

An Investigation of the Tourism Distribution Channels in the VFR Segment

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This study contributes to the understanding of the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel segment, as it focuses on the use of tourism distribution channels as information sources for consumer travel behaviour in the VFR segment. Demographics and trip characteristics of the VFR travel segment were also analysed, according to trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking; the findings justify the significant and profitable role of VFR in commercial accommodation. The data are representative of the province of Arcadia, Greece, serving as the research field of a longitudinal study. The findings underscore the important role that VFR travel holds in commercial accommodation, confirming the 'hybrid' nature of VFR travel, and highlight the importance of social identity issues involved in VFR travel, as well as indicating an emerging role of the diasporas in their return visit(s) to the homeland. As such, the findings would seem to promote a marketing strategy of organized governance that takes into account identification and focuses on a 'sense of belonging' and community, tailored to the characteristics of this particular target market and aligned with the distribution channels they use, as evidenced in the research findings.

Keywords: VFR travel, consumer behaviour, distribution channels, tourism marketing, tourism segmentation

Introduction

This study contributes to the understanding of VFR travellers' behaviour in a 'during the trip' context. The use of the term 'travel' was deliberately chosen, as according to Backer (2012):

[...] a person travelling to a destination to: attend a wedding, assist a daughter to care for a newborn baby, or visit an ailing relative could not be included as a tourist – under Leiper's (2004, p. 35) definition of tourism as a search for leisure experiences from interactions with features or characteristics of places they choose to visit – but rather they would identify themselves

as travelling for the purpose of visiting friends and relatives and fall under the official data as VFR travelers.

It is clear that VFR travel may not always involve a leisure experience and VFR travel is motivated by a range of reasons according to which specific obligations are fulfilled through host-guest social interactions (Capistrano, 2013).

The whole analysis is through a consumer behaviour framework, because consumer behaviour has been used to explain the decision-making processes of consumers facing several alternatives or choices, thus making consumer research on tourism the cor-

nerstone of marketing strategy (Van Raaij, 1986; Katsoni, Giaoutzi, & Nijkamp, 2013). Demographics and trip characteristics of the **VFR** travel segment were then analysed, according to trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking, where the findings highlight the differences between **VFR** travelers and other tourists and justify the important and profitable role of **VFR** in commercial accommodation.

The study also focuses on the use of information sources for travel consumer behaviour, discussing the implications of tourism distribution channels. While the tourism literature evidences that several factors influence travelers' behavior in consuming tourism products (Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009), to date, investigation into the determinants of tourism consumption remains inadequate in the literature; for example, the relative importance of the various information sources (ICT sources included) used by travelers has not yet been systematically analysed (Katsoni et al., 2013). Distribution channels are the paths by which tourism organizations execute the communication and sale of their products and services and as Buhalis (2000, p. 113) argues: 'The primary distribution functions for tourism are information, combination and travel arrangement services.' To varying degrees, all tourism product suppliers depend on these channels for the distribution of their products. While the importance of understanding and managing the structure and behaviour of such channels has been clearly identified in many mainstream academic and trade publications, relatively little tourism research has focused on **VFR** travel. The data of this study are representative of the province of Arcadia, Greece, serving as the research field of a longitudinal study. The results of the research give the industry the possibility of improving information distribution systems and an understanding of **VFR** travellers' consumer behaviour in order to make adequate marketing decisions.

Literature Review

Visiting Friends and Relatives (vfr) Tourism Defined
The Visiting Friends and Relatives (**VFR**) form of travel is recognized as a substantial form of tourism world-

wide, and it is also likely to be the oldest form of travel (Backer, 2011) as travelling to visit friends and relatives has always been socially significant. **VFR** is defined as 'a form of travel that is about being co-present with significant "faces," being their guests, receiving their hospitality and perhaps enjoying their knowledge of local culture' (Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen (2007, p. 247). Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green, and O'Leary (2000) provide five defining features of the **VFR** travel: sector (**VFR** as a major motive/trip type or as an activity); scope (international and/or domestic); effort (short- and/or long-haul); accommodation used (accommodated by friends/relatives, commercial accommodation, or a combination); and the focus of the visit.

It is evident then that there is a definitional issue in **VFR** travel, as recognized by Backer (2010), who highlighted an inconsistency in tourism literature: **VFR** is commonly categorized by the purpose of visit (Yuan, Fridgen, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995; McKercher, 1995), but it can also be categorized by accommodation type (Boyne, 2001; King, 1994; Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006; Boyne, Carswell, & Hall, 2002). Backer (2012) then developed a definitional model of **VFR** travel as a form of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives. Thus, in tourism literature, **VFR** travel is recognized as having a multifaceted nature and might be a kind of hybrid travel, i.e. travel which comprises a mix of pleasure, business and **VFR** travel experiences.

As a consequence, difficulties arise in synthesizing existing research on **VFR** travel and many authors argue that a basic step in formulating a typology of **VFR** travel is distinguishing **VFR** as the prime travel motivation or trip type from **VFR** as one activity among several in which the travellers participate (Morrison, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1995; King 1996). However, the purpose of visit definitions may capture different people than accommodation definitions will. Nor do all **VFR** travellers who stay with friends and relatives state a **VFR** travel purpose (Jackson, 1990; 2003), and neither do all people who travel for **VFR** purposes stay with friends and relatives (Backer, 2010). Therefore, a more inclusive definition is that '**VFR** travel is a form

of travel involving a visit whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and/or relatives' (Backer, 2007, p. 369).

This misconception about the **VFR** market in general, based on its assumed non-commercial accommodation usage and assumed within-group homogeneity, has led to the notion that **VFR** travel is underestimated (Backer, 2012; Griffin, 2013) and that official data fail to measure it appropriately, as many people who are **VFR** travellers may not actually identify themselves as such and simply state that they are on holiday. Some empirical research on this topic shows that while **VFR** travellers are commonly considered to spend less than other types of tourists, more detailed comparative analysis indicates that this market should not be disregarded, as they find that **VFR** travellers tend to participate in a wide variety of local and regional leisure activities (Moscardo et al., 2000) and have a significant economic impact on commercial tourism operations, such as travel services and retail (Backer, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Lee, Morrison, Lheto, Webb, & Reid, 2005; Seaton & Palmer, 1997). Another strong indication that **VFR** can be a lucrative market for destinations is the link between repeat visits and **VFR** travel (Tiefenbacher, Day, & Walton, 2000), as the segment of repeat visitors appears to include a high rate of **VFRS** and **VFR** travel is less susceptible to seasonality, as tourist arrivals tend to be dispersed more evenly throughout the year (Hu & Morrison, 2002; Seaton & Palmer, 1997).

Moreover, **VFR** travel was found to be distributed more equally throughout the destination, benefiting areas beyond typical tourism hubs (Asiedu, 2008; Jackson, 1990). Asiedu (2008) mentioned other reasons for the attractiveness of the **VFR** market segment, such as the fact that **VFRS** are less influenced by image and political instability concerns. **VFR** was also found to be one of the primary motivations for both domestic and international traveling (Paci, 1994; Pennington-Gray, 2003; Yuan et al., 1995), and to have close association with immigration patterns (Bywater, 1995; Jackson, 1990), which generate two-way movements of 'ethnic' tourism: emigrants who return to their homeland out of senses of belonging and identification with

its way of life, and their friends and families who travel to visit them in their current country (King, 1994).

For all the reasons mentioned above, **VFR** travel is now considered to be a legitimate market segment with significant relevance to the tourism-related economy as well as to the hospitality industry (Lehto, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2001). The contribution of **VFR** travel to the tourism benefits for the development of the tourism destination of Arcadia, Greece, made this research relevant.

Tourism Distribution Channels, Information Sources, and Tourist Segmentation

Travel products are mostly intangible personal service products, involving personal interactions between customers and service providers (Lovelock & Wright, 1999; Normann, 1996; Teare, 1992) and the consumption and production of tourism products always coincide, creating high personal involvement (Bieger & Laesser, 2002). According to the economics of information, these characteristics often lead to great personal investments of time, effort, and financial resources for customer decision making (Lambert, 1998). With increasing frequency, tourists have been directly segmented based on their search behaviour (Katsoni et al., 2013; Bieger & Laesser, 2004). Market segmentation is a technique used to subdivide a heterogeneous market into homogeneous subgroups that can be distinguished by different variables, such as consumer needs, characteristics, or behaviour (Kotler, 1998; Middleton, 1994). Because people have individualized needs, tastes, and attitudes, as well as different life stages and lifestyles, no single variable can be used to segment travel markets (Andereck & Caldwell, 1994), and the use of 'multistage segmentation' (Middleton, 1994; Havitz and Dimanche, 1990; Morrison, 1996) or a 'combination' (Kotler et al., 2006) of multiple variables rather than just one has been recommended. A review of the literature indicates that there is no one correct way to segment a market.

Although information seeking is often coupled with a cultural (and therefore regionally different) background resulting in different patterns of behavior (Dawar, 1993), a number of common travel-specific denominators regarding information collection have

been identified, such as length of trip, previous experience and/or visits to the destination, and travel party characteristics, e.g. composition of the vacation group, the presence of family and friends at the destination (Bieger & Laesser, 2002, 2004; Fodness & Murray, 1997). Understanding how customers acquire information is necessary for marketing management decisions (Katsoni et al., 2013; Moutinho, 1987).

The 'purpose of trip' is recognized as one of the non-traditional segmentation bases closely associated with travel motivation, and has been approached from different perspectives. Examples of such studies include the interaction of trip purposes with activities (Hsieh, O'Leary, & Morrison, 1992; Jeffrey & Xie, 1995; Morrison, Hsieh, & O'Leary, 1994; Moscardo, Morrison, Pearce, Lang, & O'Leary, 1996), interest (Sorensen, 1993; Wight, 1996), motivation (Cha, McCleary and Uysal, 1995; Wight, 1996), opinion (Cohen & Richardson, 1995), and value (Madrigal & Kahle, 1994). In using trip type as a key variable to segment the travel market, the inclusion of more trip-related characteristics in the analysis is highly recommended for the comprehensive understanding of the target segment from a consumer behaviour perspective, such as length of stay and size of the travel party (Sung, Morrison, Hong, & O'Leary, 2001).

Information search behavior and tourism distribution channels usage are closely related; the Internet has also intensified the complexity of the travel decision-making process, and it has become an important channel for travellers' information search (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, & O'Leary, 2006; Gursoy & McLeary, 2003; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2003; Xiang, Weber, & Fesenmaier, 2008; Jun, Vogt, & Mackay, 2007), creating an environment whereby online information providers, such as tourist boards, hotel and resort websites, travel agents, bloggers, and magazines, actively compete for attention to attract searchers and, ultimately, bookers. The application of ICT in the tourism sector provides an opportunity for travel and tourism service providers to intermix traditional marketing channels (i.e. distribution, transaction, and communication) that were previously considered independent processes (Peterson & Merino, 2003; Zins, 2009). A single interaction on the Internet can provide product informa-

tion, a means for payment and product exchange, and distribution, whereas more traditional interaction approaches frequently separate these functions (Jun et al., 2007; Stratigea, Papadopoulou, & Panagiotopoulou, 2015) and recent studies have considered the use of online information sources relative to more conventional ones (Katsoni et al., 2013).

Implications of the Literature Review

The literature review offers a number of options to analyse the profile of VFR travellers: firstly, an analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics. Secondly, an analysis of their trip characteristics: trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday), time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking. Thirdly, an analysis of their information sourcing behaviour, based on internal and external information sources, and ICT use in particular: the Internet, the use of Global Positioning System (GPS) and smartphones.

Method

This investigation was designed to further understand the tourism market in the province of Arcadia, Greece, in 2012. To eliminate seasonality, the survey included a convenience sample of Greek and foreign tourists in the region over a period of 12 months. Questionnaires were distributed to various survey sites from people working in the prefecture of Arcadia. Data were collected by using a four-page self-administered questionnaire, in Greek and English, primarily designed to gather information on the subjects' general motivations for travel. A total of 3500 questionnaires were distributed to the sites, and 766 usable questionnaires were collected, which leads to the response rate of 21.88%. Their participation in VFR travel was identified through the question: 'As part of your vacation how likely are you to be interested in visiting friends and relatives?' The survey data were coded and analysed using R, an open-source statistical package. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to the collected data to explore the overall sample profile. In order to identify individual characteristics of the sub-population of tourists that had replied positively to the question on how likely they were to be interested

in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation, the VFR travellers' group was separated from the rest of the respondents, and the following sub-groups for subsequent analysis were constructed:

- Group A or 'VFR travellers' ($n = 312$): 'Very likely' to be interested in visiting friends and relatives.
- Group B ($n = 454$): 'Very unlikely' to be interested in visiting friends and relatives.

Then, the individual characteristics of the two sub-groups were analysed. Chi-square tests were conducted to verify whether differences between the two sub-groups, as regards particular characteristics of the population of tourists, were due to chance variation or revealed some statistically significant trend. Chi-squared tests were chosen for use in this exploratory investigation to aid in making inference about the uniform distribution (or not) of the two sub-groups in relation to demographic, trip characteristics, selection of information sources for their journey and degree of satisfaction from the use of these information sources.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The initial chi-square analyses were conducted to determine differences in the Group A and Group B tourists' gender, age, education, occupation and nationality. Amongst VFR travellers (Group A) the number of female participants was greater than the number of male participants: females at 60.6% and males at 37.8%. Results in Table 1 reveal a significant chi-square for the variables: Occupation ($\chi^2_{9df} = 36.03$, $p < 0.0001$). Table 1 also reveals that there is a tendency for unemployed/people looking for a job to visit friends and relatives in their vacation. Visiting friends and relatives is also less popular for scientific, free professional, technical and related workers, as well as for trade and sales workers; Nationality/Origin ($\chi^2_{1df} = 4.3$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that it is more likely for Greek than foreign travellers to show preference in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation.

Trip Characteristics

Trip characteristics were analysed according to trip organization (package holiday/self-guided holiday),

time used to decide about the trip, type of accommodation, travel companion, and booking.

The majority of VFR travellers (79.5%) organize their holidays on their own and make the final decision of their trip in a period of less than one month before their departure. They prefer to stay in upgraded hotels: first choice (27.2%) is hotel/club of 4- and 5-star categories. Only 2.9% prefer camping facilities. Bookings are made by phone, directly from the producer (55.4%). The tests on the trip characteristics of travellers in Group A and Group B, as displayed in Table 2, reveal that it is more likely for travellers of Group A compared to travellers of Group B to travel on their own or with their family but less commonly so with friends ($\chi^2_{2df} = 10.07$, $p < 0.005$). It is also evident that travellers of Group A are not only interested in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation, but also choose to stay with friends and relatives ($\chi^2_{6df} = 23.5$, $p < 0.001$). B&B is also more popular for Group A, while living in 2- and 3-star hotels and camping is less popular.

Selection of Information Sources

The aim of this part of the analysis is to explore the tourists' habits with regards to the preference they show in the selection of information sources for their journey. Comparisons between the two sub-groups (Group A and Group B) have been conducted using the chi-squared test in Table 3, and a significant chi-square has been derived from the sources: Personal experience/knowledge ($\chi^2_{1df} = 4.07$, $p < 0.05$) and GPS ($\chi^2_{1df} = 6.49$, $p < 0.05$). Figures in Table 3 reveal that it is more likely for travellers in Group A to use their personal experience and knowledge than tourists in Group B. It is also more common for tourists in Group A to get information on the place that they visit using a GPS device.

Information sources are displayed in the same Table 4, in descending order of preference for travellers in Group A. Thus, travellers interested in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation seek information on the place that they visit from recommendations from friends and family and secondly from the Internet. Third in their preference are travel guidebooks and travel magazines, while personal experi-

Table 1 Chi-Square Analysis of Demographic Characteristics of Travelers Who Are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Category	Subcategory	Group A		Group B		χ^2	df	p
		n	%	n	%			
Gender	Male	118	37.8	200	44.1	3.461	1	0.0628
	Female	189	60.6	239	52.6			
Age	15-25	54	17.3	58	12.8	8.225	5	0.1443
	25-35	102	32.7	135	29.7			
	35-45	59	18.9	119	26.2			
	45-55	56	17.9	75	16.5			
	55-65	23	7.4	40	8.8			
	Over 65	13	4.2	16	3.5			
Higher level of education	Primary	10	3.2	16	3.5	6.8458	4	0.1443
	Secondary/high school	85	27.2	105	23.1			
	Tertiary	117	37.5	193	42.5			
	Postgraduate Studies	59	18.9	102	22.5			
	Other	29	9.3	26	5.7			
Occupation	Scientific, free professional, technical and related worker	71	22.8	141	31.1	36.0325	9	$3.912e^{-5}$
	Administrative and managerial worker	45	14.4	62	13.7			
	Clerical worker	54	17.3	88	19.4			
	Trade and sales worker	17	5.4	37	8.1			
	Farmer, fisherman, and related worker	8	2.6	8	1.8			
	Craftsman, worker, operator	24	7.7	16	3.5			
	Pensioner	16	5.1	24	5.3			
	Housework	18	5.8	20	4.4			
	Unemployed, looking for job	27	8.7	7	1.5			
	Student	28	9	48	10.6			
Nationality/origin	Foreign tourists	37	11.9	80	17.6	4.3096	1	0.0379
	Native (Greek) tourists	275	88.1	374	82.4			

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested ($n = 312$). Group B: Unlikely to be interested ($n = 454$).

ence/knowledge, radio & TV broadcasts, and information brochures also rank high in their choices. The last two in their choice are the hotel listings and oral information provided by tourist information at the destination or from local tourist offices.

Degree of Satisfaction

Overall, travellers interested in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation (Group A) are satisfied with the information sources that they use, but not at a sig-

nificantly greater or lesser extent than other tourists are (Group B), as shown in Table 4.

Discussion

The preceding analysis has revealed significant differences between vFR travellers and travellers with other trip interests. Firstly, in terms of demographics, the research suggests that occupation and nationality are not independent of the tourists' reported preference/interest in visiting friends and relatives on their

Table 2 Chi-Square Analysis of Trip Characteristics of Travelers who are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Category	Subcategory	Group A		Group B		χ^2	df	p
		n	%	n	%			
Trip organization	Package tour/holiday	20	6.4	22	4.8	1.7297	2	0.4211
	Partial package tour/holiday	40	12.8	49	10.8			
	Self-guided tour/holiday	248	79.5	376	82.8			
Final decision for the trip was taken	Less than 1 month before departure	203	65.1	289	63.7	5.2688	2	0.0718
	1 to 6 months before the departure	74	23.7	130	28.6			
	More than 6 months before the dep.	33	10.6	30	6.6			
Type of accommodation	Hotel/club (4*/5*)	85	27.2	124	27.3	23.5107	6	0.0006
	B&B	61	19.6	78	17.2			
	Friends & Relatives	35	11.2	16	3.5			
	Hotel/club (2*/3*)	63	20.2	119	26.2			
	Holiday Home	27	8.7	37	8.1			
	Camping (tent, trailer, mobile home)	9	2.9	27	5.9			
	Combination of the above	22	7.1	33	7.3			
Travel with	On your own	29	9.3	20	4.4	10.6707	2	0.0048
	With one or more friends	137	43.9	242	53.3			
	With your family	138	44.2	186	41			
Book accommodation through	Travel agent	29	9.3	46	10.1	7.0214	3	0.0712
	By yourself directly from the producer via the telephone	173	55.4	289	63.7			
	By yourself directly from the producer via the Internet	39	12.5	50	11			
	By other person	63	20.2	63	13.9			

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested ($n = 312$). Group B: Unlikely to be interested ($n = 454$).

vacation. As might be expected, it is more likely for Greek than foreign travellers to show preferences in visiting friends and relatives on their vacation; however, it is noteworthy that foreign travellers accounted for 12% of the VFR group. There is also a tendency for unemployed/people looking for a job to visit friends and relatives on their vacation. Visiting friends and relatives is less popular for scientific, free professional, technical and related workers, as well as for trade and sales workers.

This study also provides evidence for the importance of VFR travel in the contribution of the hosts themselves to the tourism and hospitality industry, as it agrees with other researchers who found that [...] countering the popular image of VFR travellers

as irrelevant to the hotel industry because VFR travellers do not purchase hotel rooms, VFR travellers are, in fact, significant purchasers of hotel room nights' (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995, p. 46); Backer, 2010; Lee et al., 2005; Pennington-Gray, 2003). Moreover, in this study we found that they prefer to stay in upgraded hotels: hotels/clubs of 4- and 5-star categories being their first choice (27.2%), while only 2.9% prefer camping facilities.

The research implies that a segmentation based on the information search behaviour is an appropriate way to develop marketing strategies and to target marketing communications. It also supports the position that trip-related (situational) descriptors have a strong influence on travel information search behaviour. VFR

Table 3 Chi-Square Analysis of Booking Characteristics of Travelers Who Are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Booking characteristics	Group A		Group B		χ^2	df	p
	n	%	n	%			
Recommendations from friends and relatives	175	56.1	245	54	0.2568	1	0.6123
Internet	156	50	249	54.8	1.5536	1	0.2126
Travel guidebooks and travel magazines	114	36.5	151	33.3	0.7395	1	0.3898
Personal experience/knowledge	82	26.3	90	19.8	4.0664	1	0.04375
Radio and TV broadcasts (documentary and news)	68	21.8	97	21.4	0.0028	1	0.9581
Information brochures	58	18.6	66	14.5	1.9494	1	0.1626
Advertisements and articles in newspapers/magazines	51	16.3	70	15.4	0.0601	1	0.8064
Information from using a Global Positioning System	24	7.7	15	3.3	6.4894	1	0.01085
Video/CD-ROM/DVD/videotext	24	7.7	19	4.2	3.6567	1	0.05584
Oral information provided by retailer/agency	22	7.1	17	3.7	3.5282	1	0.06033
Information from using a smartphone	21	6.7	17	3.7	2.893	1	0.08897
Hotel listings	19	6.1	28	6.2	0.0119	1	0.913
Oral information provided by tourist information at destination or from local tourist offices	4	1.3	10	2.2	0.4357	1	0.5092

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested ($n = 312$). Group B: Unlikely to be interested ($n = 454$).

Table 4 Chi-Square Analysis of the Degree of Satisfaction with Information Sources for Travellers Who Are Interested in Visiting Friends and Relatives in Their Vacation

Booking characteristics	Group A		Group B		χ^2	df	p
	n	%	n	%			
Satisfied	219	70.2	314	69.2	4.2298	2	0.1206
Somewhat satisfied	76	24.4	129	28.4			
Not satisfied	13	4.2	9	2			

Notes Group A: Very likely to be interested ($n = 312$). Group B: Unlikely to be interested ($n = 454$).

travellers in Arcadia are independent visitors, as 79.5% organize their holidays on their own. A significant finding of this research indicates that VFR travel consumers tend to prefer strongly internal information sources: recommendations from friends and relatives account for 55.1% of the respondents' choices. After a definite trip decision, information from friends and relatives is very important and travel behaviour adapts to their recommendations. The second source of information is the Internet (50%). This increased use of the Internet shows its enormous importance, as a single interaction on the Internet can provide product information, a means for payment and product exchange, and distribution, whereas a more traditional

interaction frequently separates these functions (Jun et al., 2007). It is noteworthy, however, that the use of the Internet was quite limited for booking purposes in Arcadia (8%), a fact that needs to be investigated in future studies.

Third in their preference was the use of travel guidebooks and travel magazines, while personal experience/knowledge, radio & TV broadcasts, and information brochures also rank high in their choices. The last two in their choice are hotel listings and oral information provided by tourist information at the destination or from local tourist offices.

While information from a Global Positioning System (GPS) device and information from smartphones

was used by a very low percentage of VFR travellers use (7.7% and 6.7% respectively) in this Arcadia study, it was still quite a bit higher than among the non-VFR travellers, suggesting that an initial level of familiarity might be a contributing factor. There is no doubt that in the future, mobile technology will increasingly provide opportunities for real-time travel information. Even today, mobile technology can bring the latest up-to-date information anytime and anywhere to customers. Developments in smartphones provide real-time web links; select automobiles offer telematics (web access in a vehicle), and the new generation of mobile broadband networks provide wireless communication spurring the development of location-based services using Global Positioning Systems (Jun et al., 2007). Indeed, travellers have already begun to use other Web 2.0 websites, which enable them to share their views and opinions about products and services (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). All these developments will influence both information search and provision (Katsouli, 2011, 2014). Future studies should be conducted to understand how to connect customers' Internet use to mobile use.

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

This paper aims to assess the magnitude and significance of VFR travel in the tourism destination of Arcadia, Greece. The findings underscore the important role that VFR travel holds in commercial accommodation, since only 11.2% of VFR travelers actually stay with their friends and relatives, thus confirming the hybrid nature of VFR travel – and this despite the fact that most of the VFR travelers in this study were Greek and in the middle of a severe economic recession. Although VFR travel is a form of travel that provides its participants with feelings of 'home' (evaluated in terms of familiarity), it also seems that VFR travellers in Arcadia enjoy the privacy provided by a paid hotel room and do not want the disadvantages of social obligations and behavioral constraints that emerge when staying with their friends and relatives. Indeed, except for the 'staying with friends and relatives' category, there were no other significant differences in accommodation preferences between the two groups of travellers.

Furthermore, the fact that 88.1% of the VFR travellers in this study are Greek highlights the importance of social identity issues involved in VFR travel, as well as pointing to an emerging role of the diaspora in their return visit(s) to the homeland. As such, the findings seem to promote a marketing strategy of organized governance that takes into account identification and focuses on a 'sense of belonging' and community, tailored to the characteristics of this particular target market and aligned with the distribution channels they use, as evidenced in the research findings.

One limitation of the study is that Internet use was treated in its general term in order to find ICT competence in the VFR travel segment, so research was limited to tourists' general perception of broad and generic Internet use. Further research on the tourism stakeholders themselves and more analysis of Internet use could improve the relevance of the research.

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