



Activity planning and decision making for international VFR guests in Finland – Host perspective

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Bachelor's thesis

November 2022

School of Business, Hospitality Management

Degree Programme in Tourism Management

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How hosts in Finland decide what to do with their VFR guests

Jyväskylä: JAMK University of Applied Sciences, November 2022, 49 pages + appendices

School of Business, Hospitality Management. Degree Programme in Tourism Management. Bachelor's Thesis

Permission for web publication: Yes

Language of publication: English

Abstract

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourism is an area of tourism that little is known about despite it being a major form of tourism. Regardless of the frequency of VFR travelers and their hosts, research is extremely lacking, especially information regarding the VFR hosts experience, motives, and values. The objective was to find out how resident hosts in Finland decide what to do with their international VFR guests.

Furthermore, it was investigated whether or not there were differences hosting friends versus hosting relatives. Mixed method was used and data collection was accomplished with an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. All respondents of both the online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were residents of Finland who had hosted either or/both their friends and/or relatives within the past five years. The results of this study reveal the importance of personal past experience and word of mouth for VFR host decision making and no drastic variations between hosting friends versus hosting relatives. These results are only applicable to Finland. Findings also suggested that tourist resources are not reaching VFR tourists and their hosts in a level that would be gratifying to all parties. VFR as a phenomena is evidently in great need of more attention and consideration.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Visiting friends and relatives, Hosting friends and relatives, VFR tourism, VFR, HFR, host experience, hosting friends, hosting relatives

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)

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1 Introduction

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is a form of tourism that we all have taken part in but perhaps have never heard of. Whether a person's friends and relatives live in the same city as them or another country, many individuals find a way to visit them. Despite being more digitally connected than ever before, with multiple video calling and messaging platforms, the desire to meet in person has not gone away and people are willing to travel even long distances to reconnect. Additionally, travel options such as budget travel carriers have made it easier and more affordable to travel. While visiting family and relatives is not a new phenomenon and a slowly increasing amount of VFR studies have been conducted in the past two decades, there are still many questions about the motives, experiences of the host and guest and how they influence each other and the communities around them.

This study was focused specifically on resident hosts in Finland and their experiences hosting their friends and relatives who are visiting from abroad. Finland is a Nordic country covered in roughly 75% forest that is home to Europe's largest Lakeland district and biggest archipelago in the world (Facts about Finland, n.d.). Many Finns and foreigners alike value Finland's clean air, safety, unique culture, natural landscape, and peaceful silence that can be found in the vast forests the nation possesses. These are just a few of many features of Finland why it is a destination that can be enjoyed by both domestic and international tourists. Therefore, it is not a surprise that many regular tourists, as well as VFR tourists, are excited to experience the wonders of Finnish nature for themselves.

VFR tourism research is still in its infancy compared to other tourism related research. The areas of VFR that have been studied so far have been mostly focused on categorizing and defining areas of the phenomenon. The host experience specifically is particularly understudied and needs closer inspection. However, it is worth mentioning that due to the relative novelty of the term "VFR", the topics may have been studied in the past but have been named differently. Finnish VFR studies and studies regarding Finland are very scarce. This study tackles the topic from host perspective in Finland and is guaranteed to be the first of its kind. The problem with VFR is that it is not understood well until explained, as friends or relatives visiting is often not considered as a form of tourism at first glance. The goal of this study is to bring awareness to this major form of tourism not to be ignored and to the experiences and important role the VFR hosts have to play in it. The research question of this study is: How do resident VFR hosts in Finland plan and decide what to do with their international VFR guests? Also, as a secondary question: How does the host experience differ hosting friends hosting relatives?

This study is attempting to bring first of its kind insights in Finland and the results may contribute to a better understanding of the experiences, decision making, and values of VFR hosts. It has become clear that this topic could be very interesting to a large audience, both private individuals who host their friends and relatives in their homes, small business owners, as well as other stakeholders in the tourism industry, both domestically in Finland and abroad. It could be relevant for many people to better understand what characteristics of activities and influences sway the decision making for resident VFR hosts. During the height of the coronavirus pandemic when there were travel restrictions worldwide, if people risked traveling, it was often to visit their family and friends. This topic is also of personal interest due to having friends and relatives living outside of Finland and having to face the problem, time and time again, of what to do with them while they visit me in Finland.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Visiting Family and Relatives (VFR)

Visiting family and/ or relatives (VFR) is the oldest form of travel (Backer,2011). However, it has only been within the past two decades that there have been studies dedicated to better understanding the multidimensional categories within VFR (Shani & Uriely, 2012). Although international research conducted on the matter, VFR is often still considered under-researched and underestimated (Backer, 2010).

Official data predominantly only considers VFR purpose for visit or VFR by accommodation are two key reasons why the size of VFR travel is underestimated. VFR travel is a substantial tourism segment globally that represents a large portion of many countries' visitor movement. Moreover, there is an apparent bias in VFR studies due the research being limited to the regions where the researchers reside, and the cultural aspects connected to that region. (Backer et al. 2020)

Video calls, text messaging, and other technological advances are readily available for individuals eager to connect (Shani & Uriely, 2012), yet actual travel seems it will never be replaced completely. Furthermore, more affordable travel options such as budget travel carriers and deregulated airlines permit a wider array of potential VFR travelers to reconnect with loved ones (Pearce & Moscardo, 2006).

According to Backer (2010), the eight key reasons as to why VFR is a neglected area of study are: it is difficult to define, difficult to measure, there is a perceived minor economic impact, there is some discrepancy with existing data, poor representation, perception that VFR isn't "sexy", and the perception that it is difficult to influence VFR travelers.

2.1.1 Definition of VFR

There are many varying perceptions of how VFR should be classified and defined. It is challenging to find early comprehensive definitions of VFR (Backer, 2010) which according to Dutt et al. (2016) makes the research and development of VFR more challenging. Numerous researchers disagree on an accurate description of VFR. Some researchers equivocate VFR with ethic tourism while others believe VFR may be studied from the specific perspectives of the reason for travel, a vacation activity, or a travel motivator. (Dutt et al. 2016)

Additionally, heterogeneity is a reoccurring topic in the field of VFR due to the numerous travel motivations of the different segments of VFR travelers. Not all VFR travelers display minimal interest activities outside

their host's home. Some travelers are in fact, more motivated by the exciting experiences a new destination brings than they are motivated by visiting their host. (Griffin, 2016)





Due to the lack of a specific, accepted definition of VFR and some misperceptions and confusion surrounding the area, when compared to other segments of the tourism industry, the literature available on VFR is quite limited (Griffin, 2016). Nevertheless, the most widely referenced definition by Backer (2010, p.63) defines VFR as "a form of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives". However, in practice, VFR travelers are sometimes not aware of their actual travel motivations themselves which may lead to confusion and inaccurate results to the researcher (Dutt et al, 2016).

2.1.2 Categories of VFR

Due to the substantial size of the VFR segment of travelers, breaking down the segment into smaller categories of VFR types can help make it easier to research, study, and understand.

The definitional model created by Backer (2010) which seen below in Table 1 presents the three distinct VFR types. Purpose of visit and accommodation type are the criteria which helps break down the traveler groups to better understand which segment of VFR they belong to.

Table 1. VFR definitional model. Adapted from Backer (2010)

	Accommodation: Friends & Family	Accommodation: Commercial
Purpose of visit: VFR	 PVFRs	 CVFRs
Purpose of visit: Non- VFR	 EVFRs	 non-VFRs

PVFRs

Travelers who fall into this group are considered pure VFRs (PVFRs) which means that they only stay at their hosts home as accommodation during their trip and staying with said host was the primary reason for their travel (Backer, 2012).

CVFRs

The primary reason for Commercial VFRs (CVFRs) to travel is so they may visit their host. However, these travelers stay in commercial accommodations instead of the hosts own home. (Backer, 2012)

EVFRs

Exploiting VFRs (EVFRs) are travelers who stay at the host's home. However, the primary purpose of their travel is not to visit the host. (Backer, 2012)

non- VFRs

Travelers who don't fit into any of the previous three categories are considered non- VFRs. Therefore, non-VFRs are defined travelers who stay in commercial accommodations and whose purpose of their trip is not visiting friends and family. (Backer, 2012)

While the VFR definitional models' four categories have been widely adopted and accepted as a good basis, there are further categories being identified that may deserve a category of their own.

Kashiwagi et al. (2020) found that there is a possibility for hidden VFRs (HVFRs) due to study participants identifying themselves as leisure travelers despite having planned to spend time visiting friends or relatives during their journey. Genealogy visits or "GV" is another division of VFR in which travelers are motivated by an ancestral link which leads them to visit their friends and relatives who reside in a particular destination (Ramachandran, 2006).

Studies that find new VFR categories show that there may still need to be work done surrounding the topic of VFR categorization.

2.1.3 A Typology of VFR Travel

Due to the varying nature of VFR travel distance travelled, accommodations used, and VFR traveler motives, using a typology tends to make it easier to understand the smaller segments of travelers when trying

to study or research the multifaceted nature of visiting friends and relatives. Figure 1, seen below, exhibits the typology of VFR as proposed by Moscardo et al. (2000). The typology serves as an extended definition of the VFR phenomenon suggesting five defining features of VFR tourism. (Pearce & Moscardo, 2006)

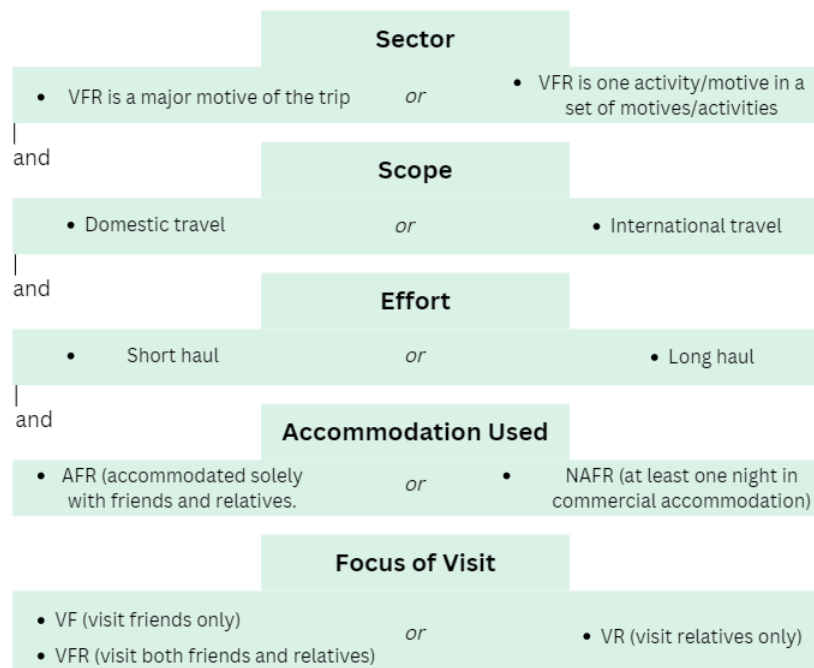


Figure 1. Typology of a Traveler. Adapted from Pearce & Moscardo (2006)

It is important to first identify the Sector the traveler falls into. Is VFR a major motive for the trip or is it simply one motive amongst many others? Once that is determined, the next feature is the Scope. Scope in this context refers whether the trip taken by the traveler is a domestic or international one which directly is connected to the effort. Whether the traveler partakes in a short haul or short haul journey is how Effort is defined in this typology of VFR. For example, geographically large nations such as Australia or the United States may involve long haul journeys to travel domestically. For nations of smaller in sizes geographically, it is possible to travel using short-haul trips which are less than 4 hours in duration. (Moscardo et al. 2000)

Accommodation Used is split into two possible categories: AFR or NAFR. The acronym AFR is designated for travelers who stay solely with friends and relatives, and NAFR which is designated for travelers who stay in commercial accommodation for either part of or for the full duration of their trip. (Moscardo et al. 2000)

According to previous studies done in the United States on international VFRs, NAFRs tended to spend more money on their souvenir shopping, transportation, entertainment, as well as food and drink. (Pearce & Moscardo, 2006) Lastly, the Focus of Visit examines whether the traveler is visiting only friends VF, visiting only relatives VR, or visiting both friends and relatives VFR (Moscardo et al. 2000). Another common acronym used not pictured in the model includes VFVR which is designated for travelers visiting both friends and relatives (Ramachandran, 2006).

By identifying the features of the typology of a traveler, a better understanding of the traveler and their motives can be developed.

2.2 Hosting Friends and Relatives (HFR)

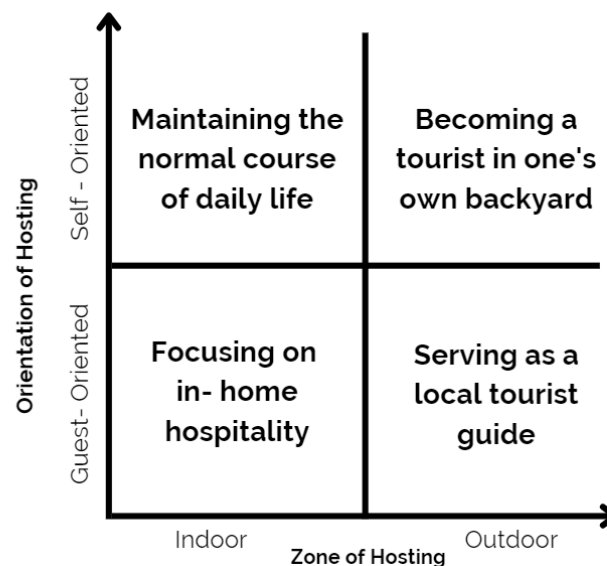
Hosting Friends and Relatives Hosting friends and relatives (HFR) focuses on the host of the VFR travelers. Surprisingly, there is not much research on the VFR hosts despite them being an integral part of the VFR travelers experience. VFR hosts possess a variety of hosting styles that are either guest- oriented or host oriented in nature. A VFR host is a person who has a non- commercial relationship with their guest. (Shani & Uriely, 2012). These hosts have their friends and/or relatives stay in their destination for at least one night, if not the guests' entire journey and are much more than facilitators as they actively shape the trip guests' trip through the duration of their stay (Yousuf & Backer, 2017). Many people who have hosted their friends or family at their home or in their city may not realize what an important role they play in their guests experience at the destination they are visiting.

A VFR host is considered a host regardless of whether the visiting family and/or relatives stay with them in their home or not. Reasons for why a guests may not stay with their host include but are not limited to there may not be enough sleeping accommodations in the hosts home for the guests, a desire for more personal space, avoid a sense of obligation of staying with one set of the same people, reduce stress from the visit, and maintain peace in the host's home (Backer et al, 2020). Host involvement is an area of VFR where not much information is available due to the lack of research pertaining to the matter (Shani & Uriely, 2012). Much of the research that has been conducted focuses on the VFR guests instead of the host (Backer, 2020) or the key roles of the host related to how they influence the travel decisions of their guests, what kind of impact they have on the economy through their expenditures, and how the hosts participate in tourist activities with their friends and relatives (Shani & Uriely, 2012).

2.2.1 Styles of Hosting

Shani & Uriely (2012) discovered four key behavioral styles in which residents appeared to adopt during their time as a host. Hosts will display one or more of these styles over the duration of their guests' visit. Hosts may adopt one more of the discovered behavioral styles during their guests visit. The hosts either engage predominantly in outdoor or indoor spaces with an orientation style that is either guest-oriented or self-oriented. Table 2 depicts a brief description of the styles of hosting that Shani & Uriely (2012) discovered.

Table 2. Styles of Hosting Friends and Relatives. Adapted from Shani & Uriely (2012)



Focusing on in-home hospitality

Hosts who focused on in-home hospitality were not very keen on showing their guests around the city even though there was a plethora of leisure activities and tourist attractions. These hosts preferred to entertain and be close with their guests inside their home and felt they could give their guests a good experience spending most of the time indoors. (Shani & Uriely, 2012)

Maintaining the normal course of daily life

Unlike the guest-oriented hosts who entertained in their own home, hosts who maintained their normal course of daily life were much more passive and reluctant to dedicate their time and effort to their guests. These hosts participated in a fewer out of the home activities and were less focused on their own in-home hospitality. (Shani & Uriely, 2012)

Serving as a local tourist guide

Hosts with the “local tourist guide” style of hosting feel responsible for their guest’s enjoyment and are willing to put time and effort into their guests. These guest-oriented hosts often accompany their guests to attractions that are outside the home and serve as a local expert often with a sense of pride for where they live. (Shani & Uriely, 2012)

Becoming a tourist in one’s own backyard

Much like the local tourist guide style of hosting, hosts who became tourists themselves often accompanied guests to out-of-home attractions. Although, these hosts are self-oriented instead of guest-oriented in nature. Hosts who became tourists themselves wanted to fulfil their own touristic desires. (Shani & Uriely, 2012) Host Impacts VFR hosts have a personal relationship with their guests which means what they recommend to their guests tend have a substantial impact in the guest’s behavior and decision making (Griffin, 2016).

2.2.2 Host Influences and Impacts

Some important decisions hosts influence includes the destination itself, tourist activities the guests will engage in, and the duration of the trip. (Backer et al., 2020) The personal recommendations a VFR host gives are what the VFR market relies upon. Whether its face to face or online, reviews from peers heavily influence the actions others decide to take. Moreover, word of mouth marketing is considered more reliable than industry sources which makes hosts a valuable segment to the local economy.

VFR hosts do more than simply entertain their guests. The hosts will often partake in touristic activities with their guests such as visiting attractions, attending events, and going out to eat. (Griffin, 2016) Hosts who actively participate in entertaining their guests is quite common in VFR tourism (Backer et al. ,2020). The resident hosts who are more engaged with their local community better able to serve as a cultural broker

of sorts and contribute to a more satisfying experience for their guests (Griffin, 2016). Frequent dining out and participating in cultural or sporting activities all contribute to the hosts direct or indirect economic contribution (Backer et al., 2020). Therefore, tourism marketers who fail in establishing long-term relationships with their local destination residents may be underutilizing an extremely influential marketing asset. (Griffin, 2016)

Investigating the relationship between the host and destination in greater detail would contribute valuable knowledge to the substantial VFR market (Backer,2010). Despite the impact hosts have on their local economy and influence they have over the visiting guest's activities being addressed in VFR literature, the wellbeing of the host themselves as an independent issue has been ignored. (Shani & Uriely, 2012)

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2.2.3 Hosting Visiting Friends vs Hosting Visiting Relatives

Hosting friends and hosting relatives can either be an experience that is very similar for the host or varies greatly depending on the host and their background. Sometimes there may be different pressures or expectations depending on the type of visitor that may change the dynamic of the trip. To better understand VFR travel, it is important to recognize the social interactions between the VFR travelers and their hosts (Yousuf & Backer, 2017). Although understanding VFR travel from the hosts perspective is currently lacking (Yousuf & Backer, 2017), there are still a few studies that shed some light on the matter.

Table 3, seen below, depicts the summary of key differences in hosting friends and relatives that were discovered by Yousuf & Backer (2017).

Table 3. Summary of Key Differences in Hosting Friends and Relatives. Adapted from Yousuf & Backer (2017)

Summary of key differences in hosting friends and relatives	
Interactions with visiting relatives	Interactions with visiting friends
Purpose of visit ◦ Trip purpose driven by reconnecting with the hosts	Purpose of visit ◦ Come to see hosts as a part of holiday
Conveniences ◦ Informal relationship ◦ Do not have to do a lot to impress them ◦ More open and understanding ◦ Help each other ◦ Relax ◦ Quiet and calm	Conveniences ◦ Similar likings and interest ◦ Fun and Exciting ◦ More compassionate
Challenges ◦ Different likings and interests	Challenges ◦ Formal relationship ◦ Friends want to be waited on ◦ Obligation to make them happy ◦ More careful about what to say and do
Involvement ◦ Focus on spending time together at home ◦ Talking and interacting; family-related matters	Involvement ◦ Do different things to impress them ◦ Focus on doing things outside the home

According to Yousuf & Backer (2017), VFR travel should not be treated as a homogenous segment. The results of their study revealed notable differences in the hosts experience hosting friends versus hosting relatives. The purpose of the trip when relatives visit tend to be driven by the urge to reconnect with the host, whereas when friends visit, the motive tends to be more out of convenience so they may see the hosts and enjoy a vacation during the same trip. Hosts who are hosting their visiting relatives tend to feel a bit more relaxed, informal, and have the feeling they are more understood. Hosts also tend to be more willing to accept assistance from their family members and are more satisfied spending time at home together.

While the relationship with friends is a bit more formal for the hosts compared to the relationship with relatives, interacting with friends tends to be more exciting and fun as hosts share similar interests with their

visiting friends. Often there is a greater focus on participating in activities outside of the home as well. However, hosts tend to have more pressure due to a feeling of an obligation to make their friends happy and make them feel taken care of. Conversing with friends who are visiting also may be tense at times as it is sometimes unclear what topics of conversation or actions may be offensive to the visiting friend. (Yousuf & Backer, 2017)

3 Method

The research question of this study aims to find information on people's decision-making processes, which can be highly individual and erratic, thus making it more challenging to determine the correct research method. An explanatory approach of using more than one type of data became the most feasible option and therefore mixed method research, which has the capability to extract more nuanced answers was chosen over a quantitative or qualitative research method. This chapter explains the research method selected for this study in greater detail and why it was selected as well as how the data was collected and analyzed.

3.1 Mixed Method

A mixed method was chosen as the research method for this study. According to Creswell (1999), if the theoretical literature reveals the topic of study deserves more attention, is understudied, or is overlooked, then a mixed method option may be the most beneficial method to utilize. The problem that is being tackled in this study required attention, has not been studied enough, and VFR tourism itself is often overlooked as a major form of tourism. Mixed method is a versatile and effective way to answer research questions due to its quality of utilizing techniques from both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Byrne & Humble, 2007). This study required in-depth data, which can only be derived from individual interviews, as well as data from a larger group. For the larger data set, a questionnaire was utilized. The interview portion provided qualitative data and the online questionnaire provided quantitative data for this study.

Quantitative research intends to obtain reliable and precise measurements that can be analyzed in a statistical way (Queirós et al., 2017). This method of research utilizes a statistical or numeric approach regarding research design and intends to confirm, validate, or establish relationships as well as create generalizations based on the information from the collected data (Williams, 2007).

Qualitative research describes, explains, and interprets the data that is collected. It is a holistic approach that builds its premises on inductive reasoning (Williams, 2007). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on aspects that cannot be quantified such as values, beliefs, motives, attitudes to gain a deeper understanding of what is being studied (Queirós et al., 2017).

Figure 2, seen below, explains the basic mixed methods research design. The basic mixed methods research design consists of three approaches: convergent parallel design, explanatory sequential design, and exploratory sequential design. Convergent parallel design starts by combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis followed by comparing or relating the data and ends with the interpretation of

the collected data. Explanatory sequential design begins with quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis, which is then interpreted. Lastly, exploratory sequential design begins with qualitative data collection and analysis and is built up to quantitative data collection and analysis which is then interpreted. (Harvard Catalyst, n.d.)

The explanatory sequential design, was the selected approach for this study for the reason that there were big open questions unanswered by the literature so it made more sense to go from macro to micro in this study. Quantitative data was gathered by using an online questionnaire which was carefully analyzed to gain a general understanding of the data provided by the respondents. This helped narrow the scope and made it possible to formulate better questions for the semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences the resident VFR hosts had. Semi-structured interview works well with explanatory sequential design (Ivankova et al., 2006).

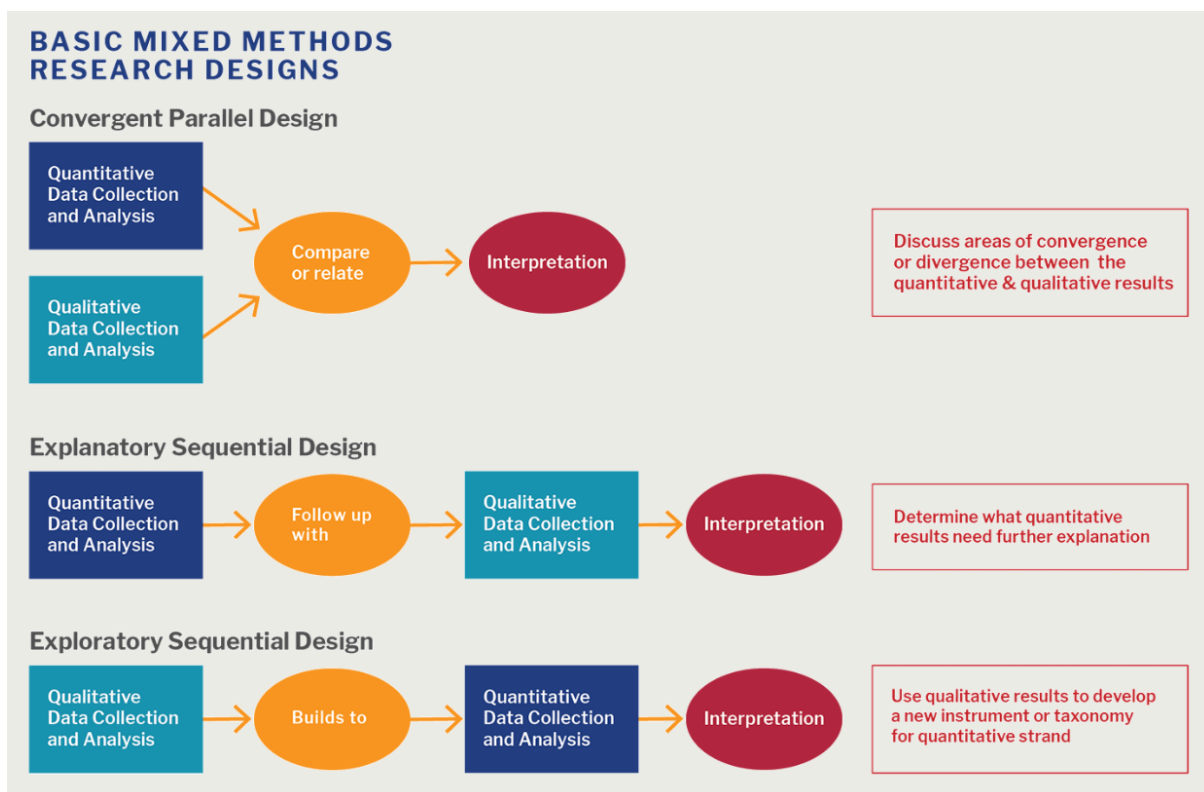


Figure 2. Basic Mixed Methods Research. Harvard Catalyst (n.d.)

According to Sutton & Austin (2015) researchers can benefit from in-depth, qualitative research methods because it helps better understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of participants involved in a study while quantitative methods assist the researcher in understanding the general, big picture tackling the why and a phenomenon may be occurring.

This study sought to discover both large amounts of general information about the VFR resident hosts in Finland as well as detailed, in-depth information about their experiences hosting their international VFR guests. For this reason, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods was deemed most appropriate.

3.2 Collection of Data

Online Questionnaire

Online questionnaire was chosen for the first data collection method, because it gives researchers the ability to access potentially large amounts of information with a diverse population that is not bound by borders or physical limitations (Lefever et al., 2007). Google Forms was used as the data collection tool for the online questionnaire. (see Appendix 1) The link to the questionnaire for this study was posted in online platforms frequented by native Finns, people who had immigrated Finland, and people temporarily living in Finland for school or work. The questionnaire was posted in the following platforms for approximately one week. The reason the length of time was not longer for keeping the questionnaire open is because due to the nature of popular online platforms, the post got buried beneath new posts and the questionnaire was no longer easily visible to the respective group members. The locations where the questionnaire was posted can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Locations The Online Questionnaire Was Posted

Location of post	Description of location
Puskaradio JKL	Puskaradio JKL is a private Facebook group used by both native Finns and residents of Finland where things can be shared and topics can be discussed, most posts being about the city of Jyväskylä, Finland. Native Finns make up the majority of this group's members.
Reddit /Suomi	Reddit/Suomi is the main page for Finland related content on the Reddit website and mobile application. Reddit is frequented by a wide variety of international visitors with different backgrounds.

	<p>However, due to many of the posts in Reddit/Suomi being written in Finnish, one can assume the majority of the visitors to the channel are native Finns and residents who can write in Finnish.</p>
<p>Matkailu Suomessa – Vinkkejä ja Ideoita</p>	<p>The Matkailu Suomessa – Vinkkejä ja Ideoita Facebook group is a public with predominantly Finnish natives as its members. The purpose of the page is to share and discuss travel related tips and ideas from around Finland.</p>
<p>Finland IESAF</p>	<p>The Facebook group Finland IESAF is forum for questions, networking, and sharing information for English speaking foreigners living in Finland. This group has members with a predominantly non- native Finnish background.</p>
<p>Americans in Finland</p>	<p>The Facebook group Americans in Finland is a private group meant for Americans who reside in Finland, either temporarily, or have made Finland their permanent home.</p>
<p>Foreigners in Finland</p>	<p>The Foreigners in Finland Facebook is a private group where members can ask questions as well as share and discuss topics related to Finland. Most of the members are of foreign decent and reside in Finland.</p>
<p>Foreigners in Jyväskylä</p>	<p>The Foreigners in Jyväskylä Facebook group is private and is a place for its predominantly foreign members to share and discuss topics relating to the city of Jyväskylä, Finland and ask any</p>

	<p>questions they may have. Most of the members of this group reside in the city of Jyväskylä.</p>
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Before answering the questionnaire, respondents were instructed to read a short text that contained the purpose of the questionnaire and criteria for participation. This was done to ensure that they were residents of Finland and if they had hosted friends and/ or family from abroad in Finland within the past five years. All responses were carefully reviewed and checked for any possible trolling or malicious intent. The responses were all given the benefit of the doubt that they were genuine and true unless there was some clear indication to the contrary.

Semi- structured interviews

The criteria for the semi- structured interview participants were that they were residents of Finland who had hosted visiting friends or relatives in Finland within the past five years. Inquiry posts were made by the researcher in the private Facebook groups to obtain participants for a semi-structured interview. The reason for only posting the inquiries in the private Facebook groups was to get as genuine responses as possible where people more often are using their real names and communication is more efficient. In the inquiry posts, it was explained the interviews when the interviews would take place and would take place in Zoom utilizing the video calling feature. The potential participants were also informed the video interview would be recorded. Six participants were originally desired by the researcher to provide a greater variety of VFR host types for the study. Five people originally agreed to participate, but for personal reasons, one changed their mind and decided not to participate.

Before the semi-structured interviews commenced, the researcher reminded the participants of what the purpose of the interviews was and confirmed that it was okay for the participant that they were being recorded. Once permission was given, the semi-structured interview commenced.

During the collection of the data for the semi-structured interviews, voice recordings and field notes were also taken. Field notes often compliment audio-taped interviews and help researchers keep track of and comment on various non-verbal expressions, impressions, behaviors, as well as environmental contexts (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The semi-structured interview method was chosen as the way to conduct the interviews for this study. Semi-structured interviews utilize both closed and open-ended questions often followed up by questions that ask the respondent to elaborate the “why” and “how” of their answer in greater detail (Newcomer et al., 2015).

It was important to allow the interview to trail off into interesting topics but then return to the main questions. Allowing participants to elaborate their answers was necessary, because the research question of this study requires more flexibility and exploration to better understand the various experiences of the participants VFR hosting experience.

3.3 Analysis of Data

Mixed method uses quantitative and qualitative research methods and therefore both require appropriate analysis methods for analyzing the data. For the qualitative interview data, thematic analysis method was chosen. Finally, the data was interpreted as it is customary in mixed method research.

Online Questionnaire

The questionnaire provided two different types of data. There were two open-ended questions in the online questionnaire which provided qualitative data and the remaining ten, multiple choice questions provided quantitative data.

The data from the quantitative questions were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis, which is used to indicate frequencies, distributions, classifications of phenomena as well as quantities of variables. It is common for quantitative analyses to utilize graphs and charts to represent the statistically analyzed data (Koppa, 2010). The results of this analysis yielded pie charts showing the percentages of each choice within each question. In order to answer the second research question of this study, whether or not there is a difference hosting friends versus hosting relatives, the results of the quantitative descriptive statistical analysis and the open-ended answers were used. Comparative analysis was done to the two types of data, open ended question answers and the pie charts. Both types of data were from two different points of views, friends visiting and relatives visiting. Comparative analysis was used in this case because it helps explain a similar phenomenon by comparing the similar features (Pickvance, 2001). This analysis provided results for the secondary research question of this thesis.

Semi-structured Interview

To analyze the data collected from the semi-structured interviews of this study, a thematic analysis was utilized. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method that is used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns/themes found in the data which organizes and describes the data set in detail. The analysis of semi-structured interview data provides a precise, descriptive summary of the interview participants perspective in a comprehensive way (McIntosh et al., 2015). Table 5, seen below, depicts the Phases of Thematic Analysis as explained by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Table 5. Phases of Thematic Analysis. Braun & Clarke (2006)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and during this process some initial codes were identified. Re-reading the transcripts multiple times helped themes to emerge and the codes were refined as well as coded in the text document by using Microsoft OneNote. The process of re-reading and refining the coding helped with understanding the themes better and once the process of coding and themes review was done, the data containing certain themes were collected into one document for each theme. This helped with the final summary and analyzing the themes better.

4 Results

4.1 Questionnaire

162 responses were gathered with the questionnaire. Respondents were asked a variety of questions that helped identify both general information about themselves such as age, sex, and whether they hosted friends or relatives. 71 of the responses were from people who had hosted their friends from abroad in Finland and 91 of the responses were from people who had hosted their relatives in Finland. They were also asked about aspects that explored their own thoughts and feelings about their experiences hosting friends and family from abroad as well as the resources used for planning before their visitors had arrived in Finland. If the respondents had experiences within the past five years hosting both friends and relatives, they had the possibility to complete the questionnaire twice, once recounting a specific hosting experience with friends and once recounting a specific hosting experience with relatives.

Resident Type

To gain a better understanding of the resident type of the respondents, the respondents needed to identify themselves as a part of one out of three resident type options. The first option was “Native Finn”, a person who has been born in Finland. The second option was “Person who has immigrated to Finland”, such as a person who has decided to make Finland their permanent home, or at least for the long-term. The last option was “Foreigner temporarily working or studying in Finland” and while the respondents who have selected this option may not have long-term plans to live in Finland, they still are residents of Finland with relevant VFR hosting experience.



Figure 3. Hosts of Friends: Resident Type

79% of the respondents who hosted their friends were people who had immigrated to Finland. The second largest resident type were native Finns, which was followed lastly by foreigners who were temporarily working or studying in Finland.

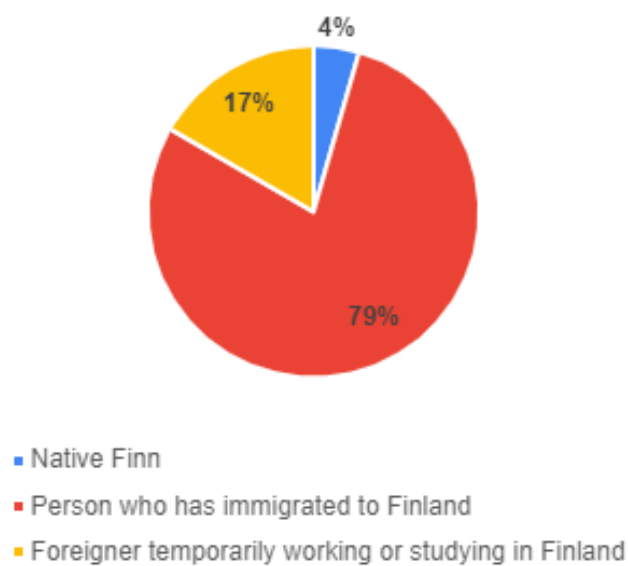


Figure 4. Hosts of Relatives: Resident Type

The resident type of the respondents who hosted their relatives were overwhelmingly people who had immigrated to Finland. Only 17% of these respondents were foreigners temporarily working or studying in Finland with the last 4% of the respondents being native Finns.

Age

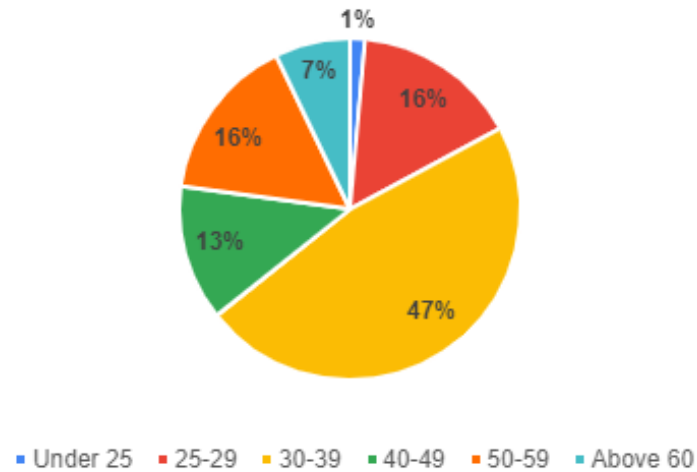


Figure 5. Hosts of Friends: Age

47%, the majority of respondents who were hosting their friends were aged 30-39. The second largest respondent age range were 25-29, followed by the 40-49 year old age range.

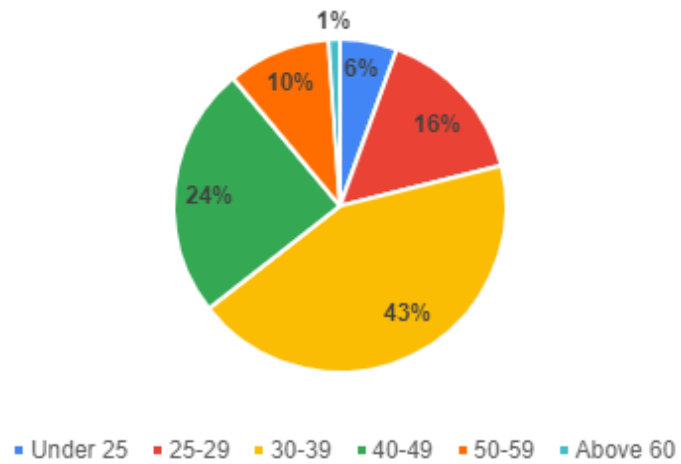


Figure 6. Hosts of Relatives: Age

Similar to the hosts of friends, the majority of the respondents who were hosting their relatives in Finland were aged 30-39. The second largest age respondent age group were 40-49, followed by the 25-29 age range.

Planning of Activities

When planning activities for their VFR guest's trip, hosts from both groups did the planning together with their guests. Less than half planned the activities alone and only a few of them had their guests plan the activities.

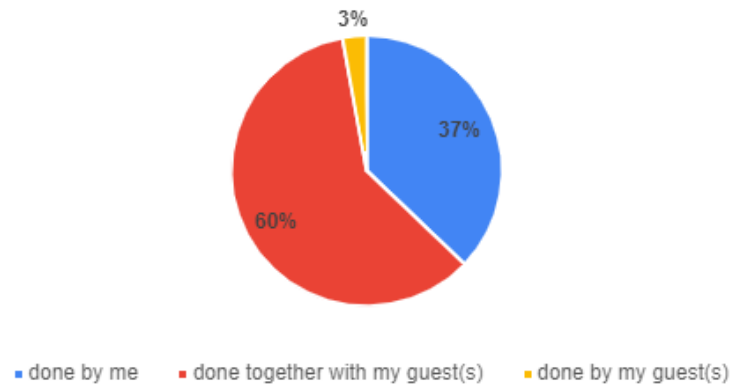


Figure 7. Hosts of Friends: Planning of Activities

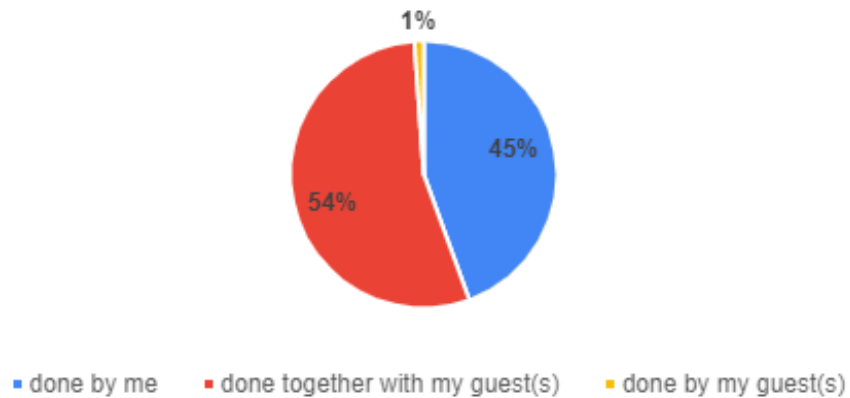


Figure 8. Hosts of Relatives: Planning of Activities

Participation

As depicted in the images below, the hosts participated by an overwhelming. None of the 160 responses received revealed “No, none of the activities” by any respondent. The two hosting groups were nearly identical with the responses relating to participation.

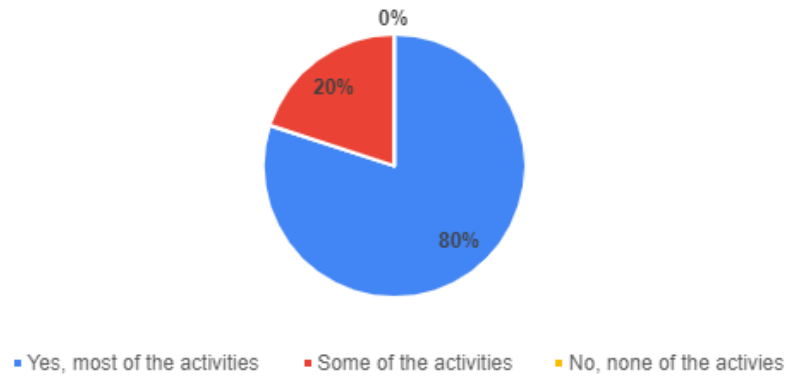


Figure 9. Hosts of Friends: Activity Participation

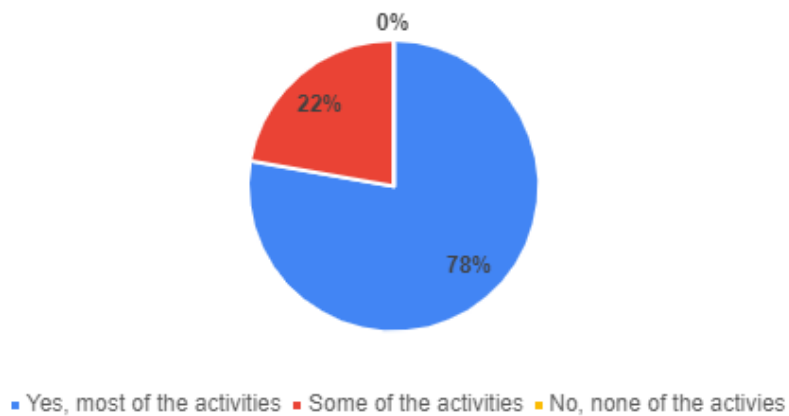


Figure 10. Hosts of Relatives: Activity Participation

Effort Used

When respondents were asked to select the level of effort, they felt they had used during the planning process, both the hosts of friends group and the hosts or relatives' group had the identical order in the way they had responded. Most of the responses in both groups revealed that "some effort" was used. It may be deduced that yet again, there are not drastic differences between the two hosting groups. However, it is worth noting there were more responses from the hosts of friends group that showed "not much effort" was used when planning for their friends visit.

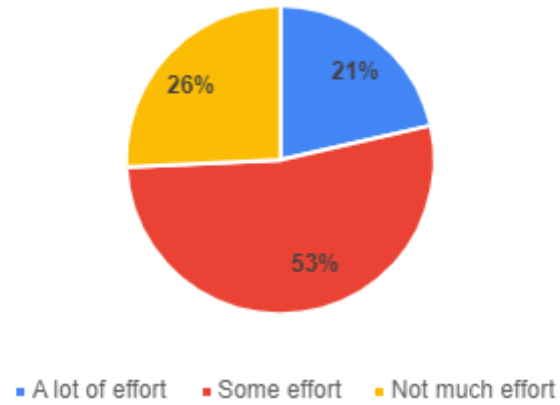


Figure 11. Hosts of Friends: Effort Used

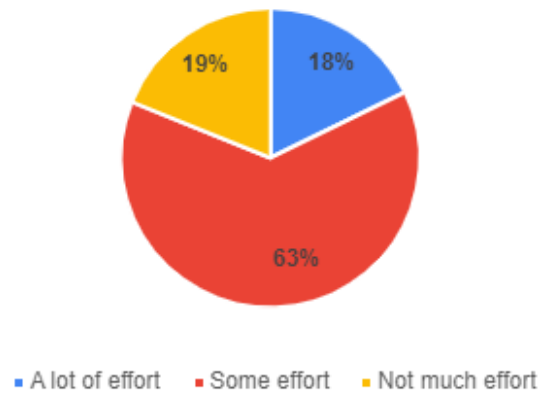


Figure 12. Hosts of Relatives: Effort Used

Planning Resources

Respondents of the questionnaire were given the opportunity to select as many resources as possible they could recall that they utilized during their planning process.

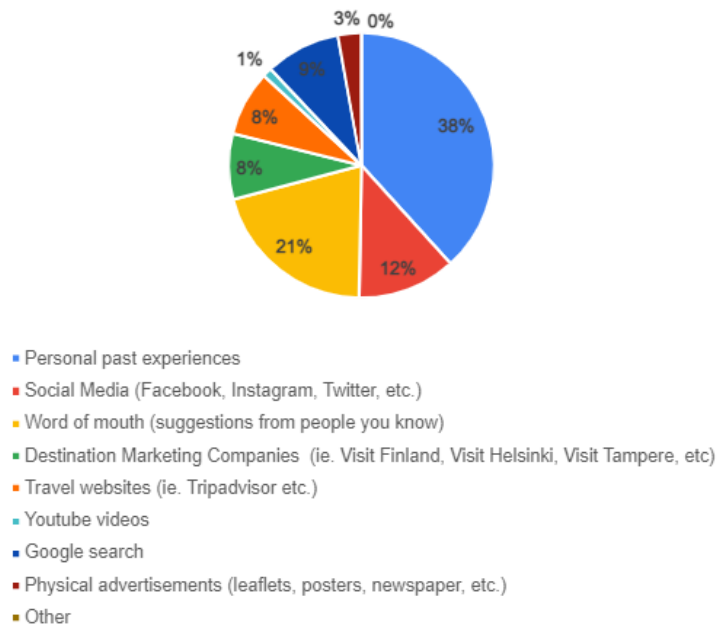


Figure 13. Hosts of Friends: Planning Resources

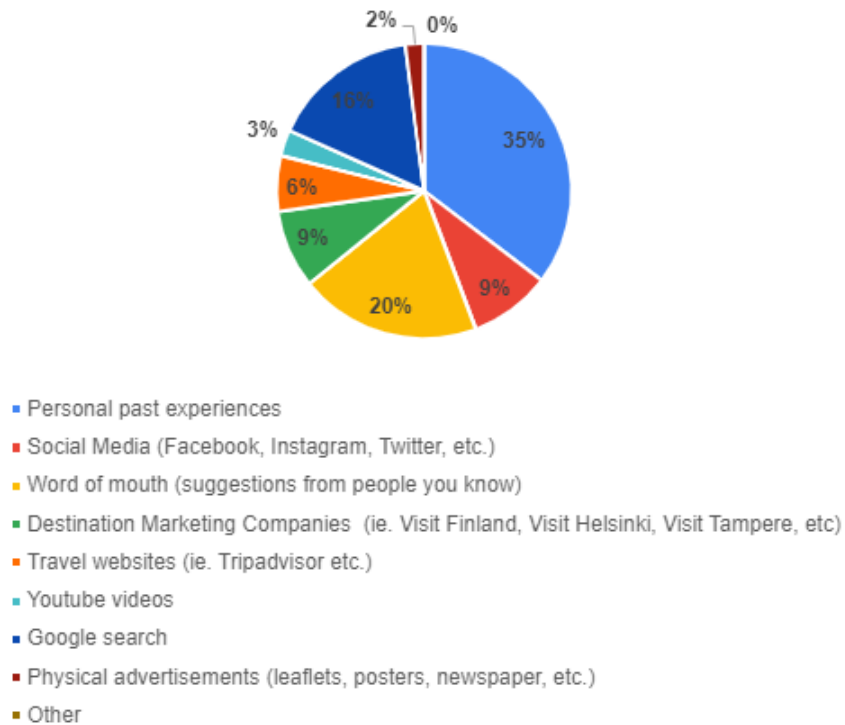


Figure 14. Hosts of Relatives: Planning Resources

The top four most utilized planning resources from both hosts of relatives and hosts of friends were identical. Personal past experiences were the most common resource in the planning process followed by word of mouth. Conducting Google searches and utilizing social media posts to help with the planning process were the third and fourth most common resources.

Comments about planning activities

Respondents were asked to freely express additional comments about their experience planning activities for their VFR visit overall. The comments were positive ones for the most part, yet there were also aspects of their planning experience which revealed some challenges some of the respondents encountered.

There were many short responses respondents used to describe their planning experience such as “good”, “fine”, “smoothly”, “perfectly”, and “successful”. However, there were also numerous respondents who were far more descriptive and specific about their positive experience planning for their VFR guests’ stay in Finland. Wanting to give authentic, preferably new, Finnish experiences and local activities to the VFR guests were two major goals of many respondents which impacted their planning of activities. One respondent commented she wanted to show their boyfriend from abroad the “real Finland” and take him ice skating since she knew that was something he had not ever done before. Another respondent had fun taking their Egyptian friend to a Finnish ice hockey game. One respondent commented the winter season was ideal for finding fun outdoor activities.

Despite many of the respondents participating in outdoor activities and events, there were also respondents who more laid back, unstructured home activities that required less effort to plan. Some respondents noted they enjoyed simply spending time with their loved ones at home and “were just happy to be in the same place after being separated for so long”.

Some negative factors which made the planning process more challenging for the respondent hosts included uncontrollable factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the weather. Others did not know where to find information that could have helped them plan for their VFR guests’ visit. One respondent had trouble with renting a car for their VFR guests’ visit which ended up in some of their planned activities being eliminated. They felt without a car, Finland was not a very accessible place. Some respondents felt there were too few possible activities to partake in while others felt there were too many activities in different locations, they wanted to take their guests to, but there was not enough time. Stress was also a negative factor which impacted some respondents planning process. They wanted to find fun activities their friends and relatives would enjoy, but when they had a hard time finding local activities and events, it made the

planning much more challenging and stressful despite putting a considerable amount of effort in to find them.

Overall, the comments regarding the respondents planning activities were positive and revealed that they felt the process was satisfactory, yet there would still be room for improvement. One respondent mentioned they noticed a difference in effort needed when planning activities in destinations that were more rural, such as in northern Finland compared to more populated southern Finnish cities. Nevertheless, most respondents felt either themselves or their guests had a clear vision of what they wanted to do during the VFR guests' visit which made the planning process easier and more enjoyable. Respondents also found word of mouth, past personal experiences, social media, and blogs to be among the valuable tools during the planning process.

Hosting Style

The questionnaire respondents were asked to identify which style of hosting friends and relatives identified in the previously mentioned Shani & Uriely (2012) study they felt best described their hosting style best. The results between respondents who hosted friends compared to the ones who hosted relatives were very similar in that both groups had most of its respondents identify best with the hosting style which has the host serve as a local tourist guide which acted as a local expert who could show the guests places they thought the guests would enjoy. Both groups also had numerous respondents who felt their hosting style was one of which they became a tourist themselves during the visit and participated in activities which they may not normally partake in.



Figure 15. Hosts of Friends: Hosting Style



Figure 16. Hosts of Relatives: Hosting Style

The key difference between the two respondent groups was the third most selected hosting style. The hosts of friends were more passive and maintained their daily routines and did not worry about entertaining their guests while the hosts of relatives did make an effort and entertained their guests at their own home. Both hosting styles do not include as much out of the house activities, but the hosts of relatives were eager to share their way of life with their family members and entertain them during their visit to Finland.

Most Valued Aspects of Visit

The questionnaire respondents were given a list of eight aspects of activities and were asked to select the top three aspects which they felt were most valuable in selecting the activities they planned to do with their VFR guests.

The top three most valued activity aspects for both the hosts of friends and hosts of relatives were nearly identical. The most valuable aspect for both groups was providing a new experience for their guest. The second and third most valued aspects for both groups were outdoors/nature activities and affordable price. Both groups also felt experiences that celebrated Finnish culture were of value.

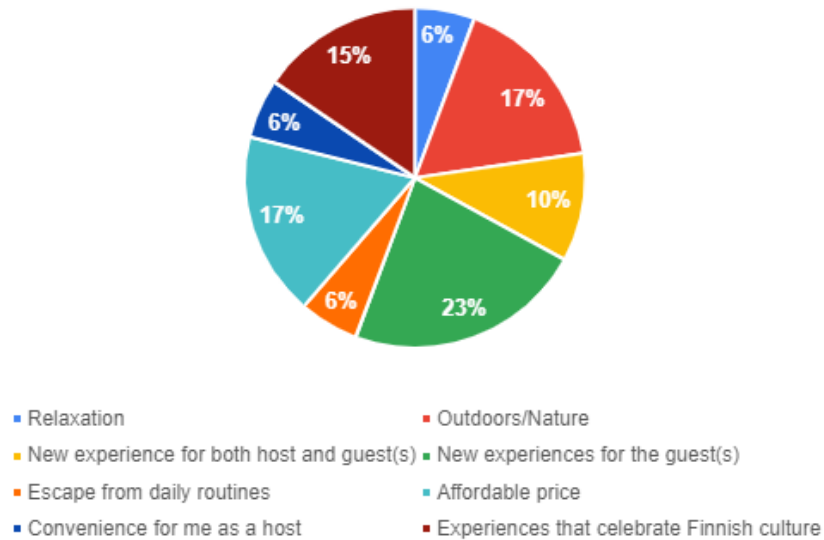


Figure 17. Hosts of Friends: Most Valued Aspects of Activities

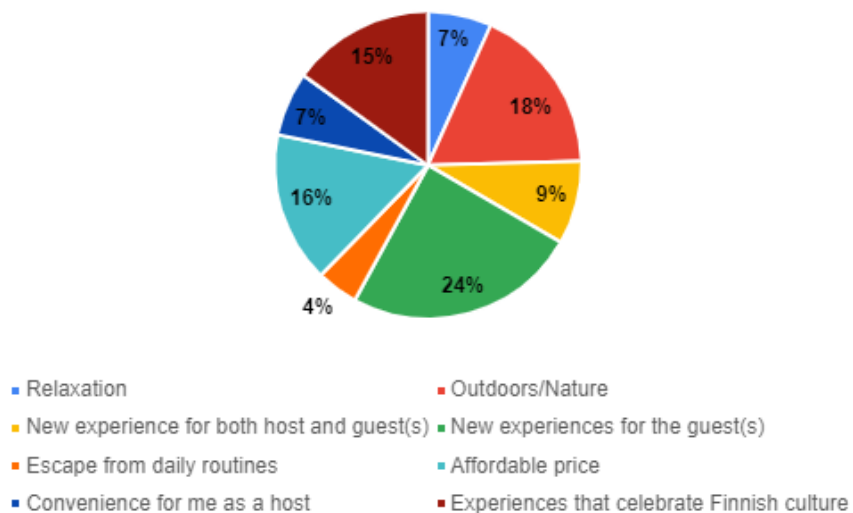


Figure 18. Hosts of Relatives: Most Valued Aspects of Activities

Additional comments

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were given the opportunity to freely make any additional comments. Information gained from these additional comments included activities the respondents enjoyed partaking in with their guests, more information about their own backgrounds, as well as opinions about the Finnish tourism industry and its accessibility.

Many respondents strived to highlight the best of what Finland has to offer. One respondent noted that while trying to plan such an exciting visit, as the host, it is important to set enough time aside to partake in the activities. Spending time at a cabin seemed to be extremely appreciated by many guests and multiple respondents who hosted their relatives said that their family enjoyed meeting their Finnish friends during their stay in Finland. There were also respondents who were eager to share and teach new skills such as baking and cooking Finnish foods.

One respondent chose commented that “Tourism need not be about objectifying the destination place/culture for consumption. Rather, it can be about learning about and experiencing a living place-- and may result in different 'touristic' choices than what you'd first think of.” This comment compliments the recurring statements from many respondents who noticed they did not have to make ordinary touristic activities for their guests. Rather, the respondents wanted their guests to experience their own local way of life and enjoy the things they had grown to love while living in Finland. However, one respondent noted that after living in Finland so long they had lost a little bit of their home countries cultural context and sense of prices which led them to end up entertaining a lot at home due to what they felt were high costs for other activities.

Another respondent did not see the Finnish tourism industry in a positive light. They felt that from their own experience, it needs a lot of help. They felt the Finnish tourism industry do not seem interested in employing international experts whom they felt could offer new ideas. Another respondent commented they felt accessibility issues, specifically for their elderly guests, made their planning of activities more problematic.

Respondents also mentioned the seasons impacting their experiences for the better and for the worse. While some may have been put off by the winter season, others were very excited about it and enjoyed partaking in a variety of winter activities with their guests. Some respondents also noted a difference in if their friend or relative had visited Finland multiple times before or if it was their first time visiting which they felt impacted the level of their guests' independence.

4.2 Semi- Structured Interview

Background Information

The interview participants were asked to identify their age and how long they had lived in Finland. Two of the participants were native Finns who had lived in Finland for most of their lives while the other two participants were immigrants from abroad who have lived in Finland for a minimum of two years and have Finnish residency. The ages of the participants ranged between 26-36 years old.

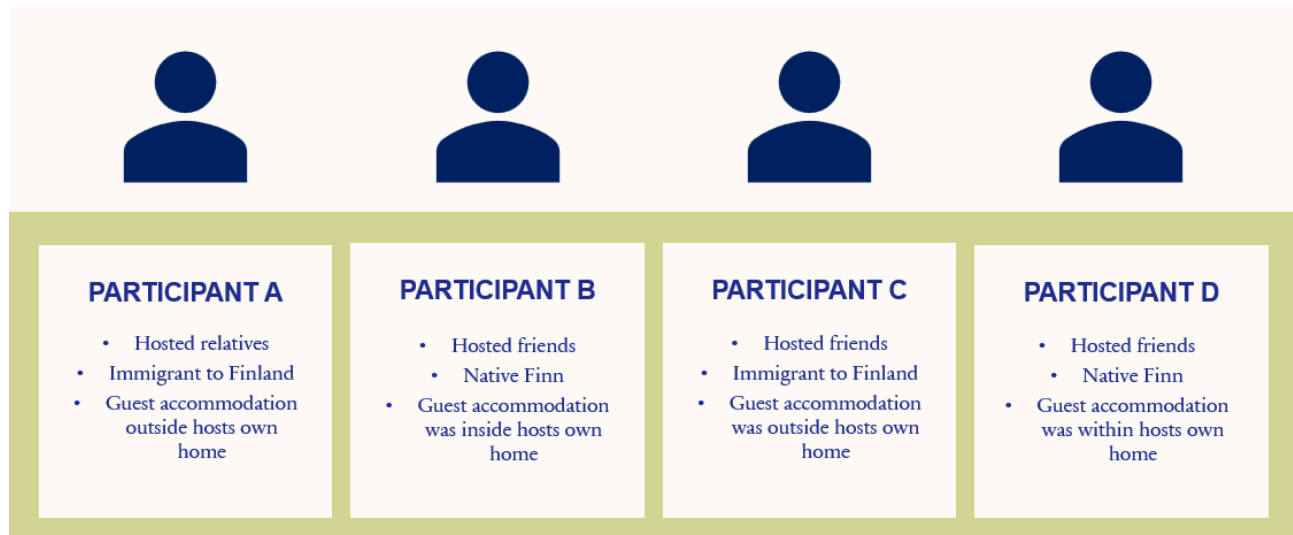


Figure 19. Semi- Structured Interview Participant Key

Guest Related

Participants were asked to recall their most recent experience hosting either friends or relatives in Finland within the past five years. Participants were asked to identify whether their visitors from outside Finland were friends or relatives, where they accommodated their guests, and the length of their guests visit to Finland. Overall, the VFR visits took place as early as 2017 and up until 2021.

One of the participants hosted visiting family members and the other three participants hosted friends. It is worth noting the nature of friendship varied between the participants with visiting friends. One participant hosted a Japanese photographer and his assistant who they had communicated in length online with, just had never met face to face before. One participant hosted a long- time friend from high-school friend. while another participant was hosting their boyfriend. This distinction between new platonic friendships, old platonic friendships and romantic friendship is important to consider as it may have affected the way the participants interacted with their guests.

The length of stay of the visiting guests ranged from 9 days to 3 weeks. All the participants interviewed felt that their guest's length of stay was appropriate. Three of the four participants accommodated their guests in their own home for at least part of the visit

One participant hosted their American friend in the Finnish town of Lahti in their studio apartment commented that their friend's visit was just long enough that they could see all the best spots in the city and spend time together, but not too long of a time that things would get boring or uncomfortable for anyone.

The participant who did not host their guests in their own home at all had their guest, in this case their parents, sleep in a nearby apartment-style hotel during the night for part of the visit. The reasoning for this was that on a previous trip, the participant's parents had stayed in their apartment. Based on that previous experience in the small apartment together, everyone agreed it would be nice to have separate accommodations. The participant's parents were also retired and had visited Finland in the past, so they had the ability to be quite independent and partake in activities by themselves. Despite this independence and separate accommodation, the sole purpose of the visit was to spend time together as a family after not seeing each other for over a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions.

All participants stayed in a cabin for at least part of their visitor's journey. Staying in a traditional Finnish cabin was an activity desired by all the visitors, so it was a convenient form of accommodation for the hosts to provide.

Planning and Decision Making

Participants were asked to reflect on how they planned activities for their guests visit and how much effort they used doing so. All participants shared they put some, if not a lot of effort in planning for their friend or relatives visit. The participant who had visitors from Japan put a lot of effort into planning which nearby natural parks they could visit. The purpose to visit of the Japanese visitors was to photograph the beauty of Finnish nature during the stay as well as spend time with the host and their family. The participant also asked the new friends to tell them which things about Finland they were most interested in so they could plan other activities the visitors would enjoy. This participant was also had previously studied tourism management with vast knowledge surrounding the customs and culture of southeast Asia, most specifically, Japan. The participant had experience working as a tour guide in local museums in Jyväskylä, Finland. The participant claimed their education and work experience proved to be very helpful with their decision-making process.

All the participants were also asked to reflect on what they thought helped them decide what to do with their guest's trip to Finland and what they thought was the most helpful of the tools and influences. Personal past experiences of the hosts proved to be the biggest influence in how the VFR hosts decided what they would do with their guests. Word of mouth was also highly regarded. The participant who hosted their boyfriend in Finland felt that the recommendations from their own friends were more reliable and accurate than anything a company may advertise about themselves. The weather was also a determining factor which all the participants mentioned. The participant who hosted the Japanese photographer and assistant from Japan was surprised with how pleased the guests were visiting in what many Finns consider the less desirable time of year, in early spring, when nature has not bloomed, and the weather is often rainy. The participant noted that photographer found beauty in in the "rough" look of the Finnish nature that time of year and found inspiration for their project during their visit in Finland.

There were a variety of activities the participants planned with their guests, some more than others. The participant who was hosting their parents did not feel obligated to have many activities planned. The nature of the visit was very unstructured with the main goal being to spend time together. The participant also noted that due to their busy schedule and the pandemic shutdowns happening during their parents visit, it made it even more challenging to plan anything. The participant recalled that their parents had also visited Finland four times prior, so there was not the same pressure of showing them all the popular locations as the first time they came to visit.

The participant who hosted their boyfriend described the culture shock upon his arrival to Finland. The boyfriend was from Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian ocean that has a warm climate. He was very surprised with how cold Finland was and needed to buy better winter clothing than what he had brought along on his trip. The participant also described how their boyfriend was surprised while experiencing his first Finnish housewarming party with how much more reserved and quiet Finnish people were compared to people in Mauritius. Regardless of this observation, the boyfriend still had a very fun time meeting the participants friends and family during his visit. The participant wanted their boyfriend to experience traditional activities and foods as well. Rice porridge and Christmas tarts were a couple treats the boyfriend got to try.

Both the participant who hosted their boyfriend and participant who hosted their friend described how much their guest enjoyed visiting Finnish grocery stores because they differed so much from the ones found in their respective home countries. What the participants felt were regular day to day activities, their guests found exciting and an experience not to miss out on.

Host Related

The participants were asked to identify which previously mentioned Shani & Uriely (2017) style of hosting they identified the most with. The responses provided by the participants did not drastically vary, and there was one hosting style all of them identified with. All participants felt they had served as a local tourist guide who acted as local experts during the time of their VFR guests visit.

All the hosts reported that they actively participated in most, if not all the activities their guests partook in. For example, despite one of the participants working many of the days their boyfriend was visiting, they spent time with their boyfriend immediately when their work shift was over. The participant also made sure that while they were at work, the boyfriend was comfortable. The participants brother would often spend time with the boyfriend during the workday. While they expressed this was not the ideal situation to be working during their boyfriends visit, they did the best they could with the situation. The participant also mentioned they found word of mouth to be the most helpful resource when planning places to go with their boyfriend. When searching for activity ideas and information, they valued companies which had their information easy to access such clearly defined prices and a smooth booking process.

The participant who hosted their friend in Lahti described their hosting style as sisterly, friendly, and a “day in the life” kind of host. They specified they do not want to “break the bank for the guest” but always wants to make sure they can get a feel for how they live their life in Finland. The participant felt they were more relaxed, and casual compared to when their mother had visited Finland and pointed out their family visits had much more structure. However, when presented with the prepared Shani & Uriely (2017) hosting styles, they still felt they predominantly served as a local tourist guide over maintaining their daily routines without worrying much about their guests.

The participant who hosted their guests from Japan described their hosting style as “relaxed and with passion” and wanted their guests to feel welcomed and have the best experience they could during their visit in Finland. As mentioned earlier, the participant relied heavily on their past experiences and knowledge of the tourism industry and Asian culture when planning for the visit. They felt that Shani & Uriely (2017) hosting style that best suited them was serving as a local tourist guide who acted as a local expert. The participant embraced activities that were budget- friendly, not “mega touristic”, open spaces, and relaxing. The participant shared they felt something both Finnish people and Japanese people have in common is a value for preserving and enjoying nature, even though there are not as many forests and parks in Japan as there are in Finland. The participant observed the Japanese guests being excited about the small details in what the participant as a native Finn considered to be quite ordinary, such having a garden at a family home. The

participant shared that these observations made it easier for them to be in the moment and appreciate the simple things that may be missed in everyday life.

Retrospective

Overall, participants felt their family and friends visit to Finland was a success and were very happy with the experience. All participants felt their guests were satisfied with their respective visits as well. One of the main highlights of the participants' hosting experience was spending quality time with their VFR guests. While the planned activities at various locations were nice to partake in, the simple, relaxed activities where everyone could be together after spending so long apart proved to be very valuable.

Lastly, all participants were asked to reflect on their experience hosting friends and family in Finland as a whole and if they felt there was something the Finnish tourism industry was missing that could have made planning and decision making easier for them. The participant who had hosted their boyfriend shared they wished there would have been more Finnish webpages would have more information about their services available in English. They felt this lack of English language, especially from smaller companies, made it more challenging for guests to be independent when checking online for possible activities.

The participant who hosted their parents could not think of anything specific that the Finnish tourism industry could improve due to that their Finnish husband was very aware of activities in Finland. They also relied so heavily on their own past experiences they did not feel the need to do much research to prepare for their parents visit. Nevertheless, the participant admitted if they would be in the situation where they would host VFR guests in a region in Finland that they were not familiar with, such as Lapland, they did believe they would utilize online services such as Visit Finland's Lapland resources.

The participant who hosted the Japanese photographer and assistant shared that they felt the photos of the national parks were somewhat deceptive and not a very accurate view of the actual hiking experience. They felt the Finnish tourism industry should strive to provide more information in other languages. The participant also felt it is important that people truly know their tourists and stressed the importance of understanding other cultures, especially the unique practices and differences found in east Asian cultures. The participant also thought large companies in Finland should do more to work with and support small businesses. They believed small Finnish brands could gain international attention with more help

from large organizations, such as Business Finland. They felt that overall, companies should network together more often, rather than just competing to boost their own visibility. The participant also expressed it was important for VFR hosts in Finland to show their guests “the real Finland” and to embrace the many simple and natural wonders Finland has to offer.

The participant who hosted their friend suggested the Finnish tourism industry could have more information that could be utilized for the VFR host living in Finland. More posts from the hosts perspective such as “Don’t let your visitor leave without...” followed by a list of suggestions for a VFR hosts may have helped make the planning process easier. The participant felt that Finns might not recognize how simple things may be great experiences. They also expressed the importance of slowing down and relaxing during the guests visit to fully enjoy the precious time together.

5 Discussion and Limitations

This study revealed personal past experience was the most commonly used resource when planning activities for VFR visits. The VFR hosts wanted to maximize their guests time spent in Finland by often doing things they themselves have enjoyed or had heard good things about. This study shows the experience a resident has, or simply the impression the resident gets of an establishment can directly impact whether the resident will plan to utilize that business when they have international guests visiting. Word of mouth was revealed to be the second biggest influencer the resident hosts when they planned their activities for their VFR guests. The resident hosts heavily considered the suggestions and experiences their friends and family in Finland, which greatly impacted their decision making.

Providing new experiences for guests was the most valued aspect the VFR hosts in this study prioritized when trying to plan their activities. Highlighting Finnish traditions and culture was an aspect the VFR hosts were eager to share with their guests. Celebrating Finnish culture through activities in the home such as cooking and baking traditional Finnish dishes was a thrilling experience for the guests. Activities that were considered ordinary to the host such as visiting a local grocery store or taking a sauna proved to be exciting activities for the guests that were enjoyable experience for everyone involved.

The results suggest that Finnish service providers may benefit from providing more information in languages other than Finnish. While many large companies in Finland do offer at least some company information in English, there were participants in this study who found there could have been more, especially smaller companies. In this study, even if a non- native resident of Finland can speak Finnish, much of the time their visiting international guests did not. Many participants in this study explained the lack of information in languages other than Finnish made it more challenging for them to share information with their guests before the guests arrive to Finland. They claimed there was lower feeling of independence for the guests to explore activity options, which may potentially remove a particular service or activity as an option when deciding what to do.

Many participants of this study, especially those just starting their career or still studying relied heavily on affordable activities and experiences for their VFR guests' trip to Finland. Most of the participants in this study did not feel any pressure to show their guests an extravagant time. The main goal for much of the participants and their guests was to spend quality time together.

Participating in outdoor activities that highlighted Finnish nature was highly valued among the resident hosts and their VFR guests. Finnish government organizations such as Business Finland have already identified target groups to market to who appreciate Finnish nature such as “Nature Wonder Hunters” and “Nature Explorers” (About Visit Finland, n.d.). As mentioned previously, enjoying Finnish nature does not mean only on a destination level, rather, joy for VFR guests can even be found in a resident’s back yard. Whether if it is a small nearby forest or someone’s garden, the guests hosted by the residents in this study often enjoyed the simple natural occurrences often overlooked or taken for granted by the resident.

Lastly, educating current and future workers in the Finnish tourism industry about both different cultures as well as the VFR demographic could be quite beneficial in a variety of ways. By better understanding the values and customs of potential customer groups such as that of east Asia, stakeholders in the Finnish tourism industry can accommodate to their needs more effectively. This understanding may lead to more satisfied customers and financial gain for businesses. This could also lead to the demographic becoming repeat visitors to Finland because they feel well taken care of and have enjoyable experiences.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study to better assess the reliability of the results and findings. Research focusing on VFR tourism, especially regarding motives, influences, and the host experience are lacking, which makes comparing the findings and results of this study to existing literature challenging. It is also worth noting that the online questionnaire does not accurately be representative of the general population. Over half of the responses were done by people not native to Finland, which does not reflect the demographics of the nation’s population. The online questionnaire was also in English which may have deterred some native Finns from participating if they did not feel comfortable responding in English. When answering the online questionnaire, if respondents had experiences within the past five years hosting both friends and relatives, they had the possibility to complete the questionnaire twice, once recounting a specific hosting experience with friends and once recounting a specific hosting experience with relatives. Allowing participants to complete the questionnaire once per hosting type made analyzing the data more challenging as it made the exact number of participants unclear. This decision also made it mandatory to compare hosting friends versus hosting relatives.

Lastly, there was only one participant who hosted their actual relatives which narrowed the data collected from the semi-structured interview to one person’s experience hosting their family members in Finland. No concrete definition was found stating whether a boyfriend or girlfriend could be considered a family member. One participant in this study hosted a friend of a close friend who they communicated with online. This

lack of classification in VFR literature of the level of friendship a host has with their guest makes it more difficult to make general assumptions because there could easily be sub-categories of VFR guests.

Ethics

In order to respect the privacy of the participants in the interview, no sensitive data was collected. The names of the participants are not revealed. The age of the participants was revealed with their consent. No confidential information was discussed in this thesis and the interviews were conducted with the contingency that confidential information will not be shared. All of the ethical principals of Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences were followed in this thesis project and the researcher followed good scientific practices.

Data Management

Data for this thesis project was obtained and stored by the researcher alone. All data was stored on the researchers' personal computer in Google Drive for the Google Forms questionnaire and everything else in OneDrive. All participants in the semi-structured interviews received the same baseline questions to maintain consistency. The online questionnaire respondents all answered the same questions, and the document was never edited after the first person had responded. The data from the online questionnaire was also carefully analyzed to filter out the responses from individuals who were obviously trolling with racial slurs or other obscene responses. After examination, it was confirmed all the responses given were deemed to be sincere and appropriate for further analysis.

6 Conclusion and Future Recommendations

This study attempted to tackle visiting family and relatives tourism, which is a big segment of tourism that does not get the attention it deserves. Exact numbers are unknown pertaining to what percentage of tourism is VFR tourism, but many people participate in VFR tourism whether they realize it or not. This might explain why the visitors and hosts often only see it as a visit and completely miss the point of it being also a form of tourism where they go to restaurants, do sightseeing, buy local memorabilia and do other things tourists would. The main research question for this thesis was: How do resident VFR hosts in Finland plan and decide what to do with their international VFR guests? And the secondary question was: How does the host experience differ hosting friends hosting relatives? This study used mixed method research design as the main method and more specifically the explanatory sequential design. An online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection and both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods were utilized.

Key results of this study were related to the VFR hosts trusting personal past experiences and that there were not many differences in experience whether someone hosted friends or relatives. Personal past experiences and word of mouth proved to be more influential to the hosts over any other resource including resources from company or governmental destination marketing campaigns. This was surprising because there are great resources available to tourists, but they are still ignored for the most parts by those partaking in VFR tourism. This might be due to hosts playing a vital role in the visit whereas normal tourists do not rely on hosts to come up with activities. There were no major differences between the experiences between the hosts of friends versus hosting relatives. Rather, the statistical data from the questionnaire in particular was nearly identical. Results had suggested that perhaps because the VFR tourists do not necessarily think of themselves as tourists, they might not realize to seek tourist related resources online or in places like Visit Jyväskylä for example.

The experiences of VFR hosts in Finland should be considered by Finnish tourism industry more than it currently appears to be. Both the resident VFR hosts in Finland and their guests are potential customers for both local businesses, and businesses around the country. Having a better understanding the VFR demographic and their motivations could benefit knowing what kind of activity aspects and offerings are valuable and in turn would reveal how to better cater to them.

Many hosts in this study revealed they wanted to share a piece of their life in Finland with their visiting friends and relatives who were excited to partake in everyday activities. This may mean that VFR tourism is much more about the people than the destination or the activities themselves.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Have you hosted guests visiting from abroad while living in Finland?

Want to reminisce about your past experience hosting your international friends and/family in Finland by taking a relatively quick survey? Bonus: your responses make a big difference by contributing to a very un-researched area of study.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information on how residents of Finland decided what activities to do with their visiting friends and relatives (VFR) guests from abroad.

You still count as a host if your guest(s) did not spend the night in your home. As long as you were in the same destination, you're good!

*** Before responding to the survey, please confirm the following: ***

- you are a resident of Finland
- you have hosted friends and/or relatives from abroad in Finland within the past 5 years

I am a...

- Native Finn
- Foreigner temporarily working or studying in Finland
- Person who has immigrated to Finland

How old are you

- Under 25
- 25-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- above 60

Sex

- Make
- Female
- Prefer not to say

Who did you host? (This survey may be taken more than once if you have experience in hosting both groups. One time for Friends experience, one time for Relatives experience)

- Friend(s)
- Relatives(s)

Planning of activities was

- done by me
- done together with my guest(s)
- done by my guest(s)

Did you participate in activities with your guest(s)?

- Yes, most of the activities
- Some of the activities
- No, none of the activities

As a host I mostly...

- Maintained my daily routines and didn't really worry about entertaining my guests
- Became a tourist myself (participated in touristic activities that I normally wouldn't)
- Served as a local tourist guide (was like a local expert and showed them place...)
- Hosted and entertained mostly at my own home

What influenced you in helping plan for your guests visit? Please mark as many as necessary.

- Personal past experiences
- Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.)
- Word of mouth (suggestions from people you know)
- Destination Marketing Companies (ie. Visit Finland, Visit Helsinki, Visit Tampere, etc)
- Travel websites (ie. Tripadvisor etc.)
- YouTube videos
- Google search
- Physical advertisements (leaflets, posters, newspaper, etc.)

How did your activities search/ planning go?

How much effort did you put into planning?

A lot of effort

- Some effort
- Not much effort

What do you value most when choosing activities? (Please choose top 3)

- Relaxation
- Outdoors/Nature
- New experience for both host and guest(s)
- New experiences for the guest(s)
- Escape from daily routines
- Affordable price
- Convenience for me as a host
- Experiences that celebrate Finnish culture

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Background Information

How old are you?

How long have you lived in Finland?

Guest Related

Please answer the following questions referencing one recent hosting experience you have had. Preferably within the past 5 years.

Who was your visitor(s) from outside of Finland? Friend or relative?

Had they been to Finland before?

What was the purpose of their visit?

Did you accommodate your guest(s) in your home?

No? Why did you choose not to?

Yes? Why did you choose to?

How long did your guest(s) stay in Finland?

Planning and Decision Related

How did you plan the activities for your guests visit?

Can you describe how you decide to do it that way?

How did you come to the final decision on what activities to do?

Can you describe how much effort you put into planning activities?

What do you think influenced you in helping plan for your guests visit?

(For example, personal past experiences, word of mouth, social media, destination marketing companies like Visit Finland, etc.)

What was the most helpful to you?

Can you describe what kind of activities were planned for your guest(s) visit?

Did you plan activities before the trip, during the trip, or both?

Host Related

At what level did you participate in the activities with your guests?

How would you best describe your style of hosting in your own words?

(Respondent answers first in their own words and then is given options to choose from that they feel they most identify with)

(Hosting Style Selection)

1. Maintained my daily routines and didn't really worry about entertaining my guests
2. Became a tourist myself (participated in touristic activities that I normally wouldn't)
3. Served as a local tourist guide (was like a local expert and showed them place...
4. Hosted and entertained mostly at my own home

Can you describe the things you value most when choosing activities?

Please explain what you mean by that...

Retrospective

Overall, how would you describe your experience as a host?

Do you think your guests were happy with their experience?

What was your favorite part of the visit?

Looking back, do you think there is something the Finnish tourism industry is missing that could have made your planning and decision making easier?