

Now is the time: VFR travel desperately seeking respect

Abstract

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is a significant form of travel in most countries. However, relatively little VFR research has been undertaken, and few destinations have developed dedicated VFR marketing campaigns. However, altered conditions have created a different environment. People unable to see friends and family due to lockdowns are focused on reconnecting. There has been a shift in economic conditions, travel opportunities, safety, and connections. This paper presents three components: (1) the psychology of lockdowns in reducing social connections; (2) a content analysis on VFR travel; and (3) recommendations on capitalising on VFR travel.

Keywords: VFR travel, visiting friends and relatives, DMO, destination marketing organisations, tourism, destination management organisations

Introduction

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) is a substantial form of travel movement across the globe. VFR has been recognised as comprising around half of all domestic overnight visitors (Backer, 2012a; Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995; Hu & Morrison, 2002). VFR is well-known in both academic and industry circles, and in many countries and destinations, it can be observed through data as being a major proportion of visitation. Despite the substantial size (by volume of visitor movement) of VFR travel, this area of tourism has lagged in both academic and industry circles.

However, in a changing world, VFR travel has emerged as a key segment, deserving more respect. Accordingly, VFR now represents a key market opportunity that destinations should consider pursuing. Lockdowns from COVID-19 resulted in a reduction in the movements of people and an inability for social connections to take place. Overwhelmingly, many people increasingly understood the importance of family and friends and felt the impact of loneliness and isolation. Those aspects resulted in negative impacts on well-being and a loss of quality of life.

Before the present pandemic, destinations focused on international marketing, which was considered more glamorous than 'marketing to Aunt Betty' (Backer, 2012b). Few destination marketing/management organisations (DMOs) developed dedicated VFR travel marketing campaigns. However, international border closures have 'turned the tourism table around' with traditional international marketing no longer relevant,

resulting in a greater focus on VFR travel. A quick search of information around the world will see many key questions and concerns regarding how to travel to see family and friends. A top theme of what emerged from lockdowns in Australia was “we ached to be close to our families” (Dunstan, 2021). The focus shifted. Research undertaken in Australia early in the first lockdown revealed that Australians felt keen to travel once restrictions allowed and that reconnecting with friends and relatives was a key driver (Walters, 2020). The evidence also highlighted a keenness to travel shorter distances, to drive rather than use public transport, to avoid crowded areas, a preference for regions over cities, and to book with providers who were giving credit for cancellations. In so many ways, the indicators pointed to greater VFR travel.

Accordingly, this research is timely, as now is the time to focus more on VFR travel. It is also a timely reminder of previous research highlighting that VFR performs well in economic downturns (Backer, 2012b); and VFR was identified as an appropriate first-mover segment after crises and disasters (Backer & Ritchie, 2017). Some destinations may find that VFR travel is the only viable form of tourism to pursue for some years. People are especially motivated to travel to reconnect with family and friends after periods of lockdown, disconnection, and loneliness, which may change travel for years. Destinations are keen for growth and economic injection but also appreciate the caution required under the circumstances. Some communities are guarded and frightened – frightened of seeing the pandemic re-ignite in their destinations and having recurring lockdowns. Businesses are wanting to extend their markets but also wish to stay open. Care is needed about which markets to invite, and when.

A critical analysis that considered first-mover markets after a crisis (Backer & Ritchie, 2017) is now timely. Using market segmentation theory (Weaver & Lawton, 2014), it was determined that domestic VFR travel satisfied all eight criteria of market segmentation, and thus VFR travel (domestic) was appropriate as the first-mover market for destinations to target post-crises (Backer & Ritchie, 2017). It was also acknowledged that VFR travel is a more acceptable form of visitor demand for a community in difficult times as VFR travellers can be considered an extension of the local community and not ‘invaders’ (Backer & Ritchie, 2017). This tension and acceptance in a local community are especially important in the early stages of seeking visitation as tension from local communities creates a sense of being unwanted and is unhealthy for destination brand perceptions.

Accordingly, these researchers considered it important to undertake an extensive content analysis for VFR travel to determine whether recent conditions were translating through to research. Research has revealed that people “are interested in and willing to travel again when they are allowed to do so, even before a vaccine is available at scale” (Borko et al., 2020, p. 7). Accordingly, this paper presents three components: (1) the psychology of lockdowns and reduced social connections; (2) a VFR travel content analysis; and (3) recommendations on how to capitalise on VFR travel.

These three components are intertwined. Whilst the world has suffered pandemics in the past, this is the first time there has been an event in such a heavily mobilised and globalised world. Lockdown conditions are foreign to how humans operate and exist and there are fears of gathering mixed with desires for connections. These impacts shape how people perceive travel and what types of travel they undertake, at least in the short to medium term. VFR travel will be a priority for many people, which will be discussed in the next section, and VFR studies must be researching this theme. An analysis of research on VFR travel to date is needed to fully understand the status of knowledge and the gaps to shape further scholarship and industry initiatives. As highlighted by Burkart and Medlik (1974), to understand and explore the future, it is necessary to understand the issues of the past and the management of the present.

Literature Review

VFR travel as a field of study is relatively new. The first scholarly paper was just over three decades ago, by Richard Jackson, in 1990 (Jackson, 1990). As at the time of writing, Jackson's (1990) article had been cited 228 times. The relevance of that citation will be discussed later.

Jackson's (1990) seminal work created a fascination from several key tourism researchers who played a leading role in shaping and highlighting VFR travel. Some of the world's leading tourism researchers: Alastair Morrison, Brian King, Joseph O'Leary, Bob Mc Kercher, and Anthony Seaton injected valuable discussion and analysis into VFR travel's foundation scholarship years. The valuable insights from these leading researchers in the 1990s were critical to creating a sound foundation of knowledge for VFR travel. Yet, few other tourism researchers were attracted to research the field.

From an industry perspective, VFR travel has been a significant part of visitor movement to all types of tourism businesses. VFR travel is the oldest form of travel (Backer, 2012a), and VFR travellers frequent a wide range of shops, dine out, visit attractions, and even stay in commercial accommodation (Backer, 2010a) including hotels (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995). Despite these aspects, VFR was identified as 'desperately seeking respect' (Morrison & O'Leary, 1995). Two decades later, it was claimed that VFR travel was 'progressing towards greater recognition' (Backer & King, 2015b). The notion of VFR travel 'desperately seeking respect' can be viewed from a range of perspectives.

First, VFR travel is rarely a dedicated marketing campaign by businesses that serve tourists, and DMOs seldom dedicate much of their marketing budget to focus on maximising VFR travel. A discussion of this matter along with an examination of exemplary VFR travel dedicated marketing campaigns was undertaken by Backer and Hay (2015).

Second, given the size of VFR travel, the lack of scholarly interest in the field is notable. This was highlighted by Backer and King (2015), who observed that their book was the

first dedicated to the study of VFR travel and yet books on niche areas of tourism existed, such as "slow tourism, battlefield tourism, horse tourism, island tourism, tea tourism, cricket tourism, spices tourism, sugar heritage tourism, marine tourism, and scuba diving tourism" (p. 1). As a result of the smaller number of researchers contributing to VFR travel research, it tends to result in heavy dominance by some researchers in the literature. As outlined by Yousuf and Backer (2015), a high proportion of VFR outputs are produced by a "very small number of scholars" (p. 4), with almost 90% of the authors in the list of VFR travel researchers having only published a maximum of four papers.

It is worth noting that this analysis purposefully uses the term VFR travel. The authors observed that some articles used the term VFR tourism, and this will be discussed in the content analysis section where it can be seen that searching for VFR travel publications requires consideration of both terms amongst others.

VFR Tourism or Travel?

Tourism can be understood to be an open system with five elements – a tourist, a generating region, a destination, a transit route, and industries (Leiper, 1979). A key component of tourism is that there is a dynamic element, which is the journey itself; and a static element, which is the stay (Burkart & Medlik, 1974). As depicted in Leiper's (1979) whole tourism systems model, tourism is also a circuit. That is, the person returns to the point of origin (i.e., the generating region). This concept also links to the origins of the word tourism, a term which first appeared in 1811; the roots of which include the Greek word for a tool that is used to describe a circle (Leiper, 1983).

It seems that before the 1500s the words tourist and tourism did not exist in any way although the word tour was used in the context of a tower (Leiper, 1983). This is where the Greek root is evident since traditionally towers that were constructed were circular in shape. Literature in the medieval period used words such as 'journeying', and 'travel', which were often used in association with pilgrimage (Leiper, 1983).

Noting the history and roots of 'tourism', there have been many attempts to define it. There have been economic, technical, and holistic definitions (Leiper, 1979). A critical component raised by Leiper (1979) regarding tourism, is its relationship to leisure:

Leisure is usually recognised as an essential factor contributing to the demand for tourism and recreation (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966; Wahab, 1975). Leisure is equally important as a factor contributing to supply. It is the *anticipation* of leisure, which is operational as a demand factor, whereas the subsequent *use* of leisure is a factor of supply. Leisure is *the* fundamental resource input consumed in the tourism process.

This point about tourism involving leisure is critical. Whilst in the majority of cases, VFR travel involves leisure experiences, there are VFR trips in which there is no leisure component at all and the trip is purely obligatory (Backer, 2012a). Accordingly, the term VFR travel is acknowledged as being accurate for accounting for all data in which some trips may be travel but not necessarily tourism. As such, all VFR trips are travel but not all VFR trips are tourism.

The motivation component for VFR travel versus other forms of travelling is a unique aspect of VFR whereby a connection to the generating region due to people rather than necessarily destination attributes is distinctive. Whilst a detailed discussion of the motivation for VFR travel versus other forms of travel is outside of the scope of this research, it is important to introduce the reader to some key aspects relating to motivation for travel, which relate to the understanding of the impacts and implications for the future.

Motivation for travel

Motivation for travel is a complex and critical aspect for understanding, “and has a fundamental role in tourism” (Soldatenko & Backer, 2019). Motivation is of course only one aspect relating to travel. There needs to be not only a motivation to travel, but the absence of constraints, availability of time, and the money to do so (Leiper, 2004). The absence of constraints is a critical aspect where lockdown conditions, or risk of lockdown conditions, are a significant impediment to travel.

The motivation to travel can be understood to be “that set of needs and attitudes which predisposes a person to act in a specific touristic goal-directed way” (Pizam et al., 1979, p. 195). The motivations to travel and the objectives for travel may not be the same. For example, a person “may be motivated to travel to attend a family function to satisfy any of his needs of belonging, status, or recognition, though his stated objective for such travel may be to visit friends and relatives” (Pizam et al., 1979, p. 195).

Motivation to travel is often described as ‘push and pull’ factors, where internal aspects are seen to ‘push’ a person to want to travel whilst destination attributes are understood to be those that ‘pull’ a person to travel to one destination over another one (Dann, 1977). Naturally with VFR travel, the ‘pull’ factor is at least in part, the friend/family who resides in the destination. Leiper (2004) highlighted that travel motivation is important to understand concerning the various constraints that are involved in the pre-trip psychological process. Constraints have been identified as influencing the initial travel decision, but that “once a decision is made to plan a trip then these constraints are negotiated or overcome and do not influence actual travel behaviour such as the number of trips, length of stay or distance travelled” (Dale & Ritchie, 2020, p. 20). However, the present pandemic has changed such traditional thinking, and lockdown rules are a dominant constraint, which changes traditional conceptual frameworks.

Lockdown rules and the resultant isolation also affect some people's perceptions of health, risk, travel, connections, and have also resulted in serious impacts on mental health. Understanding such aspects is important for comprehending how people may perceive and respond to future travel motivations.

Social and mental health

The COVID-19 virus was formally declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020) and although the speed and extent of responses varied, most nations implemented public health restrictions to contain transmission. Almost all responses curtailed face-to-face contact with non-cohabiting friends and relatives as well as any travel that facilitated it. Restrictions included the closure of schools, leisure facilities, and places of work; physical distancing in social settings; personal hygiene protocols; stay at home orders, and; restrictions on domestic and international travel (McCracken et al., 2020).

Economic effects followed through lost work and wages, as well as social effects due to increased isolation and reduced social support. Concern about the risk of ensuing psychological effects was justified as early surveys in first-affected countries such as China (Wang et al., 2020), Italy (Mazza et al., 2020), the United States (Tull et al., 2020), the United Kingdom (Groarke et al., 2020), and Sweden (McCracken et al., 2020) showed high rates of loneliness and mental health problems such as insomnia, anxiety, and depression. The point-prevalence rates were twice the usual 12-month prevalence for anxiety and depression. They were similar in magnitude to the lifetime prevalence rates usually found in developed nations (Kessler et al., 2007). However, the impact of social isolation on loneliness and mental health during this unique pandemic, especially those who would usually travel to visit friends and relatives is still not entirely clear (Groarke et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2021). The serial imposition and relaxation of restrictions by governments further clouds investigation (Kwong et al., 2021) but the importance of relationships for well-being has long been known. Even Aristotle wrote that man was a social creature (Aristotle, 350 B.C.).

Social integration and support through relationships serve a basic human need to belong through attachment with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As well as meeting this need to affiliate, social support in general (Syrotuik & D'Archy, 1998) and relationships in particular (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001) are known to play an important protective role against mental ill-health. The amount of social contact, or lack of it in the case of social isolation, can be objectively measured but loneliness is more subjectively defined. It involves an emotional response to a perceived imbalance of social needs and available resources to fulfill them (Hawkley & Capitano, 2015). In the last decade, loneliness has been acknowledged as a significant public health issue in developed nations. VFR travel has been identified as adding to the quality of life (Backer, 2019) and reducing the impact of loneliness in the elderly (Backer, 2020). Loneliness appears to peak in late adolescence, gradually decrease through mid-life

then increase again in late adulthood. Gender and relationship status add complexity but greater loneliness is associated with lower general and mental health as well as a socioeconomic disadvantage (Beutel et al., 2017; Groarke et al., 2020). As a counterbalance, the presence of close relationships and perceived social support is associated with lower loneliness (Groarke et al., 2020; Matthews et al., 2016). Importantly, feeling lonely is associated with mental ill-health. A large German pre-pandemic community study found it significantly predicted depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation when demographic variables are controlled (Beutel et al., 2017).

Young adults

Evidence is accumulating that groups already at risk of loneliness and mental health problems, especially as young adults (19-29), have been disproportionately affected during lockdowns (Kwong et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021). This life stage is highly represented in VFR sub-groups including tertiary students returning home on their breaks (Backer et al., 2017). Anxiety was higher amongst student groups, and was positively correlated with the level of disruption to life but was negatively associated with social support amongst medical students (Cao et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

A Canadian study of tertiary students showed that students with pre-existing mental health problems reported similar or improving mental health during the pandemic yet those without pre-existing difficulties showed a decline in their mental health, coincident with increased social isolation stemming from closures, social distancing, and separation from family (Hamza et al., 2021). Hamza et al. (2021) suggest it may be that only those students who experienced social isolation as a result of lockdowns were at risk of increased psychological distress. This accords with another North American multi-wave study of young adults (Tull et al., 2020) that found being under a stay-at-home order was associated with greater loneliness, anxiety, and financial worry.

The perceived impact of lockdowns was also positively associated with anxiety and financial worry. However, the perceived impact was negatively associated with loneliness and positively associated with social support. It may be that whilst enforced physical isolation increases concern about the future and bestows changes to daily life, initial loneliness might motivate increased social support seeking. Perhaps it is the case that for those with pre-existing social and psychological resources, a shared adverse experience creates some unity of purpose (Courtet et al., 2020; Tull et al., 2020). In Victoria Australia, there is anecdotal information suggesting that Lockdown 6.0 was a tipping point for many Year 12 students. The date for the General Achievement Test (GAT) has changed numerous times, and the cocktail of events has reportedly resulted in an increased number of students being prescribed anti-depressants.

Although, the majority of general population studies show that it is those groups within society that are already at the highest risk of loneliness and mental health problems that fared worst during the pandemic (Groarke et al., 2020; Kwong et al.,

2021; O'Connor et al., 2021; Tull et al., 2020). Young adults studying abroad are by no means the only sub-group to participate in VFR travel, but they have come to attention due to the higher risk conferred by their life stage and the significant impact of border closures. Late teens or early adults visit relatives for a range of reasons (Backer et al., 2017). Other groups include those with young families that visit with children and do so frequently (Backer et al., 2017).

This article is focused on VFR articles, assessing trends and volume. As will be discussed in the next section, the number of articles, given the size of VFR travel, is small. VFR is the oldest form of travel, and yet scholarly interest is quite recent, commencing in 1990. By way of comparison, COVID-19 is a new event for the world and yet a search for the terms tourism COVID reveals an astonishing number of results (e.g., 151,000 in Google Scholar at the time of writing).

Content Analysis Method

This content analysis commences with the year 1990, which is the year in which the first VFR paper was published. A content analysis conducted by Yousuf and Backer (2015) highlighted the 'long tail' of VFR researchers, with a large proportion of VFR researchers publishing few papers and the majority of the volume sitting with a small number of tourism researchers. Given the increased focus on reconnecting with people and not having risks of losing accommodation deposits in uncertain times, VFR travel has emerged as a safe and important form of travel. Thus, it was considered critical to extending the content analysis work undertaken previously to see in what ways trends had emerged in the past six years, most particularly since 2020 due to altered conditions from lockdowns. Deliberately, this research employed the same method as in the previous study; however, it extended that method by incorporating an iterative categorisation approach, in which deductive classifications were supplemented by inductive (*in vivo*) categories that emerged from the data (Neale, 2016). This enabled this content analysis to include topical themes not previously investigated, and emerging trends. This research continues to build an understanding of how VFR research has progressed since its inception in 1990, examining the research methods and topics of interest, particularly of relevance due to conditions from lockdowns.

The data collection search engine employed was 'Google Scholar (GS)'. Whilst GS is considered a "comprehensive tool for citation tracking for social science" (Kousha & Thelwall, 2007, p.1064), it has several limitations including only displaying the first 1,000 results of any search, and the update period for some resources being up to nine months (Boeker et al., 2013). Considering these limitations, this study further identified additional tourism journals categorised, by Scimago. Whilst Yousuf and Backer (2015) used 'ProQuest' to collect theses, an initial search did not return adequate results to be used in this study. Accordingly, a GS advanced search was undertaken. Replicating Yousuf and Backer's (2015) approach, document abstracts, thesis introductions, keywords, research methods, author names, and several

individual authors were analysed. Other sections within publications were examined as needed when further evidence was required. The units of analysis selected were journal articles, theses, book chapters, and conference papers with a VFR focus; and for inclusion, these needed to meet the following criteria:

1. VFR had to be the primary focus of the research. Studies that merely mentioned VFR in the literature or considered it as one of the variables of analysis were not included.
2. The journal articles, conference papers, and book chapters needed to be full papers, peer-reviewed, and followed the standard research format.
3. The publications had to be available online.
4. The publications needed to be in English.
5. All journal papers had to be in verified tourism journals. This included destination and vacation marketing journals with a tourism focus. The verification process was undertaken through Scopus and Scimago searches, and when needed an investigation of journal websites.

The criteria listed above were used to filter GS results and select appropriate papers for analysis. The final result was 57 documents from July 2015 to July 2021 for analysis. July 2015 was selected to tag on to the previous content analysis which was undertaken from 1990 until June 2015. Four distinct attributes of the selected works were evaluated: (1) year of publication, (2) authorship, (3) research method, and (4) topics of interest.

For authorship, "...each publication was counted as one output for an individual author irrespective of the number of authors in an article" (Yousuf & Backer, 2015, p. 3). Research methods included quantitative, qualitative, review, and mixed. Quantitative studies were classed as research that focuses on the "...quantity, frequency, or magnitude of a phenomenon" through statistics-based enquiry (Schindler, 2019, p. 76). Review studies were classed as the "systematic examination of the scholarly literature" providing a broad indication of existing knowledge relevant to VFR (Efron, 2019, p. 2). Mixed studies were classified as research that incorporated a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis (Saunders, 2016). Any paper that had a purely theoretical or conceptual perspective to VFR was classified as 'VFR conceptual'.

The computer-assisted analysis helped with coding validity by ensuring "...the coding rules are always applied in the same way" (Weber, 1990, p. 2). Whereas Yousuf and Backer (2015) used MS Excel 2000 software for data entry and calculation purposes, this research used a combination of EndNote X9, NVivo, and MS Excel 2000. The process began with an EndNote reference created for each publication and a PDF of the file imported into Endnote. A group was created in EndNote to cluster all relevant references, and to enable all references to be exported as an XML file. Files were then imported into NVivo for analysis. Although additional VFR publications were known by the authors, they were not included if they did not meet the criteria listed above.

Results

The following results present the content analysis findings in the context of VFR academic literature. Content analysis "...provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences" from selected data (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314).

The Continuing Progression of VFR Travel Research

To scrutinise the continuing progress of VFR travel research since Yousuf and Backer (2015), this study divided the total number of identified VFR publications into the categories of book chapters, journals, conference papers, and theses. The findings revealed a total of 57 research publications, journal articles represented 64.9% (n = 37), followed by 17.5% (n = 10) from conference proceedings, 12.3% (n = 7) from theses, and 5.3% (n = 3) from book chapters. Combining these data with the study by Yousuf and Backer (2015) revealed the publication pattern over 32 years. The findings are presented in Figure 1, showing a total of 186 identified research publications. Journal articles represented 50.5% (n = 94), followed by 23.7% (n = 44) from conference proceedings, 14.5% (n = 27) from book chapters, and 11.3% (n = 21) from published theses.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1 illustrates the broader trend across the four units of analysis over 32 years. A comparison of average annual publications over the last six years to the previous 25 ½ years in Yousuf and Backer (2015) indicates an upward trend for journal articles. The average number of articles published annually between July 2015 and July 2021 was 6.2 compared to 2.2 in the previous content analysis. This was influenced by the VFR special issue in the *International Journal of Tourism Research* published in 2017. Notably, this is only the second special issue published, the first being the 1995 special edition in the *Journal of Tourism Studies*. The average rate of VFR conference papers over the last six years was 1.7, slightly higher than the previous 1.3. There also appears to be an increase in VFR theses published with the average increasing from 0.5 annually to 1.2 annually between July 2015 and July 2021. Of the seven theses evaluated, four were for a Ph.D. and three were for master's degrees. This may indicate improved interest in VFR as a postgraduate topic, with one Ph.D. candidate being attracted every two academic years. Book chapters had the highest impact in the previous study, with only one book chapter every two years on average published. This continues to support the issue identified by (Backer, 2010b) that there is a paucity of VFR research in books.

The numbers of contributing authors were disaggregated across the various units of analysis represented in Table 1. Consistent with the findings from Yousuf and Backer

(2015), there is a 'long tail' of VFR publications where the majority of authors only contribute once to VFR research. The top-ranking authors are presented in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

This research also considered which words frequented VFR papers as keywords in the past six years. As outlined in Table 2, VFR publications had different keywords identified with VFR occurring 35 times and on 15 occasions the full words "visiting friends" and "relatives" were used. Other keywords include marketing and destination. It is also worth noting that the keywords do not necessarily translate to words used in abstracts and introductions (Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The authors also considered methods employed in the research publications from the last six years. Yousuf and Backer (2015) identified a trend towards more qualitative studies, which was also evidenced across the last six years (Table 3). This research revealed quantitative studies comprise 47.4% (n = 27), followed by qualitative (22.8%, n = 13), review-based publications (17.5%, n = 10), and finally mixed methods with 12.3% (n = 7). However, the results corroborated the findings in the previous study related to thesis publications with 57.1% (n = 7) using mixed methods followed by qualitative studies (28.6%, n = 2).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

This research revealed a shift in the specific topic areas over the last six years. Whilst traveller's profile and characteristics were the dominant themes in Yousuf and Backer's (2015) article, being evident in 33.3% of all publications, it was only 1.8% (n = 1) in this study. Similarly, the topic of volume size was previously identified as a significant topic of interest with 10.3% of publications, and commercial accommodation had 4.0%. However, neither of these topics were evident in this study. As outlined in Table 4, the importance of international factors on VFR research was evident in three topics, two of which are new themes: relationship with migration (8.8%, n = 5), cultural influences (12.3%, n = 7), and international student influence (10.5%, n = 6). Other new emergent topics of interest were the role of VFR (7.0%, n = 4), quality of life (8.8%, n = 5), and VFR conceptual (5.3%, n = 3). This shift in topics of interest evidences a maturing and deepening of research in VFR.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

This research indicates that most tourism journals have published few VFR papers, with many only having single publications over the recent six-year period (Table 5). This may be indicative of limited scholarly submissions. Notably, the '*International Journal of Tourism Research*' published 22.2% (n = 8) of all VFR journal articles (n = 36) in the past six years, covering seven different topics of interest. The next most prominent journals were '*Tourism Management*' with four papers published about three topic areas and '*Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*' with four articles about four topic areas. This was then followed by '*Tourism Geographies*' with three papers addressing three topic areas, and the '*Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*' and '*African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*' with two articles covering two topic areas.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

The extent to which citations had changed in recent years was also assessed. A measure of citations was undertaken by Backer and King (2015a), who stated that “the paucity of relevant citations provides a quantitative indicator of the lack of respect that academics have afforded to the VFR travel phenomenon” (p. 212). These researchers were interested in examining the growth of citations since the work undertaken by Backer and King (2015), the timing of which aligned well with the content analysis study undertaken by Yousuf and Backer (2015). The same base was applied; that is, the articles from Backer and King (2015) were used for measurement. No changes were made to the list of articles. As shown in Table 6, there has been considerable growth in citations in the past six years.

INSERT TABLE 6 HERE

Discussions and Conclusions

Traditionally, DMOs have not given VFR travel much attention as they underestimate its importance and have several inaccurate assumptions on these travellers. The importance of VFR is often underestimated for three reasons (Morrison, 2019).

The first reason is that there is an assumption that VFRs only stay at the homes of friends and relatives, and do not use hotels or other commercial accommodation. However, research has proven that this assumption is inaccurate as some VFRs do use commercial accommodation. Based on research conducted on the Sunshine Coast of Australia, Backer (2010) found that 26% of VFRs stayed in commercial accommodation

and she classified them as CVFRs. Braunlich and Nadkarni (1995) also reached a similar conclusion based upon research in the US. They found that over one-fifth of the VFR travellers in the East North Central Census region were hotel users.

The second reason is that the expenditures by VFRs and their hosts in a destinations' tourism sectors are often assumed to be modest. However, several research studies have proven that this too is inaccurate. Some of the research suggests that VFRs outspend other domestic tourists in certain categories of expenditures (but not for lodging).

Third, DMOs feel they cannot influence these people to travel to their destinations. The assumption is made that VFRs are most influenced by word of mouth and by invitations from their friends and relatives. This is an erroneous assumption as many VFRs plan trips the same way as do other tourists. Additionally, DMOs can promote the idea of VFR travel to local community residents.

As was discussed earlier, lockdowns have resulted in various impacts that relate to VFR travel. Ongoing lockdowns have impacted well-being and disconnected people from others. Whilst different countries have responded in dissimilar ways to the current pandemic, borders have been closed, and travel has been greatly reduced. In some cases, non-essential businesses have been closed, and people have been prevented from having even one person come to their home. Key VFR events such as weddings, funerals, christenings, graduations, and milestone birthdays have been significantly impacted in many countries.

By way of example, at the time of writing this paper, New Zealand was put into a country-wide lockdown triggered after one new COVID-19 case emerged after the country had enjoyed six months of no cases. At the same time, the Australian state of New South Wales was experiencing an ongoing lockdown, with particularly heavy restrictions in the State's capital of Sydney. Simultaneously, regional Victoria entered its seventh lockdown, whilst the State capital Melbourne continued its heavy and harsh sixth lockdown that included curfews for residents.

People are forbidden from seeing friends and family and travelling more than five kilometres. The impact on well-being and loneliness is axiomatic, and those living alone such as the elderly face separation from loved ones, who may also be important not only for social connections but for assisting with tasks that become difficult for those who are aging.

In combination, these factors create an environment that is ripe for targeting. People are wanting to reconnect. As stated by NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian "[We] know people coming together is what people miss the most" (ABC, 2021). Those connections are a priority for people. Such an environment presents risks – risks of disruption if booking commercial accommodation and commercial transport. People are also concerned with safety such as cleanliness at places where there are groups of other

people (e.g., planes and larger commercial accommodation outlets). Risks and disruption are reduced through VFR travel that is closer to home where self-drive can occur, and for some VFRs, staying in the homes of friends/relatives may be an option. These types of VFRs may be a suitable type of segment to target. VFR travel provides four key benefits:- 1) it adds to the quality of life, (2) it allows staff to be retained in tourism businesses where few other customers are available, (3) images and perceptions of destinations can be enhanced in showing VFR guest activity through photography and related stories, and 4) DMOs can encourage residents to invite friends and family to boost local economies.

As was identified in the content analysis, there are new topics of interest that were not present in the previous research undertaken by Yousuf and Backer (2015). This research identified international components as a recent theme. Lockdowns have largely prevented international travel as well as impacted international student numbers and migration. In addition, quality of life has emerged as a theme that was not present before.

Newer VFR studies have revealed that VFR largely has a positive impact on quality of life. As was discussed previously, lockdowns have reduced the quality of life. Backer and Ritchie (2017) identified that domestic VFR is an appropriate first-mover market for destinations to focus on after crises and disasters; passing all eight market segmentation criteria.

It is recommended that DMOs seek to launch domestic VFR communication campaigns for the forthcoming years. In addition, the authors recommend an extension of the scholarship on the relationships between quality of life and VFR to further guide industry practitioners in the future. Consideration of motivating people to reconnect with friends and family, in particular those who are living alone, and the elderly, holds a powerful role to reduce loneliness and improve quality of life, which correlates with independence and ability to live in the home longer. Such elements will have potentially important elements to economies beyond economic stimulation, but that also reduce impacts on aged-care facilities and improve mental health. Recognising the incredibly difficult time the world has been experiencing since early 2020, the authors believe that now is the time for DMOs to develop VFR campaigns and for researchers to contribute to VFR scholarship.

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