Stopover destination image — Using the Repertory Test to identify salient attributes

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a rare investigation of stopover destination image. Although the topic of destination image has been one of the most popular in the tourism literature since the 1970s, there has been a lack of research in the context of stopover destinations. The purpose of this study was to identify attributes deemed salient to Australian consumers when considering stopover destinations during travel to Europe. Underpinned by Personal Construct Theory, the study used the Repertory Test to identify 21 salient attributes, for use in the developing a survey measuring the attractiveness of a competitive set of stopover destinations. While the list of attributes shared some commonality with general studies of destination image reported in the literature, the elicitation of a relatively large number of stopover context specific attributes highlights the potential benefit of engaging with consumers in qualitative research, such as using the Repertory Test, during the questionnaire development stage.

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1. Introduction

Australians are prolific international travellers. Outbound travel by Australian residents increased 125% in the period 2003–04 to 2013–14 (see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015), to the extent that Australia has an estimated annual travel trade deficit of over $5 billion (Tourism Research Australia, 2011). At the commencement of this project the most current data breaking down outbound travel by Australians was as at the year ending September 2013 (see Tourism Research Australia, 2015). Of the 7.628 million outbound trips that year, at least 25% were to destinations not served by direct flights, such as in Europe and Africa, and therefore passengers must transit another destination en route. This estimate does not take into account transiting that also takes place during travel to other destinations within South East Asia (e.g. Vietnam), South America (e.g. Brazil), the Caribbean (e.g. The Bahamas), and North America (e.g. New York). Clearly, for a country of only 22 million people, there is a high level of international travel, including long haul trips involving stopovers. The purpose of this research project was to investigate what constitutes an attractive stopover destination for Australian consumers interested in travelling to the United Kingdom and Europe. The destination of interest is Dubai, which emerged relatively recently as a new stopover option for Australians.

The shortest route from Australia to the UK and Europe is via Asia and/or the Middle East, and based on airline schedules the most popular stopover destinations have traditionally been Singapore and Hong Kong. The Australian airport departure cards used to collect outbound data ask travellers for their main destination only, and so information on stopover destinations is not collated. Singapore Tourism Board (2014) reported Australia was the country's fourth largest source of arrivals with 1.05 million visitors in 2012, but lamented the majority were on stopovers with an overall average length of stay of 2.9 days. The report also noted there were 242 direct flights a week between Australia and Singapore, but with the emergence of the Qantas/Emirates alliance in March 2013, flights to Europe would operate via Dubai rather than Singapore. However, Qantas has continued to operate direct flights to Singapore outside of the alliance. The Hong Kong Tourism Board (2015) reported 604,000 visitors from Australia in 2014, of which 22% were transiting Hong Kong on the same day. Of the other 78% of visitors staying at least one night, the average length of stay for all visitors was four nights. The report found 95 direct flights a week operated by the top two airlines, Cathay Pacific and Qantas. Other less frequent air services representing stopover opportunities within Asia include Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo, Seoul and Guangzhou. Also, the longer trans-Pacific route to Europe via North America offers stopover opportunities at destinations such as Los Angeles, Dallas and New York. The stopover destinations available to Australian travellers also represent the same options for travellers from the UK, Europe and Scandinavia travelling to Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific.

Since 2013, cities in the United Arab Emirates have emerged as stopover destinations competing for Australian and European long haul travellers, through the introduction of air services by Emirates out of

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Dubai and Etihad out of Abu Dhabi. This project is ultimately interested in the perceived attractiveness of Dubai as an emerging stopover destination, in relation to traditional stopover destinations such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Given the increasing range of stopover destination options for long haul travellers research is required to enhance understanding of stopover destination attractiveness. However, a review of the literature identified a lack of research in relation to the measurement of stopover destination images, thus necessitating an exploratory research stage of engaging with Australian consumers to identify the range of attributes deemed salient when choosing stopover destinations. Underpinned by Personal Construct Theory, the study aims to contribute to the literature by identifying salient attributes, which could be used to develop a questionnaire to measure stopover destination attractiveness. It is suggested this exploratory study warrants attention as a standalone project. The study employs the Repertory Test, which is valid for the research aims and is relatively unique in that it was designed to operationalise a theory of human behaviour. Personal Construct Theory and the Repertory Test have received some attention from destination image researchers, but warrant more publications that detail the rationale for, and description of the procedure used, to guide future research.

A number of studies have suggested the characteristics and preferences of long haul travellers differ to those for short haul travellers (see Ho & McKercher, 2012; King, 1994; McKercher, Chan, & Lam, 2008; McKercher & Lew, 2003; Yan, 2011). While *long haul travel* is a common term, there is no widely accepted definition (Bianchi, Pike, & Lings, 2014). Definitions have either been based on flying time, ranging from four to eight hours (see Boerjan, 1995; Ferrari, Chevallier, Chapelier, & Baudouy, 1999; Medlik, 1996; Scur et al., 2001), or travel distance, such as 3700 km (Smith & Rodger, 2009). The top ten most visited destinations in the world attract nearly half of all annual international arrivals (WTO, 2014), and are all in the northern hemisphere: France, USA, Spain, China, Italy, Turkey, Germany, UK, Russia, and Thailand. By any definition, travel from Australia to each of these countries can be categorised as long haul. Indeed, six of the top 10 most visited countries by Australians are in the northern hemisphere (see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). While stopovers are popular for long haul travellers there has been a lack of research about the habits and preferences of Australian consumers. As discussed the topic of international stopovers has received little attention in the tourism literature. A review of the academic literature did not identify a commonly accepted definition of what constitutes an international stopover. For this project the International Air Transport Association definition of a stopover being at least 24 h at an intermediary port (see for example Beaver, 2005, p. 297) was adopted.

Ever since the first destination image studies were published in the 1970s (see Anderssen & Colberg, 1973; Gearing, Swart, & Var, 1974; Hunt, 1975; Matejka, 1973; Mayo, 1973; Riley & Palmer, 1975), there has been acknowledgement the images held of a destination by consumers are as important as the tangible features. This is because a destination represents a bundle of intangible service offerings that cannot be experienced before visitation. Therefore, the competitiveness of a destination is determined to some extent by its perceived attractiveness in the minds of target consumers, who might or might not have previously visited the place. Following Goodrich (1978) and Mayo and Jarvis (1981) destination attractiveness is conceptualised as the degree to which a place is perceived to provide features that are desired by consumers, relative to competitors. Measurement of destination attractiveness therefore requires two stages: 1) identification of salient destination attributes, and 2) understanding perceptions of the destination's capability of providing these attributes, relative to competing places. The purpose of this paper is to report the procedure undertaken to complete the first stage.

2. Literature review

There has been a lack of research published about the perceptions held of stopover destinations by consumers and travel intermediaries. Interestingly the first two destination image studies to be published (see Mayo, 1973, Anderssen & Colberg, 1973) were travel context specific. However, while destination image has been one of the most popular topics in the tourism literature since then, there has been little published in relation to travel context and destination image (see Gertner, 2010; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Snepenger & Milner, 1990). The majority of destination image studies have surveyed consumers' beliefs about a destination without specifying travel context; even though it might be posited that consumers will sometimes seek different destination attributes for different travel contexts, and therefore prefer different destinations for different travel situations, such as for a short break versus a long summer holiday for example. Pike's (2002, 2007) analyses of 262 destination image studies identified only 38 (14.5%) that demonstrated an explicit interest in a travel context. These were categorised into 18 themes, of which short break holidays was the most common. None of the studies involved stopover destinations. Of the 262 studies less than half used a qualitative stage involving consumers to identify salient attributes. The majority used a literature review to identify scale items for their questionnaire, which runs the risk of not including salient context specific attributes. Therefore research is required to enhance understanding of what constitutes an attractive stopover destination, to explore the extent to which attribute salience might differ to the wider destination image literature. Due to the lack of previous research related to stopover destination images, an exploratory study is required to identify attributes that are salient in travel planning.

2.1. Personal Construct Theory (PCT)

A useful lens through which to attempt to gain an understanding of how individuals differentiate a competitive set of destinations is Personal Construct Theory (PCT). PCT views individuals as scientists, whose aim is to predict and control their own world. Individuals view their world through patterns that are personally created and recreated during a lifetime of experiences that are unique to them (see Kelly, 1955). Kelly referred to these patterns guiding an individual's behaviour as *personal constructs*. Kelly's (1955, p. 46) fundamental assumption, was "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events". Anticipating outcomes is the reason for construing; in other words making predictions about the outcome of future events. For example, why would we be disappointed in the behaviour of another person, if we did not have a different expectation (prediction)? We all have a repertoire of personal constructs, which we continually trial and amend from experience, to enhance our future predictions (expectations). Kelly proposed 11 corollaries to support the fundamental assumption of PCT. These are briefly summarised in Table 1.

The way in which consumers anticipate intangible travel events fits Kelly's (1955, 1970) view of human decision making and behaviour as representing experiments. In terms of the sociality corollary, to gain access to, and attempt to understand, an individual's construct system, Kelly developed the Repertory Test and Repertory Grid Analysis.

3. Method

A series of personal interviews using the Repertory Test was used to address the research aim. The Repertory Test has strong face validity since it was developed to operationalise Personal Construct Theory. Kelly developed the Repertory Test to elicit an individual's repertoire of personal constructs they use to guide their behaviour, which in this case is salient attributes of stopover destinations. Repertory Grid Analysis is an extension of the Repertory Test, which is used to explore the