

Sho Kashiwagi / Hayato Nagai / Tomoyuki Furutani

# VFR travel generated by international students: The case of Japanese students in Australia

## Abstract

The visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market is one of the largest and most rapidly growing global tourism markets. Although much research has been carried out on this market since the early 1990s, these studies have largely been in the Western context, with Asian VFR travellers receiving little attention. To extend our understanding of the international VFR market, this study focused on Japanese international students studying in Australia. Through a series of in-depth interviews with 26 students, their roles and experiences as VFR hosts and the behaviours of the VFR travellers who visited them were explored. The results show that the majority of the students not only played important roles in motivating their friends and relatives to visit their study destinations but also recognised these roles. A number of unique behaviours on the part of Japanese VFR travellers, such as accommodation use and information searches, were also observed. The study's findings extend our understanding of the VFR market. The study suggests that international students are important resources for tourism practitioners because they can trigger international visits by friends and relatives.

**Key words:** international students; VFR hosts; VFR travel; Japanese; Australia

## Introduction

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel has received considerable research attention in the tourism literature. Migration and the globalised movement of society are closely associated with VFR travel (Dwyer, Seetaram, Forsyth & King, 2014; Jackson, 1990). Because VFR travel has historically been notable in countries with large numbers of immigrants, such as Australia, Canada and the United States (US), most previous VFR studies have investigated Western travellers (Backer, 2012; Jackson, 1990; Morrison, Verginis & O'Leary, 2000).

However, recent changes in migration patterns now require the investigation of the VFR market in various parts of the world (Dwyer et al., 2014; Jackson, 2003). The increasing number of VFR travellers from Asian countries makes it especially important to understand this type of travel behaviour (e.g., Hu & Morrison, 2002; King & Dwyer, 2015; Lehto, Morrison & O'Leary, 2001). For example, the number of Asian VFR travellers to Australia continues to increase, from 275,847 in 2006 to 696,043 in 2015, and such travellers from other source regions increases from 544,849 in 2006 to 778,469 in 2015 (Tourism Research Australia, 2016a).

The number of international students has been increasing globally, from 2.1 million in 2000 to 5.0 million in 2014 (International Consultants for Education and Fairs Monitor, 2015). Because the globalised movement of society includes not only migrants but also students studying abroad, scholars must consider the fact that international students generate VFR travels from their home countries and how this affects the tourism industry (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Dwyer et al., 2014). However,

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**Sho Kashiwagi**, PhD student, Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan; E-mail: [shok@sfc.keio.ac.jp](mailto:shok@sfc.keio.ac.jp)

**Hayato Nagai**, PhD, Faculty of Tourism, Wakayama University, Japan; E-mail: [hnagai@center.wakayama-u.ac.jp](mailto:hnagai@center.wakayama-u.ac.jp)

**Tomoyuki Furutani**, PhD, Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan; E-mail: [maunz@sfc.keio.ac.jp](mailto:maunz@sfc.keio.ac.jp)

although international students often engage in VFR travel at their study destination, there has been a limited focus on VFR research related to international students (Hunter-Jones, 2008).

The present study, therefore, attempts to extend the current understanding of VFR travels in the tourism literature. It specifically explores Japanese VFR travellers in Australia, one of the major VFR source countries from Asia, with a focus on Japanese international students as generators of VFR travels to Australia. The focus of the study is on the roles played by Japanese international students in motivating their friends and relatives to visit them during their stays overseas.

The paper begins with a literature review investigating roles of the students as VFR hosts. The methodology is then described. The results and discussion then reveal the attributes of the hosts and travellers in the VFR market generated by international students. Finally, the conclusion suggests definitional aspects of VFR and marketing approaches.

## Literature review

### Definition and categorisation of the VFR market

VFR travel has commonly been defined and differentiated from other travel types by the purpose of the visit and accommodation type (Seaton & Palmer, 1997), and most previous studies have applied these criteria (Hu & Morrison, 2002; McKercher, 1996). Many studies (e.g., Backer, 2007; Lee, Morrison, Lheto, Webb, and Reid, 2005) have found that VFR travellers often stay in friends' or relatives' houses, but they also use commercial accommodation, as in other markets. Thus, the type of accommodation chosen is commonly used in categorising VFR travellers (Backer, 2012; Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green & O'Leary, 2000).

Even though the term 'VFR market' is common in the previous literature, this market is not homogeneous, and there are different travel purposes for different types of VFR travellers (e.g., Backer, 2007; Pennington-Gray, 2003). Moscardo et al. (2000) identified three roles VFR can play in travel: VFR as the purpose of travel, VFR as the trigger for travel and VFR as one activity in travel. While visiting friends and relatives can be a reason to visit a destination, the attractiveness of the destination may influence travel patterns, such as trip length (Backer, 2008).

To categorise VFR travellers, Backer (2012) proposed a definitional model of VFR (Table 1) using both purpose of travel and type of accommodation. Often, only purpose of travel is used only to segment travel markets in official statistical data (Backer, 2007). However, this model can include VFR travellers who are overlooked in these statistical data by using both elements together. Furthermore, this model not only differentiates VFR travellers from other travellers but also categorises them into three types: pure VFRs (PVFRs), those who visit a destination to meet either their friends or relatives and stay in their homes; commercial VFRs (CVFRs), those whose purpose is to VFR but who stay in commercial accommodation, and exploiting VFRs (EVFRs), those who stay with either friends or relatives at the destination but have a different primary purpose for visiting the destination (Backer, 2012). This model and its views have been used in many recent studies to characterise VFR travellers because they help quantify VFR travels, define the details of various VFR-related travels and compare the VFR market with other markets (e.g., Oliveri, 2015; Prideaux, Payer & Thompson, 2016).

Table 1

**Definitional model of VFR**

	<b>Accommodation: friends and family</b>	<b>Accommodation: commercial</b>
Purpose of visit: VFR	✓  PVFRs	✓  CVFRs
Purpose of visit: non-VFR	✓  EVFRs	✗  non-VFRs

Source: Backer (2012).

## Roles of hosts in the VFR market

VFR hosts play various roles for VFR travellers before, during and after hosting. The person hosting a VFR traveller can be one of the most significant reasons that the travel occurs because the host generally represents a reliable source of information regarding activities and destinations (Backer, 2015; King & Dwyer, 2015; McKercher, 1996). The host can be a motivator of travel by enticing the traveller with planned activities (Backer, 2007; 2008). Hosts can also contribute to the local economy, such as by dining with their guests (Backer, 2007, 2015; McKercher, 1996).

Several studies have attempted to categorise local residents by investigating their experience and involvement in hosting VFR travellers. Young, Corsun, and Baloglu (2007) categorised VFR hosts into four groups — neutrals, talkers, ambassadors, and magnets — according to their frequency of hosting, extent of involvement with guests, and word-of-mouth behaviours. Shani and Uriely (2012) referred to the costs and benefits of hosting VFR travellers and categorised the hosts by orientation (either guest- or self-oriented), zone (either indoor or outdoor) and VFR hosting experiences and behaviours. Both studies revealed the heterogeneity of the VFR hosts and stressed the importance of encouraging hosts to continue hosting VFR travellers for the good of the local economy. Hosts can be viewed as key stakeholders in the VFR market. Backer (2008) studied the link between destination attractiveness and the hosts of VFR travellers and found that hosts play an effective role in marketing a destination and increasing participation in the activities at that destination. Her study also suggested that local residents should be included in marketing initiatives to entice their friends and relatives to visit a given destination (Lee et al., 2005; Morrison et al., 2000). Similarly, Backer (2010) and Lehto et al. (2001) encouraged marketing campaigns that target local residents as information sources to invite their friends and relatives during off-peak times and for return visits.

## Travel behaviours in the VFR market

The behaviours of VFR travellers are unique in various aspects, such as the purpose of travel, seasonality, length of travel, number of cities to visit, and, most notably, types of accommodation. The statistical data released by public organisations often show less spending by VFR travellers than holiday travellers. For example, outbound Japanese, Australian, and British VFR travellers spend 84%, 59%, and 62% as much as holiday travellers (Japan Tourism Agency, 2016; Office for National Statistics, 2016; Tourism Research Australia, 2016b). Although some previous studies have tended to view the VFR market as less economically attractive to the accommodation industry as compared to other markets, recent studies have noted the frequent use of commercial accommodation by VFR travellers (e.g., Backer & Morrison, 2015; Hänsel & Metzner, 2011; Seaton, 1997). Hu and Morrison (2002) conducted

research on domestic travel in the US and found that approximately 10% of VFR trips had multiple destinations. Morrison, Hsieh, and O'Leary (1995) and Meis, Joyal, and Trites (1995), however, found that most VFR travellers visited multiple destinations in their studies.

Another notable finding of previous VFR research is the effect of seasonality on travel to some destinations. Several studies have highlighted VFR travels undertaken outside the peak season for certain destinations such as the US and UK (e.g., Hu & Morrison, 2002; Lehto et al., 2001). Conversely, in a study in Northern Ireland and South Africa, VFR visitors largely followed general holiday seasons, such as Easter, summer, and Christmas (Seaton & Tagg, 1995). Many researchers have investigated length of stay in the VFR market as compared to other markets (e.g., Backer, 2012; Moscardo et al., 2000; Seaton & Tagg, 1995). Pennington-Gray (2003) revealed, in her study of American domestic VFR travels, that travellers staying at their friends' and relatives' homes for purposes of VFR stay longer than travellers staying at commercial accommodation and travellers staying at friends' and relatives' homes for non-VFR purposes. In contrast, Müri and Sägesser (2003) found that Swiss VFR travellers have shorter holidays than travellers with other purposes. The findings of those studies illustrate that VFR travellers vary in their length of travel depending on study area, market, type of accommodation, and trip purpose.

### Limited VFR studies in Asian contexts

Since the seminal VFR study conducted by Jackson (1990), most VFR studies have focused on the Western context, such as travellers from Europe to Australia and New Zealand (Griffin, 2013; Jackson, 1990). Many researchers have noted the need for VFR studies in different regions, especially in Asia, to understand the profiles and attributes of VFR travels because the number of Asian VFR travellers is increasing. In fact, Asian VFR travellers to Australia have been growing at a rate of about 10% per year on average since 2006, more rapidly than other VFR-generating regions (Backer & King, 2015; Griffin, 2013; Tourism Research Australia, 2016a).

However, little is known about VFR travel in the Asian context. Jang, Yu, and Pearson (2003) found that Chinese VFR travellers to the US were more often female, were more often older, stayed for a longer number of nights, and had fewer travel companions as compared to business travellers. Some studies mentioned Japanese VFR travellers (Divisekera, 2010; Jackson, 1990; Tham, 2006), although these travellers were not the major focus of their studies. Jackson (1990) and Divisekera (2010) analysed Australian inbound tourism statistics and found that less than 5% of Japanese travellers to Australia were VFR travellers in 1988 and 2008, with the remainder being either holiday or business travellers. Tham (2006) reported that Japanese VFR travellers to Australia were more likely to stay in commercial accommodation and visit a few cities as one-day trips. In Japanese domestic journals, few studies have investigated the Japanese VFR market (e.g., Kurosu, 2013; Nagai, 2015; Sato & Nakamura, 2016; Shi, Sun, Yoshida & Yamamoto, 2012). Furuya, Nishii, Nose, Ge & Kim's (2008) study, which investigated Japanese domestic travellers, indicated that 36% of the respondents were visiting their families. However, although VFR is the third-largest market for Japanese outbound tourism, after the holiday and business markets, research conducted on the Japanese VFR market remains limited (Kurosu, 2013).

### VFR travels generated by students

Many studies on the VFR market have focused on migration because the majority of VFR travels originally occurred within migrants and diaspora populations (e.g., Li & McKercher, 2016; Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2003; Williams & Hall, 2000). Such studies have found that VFR travel is typically

associated with, for example, settlers visiting their home country or staying with friends and relatives from their home country. However, the recent phenomenon of students moving and studying abroad in global society has propelled those students into important roles as tourists and generators of VFR travel (Hunter-Jones, 2008; Taylor, Shanka & Pope, 2004).

Michael, Armstrong, and King (2004) and Weaver (2003) found that, respectively, 55% and 78% of international students studying in Australia hosted VFR travellers at least once, and 40% of such students generated VFR travels multiple times (Michael et al., 2004). In terms of the behaviours of VFR travellers generated by students, many studies have revealed visiting these students to be the main purpose of travel and that such travellers are unlikely to stay in commercial accommodation (e.g., Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Hunter-Jones, 2008). Students are not only receiving VFR travellers passively but also actively generating VFR travellers by asking their friends and relatives to visit (Hunter-Jones, 2008; Tham, 2006). The seasonality of VFR travellers generated by students is unique and likely to follow the academic calendar; therefore, previous studies have suggested that such travellers could be a target market during off-peak seasons (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Hunter-Jones, 2008).

### Japanese students in Australia

There were 12,927 Japanese students studying at educational institutions in Australia under student visas in 2015 (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Of those, 1,515 were students at either universities or higher-education institutions equivalent to universities, 6,272 were English language students, and the rest were students in either vocational education or other sectors (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Although the total number of Japanese students in Australia is low, it has been increasing. From 2011 to 2015, this number increased from 10,998 to 12,927 (Department of Education and Training, 2016). Notably, Japanese students do not need a student visa when they study English at language schools in Australia for up to 13 weeks (English Australia, 2016). This explains the difference between the number of Japanese students under student visas and the number of Japanese visitors who have an educational purpose. In 2015, 8,937 Japanese students began studying in Australia; in contrast, 25,700 Japanese people visited Australia with an educational purpose. The number of Japanese visitors with an educational purpose has increased by more than 6,000 for the past five years (Tourism Research Australia, 2016c).

Furthermore, the Japan-Australia Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) was issued in 2015, and it is expected to advance more progressive social interactions, including education, business, and trade, between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014). Major airlines have already established routes between Japan and Australia, with total direct flights growing by 11% in 2015 (Tourism Australia, 2016). In addition, the number of VFR travellers generated by international students can be expected to increase because there is a relationship between the two groups (Tham, 2006).

The aim of this study was primarily to explore the roles, importance and hosting experiences of VFR hosts and, secondarily, to explore the attributes of VFR travellers generated by international students, particularly Japanese students. Knowledge about the influence of international students in generating VFR travellers from their home countries has been lacking in the literature because many studies have focused on VFR travellers generated by migrants. The VFR travel market generated by students is expected to grow due to increasing international study worldwide and also to students actively generating and repeatedly hosting VFR travellers from their home countries (Hunter-Jones, 2008; Tham, 2006). Given the attributes of VFR travellers generated by students found in past studies, these VFR travellers could be economically valuable for the destinations.

## Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach. This approach is suitable for the investigation of phenomena and situations that are not well-known (Peterson, 1994; Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). This approach also allows researchers to gain detailed information regarding each participant and thus specifically describe individual cases (Patton, 2002).

This study recruited the three major types of Japanese students in Australia: undergraduate and post-graduate university students and English-language students (Department of Education and Training, 2016). South-East Queensland, which includes Brisbane and the Gold Coast, was chosen as the study site. Queensland is one of the most popular holiday destinations for Japanese tourists and it is also the popular study destination for Japanese students in Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2016; Tourism and Event Queensland, 2015). The participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. The selection criteria were that the participants needed to be over eighteen years old, held a student visa as of the interview and had experience hosting Japanese VFR travellers or the intention to receive Japanese VFR travellers. The method used in choosing the sample size was that of Creswell and Clark (2011) and Mason (2014), and the researchers stopped recruiting after interviewing 26 students after new and different information was not provided by the 22<sup>nd</sup> interviewee. Four interviews were added after that, confirming that saturation had been reached.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the students. The interviews addressed all VFR travellers received by the students during their studies in Australia. Therefore, the same set of questions was asked about each VFR visit if a student had received multiple VFR visits. In most previous VFR studies, which collected data from either the hosts or the visitors, only either the most recent or a single, chosen VFR visit was included; thus, the data were limited and biased. Notably, some did collect data on multiple VFR visits (e.g., Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Hunter-Jones, 2008; McKercher, 1996). Using such partial data could limit explorations of hosting and visitor experiences. The inclusion of the students and all of their VFR visitors enabled a full exploration of both host and visitor experiences. The key questions for all the interviewees concerned how the students influenced the decisions of their friends and relatives to visit and why their friends and relatives came. These two key questions led to the development of seven major categories of questions, which related to the students' domestic travel experience in Australia before their VFRs visited, whether students actively recommended that visitors come, how the students approached their friends and relatives to make such recommendations, the students' involvement in their VFRs' stay and activities, the VFRs' intentions to visit before they came, the season and timing of the VFRs' visits and the reasons for this timing, and how they spent their time at the destination.

During the data collection period — between February and May 2015 — 26 Japanese students from four universities and three English-language schools were interviewed for this study. The participants included eleven males and 15 females, aged between 19 and 33 years. Their cities of origin ranged from the north to the south of Japan. The students' length of stay was variable, with less than one year to more than eight years. Although most of the participants were taking courses at the time of the interviews, some had recently completed their programs. Table 2 presents the participants' profiles.

Table 2  
Participants' profiles

Name	Age	Gender	City of origin	Education type	City in which they live and study	Length of stay as of interview	Total study duration	Times VFR travel was hosted
P1	26	Female	Yokohama	Language	Brisbane	3 months	8 months	0
P2	29	Female	Hokkaido	Language	Brisbane	3 months	7 months	0
P3	33	Male	Osaka	Language	Brisbane	2 months	3 months	3
P4	22	Male	Fukuoka	Language	Gold Coast	3 months	8 months	2
P5	29	Male	Hokkaido	Language	Gold Coast	3 weeks	6 months	0
P6	29	Female	Iwate	Language	Gold Coast	1 month	10 months	0
P7	28	Male	Gifu	Language	Gold Coast	3 weeks	11 months	0
P8	25	Female	Fukushima	Language	Gold Coast	3 weeks	7 months	2
P9	19	Male	Tokyo	Language	Gold Coast	3 months	5 months	0
P10	24	Female	Yamanashi	Language	Brisbane	1 month	11 months	1
P11	23	Female	Tokyo	Undergraduate	Brisbane	3 years and 10 months	Unknown	2
P12	22	Female	Tokyo	Undergraduate	Brisbane	11 months	1 year	3
P13	28	Female	Kumamoto	Undergraduate	Brisbane	5 years and 4 months	6 years	0
P14	27	Female	Saga	Undergraduate	Gold Coast	8 years and 10 months	Unknown	3
P15	26	Male	Tokyo	Undergraduate	Brisbane	8 years and 5 months	Unknown	5
P16	21	Female	Osaka	Undergraduate	Brisbane	2 years and 6 months	5 years	2
P17	23	Male	Gifu	Undergraduate	Brisbane	5 years and 0 month	9 years	3
P18	24	Male	Chiba	Undergraduate	Brisbane	5 years and 1 month	6 years	1
P19	20	Male	Chiba	Undergraduate	Brisbane	1 year and 11 months	5 years and 6 months	4
P20	30	Female	Kobe	Postgraduate	Gold Coast	1 month	1 year	2
P21	25	Female	Yamaguchi	Postgraduate	Brisbane	1 year and 10 months	5 years	0
P22	31	Female	Nagoya	Postgraduate	Brisbane	8 months	Unknown	1
P23	27	Female	Tokyo	Postgraduate	Brisbane	1 year and 10 months	1 year and 11 months	3
P24	30	Male	Osaka	Postgraduate	Brisbane	1 year and 4 months	2 years and 4 months	1
P25	31	Male	Tokyo	Postgraduate	Brisbane	9 months	1 year and 10 months	2
P26	24	Female	Yokohama	Postgraduate	Brisbane	1 year and 6 months	1 year and 8 months	0

The interviews were conducted in Japanese so that the participants could aptly express their ideas. Importantly, all the researchers involved in this study speak Japanese. Each interview took approximately one to two hours and was recorded with the participants' permission. The researchers transcribed all the recorded data in Japanese following each interview to enable the analysis of the data. The transcribed data were then analysed by the research team using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Walters, 2016). Using this analysis technique, this study was able to gain an in-depth understanding of the motivations of Japanese VFR travellers from the perspective of Japanese international

student hosts. Although quantification and generalisation were not the purpose of the analysis of these qualitative interview data, some features of the travel patterns were countable based on the comments in the transcripts.

## Results and discussion

### Purpose and triggers of travel and factors in destination choice

The analysis of the transcripts clearly showed the roles of Japanese students in Australia as VFR hosts. They are important drivers of visits from friends and relatives from Japan. Seventeen out of 26 students hosted VFR travellers at least once during their stays in Australia. There were 40 VFR trips hosted by 17 students, with 13 students receiving multiple VFR visits. The highest frequency was found for one male student (P15), who hosted five trips. Most notably, the students receiving VFR travellers in the study mentioned that their family's and friends' travels to Australia would not have occurred without their presence in Australia. One female student noted, *'My mother and brother came to the Gold Coast because I am here; otherwise, they would not have come'* (P4). These comments illustrate that meeting and travelling with the student hosts was a major purpose of travel for their VFRs. For many of the Japanese VFR visitors mentioned in this study who had been travelling abroad frequently, the existence of the students in Australia was a factor in the decision to visit Australia. One female stated, *'They [her friends] travel abroad for a holiday every year. Because I am in Australia, their destination was Australia this year'* (P8). P12, P23, and P24 noted similar experiences, and P12 stated, *'My sister had thought to have a holiday and decided to come to Australia to see me'* (P12). Although a holiday was the primary purpose for the VFR travellers generated by P8 and P12, the students themselves were the most common reason to visit Australia.

Although nine students had not received any VFR travellers at the time of the interviews, six of those nine stated that their friends and relatives had expressed a willingness to come to Australia because of the students' presence in Australia. Even if those VFR visits do not occur, the students' stays in Australia have brought the country to the attention of their friends and relatives. Of those six students, one male student commented, *'My friends and family [parents, brother, and sister] always say that they want to come and see my life in Australia before I come back to Japan'* (P7).

According to the present study, VFR guests depend heavily on their student hosts. Most of the students who received VFR guests (15 out of 17) thought about which attractions and activities they should plan for their VFR guests based on their own travel experiences. This correlated with the findings of Hunter-Jones (2008) and Backer (2008). The participants in this study stated that their VFRs were highly dependent on the hosts' English proficiency and local knowledge, for example, with regard to transportation systems. The VFR guests wanted diverse experiences during their stays and were able to avoid common mistakes during their travels in Australia due to the students' knowledge about the cities, activities and language. One student shared the expectations placed on her by friends and relatives by stating, *'I remember that both my friends and my parents always told me, as a joke, that they have a free translator and tour guide on their travels'* (P23). Another stated, *'It is impossible for my friends and family to move around Australia without me. They told me that they do not know the roads, routes, or English'* (P19).

Because the students accompany their VFRs as translators and tour guides to most attractions and activities, the VFRs experience little miscommunication while shopping and few troubles with transport and attractions. One student emphasised her efforts when hosting her VFR guests:



*'My friends and parents told me that they would go to any place and do any activity that I recommended because they knew that I had enjoyed many tourist attractions around the Brisbane area. I needed to choose what to do for their three-to-four-day visit in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast. I took both my friends and my family to almost the same places that I had experienced.'* (P23)

Given the attributes of Japanese international students acting as VFR hosts, they can be categorised as either talkers or ambassadors, whose attributes include high involvement and profound word-of-mouth influence on VFR travellers' activities, according to the taxonomy of Young et al. (2007). Furthermore, the students can clearly be categorised into serving as local tour guides in terms of the categories divided by behavioural style, including the zones and orientations of hosting (Shani & Uriely, 2012).

The current study shows that students play a role in the purpose of the visit, trigger travelling, and factor into the destination choices of VFR travellers, even though VFR travellers often do not recognise themselves as VFRs. These data were consistent with the findings of Moscardo et al. (2000) and Backer (2008), even though the VFR hosts were not students in their studies. Regarding this point, one participant mentioned, *'My friends and relatives do not know the difference between VFR and holiday travellers, but they came to Australia to visit me'* (P3). Three other participants (P10, P19, and P23) had similar thoughts on this point. Out of the 40 trips noted, 35 had the primary purpose of visiting a student. Among these 35 trips, 28 were triggered by students to visit Brisbane and the Gold Coast, and 14 were triggered by students to travel generally. One student emphasised, *'All my friends and my mother and sister came to Australia to visit me. Otherwise, they would not have come. They wanted to see my life in Australia'* (P24).

It appears that some important criteria can be added to help categorise the VFR market. For most of the VFR travellers in this study, visiting a student was not only the primary purpose of their travel but also the trigger for the travel and a factor in their destination choice. Therefore, it is difficult to categorise the VFR market using only the purpose of travel and the use of accommodation, as in Backer (2012). Some friends and relatives coming to Australia had a holiday purpose, even though the students themselves were the trigger for the travel, as well as a factor in the destination choice. The categorisation of Japanese VFR travellers can include the trigger for the travel, as well as factors affecting destination choice. The trigger for travel emphasises that these VFR travels were generated by the international students themselves. The factors in destination choice signify that the students made their friends and relatives choose to visit the destination. In this regard, one student stated, *'If I had not been in Australia, they would not have travelled abroad or chosen Australia as a destination'* (P24). Another stated, *'Even though both my parents and my friends came to the Gold Coast, I think they would not have come if I was not here. My friends would not have travelled even domestically unless they wanted to see me'* (P4).

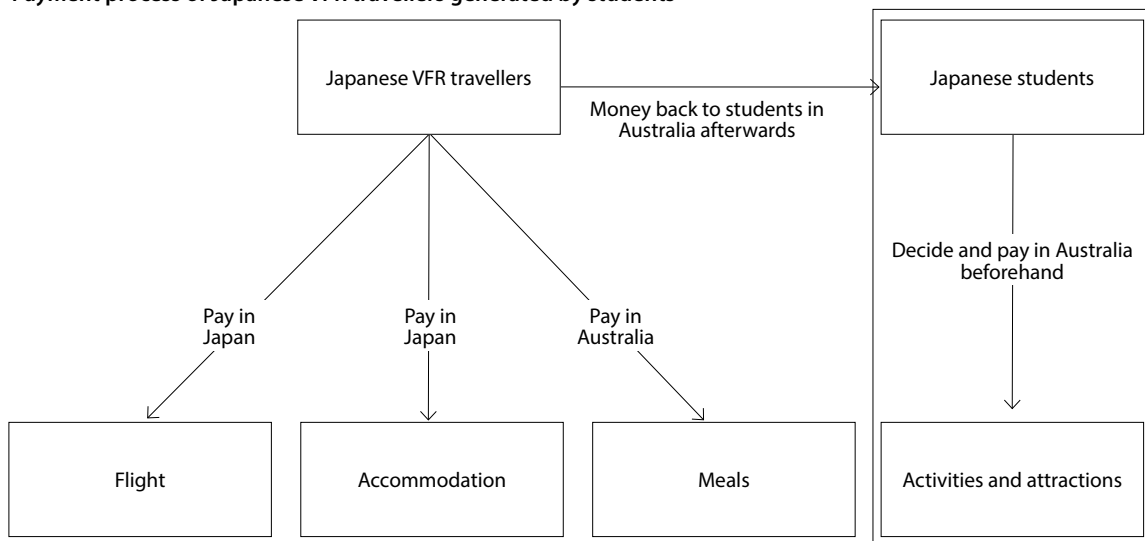
## Travel patterns of Japanese VFR travellers generated by students

Students should be approached as a part of efficient promotional and marketing strategies because students are key to convincing VFRs to visit Australia, as well as to choosing which cities to visit and which activities to attend. Thirteen of the students who received VFRs booked attractions and activities through either websites or visitor information centres before the VFRs arrived, and the VFRs determined the total length of stay, the date of travel, and the city in which to stay. Because most of the VFRs booked their flight and accommodation in advance, the payments for the attractions and activities were made by the students within Australia. Notably, twelve of the students were reimbursed for all the expenses — including those of the student — by their relatives, while friends paid for only their

own expenses. Figure 1 details the common payment process of Japanese VFR travellers generated by students. Japanese VFR travellers pay for their flights and accommodation in advance, while in Japan, and they pay for meals for themselves and the student hosts in Australia. The Japanese student hosts decide on and pay for activities and attractions to participate in with the VFRs before they arrive in Australia, and the VFRs pay the student hosts back after arriving in Australia.

Of the VFR travellers generated by students, 29 out of 40 visited multiple cities during their trips. The Gold Coast, Brisbane, the Sunshine Coast, and Byron Bay were popular. Interestingly, visiting only the student's city of residence was uncommon. One participant mentioned, *'My friends and relatives had already decided to stay on the Gold Coast, so I did not recommend a city to stay in. I gave them information about places that are accessible from the Gold Coast'* (P14).

Figure 1  
Payment process of Japanese VFR travellers generated by students



The VFR travellers in this study often stayed on the Gold Coast, even though some students lived in Brisbane. Therefore, the Gold Coast plays an important role as a main travel hub, and Brisbane, Byron Bay, and the Sunshine Coast are regarded as day-trip destinations. Notably, twelve of the 17 students who hosted the VFR trips took their VFR travellers to cities that the students had visited previously, usually within the first two months of their study in the country. One student made the following comment:

*'My friends and I went to Brisbane, Byron Bay, and the Sunshine Coast as day trips, and my friends did not know what to do in each city, but I took them to some attractions that I had been to before.'* (P17)

The VFR travellers were interested not only in Brisbane and the Gold Coast but also other symbolic destinations in Australia. For instance, seven out of the 40 VFR trips were neither to Brisbane nor the Gold Coast but instead to Cairns, Melbourne, Sydney, and Alice Springs. The students and their VFRs met up at these destinations and used commercial accommodation. The length of stay of the participating VFR travellers averaged between 5 and 7 days, which nearly corresponds to the median length of stay for Japanese holiday travellers in Australia (5 days) (Tourism Australia, 2016). The popular months for visits by the Japanese VFR travellers in this study were February, August, and December. Twenty-seven out of the 40 VFR trips occurred in those three months, a trend that follows the peak seasons

of other Japanese markets' visits to Australia (Tourism Australia, 2016). Furthermore, fourteen out of the 17 students who hosted VFR trips received VFR travellers in their first year of study in Australia. Therefore, the aforementioned three months in the first year of study are significant for generating VFR travels. Any promotional approach should be conducted as students begin their studies abroad in Australia because they often take VFRs to cities and activities that they themselves visited within the first two months of their stay in the country.

Only two of the trips were aimed at attending a graduation ceremony, which does not align with the findings of the previous studies on VFR travellers generated by students in Western contexts (e.g., Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Hu & Morrison, 2002; Hunter-Jones, 2008). These previous studies revealed that VFR travellers generated by students were dispersed seasonally, lengthened the holiday season, and followed an academic calendar, but this study found none of these points to hold. Many of the students commented on the difficulty of Japanese people visiting Australia during the nonholiday season because the student's friends and relatives are either studying or working full time. One female participant made the following comment:

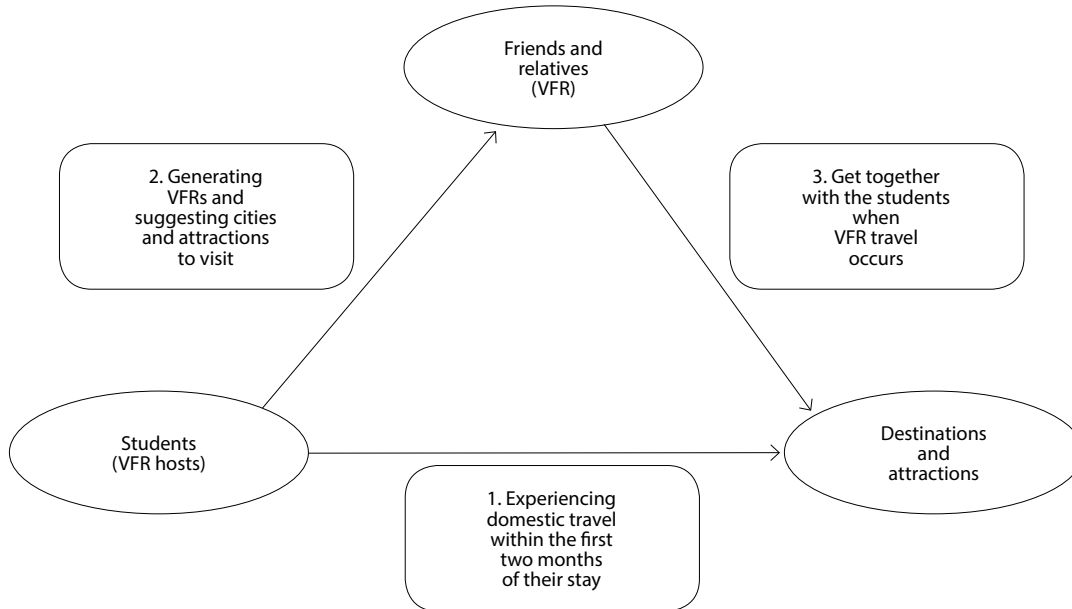
*'My parents go on international travel roughly once a year in August because they can have a holiday in only that month . . . My friends cannot afford to take enough time to come to Australia due to their studies and part-time work.'* (P10)

This study found that few Japanese VFR travellers stay in a student's residence, such as a shared house or homestay; thus, commercial accommodation is often used when VFRs visit Australia. This finding supports several prior studies that revealed the frequent use of commercial accommodation by VFR travellers, including those on trips generated by students and immigrants (e.g., Backer, 2010; Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Pennington-Gray, 2003). Of the 33 trips by Japanese VFR travellers who stayed on either the Gold Coast or in Brisbane, 24 trips included commercial accommodation. Hotels or serviced apartments were preferred over hostels among Japanese VFRs. Four students (P6, P12, P22, and P25) asked their VFR guests to stay in their shared houses or homestays, but their VFR guests refused and preferred to stay in commercial accommodation. One male student shared his experience regarding this matter:

*'When I offered for my mum and younger brother to stay in my shared house, they adamantly refused and said they would rather that we stay together at a great accommodation. My mum told me that she appreciated my hard work, but she added that she needed more privacy and did not understand how to behave when staying at my shared house with someone unknown to her.'* (P6)

This study found three reasons Japanese VFR travellers prefer staying in commercial accommodation. First, the visitors and students go on overnight trips together to places far from where the students reside. This is consistent with a study conducted by Lehto et al. (2001), although in that study, the hosts were not students. Secondly, VFR travellers offer the students a more luxurious lifestyle while visiting. Thirdly, VFR travellers hesitate to share a place with unfamiliar housemates or homestay families. The latter two reasons have not been seen in previous studies. Figure 2 shows a summary of the travel patterns of the Japanese VFR travellers generated by the students in this study.

Figure 2  
Summary of the travel patterns of Japanese VFR travellers generated by students



## Conclusion

The analysis of the data suggested that Japanese VFR travellers generated by students were difficult to categorise using only the two commonly used criteria: the purpose of travel and the type of accommodation. The findings of this study suggest that the categorisation of Japanese VFR travellers requires the inclusion of the trigger for the travel and the factors affecting destination choice. These two criteria could theoretically extend research on VFR travellers to include a variety of destinations and countries of origin, as well as Asian perspectives.

Japanese VFR travellers generated by students preferred commercial accommodation and heavily depended on these students during most of their time at their destinations. This study further explored three reasons for the significant use of commercial accommodation, which included overnight trips to destinations far from the student's residential area, giving students a more luxurious experience, and helping their friends and relatives to avoid sharing space with strangers. Additionally, the students were mostly responsible for planning, booking, and paying for attractions and activities in advance, while the VFR travellers, except for the students' friends, who paid for only their own expenses, reimbursed the students for all expenses. The length of stay and seasonality of the visits mirrored those for typical Japanese holiday travellers to Australia.

The current study shows the significance of researching VFR generated by students and the diverse countries of origin of VFR travellers. Specifically, it implies that a large volume of non-Western and non-migrant-generated travellers exist in the VFR market, especially from Asian countries, including Japan. Travellers generated by students are among these. Thus, the findings of past VFR studies should be applied to Asian contexts. Furthermore, such attempts will contribute to redefining and reconceptualising the market and thus creating a new definitional model of VFR. Marketing activities aimed at international students can help encourage VFR travellers. Therefore, marketers, when developing marketing campaigns, should consider international students as representatives of the destination and its activities while in the early stages of their study periods.

Although this study explores additional criteria for categorising the VFR market, further research is needed to confirm the importance of these criteria. Thus, in future studies, the aforementioned additional criteria should be investigated in detail to augment the VFR definitional model developed by Backer (2012). This study provides important insights into the travel behaviours of Asian VFR travellers, specifically Japanese travellers to one area. Expanding this focus in the future, such as including different nationalities and destinations, will aid the formation of feasible and applicable marketing campaigns in many settings.

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Submitted: 14/09/2017

Accepted: 24/02//2018