



Expanding the concept of the VFR market: Excavating 'hidden VFR travellers'

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

VFR market
Japanese traveller
Travel purpose
Accommodation
Behaviour
Host

ABSTRACT

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travellers have often been categorised based on their purpose of travel and their use of accommodations. This study focuses on the non-VFR category defined by these two factors and on the investigation of 'hidden VFR travellers (HVFRs)' in the non-VFR category. A total of 500 Japanese participants who met their friends or relatives in five major English-speaking destinations completed an online survey. Using the two criteria, 164 were categorised as VFRs, whereas the others were grouped into the non-VFR category. Among the non-VFR travellers, there was a group that shared similar characteristics with the VFR travellers. The result implies that there are HVFRs in the non-VFR category. To expand the current understanding and concept of VFR travellers, this study proposes an additional criterion for categorising VFR, namely, the influence of VFR hosts.

1. Introduction

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel has been deliberately conceptualised and categorised over decades of continuous research. One of the early studies on VFR travel by Jackson (1990) indicated concern about the classification of types of travellers. At that time, travellers were classified exclusively by their purpose of travel, which was mostly determined by the travellers' self-assessment (Jackson, 1990). However, travel frequently has hybrid purposes, and business, leisure or VFR activities often occur on the same trip (Seaton, 1997). A few studies in the late 1990s identified the existence of motivational VFR travellers and accommodation VFR travellers, and they emphasised the importance of the two factors to define VFR travel (Meis, Joyal, and Trites, 1995; Seaton and Palmer, 1997). It was, however, reported that greater than 40% of VFR travellers regard themselves as leisure travellers (Hu and Morrison, 2002). Many potential VFR travellers do not realise there is a difference between leisure and VFR travel (Backer and King, 2017; Jackson, 1990; Paci, 1994). Thus, they may regard themselves as leisure travellers even if their plan and purpose is to visit friends and relatives. Given these points, there may be 'hidden VFR travellers' (HVFRs) in the leisure or other travel markets that are not reported in government or industry statistics.

In this study, Japanese VFR travellers are used as a case for broadening the understanding of the VFR market, particularly the non-

Western market. Japanese tourism is a mature outbound travel market to international destinations because Japan was one of the first countries in Asia to develop outbound travel (Nozawa, 1992). Such maturity and the long history of Japanese outbound tourism can be an influential example of the Asian market. Past VFR studies have mainly focused on the Western market. Considering the increase in the number of VFR travellers from and within non-Western countries in many areas (Dwyer, Seetaram, Forsyth, and King, 2014; Jackson, 2003), it is important to look into non-Western VFR travellers to broaden the understanding of the international VFR market (Griffin, 2013; King and Dwyer, 2015). The Japanese VFR market is not an exception to this trend and has been increasing in recent years. The number of Japanese outbound VFR travellers has increased from 1.34 million in 2010 to 1.95 million in 2017 (Japan Tourism Agency, 2012, 2019). One reported attribute of Japanese VFR travellers is that they are hesitant to stay at others' houses because they want to avoid being a source of trouble for the homeowners (Kashiwagi, Nagai, and Furutani, 2018). This notion implies that using accommodation type as a key criterion may overlook the actual size of the Japanese VFR market given that many travellers stay at commercial accommodations. The aim of this paper is to investigate HVFRs in the non-VFR category by examining their travel behaviours, including purpose, accommodation, length, activities, spending, information source and invitations from VFR hosts using the case of Japanese VFR travellers. By looking into these factors,

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Table 1
VFR definitional model.

	Accommodation: Friends and relatives	Accommodation: Commercial
Purpose of Visit: VFR	✓ PVFRs	✓ CVFRs
Purpose of Visit: Non-VFR	✓ EVFRs	✗ Non-VFRs

Source: Backer (2012).

this study attempts to expand the current concept of the VFR market.

2. Literature review

2.1. Categorisation and definition of VFR travellers

The VFR market has been studied since the 1990s, but the concept and definition of this market has remained a point of discussion, even into the 2010s (Backer, 2012; Munoz, Griffin, and Humbracht, 2017; Tran, Moore, and Shone, 2018). After some studies identified motivational and accommodation factors in defining VFR travel (Meis et al., 1995; Seaton and Palmer, 1997), Backer (2012) proposed a definitional model using the purpose of travel and the use of accommodation. In her model presented in Table 1, four types of VFR travellers were proposed: pure VFRs (PVFRs), who stay at the host's house with the primary travel purpose of visiting the host; commercial VFRs (CVFRs), who stay in commercial accommodation with the primary travel purpose of visiting the host; exploiting VFRs (EVFRs), who use the host's house and whose primary travel purpose is other than visiting the host; and non-VFRs, who stay in commercial accommodations and whose primary travel purpose is other than visiting the host. This model has attracted attention from scholars, and many subsequent VFR studies have mentioned and used this model (e.g., Griffin and Nunkoo, 2016; Munoz et al., 2017; Tran et al., 2018).

Although the model's contribution to VFR research is immense, this model does not identify other important factors that could differentiate VFR travel from other travel types, such as how much time travellers spend with their hosts at a travel destination, what they experience with the hosts and to what extent the hosts influence their visitation. Munoz et al. (2017) therefore proposed a new definitional model that includes the factors of travel purpose, accommodation use, activities with the hosts and travel advice from the hosts. However, their model has not been empirically tested.

Moreover, these models were developed based on studies of Western travellers, which was reasonable because the VFR market has historically been more noticeable in countries where there are large numbers of immigrants, such as Australia, Canada and the United States (Backer, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Jackson, 1990). The VFR market is currently one of the largest markets worldwide and should be analysed from the viewpoints of various countries and markets, especially the emerging Asian market (Dwyer et al., 2014; Griffin, 2013; King and Dwyer, 2015). It is therefore important to advance VFR research on non-Western travellers and develop a conceptualisation of them.

2.2. Types of VFR travellers

The length of VFR travel is often greater than non-VFR travel (Lee, Morrison, Lheto, Webb, and Reid, 2005; Lehto, Morrison, and O'Leary, 2001; Yuan, Fridgen, Hsieh, and O'Leary, 1995). However, some studies indicate that there is a small or insignificant difference between the two (Backer, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Some studies even suggest that non-VFRs have a longer travel length than VFRs (Boyne, Carswell, and Hall, 2002; Müri and Sägerser, 2003; Seaton and Palmer, 1997). Although the literature concerning VFR travel has investigated total travel length, studies have not necessarily considered how much time VFRs spend with their hosts at the destination. However, it is important to identify how long travellers are together with their hosts because it directly

relates to the travel activities in which they participate. Backer (2008) states that it is highly possible that VFRs choose to stay in commercial accommodations to have more freedom in their planning and activities; in other words, it is possible that some travellers intentionally plan to use commercial accommodation so they can manage their time with and without their VFR hosts.

In terms of the tourism activities and spending patterns of VFRs, many recent studies have revealed that VFRs participate in various activities and provide enormous economic contributions to the tourism industry and destinations (Backer, 2015; Griffin and Nunkoo, 2016; Hänsel and Metzner, 2011). VFRs often accompany their hosts at the destinations, and the hosts spend money on tourism-related activities to entertain the VFRs (Backer, 2007; Boyne et al., 2002; Mc Kercher, 1996; Meis et al., 1995; Shani and Uriely, 2012; Young, Corsun, and Baloglu, 2007). Non-tourism services are also frequently purchased by both VFR travellers and hosts, and they contribute to local restaurants, attractions, petrol stations and grocery stores (Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Boyne et al., 2002; Morrison and O'Leary, 1995). It can be said that VFR spending, HVFRs in the non-VFR category and their VFR hosts have a direct economic contribution to the tourism industry and non-tourism services at the destination.

The type of VFR host is also essential to better understand the market since travellers visiting friends (VFs) and those visiting relatives (VRs) have significantly different attributes (Backer, Leisch, and Dolnicar, 2017). Concerning the percentage of the market share for VFs and VRs, Seaton and Tagg (1995) found that among the VFRs travelling to Northern Ireland, 20% were VFs, and 77% were VRs. Similarly, other studies examining the difference between VFs and VRs (specifically in the UK, New Zealand and Australia) revealed that although market shares fluctuate over time, VRs dominate in greater than half of the researched instances (Backer et al., 2017; Hay, 1996, 2008; Lockyer and Ryan, 2007; Seaton and Tie, 2015). Moreover, in terms of accommodation types, more VRs tend to stay at their hosts' homes than VFs (Backer et al., 2017; Seaton and Tagg, 1995). VRs are also more likely than VFs to have VFR as their primary travel purpose (Backer, 2010b; Dutt and Ninov, 2017; Seaton and Tie, 2015). Therefore, because travellers in the non-VFR category do not show VFR as their primary purpose and do not use the host's house, HVFRs may have more similar attributes to VFs than VRs.

2.3. Influence of invitations and travel information from VFR hosts on VFRs and non-VFRs

It is assumed that influence from VFR hosts on non-VFR travellers is less profound than VFR travellers since many studies indicated less travel motivation and information by friends and relatives for non-VFR travellers (Morrison, Verginis, and O'Leary, 2000; Prideaux, Payer, and Thompson, 2016). Generally, the host is a significant factor for VFRs to visit a destination, which results from active communication between the host and traveller (Choi and Fu, 2018). However, Prideaux et al. (2016) showed that a number of non-VFRs are also motivated by friends and relatives albeit not to the extent of VFRs. From this perspective, although most VFRs receive invitations more frequently from their hosts than HVFRs, it can be assumed that HVFRs are also influenced by invitations from VFR hosts.

Fewer non-VFRs than VFRs might rely on hosts to obtain travel information. VFR hosts are likely to be an important source of

information for VFRs when VFRs visit a destination (Morrison and O'Leary, 1995; Pennington-Gray, 2003; Prideaux et al., 2016). Backer (2010a) revealed a more detailed finding that approximately 80% of CVFRs use the hosts' advice for planning their trip, while approximately 65% of non-VFRs use host advice. This finding implies that non-VFRs also obtain travel information from their friends or relatives even though they might frequently obtain travel information from different information sources. This tendency is confirmed in the studies of Morrison et al. (2000) and Prideaux et al. (2016). It was found that 41% of the non-VFR market in their study relied on friends and relatives for their travel information (Prideaux et al., 2016). As long as travellers in the non-VFR category do not have the primary purpose of visiting friends and relatives, it can be assumed that non-VFRs would be less influenced by VFR hosts regarding their visit compared to VFRs. There should be a difference in the level of influence of invitation and travel information from VFR hosts between non-VFRs and VFRs. However, this does not mean that non-VFRs are entirely uninfluenced by the hosts. Those travellers who are influenced by the hosts can be potentially perceived as HVFRs. It is therefore possible that influence of VFR hosts plays an important role in expanding the concept of VFR travel.

2.4. Aim of the study

The literature review shows the important factors in the travel behaviours of VFR and non-VFR travellers. It also demonstrates that there is insufficient understanding and gaps in the research on the difference between them, such as the length of time spent with the hosts, travel activities, spending patterns and the influence of hosts. As mentioned earlier, the current VFR definitional model developed by Backer (2012) exclusively uses travel purpose and accommodation type as the definitional factors. Using these two factors may underestimate a concise VFR market size since the literature review showed there may be hidden VFR travellers (HVFRs) who are now seen as non-VFR travellers. In addition, the influence of VFR hosts is not dealt with as the definitional factor even though the hosts play an integral role in the VFR travel. The significance of this study involves the exploration of a new segment of the VFRs and expansion of the concept of VFR travel with the inclusion of HVFRs through the identification of an additional factor of the VFR definitional model.

Based on these premises and their significance, there are four main areas that the current study attempts to explore to expand the concept of the VFR market by focusing on non-VFR travellers. First, this study explores the length of travel by VFRs and non-VFRs and the amount of time spent with VFR hosts. Second, this study considers invitations and travel information from VFR hosts, and the differences in these between VFRs and non-VFRs are examined. Third, travel expenditure is investigated, and VFR and non-VFR spending is compared. Finally, the type of VFR hosts (friends or relatives) visited by non-VFRs and the attributes associated with the host type are explored.

3. Research method

In this study, Japanese participants who had met their friends or relatives in five English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA) were selected as a sample population. The five countries were selected due to the large Japanese populations in those countries, including residents and international students (Japan Association of Overseas Studies, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). Several studies have noted that many travellers do not recognise whether they are VFR travellers or leisure travellers (Backer, 2012; Jackson, 1990). The sample is not limited to VFR travellers (including PVFRs, EVFRs and CVFRs) in contrast to Backer's (2012) previous VFR definitional model; therefore, meeting friends or relatives was not necessarily the primary purpose of travel of the individuals chosen to participate in this study. As long as they had planned to meet, and actually met, their friends or relatives at the

destination, they were included in the study. Those who met their friends or relatives at the destination coincidentally were not considered. Therefore, because the respondents' travel purpose and accommodation were not exclusively considered, this study's sample is not limited to VFR travellers. Accordingly, the sample was screened using three steps. The first was having been abroad. The second was having met Japanese friends, including acquaintances and colleagues, and relatives, including family, at the destination as planned. The third was that the destination of the second screening question was Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK or the USA.

The respondents included 500 Japanese participants who were living in Japan at the time of the survey in 2017. The participant age was set as 20 years or older because the official government data about the number of Japanese overseas travellers is provided in five-year age increments (e.g., 10–14, 15–19 and 20–24) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018). Travellers aged 18 and 19 are segmented in the category of 15–19, and they cannot be clearly contrasted with the official data because the category includes 15- to 17-year-olds who are not mature enough to include in the study sample. By establishing a minimum age of 20, all of the participants in this study can be clearly contrasted with those over age 20 in the official data. To access the target population, a major Japanese online survey company was used. The questionnaire consisted of three main parts: questions about the travellers (such as travel purpose, total travel length, amount of time spent with the hosts, host type, accommodation, information source, expenditure and activities), questions about the hosts (such as relationship to the traveller, attitude towards the traveller, family structure, the length and reason for residence abroad), and questions about the travellers' demographics (such as gender, age, yearly income, occupation and family lifecycle) (See Appendix A). Except for the travellers' demographics, the questions asked about the most recent experience of meeting friends or relatives at a destination. Some of the questions concerning the travellers' behaviours and the hosts' attitudes were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree* or 1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very frequently*). Question items were based on the study of Backer et al. (2017) and adapted from several relevant VFR papers, such as Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green, and O'Leary (2000); Morrison et al. (2000); and Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis (2007). Each item in the questionnaire was checked within the research team, and further feedback was sought from industry and academic experts who are especially knowledgeable about tourism and statistics (Altinay, Paraskevas, and Jang, 2016; Mason, 2014). These procedures increased the clarity, readability, accuracy and relevance of the questionnaire and ensured content and face validity. While consulting the studies of Backer and King (2017) and Backer (2012), this study mainly discusses the differences and comparisons between VFRs (PVFRs, EVFRs and CVFRs) and non-VFRs. The exploratory analysis is conducted regarding the potential HVFRs who are originally categorised with the non-VFRs. It addresses a new perspective of the VFR definitional model by conducting an analysis that is very exploratory in its nature.

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25, a Mann-Whitney *U* test and cross-tabulation were conducted on the set of items to determine travel behaviours, characteristics and socio-demographics and to compare the differences in those factors between VFRs and non-VFRs. The Mann-Whitney *U* test, a non-parametric statistical technique, was used because histograms showed the data did not follow a normal distribution (Li, 2012). In addition, absolute values of skewness and/or kurtosis were greater than 2.0 (Pett, 2016).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Demographic characteristics

Within the 500 respondents, males accounted for 65.0%, and females accounted for 35.0%. Respondents were aged between 23 and 69 years old. The majority had an annual income between 3,000,000

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of respondents, VFR and non-VFR.

	VFR (n = 164)		Non-VFR (n = 336)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Male	91	55.5	234	69.6
Female	73	44.5	102	30.4
Age				
20–29	8	4.8	7	2.1
30–39	22	13.4	40	11.9
40–49	54	33.0	110	32.7
50–59	53	32.4	112	33.3
60–69	27	16.4	67	20.0
Annual income (JPY)				
0–999,999	25	15.2	35	10.4
1,000,000–2,999,999	17	10.4	41	12.2
3,000,000–4,999,999	34	20.7	63	18.8
5,000,000–6,999,999	21	12.8	48	14.3
7,000,000–8,999,999	17	10.4	40	11.9
9,000,000–11,999,999	20	12.2	39	11.6
12,000,000+	11	6.7	41	12.2
Unknown/Not provided	19	11.6	29	8.6
Occupation				
Student	1	0.6	0	0.0
Full-time worker	95	57.9	222	66.1
Part-time worker	38	23.2	62	18.5
Housewife/husband	21	12.8	29	8.6
Unemployed	9	5.5	22	6.5
Other	0	0.0	1	0.3
Lifecycle stage ^a				
Single	32	19.5	60	17.9
Couple (no children)	57	34.8	111	33.0
Spouse and pre-school children	13	7.9	28	8.3
Spouse and school-age children	29	17.7	75	22.3
Spouse and working children	16	9.8	33	9.8
Spouse and working children living separately	4	2.4	4	1.2
Spouse (retired) and working children living separately	2	1.2	1	0.3
Other	11	6.7	24	7.1
Average instances of annual international travel				
0	28	17.1	46	13.7
1–2	96	58.5	196	58.3
3–4	24	14.6	53	15.8
5–6	9	5.5	16	4.8
7–8	2	1.2	5	1.5
9–10	1	0.6	6	1.8
Over 11	4	2.4	14	4.2

^a Adapted from the traditional family lifecycle (Weaver and Lawton, 2014; Wells and Gubar, 1966).

and 4,999,999 Japanese yen followed by those with an income of 5,000,000–6,999,999 Japanese yen (approximately 1 US dollar = 110 Japanese yen). Greater than half were full-time workers and travelled overseas once to twice yearly. Following the family lifecycle model (Weaver and Lawton, 2014; Wells and Gubar, 1966), couple (no children), spouse and school-age children, and single were the top three lifecycle stage categories. Although the respondents were divided into VFR and non-VFR based on the traditional definition in the next section, Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of VFR and non-VFR travellers. Greater than half of VFR and non-VFR travellers were males, full-time workers and travelling overseas once to twice yearly. The majority were in their 40s and 50s. Couple (no children), spouse and school-age children, and single were the top three lifecycle stages for both VFR and non-VFR (Weaver and Lawton, 2014; Wells and Gubar, 1966).

4.2. Travel purpose and accommodation type

For the most recent experience meeting friends or relatives at the destination, leisure dominated (64.4%) as the primary purpose of travel. VFR was the third-highest purpose at 14.6% after business at 15.8%. For the VFR travellers, there were slightly more VFs (8.6%) than VRs (6.0%). Regarding travel purpose, there were fewer respondents with a VFR purpose, which is similar to many previous studies (e.g., Ghaderi, 2015; Moscardo et al., 2000; O'Leary, Lee, Kim, and Nadkarni, 2015). Regarding accommodation type, 28.0% used the host's house at the destination even though all the respondents met their friends or relatives at the destination. Thus, approximately one-fourth of the respondents stayed with their host, and the other three-fourths used commercial accommodations. This finding is inconsistent with Dutt and Ninov's (2017) and Backer and King's (2017) studies where more VFRs stayed at the host's house rather than in commercial accommodations. A breakdown of these accommodation types showed that the use of friends' and relatives' houses accounted for 20.0% and 8.0%, respectively. Hotels received the highest share at 64.8% followed by serviced apartments at 5.2% and vacation rentals at 1.4%.

Travel purpose and accommodation type were the definitional factors in Backer's VFR model (Backer, 2012). Using cross-tabulation of these two factors, the respondents in this study can be categorised into PVFRs, EVFRs, CVFRs and non-VFRs. This categorisation illustrates that greater than two-thirds of the respondents can be categorised as non-VFRs. PVFRs, EVFRs and CVFRs are combined for a total of 164 VFRs to explore the difference and for comparison with 336 non-VFRs in the analyses below. Moreover, non-VFRs are mainly used to discuss whether there are HVFRs in the category (See Table 3).

4.3. Differences in key travel behaviours between VFRs and non-VFRs

A Mann-Whitney *U* test was conducted to compare total travel length, time spent with VFR hosts, percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of the total travel time, invitation frequency from VFR hosts, travel information from VFR hosts and total expenditure between VFRs and non-VFRs (See Table 4) (See Appendix B for a list of the items used in scaled data).

Regarding total travel length, there is no statistically significant difference between VFRs and non-VFRs ($p > 0.05$). The finding of a similar total travel length between VFRs and non-VFRs is consistent with Backer (2010a) and Backer (2010c). Nevertheless, in terms of time spent with VFR hosts and percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of the total travel time, VFRs spend more time with the hosts than non-VFRs ($p < 0.05$). Time spent with VFR hosts is a unique behaviour; thus, it is additionally analysed in terms of frequency. The respondents were categorically asked to indicate their time spent with VFR hosts from '2 hours (such as having a meal together)' to 'all days of the trip' (1 = 2 h; 2 = half a day; 3 = 1 day; 4 = 2 days; 5 = 3 days; 6 = 4 days; 7 = 5 days; 8 = 6 days; 9 = 7 days; 10 = 8 days and more and 11 = all days). For VFRs, '3 days' had the highest percentage (19.5%) followed by '2 days' (17.1%) and '4 days' (14.6%). For non-VFRs, '2 days' had the highest percentage (24.7%) followed by '1 day' (20.8%) and 'half a day' (18.5%). 'More than 1 day' dominated at 67.6% for non-VFRs, illustrating that two-thirds of non-VFRs join VFR hosts for more than one

Table 3
Frequency of VFR types of respondents.

Purpose of travel	Accommodation type	
	Host's house	Commercial
	n	n
VFR	49 (PVFR)	24 (CVFR)
Non-VFR	91 (EVFR)	336 (Non-VFR)

Table 4
Mann-Whitney *U* test of travel behaviours and expenditures between VFRs and non-VFRs.

	VFR		Non-VFR		<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean rank	Median	Mean rank	Median			
Travel behaviours							
Total travel length (days)	267.26	7.00	242.32	7.00	24,803.00	-1.83	0.068
Time spent with VFR hosts ^a	360.33	6.00	196.89	3.00	9540.50	-12.01	0.000*
Percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of total travel time (%)	366.01	60.00	194.12	20.00	8609.00	-12.55	0.000*
Invitation frequency from VFR hosts ^b	299.42	6.00	226.62	5.00	19,529.00	-5.47	0.000*
Travel information from VFR hosts ^c	332.03	6.00	210.71	5.00	14,181.50	-8.97	0.000*
Travel expenditure (10,000 JPY)							
Total expenditure	228.47	25.00	261.25	33.00	23,939.00	-2.38	0.017*
Air ticket	181.81	13.00	206.79	15.00	15,541.50	-2.09	0.037*
Food and beverage	238.44	4.00	256.39	5.00	25,574.50	-1.32	0.187
Transport at the destination	224.47	1.00	263.21	2.00	23,282.50	-2.88	0.004*
Accommodation	125.79	1.00	237.21	9.00	7754.50	-9.35	0.000*
Travel activities at the destination	247.39	4.00	252.02	5.00	27,041.50	-0.340	0.734

* Significant at the level of 0.05.

^a Asked by the categorical question (1 = 2 h, 2 = half a day, 3 = 1 day, 4 = 2 days, 5 = 3 days, 6 = 4 days, 7 = 5 days, 8 = 6 days, 9 = 7 days, 10 = 8 days and more, and 11 = all days).

^b Rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very frequently).

^c Rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

day. Thus, a high number of non-VFRs spend time with VFR hosts at the destination. Given these points, such non-VFRs cannot be ignored even though they reported a shorter time spent with VFR hosts than VFRs.

The respondents were asked to provide an amount of travel expenditure in Japanese yen, and this was divided into five factors, which were also tested by the Mann-Whitney *U* test. A statistically significant difference in total expenditure was found between VFRs and non-VFRs ($p < 0.05$), and total spending of non-VFRs was higher than VFRs. Non-VFRs reported higher spending on accommodations than VFRs ($p < 0.05$). This was predictable because all the non-VFRs used commercial accommodations and spent more money on this service than VFRs who stayed at a host's house. Non-VFRs also rated their spending on food and beverage and transport at the destination higher than VFRs ($p < 0.05$); however, food and beverage was not significantly different. This result was also understandable, and it is possible that non-VFRs are less likely than VFRs to have an opportunity to be served a meal and driven by VFR hosts during their stay. The finding of this spending behaviour is in contrast to that reported in the studies by Moscardo et al. (2000) and Backer (2007). Backer's study (2007) found that VFRs and non-VFRs have a similar economic contribution at the destination; however, this was not the case in the current study.

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of invitation frequency from VFR hosts on a 7-point Likert scale. The mean rank of invitation frequency from VFR hosts for VFRs and non-VFRs was 299.42 and 226.62, respectively, and VFRs had a higher mean rank ($p < 0.05$). Regarding the cross-tabulation of the invitation frequency for VFRs, 'very frequently' ranked at 19.5%, 'frequently' was 36.0% and

'sometimes' was 29.3%. For non-VFRs, 'very frequently' was 8.6%, 'frequently' was 24.7% and 'sometimes' was 34.2%. Given that 164 respondents are VFR travellers, it is understandable that they received an invitation from VFR hosts. Conversely, it is also understandable that the 336 non-VFRs do not have a VFR purpose of travel since they have fewer invitations from their hosts although they may have had a plan to meet their friends or relatives. However, greater than two-thirds of non-VFRs had a positive answer to this question. Young et al.'s (2007) study found that many VFR hosts invited and gave word-of-mouth travel information to VFRs. Despite this, the current study found that not only VFRs but also some non-VFRs received invitations from their hosts.

The amount of travel information from VFR hosts was also analysed. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the extent of travel information received from VFR hosts on a 7-point Likert scale. The mean rank of VFRs and non-VFRs was 332.03 and 210.71, respectively, and non-VFRs were significantly less informed by their hosts ($p < 0.05$). Regarding the frequency of VFRs receiving travel information, 'strongly agree' was chosen by 32.9%, 'agree' was 30.5% and 'somewhat agree' was 21.3%. For non-VFRs, 'strongly agree' ranked at 9.5%, 'agree' was 16.1% and 'somewhat agree' was 25.9%, which was the highest for non-VFRs.

One detail about information sources was also analysed for VFRs and non-VFRs (See Table 5). The respondents were asked to rate their agreement about the use of eight information source items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The items were adapted from Backer's study (2010b), and some items were changed to suit the tendencies of the Japanese market. The Mann-Whitney *U* test

Table 5
Mann-Whitney *U* test of information sources for VFRs and non-VFRs.

	VFR		Non-VFR		<i>U</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean rank	Median	Mean rank	Median			
Information from VFR hosts	332.03	6.00	210.71	5.00	14,181.50	-8.97	0.000*
Travel guidebooks	239.63	5.00	255.81	5.00	25,769.50	-1.20	0.229
Internet	233.77	5.00	258.67	5.00	24,808.50	-1.85	0.065
Information from friends and relatives in Japan	267.21	4.00	242.35	4.00	24,812.00	-1.84	0.066
TV, newspapers and other media	254.14	4.00	248.72	4.00	26,955.50	-0.402	0.688
Information centre at the destination	259.61	4.00	246.05	3.50	26,058.00	-1.01	0.315
Travel agent in Japan	263.41	3.00	244.20	3.00	25,435.50	-1.43	0.153
Social networking site	263.83	3.00	243.99	3.00	25,366.00	-1.49	0.137

Source: Backer (2010b).

* Significant at the level of 0.05.

was used to explore the differences in the set of information sources between VFRs and non-VFRs (See Appendix B for a list of the items used in scaled data).

Only information from VFR hosts had a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$), whereas the other seven information sources did not. This finding is consistent with Backer's study (2010b), which reported that VFRs were more likely to rely on travel information from VFR hosts than non-VFRs although this was an important source of information for both groups. In fact, the non-VFRs are nominally regarded as not VFRs and have less information from the hosts than VFRs. Nonetheless, greater than half provided a positive answer to obtaining information from their hosts: 32, 54 and 87 out of 336 non-VFRs indicated they strongly agreed, agreed or somewhat agreed with it, respectively. From this perspective, some non-VFRs who receive travel information from their hosts can be seen as HVFRs despite the difference between VFRs and non-VFRs in their level of their agreement with it since the information from their hosts might influence their travel behaviours. In addition, such information might influence the fact that they visited the destination and met their friends and relatives. These findings show that non-VFRs were somewhat invited and informed by their hosts, which is similar to VFRs. Given these analyses, it can be said that those non-VFRs influenced by their hosts can be regarded as HVFRs even if they use commercial accommodations and do not indicate that their purpose of travel is VFR because they actually visited the destination and met their friends or relatives.

4.4. Potential HVFRs

Considering the findings in this study, the discussion of the total travel length, time spent with VFR hosts, invitation from VFR hosts and travel information from VFR hosts indicates the possibility of the existence of HVFRs among non-VFRs. Given that all the 336 non-VFRs in this study have met their friends or relatives at the destination and that approximately two-thirds of non-VFRs join VFR hosts for more than one day, it is possible that some are influenced by their hosts and have similar travel behaviour to VFRs although the type of accommodation and the purpose of travel categorise them as non-VFRs. The exploratory analysis was conducted on 51.5% of non-VFRs whose response to obtaining travel information from the hosts indicated they strongly agreed, agreed or somewhat agreed because VFR hosts are also an important source of information for non-VFRs (Backer, 2010b). The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted between VFRs and non-VFRs to compare their travel behaviours, including total travel length, time spent with VFR hosts, percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of total travel time, total expenditure and invitation frequency from VFR hosts (See Table 6). The result showed that all five factors had statistically significant differences between the two groups ($p < 0.05$). Thus, these non-VFRs cannot be seen as HVFRs. Thus, the same test was retried without non-VFRs who somewhat agreed with obtaining travel information from the hosts. It showed notable results, and factors had

significant differences and non-significant differences on travel behaviours. Thus, the travel behaviours of these 86 non-VFRs who strongly agreed or agreed with obtaining travel information from the hosts were analysed and compared with 164 VFRs in detail as 'potential HVFRs' (See Appendix B for a list of the items used in scaled data).

The total travel length of the potential HVFRs was not significantly different with VFRs ($p > 0.05$), and the same tendency was seen between VFRs and non-VFRs (Table 4). A statistically significant difference was seen in the time spent with VFR hosts and percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of total travel time between VFRs and the potential HVFRs ($p < 0.05$). Nevertheless, the median time spent with VFR hosts was 4.00 for potential HVFRs and 3.00 for non-VFRs, which is presented in Table 4. Moreover, potential HVFRs had a median value of 30.00 for the percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of total travel time, and this was higher than that noted for non-VFRs at 20.00 (Table 4). These two aspects reveal that the usage of time at the destination for potential HVFRs was more similar to VFRs compared to non-VFRs. This fact also shows that their travel behaviours were similar to VFRs for approximately one-third of their time at the destination. No statistically significant difference was between VFRs and potential HVFRs in terms of total expenditure ($p > 0.05$). Of note, non-VFRs had a significantly higher median value of total expenditure than VFRs, as shown in Table 4; however, this finding was not observed between VFRs and potential HVFRs. Potential HVFRs did not have a statistically significant difference of invitation frequency from VFR hosts compared with VFRs ($p > 0.05$), indicating that potential HVFRs were likely to get invited by VFR hosts as much as VFRs. As a result, 86 potential HVFRs had travel behaviours similar to VFRs, such as total travel length and total expenditure, and they were profoundly influenced by VFR hosts as much as VFRs. Therefore, it should be emphasised that approximately 25.6% of non-VFRs could possibly be HVFRs, and the influence of VFR hosts, such as invitations and information, should be regarded as an additional VFR definitional factor. Using this additional factor, it is possible to differentiate VFRs from other travellers not only during travel (travel purpose and accommodation use) but also before the travel (influence of VFR hosts). Given these points, it is important to understand what types of VFR hosts influence HVFRs before travelling, and this will play a decisive role in identifying a target of promotional activities among various host types. Thus, the next paragraph will discuss host type details and their reason for residing at the destination.

Table 7 represents the frequency of the types of VFR hosts of HVFRs and their reasons for residence at the destination (although the population is limited to 86). Most HVFRs met friends followed by acquaintances and past or present co-workers. Business dominated as the reason for the hosts' residence at the destination (61.6%). The other major reasons were study, lifestyle and marriage. Thus, 79 of the HVFRs are grouped into the VF type, and many of their VFR hosts cite business as the reason for moving to the destination. The finding that many of the HVFRs met friends who had business reasons for living at the destination is important in terms of its practical contribution to the

Table 6
Mann-Whitney U test of travel behaviours for VFRs and potential HVFRs.

	VFR		Potential HVFR		U	z	p
	Mean rank	Median	Mean rank	Median			
Total travel length (days)	131.58	7.00	113.90	7.00	6054.50	-1.85	0.065
Time spent with VFR hosts ^a	148.17	6.00	82.26	4.00	3333.50	-6.92	0.000*
Percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of total travel time (%)	148.23	60.00	82.16	30.00	3325.00	-6.89	0.000*
Total expenditure (10,000 JPY)	121.66	25.00	132.83	31.50	6421.50	-1.16	0.246
Invitation frequency from VFR hosts ^b	125.67	6.00	125.17	6.00	7024.00	-0.054	0.957

* Significant at the level of 0.05.

^a Asked by the categorical question (1 = 2 h, 2 = half a day, 3 = 1 day, 4 = 2 days, 5 = 3 days, 6 = 4 days, 7 = 5 days, 8 = 6 days, 9 = 7 days, 10 = 8 days and more and 11 = all days).

^b Rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very frequently).

Table 7
Frequency of VFR host type for HVFRs and reason for host residence at the destination.

	<i>n</i>	%
VFR host type		
Friends	62	72.1
Acquaintances	9	10.5
Co-workers (past or present)	8	9.3
Siblings	3	3.5
Relatives	3	3.5
Parents	1	1.2
Reason for the hosts' residence at the destination		
Business	53	61.6
Study	13	15.1
New lifestyle	9	10.5
Marriage	9	10.5
Second life after retirement	1	1.2
Economic reasons	1	1.2

destination and tourism industry and will be discussed in the next section.

5. Conclusion and implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the travel behaviours of VFRs and non-VFRs to expand the view of the VFR market. The sample population of this study included 500 Japanese travellers who had met their friends or relatives in five major English-speaking destinations. The sample was not limited to VFR travellers categorised by purpose of travel and type of accommodation in contrast to the previous VFR definitional model (Backer, 2012).

To compare travel behaviours, the sample was then divided into VFRs and non-VFRs using two definitional factors: the purpose of travel and the type of accommodation. In total, 164 and 336 respondents were categorised as VFRs and non-VFRs, respectively, although all of them met their friends or relatives during their trip. The analyses of the travel behaviours of non-VFRs were mainly conducted to compare and differentiate these travellers from VFRs based on factors, such as total travel length, time spent with VFR hosts, percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of the total travel time, invitation frequency from VFR hosts, travel information from VFR hosts and total expenditure.

Time spent with VFR hosts, percentage of time spent with VFR hosts out of total travel time, invitations from VFR hosts, travel information from VFR hosts, and total expenditure were significantly different. However, greater than two-thirds of non-VFRs accompanied VFR hosts for more than one day at the destination and had frequent invitations by VFR hosts that were similar to VFRs. Only total travel length was not significantly different between VFRs and non-VFRs. In addition, exploratory analyses of the 86 non-VFRs who strongly agreed or agreed with obtaining travel information from the hosts had almost the same travel behaviours as VFRs. In particular, total travel length, total expenditure and invitation frequency from VFR hosts were not significantly different from VFRs. These findings indicate the possibility that approximately 25.6% of the non-VFRs were HVFRs in the current study, and the influence of VFR hosts seems to be a potential additional factor in defining VFR travellers.

This study identified VFR travellers whose travel purpose and accommodation were not primarily related to their VFR hosts and revealed a potential additional VFR definitional factor, namely, the influence of VFR hosts. It is therefore reasonable to widen the view of VFR travel and state the existence of HVFRs in the category of non-VFRs. Of those HVFRs, invitation and travel information from VFR hosts were obtained with a similar frequency as VFRs. These two points also played a primary role in differentiating their travel behaviours from non-VFRs. This influence of VFR hosts can be an additional factor in defining VFR travellers.

Regarding the increase in worldwide migration for various reasons, the tourism industry cannot ignore the VFR market and these hidden VFR travellers. Their economic contributions are attractive for the destination given that HVFRs use commercial accommodations, and they also induce not only additional spending by VFR hosts but also the injection of foreign money into the local economy. Therefore, tourism marketers should distinguish HVFRs from non-VFRs and understand them as VFRs who behave like leisure or business travellers whose purpose and accommodation are not primarily related to VFR hosts.

This study also found that friends were most often the VFR hosts for HVFRs. Therefore, the VFR market should be focused on HVFRs, and promotional activities should be conducted to accelerate the VFR market for HVFRs. In addition, more than half of the hosts for HVFRs were driven by a business reason to live at the destination. In general, such hosts, i.e., Japanese businesspeople, move overseas using a Japanese travel agent because working at foreign posts is one of the duties assigned by their company. For example, if the travellers have a leisure or business purpose, it is still conceivable that they would allocate their time to see their friends or relatives who live at the destination for a business reason. Even for a short time, this opportunity influences the realisation of visiting their friends or relatives in the destination and might possibly lead to repeat visits.

Thus, collaborative campaigns should be conducted between destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and Japanese travel agents that send Japanese businesspeople overseas. DMOs and Japanese travel agents that have information about those staff members should approach the companies sending their staff overseas. Moreover, these campaigns should also approach the hosts – especially those who are Japanese businesspeople – because the VFR hosts play an important role in promoting and influencing VFR travellers (Choi and Fu, 2018; Kashiwagi et al., 2018). Since these businesspeople will likely be VFR hosts, campaigns to encourage their friends and colleagues to visit them should be undertaken.

Future directions for this study include establishing an extended VFR categorisation model and increasing the number of destinations. The findings above confirm HVFRs in the non-VFR category and extend the current model built by Backer (2012). However, this study also has some limitations. This research is exploratory in nature and therefore is not sufficient to establish a new VFR definitional model. In this context, future studies must use a larger sample to confirm this extended version of the definitional model. The respondents in this study were limited to Japanese travellers who had met their friends or relatives in only five English-speaking countries, and these are all long-haul destinations for Japanese travellers. Destinations in Asia, such as Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and other short- and middle-haul destinations should also be included in future studies. Finally, the VFR market and its attributes deserve to be further investigated and unveiled since the recent global movement of society rapidly increases opportunities to interact and have friends and relatives all over the world.

Author contribution

Sho Kashiwagi contributed to the design and implementation of the research, performed the analysis of the results and took the lead in writing the manuscript. Hayato Nagai contributed to the design of the research and assisted in analysing and interpreting the results and worked on the manuscript. Tomoyuki Furutani contributed to the design of the research, guided the direction of the data analysis and supervised the project. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Acknowledgement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2019.100610>.

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