

International Students as Generators of VFR Travel and Tourism in South Africa

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to determine the significance of international university students as generators of VFR tourism in South Africa. The study adopted a mixed methodology approach to meet the set objectives. Quantitatively, a purposive sampling technique was used to generate 346 valid questionnaire survey responses from international students. For the qualitative angle of the study, a total of 7 participants contributed to a focus group discussion. The findings indicate that international students serve a key role in stimulating VFR visits to their study destinations. Many of these are repeat visits and the travel pursuits in which they engage during their stay at the destination. A key recommendation emanating from this paper is centered on the development of efficient promotional and marketing strategies to encourage international student led VFR in the country. Strategies to this end need to be developed and implemented in order to fully leverage the benefits of VFR in South Africa, given the significant role that international students play, as well as in terms of the way in which they influence the travel activities of their visitors.

Keywords: VFR travel; international students; South Africa

Introduction

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourism and travel has generated significant benefits within the tourism industry, with the ability of this segment extending into the leveraging of local economic development of destinations, as well as triggering other forms of tourism activities associated with VFR travel (Zentveld & Yousuf, 2022). Additionally, VFR travelers can serve as important triggers for an increase in domestic travel within the industry - a phenomenon which has been observed by Dube-Xaba (2021). Within the South African context, where the growth potential of domestic tourism has been recognized and consequently flagged as an avenue for strategic growth, VFR travel and tourism has gained traction. Rogerson and Hoogendoorn (2014) noted the potential of the sector and conducted further investigations into how this type of travel can be leveraged for the overall growth of the South African tourism sector. Various triggers of VFR travel and tourism have emerged, interestingly being linked to other forms of tourism, such as business and leisure tourism (Lin et al., 2022). Much of South Africa's domestic tourism and some of its international tourism can be attributed to VFR travel, spurred on by the high levels of rural to urban migration for work,

education, health or other purposes (Rogerson, 2015; Zhao et al., 2020). Thus, VFR could be seen to embody an important aspect of tourism demand (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007).

Despite the potential of VFR travel and tourism to contribute towards tourism development in the country, as well as trigger local economic development, relatively little research has been conducted within the South African context (Dube-Xaba, 2021), specifically from the perspective of international students as generators of this type of travel and tourism. Thus, having established the importance of VFR travel, and its knock-on effects within the tourism sector, this paper focuses on investigating the role of international students as generators of VFR travel and tourism in South Africa. This was done through an examination of the VFR visits that international students registered at an institution of higher education and the consequential travel activities generated.

Literature

Contextualizing VFR tourism

According to Backer (2012), Yousuf and Backer (2015), and Rogerson (2015), travelling for the purpose of VFR is understudied as a key motivation for travel in the tourism research field, even though the segment is one of the largest components of the tourism economies concerned. During the last two decades, research on VFR tourism in Australia, the USA and Europe, emerged (Arcodia et al., 2006). Most of the studies acknowledge the VFR segment to have had a more significant economic impact on the host communities involved than has been customarily supposed. Backer (2007) articulates that VFR tourism is a form of tourism that encompasses the motivation behind the visit and/or the type of accommodation. In turn, Munoz et al. (2017) ascertain that VFR tourism entails physical interactions between the guests and the host.

According to Wang and Davidson (2010), the contributions made by visitors regarding the expenditure involved with VFR tourism remain significant, because tourism is known to be an 'expenditure-driven' commercial activity. The lack of research concerning VFR is often related to the assumed low spending of VFR travelers. However, from the same standpoint, Backer and Morrison (2015) argue that visitors tend to spend more than other tourists do on such tourism-related activities as shopping, accommodation, restaurants, and local attractions. Visitors often spend on activities that are unavailable to them in their native countries (Backer & King, 2015; Backer & Morrison, 2015).

According to Hu and Morrison (2002), with VFR tourism having been overlooked in terms of marketing campaigns, it has often been considered to be a form of tourism that happens 'naturally', and which cannot be influenced. However, Backer (2007) considers the role of the host in stimulating VFR tourism, and in influencing VFR tourism activities, as grossly underestimated. Since VFR hosts are considered to play a highly influential role regarding the destinations visited and the activities undertaken by VFR tourists (Jackson, 2003), VFR tourists therefore have an influence at the local host level. Mill and Morrison (2002) assert that tourists trust the advice provided by friends and relatives in terms of the choice of destination that they wish to visit, thereby highlighting the role that international tourists can play in generating VFR tourism. This is important to note, given the crucial impact that VFR has on the host economy (see Hoogendoorn & Rogerson, 2015).

Complexities in terms of the classification of the VFR tourism market

On a global scale, it is argued that VFR is still a broad and complex concept in the tourism industry (Backer, 2010; Backer & King, 2016). VFR tourists can be classified as either night or day visitors, and as national and/or international tourists, or concerning the activities in which they might partake during the course of their trip (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007).

Moreover, Backer and King (2016) opine that there are three key forms of VFR tourists: tourists whose main travel purpose is to visit their friends and relatives with such travelers frequently staying with those whom they came to visit; commercial VFR tourists who use paid accommodation while visiting friends and relatives; and VFR tourists who travel to explore, and who would rather stay with friends and relatives (Backer & Hay, 2015). Drawing on these different classifications, the link between international students as generators of VFR can be well conceptualized, given that they act as pull factors towards their study destination.

Research into student-related VFR tourism

The academic domain is gradually beginning to appreciate the contributions made by international students to the VFR market, with a review of the existing research revealing that several studies that have examined the student-related VFR market have largely been carried out in the Australian context (Arcodia et al., 2006; Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Huang & Tian, 2013; Min-En, 2006; Weaver, 2004). In such related works, Weaver (2004) notes that, besides their education-related activities and expenditure, international students have also had a long-term impact on tourism in Australia. Michael et al. (2004) postulate that, regardless of the role that international students play in instigating visits from their friends and relatives, scant marketing of study destinations has occurred at tertiary institutions to fully leverage VFR tourism.

Min-En (2006) emphasizes the significance of international students in stimulating VFR visits, and in selecting activities undertaken during the visits. Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis (2007) stress that the VFR segment could represent an important component of tourism demand, and that it should, arguably, receive more attention from a marketing perspective. However, apart from the above-mentioned authors' work, relatively little attention has been paid to international students from a VFR market perspective. Moreover, the African continent has been regrettably neglected, with part of this research envisaged to add to the existing body of literature, by means of providing a narrative within the South African context.

The economic significance of VFR tourism

Palovic et al. (2014) express the belief that the tourism industry can no longer afford to disregard the value of VFR tourism and the significance that it has for the economy as a whole. The total amount of the expenditure generated from VFR contributes towards the local development of the destinations being visited, through retail, accommodation, entertainment, and other related services (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007). The VFR tourism sector benefits from the visits paid by international travelers, given that they tend to stay longer, when travelling from afar, than the local VFR tourists do. Additionally, VFR travelers engage in repeat visits, which is beneficial for host destinations (Kazakova et al., 2021). The importance of VFR travel is also brought out by the use of paid accommodation, depending on the length of stay involved. However, some VFR travelers opt to stay with friends and relatives (Seaton & Palmer, 1997), which enables them to spend money on other goods and services at the destination.

The potential significance and contributions of international students to the VFR market

International students are undoubtedly a promising market for the tourism industry in any country where they choose to undertake their studies, especially through their role of attracting friends and family to visit their place of study (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007). Typically, an average frequency of visitation that proves to be fairly high, and the value attached thereto is significant to the local economy (Backer & King, 2015). VFR tourism fulfils a role, both as a motivating influence and as a tourist activity, making it unique, and a highly relevant tourism

category. VFR tourists tend to make the most of local accommodation, restaurants, special events, and attractions, adding value to the local economies (Asiedu, 2008; Richards, 2011; Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). Various reasons have been presented to support the view that VFR tourism is an important source of revenue for national economies (Backer, 2010; Rogerson, 2011), attracting a significant number of visitors to destinations relative to other tourism categories.

Despite the fact that VFR tourism involves travel with the purpose of VFR, it does not necessarily mean that those concerned share living accommodation with their friends and/or relatives (Asiedu, 2008; Backer, 2008), thus the accommodation industry can also benefit from VFR tourism. Most students stay at students' accommodation that most likely do not allow family and friends to stay over, thus the latter tend to seek out alternative accommodation, such as bed and breakfasts, guest houses and/or hotels, as well as to eat out and to shop, all of which are likely to form part of the tourism-related offerings of the destination concerned (Dockery et al., 1999). Consuming such offerings, for which they must pay, translates into contributions made to foreign exchange, which then adds to the country's economy. Thus, the presence of international students in an area gives the local tourism industry an opportunity to grow (Dockery et al., 1999; Rutty et al., 2015).

The role of students as hosts is central to international student generated VFR tourism. Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis (2007) found that friends and relatives in the host country were one of the foremost sources of information for international travelers, with the local residents needing to be provided with up-to-date and accurate travel information (Pennington-Gray & Kerstetter, 2001). Typically, friends and relatives are the primary basis of information when deciding to travel to a destination (Pennington-Gray & Kerstetter, 2001). Consequently, the students do not only generate visits by means of inviting guests, but they also help decide where they stay and what activities are undertaken, both in the present and in the future (Dockery et al., 1999). The most frequently reported activities that hosts tend to undertake with their guests are dining out, shopping, and visiting clubs and local attractions (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007). This once again shines a spotlight on the central role of international students in the generation of VFR travel and tourism.

Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2001) identified significant differences in activity participation with regards to various VFR segments. For instance, visitors whose main purpose involves visiting friends and relatives, and who stay with them, are more likely to dine out, whereas those who stay in commercial accommodation are more likely to go shopping, or to search for items like antiques (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007). Furthermore, as the majority of the hosts tend to accompany the guests to places that they visit, they increase their own awareness of local tourism. Another important impact to consider is the knock-on effect that VFR travelers themselves can have in the promotion of the destination to others. These travelers are likely to spread positive and/or negative sentiments about their experiences to potential tourists upon return to their home countries, and they are likely to make repeat visits (Van Dyk et al., 2019).

Travel patterns and preferred activities of international visitors

When international students receive visitors, with the presence of the former being the key purpose for the visit, they automatically become the host for the visitor concerned (Tran et al., 2018). International students play a crucial role as hosts, in that they are usually the ones who initiate, or inspire, the visits to the destination, and also have a key part to play in selecting which activities are undertaken during the visits, as well as the length of stay of their visitors (Kashiwagi et al., 2018). The role of hosts, their involvement and their hospitality can be seen as an important factor in motivating, or deterring, VFR travelers (Backer, 2007; Backer, 2008;

Young et al., 2007). The host's involvement comprises the part played in attracting their guests, as well as in incurring the additional costs involved. Thus, some of the key travel patterns and activities of international VFR tourists may be summed up to include their length of stay (Kashiwagi et al., 2018), preferred accommodation type (Backer, 2008, 2010, 2012) and preferred travel activities (Ramachandran, 2006; Rogerson, 2011).

Methodology

A mixed methodology approach was adopted in this study which was thought to be essential to strengthen the current study, given: 1) its exploratory nature; and 2) the fact that the limited focus on the current topic required the generation of in-depth analysis. The above was achieved through the use of a self-designed survey, as well as a focus group discussion.

Sample population and size, procedures and instrumentation

Given that the aim of this paper was to investigate international students as generators of VFR, the sample population of this study was international students at a tertiary institution in Johannesburg. Non-probability sampling, specifically, purposive sampling was used in the selection of international students to participate in the study. In determining an appropriate sample size, data was obtained from the selected university's International Student's Office. According to information gained, the total number of registered international students at the time of this study was 3352. Through the use of a sampling calculator, recommended for empirical studies, the sample size for the study was calculated as 364 respondents. This was calculated at a 95% confidence level (Isaac & Michael, 1981).

The survey instrument was administered by the researcher with the assistance of trained fieldworkers, using the purposive and convenience sampling methods. Two instruments were involved in collecting the data for the current research. The main survey instrument was aimed at understanding the role that international students play in generating VFR tourism and consisted mainly of closed ended questions. Key variables included in the survey was geared towards determining the socio-demographic profiles of respondents, the frequency of visits paid to the international students, the types of accommodation used by the VFR visitors, their activities engaged in as well as their travel intentions and patterns. The survey was piloted with a group of 10 respondents, with the main data collection process occurring during the university's international student festival that was held in September, 2017. This event was attended by many of the university's international students, therefore making it the ideal opportunity for data collection. During the event, trained fieldworkers were stationed at various stalls that were set up representing the countries from which the international students originated, so as to purposively and conveniently target the respondents concerned. A screening question was used to identify the international students involved.

To supplement the survey data collected, the focus group technique was also employed, constituting the qualitative aspect of research. The use of a focus group was considered appropriate to further investigate whether or not international students are indeed generators of VFR. The focus group purposively targeted international students who had spent more than four years of study at the institution, and who had had a minimum of one visit from a friend or relative. The researcher, prior to the discussion, selected seven participants who were available, and who gave their consent to take part in the research. The profiles and codes of the participants are shown in Table 1 below.

The focus group discussion took place in July 2018 at a boardroom reserved for such purpose. At the commencement of the discussion, the participants were informed of the nature of the discussion and were afforded the option to opt out. An audio recording device was used to record the discussion, with the researcher using a semi-structured schedule of questions for



guidance. The use of such a schedule was intended to allow for probing during the focus group discussion that lasted for approximately an hour.

Table 1: Profile of focus group participants

Name	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Educational level
Participant 1 (P1)	21–30	Female	Nigeria	Master's
Participant 2 (P2)	21–30	Female	Botswana	BTech
Participant 3 (P3)	21–30	Male	Lesotho	Honours
Participant 4 (P4)	21–30	Male	Lesotho	Honours
Participant 5 (P5)	21–30	Male	Zimbabwe	PhD
Participant 6 (P6)	21–30	Female	Zimbabwe	Honours
Participant 7 (P7)	21–30	Female	Lesotho	Honours

Data analysis

The package used for the quantitative analysis was the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25 software. Descriptive analysis was performed to obtain an overall summary of the variables in the sample. In terms of the qualitative data gleaned through the study, the researcher transcribed verbatim the interviews from the focus group discussion. The data were then analysed in terms of their content and grouped into conceptual categories, using the constant comparative method. In the current study, the researcher ensured validity and reliability through various means, such as the development of the survey in consultation with a statistician and drawing from existing literature on VFR tourism, as well as pilot testing the survey. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods also served as a form of validation, with the data being triangulated.

Results and discussion

Profile of the respondents

The following discussion provides a summary of the findings that were made in relation to the profile of the respondents. The two key variables included place of origin, and level of education of respondents, and were considered to be significant in understanding the role of international students as generators of VFR.

Place of origin

Table 2 reveals that the respondents came from various continents, even though, as was expected, the vast majority originated from Africa (94.4%). In this regard, the country of origin respondents indicated that they were from included Zimbabwe (22.4%), Congo (15%), Nigeria (12.8%), Swaziland (10.6%), Lesotho (7.2%), and Malawi (6.2%). These results were mirrored in the population of the focus group (see Table 1), in which the majority of the respondents were also from countries within the SADC region. The high representation of Zimbabwean international students is unsurprising within the country's context, given that South Africa is a significant emigration destination for many Zimbabwean nationals, accounting for approximately 85% of all emigrants from the country according to Zimstat (Ndebele, 2022). Some cohorts of students were from the western parts of the African continent (16%), with them largely being from Nigeria, which is South Africa's biggest trading partner. Few of the respondents were from America (5%) and Europe (1%). These findings are similar to those of Raghuram et al. (2020), who also found that many international students at a South African tertiary institution emanated from the SADC region.

Level of education

In terms of education, the majority of the respondents (79%) indicated that they were studying at undergraduate level, compared to those who were studying at postgraduate level (21%).

Table 2 below contains a detailed breakdown of the years of study of the respondents. Interestingly, the higher percentage of undergraduate student participation is linked to the fact that the event that was chosen as an occasion for data collection mainly attracted younger students. In addition, the cohort of undergraduate students is much higher in terms of numbers than is the cohort of postgraduate students.

Table 2: Profile of respondents

Place of origin	Total (n=346, in %)	Level of education	Total (n=346, in %)
SADC countries	72	First year	26
West Africa	16	Second year	30
Central Africa	2	Third year	23
North Africa	1	Fourth year (BTech/Honours)	11
East Africa	3	Master's	6
America	5	Doctoral	3
Europe	1	Post-doctoral	1

Understanding the nature of VFR travel, as generated by international students

Given that the primary aim of this paper was to determine the extent to which international students stimulate VFR tourism in South Africa, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had had family or friends from their home country coming to visit them in South Africa. Table 3 indicates that more than two thirds (68%) of those surveyed had indeed had a VFR related visit. This finding draws parallels with the existing literature on student-related VFR that found that they stimulated international travel (Hunter-Jones, 2008). Furthermore, Hunter-Jones (2008) and Min-En (2006) assert that such students not only receive visitors, but also utilise the opportunity to generate VFR tourism actively, by asking their friends and relatives to visit them, and by suggesting in which activities they can engage when they visit. Hence, the importance of international students as generators of VFR tourism is valid and should be leveraged within destinations to contribute to the overall growth and development of tourism sectors (Kashiwagi et al., 2018).

Table 3: Whether they ever had a friend or relative visiting from home country

Did respondents ever have a friend or relative visiting from their home country (n=346, in %)	
Yes	68
No	32

Relationship with visitor

Table 4 below reflects the results of the nature of respondents' relationships with those who visited them. The majority of visitors (42%) were mainly parents, followed by 34% accounting for siblings or other relatives, and 22% indicated their friends. Ashworth and Page (2011) assert that having an existing relative who they are able to trust as a host at a destination helps the visitor to feel comfortable and secure, thus acting as a pull factor for traveling to the destination. Additionally, personal connections with resident friends and relatives can be a powerful attraction, and can encourage repeat visits (Griffin & Dimanche, 2017). Zentveld and Yousuf (2022) emphasize the importance of repeat visitors, linked to their increased spending patterns, as well as tendency to engage in activities recommended by their hosts. Thus, repeat visits may be said to be an important aspect of destination growth (Zhao et al., 2020; Van Dyk et al., 2019).

Table 4: Relationship of student with visitors

Relationship with visitors	Total (n=346, in %)
Parents	42
Siblings/relatives	34
Friends	22
Other (unspecified)	2

Discussion in the focus group reiterated these results, with respondents elaborating on the visitors that they receive. For example, one participant mentioned: “For me, it is mostly my parents who come to visit me, and, on some occasions, it would be my aunts and uncles and extended family members” (P2). Likewise, another mentioned: “I have had a lot of visitors, and either it’s my family, or my extended family, or its church mates stuff like that – I get a lot of visitors” (P6).

The implication of these results is congruent with those of other studies conducted on international students and VFR, ultimately indicating that international students commonly generate VFR within the region that they are studying (Tran et al., 2018). The knock-on effects of such visits within destinations need to be fully examined, to leverage the benefits for tourism growth and development. This is especially important for destinations trying to rebuild and grow their industries (in the post-COVID recovery stage), such as South Africa, especially since the country hosts a significant cohort of international students (Raghuram et al., 2020; Dube-Xaba, 2021).

Frequency of visits

Table 5 illustrates the frequency of VFR visits received by international students. The majority of the respondents (61%) indicated receiving a visitor once / twice a year. Others (30%) received between three to four visits a year, while only 9% received more than four visits a year. The results in this regard are significant, as they illuminate the extent to which student related VFR is generated in the South African context. These results are not unique to the South African context and have been observed in other countries as well. For example, a study on international students in Turkey as recipients of VFR visits also found that these students generated repeat visits through family and friends, as well as knock-on effects such as the visitors engaging in various tourism activities whilst visiting (El Gamil, 2021). Petry et al. (2021) similarly found that the relationships between students and the visitors (parents, siblings, extended family or friends) influenced repeat visits, as did the ability of the student to host the visitors and engage with them in touristic activities. This underscores an important point on the ability of international students to market destinations, and to influence tourist’s travel motivations and behaviours.

The frequency of visitors’ trips could be aligned with issues of costs, length of stay and available time. Weaver (2004) and Micheal et al. (2004) found in studies conducted within the Australian context that international students studying at a destination have been seen to have hosted VFR tourists at least one or more times during the course of their studies. Therefore, undoubtedly, such students have generated VFR tourism numerous times with each visit received. The frequency of visitation often determines the extent to which VFR is embarked on as a tourism typology. Thus, drawing on these results, planning the development of VFR as generated by international students needs to be prioritized within the South African context.

Table 5: Frequency of visits

Visit Frequency (n=346, in %)	
Once/twice a year	61
Three/four times a year	30
More than four times a year	9

Length of stay

The results depicted in Table 6 suggest that most visitors of international students generally tend to stay for longer periods of between one and three weeks (65%), whilst 23% stay for less than a week. Few visitors exceed a three week stay, and this could be attributed to matters of cost and time constraints, as well as the distance traveled to the destination. This is important

to note, given that longer stays will result in increased demand for services such as accommodation, shopping and eating out (Gozgor et al., 2021). The length of stay plays a significant role in the travel activities of visitors. The questions about what activities they are most likely to participate in during their visits is often influenced by their length of stay, as well as the knowledge of the destination or recommendations made by their host (Tran et al., 2018). The assumption would be that the longer their stay, the more money they are likely to spend, and the more activities in which they are likely to engage, than if they were to stay for a shorter period. Zentveld and Yousuf (2022) reiterate these associations between length of stay, engagement in tourist activities and various forms of spending.

Such findings yet again highlight the need to recognize the importance and significance of the VFR tourism stimulated by international students in South Africa, as the longer duration of the stay that characterises such visits might have positive economic implications that are generated through visitor spending.

Table 6: Length of stay

Length of stay	Total (n=346, in %)
Less than a week	23
One week	35
Two to three weeks	30
One month	6
Longer than a month	7

The benefit of the visit to the student

During the focus group discussion, the participants were requested to share their experiences regarding how the visits benefited them as the host international students living in South Africa. The majority of the participants cited emotional benefits, given that they resided away from family and friends. These visits gave them an opportunity to reconnect with their loved ones, as well as feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, having family or friends visiting stimulates a ‘home away from home’ experience, as the following quote indicates, “Okay, I think it’s more of an emotional benefit, because, when my parents come, it [is] sort of like comforting to be around them, even if it’s for a little while, it’s sort of like, okay, I’m with family.” (P2).

Another participant saw such a visit as an encouragement and motivation and expressed the following:

I think it’s also beneficial in terms of your own personal progress, because, if you are not in your own country, you are far, so you always need that person from home to encourage you, comfort you, and, to some extent, they will also give you an update of what’s going on back home (P5).

Some students added that, other than the visits being of an emotional benefit, they found that having friends and relatives come to visit also gave them the opportunity to travel, and to experience attractions in South Africa. For example, one participant recalled the benefits accessed by being visited by those from home in the following words, “Well, to me, it is beneficial, in that I get to tag along when they visit other places. I have an aunt who usually visit[s] from the UK, and will be like ‘let’s tour, let’s see places’, so it’s beneficial to me, because I get to see places” (P4). Another participant stated, “I can also add on [to] that, there are a lot of places that I’ve gone to because of my parents. [They] were like, ‘okay, we want to see this or that’, and I have to show them” (P2).

The preceding quotes emphasize the role that international students play in the generation of VFR travel in the country, as well as in encouraging visitors to engage in tourist activities. The services that these visitors utilize can also contribute to local economic development within the areas that they reside.



Accommodation utilized during stay

In terms of accommodation type utilised by the visitors of international students, the study found that such visitors made use of a range of accommodation types, as shown in Table 7 below. Collectively, almost half of the visitors stayed with relatives (25%) or with the students themselves (22%), whilst 41% collectively stayed in a bed and breakfast (15%) or self-catering apartment (15%) or guesthouse (11%). Within the South African context, many of the bed and breakfasts and guesthouses are classified as small businesses, often operating on a micro scale within local communities (Deen et al., 2016). Thus, through frequenting these establishments, VFR tourists also trigger and support local economic development initiatives, further emphasizing their importance.

Accommodation is a basic need and has been noted to be one of the most critical aspects within the tourism sector (Kuhzady et al., 2022). Hence, accommodation should be included as a key consideration in conceptualising the VFR market (Backer, 2010). Accommodation has the power to influence the tourism economy, in that it also plays a role in the tourists' length of stay, tourism activity engagement and travel patterns. Hao et al. (2019) note that tourists are hyper-aware of services relating to food, transport and accommodation. Additionally, the type and availability of accommodation can either positively impact the image of a destination or generate negative feedback regarding the destination a whole (Marine-Roig, 2019). Thus, the success of the tourism industry depends on the quality, quantity and accessibility of the accommodation sector present within a tourism destination (Buhalis, 2000).

According to Backer (2008), not all VFR tourists stay with the friends and relatives whom they come to visit. VFR travelers, especially those who form relatively large travel parties and part of families travelling with children, are most likely to utilize commercial accommodation. While the issue that not all VFR tourists stay with friends and relatives has previously been highlighted (see Backer, 2008; Pennington-Gray et al., 2003), VFR still continues to be snubbed as a tourism segment by commercial accommodation operators. The so-called 'segment' is also not accounted for in assessing the true size of VFR travel. Yet, as the findings of the current study show, the VFR visits generated by international students make a valuable contribution to the accommodation sector and should therefore be further investigated as a potentially lucrative market.

Table 7: Type of accommodation used

Type of accommodation	Total (n=346, in %)
Relatives' /family house	25
Student	22
Bed and breakfast	15
Self-catering apartment	15
Guest house	11
Hotel	10
Lodge	2

Activities in which engaged

The data reflected in Table 8 stems from the notion that visitors take advantage of other activities while visiting their friends and relatives studying in the country (Kazakova et al., 2021). The respondents were asked, according to their preferences and interest, to indicate the type of activities in which those who travelled to visit them participated during their visit(s). South Africa, and specifically the city of Johannesburg, offers a wide variety of activities for tourists to engage in, ranging from historical to cultural activities. Furthermore, tourists are able to travel to other parts of the province and surrounding areas relatively easily to partake in eco- and adventure tourism activities (see Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019; McKay, 2017; Visser & Hoogendoorn, 2011). Despite this, for the interests of sightseeing and touring within



the city, only 23% of the respondents indicated that their friends and relatives were interested in such a tourism product offering. Interestingly, just under a third of respondents (29%) indicated that their visitors engaged in shopping activities, and a further 10% engaging in city night life. Cumulatively, approximately 13% of respondents were interested in attending various festivals and events related to sport, food and arts. The activity of shopping is linked to tourist spending, which has positive knock-on effects for the destination at the local level, especially when shopping in its various forms is carried out within local shops, eateries and other local businesses (Kazakova et al., 2021). The findings indicate that visitors often take the opportunity to visit, or to engage in, other activities during their visit, beyond the international students being their primary reason for their visit. One participant in the focus group stated as follows:

Speaking on shopping, I think it's one of the main reasons; people shop, because to some extent you would just feel that you were just someone they were just coming to see, and then they go to their main thing, which is shopping there, and sometimes they even forget about you, and, to some extent, you have to contribute money for them to buy, so I think, on my side, it's mostly shopping. And I mean big, big shopping. I'm talking about big suitcases, not just shopping... Also, just to add, the other two activities that they engage in when they visit me is nightlife entertainment and religious events... (P5).

Another offered another sentiment:

For events, like a lot of my family relatives comes [i.e. come] to South Africa. For example, my parents are coming for an event that's coming up now ... and even for family events like now, they are coming for the Food and Wine Festival. They'll come for music events. They'll come for things that they normally see on TV that's being advertised. If they [find] it interesting, they'll come, and [go] shopping. They'd come to shop here, because they think there's a lot of variety here (P2).

Table 8: Visitors' preferred travel activities

Preferred travel activities	Total (n=346, in %)
Shopping	29
Sightseeing and tours of the city	23
Visiting local attractions	12
City lifestyle (nightclubs/dances)	10
Tours of city	8
Attending sport events	6
Health/beauty activities (e.g. spa treatments, etc.)	6
Attending cookout events / food markets	4
Attending art/festival events	3
Game viewing and safaris	3
Going on package tours	2
Local wine/brewery routes	2
Other	2

Note: Multiple responses permitted

Secondary reasons for the visits of international visitors

Table 9 shows that most respondents indicated that those who traveled to visit them had a dual purpose to their stay. For example, 34% of travelers used their VRF travel as an opportunity to be on holiday, while a cumulative 28% of travelers also attended birthdays and other family events during their stay. A significant portion (14%) of travelers engaged in business activities. Other secondary reasons for travel indicated were to attend seasonal events or graduations. Griffin and Nunkoo (2016) note that other than travelling to visit their friends and relatives, visitors often have secondary motives for visiting particular destinations. This once again emphasizes the importance and potential of VFR tourists for tourism development in a



destination (Petry et al., 2021). The results indicate that, for most of the VFR visitors in the study, visiting a student was not the only reason behind their travel, but the trigger for it, with it also serving as a factor in their destination choice. In this regard, one respondent stated:

Mostly because people know you are there, so they believe they can come. They feel it's safe, because they know somebody they know is there. So that's like one of the motivations for coming to South Africa, when you have somebody who is there, or who has already stayed there, you feel safer coming (P6).

Another participant stated:

Let me start with my father. He doesn't only come to visit us, but [he] also comes for conferences. He speaks in [i.e. at] conferences, so that is why he comes here. And then for my cousins, to visit tourist attractions in South Africa ... Then for other extended families and friends, some for conferences, some for tourism- related activities, and also for weddings and graduations (P1).

Griffin and Dimanche (2017) assert that visitors take advantage of additional opportunities (secondary reasons) during their travel. One traveler might choose a particular destination over another on the basis that they can spare time during their travel to visit their relatives (Hateftabar, 2021).

Table 9: Secondary reasons for visits

Secondary reasons for visits	Total (n=346, in %)
Holiday	34
Birthday	14
Family meetings/gatherings	14
Business	14
Seasonal event	10
To attend graduation ceremony	7
Other	7

Note: Multiple responses permitted

The current study asserts that the international students play a significant role in VFR tourists destination choice, and as such, visiting was unlikely to have occurred if the student had not been staying there in the first place. The results obtained concur with the results of Kashiwagi et al. (2018), whose study focused on the VFR travel initiated in relation to international students. Overall, the cumulative findings of this study points towards international students being important generators of VFR tourism.

Implications and conclusions

Reflecting on the foregoing discussion, international students can be considered as key generators of VRF tourism and travel within South Africa, as illustrated by the results of this paper. However, this brings to light a few important considerations, such as the optimization of destination image to appeal to such visitors, as well as targeting international students as destination ambassadors of sorts (Petry et al., 2021; El Gamil, 2021). Additionally, the development of products and services (such as accommodation and attraction packages) targeted at VFR tourists is also important to consider, given that many of these tourists often have secondary motivations for travel too (Kazakova et al., 2021). Fully understanding the needs of VFR tourists can also assist in leveraging local economic development within local destinations, where products and services can be tailored to their specific needs.

Although research on VFR travel and tourism is abundant (see Zhao et al., 2020; Kashiwagi et al., 2018; Accordia et al., 2006; Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Min-En, 2006), most of this research was conceptualized and conducted from a global north perspective. The research that was conducted from the global south perspective, whilst useful in providing

important context (Dube-Xaba, 2021), has not investigated the role of international students as generators of VFR travel and tourism. Thus, the uniqueness of this paper lies in its theoretical contribution towards broadening the discourse on VFR travel and tourism in the South African context, with a specific focus on international students generating this type of tourism. The results of this study imply that international students are indeed valuable generators of VFR travel and tourism in the country, and as such, increased focus should be given to them as key stakeholders in the tourism VFR value chain within the country. Specifically, tourism authorities and marketers should collaborate on how to market the country as a VFR destination for the counterparts of international students. In doing so, the benefits of this type of tourism can be leveraged, particularly at local levels.

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