

# AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT-INDUCED VFR TRAVEL IN THAILAND-A PERSPECTIVE OF HOST

<sup>1</sup>Guifang Liu

**ABSTRACT:** *The visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market is one of the largest and most rapidly growing global tourism markets nowadays (Sho, Hayato, & Tomoyuki, 2018). Influenced by globalization in the beginning of the 21st century, Southeast Asia has experienced a remarkable development of student mobility (Do & Pham, 2016). The purpose of this research is to explore the impacts on hosts caused by VFR travel and the further opportunities of tourism in Thailand linked with international student-induced VFR travel. The researcher try to identify the multiple roles of the international students and the tourists' travel behavior based on VFR travel through this investigation from the perspective of host. This study adopted qualitative research methods to gather amounts of detailed information rely on eight respondents. Semi-structured, in-depth interview approach was conducted to collect data in Bangkok from September 19<sup>th</sup> to November 14<sup>th</sup> in 2018. The selection of sample was concentrated at Assumption University in Bangkok and it covers the international students as many as possible across different countries and genders. The researcher find that the international students take on multiple roles before and during the period when their friends and relatives come and visit them. The tourist behavior in Thailand identified by this study are similar. And for impacts on the host of VFR travel, the majority of the hosts' feeling are happy, but a little disturbed sometimes. And some of the respondents have learned something form their hosting experience. The traffic problem and language barrier are identified as the negative comments that Thailand related sector should pay attention.*

**Keywords:** *VFR travel, international students, friends, relatives, Thailand, host.*

## Introduction

The visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market is one of the largest and most rapidly growing global tourism markets (Sho, Hayato, & Tomoyuki, 2018). Although much research has been carried out on this market since the early 1990s (Sho, Hayato, & Tomoyuki, 2018), most of the previous studies are research from the perspective of visitors, to identify their visiting purpose, tourist behavior, less of them take an interest in the host-related benefits (Christopher & Ivan, 2017; Shani & Uriely, 2012).

Otherwise, the majority of previous researches are focused on western countries, the study on VFR travel of Asian countries are limited (Lee & King, 2016; Sho, Hayato, & Tomoyuki, 2018), even there is no research study on VFR tourism in Thailand.

The number of students study abroad has steadily increased over the past few decades. Students left their home countries to study with both external and internal reasons. A review of the existing literature indicates that many international students have hosted at least one visit by friends and relatives during and outside their studies (Lee & King, 2016). International students as the main or minor diver to promote their friends and relatives visit bring opportunity to the destination tourism market.

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<sup>1</sup>Master Degree Student of Business Administration Program

Influenced by globalization in the beginning of the 21st century, Southeast Asia has experienced a remarkable development of student mobility. (Do & Pham, 2016). Because of its strategic position in ASEAN, “the friendliness of the people, fundamental infrastructure, affordability, beauty of the environment, and safety” (Malai & Juan, as cited in Michael & Trines, 2018), Thailand has become an increasingly popular country for receiving international students in Southeast Asia.

Students not only passively receive VFR travelers, but also actively generate VFR travelers by asking their friends and relatives to visit (Hunter-Jones, 2008; Sho, Hayato, & Tomoyuki, 2018; Tham, 2006). The seasonality of VFR travelers generated by students is unique and likely to follow the academic calendar; therefore, previous studies have suggested that such travelers could be a target market during off-peak seasons (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Hunter-Jones, 2008). It is worthy to consider VFR travel which is driven by international student as a distinct niche market (Lee & King, 2016).

As one of the “top tourist destination”, tourism is a major economic contributor to Thailand. With the upward trend of receiving international students, there are certain opportunities in Thailand’s tourism by international student-induced VFR travel.

VFR travel as a type of travel worldwide, prior studies on VFR tourism indicated that it is underestimated. With the relative few studies on VFR travel centered on Asian context, and the increasingly travel and study demand in Thailand, this study attempt to explore the link between international student-induced VFR travel and tourism of Thailand from the perspective of hosts, whilst examining how VFR travel influence the hosts.

1. RO 1 To determine the role of international students of VFR travel in Thailand.
2. RO 2 To explore the VFR tourist behavior driven by international students in Thailand.
3. RO 3 To explore the negative and positive impacts of VFR tourism on hosts through their hosting experience.
4. RO 4 To explore the opportunity to tourism in Thailand which brought by international student-induced VFR travel.

### **Literature Review**

VFR travel is usually defined from the purpose of the visit and the type of accommodation which differ from other types of travel (Seaton & Palmer, 1997). Although the term "VFR market" is common in previous literature, the market is not uniform and different types of VFR travelers have different travel purposes. (e.g., Backer, 2007; Pennington-Gray, 2003). Moscardo et al. (2000) identified three roles VFR can play in travel: VFR as the purpose of travel, VFR as the trigger for travel and VFR as one activity in travel. Backer (2012) used a matrix (Table 1) to categorise VFR travelers into three types: PVFRs - pure VFRs are those who live in their friends or relatives home and visiting friends or relative is their main motivation to the destination; CVERs - commercial VFRs are those who choose commercial accommodation, but visiting friends or relatives as the purpose driven them to the destination; EVFRs - exploiting VFRs, visiting friends or relatives is not the primary purpose induce them come to the destination, but they stay with their friends or relatives (Backer, 2012).

**Table 1**  
**VFR Travel Definition Model**

	Accommodation: friends and family	Accommodation: commercial
Purpose of visit: VFR	√ PVFRs	√ CVFRs
Purpose of visit: non-VFR	√ EVFRs	× non-VFRs

**Note:** Retrieved from "VFR travel: It is underestimated?" by E. Backer. 2012, *Tourism Management*, 33(1), 74-79. Copyright 2011 by Elsevier Ltd.

VFR hosts are identified as the key stakeholders in the VFR market and play various roles for VFR travelers. The previous studies show that most VFR studies were focused on the Western context. Many researchers have pointed out the demand of VFR studies in different regions, especially in Asia. For example, the studies concerned with Japanese VFR market are limited, in spite of the VFR market is the third-largest market for Japanese outbound tourism (Kurosu, as cited in Sho, Hayato & Tomoyuki, 2018). Most of the researches on the VFR market has focused on immigration, as most VFR travels initially occurred in immigrant and diaspora groups (e.g., Li & McKercher, 2016; Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2003; Williams & Hall, 2000). However, in recent years, the phenomenon of students migrating and studying abroad in the global society has made these students played significant roles as tourists and producers of VFR travel (Hunter-Jones, 2008; Tham, 2006).

## Methodology

This study adopted qualitative research methods which stand in contrast to quantitative methods. Qualitative research methods tend to gather amounts of detailed information on relatively few cases, it focuses on obtaining non-numerical data through open-ended and conversational communication. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents in this research. The in-depth interview seeks to probe more deeply than is possible with a questionnaire-based interview. Instead of just asking a question, recording a simple answer, and moving on, the researcher used in-depth interview approach to encourage respondents to talk, with asking supplementary questions to let respondents explain more for exploring detailed information about the topic. How the interview went on depended on the performance of respondents.

The target population of this study is the international students who study in Thailand. The selection of sample was concentrated at Assumption University in Bangkok because of limited time and it covers the international students as many as possible across different countries and genders. Recorded the interview with a permission and taken notes were used to collect the data.

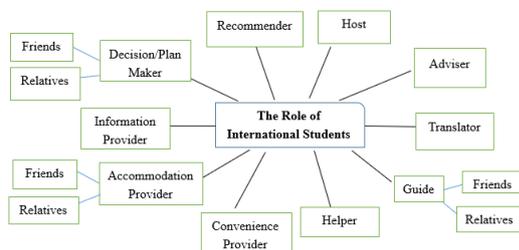
The researcher selected the sample using purposive sampling in ABAC Huamak campus of Bangkok from September 19<sup>th</sup> to November 14<sup>th</sup> in 2018. The interview proceeded in library, coffee shop, study areas and the corner of the campus. There were 17 international students were asked "did you have any friends or relatives come here to visit you during your study time here?" Eight international students answered no, most of them because they stayed here just short time, like several months or around one

year. One student answered yes, but she didn't have time to do the interview. While eight international students accepted the interview request by the researcher.

The researcher used thematic analysis technique to analyze the collected data. The researcher first put all the data item together. The answer of eight respondents matched to each of the same question and showed in a table. The researcher read the profile again and again, select the useful information to become the open coding. Then, with repetitive read the open coding, identified the similarities and difference to create axial coding. Creating new categories or themes, identifying the connection between them to reach the research objectives and answer the research questions.

## Results and Discussion

### *The Role of International Students*



**Figure 1** The role of international students

To determine the role of international students of VFR travel in Thailand, the figure 1 indicates that the international students as the host in their studying country have multiple identities. They take on more than one role before and during the period when their friends and relatives come and visit them. They are identified by the researcher as a translator, a decision maker, a information provider, a accommodation provider, a convenience provider, an agent, a helper, an adviser, a guide, and a host. They provide useful

information of the destination to their guests like what they should bring, how to go to the tourist's spots, how to take the transportation, where they should go by the hosts' suggestion. They usually recommend tourists attractions and good places to their guests rely on their living experience in Bangkok or Thailand and share their nice life and things about Thailand to attract their friends and relatives come to Thailand. The international students mainly as a guide to accompany with their friends and relatives by their free time and take care of their guests to provide convenience and the sense of safety in a strange area. The international students actually as a intermediary to advertise Thailand.

### **Tourist Behavior**

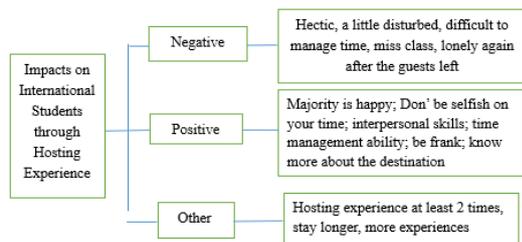


**Figure 2** The VFR tourist behavior driven by international students in Thailand

Based on the research objective of exploring the VFR tourist behavior driven by international students in Thailand, the figure 2 shows that the tourist behavior in Thailand identified by this study are similar. The visitors induced by international students like normal tourists, go shopping, visit tourist attractions, search for Thai traditional food, watch shows, enjoy night life, lost in Thai culture, and so on.

All most every visitors are covered famous temples and shopping malls. And the visitors usually stay at Bangkok longer and visit one or two or more cities or island near but outside the Bangkok. This kind of place usually be some story cities like Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Phuket, Pattaya are frequently mentioned as the popular island.

### The Impacts on Hosts

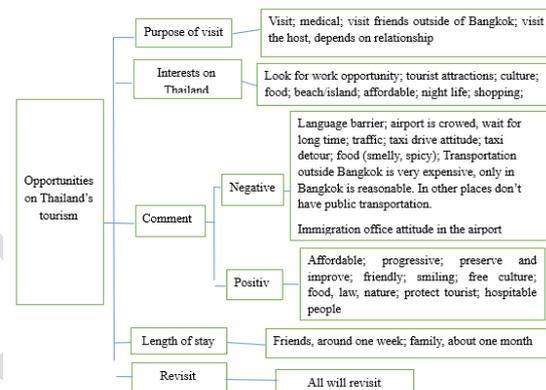


**Figure 3** The negative and positive impacts of VFR tourism on hosts through their hosting experience

From the perspective of host experience, the international student as a student have their duty on study. The coming of their friends and relatives require students to reasonable arrange their time. All the respondents felt happy with their friends and relatives visit but made their life hectic sometimes. Sometimes it is a little bit disturbed. When their friends and relatives are here in Bangkok, they help them, offer advice to them, try to balance their study life and entertain them. They arrange their time as much as possible to accompany with them, even someone sometimes absent the class. They cared about their guests, they want to make sure their safety, and want to ensure everything goes well even though they cannot accompany with them. There was one respondent said his friends' and relatives' coming also entertained him, but their leaving made he felt lonely again. However, most of the hosts' feeling is happy, they also learn something from their hosting experience. There was one

respondent said she learned “don't be selfish on your time.” She said “I help them little things but it's means much to them.” And one respondent shared he learned to be frank to his guests, so that their guests would not expect too much on him. The international students can know more things about the destination and improve their international skills and time management ability through their hosting experience.

### The Opportunity to Tourism in Thailand



**Figure 4** The opportunity to tourism in Thailand which brought by international student-induced VFR travel

The figure 4 gathered information from researcher illustrates there are some opportunities and challenges to tourism in Thailand which brought by international student-induced VFR travel. The visitors' purpose of coming to Thailand mainly is for visiting, but medical tourism, visiting host were also mentioned by respondents.

Thailand attracted people usually because its nature, culture, food and colorful life, and there was one respondent mentioned her friend came here was looking for job opportunity. The language barrier and transportation problem are the frequently mentioned negative comments the respondents. And all the interviewees said their friends and relatives are willing to revisit Thailand again which revealed the

international students are the one of the fundamental drivers to attract the visitor come to Thailand.

## **Discussion**

Hunter-Jones (2008) and Tham (2006) indicated that students not only passively receive VFR travelers, but also actively generate VFR travelers by asking their friends and relatives to visit. Based on the results of the investigation, the main purpose of most of the VFR travelers visit Thailand actually is not for the host, but it is obviously that international students are the essential factor to drive their friends and relatives visit Thailand.

There is one thing should be noticed is that the tourist behavior, the main purpose they come here, the length they stay here, and some related factors have some differences between friends and relatives especially between friends and family members. The situation of people who visit friends is very different from the situation of people who visit relatives (Backer, Leisch & Dolnicar, 2017). The main purpose of family members or closely relatives come here is for the host. They usually stay here around one month like a company with the host. And they usually stay at host's condo and cook by themselves sometimes. The relatives or family members usually rely on the international students to make the itinerary, arrange their time during their stay, but friends usually have their own ideas before they came to Thailand. And international student as the role of a guide, their company time with relatives or family members is more than their company time with friends. There are some respondents mentioned that it depends on the relationship. The intimacy of relationship between the host and guest will affect the mood of the host and the host' behavior. The closer relationship they

are, the host are happier, and they spend more time to get together.

Backer (2012) proposed a VFR travel definition model (Table 1) to categorize VFR travelers by using purpose of travel and type of accommodation (Sho, Hayato & Tomoyuki, 2018). According to the findings of the research, the motivations of the visitors visit the host area are multiple, their choice of accommodation are changeable, simply divided VFR travel seems not appropriate. It is hard to categorize the VFR market only by purpose of travel and the use of accommodation (Sho, Hayato & Tomoyuki, 2018).

In addition, previous literature showed that many international students have hosted at least one visit by friends and relatives during and outside their studies (Lee & King, 2015). The research find that the eight respondents of this study all have at least two times of this kind of hosting experience. It is suggested that the international students stay here longer, the host experience are more.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the main purpose of VFR travel can be visit, medical, visit friends outside of Bangkok, visit the host, look for job opportunity. Whatever the purpose is, they would visit the international students at the same time. The factors attract their visit can be tourist attractions, Thai culture, food, nature, island, hospitable people, affordable price, but we cannot ignore the indispensable role of international students as an intermediary in this process. The tourism related sectors should attach importance to international students-induced VFR travel. From national level, the government can formulate some favorable and supportive policies to attract more international students come to Thailand which might contribute to tourism of Thailand.

The visitors' interests in Thailand based on this research are kindness people, affordable price, shopping, nature, culture and so on. And the shopping malls in Sukhumvit area, the temples, the Chao Phraya river, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Pattaya, islands are high frequently mentioned, but floating market, Thai massage are rarely mentioned. As far as the researcher concerned, the tourism sectors have made good publicity on the frequently mentioned places, they should put more effort on other place that rarely people know. There were two respondents from Myanmar mentioned their guests' visiting purpose of medical, the researcher suggested the tourism organizations can put different focus on different market.

From the findings of the study, there are some negative comments of Bangkok and Thailand. The most serious problem mentioned by informants is language barriers. Language becomes a hard problem when the visitors want to purchase, when they by taxi and when they want to communicate with people anywhere. The researcher suggests the government can take some measures to widely training English of the public, especially tourism occupies great important position of Thailand economy. Another problem was mentioned is about transportation. The traffic is usually very bad in Bangkok, it affected the tourists' schedule and itinerary. There was one respondent said, "the transportation outside Bangkok is very expensive, only in Bangkok is reasonable." And one respondent mentioned that the attitude of the taxi driver is very rude, and the driver detour made them hard to the destination. The researcher suggests the government should take some measures to fix the traffic problem, like traffic control, build new road, broaden the roads and so on. They can put more effort on public

transportation and strengthen the control and training of taxi and taxi driver.

Besides, one respondent talked about the service in airport. It is said that the airport is too crowded, they should wait for long time, and the immigration office staff is not that polite. The researcher suggests the airport should reinforce their management of their service, improve work efficiency and correct the service attitude.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The main limitation of this study is about sampling. The data collection was based on a convenience selection of international students at Assumption University Hua Mak campus in Bangkok only. To provide stronger verification of the findings, future study could cover more universities and regions in Thailand. Besides, the certain contribution to the destination is hard to measure and the findings lack tourist view which might have different comments with the hosts.

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher suggest that future study can divide relatives and friends as different target group to research their visiting connect to VFR tourism. The findings showed there are some differences on the length of stay, their visiting purpose, tourist behavior and so on between friends and relatives visit. Further quantitative research is suggested to apply in wider range, more universities and regions should be covered to avoid particularity.

Specific research on different nationalities is also advised by the researcher due to their different cultural and economic background. For example, only two respondents from Myanmar mentioned medical as their guests' visit purpose. Additionally, China is one of the countries to send the most students and tourists to Thailand, specifically research on Chinese international students induced VFR travel

may contribute to the tourism development of Thailand.

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