University of Alberta

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

by

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Abstract

Using social positioning theory and the concept of the liminoid, the objectives of this qualitative research project were three-fold: 1) investigate how social positioning affects the information behaviour of volunteer tourists; 2) determine what effects cultural confusion (aka "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. These questions were explored through observation and semi-structured interviews with fifteen volunteer tourists in Thailand. Previous travel experience proved to be a significant predictor of participants' information behaviour. Volunteer tourists reported more consciousness of the embodiment of information and the concept of face than they did at home. The results emphasize the importance of developing a theory of liminoidal information behaviour, in order to explore how people in the liminoid – a place between cultures where identities are often suspended – interact with information.

Acknowledgements

This thesis was written in an elephant tower in Lao jungle, on a platform in a rice paddy in Isaan, Thailand, in a Starbucks at the base of the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, under unreliable lighting in Myanmar (Burma) and by road-side eateries in Singapore. It's been written while winging around the world on twenty-two different planes and during bone-jarring tuk-tuk rides along rural roads. Along the way, I was aided by numerous people who crossed my path for only a short time and whose names I don't know. To these people, I want to convey my sincere thanks and appreciation for your assistance and kindness, from sharing a meal, giving directions, helping me find flea shampoo or simply exchanging a smile that kept my spirits high. To the young man at the ATM-less Singapore Immigration office, without whose generosity I would still be at the Malaysia/Singapore border, I will pass on your touching act of kindness. The last year has not only seen a thesis born, but also left me in awe of the human spirit that connects people regardless of cultures and continents.

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Finally, special thanks go to my partner-in-crime Darby Love. There are no words that can come close to adequately expressing just how much your presence in my life means to me. Every single Oxford comma in this thesis is for you.

Kathleen Reed
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[1] All figures have been hand-drawn from the original images for copyright reasons.

Chapter One - 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 (see map in Appendix 1). Amidst the saffron-coloured robes of monks in the markets and the crowds eating at road-side food stalls, *farangs* (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.

These "voluntourists" are a special group of travelers – neither professionally trained in international development (ID) nor average tourists because of their purpose for travel. Yet despite increases in both 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. This study seeks to contribute to this little-explored area from an information behavior (IB) point of view.

Research Questions

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 that is a mix of home and host cultures (Hottola 2004). In this state, identities are subjected to re-evaluation and negotiation much

[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.

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 (LIS) field. Using volunteer tourists undertaking placements with two organizations, Travel to Teach and Openmind Projects, as the basis for study, this research seeks to explore 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?

In order to explore these questions, fifteen volunteer tourists working with two different organizations based in Nong Khai were interviewed using a semi-structured format. These interviews were conducted in Nong Khai, Chiang Mai, and Bangkok between May and November 2009.

Organization Background: Openmind Projects (OMP)[3]

Standing outside what would be my classroom at a Buddhist temple for the next three months (November 2005 – January 2006), being told not to pass anything directly to a monk because as a female I am considered "impure," I knew that I was about to enter new and challenging cultural territory. My hunch was correct; over the course of teaching computing and web design at Wat Prathiwattaya (a small temple/school in the rural Thai town of Nong Khai), delivering intercultural studies lectures at the Buddhist university, working on PHP curriculum and living with other volunteers at the project house, I inhabited a new world that

[3] General information about OMP was found on the OMP website: http://www.openmindprojects.com.

was frequently both exciting and frustrating. This was my first introduction to OMP, and it came about when I volunteered with the organization as an undergraduate in 2005-2006 to fulfill a practicum requirement for a Diploma in Intercultural Education and Training. Before departing the organization, a standing offer to return was issued. It is this offer that I took up to do this research, when I returned to OMP and Nong Khai for the second time. On the first of two trips to Nong Khai to conduct this research, I lived at OMP house and did some special computer projects for the organization. This high level of involvement is discussed further in the research methods chapter. The second research trip was to interview T2T volunteers, and thus I did not stay at OMP house or work on any projects for the organization.

Openmind Projects is a non-governmental organization that offers volunteer tourists opportunities to undertake placements related to education, healthcare, child and youth care, nature conservation, and information technology in Thailand, Laos, Nepal, and Cambodia.

OMP started as a 2001 pilot project called IT in Isan.[4] The aim of this initiative was "to create simple and cheap computer learning centers emphasizing social rather than technical qualities, thus volunteers are recruited into the projects. These ICT volunteers help learners, acting as coaches, they demonstrate computer applications, encouraging independent, self-paced exploration to discover and to learn. Self-directed computer learning, D-E-D, demonstration, exploration and discovery" (IT in Isan).

While the organization began purely as an ICT-initiative based in the Isan region, it has rapidly expanded to include volunteer placements unrelated to ICT work, including opportunities for volunteers to work at orphanages, schools, hospitals, and nature reserves. OMP currently has three missions:

- *To bridge knowledge divides between rich and poor. Help the underprivileged to better learning opportunities with the help of modern information technology and international volunteers.*

[4] More information about the original project can be found at: http://www.itinisan.org.

- *To save nature. To contribute to the fight against increasing threats to our environment, nature and animals.*
- *To offer international volunteers unique opportunities to help bridge knowledge divides and save nature while growing as persons in our grass roots education and eco projects. Our programs, to volunteer in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Nepal are designed to contribute to the motivation, creativity, inter-personal and cross-cultural skills of the international volunteer overseas* (Openmind Projects, "Volunteer Overseas").

Since I worked for OMP in 2005-2006, the organization has expanded to include not just placements in Thailand and Laos, but also in Nepal and Cambodia. OMP offices and the volunteer house moved from a two-house property to a large "compound" that is home to housing, offices and a tennis court. As the organization has expanded, it has continued to hire staff born and raised in the regions in which it works.

While in 2005-2006 the minimum required length of participation was one month, the organization now offers opportunities beginning with only a two-week program. In these ways, OMP is moving more towards a business model of operation, offering shorter-term placements and collecting revenue from participants in the same style as Cross-Cultural Solutions, a leading volunteer tourism for-profit company.

However, unlike this other business, OMP has a commitment to non-profit work, and charges volunteers not to turn a profit for its founders but to finance its development initiatives after covering operating costs. The fees that volunteers are charged are much less than for-profit travel companies, with a one month placement with OMP costing $965 CND compared to approximately $4350 CND for a similar experience with Cross-Cultural Solutions (Cross-Cultural Solutions; Openminds Project). After completing a placement, volunteers that prove themselves capable are often invited to return to the organization to work on internal OMP projects (developing software, curriculum, etc.) in the future. In these situations, volunteers cover their own expenses and are not charged organizational fees.

As the organization has grown, it has begun to draw major media attention. OMP has been featured in *National Geographic*, *Lonely Planet*, Qantas Airlines' in-flight magazine, and major newspapers around the world. Additionally, the organization was one of eight featured in a CNN special report, *Be the Change*. Perhaps the highest honour OMP has received was making it into the final round of the highly-competitive Stockholm Challenge, a prestigious global competition based on international ICT development initiatives.[5]

Organization Background: Travel to Teach (T2T)[6]

Like OMP, Travel to Teach enables volunteers to work on projects related to English and IT teaching, conservation, eco-tourism and community development. T2T's mission statement is to:

- *Provide valuable opportunities for our volunteers to work abroad.*
- *Ensure genuine experiences of different cultures at a cost that most travelers can afford.*
- *Teach, or provide other assistance and support in poorer parts of the world where too little education is provided* (Travel to Teach).

While this statement is largely geared towards potential volunteers reading the T2T website and is thus focussed on what volunteers get out of their placements, other organization documentation emphasizes how the local host communities benefit.

T2T was formed as a reaction to large for-profit volunteer tourism organizations that put development second to profit. The organization is staffed by Thai nationals and largely focused on teaching and learning, regardless of the type of project on which volunteers work. On the T2T website, the founder explains the organization's philosophy:

> *I have the strong belief that the best way one can help a person, or a country is by providing education. Nothing is more positive than trying to help 'empower' people, and create conditions for 'sustainable development' than offering education. I also believe*

[5] More information on the Stockholm challenge can be found at: http://www.stockholmchallenge.se.
[6] General information about T2T was found on the T2T website: http://www.travel-to-teach.org.

> *that nothing is more likely to help provide an international understanding than by actually being in day-to-day contact with the people of another country as this goes towards creating a positive bond between different cultures.*
>
> *Kerstin Ahlzen, Founder of Travel to Teach*
> (Travel to Teach)

While T2T first began in Nong Khai, Thailand in 2002, the organization has since expanded to include volunteer opportunities in Bali, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Nepal, Vietnam, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Mexico, and the Galapagos Islands. The minimum amount of time a volunteer must work is two weeks, while others stay for six months or more. A four week placement in Thailand with T2T is approximately $823 CND, slightly cheaper than OMP and far less expensive than for-profit organizations.

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 (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and van Langenhove 1999) is a useful lens to apply to the experience of volunteer tourists and is used throughout this thesis. Further discussion of this theory is contained in the literature review section.

Value of Research

Little inquiry into the information behaviours of travelers has been undertaken. This particular research contributes to an understanding of how established and comfortable social identities mix with new and often transitory identities to affect information behaviours. In addition to contributing to the development of information behavior theory, it is expected that the results of this study will have practical benefits for people within the international development activist community. This research aims to help people volunteering with NGOs abroad to more easily access information in the future and for NGOs to streamline information

delivery to technically-savvy “voluntourists,” saving organizational resources and time, and aiding NGOs to undertake their work more effectively.

Thesis Outline

Chapter two begins with a review of the literature on volunteer tourism and a general overview of the intercultural studies concepts of culture shock, cultural confusion, and the “third-space” travelers often find themselves in. Following this review, information behavior literature is introduced, with special emphasis on information face and embodied information. Finally, social positioning theory, the main theoretical framework deployed in this study is reviewed. Chapter three gives details of the methods used in this study, while chapter four breaks down results by specific research question. This document is rounded out in chapter five with a summary of research findings, the practical and theoretical implications of this work, and further questions raised by this exploration of the information behaviours of volunteer tourists.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Volunteer Tourism

From 19th century "grand tours" of Europe to current gap year expeditions, economically-privileged young people have for centuries undertaken cultural rites of passage in the form of travel. It is no surprise, then, that many OMP and T2T volunteers are in their twenties and thirties. Recently, however, there has been a spike in marketing volunteer tourism opportunities to potential travelers of more advanced ages (Rogers 2007; Kirby 2008; Lambert 2008). Brown (2005), Hudson and Inkson (2006), and Rogers (2007) suggest that with the aging of the baby boomers, many people in this cohort are in the process of re-examining their personal values and are increasingly dissatisfied with how their lives to this point have matched these supposed espoused beliefs. Consequently, volunteer tourist organizations are seeing increasing numbers of people older than their 20s and 30s. OMP and T2T are no different, with a significant number of older volunteers wanting to use their career training and skills in a variety of placements.

Although no previous studies have been undertaken concerning OMP or T2T, it can be reasonably assumed that the organizations' volunteers share similarities with research participants drawn from other recent studies on the phenomenon of volunteer tourism. For example, voluntourists have reported longer lengths of stays and a lesser need for amenities than regular tourists (Gray and Campbell 2007, 471). Although many voluntourists cite altruistic motives for participation, they are also influenced by "challenge, adventure, and life change" (Hudson and Inkson 2006, 317). Once home, volunteers often report a changed worldview and self-identification (McGehee and Santos 2005; Zahra and McIntosh 2007).

Volunteers must not only contend with issues associated with moving from their home cultures to host cultures; they also generally undergo significant shifts from paid to unpaid work, from urban to rural environments, and from developed to underdeveloped countries (Hudson and Inkson 2006, 306). This change has been described not as a rapid shock that volunteers can deal with all at once, but as a "war of attrition" that gradually wears on people (Hudson and Inkson 2006, 312). The Lonely Planet guide to volunteering suggests that

volunteers need to be mindful of the "six-week rule," which posits that the first six weeks of international volunteering are critical in adapting to new environments (Hindle et al. 2007, 43).

Travel publications have recently seen an explosion of articles about volunteer tourism (Hindle et al. 2007; Rogers 2007; Lambert 2008). In these articles, organizations of all types are featured, with even the Ritz-Carleton Company beginning to offer its guests the opportunity to participate in voluntourism programs (Kirby 2008). In the travel industry and in the popular press (i.e. guidebooks), "volunteer tourist" and "voluntourist" have come to mean that in the balance between volunteering and tourism, tourism weighs more heavily. In this body of literature, the volunteering component of volunteer tourism is frequently discussed as a half-day to full day commitment. On a two-week package holiday, for example, tourists may spend one afternoon helping to plant a garden or undertake some other form of community work. Longer commitments that focus more on volunteering are generally not referred to as voluntourism.

Unlike trade and popular travel literature, however, academics have a less well defined distinction between voluntourism and international volunteering. There is slippage between the terms; depending on the author, both terms can be applied to the people who volunteer with OMP and T2T. In order to differentiate between short and long-term volunteer tourists, Callanan and Thomas (2005) propose breaking down this category into a range from "shallow" (those who volunteer for only a few weeks) to "deep" (those who volunteer for more than six months) voluntourists. In this study, "volunteer," "voluntourist," and "volunteer tourist" are synonymous, although I use Callanan and Thomas' distinctions between volunteer tourists based on the length of participation.

Most volunteer tourism discussions rely on Wearing's definition of volunteer tourists as: "those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment" (2001, 1). This definition, while reflective of the usual types of activities of early voluntourism opportunities, needs to be reworked to encompass the many types of activities undertaken by

volunteer tourists today. Not included in the definition would be teaching subjects in schools, assisting in hospitals, building libraries, developing ICT initiatives, and many other types of activities. Thus, in my thesis I use the broader definition of volunteer tourism put forward by McGehee and Santos: "utilizing discretionary time and income to go out of the regular sphere of activity to assist others in need" (2005, 760). I qualify "need" 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 communities.

Like other identity groupings, however, the category of "volunteer tourist" is not homogenous. Not all voluntourists "see themselves or are perceived by host organizations and communities, as volunteers and/or tourists" (Lyons 2003, 5). There are numerous ways volunteers can describe themselves, including the general "tourist" or the more specific "backpacker." Volunteer tourists are closely related to backpackers in that both groups share a desire to interact with local hosts in an "authentic" fashion; additionally, many volunteer tourists often pick up the role of backpacker before or after their time with volunteer organizations has concluded (Mustonen 2005, 168). In my experience at OMP, there were several people who never set the role of backpacker aside.

Despite the multiplicity of roles volunteers identify with, the people who sign up for placements are usually at least partly enticed by a common message found in the marketing of volunteer tourism organizations. Volunteer tourism is often promoted as an ideal method of gaining cross-cultural understanding, developing a mindset of global citizenship, and encouraging positive personal change through involvement and self-reflection. Indeed, the body of scholarly literature on volunteer tourists frequently trumpets the benefits of this type of travel (Wearing 2001; Broad 2003; McGehee and Santos 2005; McIntosh and Zahra 2007).

Numerous academics have gone so far as to compare the situation of international development volunteers to the "the myth of the hero's adventure," a concept developed by anthropologist Joseph Campbell (1968, 1988). This myth includes the following details:

1. starting-point in a familiar world;

2. a call to adventure or a new challenge;
3. challenges and trials along the way;
4. assistance by magical helpers; [in ID work, interpreters, colleagues, expatriates]
5. victory as the hero confronts the greatest challenges;
6. new learning and personal transformation through the experience;
7. return to the previous world, bearing an elixir or boon to share; and
8. resumption of the original life, 'master of two worlds not one'

   (Hudson and Inkson 2006, 307).

Noticing the similarities between the construction of heroes in Campbell's work and the experiences reported by international travelers, Hudson and Inkson apply Campbell's work to the world of international development volunteering. The model has also been used by Osland (1990) with international business travelers, and by Richardson and McKenna (2002) with expatriate academics. All of these studies have noted that while participants did not describe themselves as heroes, they did use "hero talk" when describing their travels of an adventurous and personally transforming nature (Hudson and Inkson 2006).

Recently, however, scholars have focused a more critical lens on the assumption that volunteer tourism is always a positive force in host communities and for the voluntourists themselves. Challenging the idea that volunteer tourists are always undertaking placements for altruistic reasons, several scholars put forward the notion that there is some self-interest on the part of voluntourists. Hudson and Inkson (2006) found that individual travelers sought to develop "soft-skills" (i.e. self confidence, adaptability, improvisation, interpersonal relations and cross-cultural awareness), while Duffy (2002) and Munt (1994) go so far as to argue that "tourists' 'selfless' contributions to local communities and environments are actually self-serving attempts to build their own cultural capital" (Gray and Campbell 2007, 466). Turner and Gilbert (2001) and Mustonen (2005) question how significant a positive effect certain voluntourism opportunities have on local communities.

Some academics have criticized a number of voluntourist organizations as being neo-colonialist in nature, sending volunteers into situations in which they are underqualified and/or

inexperienced (Raymond and Hall 2008) or where they can mine the situation for personal skill development and then leave (Roberts 2004). Simpson suggests that voluntourism may actually reinforce stereotypes and dichotomies of "us and them" (2004).

Despite the valid criticisms that have emerged in the last few years, most studies conducted into volunteer tourism have repeatedly and consistently concluded that volunteer tourism is an excellent opportunity for individuals to develop or expand a global consciousness, so long as there is a serious reflection component integrated into the program (Raymond and Hall 2008, 539). The research on host community feelings about volunteer tourists has also largely shown that volunteer programs are generally welcomed and regarded as a positive force (McIntosh and Zahra 2007; Huttasin 2008).

Culture Shock

In order to understand how radically different the situation volunteer tourists are placed in is different from their everyday lives and home cultural frameworks, it is useful to have some background on various theories of culture shock and the academic debates surrounding this concept.

With increasing numbers of people travelling in the post-WWII era, scholarly interest in the phenomenon of culture shock began to blossom. In 1955, Lysgaard developed the U-curve hypothesis to explain the experience of international academics in various host cultures (Figure 1). Lysgaard understood culture shock to begin with a "honeymoon" stage in which travelers found their new surrounding thrilling and fascinating. After several weeks, travelers slide down from their initial high when faced with cultural conflicts. They move into a state of negativity when they realize that they are not able to function well in the host culture because of different cultural frameworks. Some revert to stereotypes about the new culture to explain their situation. Finally, travelers begin to become more familiar with their environments and more willing to explore. They begin to feel better about their situation as they adapt (International Programs; Office of International Programs).

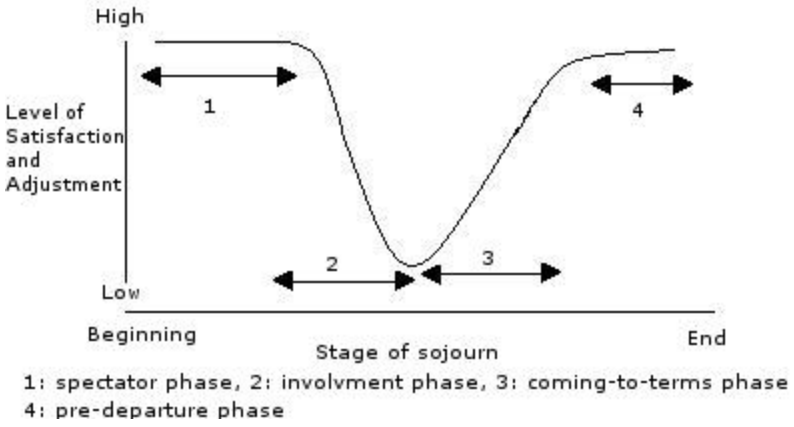

Figure 1 – U Curve Theory (Lygaard 1955)

The U-curve model was updated in 1963, when Gullahorn and Gullahorn reconceptualized it into a W model (Figure 2). The initial up-down-up theory of the U-curve continued in the W model, but the Gullahorns added a second up-down-up section to explain re-entry into the home culture. Mimicking entry into the host culture, the second dip and rise account for alienation felt from the home culture upon return, and then eventual reintegration.

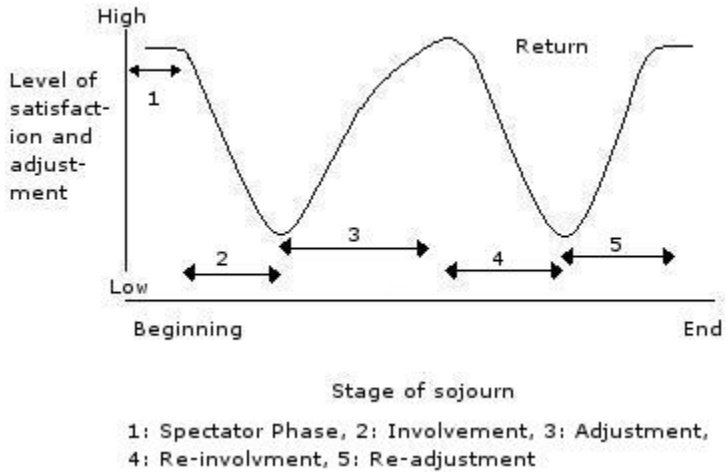

Figure 2 – W Curve Theory (Gullahorn and Gullahorn 1963)

Both the U-curve and W models and various less influential models developed in the last half of the 20th century are based on a disease model, which assumes that culture shock is a disability that could potentially be cured by the correct treatment (Pederson 1995, 5) and an experience

that is always negative and reactionary. Oberg (1960), for example, understands the effects of culture shock to be one or more of the following:

1. strain resulting from the effort of psychological adaptation,
2. a sense of loss or deprivation referring to the removal of former friends, status, role, and/or possessions,
3. rejection by or rejection of the new culture,
4. confusion in the role definition, role expectations, feelings and self-identity,
5. unexpected anxiety, disgust, or indignation regarding cultural differences between the old and new ways, and
6. feelings of helplessness as a result of not coping well in the new environment. (Pederson 1995, 2).

Beginning in the late 1980s, however, the disease model of explanation fell out of favour with some scholars who critiqued it as too fatalistic, simplified, and negative (Furnham 1988). In the minds of these academics, the growth model of culture shock began to replace earlier disease theories. Today, although still highly popular for explaining culture shock to travelers by travel professionals and international exchange university offices, the W-curve model has disappeared as the basis of academic arguments. Arguments based on the general disease model of thinking, however, continue to be made.

Unlike the disease theory, the growth model suggests that culture shock is not always a negative experience. It can be a useful way in which to gain skills and strength in intercultural situations (Pederson 1995, 7). Several scholars point out that one of the reasons people travel in the first place is to experience cultural distance (Desmond 1999; McKercher and So-Ming 2001). Additionally, while the disease model is centered on a person assimilating into the host culture, the growth theory argues that acculturation occurs. Acculturation is "the exchange of cultural features that results when groups come into continuous firsthand contact; the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered, but the groups remain distinct" (Kottak 2005, 209). Thus, the growth model sees culture shock as a potentially positive state to be in. For example, Mohamed's model is based on four stages:

1. orientation and autonomy (learning new skills),
2. transitions of self-worth (stress and ambivalence between complying with and resisting new demands),
3. consolidation of role identity (awareness of various systems), and
4. competence and integrative maturity (development of hope and confidence) (Ct. Brown and Holloway 2007, 34).

Unlike previous models based on negative feelings, Mohamed argues that there are many positive aspects to the culture shock experience including the development of skills, new conceptualizations of self, increasing awareness of the world, and confidence-building.

While scholars are still split between the disease and growth conceptualizations of culture shock, there has been a shift in thinking in both camps surrounding the linearity of previous models, which has led to questions regarding the solidity of stages. There has been recognition that travelers rapidly cycle through different feelings about the host culture on a daily basis. Travelers can go from feeling exhilarated to frustrated in seconds; they are not bound to a certain order of emotions. There have also been arguments made that while most of the culture shock models position a "honeymoon" experience as the first stage of interacting with a host culture, there is little evidence that confirms this (Searle and Ward 1990). Ward et al. (2001) even suggest that the most distress travelers feel may be early on in their journey, which is exactly the time that, according to the U and W-curve models, people should be feeling thrilled and excited. In fact, some scholars have found the U-curve model to be useful in only one of ten individual cases (Kealey 1989).

For the purposes of this thesis, however, one of the most important critiques made to culture shock models is that most theories are relevant to people who are in a host culture for long periods of time (generally over a year), not for short term visitors (Hottola 2004, 451). While Hottola is bringing forth this critique through his study of backpackers, not voluntourists, his point is easily transferrable to this study as the vast majority of OMP and T2T volunteers do not stay with the organizations longer than one year.

Cultural Confusion

In addition to his issues with the applicability of culture shock models to short term visitors and the general linear criticism, Hottola takes issue with the term "culture shock" itself. He argues that while travelers may experience confusion, weariness and disorientation, they rarely experience genuine bodily shock, and thus suggests that the word "shock" should not be used so loosely (2004, 453). He does concede that people do experience "life shock," a term first coined by Bock (1970) to mean "a sudden and direct exposure to the less desirable facts of human life, from which the people in Western societies often are shielded by social security and state institutions" (Hottola 2004, 454).

As an alternative to "culture shock," Hottola proposes the term "cultural confusion," which encompasses "the whole variety of emotions from mixed feelings during the intercultural experience to the occasional serious confusion and consequent depression called culture shock" (2004, 453). The term is used to discuss not only cultural adaptation problems, but also the "frequently-simultaneous presence of enjoyment, success, and learning" (Hottola 2004, 453). The model of cultural confusion is not based on a linear progression, or well-defined stages of experience. It also takes into account that there is a difference between adjusting socioculturally and psychologically, unlike either the U or W-curve models (Furnham and Erdmann 1995). Most importantly, it fuses together what has been found to be common among travelers in intercultural situations and complex individual experiences (Hottola 2004, 461).

Hottola puts forward two diagrams to explain cultural confusion theory in relation to non-package travelers. Figure 3 outlines the initial phase of cultural confusion, which generally lasts for several days (Hottola 2004, 456). Travelers experience a blend of euphoria and disillusionment, with the small numbers of travelers at the extreme ends of the reaction spectrum represented through the portrayal of actual physical culture shock and overload shock, a sensory overload situation in which there is simply too much stimulus in the local environment to take in at once. Travelers generally have two reactions when finding

themselves culturally confused: escape back to their host culture or seek out a meta world, a place where host and home cultures are mixed and some level of control can be exercised.

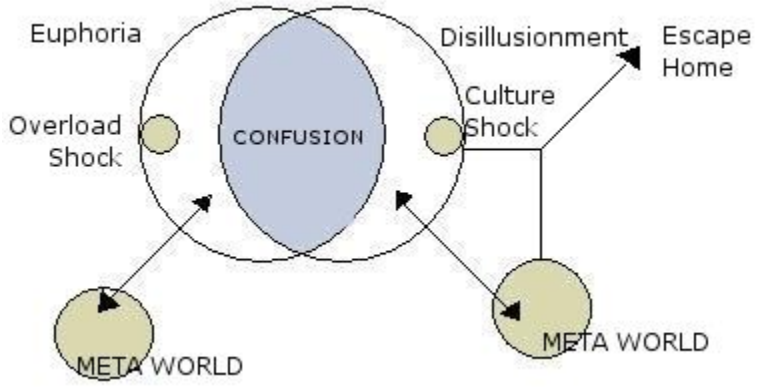

Figure 3 – Initial Cultural Confusion (Hottola 2004, 455)

Once travelers have adjusted to their new cultural environs enough not to regularly experience wild swings between euphoria and disillusionment, Hottola's model (Figure 4) explains that people struggle with feelings of adaptation or opposition. From this position, travelers can once again escape home, or exist in a meta world. New to this diagram, there is also the option of integration, in which people can settle into a culture without feeling the need to escape home or exist in a meta world.

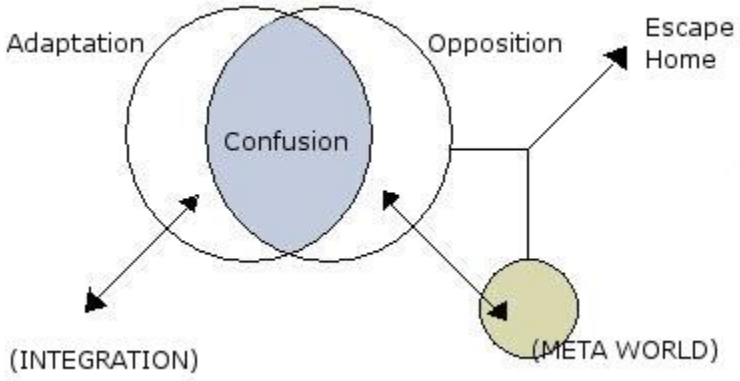

Figure 4 – Adaptation/Opposition (Hottola 2004, 455)

Hottola's conceptualization of cultural confusion has more explanatory power than traditional explanations of culture shock, particularly for travelers who are in a specific society for less than a year. Thus, in my thesis I use the term "cultural confusion" in the place of "culture shock."

The Liminoid

As it has increasingly gained favour among scholars, the acculturation (as opposed to assimilation) process is leading to the development of theories about the geographic and mental spaces travelers inhabit while in foreign cultures. Whether called "metaspaces" (Hottola 2005), "liminal states" (Selstad 2007), or "the liminoid" (Selänniemi 1996, 2001, 2003) as it will be referred to in my thesis, academics have theorized that travelers outside of the package tourist crowd experience states of suspension between host and home cultures; within these spaces, individuals reevaluate their own culture and integrate new information. Travelers can be suspended in the liminoid spatially, temporally, mentally, and sensually (Selänniemi 2003, 27). Wilson and Richards (2008, 193-4) also argue that the liminoid causes behavioural changes. In these situations, "suspension becomes a means of managing personal contradictions that emerge from shifting identities" (Wilson and Richards 2008, 194).

Selänniemi (2003, 27) explains the process of transition in the liminoid in four stages. First, there is the spatial transition from home to a vacation destination, the physical act of getting on a plane and arriving at a new location hours later. Second is a temporal transition where time and routine is left at home; the only deadline that becomes important is the time of a departing flight. The spatial and temporal transitions allow for a mental shift which is the third transition, in which normal boundaries are transgressed due to an absence of social and self-control. Fourth, senses are stimulated by the new environment and there is a high level of consciousness of sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and physical feeling.[7] Wilson and Richards (2008) would add a fifth category, a change in behaviour, while Selänniemi prefers to roll behaviour into the four changes already identified.

[7] While there is debate among neurologists as to exactly how many senses humans have, I use the traditional five Aristotelian senses (sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch) in this thesis for the sake of simplicity, recognizing that these particular five sense form a traditional view that is based in European philosophy. Other cultures count more or less, as do many neurologists (see, for example, Voustianiouk and Kaufman 2000).

The idea of the liminal was developed by anthropologist Victor Turner (1978), who studied ritual process. Turner suggested that ritual subjects go through three phases: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal. The preliminal "is the normal profane state of being; the liminal phase is sacred, anomalous, abnormal, and dangerous, and the postliminal is the normal state of things to which the ritual subject re-enters after the transition" (Selänniemi 2003, 24). The roots of the word "liminal" comes from *limen*, a Latin word which means "threshold." Thus, Turner's ritual liminal is a "state and a process in the transition phase during which the ritual subjects pass a cultural area or zone that has minimal attributes of the states preceeding or following the liminal." The idea of the liminal was picked up by tourism scholar Graburn (1989), to demonstrate how tourism can be viewed as a ritual with transitional phases. It is at this point that scholars began to develop the concept of the liminoid, as opposed to Turner's ritual liminal states. The main difference between the two is that the former is "produced and consumed by individuals [... and is] fragmentary" while the latter "is believed by the members of society to be of divine origin and is by its nature anonymous" (Selänniemi 2003, 24).

A concrete manifestation of the liminoid is a physical space in which travelers congregate such as a backpacker's hostel, or internet café – places that Wilson and Richards call "enclaves" (2008). In the case of this thesis, OMP House, T2T House, and Mutmee Guest House serve as physical enclaves which many volunteers inhabit during their time with the organizations. In enclaves, travelers have some sense of control over their situation and are surrounded by an increased level of Western comforts such as "normal" food and bedding, and the use of English. Westerhausen refers to enclaves as "a cultural home away from home" (2002, 69), while Lloyd describes them as "safe bubble[s]" (2003, 355).

Aside from a spatial dimension to the liminoid, visitors change temporally (i.e. change routines and rhythms). While I was working for OMP, for example, many of the volunteers would spend their work week eating Thai food and living as most of the village populations did, in sparse Thai houses. When they came into town on the weekends, they would order pizza and use their status as visitors to Thailand to take evening swims in the "foreigner's hotel." If they went out of town, they would frequently pull out a credit card and pay for Western-style

accommodations. Travelers fluctuate between the "cultural work" they do in the host culture and the cultural norms to which they are accustomed (Wilson and Richards 2008, 193).

The final dimension of the liminoid relates to behaviour. Wilson and Richards note in their study of backpacker enclaves that such places offer travelers a place to forge new identities balanced between "intimacy and anonymity" (2008, 194). When moving through the host culture, travelers often feel they are reduced to tourists. Particularly in Thailand, locals will often use the term *farang* ("foreigner/outsider") to describe anyone who does not look or speak Thai, regardless of how long they have lived in Thailand. The liminoid allow travelers to get some distance from this label and find intimacy with other travelers. Often, this bonding occurs through the establishment of a temporary shared culture that changes a person's normal behaviour patterns (ex. lounging around all day instead of rushing around) (Wilson and Richards 2008, 194).

Although a bonding process often occurs within the liminoid, cultural confusion generally never completely dissipates. Part of the reason for continued confusion is the mix of volunteer cultures. Numerous studies have shown that participants are challenged by intercultural interactions with their fellow volunteers from other countries (Wearing 2001; Raymond and Hall 2008). Despite the relatively short duration of many volunteer tourism placements, the intensity levels of the programs are very high with volunteers often working, eating, sleeping, and spending free time at the same locations (Brown 2005, 488-489; McGehee and Santos 2005, 764; Mustonen 2005, 165).

Thus, when relating this discussion to the idea of the liminoid, the temporary location that is seen as safe for volunteers is not always so. There is no stable, shared identity within the bubble. On the outside wall of the OMP house there is testament to this diversity of nationalities, as each volunteer is asked to paint the flag of her or his country. The wall is a rich tapestry of colours, with the flags of dozens of countries represented. Each person that represents a flag comes to the organization with her or his own set of cultural rules and habits. Not only are these guidelines based on nationality, but also on socio-economics, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, racialisation, and a wide variety of other types of identity categories.

Hence, while volunteers must deal with the cultural confusion of working in Thailand, they are additionally challenged in their interactions with colleagues from around the world.

One important detail to note is that unlike the enclaves associated with mass tourism (ex. Mexican resorts), the enclaves that are associated with independent travelers are much more permeable (Wilson and Richards 2008, 191). Locals are welcomed into these spaces and the physical distance between traveler and local host culture is significantly less than one would find at a mass tourism enclave. Consequently, local "brokers" emerge, who function as gateways to "authentic" local culture. In the OMP and T2T programs, the brokers are the local students and graduates employed by the organizations to help volunteers settle and function both in their placements and in the local culture.

Information Behaviour

The combination of hero's journey and liminoid concepts makes for a rich environment in which to study the information behaviour of volunteer tourists engaging in international development work. Donald Case defines information behaviour as "encompass[ing] information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviours (such as glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviours that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information" (2008, 5). It has been well established that there is also an affective aspect to information behaviour (Nahl and Bilal 2007). As mentioned above, with such rapid cycling through identities, emotions tend to range widely while traveling. Thus, it is particularly important in this study to devote attention to how these changing emotions affect information behaviour.

Within the small number of scholarly works undertaken on tourists and development volunteers, almost all focus solely on information seeking, not general information behaviour. No research has been undertaken into the information behaviour of volunteer tourists. Thus this particular study aimed to observe information behaviour more generally than most travel studies do, going beyond just information seeking. Coupled with rapidly changing social roles and inhabiting a state of cultural confusion, I hypothesized before doing fieldwork that it would

not be unreasonable to suspect that passive information gathering and information avoidance could play an important part of a voluntourist's experience.

Scholarly work undertaken by academics based in the information studies field related to any kind of travel is few and far between. Most recently, Fairer-Wessels conducted a qualitative study to determine the information needs and information seeking behaviour of professional black women in Pretoria, South Africa (2004). Based on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, she interviewed twenty women. The study is fairly simplistic, with information sources broken down no further than "formal" and "informal" (Fairer-Wessels 2004, 145). She found that the women interviewed tended to travel for escapism and preferred traditional information sources to the internet (147). The article concludes with a call for a larger, quantitative survey into information needs and behaviours of women across South Africa (Fairer-Wessels 2004, 147).

Aside from Fairer-Wessels' work, the other information studies article of particular significance to the current study is a 2008 exploration into the information needs of non-governmental organizations in northern Ghana by Nikoi. Although he interviewed individual workers, Nikoi writes about the information needs of NGOs in general, based on three categories of information needs: sociological, cognitive, and ecological (2008, 46-47). The study is concerned with the information behaviour of NGO workers in order to complete projects, and leaves out all mention of non-work related information behaviour.

Outside of the information studies field, there has been some interest in the topic of travelers' information seeking behaviours from academics in the tourism and leisure studies field. Much of this work, however, is written from a marketing perspective. Because of this focus, many studies tend to be concerned with package tourists and the information seeking behaviour that drives them to make a purchasing decision (Fodness and Murray 1999; Heung 2003; Bieger and Laesser 2004; Gursoy and McClearly 2004; Luo, Feng, and Cai 2004).

Lehto et al.'s 2006 study is typical of this perspective. Their work tracks what type of sources potential travelers use for information and correlates this with time spent online and destination knowledge. The authors found that information seeking changes with destination

knowledge; first-time travelers to a particular destination were more prone to look at more sources for a longer time period, while travelers who had some prior knowledge or experience of a destination had much shorter search times with a fewer number of sources (173). Lehto et al. then tie these study results to a discussion of marketing, including how to design travel websites to suit the different information seeking behaviours of potential clients (175).

As marketing is a significant focus in much of the information seeking literature, it makes sense that quantitative methods are preferred by scholars (Zins 2007). In order to sell a product, advertisers generally want results based on large numbers of people, not small sample groups. Consequently, many studies are based on one-off questionnaires, not qualitative or longitudinal studies (Zins 2007).

Everyday Life Information Seeking

As a 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. Thus, although focused on "the role of social and cultural factors that affect people's way of preferring and using information sources," widely-used information behaviour models like Savolainen's Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) was not deployed in this project because the situations that interviewees found themselves in were far from everyday life in their home cultures (Savolainen 2005, 143). ELIS is concerned with "non-work" activities that humans undertake such as taking care of family members or undertaking hobbies. These are routine type activities, which do not occur in the same context while traveling.

Every person interviewed expressed their beliefs about the vast cultural, geographical, physical, and mental divide between their everyday life back at home and their volunteering situation, including one that described his experience as: "it couldn't be more different than my life at home" (Kris). When asked how he felt about this difference, Kris echoed a point that came up repeatedly: "I love it! That's why I wanted to do this. I wouldn't want to go six months to another country to do the same thing I'm doing back home." Almost all of the

interviewees specifically expressed that one of the main motivating factors in undertaking placements and traveling was to get a change from their everyday lives back in their home countries. With this in mind, the deployment of ELIS theory makes little sense in the context of this work, as participants are situated in a liminoid that is definitely not everyday life and is thus is not easily explained using traditional LIS information behaviour models. Looking outside of LIS for a theory that accounted for rapidly shifting roles, social positioning theory became an attractive lens to apply to the experience of volunteer tourists.

Social Positioning Theory

SPT emerged from role theory, in order to provide the ability to analyze the complexities of multiple roles (Given 2005). This theory emerged from the work on heterosexual relationships and identity reinforcement conducted by Hollway (1982). The main developers of SPT are Davies and Harré (1990), and Harré and van Langenhove (1999).

As a postmodern theory, SPT is based on the assumption that "personal identity is relative, socially constructed, contextual, and highly individual" (Given 2005, 344). Within this theory, identities are reinforced by "relations of power, knowledge, ignorance, dominance, submission and so on" (McKenzie and Carey 2000, np). 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). Harré and van Langenhove outlined a number of modes of positioning:

1. **First and second order positioning** – First order positioning refers to the way in which people locate themselves and others through the use of categories and storylines (ex. a Thai person telling a volunteer that she is a tourist "farang" (outsider)). Second order positioning occurs when a person questions and negotiates their original positioning (ex. when the volunteer replies that she is a volunteer, not a tourist).
2. **Performative and accountive positioning** – Performative positioning refers to second order positioning, in the instances in which it occurs in a conversation with the actor who undertook first order positioning. When a third party is involved with second order

positioning, this renegotiation is classified as third order or accountive positioning (ex. the volunteer who has been labeled a tourist by a local Thai person goes back to OMP or T2T property and complains to a fellow volunteer about the label).

3. **Moral and personal positioning** – Individuals can be positioned in light of the moral hierarchy in which they exist. Positioning can usually be explained by referring to the roles people take up or are assigned within this hierarchy (ex. a volunteer racialized as white and viewed as a volunteer by local people will often be viewed as being rich economically and in terms of social capital).
4. **Self and other positioning** – The concurrent positioning that occurs on the part of individuals in a conversation, through the assigning, taking up, or challenging of social positions.
5. **Tacit and intentional positioning** – Generally, first order positioning occurs tacitly, where individuals will not position people intentionally or consciously. When a person lies or teases, however, first order positioning is counted as intentional. Second and third order positioning are always intentional (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, 20-23).

Aside from the above general types of positioning, Harré and van Langenhove go on to identify four types of intentional positioning:

1. **Deliberate self-positioning** – How an individual defines her personal identity.
2. **Forced self-positioning** – Similar to deliberate self positioning, only in this case the initiative to self-position rests with someone else (ex. At Mutmee Guesthouse in Nong Khai, people working on international development projects are given a 10% discount on food and lodgings. In this case, when asked "Are you a volunteer?" people are forced into defining themselves as either a volunteer or not in order to get the discount.)
3. **Deliberate positioning of others** – The deliberate positioning of others can occur whether the person being positioned is present or not. When the person is present, this positioning can take the form of a moral reproach. When the individual is absent, deliberate positioning is understood as gossip.

4. **Forced positioning of others** – Forced positioning occurs when a third party is made to position herself in relation to the person being positioned, whether that individual is present or not (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, 23-28).

The types of positioning outlined above have significant implications for an individual's information behaviour. In order to illustrate how one type of positioning works for volunteers and how this relates to information behaviour, I offer the following reflection on my first time in Thailand. When I was working for OMP, one of the most difficult positioning-related issues I had to face was being constantly called a *farang* (outsider) by local people (first order positioning). For the first few days in Thailand, I did not mind that children would walk passed me, shouting "*farang*!" or that adults would ask me to pose for a picture with them because of my pasty white skin. Gradually, however, being constantly reminded that I was an outsider became psychologically difficult, particularly when I had acculturated enough to be able to function relatively well in the marketplace, at the post office, or other spots around town. Although I was indeed an outsider, I was used to being known by my name, not a label. Yet among many local people I was only seen as representing a category, not important enough to even have a real name.

In order to challenge the identity that was being foisted on me (second order positioning), I took up several strategies related to information behaviour that depended on how culturally confused I was feeling on any particular day. On days where I could not take being marked only as an outsider, I would physically retreat to OMP house. There, I would ask for information or help from the other volunteers or rely heavily on the organization's staff (i.e. "local brokers"). On the days I felt like I was up for a challenge, I would go out and practice my Thai language skills by asking for directions, struggling through a Thai-language children's book at the library, or going to aerobics with dozens of local women in a nearby park. I would actively seek information from local people, who got to know me and started calling me by my given name, not simply "*farang*." Undertaking these activities allowed me to challenge the nameless outsider position I was being forced into, and re-affirm my own constructed identity as a person that is comprised of multiple identities, not simply my nationality or racialization.

The above example illustrates one small possibility of how a person may experience socially-positioned categories while volunteering abroad. Combining this experience with other rapidly shifting identities can make for significant cultural confusion, which has effects on information behaviour. It is these implications that this research seeks to explore.

The Use of Social Positioning Theory in Relevant Literature

Social positioning theory has been underutilized in LIS research, with only McKenzie and Given spending significant time exploring how SPT can be applied to topics in the LIS world. McKenzie applied SPT to a study of pregnant women (McKenzie and Carey 2000; McKenzie 2003a; McKenzie 2004), while Given used SPT to examine the information behaviour of mature students (Given 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2005) and Julien and Given deployed the theory to understand faculty-librarian relationships (2003).

Outside of the LIS field, SPT is largely used in the education and psychology fields. Despite its increasing popularity, this theory tends not to be utilized when dealing with intercultural research. Sukhjeet Rattan's 1998 doctoral dissertation, entitled: "Intercultural Spaces and Positioning: Narratives of Identity, Constraint, Ethnicity and Support," is one of the only works to mix culture and SPT (Rattan 1998). Rattan's study looked at the positioning of culturally-diverse young adults in Canada and implications for counseling.

Recently, Harré et al. surveyed the use of SPT by psychologists and determined that focus is shifting toward the use of prepositions, or the "positioning of positionings" (2009, 11). In these situations, people will "list and sometimes justify attributions of skills, character traits, biographical 'facts,' deemed relevant to whatever positioning is going forward" (Harré et al. 2009, 10).

Conclusion

Traveling from dozens of countries around the world and cultures that are familiar to themselves, volunteer tourists arrive in an environment that challenges them on a number of fronts. Suspended somewhere between home and host cultures, they enter the liminoid in which normal life as they know it at home does not exist. With no previous information

behaviour-focused studies examining this confusing cultural space to guide my research, it was necessary to go outside of LIS for a theory that could be deployed in this project. With its ability to explain rapidly shifting roles, social positioning theory is used as the main theoretical lens in this research. The next chapter turns to the research methods that guided this inquiry.

Chapter Three – Research Methods

Research Design

It has been well established among social scientists that multiple research methods are an ideal way in which to proceed with research activities, as they provide triangulation of data that enhances reliability (Creswell 2008). This research employs a mixed methods approach that includes multiple semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Fifteen volunteer tourists were interviewed to explore 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 effect 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.

Definitions

The following definitions are used throughout this study, and all are explored in more detail in the literature review chapter:

- **Cultural confusion**

  As an alternative to "culture shock," Hottola proposes the term "cultural confusion," which encompasses "the whole variety of emotions from mixed feelings during the intercultural experience to the occasional serious confusion and consequent depression called culture shock" (2004, 453). The term is used to discuss not only cultural adaptation problems, but also the "frequently-simultaneous presence of enjoyment, success, and learning" (Hottola 2004, 453).

- ***Farang (in Isaan dialect, "bak sida")***

  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*. *Farang* is also the Thai word for the guava fruit, as it was brought to Thailand by Portuguese traders in the 17th century. 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.

- **Information behaviour**

  LIS scholar Donald Case defines information behaviour as "encompass[ing] information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviors (such as glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviors that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information" (2008, 5). It has been well established that there is also an affective aspect to information behaviour (Nahl and Bilal 2007).

- **Liminoid**

  Academics have theorized that travelers outside of the package tourist crowd experience states of suspension between host and home cultures; within these spaces, individuals reevaluate their own culture and integrate new information. In these situations, "suspension becomes a means of managing personal contradictions that emerge from shifting identities" (Wilson and Richards 2008, 194). While others have termed this state "metaspaces" (Hottola 2005), and "liminal states" (Selstad 2007), I will refer to it as the "liminoid" (Selänniemi 1996, 2001). A further discussion of this concept can be found in chapter two.

- ***Mai pen rai***

  A Thai word with numerous definitions, the most common translated as "nevermind." Deployed in situations that require face-saving actions, m*ai pen rai* is a philosophy that is uniquely Thai. If someone is late, for example, instead of getting angry, one would be expected to remain calm and brush tardiness away with a happy-sounding "*mai pen rai!*" Participants had difficulties adjusting to this attitude, which is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

- **Social positioning**

  As a postmodern theory, social positioning theory is based on the assumption that "all conversations always involve some sort of positioning" (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, 29). An exploration of positioning looks at the socially-constructed nature of identity, exploring the notion of identity as a constant shifting and contextual dialogue with others. Within this theory, identities are reinforced by "relations of power, knowledge, ignorance, dominance, submission and so on" (McKenzie and Carey 2000, np). Positioning is defined as the rhetorical devices "by which oneself and other speakers are presented as standing in various kinds of relations" (Harré and van Langenhove 1995, 362).

- **Volunteer tourist ("voluntourist")**

  There are numerous definitions of what constitutes a "volunteer tourist," as discussed in the literature review. For the purpose of this study, I use the broader definition of volunteer tourism put forward by McGehee and Santos: those who "utilize discretionary time and income to go out of the regular sphere of activity to assist others in need" (2005, 760).

Participants

Participants in Nong Khai were recruited in person, or via OMP and T2T's volunteer coordinators who passed along my information/consent form letter (Appendix 2) to their volunteers. When first talking to potential participants, I explained in general terms the nature of the study and gave them a copy of the information/consent form letter. Once individuals agreed to participate, an interview time was scheduled. These interviews always began with the participant reading the consent form and signing it after I verbally went over the ethical guidelines and rights of participants.

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. Holding any kind of citizenship from Thailand (single or dual) excluded participants. Although participation from Thai nationals is fairly rare, there have been Thai volunteers undertaking placements with T2T and OMP in the past. As this study was designed to focus on cultural confusion, Thai nationals who can reasonably be assumed to be comfortable with their own culture were excluded from participation.

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 and this background gave her what she felt were unique perspectives on volunteering in Asia. All

people interviewed had worked for a minimum of four weeks at their various volunteer placements.

Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

Each of the volunteers who participated in the study took part in one interview. The interviews were all semi-structured in nature to allow for exploration of answers. The length of interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to two hours. Almost all of the interviews with participants were conducted over lunch or dinner bought by me, as the sharing of information is closely tied to the sharing of food in Isaan and is thus culturally appropriate and expected. The location of interviews varied, but all were conducted in a setting that respected participants' privacy.

When beginning this research, I believed that at a minimum, the time between the volunteers beginning with OMP and the interviews would be one month. Ideally I thought interviews would be held at the two month mark, in order to ensure participants are well past the "six-week rule" mark for cultural adaptation mentioned by an academic in a *Lonely Planet* guide to volunteering abroad (Hindle et al. 2007, 43). In reality, however, it became quickly apparent that for this group, four weeks was a significant marker and thus the length of time was lowered to accommodate both this realization and the work schedules of volunteers.

The interviews were designed to explore the socially constructed identities volunteers experience and the implications of this positioning on their information behaviour (Appendix 3). The interviews were all digitally recorded and took place in a quiet, private area. All interviews were transcribed and both these documents and the original audio are stored in a folder on my computer protected by encryption. Data were also encrypted and uploaded to three different secure servers, to ensure there was a backup in the event of a loss of local data.

In order to collect demographic and travel experience data, research participants were asked several questionnaire-type questions in the interview (Appendix 3). In order to assess technical skill, each participant went through a checklist of technical tasks and indicated whether they had completed the task or not (Appendix 4). I looked for basic information that

would serve to contextualize the open-ended questions that were the focus of the interviews. I asked targeted questions as well as provided explicit instructions. For example, the questions that asked participants to describe their travel histories included specific instructions that traveling through a nation "in transit" does not count, and that at least twenty-four hours must have been spent in the country. Aside from questions that brought out demographic data, questions were structured to elicit information about the identities of participants, general themes such as culture shock and information behaviour, as well as a comparison between participants in Thailand versus at home.

Data Collection: Participant Observation

Basing myself at OMP house on the first research trip to Thailand allowed me to observe and interact with OMP participants during orientation, and free time. Occasionally I also had opportunities to observe volunteers at their placements, as volunteers sometimes tag along with one another to experience different environments. While I had ample time to observe OMP volunteers, I had much less contact with T2T volunteers. For this group I relied on observations in social situations we were all in together.

One of the benefits of this method of data collection is that it can identify inconsistencies between what I am told and what I observe (McKechnie 2008). Additionally, reflecting on information behaviour was new to participants. While I did my best to ensure that interviews were designed to elicit information behaviour data, there was the potential for a lack of understanding as to what counts as information behaviour. Participants may have declined to mention some kinds of behaviours because they do not recognize them as ways in which they come into contact with information, or regard them as unimportant. Undertaking participant observation put me in a situation in which my attention could be drawn to behaviours that were not brought up by participants in interviews. The observation part of this study was specifically discussed with all participants before they signed the consent form. In order to ensure the data collected by observation were reliable, I based a number of questions in the interview around what I witnessed.

Although one of the frequently cited drawbacks of participant observation is difficulty accessing the communities being investigated, my demographic profile, previous experience with OMP, the fact that I lived and socialized with volunteers for periods of time, as well as worked on an OMP project while also doing research allowed me to easily access and develop trust with participants (McKechnie 2008). I anticipated being accepted as "one of the gang," and being viewed more as a fellow volunteer than a researcher, and this proved true. On Raymond Gold's continuum of researcher participation, I was an "observer-as-participant" (more participant than observer) (ct. McKechnie 2008, 598-599). This has both drawbacks and benefits, as mentioned in the literature review.

It is important that I was seen more as a participant than an outside researcher, as how I was viewed had implications for access, trust and data collection. McKechnie points to the commonly held belief that "the presence of an observer will change to at least some extent the context being studied that may threaten the trustworthiness of the data collected" (2008, 599). Part of encouraging the view that I was a fellow participant meant separating my volunteer activities and my research activities as much as possible. I conducted as much research work out of view of participants as possible, either alone in my room or on trips out of town.

Data Collection: Fieldnotes

Although fieldnotes are not a method in and of themselves, they play a significant role in any qualitative research (Brodsky 2008). After every fieldwork activity and personal reflection on process, method, problems, personal biases, etc. that occurred during the course of this research, I sat down and recorded detailed and organized notes (see form in Appendix 5). These fieldnotes took the form suggested by David Fetterman, who advises splitting them into two sections, one for observations and the other for speculative-personal reflections (1998). The observations section "should dissect the world, objectively describing it with rich adjectives rather than with abstract evaluative or summative phrases" (Brodsky 2008, 342). These notes were taken immediately after an event, as it has been noted that taking notes as quickly as possible after an interview and before speaking to anyone else about the experience is crucial to the collection of useful fieldnotes (Brodsky 2008).

Analysis

I transcribed the interviews using Express Scribe, and then coded them using NVivo. In order to minimize bias as much as possible due to the close relationships volunteer tourism researchers often have with participants, McIntosh and Zahra (2007, 546) suggest that it is necessary to allow key themes to emerge via the words of participants. Thus, following the Grounded Theory model of Glaser and Strauss (1967) in which theory is generated from the words of participants instead of being pre-formed and tested as a hypothesis, I began coding relying on themes that emerged from the volunteers themselves. From these themes, a codebook was developed.

Multiple rounds of coding were undertaken both during and after the creation of a codebook. I was, however, careful not to assume that coding always moves from identifying broad categories to specifics. Not being tied to a linear process allows new concepts to emerge that may have been originally missed or not considered (Benaquisto 2008). Instances of social positioning were coded by individual type (e.g. first, second).

While I used grounded theory in my initial coding rounds, I did return to a list of very general key themes (i.e. culture shock, homesickness) found in other volunteer tourism literature that I drew up over a year ago and put aside to forget about until after coding. The decision to look for established themes after doing grounded theory sweeps through the data was made in order to minimize any heightened bias or intellectual blind spots that may have seeped into the research because of the close relationships I had with participants, as well as the lack of research on this topic in the information studies literature. The list was used only after several runs through the data using a grounded approach. In the end, the list was useless as all the themes I originally picked out were already in my codebook.

Research Ethics

This research was approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana, and Campus Saint-Jean Research Ethics Board. The University's ethics guidelines and requirements were followed throughout this research, as OMP and T2T do not have their own research ethics

policy. OMP does, however, have a Code of Conduct for volunteers (Appendix 6), and this was followed by the researcher. As this research took place in Thailand, I signed a travel waiver and was advised by the Office of Risk Management at the University of Alberta.

Anonymity was adhered to throughout this research. Pseudonyms are used, although participants picked from an offered list of names to deal with the problem of culturally-specific naming. With volunteers from so many countries, it is important to avoid having participants select names that could give their identities away. For example, if there is only one volunteer from a Nordic country and she chooses a name that is uncommon outside of her home country, it would be fairly easy for people connected to the organizations involved to identify her. The names on the list are widely used around the world and thus help to ensure the anonymity of participants.

Study Limitations

Mixed methods were particularly important in the case of this research; as a past volunteer with OMP, someone who lived with research participants at OMP House for the first half of data collection as an invited special-projects volunteer for two months at the same time the first part of this research was conducted, and as someone who frequently socialized with OMP and T2T's volunteers, my level of involvement with the organization and its volunteers was high. This high level of involvement is not uncommon among researchers exploring the world of voluntourism, as these researchers often live and/or work with participants. Even for those researchers who do not work or live with participants, separating themselves from participants is difficult. Many volunteer tourism studies take place in small towns or villages that have particular geographic locations where foreigners tend to congregate (i.e., Nong Khai's famous "Chicken Corner;" a block or two of restaurants, bars, and guesthouses dedicated to foreign travelers; or particular markets and food stalls). It was inevitable that my paths and those of the participants crossed, particularly as the study took place over several months.

There is some disagreement between scholars on how close contact like this affects research. Gray and Campbell (2007, 468) suggest that daily interactions provided extra context and aided in developing their conclusions, while Zahra and McIntosh argued that close contact

was vital in establishing trust (2007, 116). On the other hand, Mustonen (2005), and McIntosh and Zahra (2007) are concerned that close quarters with participants heightens the potential for inappropriate researcher bias. Ultimately, I believe that my insider status as someone with a history of involvement in volunteer tourism allowed me to gain a level of rapport that only comes with shared experience.

Aside from close contact between researcher and participants in this study potentially limiting the conclusions of this study, the selection of volunteers was highly limited. I had very little choice about who to interview, so this research should be regarded as a snapshot of volunteers at two organizations over four months. It cannot be guaranteed that the volunteers during this four month span are typical of the type the organizations normally attract. However, it should be noted that this particular group did seem very similar to the group of volunteer tourists that I lived and worked with during my first experience with OMP in 2005-2006.

Finally, the findings of this study contribute to a highly understudied aspect of information behavior research. Not having additional coders or a pool of other research to compare with complicates evaluating the findings of this study for credibility. Having a greater saturation of themes across more organizations would have helped to remedy the problem, but this sample size was appropriate for a masters' level thesis.

Conclusion

Semi-structured interviews and participant observations formed the basis for this qualitative study exploring the information world of fifteen volunteer tourists in Thailand. NVivo was used to code data, a process first informed by grounded theory and then analyzed using a list of pre-selected themes because of the nature of the researcher's close relationships to participants, as well as the lack of previous inquiry into this area from an information behaviour perspective. The resulting analysis is found in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 – Results and Discussion

From pre-trip excitement to actually living in Thailand, this chapter examines how and why information behaviour changes at different phases of the volunteer tourist experience. After introducing the research participants, this section focuses on establishing what counts as routine information behaviour at home, then examines the reasons why certain aspects of this routine cannot and/or do not continue while volunteer tourists are engaged in their travels and are in a liminoidal state. Finally, information behaviour in Thailand is explored, broken down into a description of reported activities, the importance of previous travel experience, a continuum of attitudes, and the effects of social positioning.

Research Participants

Khadija is 21 and from Sweden. She spent years at a boarding school in France, and has significant travel experience. Next year she will study undergraduate Arabic and Political Sciences at a university in England.

Fed up with a "capitalist corporate environment," Aya came to Thailand wanting to do something worthwhile with her life. She's in her 40s and from France.

Jasmine is 52 and has Swiss citizenship. Originally born in Africa, she was raised in Lebanon. She has an undergraduate degree in anthropology, although she is now retired and does art.

Maria was born in Marseille, France, but moved around the country every three years due to her father's job. She took post-graduate tourism courses and worked as an au-pair in the USA. She lived in Mali for a year and has traveled widely due to her career in tourism. She is in her late 30s.

Both Matilda, 22, and her friend Ginny, 23, are from Germany. Friends at home, they decided to take a break from home life to figure out their future life plans. Both have travel experience in Europe, but not on other continents.

Parvati is from Brazil, although she has traveled widely and is currently finishing up a Masters degree in Anthropology from the London School of Economics. She is 27.

Sarah is from Finland and volunteers to fulfill a practicum requirement for her tourism program back home. She is 19 and has limited international travel experience.

Alex, 32, makes his home in Texas, USA, where he teaches mathematics at a college. He volunteers a lot in the USA, but has limited international experience.

Cooper is 25 and from Australia. Originally wanting to be a lifeguard, he now does voice-overs for Australian commercials. He has significant travel experience in South-East Asia.

Hailing from the Netherlands, at the age of 19 Eion was one of the youngest participants in this study. Put on half-pay and told to take the rest of the year off by an advertising agency reeling from a poor economy, he found his way to Thailand. Although he traveled around Europe to ski, he has no experience traveling on other continents.

Noah, 19, finished off his exams in the Netherlands and decided to take some time to volunteer abroad while he thinks about his future academic path. Following in his parents' footsteps, he is undertaking a modern "grand tour."

A former pediatric nurse and freshly minted Doctor of Chiropractic, Omar is from Canada and in his mid-30s. As part of his chiropractic training, he went to Madagascar and provided treatment to locals. He loves to travel and volunteer, and does both frequently. The word "can't" does not exist in his vocabulary.

Kris is from Austria and in his late 30s. Like many volunteers, his volunteering stint is part of a larger trip through South-East Asia. He has significant travel experience, as his job in engineering has taken him around the world.

Pre-Trip IB

It comes as little surprise that the pre-departure information behaviours of the participants described above are in line with numerous everyday-life information seeking

behaviour studies that show personal communication and internet as favourite sources for people seeking information (McKenzie 2003b; Savolainen and Kari 2004). Participants all mentioned that they did some kind of conscious information seeking before leaving home. When asked how much information played a role in getting ready to leave, Khadija responded: "A lot! I mean, before you go somewhere, you have to research and find information about the place. When I travel, I just don't hop on a plane and see where I end up." Participants emphasized the internet, and to a lesser extent, personal communication as primary sources of information. Running a very distant third, books were sought out.

The Internet

In all cases, participants found, contacted, and arranged a placement via the internet. The internet was seen as being particularly vital to volunteer tourists, as it allows instant contact between small organizations and potential volunteers.

> *I would definitely say that without easy access, I could probably imagine that I could never have been able to put together a trip like this 20 years ago. I can't imagine where I would have gotten information to get connected to these organizations. I honestly couldn't guess where. I mean, the card catalogue at the library? Possibly, I don't know. I know how to use it to find where Hemmingway is in the library, but I don't know how I would have gone about putting something like this together without the internet. So that's been the main source of my information in getting here. (Alex)*

> *The ability to [do online] research about the area I'm going to here in Nong Khai, research Openmind Projects, what kind of organization it is, had a lot to do with why I decided to come here. (Khadija)*

Fourteen of fifteen participants used Google to search for information online, while one preferred Yahoo!. They searched general keywords like "volunteer Thailand" or simply "volunteer" to find the organizations they would eventually volunteer with. One participant

mentioned looking on lists of volunteer organizations posted on the websites of universities and professional associations.

Aside from using the internet to organize a placement, some participants also used it to search for cultural and linguistic information before leaving home. This type of search, however, posed problems for most volunteers and will be explored in detail further below.

Personal Communication

Several volunteer tourists also mentioned family, friends, and online communication with previous volunteers as being useful sources of information in the pre-departure phase.

> *When I volunteered with OMP, it was the same time as the putsch [coup]. And Prime Minister Thaksin had to go and I saw the news activity about that, it was just before leaving. Like, a few days before leaving, so I thought, 'is it really serious?' But I trusted Openmind Projects, I don't know why, immediately. And I thought, if it's really important, they will tell the volunteers 'okay, it's a problem, too dangerous.' And I called them, because I wanted to know if it was okay, for sure. So I called them and I talked to Sven [co-founder] and he said, 'no, it's okay, you can come.' So, no, they gave me all the information. And I was lucky, because I was in contact with a volunteer who went to the national park just a year before me. And she gave me a lot of information. We didn't meet each other, just by e-mail she sent me a lot of information, documents, on what she has done and what should be done. So when I arrived there, I knew lots about the park already. I knew that I wanted to go there and I was sure. (Maria)*

> *I knew about it [the Isaan area] before, because I had spoken to one of our friends who has lived here for twenty years. He's based in Bangkok, but he's got business all around Thailand. And we were talking about it, and he was like, 'it's very different foods and traditions' – stuff like that. So I had an idea about it that was confirmed when I came here. (Khadija)*

Other volunteers, particularly those who had not had significant solo travel experience mentioned going to well-traveled family members for advice. Participants mentioned that

those people who had been to Thailand before emphasized very basic cultural information such as explaining the *wei* (Thai version of a handshake) and other polite actions.

Books

Only one participant mentioned visiting the library, while two mentioned purchasing books on Thai and Lao culture and demographics. Twelve of fifteen participants said they brought *Lonely Planet* or their national equivalent of travel guides with them, but only three people said they actually used them. This difference between the number of books bought versus actually used will be explored later on in the section about information behaviour during travel. The ambivalence toward books before leaving, however, is due to the widespread feeling that books were inadequate preparation:

> *Customs-wise, I did read up a little bit but it doesn't really prepare you… it's kind of like trying to brush up on Thai language on the plane coming over. I might as well take that book and throw it out the window. (Alex)*

> *They [the volunteer organization] did give me a book [before I left home], like basic things to say in Thai and information about Thai – like don't touch kids on their head, don't put your foot to the Buddha which is not applicable at all in Thai, don't step over people. But in my rural village, all of those happened all the time. (Pavarti)*

> *Before I arrived, I had a Thai culture guide that basically repeated everything I was told by my friends. And a Thai language book, but that didn't help out because krup…krop… [demonstrating male and female designations in Thai] it doesn't work for me, I can't make myself understandable towards Thai people if I use it. (Eion)*

With cultural information so dynamic and region-specific, books with "frozen" cultural and linguistic information were deemed by participants to be of little use for all but the most basic facts about Thai culture.

Moving into the Liminoid

While pre-departure information behaviour is consistent with numerous other studies on everyday life information seeking, this behaviour begins to change once plane wheels hit the runway in Bangkok. Walking out of the airport, volunteer tourists are not simply entering the nation of Thailand, but taking their first steps into the liminoid, a place of suspension of regular life. Discussed previously in the literature review, this is a space where home cultural ideas give way to a highly fluid state in terms of space, time, identity, senses, and behaviour, so as to allow individuals to manage shifting and conflicting identities that occur during travel. The following quote illustrate the jarring nature of moving into the liminoid:

> *I have some friends living in Bangkok, and I stayed there for the first four days and felt like I was in a whole different world. And I was just shocked by everything. I would walk down outside the elevator from his condominium, walk onto the street. And on your left you'd have the most amazing shopping center in Thailand, we don't even have those in Holland. And right next to it, there's a lady sitting on a 10 lane highway eating noodles, while a lady there without a mouth protector is making the noodles while the taxis rage by all day. It's way different than life at home. But it's a good experience, all this new stuff. Just really, really different.*

New challenges and options allow voluntourists to expand or develop life strategies or identities; there is more room for experimentation away from the rigors of home cultural rules.

> *Now I'm here in Thailand, I've been doing things for myself and doing things on my own and doing things I would never have done in Australia. And I feel so much better for it. So much better for it. (Cooper)*

Here it is important to note that while the liminoid is an area of experimentation, it is not a completely lawless space. Each person in the liminoid carries in their own cultural residue – the ideas and practices of their home cultures. Socialization into one's own culture over 20, 30, or 40 plus years cannot be erased by a stay of several months in another country. Nevertheless, the liminoid does allow personal and social ideas to be challenged.

It should also be stated that while this thesis discusses "Thai culture" and "home culture," there are many sub-cultures within one particular culture. Although I often refer to

national cultures, it should be noted that there are numerous and rich sub-cultures with their own rules and practices. When I write about "Thai locals," it is with the recognition that this is not a homogenous group of people. All groups contain people with their own characteristics, beliefs, and motivations.

Barriers to Regular Information Behaviour

Finding themselves in a strange culture and in a transitory liminoidal state, participants initially attempt to utilize the information behaviours they are familiar with at home: internet searching and personal communication. In Thailand, however, there are several barriers to these routines.

Language

Overwhelmingly the barrier cited most by participants was language. Fourteen of fifteen participants mentioned the language as being an issue to their regular information behaviour.[8]

> *First of all, we have the language barrier. It takes a long time to get that information – 'what time do I have to be there?' It doesn't take just one question. You have to use body language. If the person doesn't understand you, find different words that they could understand. (Khadija)*

> *Well, I think the language barrier is a barrier to the word-of-mouth [sharing of information]. Being able to just go up to locals and have a conversation about things that are around, things they think I should do, or places I should go, or easier ways to travel… so I think that's the biggest barrier, just not being able to speak the language. Back home a lot of the things I do are because someone said it was… a friend went and did it and experienced it and told me about it, so I wanted to do it. And here, I'm kind of missing that with the locals because I haven't mastered the language. (Alex)*

[8] The one participant that did not cite language as a barrier was fluent in Lao. The Lao and Thai languages are very similar, and both are understood along the Thai-Lao border area. Thus, this particular participant was able to understand and communicate with Thai people, despite speaking very little Thai.

Cultural Differences

Aside from the language barrier, cultural differences posed an issue for participants. In their home countries, many of the participants are used to direct questions and answers. In Thailand, this is not always the way communication works.

> *I think a barrier is definitely how Thai people and, I wouldn't say Swedish people, maybe Western people, you could do that generalization… how they communicate. Because back home, if I asked a question, I would get an answer. Here, it's not that easy. If you say you want to do this, and you can't do that, they won't tell you that you can't do that. They'll just dance around it until you eventually understand that it's not going to happen. So it's definitely a cultural barrier that kind of prevents you from getting your information. (Khadija)*

> *Thai people tend to not want to say bad things about your country or your culture, but if you ask them about the downside of Nong Khai – for example if you go to the wrong side of the tracks, there's a lot of drug use over there – they will tend not to tell you about it unless maybe you're a friend of them. As in Holland, if you ask 'Hey, isn't that the wrong side of the tracks?' they would say 'Yeah, that's where the drug dealers and the pimps live, I wouldn't go there by yourself at night.' (Eion)*

In addition to different communication patterns, every single research participant mentioned the frustration of dealing with the Thai "*mai pen rai*" attitude. *Mai pen rai* translates to "nevermind," "don't worry," "no problem," or "forget about it." The term is deployed as a situation-defusing, face-saving measure in a culture that places a very high value on face and the maintenance of group harmony. To get upset that someone is late, for example, would be a loss of face both to oneself and the person who was delayed. Thus, despite a contact being an hour late for a meeting, research participants would be expected to wave the tardiness off with a happy, smiling, "*mai pen rai!*" Participants found this attitude particularly difficult to deal with, as explained by Khadija:

But definitely, how when you're teaching at the hospital and they would mess up the schedule, and they wouldn't call and tell me that it was cancelled. And you would go there. .. And it's very different, because they just look at you like it's not a problem. And then you have to adjust. And that's definitely a shock, because that would never happen back home. People would be… like, it just wouldn't work. You have to be organized, and if you say a date, you say a date. Things like that. And also with conflicts… and you have to kind of scale back and just step back, and just go 'No, never mind.' You can't take this conflict now, while at home I would definitely be more forward in that sense, showing dissatisfaction or something like that. (Khadija)

The concept that small problems like a scheduling mistake or a task not completed do not matter proved difficult for participants to adjust to. Almost all participants mentioned plans rapidly changing at their placements, which caused them to be confused about what was happening. Asking questions frequently did not gain them any information because of the *mai pen rai* philosophy:

It could be just something basic, about when are we finishing, when is our next class and stuff like that. And you just can't get an answer, so then you just have to sit down and wait, and maybe it will come up later. Or you'll find out when all the kids are running in the class, and you're sitting there, - 'oh, okay, now it must be….' Here if you can't get the answer from the person at your placement, for example, then you just have to just sit back and accept the fact that you might not find this out at the moment. (Khadija)

Participants frequently were not able to get information about plans for the day upon their first request. As Khadija says, they often just had to take a deep breath and relax, learning to be okay without the information they wanted. In other words, they needed to display *jai yen* (cool heart), which is signified by calm and restraint.

Aside from the difficulty and frustration associated with engaging with *mai pen rai* attitudes, differing ideas of privacy also proved to be a barrier to normal channels of information behaviour. Because Thailand is a collective type of society, as opposed to more individual-based North American and European cultures, there is an emphasis on group

cohesiveness. Thus, in Thai culture, if someone wants to be alone or do something alone, it is not considered *sanook* (fun) or even socially acceptable. In the Thai language, there is no real word for privacy (Welty 1996, 164). In Western society, privacy is often conceived of as being external and physical, whereas in Thailand privacy tends to be internal and mental (Welty 1996, 165).

Sleeping in shared rooms, dining as a group, working with colleagues, and going out with other volunteers left participants with very little time to themselves. Being surrounded by other people constantly sets up a situation that encourages face-to-face communication. However, when participants are almost always encouraged to talk to other people, language difficulties between English-speakers and Thai-speakers are inflamed. It is very difficult for people who do not speak the same language to transfer all but the most basic of information.

The emphasis on the group also calls into question private and/or potentially embarrassing information needs. Participants did not comment on what actions they undertook when they needed this type of information, but one might reason that a lack of privacy and an emphasis on group activities might be detrimental to these types of information requests. This is an area that requires more study.

Technology

Issues with using technology in Thailand played a significant role in inhibiting the information behaviours of participants, despite their decent computer skills. Although most volunteer tourists were not programmers, their scores on the technical skills checklist given to them in the interviews proved they were competent computer users (Appendix 4). All were experienced at surfing the Internet and using search engines. Most had done some graphic design and web design. The decrease in reliance on the internet participants reported can be attributed to several factors:

- *Language*

  Just as language was reported to be a barrier to normal information behaviour offline, online language is also a significant obstacle. It is not a large intellectual leap to

believe that information generated in a particular country will largely be created in the language of that country. When one cannot read this language, finding information online becomes difficult. If there is an online explanation of a particular Isaan ceremony practiced only in a small area, for example, it may well be in Thai only. While there are online dictionaries and translation programs, they are difficult to use in searches and are primarily for translating documents that one has already found.

- *Information Illiteracy*

Just as participants find themselves to be largely illiterate in Thailand generally, information illiteracy plays a role in travel abroad. Information literacy is "the ability to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association 1989). While participants were all comfortable using search engines and could access the same websites both in Thailand and in their home countries, fresh types of information demands forced them to seek out new and more challenging areas of the internet which they have little experience working with at home. For example, new online communities with different participation guidelines based on Thai culture, or websites that were largely written in Thai posed problems for participants. The daily internet routines of checking certain websites suddenly was no longer enough to meet participants' information needs, and when they tried to find new information sources they had difficulty identifying, evaluating, and using them. While not seen at a severe level in this study, the phenomenon of information literacy levels temporarily dropping while abroad and the consequences of this change are an important area for future research.

- *Opinion*

Part of the issue with temporary decreases in levels of volunteer tourists' information literacy was that often participants were looking for information that was much more opinion than fact, a change from their lives at home. They often asked

questions about experiences such as, “How was going up the elephant tower in Ban Na?” or “What’s the best way to teach verbs?,” for example. The overwhelming number of opinions available made it difficult for participants to judge whether the information offered was in line with their travel values, especially when it was difficult and/or time consuming to assess the background of the person offering the opinion.

> *Yes, I read a blog about Laos four years ago, and it was terrible because you had the advice of everybody but they were completely contradictory and so on. You get confused, so I said ‘okay, stop it, you go and you see for yourself, and then you will ask people who really know the place.’ I think it’s the best way, people with experience. (Aya)*
>
> *And if there’s an issue with me about getting information, like you said, it’s about getting all the different stories and everything. Different stories from experienced people. I don’t know what to choose. (Noah)*

While participants might be skilled at handling opinions at home, seeing and listening to an overwhelming number of them in Thailand seemed to put participants back on their heels in terms of ability to evaluate the ones they should trust.

- *Dynamic Nature of Information Sought*

Even if a participant could find an online source for the information they sought, often the type of information sought was too dynamic and heterogeneous to be accurately captured online. To illustrate this point, consider being in a situation where information is needed on the bacii ceremony, which is used to celebrate a special occasion like a birth, a marriage, or a welcome to a newly arrived person. It is also used to send off males entering the Buddhist temples during the rainy season, or anybody departing the community for an extended period of time. Depending on who is at the ceremony and where it is performed, there is a varying level of ritual. The centerpiece of the ceremony, regardless of other differences, is that each person in the community ties a small white cotton string that has been blessed around the wrist of the person

being honoured. This string symbolizes the bonds between individuals and is thought to bring the person protection and good luck.

One participant reported looking for information on the bacii ceremony through Google. First, she had problems spelling "bacii," as it is not an English word. Her first attempt in Google was fruitless. After asking other volunteers who did not know and Thai staff who just brushed her information request off, she returned to the internet. She still had no success. I had several detailed Thai culture books with me, and happened across the correct spelling of the ceremony one day. After I relayed the correct spelling, the participant was able to go online and look up further information, but became frustrated when the ceremonies she had taken part in and witnessed did not match the ones being described online. The websites she looked at were specific to a particular location and written by people of varying levels of tradition. For example, certain people believe that it is fine to cut the strings off one's wrist after three days, while others believe that the strings must be left to fall off on their own. Culture is living and changing, and websites have not yet evolved to be able to adequately capture this shifting type of information.

- *Problems of Access, Reliability, and Speed*

Interviewees were all used to having internet access at home. In Thailand, however, the volunteer tourists posted in tiny villages or jungle outposts reported difficulty in obtaining internet access. If they could find a computer connected to the internet, the link was not always reliable or fast.

> *It was maybe difficult for me in the National Park because there was no internet and there was a close town that had it – like 15 minutes by car – but we couldn't go all the time, just sometimes during the weekend and sometimes not. When you really do need that information about wildlife, for example, because I was working on that, and you have a book only in Thai on the national park, that's*

> *very tough. I think that was, for me, maybe the most difficult. I realized, without internet, oh my god. How can I do it? (Maria)*

Even in Nong Khai, outside of the volunteer houses internet connections could not be relied upon:

> *The internet connection… there's fucking nothing and it drops out with the drop of a hat. The internet connection sucks in Thailand! (Cooper)*

As people used to reliable, cheap, and widespread internet access, to suddenly be in a situation where the link to the virtual is often tenuous posed a significant frustration for volunteer tourists, and a barrier to their normal patterns of information behaviour.

Information Behaviour on the Road

Combine the barriers to information and the liminoid state of flux where normal personal and social boundaries are transgressed or are in transition, it is not surprising that changes to information behaviours emerged among participants.

First, there was a much higher awareness of purposely seeking out information. Participants no longer had a massive and often invisible warehouse of cultural knowledge to draw on while moving about the world. Suddenly, they found themselves child-like, unable to speak the language or have the background knowledge to comprehend what was going on around them. They were much more aware of their lack of knowledge, and thus often identified the need to take steps to rectify this situation. This behaviour is similar to the findings of many other IB studies that demonstrate people will seek out information when they feel a lack of knowledge in a particular area (Harris and Dewdney 1994), or in Belkin's terms, an "anomalous state of knowledge" causes people to address their information need (Belkin 1977, 22).

Personal Communication

There was still a high level of reliance on face-to-face communication for information, although participants tended to rely more on strangers to stand in the places that would

normally be occupied by friends and family back home. More often than not, these strangers would be fellow travelers. Here it is important to note that communication and information difficulties can also occur between participants and other travelers because of the wide range of cultures each represents. While this "global-village" issue did not emerge much in this particular study, the first time I did an OMP placement I did witness cultural clashes between volunteers and believe it to be a fairly common issue among travelers.

While participants often formed quick bonds with each other despite their different cultures, local Thai people tended to be passed over as information resources because of the significant language barrier. This is despite participants' feeling that Thai people were much more approachable for information than strangers at home. Even when parties had the capabilities to understand each other, the surprise of a *farang* speaking Thai often derailed communication attempts:

> *They [Thai locals] expect me to try and speak English because I'm farang and… so when I speak Thai, sometimes they think it's a word in English that they just don't understand. (Eion)*

> *If at first you talk to them [Thai locals] in Thai and then you go over to English, they don't understand you at all. So you need to be in one language to speak to them. So I pick either Thai or English, but not a combination because then they get so confused and they don't know what you're talking about. So you really have to choose between Thai or English. (Sarah)*

Other volunteers tried to slide around the language barrier and try to connect with locals at a basic human level:

> *And with Thai people, I always try to talk because I, I mean, what's the whole point of coming all the way here if you're not going to get to? But it's not verbal. It's definitely not verbal. And that's what I find very beautiful about it, to realize that when you actually eliminate the verbal, we're very similar. It's beautiful. It's very humbling. (Pavarti)*

When the local people volunteers came into contact could speak enough English and the volunteers enough Thai to communicate verbally, participants often worried about different standards and rules of communication in Thai culture.

> *I would have a more polite attitude with Thai people than with my colleagues, because it's in our culture, we don't ask things the same way. And you speak more slowly, using your hands – you know, is it left or right… In a soft voice, not shouting, and we smile. A nice greeting instead of… argh! [joking around about impolite exchanges with other volunteers] (Aya)*

> *I'll ask the principal for information I can't ask other Thai people for. He works with foreigners a lot, so he knows I don't mean to be impolite or rude with certain questions. (Matilda)*

The last quote brings up the importance of local brokers, local Thai people who speak English and act as intermediaries between volunteer tourists and the host society. In most cases for the participants, OMP or T2T staff would fill this role. While not looked to as much as other travelers, local brokers were the source of choice when it came to information needs concerning participants' placements.

Internet

Internet searches and communication took a drastic dip in participants' lives while they were traveling. As mentioned previously in the technology section, there are a variety of factors that cause this, including: language barriers, information illiteracy, the type of information found (i.e. opinions), the dynamic nature of certain practices, and the speed and reliability of internet connections in Thailand.

Embodiment

One of the marked differences between home information behaviour and abroad was a reliance on embodied information. Before exploring how this played out in this particular

study, it is useful to look at how embodiment is discussed by tourism and information behaviour scholars.

Transgressing the Sensible Body

Unpacking the idea of the liminoid, tourism scholar Tom Selänniemi explores the narrow focus that many travel researchers put on sight. He argues that much of the theorizing about the liminoid is based on sight and this is to the detriment of an understanding of how other senses affect tourists. Selänniemi suggests that the ocular-centric nature of tourism studies is based on Western obsession with Aristotelian hierarchy of sense, where sight ranks number one and taste and touch are considered animal senses (2003). He argues that an analysis of senses other than sight is necessary to expand our understanding of the liminoid.

Although Selänniemi's work focuses on tourists who go to sunny Southern package vacation resorts, his critique of the absence of embodiment is useful to studies of other types of travelers, including volunteer tourists. Selänniemi writes, "The human body as a sensory and sensual being presupposes always (already) its counterpart, the sensible body, that is, a body subsumed to a cultural order – both symbolic and practical – defining its boundaries and its position in the larger whole (community or society) (Falk 1994, 2). Maybe the transition from home to south in sunlust tourism could be understood also as a transgression of the boundaries of the sensible body" (Selänniemi 2003, 21). This transgression also happens to volunteer tourists, who find themselves in environments that provide their bodies with very different information than makes sense to the sensible body.

Traveling abroad leads to a greatly heightened conscious collection of sensual information (Curtis and Pajaczkowska 1994, 206-7). This causes particular smells, physical responses, and noises that are different from their home cultures to stand out to tourists. 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 resides. 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.

LIS Background

Paralleling the narrow focus on sight as the main sense to study amongst tourism scholars is disregard of most behaviours other than active information seeking, including embodiment of information, by LIS researchers. Talja (1997) and Julien (1999) have both critiqued the high level of attention given by scholars to active information need, to the detriment of more passive information behaviours. As Wilson points out, information behaviour research emerged from library and information system evaluation (2000), which Julien (1999) suggests explains why so much of the work done by information behaviour scholars is "system-centered." Because of the focus on users of systems, information behaviour was assumed to be active and as a consequence, behaviours such as embodiment were generally ignored.

To break from a system-centered paradigm, Talja advocates for a change from "uncertain people who need help" to "knowing subjects, as cultural experts" (1997, 77). In this research, however, volunteer tourists in a liminoidal state are not experts on Thai culture. Nor do they fit into the more negative category of people who are simply struggling to find information. Most participants in this study were simply sitting back and letting their travel experience unfold as it may, despite being in a culture they were not familiar with.

Embodied Information

As mentioned above, a significant information behaviour that emerged for participants was a reliance on embodied information, "the corporeal expression or manifestation of information previously in encoded form" (Bates 2006, 1036). Several volunteer tourists in this study mentioned the importance of information expressed by the body:

> *[The language barrier] makes you pay attention to more fundamental things. Sometimes I think talking you get lost… I'm a dancer. I mean, I dance and I do yoga, so I*

pay a lot of attention to body. So I think that also gives a lot of understanding to what's going on. (Pavarti)

The reading that I did on the internet, culturally, was only about 1% of what I've learned since I've been here, since I've experienced it. I think with any learning that goes on, when you see it, smell it, hear it, touch it, that's when you've actually learned it. (Alex)

I guess I rely a lot on visual information – what it looks like, what it smells like, whether there's lots of people there. (Pavarti)

One of the most obvious examples of what contributes to the reliance on embodied information for volunteer tourists is no doubt the importance and prevalence of food everywhere in Thailand. Eating is almost a religion in the country; "*gin khao?*,*"* the Thai equivalent of a Canadian "how are you?," literally translates to "have you eaten rice yet?" It is rare to see a street devoid of a vendor selling some kind of edible snack, so in public it is common to have the senses assailed by colourful and pungent foods.

Before going further with this example, however, it is important to note that what makes the sensible body make sense to its inhabitant is culturally-based: "Even though we normally think that sense perception is more a physical than a cultural phenomenon, the way we interpret and classify our perceptions is culturally patterned (Selänniemi 2003, 22)." Thus, when their noses lead them to a stall selling a soup made with animal intestines and organs, the olfactory response of participants that may have initially led them over is still rooted in their home cultures. Because animal intestines and organs are not particularly socially acceptable to eat regularly in most of the countries participants hailed from, they would be more likely to find something else to eat.

Whether they believe a dish to be tasty or not, they are relying on smell, taste, and touch to gather enough information to establish whether or not they should eat it. This information then passes through cultural filters and a decision whether to sample or not is made. While this is the same process used in their home countries, the heightened senses

during travel discussed by Selänniemi above come into play and have more of an impact on information behaviour than at home.

Information Authority

When asked how they judged whether information they interacted with was correct or not, participants had several responses. They largely looked to "gut feelings" and authority, which is similar to the criteria for authority at home (Wilson 1983). More prominent than at home, however, was a focus on assessing the background of someone giving the information:

> *In the end, I rely much more on what other travelers that somehow fit my personality have said. If I encounter tourists versus travelers, I'll go with what travelers would say… (Pavarti)*

Because they heard so many opinions expressed by other tourists and travelers, participants tried to assess how closely the person giving the opinion fit their own travel philosophy. Was the person giving them information, for example, someone interested in interacting with locals or just having a good time in the company of other tourists? Did the person seem like all he wanted to do was go drink and party on a beach the whole vacation, or did she express an interest in going to museums?

Unlike in their home countries, participants also reported trusting people who spoke English, simply because they spoke English. This happened even in the cases of volunteer tourists whose first language was not English. A participant explains this:

> *I went to the doctor here. And I got there, and I had a bladder infection that was bleeding. And I had, with me, amoxicillin and then I thought, 'Okay, I can take amoxicillin or I can go to this doctor.' And I told someone - I don't know who it was, - and they said 'Just take amoxicillin! You're going to go to a Thai doctor?!?' And I thought, 'Yeah, I'm gonna go to the Thai doctor.' So I went there. And he was this very young boy, he was 24, because I asked him. And obviously, there is this whole factor, right? If a person is… I find it amazing. I did my fieldwork with illegal immigrants and you can see this quite clear… like if you're talking to someone who's fluent in a language,*

he automatically seems very intelligent. Not intelligent, but I mean if you talk to someone who can't speak, you will immediately think that he's just not so intelligent just because language has such, like… This doctor was very good, he could speak and probably, my whole trusting system was from the fact that he was able to explain me things. So then I could relate. I'm pretty sure if he was a great, amazing doctor and I couldn't talk to him, and I couldn't ask what I wanted to ask, then it would be harder to trust. (Pavarti)

While gut-feelings and the amount of authority someone has play the same role while abroad in the process of assessing the reliability of information as they do at home, new criteria that appeared in this study included a focus on uncovering a general philosophy of travel for comparison purposes, as well as a trust based simply on language.

Coping with Life in the Liminoid

Part of this study assessed the background factors that influenced participants' information behaviour. While most of the factors like home country, geographical location in Thailand, and technical skill level had no correlation, there was one factor that proved an overwhelming indicator of a participant's approach to information: previous intercultural experiences. Volunteers with significant experience traveling, working, and living abroad developed coping strategies that those who had little or no previous travel experience did not have access to. These coping strategies heavily influenced the information behaviours of participants. While limited in participant numbers, this research found three different volunteer tourist information identities that exist on a continuum.

Information Hippies

One of the most frequently mentioned coping strategies among experienced travelers was not having any specific expectations about the adventure on which they were embarking. Thus, little to no information was sought out or wanted. For this group, unexpected surprises during their travels were relished:

There's only one thing that I said to myself I shouldn't do, and that's expect anything. Don't expect anything and you'll be absolutely fine. Because you get surprised the entire time if you don't expect anything. (Eion)

I just let information come to me. You could call me an information hippy. That's pretty much how I live my life… wing and a prayer. Part luck sometimes as well. It's the whole idea behind just letting the world unravel as it should and just trusting that it does. If it doesn't work out the way you want it, it's okay. If the world doesn't work out as it should then in the end, that's how it should, to tell you the truth. It doesn't work out your way, but it will work out someone else's. (Cooper)

I'm not blasé, but I like the surprise and I have… I love the surprise. Just arriving and not knowing, it's nice. And I always know that I can rely on my goodwill, my smile, my gestures to get by… I rely on myself to really get out of trouble. I've been very lucky; I haven't had many major problems to deal with. (Jasmine)

I did read up a bit on [Thai culture]. And just saw on the map where I was going. But apart from that, I didn't want to get too much information about it – there's a very Dutch saying about it: 'go on de pomfoy,' which freely translates to 'don't think about it, just go.' (Eion)

I tried not to have any expectations. I think that helped. When you've got too many expectations, they're certain to be shattered and you're going to wish you had known more. Since I don't know a lot, it helps. (Alex)

I tend to drift in the wind. I go where I want to, based on advice from people I meet. (Kris)

I'll pick up a Lonely Planet if it's around, but to compare my experience in a place with how it's described in the book. My first trip to Australia, I used it a lot. Now I trust that things will work out. I like traveling this way. I've had many more positive experiences not planning and simply going out in the world. […] The best things aren't planned. (Omar)

The travel philosophy of letting the universe take its course has significant implications for information behaviour. The most extreme examples in this group actively avoided information, not wanting their experience to be tinged with previously learned facts or opinions. Most participants in this group, however, tended to passively sit back and interact with information only when it came to them. The grouping of people into "information hippies" makes sense if viewed in the context of opportunistic acquisition of information (OAI), "a memorable experience of unexpected discovery of useful or interesting information" (Erdelez 2005, 179). It is recognized that there are several sub-types of OAI, with the most common being information encountering, defined as "an instance of accidental discovery of information during an active search for some other information" (Erdelez 2005, 180). The group identified in this study, however, does not fit into this sub-category, as information hippies are doing no active searching. As repeated in several interviews, people in this group simply move through the world and passively bump into information. They were adamant that the universe would send them in the direction they were meant to go and consequently undertook very few information searches. Thus, information hippies can be considered a group under the banner of OAI, but distinct from Erdelez's conception of information encountering.

Part of the reason for deliberate passivity may be traced back to the liminoid, and the level of comfort experienced travelers feel in this space:

> *When you go abroad, you are always freed from all these conceptions and relationships you have to people. And you can question your ideals and beliefs, or understand them. But because I have been for very many years doing that, it's not that dramatic for me anymore. (Pavarti)*

For people who are used to having the lives they knew back home suddenly disrupted and shaken up, travel is a fun experience and not knowing what is coming next is part of the adventure. They are comfortable with low levels of information and would not have it any other way.

Balancers

A balance of allowing experience to unfold and pre-planning, the balancers are a group of travelers ranging in low to medium travel experience. In this study, only three people in this study could be classified in this state. People in this category tended to do itinerary-oriented information seeking, searching out places to stay, activities to engage in, or locations to experience, but recognized that there was some element of the unknown that was simply part of life abroad:

> *The culture was totally new for me, so I just read about Thailand in general – you know, the feet are low, the head is holy – the small things, and the wei – that kind of stuff. But I think when you want to learn a culture, you just need to go into it and then you can learn it. You've got to flow into the culture. (Eion)*

Several participants reported arranging travel center-piece type activities in Thailand:

> *I wanted to meditate with monks on my birthday. I knew I wanted to do that, so I planned it… apart from planning that, I just wanted to take what comes at me and drift around. (Omar)*

People in the balancer category look for information on certain aspects of their trips, but otherwise are content to allow happenings to unfold around them.

Google-Fu Masters

At the opposite end of the spectrum to the "information hippies" that sit back and allow their trip to unfold before them with minimal information needs, participants who had little or no previous travel experience abroad were always associated with more active information behaviours in this study. Participants in this group always wanted to know where, when, why, what, who, and how. There was a belief that rapid information re-stocking of the cultural knowledge warehouse that was severely depleted when they left their home cultures would help them during their time in Thailand. They also tended to favour the internet for information, with one participant referring to herself as a "Google-fu master" (Anna). Of the

participants that were inexperienced travelers with active information behaviours, the most obsessive information seekers were all female. The desire for as much information as possible can be traced to a need for security and a desire to reduce personal risk. There was a general feeling among this group that "knowledge is power," and the more information they could acquire, the less risk there would be. The concept of risk tended to not to just include physical harm, but also harassment, theft, and exploitation based on economic privilege. Information that this group felt would decrease risk included suggestions for particular areas or activities, tips for carrying valuables, recommendations for certain guesthouses or restaurants, and reliable contacts. This information came through several channels, including guide books:

> *I like to have the information on the internet but I feel secure to have the Lonely Planet. Because you have everything, and the internet connection you can't have everywhere. (Maria)*

In response to my query of whether she carries a guidebook or not, Aya said:

> *Lonely Planet. It's good to have when you travel alone.*

While guidebooks were clung to, information from people was just as important. In interviews for this study, inexperienced female travelers tended to bombard me with questions once they found out about my own significant travel history.

Emotion

Entangled with a strong need for information displayed particularly in the "Google-Fu Masters" category is emotion. Emotion has been the subject of controversy in LIS research, with Olsson (2010) critiquing much of the research on the role of emotion on information behaviour as being "individually focused and essentialist in its construction of emotion – grounded in a scientific discourse which sees affect as fundamentally acultural" (5). This study challenges emotion as acultural, instead arguing that the emotions entangled with information behaviours are highly culturally-based. For example, that inexperienced women travelers feel insecurity and fear of being deficient when it comes to information is based in larger cultural ideas about individuality and the role of women. Participants from highly individualistic

societies were much less likely to trust that they would find a group in Thailand that would supply them with information. Meanwhile, that it is inexperienced women travelers that get nervous when they do not feel information security points to roots in a society that places women in less powerful positions and teaches them to fear. Men who were inexperienced travelers did not mention security concerns, and were generally fine with simply sitting back and letting their travel experiences unfold around them despite having little information. In their home cultures, men were expected to go out and explore the world, while there is a whole safety industry that encourages women travelers to buy hotel door alarms, tasers, and other self-defense products that suggest women face increased risks and consequently, with the underlying message that travel is dangerous for women.

The Continuum

It is important to reiterate that this is a masters' level project, and thus fifteen participants was the number deemed appropriate to interview. The small number of participants should be taken into account when the continuum described above is theorized. While the volunteer tourists in this study all fit nicely into one of the three categories, it is doubtful that such clean-cut distinctions could be made with a much larger pool of participants. The value of this study is not the establishment of the three particular categories described, but identifying that travel experience is a significant indicator of information behaviour.

It is important to take into account that movement along the continuum is fluid. In this study, only movement toward the relaxing of information needs was identified. In the following quote, one can witness the evolution of information need as travel experience grows:

> *I'm quite different because I've known Laos culture for 30 years now, so I was prepared for [it] when I came. When I came twice before, it was for backpacking only. The first time I planned, really planned my touring because I wanted to know when and where, which one I was going to choose, because of security and the money as well. But the second time, I just planned nothing. And now [third time in Laos, on a volunteer tourism placement], it wasn't worth planning. I'm just coming, and we will see. (Aya)*

A larger participant pool, however, may well show that a scary incident can cause an increased feeling of risk, thus sending people moving back along the continuum towards feeling the need for more information.

Social Positioning

While the words of participants cited above have already pointed to various social positions, I now turn to an explicit discussion of how some general social positioning trends affect information behaviour.

New Identities

When combined with the liminoid, normal at-home social positioning of participants gets more complex. Normal social scripts and positioning that are clearly recognized at home no longer can be used in the same way as they would be in home countries. Canadian social scripts, for example, and Thai social scripts are very different. Harré and van Langenhove state, "It is the constant interplay of mutual recognition of one's own and the other's position that the particular version of public self appropriate to the occasion is constructed" (1999, 9). When there is a breakdown in recognition, the public self appropriate person no longer needs to be constructed. In this gap is an opportunity for new identities to be tested and/or taken up by participants. As mentioned above, without home social rules to keep bodies in line, anything becomes possible in the liminoid.

One of the most obvious positioning shifts was how participants referred to themselves depending on various interactions. At various times they were travelers, tourists, *farangs*, and volunteers. These various identities changed depending on the situation. At their placements, where they needed to have respect from students and teachers, they emphasized that they were *asasamak* (volunteers), distinguishing themselves from tourists, who have the reputation among many locals of being loud, obnoxious, neo-colonial, environmentally-destructive, patronizing, and self-centered. In these situations, they tended to challenge any positioning of themselves as tourists, explaining what they were doing in Thailand, and how long they were staying. They would also attempt to speak in Thai, to demonstrate that they were different

from most other *farangs* who visited Nong Khai. In this discussion, the original positioning of the volunteers as being tourists is an example of first order social positioning, while the insistence on being volunteers, not tourists, is an example of the second type of social positioning.

At other times, however, participants wanted the social leeway that taking up a tourist identity allowed, thus demonstrating that social positioning can change with every conversation; their former second order positioning of themselves as volunteers, not tourists, rapidly dissipated on Halloween, for example. Several volunteers wanting to celebrate the holiday dressed up as ghosts, swaddling themselves in old white mosquito nets. Halloween is not celebrated or widely known in Thailand, so when locals saw four white people wearing mosquito nets, I can only imagine that they believed they saw crazy *farangs* who did not understand the correct usage of mosquito nets. If participants were highly concerned with fitting into Thai society and not be seen as outsiders, they would not have dressed in costumes and pranced down the road singing English songs at the top of their lungs.

Face

A component of participants' shifting identities related to the concept of face. In his essay outlining face threat theory, Goffman (1955) defined "face" as "the public image of the self as indicated through socially approved attributes in accordance with expected social roles and behaviours" (Mon 2005, 149). In home cultures, we have been socialized since birth in the ways of avoiding a loss of face. We know how society expects us to behave in a wide variety of situations, and when we transgress, we feel embarrassment or shame. In Thailand, the actions and responses that bring shame, embarrassment, and loss of face are different from those the participants are used to. The transition away from home face rules into the liminoid allows participants to act markedly different than they would at home without the fear of losing face. Take the following example a participant related to me about alternate ways around the language barrier:

> *If you're not afraid of making a fool out of yourself, you'll get there. For example, you met [name of man] – he had a sore throat and he was congested with snot in his frontal*

> *lobes – and basically after 20 minutes in a pharmacy with a Thai lady who didn't really speak a word of English, with some broken Thai, play acting, and just pointing at throat [gestures and makes hoarse-sounding 'mai dee, mai dee' ('not good, not good')] […] it worked out. (Eion)*

If the same man went into a pharmacy in his home country and play acted out his situation, he would be looked on as weird and lose face. As Harré and van Langenhove state, "If what one says or does cannot be fitted coherently into a locally acceptable cluster of the types of behaviour that define a persona, that person is bound to be treated with reserve or even suspicion" (1999, 8). In Thailand, however, the man was able to get away with this type of action with minimal loss of face. Most Thais generally regard *farangs* as strange, and are used to dealing with non-Thai speaking people miming and play acting. In the space between home and Thai social rules, there is a transitory space that allows for identity experimentation with minimal consequences.

Power

The one exception in this study to a feeling of being free from face was an Asian-American participant, not of Thai descent. She reported that the need to maintain face while in Thailand was a significant pressure, even more so than she felt at home. She explained:

> *As an Asian woman, traveling among Asians, in Asia, I feel a lot of pressure because I know what they're [other Asians] thinking of me. I know what they expect Asian women to do, and traveling alone doesn't fit in. (Anna)*

What this suggests is that racialization matters when traveling, and that it is connected to social power. Participants racialized as white were not subjected to serious attempts to conform to local standards by locals. Often Thai people that the "white" group came into contact with were fascinated by whiteness, picking at moles, pulling arm hair, and wanting photos with participants. On the other hand, the Asian-American participant reported people expressing suspicion and disapproval when she explained what she was doing in Thailand. The role of racialization in the liminoid needs further examination, but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Conclusion

Before packing their bags and setting out on their travels, participants reported information behaviours that are in line with other studies of everyday life information behavior. Once in Thailand, however, a number of barriers kept them from their normal information practices: the language barrier, cultural differences, and technological problems. To deal with these changes, information behaviours tended to shift to a reliance on strangers for information, and a heightened sense of embodiment. How much information participants felt they required, however, was closely linked to the amount of travel experience each individual had. For people with minimal previous travel experience, information was deemed vital. This is particularly the case for female travelers, who linked information with enhanced personal safety. Travel experience and gender were the only two aspects of a person's background set out in the second research question that had a significant effect on information behaviour. For those participants with significant travel experience, having information before they experienced a situation was seen as a negative. This group wanted to simply live in the moment, and thus did not report much active information seeking. Much of the information this group received was passive and embodied.

Further affecting information behaviour was the social positioning dialogue of each participant, the subject of my first research question. Suspended in the liminoid where normal cultural rules no longer apply, most volunteer tourists were able to rapidly try on new identities that may be unacceptable and face-losing at home. The lack of concern with loss of face encouraged information behaviours that would be deemed odd or unacceptable at home. The exception to this was one Asian-American participant, who felt that her racialized identity was more constraining in Asia than at home.

Not mentioned in this chapter, the third research question concerning what actions NGOs can undertake to help their volunteers will be taken up in the forthcoming conclusion section.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions

The following chapter concludes this research project, summarizing the findings for each research question, addressing practical and theoretical implications, and suggesting areas of future research that LIS scholars and community members might explore.

Summary of Findings

How does social positioning function in the world of the volunteer tourist, and what are the implications for information behaviour?

There are numerous examples of social positioning that were reported by participants. In this study, the negotiation of insider/outsider identity, power, and face are discussed, as these 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.

What effect 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?

Previous intercultural experience and gender were overwhelmingly the most important of the categories mentioned above. Significant previous travel experience resulted in participants feeling comfortable with minimal information, while 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.

Cultural confusion, physical location, and technical skill had no bearing on information behaviour in this study.

Practical Implications

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?

Based on the above findings, there are several strategies and changes that NGOs can implement in order to assist their volunteers:

- ***Pre-Departure Information***

  With participants, particularly those with significant travel experience, minimizing the importance of pre-departure information, organization resources might be better invested in training or informal information sessions once volunteers are at their placements. While participants tended to say that pre-departure information was good, they generally did not spend significant time looking at printed material made available to them.

- ***Gossip***

  Participants relied on personal communication, with a decent portion of the information communicated through this channel being gossip. Organizations should not minimize the importance of gossip. If an incident arises, it is important to address it fully with volunteers instead of trying to sweep it away with partial information. If rumours are floating about, they may need to be addressed by staff.

- ***Local Brokers***

  Local brokers, the Thai staff who formed bridges between participants and wider Thai society, were invaluable to participants. It is vital that NGOs hire, train, and retain local brokers who are personable and get along well with others. Outgoing personalities were associated with approachability and consequently positive information transactions, even if the information given was misleading or incorrect.

- ***Security***

  If dealing with inexperienced travelers, provide information about personal security. At orientations, go over some travel tips that enhance security (i.e. keep money in different bags, do not look timid while out walking). If there are specific security concerns in the region, make participants aware and address the issues. Be open and honest with any previous situations that have occurred at specific placements that would cause volunteers to feel insecure.

- ***Mai Pen Rai***

  Specific to organizations working in Thailand, spend significant amounts of time discussing the *mai pen rai* attitude, its consequences for volunteers, and coping strategies.

- ***Importance of the Body***

  Recognize that for travelers, there is a heightened focus on senses and design training around this phenomenon. Take participants to a local market, for example, where they can taste, touch, smell, listen, and look at what is going on around them instead of simply going over cultural rules in a room.

- ***The Liminoid***

  It is important for NGOs to realize that people outside of their home cultures are situated in a mental space that allows for unpredictable behaviour. Normal cultural rules generally do not apply, so people feel some license to experiment with identity.

Theoretical Implications

The main theoretical thrust of this work concerns the development of a theory related to information behaviour in the liminoid. More work needs to be done, but this study does indicate that information behaviour changes when people experience a suspension of normal identity in the liminoid.

While this work only scrapes the surface of what can be done with social positioning theory, it does confirm that this theory has a role in the LIS community. In this thesis, social positioning theory allowed for an analysis of power and face, two significant factors relating to information behaviour.

Finally, this work throws its support firmly behind those engaged in research related to embodied information. Embodiment is a concept that needs more exploration in information studies, and this particular work adds to the growing body of work that demonstrates its importance in understanding information behaviour.

Potential for Future Research

Many avenues of future research have emerged from this study for several areas of academia. For tourism scholars, there needs to be greater investigation into the idea of the liminoid. How does racialization and gender affect life in the liminoid? Does the experience of the liminoid change with different purposes for travel? Specific to volunteer tourism, what coping strategies do volunteer tourists use abroad to deal with cultural confusion?

In terms of information behaviour research, 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. How and why, for example, do people react in highly fluid situations where normal rules are transgressed? How does shifting identity tie into information behaviour? How do peoples' information behaviours change once they are out of a liminoidal state? In addition to focusing on the travel liminoid, linkages between travel and other situations where identity is highly fluid need to be established.

In addition to developing the idea of the liminoid, travel-specific inquiry is also needed. Little research on information behaviour in travel situations has been done by LIS scholars; most inquiry has been done by market researchers who are interested in selling products to travelers. An information behaviour inquiry, especially a long-term study that tracks travel information behaviour over time would be useful in understanding how people interact with information while they are traveling. Questions could include: What is the influence of culture on information behaviour? What are the most effective ways for travelers to interact with information abroad? Does this differ between various types of cultures?

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. To start with, scholars could ask: How is information embodied during everyday life? In what situations is embodiment particularly important, and why? How can information sources purposely transfer information that can be embodied?

Final Comments

For centuries, travel and the accompanying experiencing of intercultural situations has been the domain of those who are economically privileged. As technology becomes more accessible to people around the world, intercultural meetings have exploded in numbers. Whether online or off, when people of different cultures gather there is a significant risk of information being inaccessible, distorted, or misunderstood. Now more than at any other time

in history, it is of critical importance to explore the interactions of people working cross-culturally in an attempt to enhance dialogue. While there has been significant work on this issue in other academic areas, information studies has lagged behind. Understanding cross-cultural information behaviour will add an important piece to the puzzle of understanding intercultural interactions.

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Appendix One – Map of Thailand[9]

[9] This image is a map derived from products of the United Nations Cartographic Section. Modified versions of UNCS maps may be used provided that the UN name and reference number does not appear on any modified version and a link to the original map is provided. The original map was found at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Un-thailand.png

Appendix Two – Information/Consent Letter

June, 2009

Dear (NAME),

I am a student completing a MLIS/MA thesis under the direction of Dr. Heidi Julien in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alberta, Canada. The goal of my research is to understand how the social identities of volunteer tourists affect their information behaviour while they are abroad. This research will contribute to understanding how intercultural experiences affect peoples' relationship to information, as well as help non-governmental organizations in determining how to best aid volunteers when it comes to distributing information, consequently preparing workers for success in the field.

As a part of this research, I will be conducting interviews and observing up to fifteen people who are currently undertaking or have recently completed a volunteer placement in Thailand. I would like to ask for your consent to participate in this project. I would like to have permission to interview you for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour, as well as be able to use observations I make about your relationship to information. Interviews will occur after you have been working in your placement for approximately six weeks. The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed.

If you choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time until the completion of your interview and any data you have provided will not be counted and will be destroyed or returned to you. You are also allowed to refuse to answer one or more questions at any time during the interview process. A pseudonym of your choosing from a list provided will be used to protect your privacy and anonymity in my thesis, as well as any reports, papers, and presentations arising from this research.

Only Dr. Julien and I will be privy to any raw data collected during this study. I will keep interview tapes and any printed data in a locked cabinet and electronic files will be encrypted. This data will be kept for a minimum of 5 years in accordance with Canadian research standards, and then destroyed.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta, Canada. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB at (+1) 780 492 3751.

If you would like to participate in this project, please sign the consent form below and return it to me. If you have any questions about this request, please feel free to contact me in

person, by mobile at (+66) 083 401 7870 or by e-mail at kjreed@ualberta.ca, or Dr. Julien at (+1) 780 492 3934 or heidi.julien@ualberta.ca. Further concerns can be directed to Dr. Ann Curry, Director of the School of Library and Information Studies at (+1) 780 492 3932.

Thank you for considering this request. Best wishes for a wonderful experience in Thailand!

Sincerely,

Kathleen Reed

MLIS/MA (Humanities Computing) Candidate

University of Alberta, Canada

I, _____(please print name), have read this information letter and have had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the project described and agree that the information collected may be used as per the terms expressed above. I understand that two copies of this information and consent form are being provided to me, one to be signed and returned to the researcher and one for my own records.

Signature_____ Date_____

Appendix Three – Interview Questions

Background

1. Please tell me about your background. How does being [whatever identity categories that volunteers identify] affect your situation here?

2. Please tell me about your previous volunteer work.

3. Please tell me about your previous travel experiences. How does this past experience affect your situation here?

4. Please tell me about your level of fluency with 1). Thai and 2). Lao languages. How has your level of fluency affected your situation? How has this changed since you first arrived?

5. I'm going to show you a list of technology-related tasks. Please place a checkmark next to each task you have done in the past. How has your technical skill affected your situation here?

OMP Experience

6. Please tell your story about coming to this placement with OMP

7. Please tell me about your placement with OMP.

8. Please tell me about the expectations of you as a volunteer. How have they affected you?

Identity

9. How is your experience here in Thailand different from your everyday life at home? How do you feel about these changes?

10. Some people say that cultural confusion or culture shock is an issue for them when they travel. Do you think you've been affected by culture shock? If so, please tell me about the experience. How have you coped with this? How has this changed since you first arrived?

Information

11. What role has information played in your travels to date?

    a. A minute ago you told me the story of how you came to be here. Can you tell me about the information you needed to arrive here, working for OMP? What did you do to find out about the information you needed to get here?

    b. Was there any information you wished you would have received about OMP or Thailand in general that you didn't find out before arriving?

    c. Tell me what kinds of information you've needed so far in Thailand? How do you determine the reliability of information here? What are the barriers you face obtaining necessary information here?

    d. Tell me about the info sources you've come to rely on here. How have they been helpful to you? Has this changed since you have arrived at OMP?

12. How does the way you generally go about finding information you need differ between home and Thailand?

13. Tell me about times when you haven't found information you need while at 1). home, 2). in Thailand. Has the way you deal with this situation changed between home and Thailand?

14. Have you developed new ways of seeking information in Thailand that are different from the beginning of your placement? From home?

15. Do you feel there's a difference between the way you find information while at OMP house around volunteers, and when you're out around town/at placement by yourself?

Closing

16. If you were to repeat your time with OMP, what would you like to have known earlier related to your placement? Life in Thailand?

17. In light of the preceding questions, is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

Appendix Four – Technical Skills Checklist

Please check off each computer-related task you have completed:

- ☐ Type a document
- ☐ Save a document
- ☐ Surf the Internet
- ☐ Use a search engine on the Internet
- ☐ Install a program from a CD-ROM
- ☐ Design a webpage in Dreamweaver
- ☐ Design a webpage in a text-editor
- ☐ Create a cascading style-sheet
- ☐ Log in to an FTP server
- ☐ Program Macromedia Flash
- ☐ Program in PHP, Ruby, C++ or any other language
- ☐ Set up your own server
- ☐ Install an operating system
- ☐ Install a CD drive
- ☐ Change the boot drive on startup

Appendix Five – Field Notes Log Sheet

FIELD NOTES LOG
Date: Location: Weather: Tags:

Observations:

Speculative/Personal Reflections:

Appendix Six – Openmind Projects' Volunteer Conditions and Code of Conduct[10]

Volunteer Conditions

- You agree to abide by local laws and volunteer rules.
- You are not supposed to proselytize, promote any political or religious opinions.
- As a volunteer you assure that you have no criminal record.
- It is your responsibility to yourself, to us, and your placement to tell us if you have any physical or mental condition or take any medicines, drugs.
- We reserve the right to terminate the volunteer period, without refund, if a volunteer is breaking the law or seriously endangering themselves or those around them.
- You cannot borrow money from your placement or OpenmindProjects.
- You should have a travel insurance that covers accidents and medical treatment, preferably also cancellation costs, if you need to terminate your volunteering. Bring your insurance policy/certificate!
- Sometimes placements do not require a volunteer as previously agreed, and then we will offer a similar placement.
- Volunteers should leave their rooms clean after the orientation and placement and not bring friends to their placements, without prior agreement with OpenmindProjects.
- Participants are responsible for any damage they cause to OpenmindProjects or their placement and accommodation.
- Present and previous volunteers are welcome to our volunteer houses during their free time and can stay there when room/bed is available.
- We take the liberty to use photos we or someone else take of you and comments (written or verbal) you make during or in connection with your placement such as including them in our brochure / website) without your prior permission unless you specifically tell us not to. Such use may include mentioning your name, age and nationality.
- Personal Data. OpenmindProjects will not pass on any personal data to any third party without your explicit approval
- By paying the fee, you acknowledge that you have read and agree with our Volunteer Conditions and Code of Conduct.

Volunteer Code of Conduct

- Participants of the program must comply with country laws, OpenmindProjects and local rules.
- Participants should travel to and attend the placement volunteer work according to the agreement with the placement.
- Participants may not take on any paid or voluntary work with placements unless agreed with OpenmindProjects.

[10] Obtained from: http://upload.openmindprojects.org/volunteerpackage/download_info/volunteer_fees.pdf

- Participants should respect the local dress and behavior codes (outlined in the culture training) and dress, behave appropriately at work and in their free time too.
- Participants must behave in a manner which does not bring their country, the placement or OpenmindProjects into disrepute.
- Participants must not enter into any personal relations with staff or students at their placement.
- Participants should consume alcohol with moderation, even if offered by other people, and must not drive any vehicle whilst under the influence of alcohol.
- Unprovoked violence towards anyone, locals or volunteers, is ground for immediate dismissal from the program.