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Information Hippies, Google-Fu Masters, and Other Volunteer Tourists in Thailand: Information Behaviour in the Liminoid

Abstract: Using social positioning theory and the concept of the liminoid, the objectives of this qualitative research project were to 1) investigate how social positioning affects the information behaviour of volunteer tourists; 2) determine what effects culture shock, physical location, gender, technical skill, and previous intercultural education and/or experiences have on the information behaviour of volunteer tourists; and finally, 3) suggest how non-governmental organizations can use the research findings to assist volunteer tourists to successfully undertake their placements. The results emphasize the importance of developing a theory of liminoid information behaviour, in order to explore how people in the liminoid – a place between cultures where identities are often suspended – interact with information.

Résumé : À l'aide de la théorie du positionnement social et du concept de la liminalité, l'objectif de ce projet de recherche qualitatif est 1) d'investiguer comment le positionnement social influence le comportement informationnel des touristes bénévoles; 2) de déterminer quels sont les effets du choc culturel, de l'emplacement physique, du sexe, des aptitudes techniques et de l'éducation ou de l'expérience interculturelle préalable sur le comportement informationnel des touristes bénévoles; et finalement, 3) de suggérer comment les organisations non gouvernementales peuvent se servir des résultats de la recherche pour aider les touristes bénévoles à mener à bien leurs activités. Les résultats insistent sur l'importance de développer une théorie du comportement informationnel liminal afin d'explorer comment les gens se trouvant dans cet état, un endroit entre les cultures où l'identité est souvent suspendue, interagissent avec l'information.

1. Introduction

Nong Khai, a dusty Thai town on the banks of the muddy Mekong River is home to evidence of a growing trend in travel. Amidst the saffron-coloured robes of monks in the markets and the crowds eating at road-side food stalls, *farangs*¹ (foreigners) from around the world can be spotted. Although most travelers in the town are headed over the Thai-Laos Friendship Bridge into Laos, increasing numbers of others are there for another purpose. Nong Khai is based in Isaan, one of the economically poorest regions of Thailand.² Consequently, several volunteer tourism non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have sprung up in the region with goals of assisting local people and the environment. These groups attract foreigners wanting to do something meaningful during a break from their commitments (i.e. work, school, life) in their home countries, and so place these volunteers in international development-type positions in the town and surrounding villages.

Volunteer tourism can be defined as “utilizing discretionary time and income to go out of the regular sphere of activity to assist others in need” (McGehee and Santos 2005, 760). In this study, “need” is qualified as those needs identified by members of the communities in which volunteers work, and are related to social, technological, educational, economic, and environmental justice. Needs are not determined by people outside of the various local communities.

Despite increases in both international development (ID) projects and voluntourism opportunities, no information behaviour studies have been conducted in either area, and little research has been conducted into this area at the ID non-governmental organization level.

Additionally, intercultural studies research has shown that individuals undertaking both short and long-term travels experience varying levels of cultural confusion (a.k.a. “culture shock”) that leads to the habitation of a psychological third space – the Liminoid – that is a mix of home and host cultures (Hottola 2004). In this state, identities are subjected to re-evaluation and negotiation much more so than in everyday life. This temporary state of suspension has implications for the information behaviour of individuals, yet it has not been studied in the library and information studies field.

2. Research Methods

This research employs a mixed methods approach that includes multiple semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Using volunteer tourists undertaking education, conservation, health, and refugee-related placements with two non-profit organizations, Travel to Teach (T2T) and Openmind Projects (OMP), as the basis for study, this research explored the following questions:

1. How does social positioning function in the world of the volunteer tourist, and what are the implications for information behaviour?
2. What effects do cultural confusion (a.k.a. “culture shock), physical location, gender, technical skill, and previous intercultural education and/or experiences have on the information behaviour of volunteer tourists?
3. What can NGOs do to assist volunteers concerning the kinds of information required and the manner in which it is provided, in order to assist volunteer tourists to successfully complete their work?

These interviews occurred on two separate research trips to Asia between May and November 2009 in Nong Khai, Bangkok, and Chiang Mai, Thailand. In order to be a participant, volunteers must have volunteered with OMP or T2T for a minimum of one month, and hold a passport from a country other than Thailand.

Volunteers came from eleven different countries: Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States. They ranged in ages from nineteen to fifty-two, and were in many stages of life including young backpackers on modern “grand tours,” to people taking breaks from work due to the recession, and retirees. While most were racialized as white, one was of Asian descent.

3. Theoretical Framework

As an OMP or T2T volunteer is plunged into a situation of interacting with locals, fellow volunteers, and organization staff that foregrounds and challenges personal and cultural identities and beliefs in extreme fashions, a theory that accounts for rapidly shifting

identities is needed in order to explore information behaviour. Social positioning theory (SPT) (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and van Langenhove 1999) is a useful lens to apply to the experience of volunteer tourists. As a postmodern theory, SPT is based on the assumption that “all conversations always involve some sort of positioning” (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, 29), where positioning is defined as “the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of the conversation have specific locations” (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, 16).

4. Results and Discussion

Social Positioning

There are numerous examples of social positioning that were reported by participants. The negotiation of insider/outsider cultural identity, power, and face emerged in interviews as the most significant social positioning themes. At times, volunteer tourists would position themselves as cultural insiders, identifying themselves as volunteers so as to gain access to information and benefits that tourists would not. Often, the insider identity was deployed in order to get equal or close to the same prices as locals for goods and services. At other times, however, it became beneficial for participants to emphasize their outsider identity, so they could place themselves beyond the social and cultural rules that apply to Thais. This gave participants’ license to undertake actions that would not normally be acceptable in Thai society.

The movement between insider and outsider identities is linked to the concept of face and power. Because they could cling to the notion that they were not a part of Thai society, participants felt free to ask for information that they would never have felt comfortable doing at home due to loss of face.

Previous Intercultural Experience and Gender

Previous intercultural experience and gender were overwhelmingly the most important of the categories specifically set out for study. Significant previous travel experience resulted in participants feeling comfortable with minimal information, and deliberately wanting to know very little. For this “information hippy” group, there was a feeling that the universe would provide guidance and fulfill information needs. On the other end of the continuum were “Google-fu masters,” whose travel inexperience was linked to a burning desire for information. Obsession with information was specific to inexperienced female participants, who felt a higher amount of risk associated with travel than others in the study. Attempting to calm this fear, they gathered as much information as possible about the situations they found themselves in.

Embodiment

Traveling abroad leads to a greatly heightened conscious collection of sensual information (Curtis and Pajackowska 1994, 206-7). This causes particular smells, physical responses, and noises that are different from their home cultures to stand out to travelers. A significant information behaviour that emerged for participants in this study was a reliance on embodied information, “the corporeal expression or manifestation of information previously in encoded form” (Bates 2006, 1036). For example, voluntourists in this study mentioned the heat and sweating, which they would not experience at home.

They talked about different noises – the zooming of motorbikes, the chirping of geckos – when trying to sleep. Smells at the market moved them to try new foods, or avoid them completely. These sensual experiences are different from those the bodies of volunteer tourists experience at home, where the sensible body – a body “subsumed to the cultural order” – resides (Selänniemi 2003, 21). Transgressing the sensible body is one of the ways in which people put themselves in a liminoidal state while at the same time highlighting different information behaviours than would be seen at home.

5. Further Study

Further development of the concept of liminoidal information behaviour is necessary. Many information behaviour studies are based on stable or routine situations or those where normal cultural rules apply. A deeper examination of information behaviour in transitory experiences where identity shifts is required.

Additionally, more information behaviour research needs to account for the embodiment of information. Most LIS studies ignore the embodiment aspect of information behaviour, especially as it tends to be passive in nature. Asking questions concerning sensory information opens a whole new area of inquiry in the LIS field, and can lead to a more well-rounded understanding of human information behaviour.

6. References

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¹Farang is a Thai word that translates to “foreigner/outsider of European descent.” Regardless of how long a person of European ancestry lives in Thailand or his or her Thai language fluency, he or she will be called a *farang*. The term is often used as a descriptive word by Thai people discussing foreigners and their seemingly odd actions. Other times, however, especially in heavy tourist areas, *farang* can frequently be used as a derogatory term. Regardless of the intention behind the word, volunteers would have heard themselves described by the term hundreds of times during their stay in Thailand. Among research participants there was a

divide on whether use of the term bothered them; some found it insulting and calling it “reverse-racism,” while others were not fazed by the term at all. Although most participants recognized that the intended meaning of the term (i.e. insulting or not) was highly dependent on context, several reported that constantly being described as a *farang* led to feeling frustrated and psychologically isolated.

Although the term will be spelled with an “r” in this thesis, *farang* is sometimes spelled as *falang*, as the “r” sound often turns into an “l” sound when spoken by Thai people not used to pronouncing an “r” sound.

² Isaan (also known as Isan) is regarded by many in Bangkok as being the most rural backwater in the country. Being a very economically poor region, many young people leave for low-paying jobs in the capital, in order to send money home to their families. Due to refugees fleeing across the border from Laos during the war in the 1970s, the region has a much higher percentage of ethnically Laotian people, and consequently has a mixed Thai/Lao culture that is distinct from the rest of the country. On the surface, this mixed culture largely comes across in dialect and food, but it also goes deeper with Isan people regarded, for example, as much more connected to folk traditions.