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The VFR Hosting Activity of Immigrant and Canadian-Born Residents

Introduction

Increasing attention is being given to the role that personal relationships between distant friends and relatives play in affecting tourism related activity, commonly referred to as Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel. More than a quarter of international trips worldwide are made for VFR reasons (UNWTO, 2015). When domestic travel is included this proportion is far higher (Scheyvens, 2007). Further, the conceptualization and measurement of VFR has been critiqued for concealing related activity (e.g. Backer, 2011). Ultimately, there are several reasons to suggest that the role of personal relationships in tourism is vastly under-estimated and misunderstood, with implications for marketing and business opportunities, as well as the cultural development and social well-being of communities. As populations become more urban, migration and mobility are more common (IOM, 2015; WHO, 2016). Advancements in both communication and transportation technology are generally making it easier for people to migrate, and to also maintain personal relationships with distant people (Vertovec, 2001). The influence of VFR is unlikely to wane.

Although the topic has been receiving growing interest from researchers, the majority of work has focused on VFR *visitors*, typically from a supply side viewpoint (Griffin, 2013b). For every VFR visitor, there must, by definition, be a host. However, insight is on this arguably influential group is comparatively limited, making the topic ripe for investigation.

Further, the consideration of immigrants as hosts is particularly intriguing, as they have some shared context with visitors of experiencing and interpreting a new community. For hosts there is an opportunity and reason to engage their community as a place of leisure, with implications for place attachment and integration. For the community at large, a higher number of immigrants means more VFR visitors, strengthening cultural links with source communities that can lead to additional forms of tourism activity and business development (Dwyer et al., 2014; Seetaram, 2012). However, very little is known about immigrant hosts in terms of the impact that hosting can have in inspiring resident activity.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to compare the activity of hosts who are immigrants with non-immigrants. Results draw from 2201 responses to a survey of residents of Toronto, Ontario collected through an online panel. A review of literature on immigration, leisure and integration is followed by a brief discussion on the conceptualization of VFR and impacts for destinations. A summary of results and implications is offered.

Literature Review

Immigrants and hosting

In major global gateway cities such as London, Toronto, or New York, upwards of a third of the populations are immigrants, with urban centres in Asia and Africa generally showing lower, but ever-increasing proportions (IOM, 2015; Skeldon, 2013).

Immigrants often experience a culture shock on arrival due to the foreign environment and culture, and disruption of social networks upon which they rely for support (Mainil and Platenkamp, 2010). The lack of interaction with those who share a relationship of mutuality of care can negatively impact well-being, sense of belonging, and identity (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Boden and Molotch, 1994; Cohen and Wills, 1985). Hosting friends and relatives can therefore help ease these situations (Shani and Uriely, 2012).

The benefits of participation in leisure have been well researched, broadly suggesting a positive link with integration and well-being (Horolets, 2012; Lange, Vogels and Jamal, 2011; Stack and Iwasaki, 2009). Leisure is very contextual however, and perceived and acted out differently across cultures (Horolets, 2012; Stodolska and Livengood, 2006; Tirone and Pedlar, 2000; Tirone and Shaw, 1997). Hosting can therefore be considered as a meaningful form of leisure that bridges old and new worlds for immigrants in a familiar context. Further, the social capital between friends may dissipate after some time, meaning that it might be expected, therefore, that more recent immigrants are more frequent and active hosts.

New understandings of VFR and implications for destinations

VFR is commonly understood as one of four main visitor segments along with *pleasure*, *business* and *other*. Respondents to visitor surveys are placed into one of these categories based on their self-reported trip purpose (Seaton, 1994). However, this method excludes visitors' accommodation use, as well as time spent with a resident friend or relative, and therefore underrepresents the number of personal relationships between visitors and residents and the influence they carry (Moscardo et al., 2000). For example, many self-reported pleasure visitors stay with friends or relatives (Jackson, 1990), and a convention visitor may choose one destination over another because of the opportunity to catch up with an old friend; all could affect destination choice, tourist activity, and level of satisfaction with a destination, but are typically missed in visitor studies. The result is that destination marketers and tourism providers are likely unaware of the reasons for much of their business, and the opportunities to engage them.

Many researchers have adapted this conceptualization to include accommodation, and occasionally VFR as an activity, to demonstrate the economic value of this market for hotels, attractions, and other tourism related businesses (e.g. Backer, 2010; Griffin, 2011).

Further, the experience of VFR has predominantly been considered from the viewpoint of the visitor and the supply side. The few examples of studies that have considered hosts suggest that residents have a varying amount of influence over their guests' choice of destination and activity within their community (Young, Corsun and Baloglu, 2007), that the experience generally encourages consideration of their community as a place of leisure (Griffin, 2016), inspires incremental activity and spending. Hosting friends and relatives can involve entertaining, feeding, guiding and other such responsibilities (Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Shani and Uriely, 2012; Young et al., 2007), and, for migrants in particular, has important impacts on their sense of identity and relationships with people and place (Humbracht, 2015; Shani and Uriely, 2012). The 'value' of different tourism segments in industry and academic discourse typically fails to consider the behavior of residents as hosts. Positioning residents as influencers and ambassadors of tourism has

implications for destinations in communicating with potential and returning visitors, but also as consumers and producers of cultural activity themselves. VFR demand is instinctively more aligned with the interests and concerns of residents, making the consumption and production of culture more diverse and reflective of the community (Griffin, 2013a).

Methodology

Respondents were asked details about their most recent hosting experience (visitor party characteristics, activities participated in, influence in encouraging visit, etc.), general experiences with hosting in the last three years, perceptions on their community as a place to live, and demographic information. The survey was distributed to an online panel. Inclusion criteria included being 18 years or more, and a resident of Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA), an area that can be broadly referred to as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), with a total population of 6.1million (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Toronto is an interesting region to consider, as around 46% of the population are immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

Online panels are appealing for the collection of data from a wide and large number of participants, and are becoming more popular in the tourism academic research (e.g. Dolnicar, Yanamandram and Cliff, 2012; Nunkoo and Smith, 2013). There are some concerns with the use of online panels, in particular the under-representation of specific groups in the community. To limit these a reputable company was chosen with a strong track record of working with industry and academics. Further, funds were used to target a special sample boost of immigrants in order to allow for substantial enough responses with which to conduct testing. Although there are concerns, the balance of efficiency and coverage can position online panels as a viable alternative to other forms data collection (Braunsberger, Wybenga, and Gates, 2007).

In total 2201 responses were collected, including a total of 823 (37.4%) from immigrants. Further, of the 823 responses from immigrants, 207 were from the sample boost. The main sample included respondents who did not host within the last three years in order to show hosting incidence within the population. However, the immigrant sample boost did have additional inclusion criteria: respondents must have arrived in Canada within the past ten years, and must have hosted within the last three years. This means, therefore, that unweighted data cannot be used to compare hosting incidence between total immigrants and non-immigrants as the sample boost only includes those who hosted in the last three years. However, a weight was formed that includes accommodation for this issue by applying the characteristics of immigrants from the main sample to the sample boost. The weight also incorporates Statistics Canada National Household Survey data from 2011 on immigration, age and gender. The weighted data can therefore be used to provide a guideline to hosting incidence (i.e. what proportion of different groups have host hosted in previous 3 years), but only unweighted data is used for statistical testing.

Results

A summary of results is provided below. Results for *hosting incidence* use weighted data and use all respondents as a base (N=2201) (those who hosted in last three years, and those who did not).

The remaining results use unweighted data, and include only respondents who had hosted in the last three years (N=1792).

Hosting incidence

Using weighted data, results show that 79.8% of all Canadian born respondents had hosted within the last three years, compared with 81.1% of immigrants. The most recent immigrants had a higher hosting incidence than others, with 89.4% of those who arrived within the last four years and 92.5% of those arriving in the last 5 and 10 years having hosted within the last three years, compared with those who arrived eleven years ago or more at 78.2%.

Vacation days

Respondents who had hosted in the last three years were asked how many vacation days they had taken in the last twelve months in order to host. Immigrant hosts were significantly more likely ($\chi^2(1)=30.354$, $p<0.001$) to have taken at least one vacation day in the previous year to host than Canadian born hosts (86.0% vs. 72.7%). Immigrant hosts also take statistically longer vacations to host (M=6.33, SD=6.00) than Canadian born hosts (M=4.23, SD=4.79) ($t(909.01)=6.51$, $p<0.001$).

Further, there were statistical differences among immigrant hosts ($\chi^2(3)=23.115$, $p<0.001$), with 97.2% of those who arrived within last 4 years having taken a vacation day in the last year to host, compared with 91.3% of those who arrived in the last 5 to 10 years, 85.1% who arrived in between 11-20 years ago, and 76.9% of immigrants who arrived 20 years ago or more. A one-way ANOVA shows statistical differences in the amount of vacation taken to host between more and less recently arrived immigrant hosts, with the most recent arrivals taking more than seven days off (0-4 yrs: M=7.18, 5-10: yrs M=7.28, 11-20 yrs: M=6.22, 20+yrs: M=5.14; $F(3, 495)=4.16$, $p=0.006$).

Visitor characteristics

Unsurprisingly, immigrant hosts' most recent visitors were statistically more likely to have been from the U.S. (25.0% vs. 18.7%; $\chi^2(1)=10.12$, $p=0.001$) or countries other than the U.S. and Canada (48.9% vs. 18.6%; $\chi^2(1)=184.09$, $p<0.001$) compared with Canadian born hosts. There was no significant difference ($\chi^2(1)=0.37$, $p=0.831$) between immigrant and Canadian born hosts in whether their most recent visitor group were friends (34.1% vs. 35.4%) or relatives (55.5% vs. 54.6%). There were also non-significant differences ($\chi^2(3)=1.73$, $p=0.629$) regarding the visitor's perceived main reason for visiting, with 'to see me and my family' as the top answer for both immigrant and Canadian born hosts (63.1% vs. 61.6%) followed by 'to see someone else/attend family ceremony' (22.2% vs. 21.4%), 'to do or see something in the city' (11.7% vs. 13.1%), and 'business' (3.0% vs. 3.9%).

However, there was a statistical difference ($\chi^2(1)=107.17$, $p<0.001$) in whether the last visitor group was a first time visitor to the GTA (immigrant hosts: 43.4% vs. Canadian born hosts: 20.5%). The differences between immigrant hosts themselves were also significant ($\chi^2(3)=54.14$, $p<0.001$) with 65.1% of those arriving within the last 4 years hosting a first time visitor most recently compared with those arriving between 5-10 years (56.7%), 11-20 years (40.0%), and 20 years or more ago (29.5%). Immigrant hosts' visitors also stayed for more nights than visitors of Canadian born hosts (M=11.23, SD=22.86, vs. M=6.16, SD=10.89; $t(898.00)=5.47$, $p<0.001$), and were also

more likely to use paid accommodation within the GTA for at least part of their trip (2.7% vs. 1.0%; $\chi^2(1)=7.71$, $p=0.006$).

Host activity

Immigrant hosts were more likely than Canadian born hosts to visit neighbourhoods and attractions with their most recent guests. In total immigrant hosts visited almost twice as many of six of the larger local attractions than Canadian born hosts ($M=1.45$, $SD=1.54$ vs. $M=0.78$, $SD=1.26$; $t(1267.78)=9.55$, $p<0.001$). Among immigrant hosts, those who arrived within the last 4 years visited on average more than two (2.25) of the 6 main attractions the last time they had visitors, significantly more than those who arrive between 5-10 years (1.74), 11-20 years (1.47), and 20 years or more ago (1.01) (Welch test, $F(3, 252.36)=18.95$, $p<0.001$).

Conclusion and Discussion

Initially it is worth noting the relatively high incidence of hosting, with around four in every five respondents claiming to have hosted an out of town friend or relative in the previous three years. This broadly supports supply side studies that suggest VFR is under-estimated, and is a part of many people's tourism experiences as both hosts and guests. Further, it was notable that recent immigrants had a higher incidence of hosting others. Initial analysis of the visitors' main reason to visit the host showed that VFR activity does seem to fall beyond the limited definitions based on visitor trip purpose alone, with just between 15-17% of respondents claiming their guest was visiting for other pleasure or business reasons. However, along with the relationship between the host and visitor (friend or family) there is surprisingly little difference between immigrant and Canadian born hosts in visitor trip purpose. Further analysis could explore these areas for greater insight.

Immigrants are more likely to bring visitors from outside of Canada who are visiting Toronto for the first time. For communities with large and increasing immigrant populations VFR should be especially intriguing. It is perhaps not surprising that for some destinations key target markets are also the sources of their largest immigrant groups (e.g. see OTMPC (2016)). Engaging residents as hosts, and acknowledging their influence and role in creating and shaping tourism in their communities is a potentially efficient way to increase awareness, developing more nuanced destination imagery that is contextual to different source markets, and galvanizing for local culture and sense of place.

Immigrant hosts are also more active with their guests than Canadian born hosts, using the hosting experience as either an opportunity to explore, or possibly obligation to guide their visitors around. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests that for many newcomers there is a need to be cautious with their time and finances, but that hosting provides justification to explore and enjoy their home community (Griffin, 2016).

In conclusion there are many implications for practitioners and future research. This study provides evidence to support the engagement of immigrants as hosts, and in particular recent arrivals, for a number of reasons. First, resident groups are comparatively easy to find for destination markers. Second, large numbers of recent immigrants are already hosting and may respond to engagement

with suggestions on what to do, generating more activity that is of specific interest to host and guest, providing more satisfying experiences; coupled with the acknowledgement of high proportions of first time visitors from other countries this group is bringing there are implications for enhanced destination image and word-of-mouth marketing. Recent immigrant hosts are also spending large parts of their vacation in the region, visiting attractions and neighbourhoods, and should arguably be considered as a gain for the destination as their time and money is being retained.

Existing research has shown that the highly contextual environment that hosting provides for immigrants can lead to positive place attachment and an evolved sense of identity that links the host with the community as their guest sees them in their new environment. The implications of hosting are significant; immigrants can experience the familiar interaction with their guest, re-establishing their links to their historical sense of place, but are also provided the inspiration to participate in activities that may lead to enhanced connections with their new surroundings (Griffin, 2014), which in turn can form and shape a sense of home (Larsen, 2008). This has broader implications for the community, not just as a destination, but as a place where immigrants feel connected, comfortable, and integrated, helping all of society to prosper (Frideres, 2008).

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