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Impact of Access Conditions to intention to visit a country:

Differential Effects of Awful *versus* Marvelous Experiences at the Airport

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Abstract:

This article investigates the impact of experiences at the international airport on the intention to visit the country. To do so, through an online survey with prospective tourists, we evaluate the differential effects of envisioning negative or positive experience at the country's gates on intentions to visit the destination.

As a result, we find that (1) anticipating a negative entrance experience at the airport of a destination ("Awful scenario") do not diminish the intention to visit it (tourists have already made up their mind). However (2), anticipating a positive entrance experience at the airport of a destination ("Marvelous scenario") significantly increases the intention to visit it (+6.4% increase on the average score of intentions to visit the country for potential visitors).

This conclusion have managerial implications suggesting that there is a persuasive strengthening effect associated with airport service quality : improve it may substantially improve tourists satisfaction.

Key words: Airport Experiences, Destination image, Intentions to visit a Country, Behavioral intentions, Interest for the country

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Introduction

Facing consumers and tourists expecting delight (Arholdt et al., 2016; Crofts and Magnini, 2011; Torres and Kline, 2013; Belk, 1988; Bettelheim, 1976; St-James and Taylor, 2004), DMO managers try to involve all suppliers of the tourism experience so that the holistic destination experience is a none-to-minimal distortion of expectations. Ideally, from arrival to departure, each moment of the consumer's destination experience must be not deceptive, even should be *enchanting* (Andersson, 2007; Andereck *et al*, 2006).

From a marketing point of view, destination managers must assure this positive entire travel experience in priority toward the more interesting and attractive tourism targets for their territories. Among these targets, international tourists are very attractive target since they represent important contributions to destination economy through volumes and expenditures (Burgueño Salas, 2022; UNWTO 2022, Vasconcelos and Rafael, 2011; Weidenfeld, 2013) due to specific consumption patterns (Alegre and Pou, 2006; Barros and Machado, 2010; Littrell *et al*. 1994; Peypoch *et al*, 2012; Martínez-García and Raya, 2008).

For these international tourists, airport are regularly the compulsory gates for access to the country. But airports have not only access functions. In fact, airports are also theaters of primary and final experiences which impact the further and whole destination experience and the souvenirs visitors. More precisely, experiences at the international airport induce impacts explained by the halo effect psychological phenomenon (i.e. a tendency to form multiple judgments or ratings based from a single trait or characteristic observable, as defined and

identified by Thorndike, in 1920). Examining the impacts of what is experienced at the airport by actual international tourists, Petr and Al Rachkidi (2018) observed that experiences of the airport for international tourist are leading to a dual impact as follow: when beginning a holiday, airport arrival experiences induce a *Priming Impact toward the destination*, i.e. a positive bias toward the whole destination experience and satisfaction; and, when leaving the country, airport departure experiences influence tourists through a *Persistence Effect toward the destination*, which leads to higher positive intentions toward the destination.

Considering that airports are part of the whole experiential tourism supply chain (Petr and Al Rachkidi, 2018; Al Rachkidi, 2016), we propose here to complete these previous analyses about current international tourists with a focus on prospective international tourists. In fact, if there is an impact of anticipated experiences at the entrance's gates of the country for international tourists, it is important for DMO managers to test and measure this impact, whether positive or negative, on the intentions to visit their country. In case of significant and large impacts, this would give priorities to destinations about the urgency to share their vision and rules of high quality and enchanting experiential purposes to airports managers. Considering this purpose, **this article proposes to measure the differential effects of anticipated experiences at airports on the intentions to visit a country for international prospective tourists**. More precisely, we ask potential international tourists what their intentions would be to visit a destination in case they have to endure two opposite airports experience fictive situations.

Based on the results of an on-line survey with 591 prospective tourists, we evaluate the effects of these anticipated entrance in the country alter the destination behavioral intentions (intentions to visit/revisit and intention of word-of-mouth recommendations) whether respondents must envision airports experience as negative (e.g., "awful welcome") or conversely positive (e.g., "marvelous welcome").

After the literature review, we expose the methodology of the survey before presenting the results. Finally, we discuss the results by proposing a conceptual model of the impact of experiences at a country's gates on subjective pre-evaluations of the country and intentions toward the country.

Literature review and conceptual framework

Access experiences as moment of truth for a destination

Previous research concluded that airport has a role as a moment of truth towards a destination (Petr and Al Rachkidi, 2018). The moment of truth is defined by A.G. Lafley, the President and CEO of Procter & Gamble, in 2005, as a particular moment when a user or a customer change or form an impression about a service, product, or brand after an interaction or contact with it. In so far, the moment of truth represents an opportunity to change the perception of the offer the manager is promoting.

Regarding access experiences when both entering and leaving a country, based on a longitudinal study between entrance and departure to the international airport of Lebanon, Petr and Al Rachkidi (2018) observed that international airport has an experiential role which could operate as crucial moments of truth for the whole tourism experience. In fact, the international airport is the place where tourists have significant personal experiences with the destination, as well these experiences are introductive or conclusive. In details, when arriving at the destination, the airport is the opportunity to give a good first impression according to a process that we called “experiential priming effect” or “*Priming Impact*” (PRI). In short, the entrance airport path leads to experiential priming effect on further evaluations of the destination through a good first impression at airport that ensures a positive destination image. Then and complementary, when leaving the destination at the airport, as the last contact with the inhabitants, the rules and the country characteristics, the airport is a last chance to confirm and strengthen the positive experience of the stay. They have called this second process of experiential influence “experiential persistence effect” or the “*Persistence Effect*” (PER). In other words, departure airport path conveys experiential persistence and revisiting intentions. These conclusions lead to various paths that tourism destination managers can consider when international customer targeting is proposed as a priority for the development of tourism

marketing in their country. It highlights to destination managers how essential it is to integrate the airport experience in a management strategy of the overall experience of leisure tourists. Such an approach requires evolving the airport status in the tourism service chain so that it ceases to be only as a functional place of transit to be the place and time of induction of emotional anchorages favorable to a positive evaluation of the destination.

The various expectancies and moderators of airport services

Regarding expectations concerning the airport, previous authors have identified the basis of the quality of airport services for the travelers (Elliott and Roach, 1993; Fodness and Murray, 2007; Gilbert and Wong, 2003; Yek and Kuo, 2003). These different studies, and other more specialized studies on segments of travelers, have shown that there are two major moderators of the level and expectations of travelers.

The first moderator concerns familiarity and experience with international travel and therefore the habit of transiting through an airport (Sultan and Simpson, 2000). The second moderator concerns the main reason for travel through the airport; it distinguishes business travelers on the one hand and travelers coming to visit friends and family (tourists known as VFR “Visiting Friends and Relatives”) and “pure” tourists on the other hand. For the first category, transit through the airport is a relatively common practice that is not a source of stress, unless there is a risk of flight delay or cancellation. For these travelers, they have three primary expectations: 1) efficiency and timeliness of the logistical stages of this transit (customs Control, passport presentation, luggage delivery, punctuality); 2) comfort of waiting areas (room dedicated to the business clientele, seats, and chairs in the waiting areas before boarding); 3) Internet connectivity (electrical outlets, free access to Wi-Fi).

For the second category, *i.e.*, the tourists, there are also complementary elements related to traveler imagination. They hope to feel like special guests in a place where the space, the atmosphere and the general environment meet their expectations (Turley and Milliman, 2000;

Schneider, 1980; Wager, 2000). This implies referring to the destination they are about to discover with, as a minimum, some decoration involving artefacts traditionally associated with the destination, product offers and advertising at the point of sale. As Martin-Cejas (2006) underlines, tourists enjoy being able to start their journey at the destination as soon as they leave the plane.

Seeing representations of Buddha when arriving to the airport in Thailand, seeing kites and small temples at Bali airport, oiled paper umbrellas and fabric dragons in China, boutiques featuring a bakery in France, a *pizzaiolo* in Italy, posters of the Sacred Aboriginal Rock of Uluru and the Sydney Opera in Australia, etc., all these would make for a memorable experience. By activating one or more of the four levers for a successful experience defined by Petr (2002, 2014) that are experiential stimulation, hyper-reality, otherness and communication, airport managers can increasingly build the experiential context that allows the “pure” tourists to start to live and consume their experience of the destination starting at the airport.

Impact of Airport experiences on intentions to visit a country: model and hypotheses

Providing quality transit service and allowing the traveler to live a new and positive experience is one of the levers that increases the potential of the destination (Martin-Cejas, 2006). However, the ideal collaboration between managers at international airports and those responsible for the destination to imagine collectively how best to exploit the strengthening role of airport experience is not so easy and obvious to establish (Al Rachkidi, 2016).

Following this model (see [Figure 1](#), p21), the assumption about the relationships between the Airport Experience and the Behavioral Intentions (Visit and Revisit, Intentions to recommend, Word of mouth) is as follow:

H1 = The anticipation of negative entrance experiences at a country impact negatively prospective tourists toward the destination

H1a_Pro prospective tourists would declare diminished intentions to visit a country if they anticipated negative airport experiences.

H2 = The anticipation of positive entrance experiences at a country impact positively prospective tourists toward the destination

H2a_Pro prospective tourists would declare higher intentions to visit a country if they anticipated positive airport experiences.

If so, this would advocate that positive airport experience functionates as a persuasive reinforcement of the preliminary information disseminated by DMO about the destination.

Methodology

Empirical Framework: Lebanon

In this research, tourism destination is the most extensive geographical level in the 6-level division suggested by Ritchie and Crouch (2003). We chose Lebanon because it is a country that is quite exclusively entered by international tourists through its unique airport. So this airport gate represents the place where are (and could be interrogated) all international tourists coming to the country.

The survey

The survey was online with a homogeneous national population regarding the geographical distance, the historical relations of visit to the country (country not usually visited by nationals) and the representations of the country. The selected country was France in order to avoid any representations or images about the country that could be linked to geographical familiarity. French potential tourists represent like naïve tourists with no preliminary positions about the country. When we present the different visuals about the country, they could not be able to remember the place. So, their first evaluations about their interest about the country (IC) measured through initial intentions to visit the country are only based on our visual stimuli.

To integrate the role of anticipating the airport experience on the intentions of visiting this country, the questionnaire took place in two stages. The survey was conducted on surveymonkey.com and provided 591(ninitial=591) valid questionnaires after sending an invitation by e-mail to a population of students and parents of students.

The 7-measurement scale favored scales with sufficient sensitivity: 5 points, 6 points (case of differential semantics), or 11 points for the probability of another stay (from 0% chance to come for the next vacation to 100% chance). Moreover, to measure the intentions of visiting the tourism destination, we asked each time three questions according to the rules of validity of the construct measurement. The three questions were the desire to go discover the country

with a Likert scale of 7 points, the immediate intention to leave with a differential semantic scale of 5 points, and the probability of selecting this destination for the next vacations with an 11-point probability scale from 0 to 100% chance.

Results:

To consider the possible balance of the interest for the country (IC) with the airport experience, we compare the intentions to visit the country according to the different types of experiences at the international airport.

Considering the two opposite scenarios of airport experiences, namely a configuration called “awful” *i.e.*, an airport experience of poor quality and a configuration called “marvelous” *i.e.*, a very good experience at the airport, [Table 1](#) (p24) summarizes the average ratings regarding the intentions to visit the destination before and after receiving the information concerning the probable quality of this airport experience.

Results highlight that the "Awful" scenario does not change the intent to visit the country in a statistically significant manner even there is a decrease. It is likely that **the airport experience appears irrelevant (meaningless) for the potential tourists who have already made up their mind about the intentions to visit the country.**

This result leads us to reject the hypothesis about the fact that the anticipation of negative entrance experiences at a country impact negatively prospective tourists toward the destination. The H1a can not be accepted. There is not significant diminishing in the intentions to visit a country if potential tourists are anticipating negative airport experiences. It seems that the interest they have for the country, developed thanks to the vision of the different visuals about the destination is more important for them than the risks of spending desirable moments at the airport during their arrival.

Looking at the "Marvelous" scenario, results show that intention to visit the country went up slightly but significantly (confidence threshold of 95%).

Commenté [CP1]: Meme question, sur titre de tableau mais si tu as fait deux fois, c'est que ça doit être sur

This result leads us to accept the hypothesis about the fact that the anticipation of positive entrance experiences at a country impact positively prospective tourists toward the destination. More precisely, the prospective tourists are declaring higher intentions to visit a country if they anticipated positive, even marvelous, airport experiences during their arrival. This conclusion contributes to the idea that a positive airport experience functionates as a persuasive reinforcement of the preliminary information potential tourists have. In the situation of information (promotion campaigns, advertisements) disseminated by DMO about the destination, the opportunity to ensure at the very beginning a positive experience might be a final convincing factor to stimulate desire to visit the country.

This conclusion suggests that there **is a persuasive strengthening effect associated with airport service quality**. Positive airport experience might even operate as a palliative measure for the desire to visit the tourism destination, however this strengthening effect is low. The positive impact was low, with +6.4% increase on the average score of intentions to visit the country for potential visitors (see [Figure 2](#), p22).

Discussion

The interest for the country expressed by the initial intentions to visit appears able to prevent possible bad consequences of a negative airport experience since behavioral intentions towards the destination remains non significantly altered by the situation of an awful airport experience. It seems that for prospective tourists, this interest for the country is more important than the international airport quality. The airport, considered primarily as an access point and an obligatory gateway, is not meaningful for the assessments of the tourists most interested in the destination.

Regarding H1, there is no effect of airport experience on the intentions to visit the country. Our design was not designed to demonstrate if there is a balance between the possible negative airport experiences and the benefits expected from the future visit of the country. H1a is rejected but results are not occulting an impact of the interest for the country (expressed by initial intentions to visit). On the contrary, our conclusions allow to propose to consider that other hypotheses should be tested further: does interest for the country operates like an on/off variable on the influence of the airport experience?

Regarding H2, our results confirm prospective tourists are more motivated to visit the destination if they know that the experience at the airport is of high quality. As details in the results part, positive airport experience seems to functionate as a persuasive reinforcement of existing cognitions and intentions. A positive experience at the airport is a way to confirm and reinforce the preliminary positive image that all the information and communication disseminated by DMO about the destination have created in future tourists mind.

To synthesize, we propose a model for further research. As indicated in [Figure 3](#) (p23), the more international tourists express a strong interest for the country, the more favorable assessments and behavioral intentions towards the destination will be. So, in case of strong

interest for the country, anticipating airport bad experiences seems to have no effect. In fact, we found that anticipating bad airport experience is not sufficient for significantly leading to decrease of intentions to visits to a country. This advocates for encouraging DMO managers to increase their efforts on the promotion of their destinations. In case of difficulty in the quality performance of their airport, it is fundamental to invest time and money in communication and promotion campaigns to try to neutralize, and even overcome this lack of quality at the very beginning and at the very end of the tourism visit.

However, even not significant, we observed a decrease in the intentions to visits the country if there is a risk of bad airport experiences. This figure should be used to convince all actors involved in the international tourism economy to be vigilant on these aspects of punctual bad experiences along the whole experience of the international travelers (see the relationship anticipated from negative experiences at the airport and global judgement of the destination). Remember that tourism competition is violently increasing. No one destination can risk that potential tourists change their mind about the intention to come to the destination. In the same vein, even very low, there is a persuasive strengthening effect associated with its good airport service quality and experience, so it is necessary to favor good relationship and partnership between DMO Managers and Airport Managers to take advantage of this positive effect.

Conclusion

In this research, we investigated the impact of anticipated airport experiences, whether bad or good, on the intentions to visit the country. Based on a survey with prospective French tourists of Lebanon, we measure their intentions to visit the country before and after having information about a fictive quality of the international entrance airport. Two airport experiences situations (an Awful one and a Marvelous one) were suggested to the respondents who evaluated their interest for the country based on visuals (without knowing exactly the destination country) then after having its name.

Conclusions demonstrate that bad experience has no significant effect on behavioral intentions for visitors who have made up their mind previously. If interested, tourists will not change their decisions to visit the country, even they have to anticipate a bad entrance and departure experience at the airport. However, if the airport experience is anticipated as positive, this reinforces the positive impact of Interest for the country on intentions to visit the country. At a more abstract level, this conclusion supports the idea that congruency between destination image and airport image of performance can be a possible means to reinforce behavioral intentions towards the destination.

Considering that airports are part of the whole experiential tourism supply chain (Petr and Al Rachkidi, 2018; Al Rachkidi, 2016), it appears important to collaborate correctly with airport managers. When the collaboration is difficult, it is important for DMO managers to evaluate the current effect of possible bad quality entrance and departure experiences of their country gates on the intentions to visit the country. But, if it appears in future research that this impact is very low and not significant, as we observed in our research, that suggests that DMO need to go on communicating on the content of the tourism experience once prospective tourists are at their destination.

Finally, a limitation of the research is that the sample is only composed of French citizens. Future research should investigate the situation of other prospective national samples (Middle East in particular) and destinations (not only Middle East destinations), so that it would be possible to verify these conclusions regarding other situations of country attractiveness.

In any case, this research demonstrates another time that DMO managers have room to maneuver. In fact, if DMO managers cannot always impose their vision and rules of high quality and enchanting experiential purposes to airports managers, fortunately DMO have other levers available to counterbalance situations they can control.

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Table and figures

Figure 1 – Conceptual framework:

The impact of anticipated airport experience on intentions to visit the country

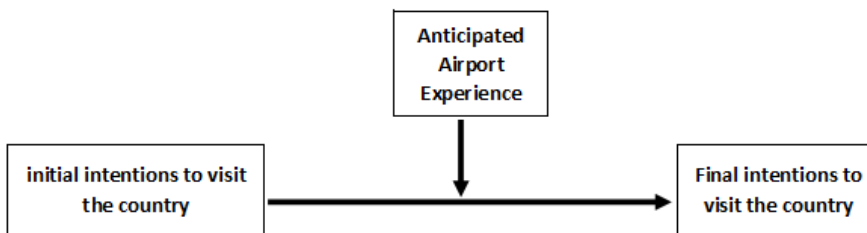


Figure 2 – Alterations of intentions to visit the country regarding the type of anticipated airport experience

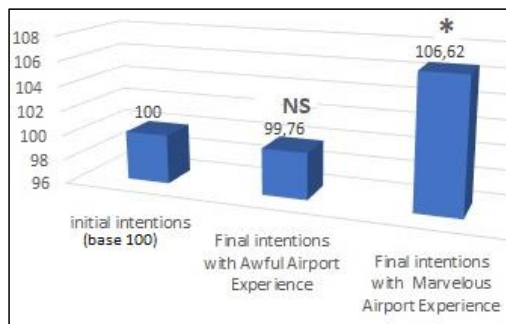


Figure 3- Proposal model for future research: The impact of Interest for the country on Behavioral Intentions toward the country

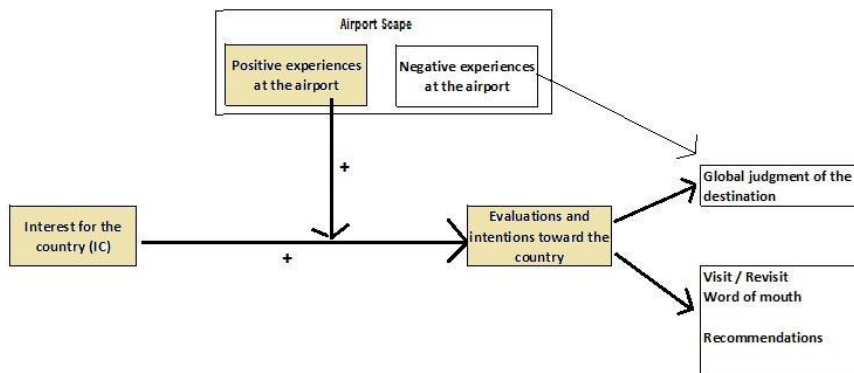




Table 1- Average and Tests of Visiting Intentions of the destination

Airport experience Scenario & Nature of the impact of airport experience	Intentions to visit BEFORE the information on the airport experience	Intentions to visit AFTER the information on the airport experience	Variables and statistical tests	Tests results and significance
	Initial intentions based on visuals about the country	Probability of going on next vacations		
Scenario “Awful”	Mean=2.1333/11; n=195; $\sigma=1.51374$	Mean=2.1282/11; n=195; $\sigma=1.49534$	Student Test Q022*Q025	t=0.076; n=195; df=194 (1-P)=0.939 (NS)
<i>Impact of the airport experience</i>	Negative effect (-)  <i>Decrease intention to visit</i>		-0.24% decrease on the score of intention to visit the country	
Scenario “Marvelous”	Mean=3.1739/11; n=138; $\sigma=2.16445$	Mean=3.3841/11; n=138; $\sigma=2.25499$	Student Test Q022*Q025	t=-2.223; n=138; df=137 (1-P)=0.028(*)
<i>Impact of the airport experience</i>	Positive effect (+)  <i>Increase intention to visit</i>		+6.4% increase on the score of intention to visit the country	
Legend: (*) : the test is significant at the 95% confidence level (NS) : the test is not significant				