

## Understanding Acculturation in the Senior Tourist Long Stay Experience

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### Abstract

Seniors, including baby boomers, have become an attractive market for the tourism industry. Accordingly, many destinations have formulated strategies to attract long stay senior tourists. However, there is little research available which examines senior long stay tourists' acculturation to a host destination. Thus, this study sought to seek a better understanding of how senior tourists adapted to one to six week vacations at a popular holiday destination in Thailand. Thirty-one interviews took place in Phuket and reflected three aspects of tourist acculturation to the host destination. The three categories identified were home comfort zone, cultural integration and sense of belonging to host destination, people and culture. A few repeat tourists showed that they enjoyed staying in their comfort zone, which was similar to the first time travellers. However, for most senior tourists, the longer the seniors stayed at the destination, the more they adapted to local culture and displayed a sense of belonging to the host culture. The theoretical and managerial implications of this study are also discussed.

### Key words

long stay, tourist experience, senior, behaviour, acculturation

## Introduction

The Thai long stay project has been promoted since 2001 and targets four main groups of tourists, one of which is seniors (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2010). Senior travellers, including the Baby Boomers, are part of the world's aging society, and are healthier, wealthier and better educated than their previous generation counterparts. This active travel cohort has become an attractive market for the tourism industry because they are likely to have more time and resources to travel. In particular, statistics show that this lucrative traveller segment accounted for approximately 35 per cent of tourists visiting Thailand during 2005 - 2010 (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2013). While many destinations have also formulated strategies to attract long stay seniors, there is little research available which examines senior long stay tourists' acculturation to a host destination. Findings related to cultural adaptation will provide information to a host destination in order to prepare its settings to meet tourists' needs. However, most previous research has examined permanent residents and international students who considered themselves locals, not tourists. As such, the purpose of the current study was to seek further insights into the acculturation of senior tourists in Phuket, a popular holiday destination in Thailand, especially in relation to their attitudes towards a long stay vacation of between one to six weeks.

## Literature review

This study drew from three main streams of literature: senior tourist behaviour, acculturation and long stay vacation. Regarding senior tourist behaviour, many studies have examined motives for travelling to a destination. These motives included a wide range of factors, such as to experience new and exciting things. Seniors also preferred to experience different cultures and ways of life (e.g., Jang and Wu 2006, Sangpikul 2008, Hu et al. 2009). Furthermore, Patterson (2006) noted that many seniors were likely to be seeking an authentic cultural experience. Although these studies seemed to show that senior tourists were interested in a cultural experience, there was a lack of research into how senior tourists adapted to such a cultural experience at a host destination. This first main area led to the second stream of the literature, acculturation.

Acculturation is defined broadly as a process of adjusting to different cultures (Tsai, Chentsova-Dutton, & Wong, 2002). Early work by Berry (1997) developed the seminal bi-dimensional acculturation model which explained that individuals could adopt either the *assimilation, separation, integration* or *marginalization* approach to a new cultural environment. Since his seminal work, numerous researchers have examined individual cultural adaptation among immigrants, residential tourists, and international students who normally stay permanently or for more than one year at a host destination (e.g., Berry et al. 2006, Juan-Vigaray and Sarabia-Sánchez 2013, Suanet and Vijver 2009).

Only a few scholars have investigated cultural adaptation within a tourism context (e.g., Howard 2008, Rasmi et al. 2014, Juan-Vigaray and Sarabia-Sánchez 2013, Ng, Lee, and Soutar 2007). Two main groups of tourism scholars showed contradictory findings in previous studies. One stream of findings demonstrated that the majority of tourists did not prefer any cultural adaptation. It was found that tourists falling into this group preferred to travel to a cultural destination similar to their country of origin (e.g., Juan-Vigaray and Sarabia-Sánchez 2013, Ng, Lee, and Soutar 2007). This preference also reflected their travel behaviours. For example, *lower levels of acculturation* tourists purchased more often at shops of their own country of origin and showed less preference for local bars and pubs (Juan-Vigaray and Sarabia-Sánchez 2013). By contrast, the second group of researchers argued that culturally different destinations actually attracted different types of tourists. The

findings showed that on the whole, tourists mostly tried to acculturate themselves to a host destination (e.g., Lee and Cox 2007, Rasmi et al. 2014). For example, tourists tended to have social interaction and mass media exposure to the host culture (Lee and Cox 2007). One limitation of the previous studies is that the majority of them have not specified the tourists' age groups. In addition, many of these studies focused on permanent residents and immigrants travelling within their host destination. This review suggested that no studies could be found that focus on the short-term long vacation which was between one to six weeks.

The last stream of literature focuses on the long stay vacation. The definition of long stay has been treated differently by various organizations and scholars. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2010), long stay tourists refer to those who stay in a destination outside their home countries for more than one month in a year. In contrast, the Japanese Long Stay Foundation (2002) states that long stay tourists are those who visit a destination for over two weeks with a view to returning to Japan. The important criterion of long stay tourists arising from these sources is that they are leisure travellers who do not earn any income in the destination. However, Rundle-Thiele, Tkaczynski, and Beaumont (2010) defined short duration of stay as less than one week, while the long stay tourist would take a vacation of more than ten days. Incorporating these definitions, the term *long stay tourists* in this study refers to those who took a trip in Phuket, Thailand for more than two week, had the intention of returning to their home country and did not earn money in Thailand.

Seniors and retirees who have a greater propensity and resources to travel are considered to be well suited to long stay tourism. For Southeast Asian destinations, only limited studies could be found focusing on the long stay vacation. Most of these studies investigated the motivation underlying an extended holiday. For instance, low living costs, self-actualisation, seeking wellbeing and seasonal migration attracted long stay tourists (e.g., Ono 2010, Abdul-Aziz, Loh, and Jaafar 2014, Wong and Musa 2014, Howard 2008). One study by Howard (2008) examined how tourists adapted to local communities. However, the term tourists in his study referred to Western expatriates who stayed in Thailand for more than one year and most of them married local Thai women. No studies could be found that have investigated how seniors adapt themselves to a host destination during their short-term long holiday (one to six weeks).

### **Methodology**

The in-depth interview approach was utilised in this study. This technique was considered to be suitable for this study as it more easily allowed the researcher to approach tourists on holiday in Phuket. The procedure of the data collection began with an interview guide development. To meet the qualitative validity, the peer debriefing technique was applied (Creswell 2009) where the peers reviewed and asked the researcher about the questions that reflected the rationale of the current research. The revised interview guide was piloted with six staff and fellow Ph.D. students of the Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith University. The pilot study enabled the researcher to become more confident and familiar with the interview procedure and allowed the researcher to improve the quality of the interview questions (Kim 2011).

In total, thirty-one semi-structured interviews with both individual and couple participants explored the nature of senior long stay tourist acculturation using a convenience sampling approach. The interviews consisted of 20 individual interviews and 11 couple interviews. Each interview took between 30 – 45 minutes. All interviewees were from Western cultures and were recruited in Phuket, Thailand. Respondents were sought from popular beach areas

and Phuket town. The age of the informants ranged from their fifties to seventies. The majority of informants were revisiting tourists (25) with 14 being the highest number of visits. Most of the participants were on holiday with their spouses, however, a number were traveling alone. The duration of stay for the first time visitors was 10 days whereas the revisiting tourists stayed in Phuket for between two to six weeks. Twenty interview sessions were with tourists who were still employed and the rest were with retirees.

After each interview, the recording file was transcribed and some initial interviews were examined before proceeding to further interviews. Brief summaries were also prepared when possible. This allowed the researcher to reflect on initial insights in order to guide the latter stages of data collection. To ensure reliability, the interview transcripts were produced by the researcher and then the audio recording files and the interview transcripts were cross-checked again with fresh eyes. In total, 159 pages of transcripts were generated for data analysis. The QSR NVivo software was used to help the researchers in analysing the data into themes. The thematic analysis was appropriated for this study because it assisted in categorisation of themes in the interview transcripts (Mills 2009). This process enabled the researcher to code and interpret the data and to verify the trustworthiness of the data and results (Creswell 2009, Lincoln and Guba 1985).

## Findings

Overall, the findings indicated that many tourists sought out and were able to adapt comfortably to a different culture. Even though they were in the host destination for a relatively short time, many seniors were proactive in their acculturation to a different cultural experience. While it is generally recognised that young people are more ready to embrace change, it is apparent that most seniors visiting a destination that is quite different culturally are prepared to accept the new cultural experience. However, not all seniors were willing to embrace the cultural experience. It was evident that three discrete categories of cultural adaptation existed. Furthermore, tourists who more frequently visited a destination tended to move out from their home comfort bubble and engaged more with the local community.

The first category is the *home comfort zone* which refers to a situation where tourists experience their usual home environment, such as meeting other tourists from their cultures, speaking in their native tongue and seeking out their home cuisine. That is, tourists displayed little or no adaptation to the host destination, regardless of frequency of visits. Indeed, the seniors falling into this group expressed their satisfaction with staying in their home environment in Phuket. Tourists who spent their holidays in the comfort 'bubble' often emphasised that they stayed in familiar hotels. For instance, "*We've been staying in this hotel for the last three trips. My wife loves the western food and the staff are lovely. We get the same room all the time. We're kind of used to the room and facilities there.*" (Informant 18, revisit). It was also found that several of them preferred to interact with expatriates and other tourists from their countries. For example, "*Sometimes, I hang out with some expats here. We don't drink, we don't smoke, so sometimes we just search for a nice restaurant and then we have dinner together.*" (Informant 20, revisit).

Seniors in the bubble often had their home cuisine, which was easily accessed in Phuket. For example, "*My husband hasn't tried any Thai food. He strictly eats western food. I can't believe that. He just has fish and chips.*" (Informant 13, first time). A number of these seniors described why they were happy to have their home cuisine; for example, "*We are just sort of sometimes careful with the food because different food can make your tummy a bit different. So we try to have our regular food. We don't want to be sick on holidays.*" (Informant 9, a couple, first time). Because they limited themselves only to home cuisine, a

number of them talked about finding shops where they could buy their own food. For instance, *“The other place will be Roma, the Italian one. Everything in Roma is all made in the house, all fresh, all pasta, pizza. Everything is all homemade. We miss our food.”* (Informant 7, two couples, revisit).

The second category of cultural adaptation is labelled long stay ***cultural integration***. This category refers to senior tourists who seek out and engage in the local culture/community. All of the seniors who belonged to this group were revisiting tourists. That is it was found that the more frequently tourists visited Phuket, the more they showed their adaptation to local life. Many informants spoke of having local style meals. That is, not just enjoying Thai cuisine but eating like a local Thai person rather than in a tourist restaurant. For example, *“In the evening I can buy [food] from the local food stands or food court where they sell grilled chicken something like that. They are available anytime.”* (Informant 1, revisit)

It was also found that the long stay tourists were willing to develop a local friendship on their holiday. This local relationship often appeared among the revisiting tourists. Several of their friendships had started on their first visit to Phuket. All of the seniors who had local friends shared that they had been regularly catching up with these friends. Regardless of language barriers, many of the informants suggested their individual connections with locals whom they often met. For example, *“I like to talk to them even though their English is not that good but I’m ok to talk to them and improve their English. I feel good too when they say that talking to me can improve their English.”* (Informant 3, revisit).

Furthermore, these long stay tourists also expressed their willingness to learn about Thai culture. The senior tourists who identified themselves as local guests often indicated their interest in the Thai language. For example, the Swedish male showed his strategy for learning the Thai language by going to places surrounded by locals, *“...Then you can learn Thai language with those Thai people. It’s more fun and interesting to learn Thai with locals. I think the more I go to talk to people in night clubs, the more I can speak Thai.”* (Informant 1, revisit).

Interestingly, a number of the informants applied Thai culture knowledge in their everyday home life. The informants who stayed closed to local communities reported their appreciation of local wisdom. For example, one of the informants showed her willingness to apply Thai ways of doing things back home. The following statements show how cultural integration works as a two-way relationship whereby visitors integrate new knowledge and learning into their behaviours back home.

It’s really interesting that my landlord uses flour as a powder to fight with ants. They just spread powder along the ants’ line and then the ants are gone. It’s really interesting. This thing I told my husband too and there we go, we get rid of ants at home.

(Informant 26, revisit)

Many informants who participated in homestay indicated more opportunity to understand Thai culture. During their stay with local families, tourists learned the different way of life among local families. For example, one couple from New Zealand went to a homestay in a fruit gardener’s family. This couple discussed their experiences of being a Thai agriculturist. They had learnt the common way of Thai traditional living style in which local females often went to the morning markets for food shopping then cooked for the family, whereas the males went to work.

The third category of cultural adaptation refers to a *sense of belonging to the host destination, people and culture*. It was found that several senior tourists, who preferred to adapt to host culture as stated previously in the second group, seemed to be part of this category. All of the informants in this group appeared to be repeat tourists. A number of the informants expressed their feeling of being part of the local community. A few seniors offered themselves as a source of information to other tourists. For example, “*Actually none of us feel like we are tourists but we treat ourselves as locals. We try to help tourists when they ask for help.*” (Informant 25, revisit).

The word *home* was often heard when they expressed their feelings about the local Thai community. The senior tourists who visited Phuket many times also felt it was their second home, with comments such as, “*...You just feel like it’s your second home. You just stay local.*” (Informant 18, revisit). One couple expressed feeling very good when locals respected them by calling them *Dad* and *Mom*. For example, “*It’s homely here. You cannot get this feeling somewhere else. Here is just homely. I feel like I come back home here. Everyone says hi Papa, hi Mama. This feels really good. Everyone here knows you.*” (Informant 6, a couple, revisit). Many tourists showed their strong bonds to locals. For example, this couple spoke of their adopted local granddaughter and showed their strong ties with the local family,

This Friday, we will go out again with them [the local family]. They pick us up here and we go for coffee and we go to the school to pick up my adopted granddaughter, their daughter. We pick them up every time and talk to her teacher.

(Informant 6, a couple, revisit).

As second-homers, several participants indicated that they would like to see improvements in Phuket. That is, they were as concerned about how the city was developing as were permanent residents. It appears that they more aligned their interests with locals compared with short stay tourists.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The purpose of this current study was to explore the pattern of senior long stay tourists’ cultural adaptation to a host destination. This study further extended the previous research on acculturation, which mostly focused on permanent migration in host destinations. The results of the current study showed that despite the relatively short time in a host destination in comparison to the permanent resident cohort, the senior tourists demonstrated a range of cultural adaptation. Although a number of seniors loved to stay in their comfort zone, many tourists acculturated to the local culture. This acculturation started when they gave up their national cuisine, which was easily accessed in a popular destination like Phuket, to enjoy authentic Thai dishes every day on vacation. Then, the longer and the more frequently tourists visited, the more they showed a willingness to learn Thai culture. Tourists who stayed close to locals revealed their strong bonds to local families and how they thought of Phuket as a second home.

The study provides some managerial insights. It details the resources the senior long stay tourists sought to meet their needs in a host destination. The identification of the three categories mentioned from the short-term long stay tourists provides an opportunity for policy makers to capture more of the senior long stay tourist market by recognising and accommodating senior long stay tourists’ needs. The results of the present study can be used to further segment senior tourists in Thailand who appear to be a heterogeneous market. That is, the Thai Government can apply the findings regarding facility preparation to

accommodate different groups of senior tourists. For example, zoning could be applied to facilitate those who prefer to stay in their comfort bubble. The host environment should also be preserved for those who desire to experience different culture while on holiday.

Like all research, this study has limitations. One relates to the sample's representativeness. Although the interviews were conducted among different nationality senior tourists, all of them were English speakers and the majority were Australians. This factor may affect the results in the sense that individuals who are from the same cultural background could present similar attitudes. Therefore, future studies should recruit senior tourists from diverse nationalities, including Japanese and Scandinavians who comprise a large group of senior long stay tourists in Phuket.

Despite these limitations, some strength of the samples should be noted. Firstly, the age group was widely ranged from their fifties to seventies. Secondly, the key informants were onsite tourists who could provide comprehensive ideas of how they adapted themselves to local culture.

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