

The categorisation of the Asian repeat tourists: A preliminary study

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Abstract

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, many inbound tourists visited Japan. Tourist from Asian countries and regions tend to become repeat tourists (repeaters), thus the Japanese national government has targeted these repeaters to boost the country's tourism. To understand these repeaters further, this study attempted to categorise Asian repeaters based on their behaviours after analysing interview data collected in 2018. The categorisation is based on their revisit intentions to Japan with the repeaters categorised into three groups: (1) variety seekers who visit multiple destinations in Japan, (2) heavy variety seekers who seek out and explore new destinations in Japan, and (3) daily life seekers who visit the same places in Japan more than once. This study is a preliminary research on this topic, which will be extended in the future.

Keywords

Inbound tourists
Japan
Asian tourists
Categorisation

Introduction

Since 2003, the Japanese national government has conducted policies to attract tourists from abroad such as relaxing certain visa requirements, and the number of inbound tourists has increased. In 2019, the number of inbound tourists numbered 31.9 million, about 84.1% of these from Asian countries or regions. The top five tourist sources were Mainland China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Thailand. Furthermore, many of those tourists from Asian countries have become repeaters (Japan Tourism Agency, 2019). According to a survey conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency (2019), repeaters accounted for 61.9% of all tourists in 2019. Asian countries or regions tend to have more repeaters because proximity enables lower travel costs and greater convenience (Japan Tourism Agency, 2019). More than 80% of the tourists from Hong Kong and Taiwan were repeaters. In the case of South Korea, Thailand, and Singapore, 70% were repeaters. The Japan Tourism Agency (2019) found that those repeaters tend to spend more money than do first-time visitors. Thus, the national government has targeted to increase the Asian repeaters. To attract more Asian repeaters, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of their intentions and behaviours.

To that end, this study attempts to categorise Asian repeaters based on their behaviours using the results from interviews conducted in 2018. A large-scale quantitative survey based on the results of the interviews results was planned to be conducted in 2020. However, due to the global suspension of international travel by the COVID-19 pandemic, it became impossible to conduct the survey. Thus, this short communication discusses the survey conducted in 2018 and provides preliminary findings from the initial study. While the results presented in this paper are based on a small study, it is believed that the results can be of use to help attract Asian repeaters in the post-pandemic era.

Previous studies of repeat tourists

In terms of repeaters, according to the marketing theory, consumers are likely to be repeat buyers of a product or service

when they are satisfied with their first experience. However, some consumers do not become repeaters even when satisfied with a product or service, which can be at least partially explained as variety-seeking behaviour (Van Trijp et al., 1996). In terms of tourist behaviour, the intention to discover new destinations can also be explained as variety-seeking behaviour. Although some studies have attempted to explain the variety-seeking behaviour of tourists as it relates to revisit intention (Bigne et al., 2009; Legohérel et al., 2015; Martenson, 2018), their results are associated with Western-style leisure tendencies, such as vacationing during summer. Bigne et al. (2009) tried to identify factors that would affect revisit intention, such as satisfaction, variety seeking, and cost switching, and categorised revisit intentions as long-term (within five years) and short-term (next vacation). Although their model might explain European tourists' vacations well, Asian tourist behaviour does not fit this model, as Asian tourists often have different vacation cultures. Thus, a concept like one's 'next' vacation holds little meaning for Asian tourists because the timeframe of 'next' varies widely.

Novelty seeking has been also used as a variable to explain the intentions of repeaters. Jang and Feng (2007) found that novelty-seeking was a significant antecedent of mid-term revisit intention that was connected to long-term revisit intention. Wong and Zhao (2016) estimated the relationships among geographic convenience, tourists' visit frequency, travel spending, and the moderating effect of novelty seeking. Their results show that geographic convenience is only significant for low-novelty seekers, while the frequency-of-visit effect is more salient for high-novelty seekers.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and November 2018. Participants of the study were individuals from Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan, who had visited Japan as tourists at least two times for leisure purpose. The respondents were recruited using a snowball sampling method, where the researchers' friends in each country asked other friends who selected respondents from their connections (e.g.

Table 1. Profile of Interview Respondents

	Thailand	South Korea	Taiwan
Gender	Male:3, Female: 10	Male: 1, Female: 7	Male: 1, Female: 3
Age	20s: 4, 30s: 5, 40s: 1, 60s: 3	20s: 1, 30s: 2, 40s: 1, 50s: 3 80s: 1	20s: 3, 30s: 1
Number of visits	2-9 visits: 7 20-29 visits: 2 30- visits: 4	1 visit: 2 10- visits: 6	2-9 visits: 3 10- visits: 1

friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, or SNS connections) known to have visited Japan. The total number of respondents was 25 (13 from Thailand, 8 from South Korea, and 4 from Taiwan). All 25 individuals had visited Japan at least two times for leisure as a primary purpose. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarised in Table 1.

The interview were conducted face-to-face in Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan at the respondent's city of residence. Every interview was conducted through an interpreter to overcome language barriers. The interview took two hours on average. The interview protocol was distributed to each participant before the interview. The questions asked for information along the following lines: experiences with overseas travel, including travel to Japan (questions covering each experience, destination, the reason for visit, year and month, duration, travel party members, shopping for souvenirs and cuisines, most memorable experience, the image of the destination both before and after the visit, satisfaction, and revisit intention), the intention of future overseas travel (destination of next overseas leisure travel), and demographics (i.e. age, gender, occupation, place of residence, academic background, place of birth, and current employment). As noted earlier, the interviews were conducted to collect information that will be used for developing a large scale survey. Thus, statements made by the participants were organised to explore any trends among participants.

Results and categorisation

Before their visits, many respondents had mental images and perceptions of Japan and Japanese people that they had been formed from anime, various manga series, such as Doraemon, One Piece, Naruto, and the Pokemon video franchise. Even respondents in their 60s from Thailand had watched Japanese cartoons on TV in their childhoods. Some anime and manga describe daily life in Japan through stories that deal mainly with school life. Almost all respondents answered that they had pictured Japan as orderly and having clean cities before their visits, and these ideas were confirmed after their visits.

In answer to why they chose to revisit Japan so many times, many respondents mentioned the 'short journey' and 'cheap airfare'. However, since there are other destinations with the same conditions, a follow-up question was asked for more specific reasons. Most answered, 'safety', 'similar foods culture', and the ability to 'travel freely by themselves'. Many respondents used tours on their first visit; after that, they were more likely to tour Japan independently by themselves. Thus, in their second visit, they planned their own itinerary often with online travel agencies. In addition, respondents who could not speak Japanese realised during their first visit that there was no language problem in urban areas. Other common

reasons recounted for revisiting Japan were the many tourist spots and new places to discover. These respondents mentioned visiting different destinations within Japan when they revisited (variety-seeking behaviour). In terms of the attractiveness of Japan, they said its safety and services were appealing. A respondent from Thailand who had visited Japan more than 30 times said:

Even though I visited the countryside in Japan, I received constant service. For example, in Thailand, there is a big difference in hotel quality between urban and rural areas. However, in Japan, hotel quality in the countryside is almost at the same level as that in urban areas. What is particularly attractive about Japan is that tourists can enjoy simple daily life. I do not seek an exciting experience in Japan. I will go to Africa if I am looking for excitement. For me, travelling to Japan is not overseas travel. It feels like daily life.

As with this respondent who mentioned feeling the comforts of 'daily life' when visiting Japan, other respondents who had visited Japan more than 10 times mentioned this as well; they often visited Japan because of the short journey and because the travel began to feel comfortable and a part of their daily lives. For Korean respondents, the cost of travelling to Japan is lower than that of domestic travel. Moreover, travelling time is almost the same as domestic travel, such as between Seoul and Jeju Island. Thus, in terms of cost and time, travelling to Japan is similar to domestic travel for South Koreans.

All respondents were satisfied with their travel, especially with the travel they planned. However, the satisfaction level with other Asian countries and regions tended to be lower. The common reasons for this were the destinations were 'dirty' or 'not safe'. Thus, 'cleanliness' and 'safety' had strong effects on satisfaction. The categorisation here is based on their revisit intentions to Japan. Overall, their intention to revisit was high, but their destinations for subsequent travel differed depending on their experiences (frequency of visit). Figure 1 shows that repeaters were categorised into three groups: (1) variety seekers who visit multiple destinations in Japan, (2) heavy variety seekers who seek out and explore new destinations in Japan, and (3) daily life seekers who visit the same places more than once. Respondents who used a group tour on their first visit planned their travel to Japan independently on their second visit and thereafter. Some of these wanted to explore new places at each visit and thus, did not revisit the same destinations. These respondents are categorised as variety seekers. The results suggest that the more a tourist visits Japan, the more likely it is that the individual will seek out a new destination within the country to explore. These tourists are categorised as heavy variety seekers. The respondents who felt travelling to Japan was a part of their daily life tended to revisit the same places; categorised as daily life

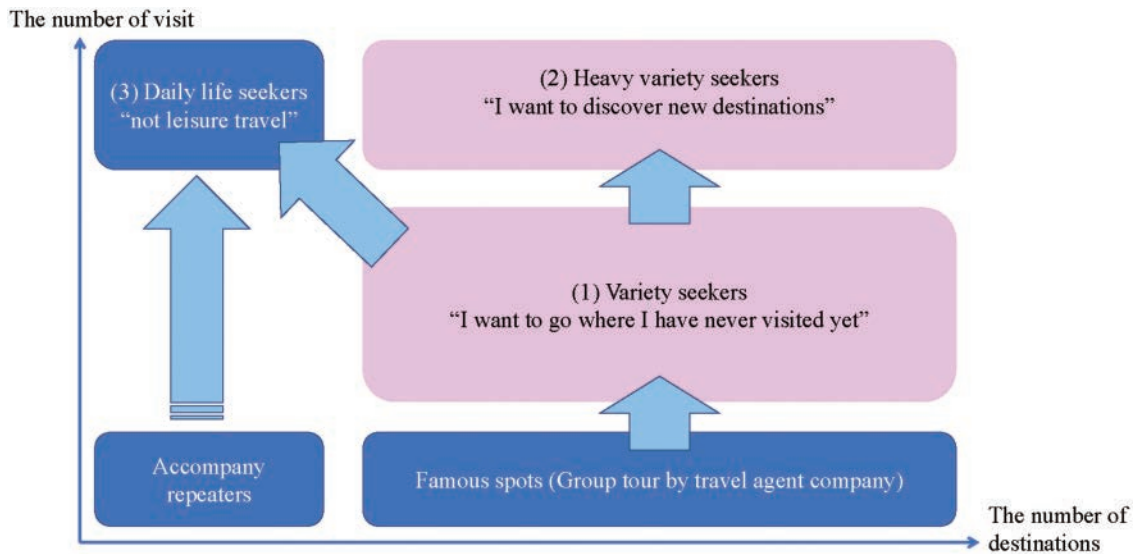


Figure 1. The change in tourists' behaviour after traveling in Japan.

seekers. Some respondents reported that they did not consider it “repeating travel” when they travelled with a different family member, friends or in a different season. When asking their thought about plans for cultural experiences offered by the government or tourist destinations, all respondents answered that there was no need for such plans; making comments such as: “We want to stay where we like. We do not seek exciting or surprising events in Japan”. As noted by a respondent from Thailand, tourists are able to receive constant services throughout Japan. All the respondents said that Japan appealed to them, and they sought to define their own exciting experiences while there.

Conclusion

To understand Asian repeat visitors, it is necessary to distinguish them by their behaviour. As mentioned, repeaters represented 61.9 % of inbound tourists to Japan in 2019, and before the pandemic, the number of repeaters had been increasing every year. The Japanese government and destinations have been conducting various marketing and outreach programs to attract these repeaters. For example, assuming that repeaters are looking for original and unique experiences at destinations they choose, destinations have been considering providing ‘cultural experiences’, such as wearing kimonos (Japanese traditional-style costumes) and practices making traditional artworks.

The results of this study show that repeaters fall into several categories: variety seekers who visit multiple destinations within Japan; heavy variety seekers who seek out and explore new destinations in Japan; and daily life seekers who visit the same places in Japan more than once. In addition, all of the respondents in all three categories mentioned wanting to travel in Japan based on their own preferences, and not seeking specific planned ‘excitement’ or cultural experiences. Moreover, most tourists who could not speak Japanese realised during their first visit that there was no language problem in urban areas. Fears of communication issues and other anticipated risks disappeared after the respondents had visited Japan; thus, they usually planned a tour independently for their second and subsequent visits.

In terms of academic contribution, this study focused on categorising repeaters into three segments based on their behaviours through interview surveys. This contrasts with

previous studies that have focused on the relationships among repeat intention, satisfaction, variety seeking, and novelty seeking. One of the new findings here is that repeaters show getting a sense of self-efficacy in their return visits, feeling comfortable enough that they can travel by themselves even if they do not speak Japanese. Self-efficacy pushes their revisit intention, and it may be a key variable in explaining their repeat behaviour. This finding, of course, is based on a limited sample; however, there may be a gap in perceptions between the Japanese government’s assumptions and inbound tourists’ intentions and expectations. In future research, the conceptual model of repeaters should be confirmed through additional interview surveys and larger sampling.

Acknowledgement

The author appreciates the interview respondents from Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 16K21334.

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