

**DEVELOPING A TYPOLOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING VFR AS A PRIMARY PURPOSE VS. VFR AS A TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION**

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**Abstract:** This study examined VFR travelers in relation to their behaviors. Data were collected at fourteen sites Alachua County, Florida in 2001. Some of the sites included: hotels, local attractions and special events. A fixed choice questionnaire contained items asking about mode of transportation, demographic characteristics, number of people in the travel party, number of nights away, type of accommodation, types of information sources used to make the travel decisions, participation in 20 local activities, and 23 items measuring various images of the City of Gainesville and Alachua County. Results suggested that there seems to be a distinction between all three segments of the VFR market. AFR's tend to stay longer, have smaller travel parties, dine out take in the nightlife and visit a community or state park. They rely heavily on friends and relatives and previous visits for information. This segment tends to be younger with lower incomes. NAFR's stay the least amount of time, rely on friends and relatives and previous visits for information about the area, and visit scenic areas, dine out and visit a community park, this market is older with higher incomes and higher education levels. OFR's stay longer periods of time (one week on average), have larger travel parties (families?),

like to participate in outdoor recreation, dining out and visiting scenic areas. This segment tends to be the most heterogeneous with varying life stages, ages and income levels.

**Introduction**

Travel for the purpose of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is an understudied area in tourism research (Cohen & Harris, 1998). VFR has been consistently listed as one of the primary motivations for pleasure travel within the United States (Lehto, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2001). With respect to the size of the market, VFR travel accounts for 43% of all weekend travel (Kate, 1987). A substantial portion of the overnight travelers in the United States stay in unpaid accommodations. Indeed, 48% of weekend travelers stay with friends or relatives (Kate, 1987). The volume of VFR travel is also noteworthy (Cohen & Harris, 1998). In 1998, 732 million away-from-home room-nights were non-commercial in nature, representing, potentially, billion of dollars in untapped hotel revenue (Shifflet & Goldstein 1999).

The VFR market also has a larger economic impact on host communities than has been traditionally assumed. Spending and other economic variables are of critical importance to tourism destinations. In the past, the VFR market has been under-appreciated in terms of its contribution to local economies. This has primarily been due to the VFR markets limited use of commercial lodging establishments. The economic value of spending on other activities has been often underestimated (Lehto et. al. 2001).

Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green and O'Leary (2000) proposed a typology of VFR travel which included five discriminating variables (Figure 1). These variables included accommodations used, focus of visit (VFR as activity or primary motivation), domestic vs. international travel, short vs. long haul travel and sector definition. Key to their typology is the distinction between VFR as an activity and VFR as a prime travel motivation or trip type. VFR as an activity indicates that this type of traveler participates in a variety of activities, one of which might include renewing or enjoying social connections. VFR as the primary purpose of travel suggests that the sole purpose of the visit is social obligations and that other activities might be secondary to the experience.

	VFR as Primary Purpose	Other Primary Purpose
Friends and Relatives Homes	44.9% (N=88) "VFR ALL AROUND"	15.3% (N=30) "STAY WITH FRIENDS/RELATIVES"
Commercial Accommodation	39.8% (N=78) "VFR IN COMMERCIAL ACCOMMODATIONS"	**Not included in this study**

Figure 1 A Proposed Typology of the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) Traveler

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this paper was to explore the behavioral differences between the VFR market defined by motive and those defined by accommodation. A typology for understanding this relationship was developed. The research questions guiding this study were: (1) Is there a difference in length of stay based on the three types of VFR groups? (2) Is there a difference in travel party size based on VFR group? (3) Is there a difference in the types of activities the three VFR groups participate in? (4) Is there a difference in use of information sources for planning based on VFR group? (5) Are there different demographic differences among the three VFR groups?

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected at fourteen sites Alachua County, Florida in 2001. Some of the sites included: hotels, local attractions and special events. A fixed choice questionnaire contained items asking about mode of transportation, demographic characteristics, number of people in the travel party, number of nights away, type of accommodation, types of information sources used to make the travel decisions, participation in 20 local activities, and 23 items measuring various images of the City of Gainesville and Alachua County.

The data collectors were students from the University of Florida. They were paid for their time and attended orientation and training sessions before beginning data collection. Using systematic random sampling techniques, a total of 862 surveys were completed between January and October. Surveyors were asked to approach every fourth person, alternating between males and females. Only those individuals who responded "yes" to the question "Do you live outside Alachua County?" were included in the study. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 10. Respondents were recoded three VFR groups. The typology of VFR traveler included VFR-stay at friends and relatives, VFR stay in other accommodations, other primary purpose of trip and staying in friends and relatives home.

The three groups were analyzed to understand the differences in behaviors of the VFR market. Crosstabs were used to examine the differences in activity participation by VFR group.

### **Results**

The VFR All-Around travelers were predominantly 18-30 years of age, were "couples" and living in all-adult homes. Their incomes were split among 4 categories, with 16% earning less than \$24,000 per year, and 18.7% earning in excess of \$125,000 per year. Their level of education was high – 26.7% held an advanced degree, while 25.6% had a college degree. Overwhelmingly, they were employed full-time.

The VFRs Staying-With-Friends/Relatives were primarily 31 to 45 years of age, at the "couple" lifestage, with incomes of between \$50,000 to \$75,000 dollars. Their highest level of education was a college degree. Most (58.6%) were employed full-time, although a sizeable portion (20.7%) were retired.

The VFR In Commercial Accommodation group were largely middle-aged, with 72.8 % between 31 and 65 years old. They were predominantly (78.2%) in the "couple" or "family" lifestage. Incomes for this group were chiefly in the \$50,000 - \$100,000 range. Their highest level of education was a college degree, and they were employed full-time (although 12.8% were retired).

The VFR travelers to Alachua County reported varying participation in activities during their visit. Significant differences were found between the VFR All Around, Non-primary purpose VFRs, and VFRs in commercial accommodations groups on eight of twenty activities.

The VFR All-Around group was more likely to participate in dining out, taking in nightlife, visiting a community park, visiting a state park, or attending a theatrical performance.

The "primary purpose" VFRs staying in commercial accommodations were more likely to visit scenic areas of the county, while the "non-primary purpose" group actually staying with friends/relatives were more likely to be found canoeing or kayaking on their visit.

Table 1 Types of Activities Participated In by VFR Segments (N=196)

	VFR All Around		Stay with Friends/relatives		VFR in commercial accommodations	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attend a UF sporting event*	4	2.3	7	4.0	3	1.7
Dining out*	55	31.8	12	6.9	33	19.1
Shopping/antiquing	38	22.0	14	8.1	29	16.8
Take in nightlife*	18	10.4	9	5.2	4	2.3
Attend a non-UF sporting event	2	1.2	1	0.6	1	0.6
Visit a scenic area*	17	9.8	15	8.7	18	10.4
Visit community park*	19	11.0	14	8.1	17	9.8
Visit state park*	17	9.8	10	5.8	9	5.2
Golfing	12	6.9	3	1.7	4	2.3
Birding/wildlife viewing	9	5.2	3	1.7	4	2.3
Attend a concert	3	1.7	1	0.6	4	2.3
Boating	5	2.9	1	0.6	4	2.3
Swimming	21	12.1	12	6.9	18	10.4
Attend art gallery/museum/historic site	16	9.2	4	2.3	17	9.8
Diving in the springs	2	1.2	3	1.7	1	0.6
Attend a theatrical performance*	9	5.2	2	1.2	0	0.0
Attend a festival	2	1.2	1	0.6	2	1.2
Canoeing/kayaking*	5	2.9	7	4.0	3	1.7
Fishing	5	2.9	2	1.2	2	1.2
Tubing in the springs	11	6.4	1	0.6	3	1.7

\* significant at alpha <= .05

Table 2 Travel Behavior and VFR Segments Table

	VFR All Around		Stay with Friends/relatives		VFR in commercial accommodations	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Travel Party Size	2.42	3.96	3.97	3.43	3.01	1.92
Nights Away	7.83	15.90	6.73	11.13	4.22	5.93

Table 3 Sources of Information Used by VFR Segments

	VFR All Around		Stay with Friends/relatives		VFR in commercial accommodations	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Chamber of Commerce	3	1.7	0	0.0	2	1.1
Previous Visit	35	19.3	12	6.6	32	17.7
Own travel files	1	0.6	0	0.0	1	0.6
Travel club	2	1.1	0	0.0	1	0.6
Friends and relatives	63	34.8	19	10.5	49	27.1
Internet	17	9.4	2	1.1	11	6.1
Map	6	3.3	1	0.6	3	1.7
Travel guide	4	2.2	0	0.0	0	0.0
Road signs*	10	5.5	1	0.6	1	0.6
University materials	2	1.1	4	2.2	4	2.2

• significant at alpha <= .05

Table 4 Demographics by VFR Segments

	VFR	Stay with	Commercial
	All Around	Friends/relatives	accommodations
Age*	%	%	%
18 to 30	35.7	16.7	15.6
31 to 45	20.2	43.3	39.0
46 to 65	29.8	13.3	33.8
65+	14.3	26.7	11.7
<b>Life Cycle Stage</b>			
Single	23.3	10.0	15.4
Couple	36.0	43.3	43.6
All adult homes	18.6	16.7	6.4
Family	22.1	30.0	34.6
<b>Income</b>			
Less than 24K	16.0	14.3	6.2
24,001 to 35,000	8.0	4.8	10.8
35,001 to 50,000	13.3	14.3	12.3
50,001 to 75,000	17.3	42.9	23.1
75,001 to 100,000	21.3	4.8	24.6
100,001 to 125,000	5.3	9.5	13.8
Over 125,001	18.7	9.5	9.2
<b>Highest level of education</b>			
Less than high school	3.5	6.9	2.7
High school graduate	14.0	3.4	18.7
Technical school	2.3	0.0	2.7
College degree	25.6	34.5	38.7
Some graduate school	10.5	13.8	1.3
Some college	17.4	17.2	16.0
Advanced degree	26.7	24.1	20.0
<b>Employment Status</b>			
Employed full time	64.4	58.6	69.2
Employed part time	10.3	6.9	6.4
Homemaker	3.4	6.9	5.1
Student	13.8	6.9	2.6
Retired	8.0	20.7	12.8

\* Significant at alpha  $\leq$  .05

### Conclusions

There seems to be a distinction between all three segments of the VFR market. AFR's tend to stay longer, have smaller travel parties, dine out take in the nightlife and visit a community or state park. They rely heavily on friends and relatives and previous visits for information. This segment tends to be younger with lower incomes.

NAFR's stay the least amount of time, relay on friends and relatives and previous visits for information about the area, and visit scenic areas, dine out and visit a community park, this market is older with higher incomes and higher education levels.

OFR's say longer periods of time (one week on average), have larger travel parties (families?), like to participate in outdoor recreation, dining out and visiting scenic areas. This segment tends to be the most heterogeneous with varying life stages, ages and income levels.

Understanding of the various market segments of the VFR market will allow marketers to better bundle packages. More focused advertising strategies can be created to address the needs of the various segments. Programs like "Be a tourist in your home town" might educate residents on the inventory in their town, which could lead to more active participation in activities in the

community (therefore more \$\$). Future research should focus on determining the different economic impacts of the various segments. It would be interesting to examine cultural differences in the VFR market (expand initial work by Lehto, Morrison & O'Leary).

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