The framework suggests that the interface between VFR tourism and international students can be explained through a number of aspects, two of which are addressed in the paper: VFR travel behaviour and host–guest dynamics in VFR tourism of international students. These aspects are analysed throughout the pre-, during, and post study periods. The paper sheds further light on emerging VFR related concepts - such as VFR tourism in a third place - as well as theories regarding the notion of hosts and guests in the modern mobile world. Suggestions for future research are also provided.

1. Introduction

Global mobility has provided opportunities for many industries to develop and grow. It is depicted through movements of populations (e.g., tourists, residents, second-home owners and recreationalists), objects (e.g., capital, resources) and ideas (e.g., information, expertise) across boundaries (Dredge & Jamal, 2013; Shone, Simmons, & Dalziel, 2016). Among consequential phenomena of worldwide mobility are international education (also known as ‘export education’) and tourism. It is increasingly common for people to travel overseas for the purpose of education, especially those who are from developing countries seeking to obtain high quality university degrees in developed countries. On a global scale, it has been estimated that around 4.3 million tertiary students are being educated outside their home country, and this number could double by 2025 (Tourism Industry Association New Zealand, 2013). With such rapid growth projected, the theme of student mobility has become a focus for many researchers.

The importance of international students as a tourism market has been noted in the literature (Glover, 2011; Ryan & Zhang, 2007). Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is one of the forms of tourism in which

international students participate. Although the broad suite of benefits associated with VFR tourism are increasingly recognised by researchers and industry managers, this type of tourism has not been studied to its full potential (Backer, 2012). Research that has focused on the VFR tourism aspect of international students’ behaviour often emphasises their role as hosts for visits by family members and friends (Liu & Ryan, 2011; Shanka & Taylor, 2003), as well as their economic contribution to destination areas (Taylor, Shanka, & Pope, 2004; Weaver, 2003). However, their potential role as VFR guests and the duality that such a conceptualisation presents, appears to have received comparatively sparse attention within this research area.

The argument of this paper is that the intersection between international students and VFR tourism is a dynamic and complex - yet under-researched - area of tourism mobilities. The paper seeks to offer a conceptual discussion of this intersection, which would add to the understanding of the migration–tourism nexus in general. For clarity, it should be emphasised that its focus is on the relationship between two distinctive phenomena: VFR tourism, and international education. It is not concerned with educational tourism as a specific type of tourism.

The paper first provides some context for understanding the

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conceptual model. It does this by, first, reviewing literature on the concept of VFR tourism and the host–guest relationship within this form of tourism. The proposed conceptual framework is then presented and discussed in detail. That discussion considers the VFR experience of international students according to the pre-, during and post- education periods. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of its theoretical contribution and avenues for further research.

2. VFR tourism

2.1. The concept of VFR tourism

Migration contributes to the expansion of individual social networks both domestically and internationally. This has helped facilitate a particular form of tourism, namely VFR. According to Janta, Cohen, and Williams (2015), VFR tourism can be conceptualised socially as a leisure constituent of VFR mobility. It is argued that, after migrating, migrants might decide to take subsequent trips to their former place of residence to visit friends and/or relatives because, as former permanent residents, they would likely have established significant social ties there (Williams & Hall, 2002). Migrants themselves also become a pull factor that motivates visits by friends and relatives from their former place of residence. As such, migration is an important contributing factor to VFR tourism leading to the progressive growth of the tourism-migration relationship (Dwyer, Seetaram, Forsyth, & King, 2014).

Backer (2007) described VFR travel as a form of travel whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives. Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen (2007) posited that ‘VFR tourism’ is about being co-present with ‘significant faces’, being their guests, receiving their hospitality and, perhaps, enjoying their knowledge of local culture. Such an approach raises the following questions: How are ‘significant faces’ to be defined? That is, how close must a friend (or relative) be in order to be considered a “significant face”? At the margins, for example, some travel involves social ‘contacts’, perhaps made via a social network of friends and relatives but not known directly by the tourist. The definition of VFR tourism by Larsen et al. (2007) also emphasises the guests’ perspective and thus may not cover all situations where VFR tourism occurs. More recently, Munoz, Griffin, and Humbracht (2017) suggested that VFR can be defined as a form of mobility influenced by a host that involves a face-to-face interaction between host and visitor within the destination. Their definition takes into account the limitations of previous definitions and appears to be inclusive of most situations where VFR occurs.

It is worth noting at the outset, that, in the VFR tourism literature, the term ‘VFR travel’ is often used interchangeably with ‘VFR tourism’. According to Yousuf and Backer (2015), although the term ‘VFR tourism’ has been traditionally used more frequently, ‘VFR travel’ is increasingly gaining popularity in usage. VFR travellers are also characterised differently from tourists for the distinction in their primary purpose of travel, accommodation, and engagement in touristic activities (Backer & Morrison, 2015). While the difference and the complexity in distinguishing these two terms are acknowledged, the term ‘VFR tourism’ is employed throughout the paper for consistency. This is partly because the paper focuses not only on the travel element of the concept, but also more broadly on the socio-cultural aspects and the host–guest relationship within the phenomenon and, to that extent, overlaps with analyses of the tourist experience. It is also used because, for international students, travelling to visit friends and relatives is partly a way of seeing more of the destination where the friends/relatives reside, and therefore, what might be referred to purely as ‘VFR travel’ by others could still be a touristic behaviour to international students.

Relatedly, debate surrounds the issue of whether or not VFR should be considered a tourism segment or simply a tourist activity (Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green, & O’Leary, 2000). Seaton (1994) considered it

as part of a hybridised form of tourism in which numerous activities and motivations are at work throughout one trip. However, the characteristic dual role of VFR tourism, both as a motivating factor and a tourism activity, makes it unique and a highly relevant tourism category while, nevertheless, a confusing one (Asiedu, 2008). It is also important to acknowledge that the VFR market is not one homogenous group. Efforts have been made in examining the heterogeneity of the VFR market, and previous literature has suggested different ways to categorise the market such as by travel distance (Moscardo et al., 2000), trip patterns (Hu & Morrison), and trip expenditure (Lee, Morrison, Lehto, Webb, & Raid, 2005). Seaton and Tagg (1995) also disaggregated the VFR market into three categories based on the visited parties: visiting friends (VF); visiting relatives (VR); and, visiting both. A clear understanding of the distinctiveness between these groups, especially between the VF and the VR, remains unrealised (Seaton & Tse, 2015; Yousuf & Backer, 2017). More research is needed to understand the travel behaviour of particular VFR groups, as well as the differences among them.

It was mentioned earlier that migration is a contributing factor to VFR tourism. Accordingly, immigrants are often noted as having a high participation in VFR tourism. Many sub-groups of immigrants with specific VFR travel behaviour have been looked at such as retiree immigrants (A. Casado-Díaz, Casado-Díaz, & Casado-Díaz, 2013), expatriates (Dutt & Ninov, 2017), and members of various diaspora (Duval, 2003). International students, as a category, has been recognised as a growing and important VFR market (Liu & Ryan, 2011; Seaton & Tse, 2015; Taylor et al., 2004). This particular group of immigrants possesses distinguishing characteristics compared to others including initial fixed timeframe in the immigrating country (usually based on the study courses), being in the younger age groups and, consequently, being in the earlier stages of a life cycle. Such traits may influence their VFR travel behaviour and distinguish it from other groups of immigrants.

2.2. Hosts and guests in VFR tourism

The tourism literature often conceptualises guests as tourists who undertake a journey to, and stay in, various destinations that are distant from their normal place of residence, and who take on different roles and activities from the resident population of the destination (Ross, 1994). The definition of hosts has been less noted because, historically, tourism studies have focused on tourists (Cohen, 1995). In a conventional sense, hosts appear to be taken as the assumed counter in the binary host–guest relationship. Sherlock (2001) made an effort to clarify hosts by introducing the term “local” which means to be connected to residency, with its connotations of belonging and commitment to the place (‘locale’) and the community. These distinguish them from tourists. As a result, in the tourism context, guests are seen as engaging in consumption practices and hosts as engaging in productive practices (Sherlock, 2001).

In the post-modern world where global movements are increasingly common, such conventional understandings of hosts and guests as local people and out-of-town visitors is arguably less useful. According to Sherlock (2001), the blurred distinction between them is due to the complex phenomenon of migration. She suggests that the transient nature of the world population adds to the complication in separating hosts from guests. For example, there are circumstances where hosts become guests in their local area (Duval, 2003), and vice versa (Liu & Ryan, 2011). As a further example, in ‘third places’ one person may arrive earlier than another and, to some extent, start to act as a host when the latter arrives. Hence, in order to better identify hosts and guests in the tourism context, both spatial and behavioural aspects should be taken into account.

In the VFR tourism context, guests (or VFR travellers) are those who either reported visiting friends and relatives as the main purpose of their trip, and/or who stay with their friends and relatives during their

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