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# **SEGMENTATION OF THE VISITING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES TRAVEL MARKET**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel market is a significant segment of the tourism industry, accounting for 76% of all trips to Illinois in 1991. This study determined the demographic, geographic, and psychographic characteristics and the benefits sought by those visiting friends and relatives in a Central Illinois Community. A self-administered questionnaire was sent to a systematic random sample of 660 inquirers to the local Convention and Visitors Bureau. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the following: (a) mode of transportation; (b) number of trips and length of stay; (c) demographic profile; (d) economic impact; and (e) impact of local university. The results of the study defined three VFR travel market segments, two of which closely resembled market segments profiled by Plog.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The visiting friends and relatives (VFR) segment is a significant market of pleasure travelers in the United States, comprising as much as three-fourths of all domestic trips. These travelers have not been clearly defined as other pleasure traveler segments (Shoemaker, 1989). According to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs (1992), the principle reason that over 36 million persons traveled in 1991 to Illinois was to visit friends and relatives; constituting 77% of all Illinois travelers. The VFR pleasure travelers significantly impact the state's economy by contributing over \$15,600,000 in travel expenditures. While travelers who tend to visit friends and relatives may not average a significant number (if any) of evenings in a hotel or motel, these households positively

impact the economy of the travel destination area/location.

Although the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) segment is a significant market of the United States pleasure travelers, these travelers have not been clearly defined or segmented. The existing literature has yet to fully profile this market, perhaps because these travelers are perceived as receiving the benefits of visiting friends and relatives without using commercial sites for lodging, food, and beverage.

## MARKET SEGMENTATION

Market segmentation is generally classified into the following categories: (a) geographic; (b) demographic; (c) psychographic; and (d) benefits sought (Haley, 1968; Woodside & Jacobs, 1985; Vincent & De Los Santos, 1990). These categories are used to define the tourist market segment.

The geographic characteristics of a market segment define the location from which visitors originate and distance traveled to a specific destination. A significant factor which would influence distance of travel is the method of transportation. Typically, travelers could choose one or more of the following methods of transportation: (a) automobile; (b) airplane; (c) bus; (d) boat or ship; and/or (e) train.

Factors such as age, gender, marital status, race, education, occupation, and median/average annual family income are considered to describe the demographics of a market segment. Although market segmentation by demographics is common, multi-variable segmentation is preferred. Multi-variable segmentation offers a more

complete description of the market segment. In addition to the demographic information, a more accurate market profile can be described when psychographic information is included.

The psychographic characteristics of a market segment describe the perceived benefits, values, and volume of the visitors. The most meaningful psychographic characteristic variables are situation specific and not of a generalized nature (Dhalla & Mahatoo, 1976). Three areas included in psychographic segmentation are (a) value orientations; (b) role perceptions; and (c) buying style.

Characteristics of the VFRs shown by tourist destination areas (TDA) officials are used to further define this market segment. Such information would assist managers of recreation events/attractions in marketing their programs to area residents, merchants, and their visiting friends and relatives (VFR). Managers, event directors, and programmers would have greater knowledge of who travels to the area and for what purposes. Local convention and visitor bureaus (CVB) could target promotional campaigns to the visiting friends and relatives travel market.

Tourism marketing is becoming increasingly important as the number of destination sites and activity options multiply. According to Dhalla and Mahatoo (1976), the best interest of a business is to capture bigger pieces of fewer markets rather than to try and collect smaller pieces of every market.

Dhalla and Mahatoo (1976) suggest "grouping respondents on the basis of the importance they attach to certain combinations of rationale, sensory, and emotional benefits expected from the

product" (p. 36). For example, travel loyalty to a particular destination location may be attributed to a combination of competitive pricing, accessibility, and retail advertising instead of high satisfaction with the location.

## **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to segment the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel market segment. Demographic (i.e., age, gender, education, marital status, income, ethnicity, and composition of group), geographic (i.e., geographic origin and distance traveled to a University community), psychographic (i.e., lifestyles and attitudes) characteristics, and benefits sought by this market segment are discussed.

## **METHODS**

The sample for the study was derived from a population of 1,500 individuals who contacted the local convention and visitors bureau of a tourist destination area in Central Illinois (Bloomington-Normal). A systematic random sample of 660 was drawn to yield a 95% confidence level with a 4% tolerated error. This sample included nonresident inquirers who requested information on the tourist destination area from March 1992 until August 1992. The contact list included mail, telephone, and walk-in inquirers.

The instrument used was the Visitor Assessment Questionnaire (VAQ) prepared by the researcher. The self-administered questionnaire was developed after studying the previous travel research reports of

Woodside and Jacobs (1985), Pitts and Woodside (1976), and Haley (1968). The VAQ questionnaire was designed to gather information regarding the individual's actual visit to the tourist destination area or reasons for requesting information from the TDA. The VAQ asks the subjects to recall information regarding their visit to the area and detailed accounts of activities. Survey distribution procedures described by Dillman (1968) were used for survey distribution.

## **SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TELEPHONE AND MAIL-BACK RESPONDENTS**

An independent t-test was performed to test for significant differences in responses between the mean scores of telephone and mail-back respondents. All means were rounded to the nearest 0.01. Alpha was set at 0.05.

The variables that were significantly different at  $p < 0.05$  were: (a) "travelling as part of a group tour during trip one" (.024); (b) "enjoy shopping in malls and large retail centers" (.002); (c) "prefer home cooked meals over restaurant food" (.001); (d) "enjoy meeting people and socializing" (.013); (e) "the TDA did not offer areas of interest to me" (.000); and (f) "marital status" (.0017).

Thirteen surveys were excluded from the sample size for various reasons (i.e., unable to forward, no such address, or return to sender), producing an initial 38.35% mail-back response rate. To address the issue of non-response bias, a total of 42 (12% of the nonrespondents at that date) telephone interviews were conducted.

The study's final response rate (response rate at the time of data analysis) was approximately forty percent (40.03%/n=259); 30 respondents from the pilot-study; 187 respondents from the actual study; and 42 respondents from the telephone interviews.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA

Several descriptive statistics were used to evaluate and describe the data. The socio-demographic information collected about the sample group included gender, age, marital status and state residency. These variables were used in the analysis of trip characteristics. A t-test was performed to examine relationships between the VFR Allocentrics, the VFR Resters and the entire population of VFR.

Independent t-tests were also performed to compare the telephone responses to the general sample population. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, mean, mode, standard deviation, sum, and median were used to interpret the different variables. The item-analysis and the descriptive statistics were analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The significant alpha level was set at .05. Procedures described by Turco and Kelsey (1992) were used to calculate the direct economic impact of the VFR market.

Visiting friends and relatives travel market segments were profiled by demographic information, cross referenced with what activities these individuals engaged in while visiting. The market segment of individuals and/or groups who visited Bloomington-Normal and Illinois State University and

their affiliated hosts were defined by group composition and demographic information.

## RESULTS

Residents from Illinois, more than any other state, traveled to the central Illinois community for the primary or secondary purpose of visiting friends and relatives during the four month period. Within Illinois, Joliet captured the highest percent (17.64%) of travelers visiting the area. The states outside Illinois with the greatest number of residents visiting the area include: California (6.90%); Indiana (6.90%); and Wisconsin (6.90%). A total of 96.23% of the respondents traveled by automobile or truck to the TDA. Only 3.77% traveled by plane.

Upon completion of data analysis, three market segments emerged: VFR Resters; VFR Allocentrics; and VFR Campus. Each segment is profiled in the following sections.

### VFR RESTERS

These respondents selected VFR as a primary or secondary reason for visiting the central Illinois community area and chose "agree" or "strongly agree" for the following "restful or relaxing" statements: (a) traveled to the area for rest and relaxation; (b) traveled to area to get away from large crowds; (c) traveled to area to relax and do nothing; (d) traveled to area to experience a peaceful vacation; (e) engage in rest and relaxation activities; and (f) traveled to area to experience unpolluted/natural surroundings.

Among the VFR Resters, there were more males (57.10%) than females (42.90%) who requested information from the CVB and traveled to the area for the purpose of visiting friends and relatives. A total of 94.74% of the respondents traveled by automobile or truck to the central Illinois community. Approximately five percent (5.26%) of the VFR Resters traveled by plane. There were no other modes of transportation cited by the respondents.

Respondents tended to be well educated (23.80% some college, 23.80% completed college, and 23.80% completed graduate work), Caucasian (95.00%) married (85.70%) men with an average annual 1992 family income of \$60,000 to \$79,999 (28.60%). Approximately twenty-three percent (23.80%) of the respondents did not disclose their family income.

The average size in each of the VFR Rester groups was 4.73 persons. These individuals were primarily members of a family unit.

## VFR ALLOCENTRICS

Several respondents selected VFR as a primary or secondary reason for visiting the central Illinois community and chose "agree" or "strongly agree" to the following allocentric statements: (a) traveled to area to get away from tourist traps; (b) traveled to get away from large crowds; (c) traveled to area to experience new and exciting places; (d) traveled to area to do as many different activities as possible; (e) enjoyed eating at new/exotic restaurants; and (f) enjoyed meeting new people. The activities mirror characteristics of Plog's allocentric travelers, travelers exhibiting those factors were termed VFR Allocentrics.

Among the VFR Allocentrics, there were an even number of males (50.00%) and females (50.00%). A total of 95.92% of the respondents traveled by automobile or truck to the central Illinois community. Approximately four percent (4.08%) of the VFR Allocentrics traveled by plane.

The average age of the Bloomington-Normal visitors was 47.27 (with a mode number of 46 and a standard deviation of 13.84). These respondents tended to be well educated (30.80% some college, 23.10% completed graduate work, and 19.20% completed college), Caucasian (96.00%) and married (80.80%).

VFR Allocentrics indicated an average annual 1992 family income of \$60,000 to \$79,999 (23.10%). Approximately twenty-three percent of the respondents did not disclose their average family income.

VFR Allocentric groups averaged 1.87 individuals per travel group. These groups were predominantly "family" members. It is important to note that approximately 91% (90.9%) of these individuals were planning on visiting the area prior to requesting information from the CVB.

## VFR CAMPUS

A third distinct VFR market segment emerged as the one associated with the local university and was labeled VFR Campus.

Among the VFR Campus, there were more males (62.50%) than females (37.50%) who requested information from the CVB and traveled to the area for the purpose of VFR. All VFR Campus traveled by automobile to the area.

The average age of the TDA visitors was 46.75 (with a mode number of 46). These respondents tended to be partially college educated (50.00% some college, and 37.50% completed graduate work), Caucasian (100.00%), married (87.50%) men with an average annual family income of \$60,000 to \$79,999 (50.00%). Approximately 12.50% of the respondents did not disclose their income.

VFR Campus visitor groups averaged three persons in size. These groups were made up of predominantly family members. Descriptive data from the three VFR market segments are presented in Table 2 for comparative purposes. The table illustrates the variable (i.e., education, ethnicity, marital status, and income) cross referenced with the percentage from the mean scores.

#### **SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VFR ALLOCENTRICS AND VFR RESTERS**

An independent t-test was calculated to test for significant differences in responses between the mean scores of the VFR Allocentrics and the VFR Resters. All means were rounded to the nearest .001. Alpha was set at .05. The variable that showed a statistically significant difference at  $p < .05$  was "traveled to the TDA to get away from the daily routine."

VFR Allocentrics are the individuals whose primary or secondary purpose for visiting the TDA was to visit friends and relatives and are considered to enjoy a variety of experiences including the local destination culture.

## **DISCUSSION**

Researchers agree that travel destination preferences are based on an individual attitude continuum. Williams, Ellis, and Daniels (1986), explained Plog's allocentric psychocentric travel personality continuum. This continuum relates the personality to the destination preference. One end of the continuum is the allocentric personality type. The other end is the psychocentric-personality type. The allocentric involves more risks, seeks new and different experiences, and prefers more exotic travel destinations. The psychocentric personality involves more familiar and secure travel destinations. Sometimes these locations are considered the "touristy" destinations.

According to Williams, Ellis, and Daniels (1986), Plog's psychocentric individuals feel that the events in their lives are beyond their control and that they are the victims of completely fortuitous circumstance. They further explained, "The allocentrics, on the other hand, could be characterized as having tendencies toward externality, passivity and avoidance of variets" (p. 27).

Hoxler and Lesler's 1988 study, Tourist Behavior and Personality, further explored the two travel behaviors in relationship to personality types. Psychocentric personalities choose travel destination close to home whereas allocentrics choose foreign destination locations over domestic trips. Psychocentric activities include: (a) traveling by means other than airplane or boat; (b) choosing safe destinations; (c) staying with tourist and avoiding the 'native'; (d) staying in highly developed excellent hotels; (e) eating American foods

at chain restaurants; and (f) looking for familiar types of entertainment. In summary, psychocentrics are usually inhibited, nervous, nonadventurous, and constricted. Allocentric personalities are more self-confident, adventurous, and more successful in most areas in life.

Allocentrics are more willing to take risks, seek new and different experiences, and prefer more exotic destinations. In contrast, psychocentrics seek familiar and secure environments: "touristy" destinations. Plog's description of allocentric travelers somewhat mirrors VFR Allocentrics. Approximately 80% (82.76%), of the VFR travelers exhibited allocentric characteristics (Williams, et. al, 1986).

VFR Resters are the individuals whose primary or secondary purpose for visiting the TDA was to visit friends and relatives and engage in rest and relaxation activities. Approximately 60% (62.07%) of the VFR travelers exhibited "rest and relaxation" characteristics. These characteristics are similar to Crask's (1981) description of the "R&R vacationer". According to Crask (1981), these individuals "use their vacation for rest and relaxation -- to get away from it all and to recuperate from the stresses and strains of their careers (p. 32)." There were more male (57.1%) than female (42.9%) VFR Resters.

VFR Campus are the individuals whose primary or secondary purpose for visiting the TDA was to visit friends and relatives. These individuals also visited friends and/or relatives associated with Illinois State or attended activities held on the University campus. Approximately 28% (27.59%), of the VFR travelers indicated affiliation to the local university. Approximately 63% of the VFR Campus toured the University campus.

Many of the VFR Campus visited University students (few visited Illinois State Faculty). Due to the method of data collection used in this study, the number of VFR Campus groups may be low compared to the actual number of travelers who visit friends and relatives associated with the University. These VFR travelers probably do not request information from the Convention and Visitors Bureau regarding the Bloomington-Normal area. Instead these individuals rely on information from those friends and relatives being visited as the primary source of information regarding the University and community.

Among the VFR Campus there were more male (62.5%) than female (37.5%) VFR Resters. These individuals were approximately 47 years of age with an average annual family income between \$60,000 and \$79,999 (50.00%).

The existence of unique groups is consistent with other tourism segmentation studies (Crask, 1981; Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988; and Dhalla, & Mahatoo, 1976). Although these three distinct groups may exist, the current data need additional support through further study.

Although the significance of these visitors is calculated by the dollars spent while traveling and at the destination location, understanding these visitors and who they visit is important in defining the market segment of visiting friends and relatives to the travel destination area.

If specific destination characteristics and traveler preferences can be identified in relationship to the visiting friends and relatives to a travel destination location, the results of the study will benefit local business, university, and tourism

professionals in planning and sponsorship of special events. These professionals are responsible for attracting individuals to the TDA for the purposes of increasing tourist revenues to the area.

## IMPLICATIONS

Several valuable contributions in identifying and understanding the VFR travel market emerged from this study. To understand the implications of this research to tourism professionals, recognition of limitations to the research is needed. After understanding these limitations and considering recommendations for future research, implications to tourism professionals can be discussed in context.

The systematic random sampling of CVB contacts may not accurately describe the VFR inquirers. As previously mentioned, VFR travelers may rely heavily on those visited for information concerning activities and experiences. Additional psychographic variables are needed to complete the profile of the VFR travelers. According to Bello and Etzel (1985), Plog's research indicates Allocentrics prefer varied activities and unfamiliar or novel trips. In contrast, the allocentric "may enjoy a new, non-tourist, or exotic place but also prefer to experience it in a relaxed, psychocentric way (Williams & Ellis, 1986, p. 80)." The extent to which these travelers actually exhibited significant allocentric characteristics should be explored after an extensive review of Plog's Allocentrics and allocentric related literature.

Findings concerning the VFR travel market significantly impact not only the local tourist destination areas but also tourism professionals. First, local communities as

tourist destination areas and local university or college towns may offer a variety of activities and interests to the VFR travel market. For example, the TDA offers the best of both urban and rural qualities in a developing and prospering community. In addition, colleges and universities provide a variety of historical, cultural, and recreational events for the community and its visitors throughout the calendar year. These attractions/events include: sporting events, homecomings, alumni reunions, parents/sibling weekends, graduation/commencements, and orientation/preview programs. All of these events influence the decisions of travelers to the local community. The impact of these college and university attractions should not be underestimated. These characteristics of colleges and universities serve as a "pull" factor to travelers; drawing them to the tourist destination area. VFR travelers have a significant impact on the natural resources (local parks), to the economy of the community, and the overall infrastructure.

Second, the three described segments of the VFR travelers to the TDA may assist conference and convention planners in marketing their services. The CVBs may have a better understanding of the demographic profile of those who request information and visit the area; the type of information requested; and the purpose for requesting the information.

Visitors to college or university faculty, staff, and students account for a significant percentage of VFR travelers to the local community. According to Ramsey (1992), the total economic impact (direct and indirect) of a central Illinois state university, excluding university visitors and guests, on the local county is estimated to be \$230 million. These factors suggest the

University as a focal attraction for VFR travelers. The University's cultural, historical, athletic, recreational, and special events would be featured prominently in promotional images/messages along with local attractions and accommodations. Significant exposure and expenditures in the local community, county, and state could be realized through a consolidated marketing effort involving the local CVB, local business community, and the University.

Travelers to areas which possess a peaceful, restful atmosphere account for a percentage of VFR travelers to a tourist destination area. According to Woodside and Jacobs (1985), "learning the benefits realized by a destination's visitors from major market segments may be helpful for planning the unique positioning messages to appeal successfully to each segment" (p. 12). This study has provided support for VFR travelers who "vacation" for rest and relaxation purposes. These travelers enjoy "getting away from everyday life" and spend time with family and friends (Woodside & Jacobs, 1985; Shoemaker, 1989). These factors suggest the local community as an area for rest and relaxation to VFR travelers. If so, then the CVB and local community could market the atmosphere of the area as conducive to resting and relaxing. A significant increase in VFR Resters to the local community, county, and state could be realized.

Overall, tourism professionals could redefine promotional materials and marketing strategies. Three recommendations for tourism professionals based on this research are provided.

1. Similar to a recommendation in Blazey's (1986) study on vacation and

pleasure travel activity of Washington State residents, local CVBs, colleges and universities should develop promotional materials targeted specifically at in-state residents designed to feature destinations and activities for the weekend traveler for rest and relaxation purposes. In-state residents are the primary visitors to the local destination area. Targeting these residents would be easier and more efficient than creating or identifying a new market segment. For example, the CVB may use images/messages promoting the area as appealing for VFRs interested in rest and relaxation (i.e., golf courses, walking trails, shopping, etc.).

2. The University and local tourism officials should develop promotional campaigns targeted specifically at recruiting friends and relatives of University students, faculty, and staff to the area. Since these visitors make up a significant percentage of the local VFR travelers, again catering to the existing market would be more efficient use of financial resources.

3. The community, university, and CVB should develop a promotional campaign designed to highlight the variety of local activities and experiences as well as emphasizing the peaceful atmosphere. Local tourism officials must educate residents of the many activities and resources then encourage them to invite friends and relatives to visit the area. For example, CVB may use images/messages promoting the area as appealing for VFRs interested in exciting for Allocentrics (i.e., nights clubs, riverboat gambling, live entertainment, etc.).

## SUMMARY

The visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel segment represents a significant portion of the United States pleasure travelers. Consistent with previous tourism studies, VFRs are a major force in the pleasure travel market in Central Illinois. The current study has attempted to clearly define these VFR travelers through a demographic profile, a geographic profile, a psychographic profile, and benefits sought related to the Bloomington-Normal area.

Although these visitors are perceived as

receiving the benefits of visiting friends and relatives without using commercial sites for lodging, food, and beverage, specific destination characteristics and traveler preferences have been identified in relationship to the Bloomington-Normal area. VFR travelers do utilize local accommodation, and restaurants and attend special events, athletic competitions, and cultural activities, contributing positively to the local economy. This study has reduced VFR travel market speculation and should assist local tourism officials in effectively marketing events and services to the VFR travel market.

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TABLE 1  
 BENEFITS SOUGHT FROM VFR TRAVEL SEGMENT OF TDA  
 RANK ORDER OF RESPONSES DETERMINED BY MEAN SCORES

Rank	Characteristic	Mean	SD
1	Enjoy telling friends about trips and experiences	3.00	0.80
2	Enjoy meeting new people and socializing	2.93	0.78
3	Engage in activities for spiritual enrichment	2.85	0.95
4	Traveled to attend a special event	2.76	1.09
5	Engage in activities for intellectual enrichment	2.70	1.07
6	Travel to get away from daily routine	2.58	0.90
7	Travel for rest and relaxation	2.52	1.01
8	Travel for peaceful vacation	2.46	1.07
9	Travel to experience natural surroundings	2.35	0.98
10	To get away from demands of everyday life	2.31	0.88
11	Travel to visit new and exciting places	2.27	0.96
12	Travel to do as many different things as possible	2.23	1.07
13	Travel to area to get away from "tourist traps"	2.15	0.97
14	Travel to get away from large crowds	2.08	0.95
15	Travel to relax and do nothing	2.04	0.89

Note. Based on four point scale with Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Agree = 3; and Strongly Agree. All means rounded to nearest 0.01. SD = Standard Deviation.

TABLE 2  
VFR TRAVEL GROUPS

	VFR Resters	VFR Allocentrics	VFR Campus
Variable	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
Completed college	23.80	19.20	12.50
Caucasian	95.00	96.00	100.00
Married	85.70	80.80	87.50
Income \$60,000 to \$79,999	28.60	23.10	50.00