THE QUASI-DESTINATION AS AN INNOVATIVE COMPONENT OF THE TOURISM SYSTEM: EVIDENCE FROM SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

Transiting through hub airports is a normal part of the tourism experience in medium and long-haul travel. Some facilities/services in hub airports are now being marketed as tourism attractions in their own right to raise revenue and promote the host country, thus blurring the distinction between the transit and destination components of Leiper's 'whole tourism system'. Such places, it is argued here, can therefore be described as 'quasi-destination'. Using evidence from Singapore, this research characterizes the quasi-destination and assesses its actual and potential effectiveness in influencing the travel decision and behaviors of the tourists. The results invite a reassessment of conventional tourism system models.
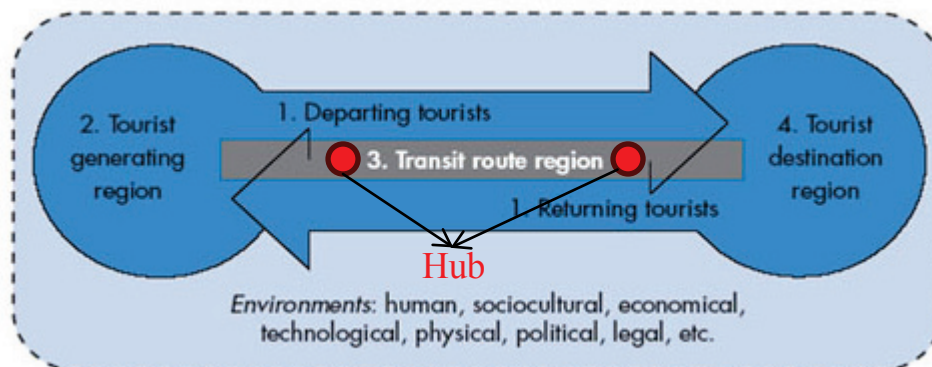
KEYWORDS
Quasi-Destination, Transit Region, Hubs, Destination Image Formation

INTRODUCTION

With the continuing development of the tourism and airline industries, many interconnections have been established between these two industries. On the one hand, good accessibility provided by the airline industry is essential for tourism destination development, and at the same time, the airline industry can substantially benefit from the additional tourism demand (Graham, Papatheodorou & Forsyth, 2008).

Early tourism models such as Campbell (1967, cited in Getz, 1986) and Miossec (1976, cited in Getz, 1986) explored their evolving relationship between tourism and transport, recognizing that the movement of tourists constitutes the primary flow of energy within tourism systems (Weaver & Lawton, 2010). Mariot (1969, cited in Prideaux, 2000) developed a theoretical tourist flow model emphasizing the linkage and access routes between the tourist's place of permanent residence and the tourist centre. Leiper (2004) amalgamated different routes linking the origin region and the destination region into a distinct transit route region. The specific place for transit in this region is the hub. At least one hub is usually required within the transit region for long haul travellers in particular. As a result, the 'hub' should be added and emphasised in Leiper's model (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
LEIPER'S WHOLE TOURISM SYSTEM WITH "HUB" ADDED TO THE TRANSIT ROUTE REGION

Despite the critical travel-facilitating role of transit regions and hubs, few studies have emphasised their importance within the tourism system. One reason is that they are often regarded as a taken-for-granted and non-discretionary space which the tourist must cross to reach their final destination (Weaver & Lawton, 2010). Normally, recreational tours aside, tourists consider the time spent in transit as wasted due to the fact that the experience is often uncomfortable and boring. Freyer (1993, cited in Grob & Schroder, 2007) indicates that the service quality offered during transit will significantly influence the tourist's overall travel experience. Some facilities/services in hubs are now being marketed as tourism attractions in their own right, thus blurring the distinction between the transit and destination components. Therefore, such locations can also be considered as 'quasi-destinations'. For example, when passengers transfer through Singapore Changi International Airport to reach their final destination, they can participate in different kinds of relaxation and entertainment activities such as visiting the various gardens and nature sites at the terminals and shopping for souvenirs. Therefore, the Changi airport is not only considered as a transit point in its own right but as a 'quasi-destination' with featured attractions and service.

Due to the highly developed global hub and spoke networks model and the establishment airline alliance strategies, more passengers in the deregulation era will transfer in the hub to reach their destination (Page, 2005), providing a valuable opportunity for the hub city to increase the number of future stayover tourists by consciously re-imagining its transit infrastructure as a quasi-destination. Passenger satisfaction is a crucial factor for such converting, as dissatisfied passengers are likely to be less receptive to marketing efforts designed for this purpose. In addition, satisfied passengers are more likely to perceive a positive image of the transit city through the 'quasi-destination', which can significantly influence tourist decision-making for the destination choice (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003).

The formation of images is a mental construct development process based on a few impressions extracted from a plethora of information sources (Reynolds, 1965), which includes promotion literature (i.e. brochures and posters), the word of mouth opinions of others (i.e. family, friends and travel agent's suggestion), social media and mass media (i.e. travel magazines, books and TV). Besides these secondary sources, tourists form or modify their perceptions through the first hand information and experience of visits (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Gunn (1988), accordingly, has developed a seven phase travel experience model, which includes:
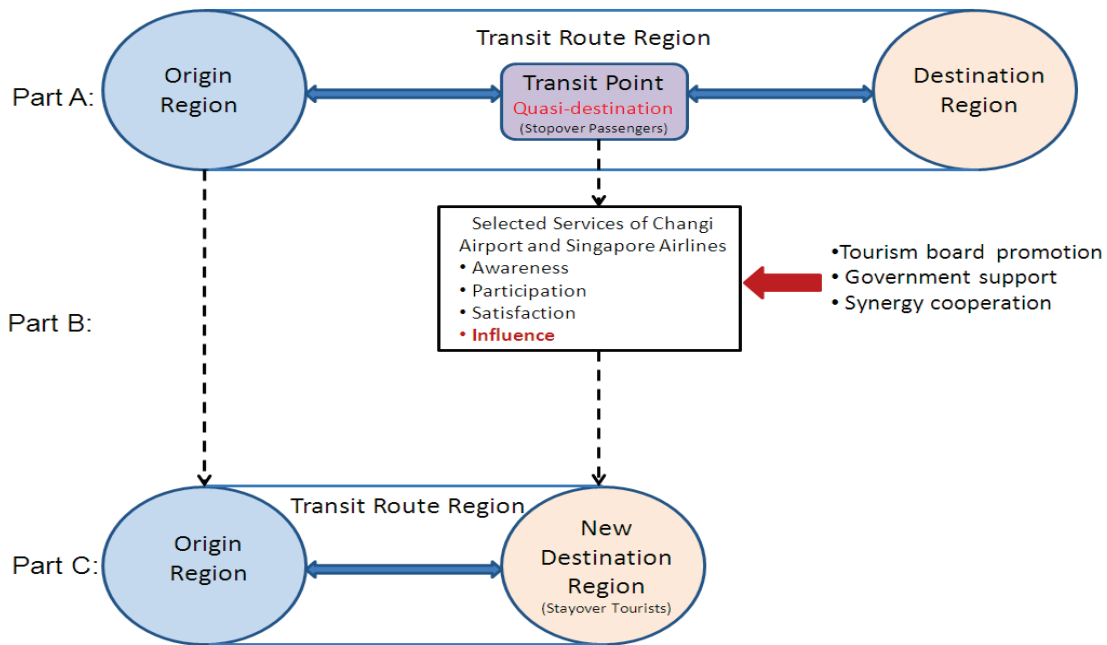
- Phase 1: Accumulation of mental images about vacation experiences
- Phase 2: Modification of those images by further information
- Phase 3: Decision to take a vacation trip
- Phase 4: Travel to the destination
- Phase 5: Participation at the destination
- Phase 6: Return home
- Phase 7: Modification of images based on the vacation experience

Gunn's model can be modified to analyse the image formation process of stopover passengers towards the 'quasi-destination'. Stopover passengers may already have an organic image of the 'quasi-destination' through various secondary resources and may choose it as the transit point based on the resultant incipient image. After receiving additional stimulus from affiliated airlines and experiencing the service at the 'quasi-destination', they may adjust their perceived image; perhaps even to the point where a visitation intention to its representative city emerges if the image is positive enough. Accordingly, Gunn's model can be modified to reflect the experience of image formation by stopover passengers with regard to the 'quasi-destination':

- Phase 1: Accumulation of mental image about the 'quasi-destination'
- Phase 2: Modification of the image by further information
- Phase 3: Decision to choose it as the transit point
- Phase 4: Receiving additional stimulus from the affiliated airline
- Phase 5: Receiving additional stimulus from the actual experience of the 'quasi-destination'
- Phase 6: Modification of the image of the 'quasi-destination' based on the information obtained in Phases 4 and 5.
- Phase 7: Onward travel to final destination and them home
- Phase 8: Reassessment of image and future decision to revisit or not revisit the transit city as stopover or stayover.

It is expected that the affiliated airline (mobile transit facilities) and airport (fixed transit facilities) can drive the tourism development of the quasi-destination transit hub and increase the number of inbound tourists by converting stopover passengers into future leisure stayover tourists through high quality of service, proper marketing promotion strategies and the synergy cooperation with the local tourism board and government. Research is therefore needed to establish the nature of such links. Based on the research gap analysis, the conceptual map of the research is summarised in Figure 1.2. Part A depicts Leiper's basic conventional tourism system with an added transit point (a hub or a quasi-destination). Part B depicts the desired conversion of this transit point into a destination for stopover passengers who are positively exposed to the hub destination through the strategic manipulation of airline and airport service, etc, and thus decide to revisit as stayovers (Part C). Figure 2, in essence, provides a simplified operational model or the quasi-destination.

FIGURE 2
RESEARCH CONCEPTUAL MAP

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Accordingly, this research examines the effectiveness of the hypothesized 'quasi-destination' (i.e. transfer hubs and affiliated airlines) in converting existing stopover passengers into future leisure stayover tourists of its host city or country. Considering the special circumstances of Singapore as a hub city, a case study about Singapore Changi International Airport and Singapore Airlines was conducted to better examine and elaborate this new relationship. Survey-based quantitative research is employed to achieve the above objective. An online survey instrument was used to disseminate the questionnaire, which was promoted among the major frequent flyer blogs, social networking service (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) and travel websites. It was also sent out to all academic staff in Griffith University.

To ensure the effectiveness and reliability of the research, the questions used to interview stopover passengers were designed based on the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire and Action) model and theory of reasoned action (TRA). Considering data reliability and ethical requirements, only people who were at least 18 years old and have transferred in

Changi Airport with Singapore Airlines during the previous 24 months prior to the survey completion date were surveyed. The questionnaire was designed mainly using Likert-scaled questions focusing on interviewing people who only got a stopover experience at Changi airport and had never been to Singapore before. Thirteen service and activity variables from Changi Airport and nine service variables from Singapore Airlines were selected to examine their positive exposure to the destination in the sequence of awareness, participation, satisfaction and influence. Demographic characteristics such as gender, age and education level, and travel preference were also solicited in the questionnaire.
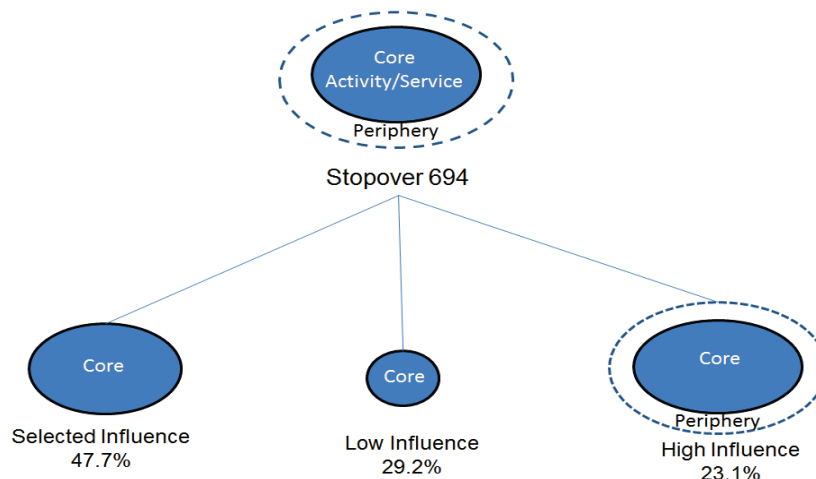
The most recent version of the quantitative statistics software SPSS was used to analyse the questionnaire data. This initially involved aggregate descriptions of the sample. Hierarchical cluster analysis was then used to identify relatively uniform sub-samples differentiated by their response patterns to the Likert-scaled questions of experience and influence. Nine selected activity/service variables of Changi Airport and Singapore Airlines, including 1) the free city tour organised by the Singapore Tourism Board, 2) the Butterfly Garden, 3) the Sunflower and Light Garden, 4) the specialised souvenir shop, 5) the book store, 6) the special themed terminal exhibition/display, 7) the on-board Singapore promotion video, 8) the personal conversations about Singapore with cabin Crew, and 9) the Touch Down Category of SilverKris magazine, were used for clustering because they sufficiently differentiated the sample. Subsequently, comparison-of-means and chi-squared tests were used to see how the clusters differ.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH OUTCOME

The main data collection was initiated on 17 October 2011 and ended on 17 January 2012. During this three-month period, 694 fully completed and valid responses were received. To find out the most effective cluster solution, five rounds of testing were made, from a two-cluster solution to a six-cluster solution using Ward's method. The three-cluster solution was the most effective way to differentiate the sample, toward achieving the research objectives. According to the engagement of the selected activities/services, the three clusters were named as High Influence, Selected Influence and Low Influence. The members in the High Influence group are influenced by all activities/services. The members in the Selected Influence group are influenced by certain activities/services including the Butterfly Garden, terminal exhibition or display, souvenir shop, free internet service, cabin food and cabin beverage, 'Singapore Girl' service style and the on board Singapore promotion video. The members in the Low Influence group participants cannot be influenced by any activities and services. The degree of awareness, participation and satisfaction of these three groups were consisted with the influence.

Based on the responses, the 13 selected activity/service variables from Changi Airport and nine activity/service variables from Singapore Airlines can be classified into the core activities/services and the periphery activities. The core services/activities have more influence on the participants to build up their revisit intention as stayover visitors than the periphery activities/services. This suggests the airport and airlines should pay additional attention in managing these core activities/services, which include the Butterfly Garden, terminal exhibition or display, souvenir shop, free internet service, cabin food and cabin beverage, 'Singapore Girl' service style, and on board Singapore promotion video, in order to convert more stopover passengers into future stayover tourists. The preliminary research outcome discussed above is briefly summarised in Figure 3

FIGURE 3
PRELIMINARY RESEARCH OUTCOME SUMMARY

There was no statistically significant difference between the three groups on the basis of gender or age. With regards to education qualification, the High Influence group had a higher portion of members with a postgraduate degree, while the Selected Influence group had a higher portion of members with the undergraduate degree. These differences are highly significant. For employment status, the Low Influence group consists of more students than the other two groups, and the Selected Influence and High Influence group had a higher portion of members who were full-time employed. The High Influence group had a higher portion of members from Grand China (i.e. mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao), while the Low Influence group had a higher portion of members from Oceania (i.e. Australia and New Zealand). The Selected group had more members from the rest of world. These differences are also highly significant.

Frequency of travel to Changi Airport and time spent there during a single visit are important because of the activity/service exposure they indicate. On average, and not surprisingly, the High Influence group transferred most through Changi Airport during the 24 months prior to the date of survey completion (2.79 times including 2.74 times with Singapore Airlines), while the Low Influence group transferred the least (1.46 times including 1.39 times with Singapore Airlines). For the flight connection time, the High Influence cluster tends to be over-represented in the longer transfer time categories (i.e. three hours or above), while the Low Influence cluster is over-represented in the shorter transfer time categories (i.e. less than two hours). The Selected Influence group represented the medium transfer time (i.e. between two hours and three hours). The three groups were significantly differentiated on this variable and, as with transfer frequency, the results are not surprising. The majority of the members in the three groups stated that they travel in the economy class most frequently, while the High Influence group had a high portion of members that preferred travelling in the business class. Based on the Pearson Chi-square test, the three groups were significantly different with each other in terms of frequent travelling class.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This research will have substantial benefits for Singapore, Singapore Changi Airport and Singapore Airlines in determining whether conversion strategies by airport and/or airline are successful and for which market segments. Other factors (i.e. informal conversations with Singaporeans on flights) that influence the decision of stopover passengers to re-visit as stayovers, if they exist, will also be identified. Based on this information, a new cooperation model between the tourism industry and the air transport industry can be thus established, and the concept of 'quasi-destination' can be better articulated, so that hub and gateway cities can achieve long-term benefit and obtain a new market segment for their tourism industry.

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