



Flying Australia–Europe via China: A qualitative analysis of the factors affecting travelers' choice of Chinese carriers using online comments data



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ABSTRACT

Recently, Chinese carriers entered the Australia–Europe route, a market currently served by several established airlines. The paper aims to explore and identify the contextual factors affecting the choice of China-based carriers for long-haul travel. The paper's innovation is in the way it uses the online comments made by readers of an aviation news article. In doing so, the paper highlights the advantages and limitations of such a data source and the full range of positive and negative perceptions about Chinese airlines as recorded by potential and actual travelers. This study highlights that in order to understand flight choice, it is worthwhile to consider the conventional itinerary choice factors in the context of the socio-cultural and historical influences. For researchers, the paper provides some evidence that air travelers apply compensatory decision rule in making airline choices. This supports the validity of the assumption of random-utility based choice models used in the study of air travel behavior.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Australians have a high propensity for air travel. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010), in the twelve-month period between July 2009 and June 2010, Australians made 6.8 million international trips in total. This is equivalent to 31 trips per 100 Australians. Among all the popular destinations, Europe, including continental Europe, UK and Ireland, attracted over 1.1 million Australians in the financial year of 2009–2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). Several airlines operate on the Australia–EU route (termed AUS–EU hereafter) competing for passengers, including Qantas, Singapore Airlines, Thai, Malaysian, Cathay Pacific, not to mention Middle East carriers such as Emirates and Etihad, and to a lesser extent, Qatar (The Bureau of Infrastructure Transport and Regional Economics, 2013). Recently, one of the three main carriers of China, China Southern, through its

expansion on the 'Canton Route', has demonstrated its significant potential to become a major air transport provider on the AUS–EU route (China Southern, 2012). As with many international aviation related developments in Australia, the entry of a major China-based airline has sparked public interest (as demonstrated by its media coverage – The Sydney Morning Herald, 2013a; The Age, 2013). It is relatively easy to verify the much lower price offered on AUS–EU via Guangzhou, which is the hub of China Southern.

Chinese carriers' ability to sustain low prices will be one of the key factors in ensuring their growth and greater market presence. This is because key factors influencing long-haul flight choice can be characterized by a core and readily quantifiable set of factors, including airfare and total travel time. However, many other context-specific factors are also important, especially when each long-haul stopover itinerary option (due to the hub-airline pairing) is often geographically unique. This is evident in the variations in the factors represented in different studies.

In a study that examined international passengers traveling to Tokyo (Narita), Yai et al. (1997), for instance, considered airfare, total travel time, frequency of flights, and nationality of airlines as factors to compare to show how travelers from different regions selected airlines. Suzuki (2000) found past experience of flight delay to be associated with airline choice. The market presence of

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airlines, which reflects the airline's share of flights in the origin market, also has a strong positive effect on passengers when selecting from different airlines (Proussaloglou and Koppelman, 1999). Jou et al. (2008a,b) defined service quality with 17 indices regarding comfort, service attitude, convenience, and service comprehensiveness and analyzed passengers' choice of airlines in Taiwan. The study found that quality of service, especially safety, is an important factor of choice (Jou et al., 2008a,b). Similarly, Park et al. (2004) studied the effect of airline service quality on Korean travelers' decision making process, and found that service value, passenger satisfaction, and airline image have direct effects on passengers' behavioral intentions. However, the results on the effect of service quality are not unanimous. For instance, Suzuki (2004) concluded that travelers will not necessarily relate their airline choice to past service failures; rather, travelers will pick an airline that maximizes their utilities on each trip. Other factors may include, seat pitch and width, in-flight entertainment and meal quality (Balcombe et al., 2009), flight schedules and legroom (Brey and Walker, 2011), number of connections and aircraft type in addition to on-time performance (Hess, 2008), airline history measured in airline age (Moreno, 2006), not to mention frequent flyer programs (FFP) (e.g., Proussaloglou and Koppelman, 1995; Chin, 2002). In summary, it appears that there are significant variations in the importance of factors.

1.2. Aims

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to explore and identify the contextual factors affecting the choice of China-based carriers for long-haul travel. As an illustrative case, we examine Australian travelers' perspectives on flight options offered by Chinese carriers on the AUS–EU route. This study primarily used the online comments made by readers of an aviation related news article. In doing so, this paper highlights the advantages and limitations of such a data source and the full range of positive and negative perceptions about Chinese airlines as recorded by potential and actual Australian travelers on the AUS–EU route.

This paper is a novel attempt at the use of online media comments data for airline strategic planning and business intelligence. We argue that such data are useful to an extent that they are an additional source of information that can help analysts identify a range of possible factors influencing flight choice. This data may be particularly useful for identifying the potential influence of contextual information such as past experiences and cultural differences. While the core, and readily quantifiable, determinants of airline choice are generally applicable to many situations, some of the other important factors influencing choice must be carefully considered so as to accurately depict the context of a research problem. Indiscriminate application of the core factors without extensive focus group and market studies increases the risks of omitted variable bias. Arguably, these influences are likely to be pronounced in circumstances where a new alternative is introduced. This paper aims to partly address this problem by proposing the use of online comments data as a valuable starting point and supplementary source in identifying contextual information.

2. Method

2.1. Research using online comments data

This study uses content analysis to analyze the 203 comments made online by readers under the news article titled “Qantas caught hopping as China bargains land” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2013a). The same article was also published in the state of

Victoria (The Age, 2013). To the best of our knowledge, readers' comments data have not been used in prior studies of flight choice. However, online comments have gradually caught the attention of researchers and are starting to be treated as a valid source of data in other disciplines. For instance, in public relations, Cho and Hong (2009) investigated 670 readers' comments about corporate social responsibility (CSR) published on the websites of two Korean newspapers. In health care, Glenn et al. (2012) examined article and readers' comments of weight loss surgery (WLS) from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation news website to explore how WLS surgery is portrayed by mass media and the public. In crisis management, Zhao et al. (2013) studied online comments to a food safety crisis event in China using simulated scenarios in order to investigate how online comments influence public reactions to discourses in organizational crisis. The validity of the use of online data of such, however, is rarely discussed in transport research literature.

Unlike a survey using a pre-formatted instrument or structured interview, readers of an online article have more freedom to discuss the issues raised in the article. Moreover, due to the anonymous nature of online comments, arguably, readers will feel more comfortable and candid to reveal their genuine reasons. When commenting on an article published either by The Sydney Morning Herald or The Age, readers are asked to provide an alias, or “Screen name”, and are given the option to provide their location. Other than the alias and location, no other information is displayed to other viewers. Given the fact that transport issues often rank high in public interest, it is likely that this data will be available in large quantities and almost immediately following an event.

Nonetheless, there are several pitfalls concerning the indiscriminate interpretation of such data. Some important comments must be made about the data generating process: online comments data are not independent samples. The non-independence property arises from comments posted as threads. One important consequence of this is that while the range of airline choice factors might be represented in the comments data, the sample distribution is likely to be biased towards some of the more extreme views. This relates to the fact that commenting on an online article is completely voluntary, and because of this, there will be pre-selection bias towards those readers who feel strongly about the discussed issue, resulting in the over-representation of some extreme views. While there are limitations, the analysis of readers' voluntary comments will be able to collect valuable information that might otherwise be missed by standard survey instruments or structured interviews. Thus, as an exploratory stage of research, it is a worthwhile exercise to investigate the validity and potential use-value of such a data source. The following analysis was conducted with the above in mind.

2.2. Data

This study focused on the AUS–EU route. This is a long-haul market that was traditionally served by legacy carriers such as Qantas, Singapore Airlines, Cathay Pacific, and British Airways. Recently, airlines from China began to offer considerably lower airfares on this route. The pressure posed by Chinese carriers, especially by China Southern, on Australian airlines, Qantas in particular, has clearly been sensed by the media, as seen from a series of media reports about the expansion of China Southern into Australian market (O'Sullivan, 2012; Upe, 2013a, 2013b). On 13 March 2013, The Sydney Morning Herald published an article titled “Qantas caught hopping as China bargains land” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2013a). The same article was also published by Fairfax Media, owner of The Sydney Morning Herald, under another newspaper, The Age, in Melbourne (The Age, 2013). The article introduces the story about the entry of China Southern into the

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