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## Been there, done that: quasi-experimental evidence about how, why, and for who, a previous visit might increase stopover destination loyalty

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**Pike, S., Kotsi, F., Mathmann, F., & Wang, D. (2020). Been there, done that: Quasi-experimental evidence about how, why, and for who, a previous visit might increase stopover destination loyalty. *Current Issues in Tourism*. (In press).**

## **ABSTRACT**

Despite stopovers being a part of long-haul air travel since commercial flights commenced over 80 years ago, the first published research on the phenomenon did not appear until 2016. Also, even though destination image has been the most researched construct in the destination marketing literature, no studies had measured perceptions of a destination in the context of a stopover until 2018. This study makes a contribution to this emerging research field by reporting how a quasi-experimental design found previous visitation enhances destination image and destination loyalty in the context of a stopover during long haul international air travel. However, this effect was weakened for individuals high in prevention focus. Conceptually, the research design is underpinned by Regulatory Focus Theory, which has rarely been reported in the destination marketing literature. The results have practical implications, for Dubai as a stopover destination, and for other destination marketing organisations responsible for emerging destinations or destinations in regions that have experienced negative publicity.

## **KEY WORDS**

Stopover; Dubai; destination image; quasi-experimental design; prevention; regulatory focus; destination marketing organisations; DMO

## INTRODUCTION

Research into the phenomenon of stopovers during long haul international air travel has emerged only recently in the tourism literature (see for example Pike & Kotsi 2016, Lund, Loftsdóttir & Leonard 2017). Stopovers have been a feature of air travel since at least the late 1940s, following the introduction of Qantas services between Australia and England (see Sutton, 2016). However, there has been little scholarly attention by researchers into what constitutes a stopover, the motivations for taking a stopover en route to a further destination, the nature of stopover activities, and what makes a stopover destination attractive. Regarding the last point, while destination image has been one of the most popular constructs in the destination marketing literature since the field began in the 1970s (Chon 1990, Gallarza, Saura and Garcia 2002, Stepchenkova and Mills 2010), there has been a paucity of research undertaken in the context of stopover destinations. This research gap has practical implications, given the proposition that a destination's attractiveness will probably vary according to the travel situation (see Snepenger & Milner, 1990).

Previous studies have found a positive relationship between destination image and attitudinal destination loyalty (see for example Konecnik & Gartner 2007, Boo, Busser & Baloglu 2009, Im, Kim, Elliot & Han 2012). This manuscript aims to make a contribution to the emerging research about stopover destinations. We investigate the influence of previous visitation and destination image on attitudinal stopover destination loyalty, and analyse the influence of regulatory focus (see Higgins, 2012) as a moderator. This theory has only recently been considered in destination image formation research (see Zhang, Zhang, Gursoy & Fu, 2018). Regulatory focus theory holds that individuals pursue their goals through the adoption of two distinct motivations; promotion and prevention orientations. A promotion focus is a motivation to seek growth, while a prevention orientation implies a concern for safety and security. A promotion focused individual is described as being eager, while a prevention focused person is considered vigilant. Furthermore, these two orientations can be situationally induced (Higgins, 2012, Higgins & Cornwall, 2016).

### *Study context*

Of interest in this study is perceptions of Dubai as a stopover destination during long haul air travel between the UK and Australia. While this air route was started by Australian airline Qantas in 1947 (Sutton, 2016), Dubai has relatively recently become an alternative stopover

option to the traditional destinations such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Dubai's image as a stopover destination is significantly more positive for those people who have previously visited Dubai (see Kotsi, Pike & Gottlieb, 2018). It has been suggested that some individuals with little knowledge of Dubai, might be influenced by the destination's geographic location in the Arabian Peninsula (forthcoming); a region that has consistently attracted negative media attention through acts of war and terrorism (see for example Cooper & Momani 2009, Avraham 2013). This study addresses this proposition by investigating the possible influence of regulatory focus (Higgins, 2012) on perceptions of Dubai as an emerging stopover destination, on the UK/Australia air route. The study used a quasi-experimental research design, using a sample of UK consumers; half of which had previously take a stopover in Dubai and half who had not.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *The influence of destination image on attitudinal destination loyalty*

The dependent construct of interest in this study is attitudinal stopover destination loyalty, which represents an attitudinal commitment to a brand (Aaker 1991, Keller 2003, Li & Petrick 2008). This is different to behavioral loyalty, which represents actual consumer behavior. There has also been recognition that attitudinal loyalty represents more than repeat purchases (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973). A high level of attitudinal loyalty among target segments represents a potential source of competitive advantage for a brand (Keller, 2003), such as a destination. This has led to increasing interest in the construct in the tourism destination marketing literature (see for example Oppermann 2000, Chen & Gursoy 2001, Bianchi & Pike 2011, Prayag & Ryan 2012). Previous studies have measured attitudinal destination loyalty by consumers' intent to visit in the future and the extent to which they would recommend the destination to other people (see Chen & Chen 2010, Eusebio & Viera 2013).

Destination image has been the most researched construct in the destination marketing literature since the field commenced (Pike & Page, 2014), and one of the most popular topics in tourism research (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Extensive reviews of the destination image literature have been reported by Chon (1990), Gallarza, Saura and Garcia (2002), Pike (2002,

2007), and Stepchenkova and Mills (2010). Interest in destination image, since the first studies were published in the early 1970s, is based on the recognition that perceptions held of a destination are as important as the tangible features (see Matejka 1973, Gearing, Swart & Var 1974, Hunt 1975). This proposition is underpinned by the marketing adage that perception is reality: “What is defined or perceived by people is real in its consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p.572, in Patton 2002). In other words, regardless of whether a consumer’s perceptions of a destination are correct or not, they will be influential in travel decision making due to the intangible nature of tourism services (Hunt, 1975). Thus, destination image is strongly linked to behavioural intentions (Chen & Tsai, 2007). In the context of stopover destinations, Kotsi, Pike & Gottlieb (2018) found a positive relationship between the destination image of four destinations and attitudinal stopover destination loyalty, in the context of a stopover during long haul international air travel.

### *The influence of travel context on destination image*

It has been proposed that an individual’s perceptions of a destination might vary depending on the travel situation (Snepenger & Milner 1990, Barich & Kotler 1991, Crompton 1992). For example, the same traveler might have different destination preferences for different types of holidays, such as a stopover, short break, or family summer vacation. In the history of destination image research, relatively few studies have asked survey participants to rate a destination for a specific travel situation (Hu & Ritchie 1993, Gertner 2010). For example, of the 262 destination image publications between 1973 and 2007, categorized by Pike (2002, 2007), only 37 indicated a specific travel situation. At that time there had not been any studies related to stopover destination image, which is the travel context of interest in this study. This is interesting given the long history of stopovers during air travel. The first definition of a stopover was offered by Kotsi, Pike and Gottlieb (2018) as a stay of between one and three nights at an intermediary port during long haul air travel en route to a further destination. Stopovers have become a common aspect part of long-haul travel in the era of deregulated air routes (Page, 2005) and the emerging era of ultra-long haul travel (Yerman, 2016). Of interest in this study is long haul travel between the UK in the northern hemisphere and Australia in the southern hemisphere, for which the traditional stopover destinations have been Singapore and Hong Kong in the eastern hemisphere.

In recent years Dubai has developed into a stopover option to rival Singapore and Hong Kong on the UK/Australia travel route. On this route between the northern and southern hemispheres, Dubai is strategically located in the Arabian Peninsula. This region consists of seven countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen. Dubai is one of seven emirates in the UAE, and is the hub for the international airline Emirates. The Arabian Peninsula is part of the wider Middle East region, which has suffered from ongoing wars and terrorism events (see Mansfield, 1999); leading to negative images in international markets for many destinations (Hollier 1991, Pizam & Fleischer 2002, Bierman 2003, Morakabati 2013). Significantly, a terrorism event in one country in the Middle East has spillover effects on neighboring countries (Bassil, 2014), which can lead to stereotypes for destinations in this volatile region (Avraham & Ketter, 2016).

Therefore, market perceptions of a relatively safe and conflict-free destination in this region, such as Dubai, might suffer from the ongoing negative media reporting of the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula. If a consumer only sees negative news reporting from the Middle East, has never visited Dubai, and has little cognition of the Emirate, their perceptions of the destination could be negative. For example, while Dubai is one of the safest destinations in the world and has not experienced any recent conflicts, an independent 2020 survey of UK consumers found almost half (47%) would avoid visiting Dubai due to safety concerns and the threat of war in the Middle East (TravelandTourWorld, 2020). The impacts of negative perceptions of destinations on competitiveness has been a recurring theme in the tourism literature. The problem of negative destination image has been a problem worldwide effective destinations large and small, famous and emerging. Research reporting negative destination images has included well known destinations such as USA (McLellan & Foushee, 1983), UK (Hopper, 2002), Thailand (Nuttavuthisit, 2007), and Haiti (Seraphin, Butcher & Korstanje 2017, Seraphin, Yallop, Capatina, & Gowreesunkar 2019).

Relative to the volume of published destination image studies, there has been relatively little published research about perceptions of Dubai (Martens & Reiser, 2019). Martens and Reiser examined perceptions of first time German visitors to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. While their study was not in the context of a stopover, they found the destination image for both emirates differed to that intended to be projected by the tourism authorities. Similarly, but in the first

study investigating perceptions of a destination in the context of a stopover, Pike and Kotsi (2018) found negative gaps between the importance of stopover destination attributes and perceived performance of Dubai on the most important attributes from samples in France and Australia. Significantly however, perceptions were more positive among those survey participants who had previously visited Dubai. Both the above studies provide some support for the proposition that perceptions of Dubai in international markets might be influenced by negative stereotypes of the Middle East.

### ***Regulatory focus as a motivation principle***

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1998, 2012) holds that consumers pursue goals through the adoption of two opposing motivational concerns, which are prevention and promotion. A prevention focus features concerns about safety and security, and a consumer with a high prevention orientation is likely to be cautious and vigilant. A promotion focus features a need for self-growth, and a consumer with a high promotion orientation is considered eager and adventurous. Higgins (2012) proposed the two quite distinct orientations shape a consumer's attention to information, and interpretation of information in consumption settings. Whereas a prevention focus will engage in precise information processing to mitigate potentially negative experiences (see Werth & Foerster, 2007), a promotion focus will rely on heuristic information processing (see Pham & Avnet, 2004). The first study to investigate regulatory focus in destination image research, found perceptions could be influenced by message framing and individual's regulatory focus (Zhang, Zhang, Gursoy & Fu, 2018). Their findings have practical implications for the design of marketing communications by DMOs.

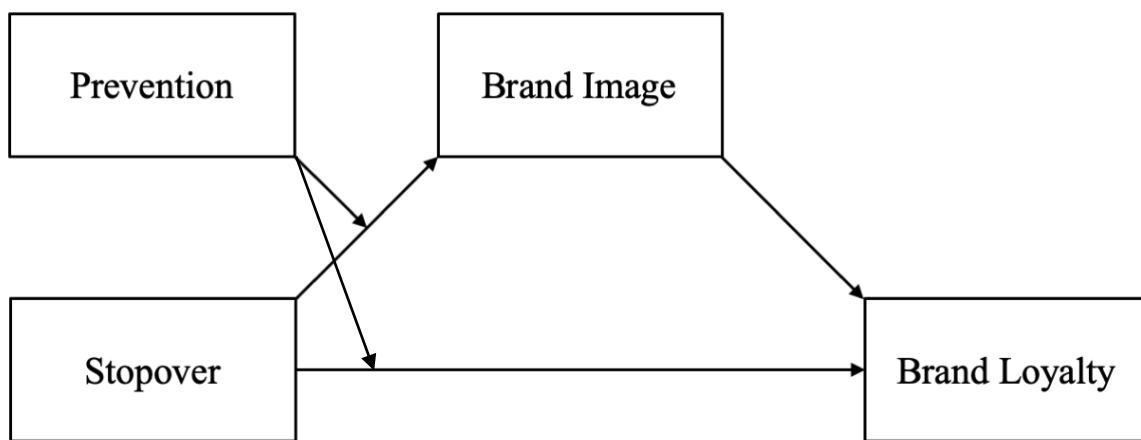
Figure 1 summarizes the proposed relationships between the constructs of interest, and the following three hypotheses:

- H1: A previous stopover in Dubai increases attitudinal stopover destination loyalty for Dubai as a stopover destination.
- H2: The effect of a previous stopover in Dubai on attitudinal stopover destination loyalty for Dubai is reduced when an individual has a high (vs. low) prevention focus.



- H3: Differences in destination brand image mediate the negative effect of a previous stopover on attitudinal stopover destination loyalty when customers have a high (vs. low) prevention focus.

**Figure 1: Brand Loyalty in the context of a stopover destination, depending on prevention focus, mediated by brand image**



## **METHODOLOGY**

A sample of 200 adult UK adults was sought from a large customer panel of a UK market research firm. A quota was specified to include 100 participants who had previously taken a stopover of at least one night in Dubai and 100 participants who had not previously had a stopover in Dubai. No participants were excluded from the analysis. Participants were invited by the marketing research firm to complete an online survey. First, participants were asked to indicate whether they had previously taken a stopover of at least one night in Dubai, using a yes/no option, which is the independent variable. Next, the mediator, *brand image*, was measured with four established scales (see Konecnic & Gartner 2007, Chi and Qu 2008, Boo et al. 2009, Bianchi, Pike & Lings 2014), using a five-point scale anchored at ‘Very strongly disagree’ and ‘Very strongly agree’ ( $\alpha = .95$ ; e.g. “Visiting this destination would reflect who I am”). The dependent variable stopover *destination loyalty* was measured using three established scales items (see Chi and Qu 2008, Boo et al. 2009, Bianchi, Pike & Lings

2014), using a five-point scale anchored at ‘Very strongly disagree’ and ‘Very strongly agree’ ( $\alpha = .95$ ; e.g. “I intend visiting this destination in the future”). Next, participants completed a standard regulatory focus scale (see Higgins et al. 2001). We measured both prevention and promotion regulatory focus using the established 11-item measure from Higgins et al. (2001; prevention using a five point scale: 5 items; e.g. "How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?"  $\alpha = .79$ ; promotion: 6 items;  $\alpha = .76$ ; e.g. "How often have you accomplished things that got you "psyched" to work even harder?" - 1 - Never or seldom; 5 Many times). This scale was shown to be the best performing measure of regulatory focus with respect to, stability, construct representativeness and predictive validity (Haws, Dholakia, and Bearden 2010). Items 1, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11 were promotion scale items, while items 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8 were prevention scale items, following Higgins et. al (2001). The survey concluded with demographic questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The characteristics of the participants ( $N = 200$ ) are summarized in Table 1. As had been requested of the market research firm, half of the participants had previously taken a stopover of at least one night in Dubai. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 81 with a mean of 46.70 ( $SD = 17.41$ ).

**Table 1 –Characteristics of the participants**

|                         |                   | <b>N</b> | <b>Valid %</b> |
|-------------------------|-------------------|----------|----------------|
| Gender                  | Male              | 103      | 51.5           |
|                         | Female            | 97       | 48.5           |
|                         | Total             | 200      |                |
| Previous Dubai stopover | Yes               | 100      | 50.0           |
|                         | No                | 100      | 50.0           |
|                         | Total             | 200      |                |
| Annual household income | < £9,999          | 22       | 11.0           |
|                         | £10,000 - £19,999 | 30       | 15.0           |
|                         | £20,000 - £39,999 | 45       | 22.5           |
|                         | £40,000 - £69,999 | 39       | 19.5           |

|                                      |                      |     |      |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|-----|------|
|                                      | £70,000 - £99,999    | 22  | 11.0 |
|                                      | £100,000 +           | 20  | 10.0 |
|                                      | Prefer not to answer | 22  | 11.0 |
|                                      | Total                | 200 |      |
| Highest level of completed education | None                 | 3   | 1.5  |
|                                      | Elementary school    | 8   | 4.0  |
|                                      | High school          | 56  | 28.0 |
|                                      | Some college         | 27  | 13.5 |
|                                      | Associate's degree   | 8   | 4.0  |
|                                      | Bachelor's degree    | 39  | 19.5 |
|                                      | Post-graduate degree | 32  | 16.0 |
|                                      | Doctorate            | 17  | 8.5  |
|                                      | Total                | 200 |      |

The means for each of the constructs' five-point scales are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Means for the scale items**

| <b>Construct and scale items</b>                                  | <b>Cronbach alpha</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std.</b> |
|---|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Dubai destination brand image</b>                              | .95                   |             |             |
| This destination fits my personality                              |                       | 4.18        | 1.999       |
| My friends would think highly of me if I visited this destination |                       | 4.19        | 1.982       |
| The image of this destination is consistent with my own image     |                       | 4.30        | 1.883       |
| Visiting this destination would reflect who I am                  |                       | 3.92        | 2.007       |
| <b>Dubai stopover destination loyalty</b>                         | .95                   |             |             |
| This destination would be my preferred choice for a stopover      |                       | 4.19        | 1.994       |

|   |     |      |       |
|---|-----|------|-------|
| I would advise other people to visit this destination   |     | 4.21 | 2.032 |
| I intend visiting this destination in the future  |     | 4.26 | 2.060 |
| <b>Prevention focus</b>   | .79 |      |       |
| Growing up, would you ever “cross the line” by doing things that your parents would not tolerate? |     | 3.27 | 1.223 |
| Did you get on your parents' nerves often when you were growing up?                               |     | 3.28 | 1.117 |
| How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?               |     | 3.86 | .957  |
| Growing up, did you ever act in ways that your parents thought were objectionable?                |     | 3.17 | 1.249 |
| Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times                                      |     | 3.03 | 1.221 |
| <b>Promotion focus</b>  | .76 |      |       |
| Compared to most people, are you typically unable to get what you want out of life?               |     | 3.32 | 1.180 |
| How often have you accomplished things that got you “psyched” to work even harder?                |     | 3.28 | 1.117 |
| Do you often do well at different things that you try?  |     | 3.65 | .981  |

|   |  |      |       |
|---|--|------|-------|
| When it comes to achieving things that are important to me, I find that I don't perform as well as I ideally would like to do |  | 3.30 | 1.081 |
| I feel like I have made progress toward being successful in my life   |  | 3.54 | 1.125 |
| I have found very few hobbies or activities in my life that capture my interest or motivate me to put effort into them        |  | 3.20 | 1.333 |

To test the three hypotheses, following the established procedure (e.g. Mathmann, et al 2017; Lechner & Mathmann 2020), we first performed regression analysis to verify whether there is a direct effect in the absence of the mediator. Then we performed a moderated mediation analysis to identify the type of mediation. Regression analysis is widely used by researchers. There are some assumptions of regression such as linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and independence (Berry 1993). As past research has suggested that minor assumption violation does not preclude the use of regression analysis in business research (Hayes 2018), it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the assumptions of regression analysis.

To test H1 and H2, regarding the main effect of a stopover (H1) and the interaction between stopover and participants' prevention focus (H2), we used linear regression analysis. In the first step, the main effects of prevention (A) and stopover (B) (no = 0, yes = 1), together with their interaction (A × B), were entered into a linear regression analysis. In a second step, we entered the main effect of promotion and the interaction between promotion and stopover. The reason why we conducted the second step is to control for the effect of promotion and its interaction with stopover as an important robustness check. It will demonstrate that the effect is indeed driven by prevention, rather than promotion focus if we find the focal effects remain significant. This procedure is common in the regulatory focus literature (e.g. Lechner & Mathmann, 2020) as well as related regulatory mode literature (see Mathmann et al., 2017b). The findings from the first step showed that 35.45% variation in the stopover destination loyalty was accounted for by the stopover, prevention focus, and the interaction

between stopover and prevention focus (coefficient of determination  $R^2 = .3545$ ). In support of H1, the predicted effect of stopover was positive and significant ( $\beta = 3.81$ ,  $SE = .88$ ,  $t(200) = 4.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This effect was also reflected in the difference between the stopover ( $M_{Loyalty} = 5.29$ ;  $SD_{Loyalty} = 1.59$ ) and no stopover ( $M_{Loyalty} = 3.15$ ;  $SD_{Loyalty} = 1.64$ ) groups. Supporting H2, also the predicted two-way interaction between prevention focus and stopover was significant ( $\beta = -.66$ ,  $SE = .29$ ,  $t(200) = -2.28$ ,  $p = .02$ ), while there was no significant main effect of prevention ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p = .26$ ). The findings from the second step showed that 41.65% variation in the stopover destination loyalty was accounted for by the stopover, prevention focus, promotion focus, and their interactions (coefficient of determination  $R^2 = .4165$ ). Furthermore, the focal effects remained significant ( $\beta = 4.14$ ,  $SE = 1.92$ ,  $t(200) = 2.15$ ,  $p = .03$ ) even after we controlled for promotion and its interaction with stopover. To illustrate the nature of these interaction effects, we applied a Johnson-Neymann (J-N) technique, using the SPSS script from Hayes (2018). Thus we could identify points in the range of prevention at which the effect of stopover shifted from being significant to non-significant. The J-N technique specifies the value of a moderator at which the ratio of the moderated effect to its standard error is equal to the critical t-score (Hayes, 2018). The conditional effect of stopover on stopover destination loyalty transitioned from significance to non-significance at a prevention value of 4.35 ( $\beta = .94$ ,  $SE = .48$ ,  $t = 1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ; 95% CI [.00, 7.42]). Please see Table 3 for the conditional effect of stopover on stopover destination loyalty at different prevention values.

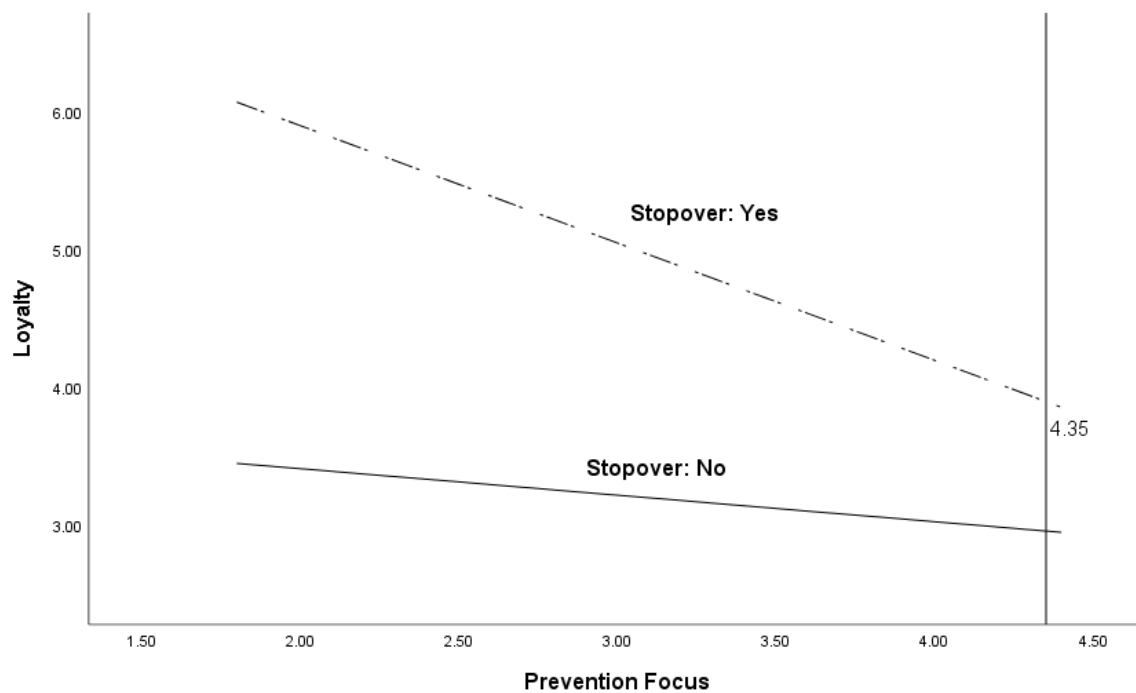
**Table 3 – Conditional effect of stopover on stopover destination loyalty at different prevention values**

| Prevention value | $\beta$ | $p$ |
|------------------|---------|-----|
| 1.20             | 3.02    | .00 |
| 1.39             | 2.89    | .00 |
| 1.58             | 2.77    | .00 |
| 1.77             | 2.64    | .00 |
| 1.96             | 2.52    | .00 |
| 2.15             | 2.39    | .00 |
| 2.34             | 2.26    | .00 |
| 2.53             | 2.14    | .00 |
| 2.72             | 2.02    | .00 |
| 2.91             | 1.89    | .00 |
| 3.10             | 1.77    | .00 |

|      |      |     |
|------|------|-----|
| 3.29 | 1.64 | .00 |
| 3.48 | 1.52 | .00 |
| 3.67 | 1.39 | .00 |
| 3.86 | 1.26 | .00 |
| 4.05 | 1.14 | .01 |
| 4.24 | 1.01 | .02 |
| 4.35 | .94  | .05 |
| 4.43 | .89  | .07 |
| 4.62 | .76  | .16 |
| 4.81 | .64  | .28 |
| 5.00 | .51  | .43 |

These findings provide support for H2 by demonstrating that the positive effect of a previous stopover in Dubai on stopover destination loyalty for Dubai is reduced for consumers with a high prevention focus. However, such a positive effect holds for consumers having a low prevention focus. Figure 2 illustrates these effects graphically.

**Figure 2: Floodlight analysis indicating Johnson–Neyman point of significance**



As a test of H3, that brand image serves as a mediator, a bootstrapped mediated moderation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 8; Hayes, 2018). The

analysis produced two multiple regression models. The first model tests the influence of the main effects of (A) stopover and (B) prevention as well as their interaction ( $A \times B$ ) on the mediator (brand image). The second model tested the effect of the mediator, the moderator, the independent variable, and the interactions of the latter two on the dependent variable (stopover destination loyalty). See Figure 1 for a graphical depiction of the tested relationships. In line with predictions, Model 1 illustrated a main effect of stopover on brand image. Participants who visited Dubai as a stopover destination before reported higher brand image ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) than those who did not visit Dubai before ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ,  $t(200) = 4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We also found a significant interaction effect on brand image ( $\beta = -.65$ ,  $SE = .27$ ,  $t(200) = -2.29$ ,  $p = .02$ ). According to Model 2, when including brand image, the effect of stopover on stopover destination loyalty was not significant ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $p = .35$ ) while the effect of destination image on stopover destination loyalty was significant ( $\beta = .92$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t(200) = 24.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Importantly, the interaction between stopover and prevention became non-significant ( $\beta = -.06$ ,  $p = .69$ ), which indicates full mediation (Zhao, Lynch & Chen, 2010). Furthermore, the 95% bootstrapped CI for the indirect effect of higher-order interaction did not include zero  $[-1.08, -0.10]$ , which indicates mediated moderation. Our Study thus supports, H3, which predicted that differences in brand image mediate the negative effect of stopovers on stopover destination loyalty when customers have a high prevention focus.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of stopovers being part of long-haul air travel since commercial flights commenced over 80 years ago, the first published research into the phenomenon did not appear until 2016 (Pike & Kotsi, 2016). Furthermore, even though destination image has been the most research construct in the destination marketing literature, with hundreds of studies, none had explicitly measured perceptions of a destination in the context of a stopover until 2018 (Pike & Kotsi, 2018). This is despite calls for research into the influence of the travel situation on consumer perceptions (see Snepenger & Miller 1990, Hu & Ritche 1993, Gertner 2010). The lack of research into stopover destination preferences has represented a major gap in the tourism literature.



The focus of this study was the emergence of Dubai as a stopover destination on the UK/Australia air route. Dubai airport now services 125 airlines and pre-COVID19 was predicted exceed 100 million passengers in 2020 (Dubai Airports, 2020). Since Qantas launched the Kangaroo route between UK/Australia in the 1940s the dominant traditional destinations have been Singapore and Hong Kong. Both these destinations have enjoyed strong business, sporting and cultural relationships with the UK and Australia as members of the British Commonwealth. Dubai has not had a long history of consumer awareness among travellers from the UK and Australia, and is also located in a part of the world that has long suffered from negative media editorial around conflicts.

This study attempts a contribution to the emerging literature on the phenomenon of stopovers during long haul international air travel, by reporting evidence to suggest that previous visitation enhances stopover destination loyalty; and that this association is moderated by an individual's prevention focus. A UK sample (N = 200) of 100 participants who had previously taken a stopover in Dubai, and 100 participants who had not, were recruited from the panel of a UK market research firm. Conceptually, the quasi-experimental research design is underpinned by Regulatory Focus Theory, which has rarely been reported in the destination marketing literature. The results have practical implications, not only for Dubai as a stopover destination, but also other destination marketing organisations (DMO) responsible for emerging destinations or destinations in regions that have experienced negative publicity. The study is one of the first to employ regulatory focus in destination image research, one of the few studies explicitly on the context of stopovers, and the first to explore the moderating effect of a prevention focus on stopover destination loyalty.

### ***Theoretical contribution***

Conceptually, the research design is underpinned by Regulatory Focus Theory. The only previous study to operationalise this theory in the destination marketing literature was Zhang, Zhang, Gursoy and Fu (2018). The efficacy of this theory for destination image research, from both theoretical and practical standpoints is highlighted by the findings of this study as well as those of Zhang, Gursoy and Foy. The first hypothesis, that previous visitation in Dubai increases attitudinal brand loyalty for Dubai as a stopover destination, was supported. This is in line Kotsi, Pike & Gottlieb (2018), who found a positive association between previous visitation to Dubai and attitudinal stopover destination loyalty; and with other

previous studies in different travel contexts (see Konecnik & Gartner 2007, Boo, Busser & Baloglu 2009, Im, Kim, Elliot & Han 2012). The practical implication of this finding in isolation for the stakeholders of Dubai, is that this emerging stopover destination might expect increased attitudinal stopover destination loyalty in line with increases in arrivals of first-time visitors. Attitudinal loyalty represents likelihood of visiting again, as well as likelihood of recommending the destination for a stopover to others.

The second hypothesis, that the effect of a previous visitation in Dubai on attitudinal stopover destination loyalty for Dubai is reduced when an individual has a high (vs. low) prevention focus, was also supported. Consumers with a high prevention focus, representing caution and motivation for safety and security, have lower levels of attitudinal stopover destination loyalty towards Dubai. This finding adds more depth to the association between previous visitation and future stopover destination loyalty. It cannot be assumed that just by visiting Dubai, an individual will have a higher proclivity to visit again and recommend the destination to others. A practical implication of this is that this is a problem that is unlikely to be overcome through marketing communications, since these travellers have already formed an attitude towards Dubai that is based on actual visitation.

The third hypothesis, that differences in destination brand image offer insights on the process by which the effect of a previous stopover on attitudinal stopover destination loyalty is reduced when customers have a high (vs. low) prevention focus, was supported. This provides some insights into why previous visitation to Dubai might not provide some individuals with an appetite to visit again. In-depth examinations of Dubai's destination image (see Pike & Kotsi 2018, Martens & Reiser 2019) provide insights into those attributes that potentially determine destination preferences. In the case of Pike and Kotsi, two of the determinant attributes were related to perceptions of safety and respect towards visitors. In both attributes the perceived performance of Dubai was rated lower than attribute importance.

### ***Practical implication***

A key practical implication for Dubai's destination marketers, of the findings from this study, is that previous visitation can lead to an improved stopover destination image and increase attitudinal stopover destination loyalty. This supports previous findings of Pike and Kotsi (2018) and Kotsi, Pike and Gottlieb (2018) who focused on Dubai as a stopover destination,

and more broadly studies in the wider destination marketing literature that have found positive associations between destination image and destination loyalty (see for example Konecnik & Gartner 2007, Boo, Busser & Baloglu 2009, Im, Kim, Elliot & Han 2012). Therefore, it could be expected that as levels of visitors increase so to will levels of attitudinal destination loyalty. This not only includes future return visitation but also the likelihood of recommending Dubai to others. Since word of mouth recommendations are an *organic* destination image agent, which can have higher credibility than *induced* destination image agents (eg DMO advertising), the implication for all destinations is to encourage increased influencers. This is particularly opportune in terms of user-generated content on social media, since many DMOs have been slow to embrace social *engagement* on these platforms, as opposed to one-to-many promotional messages.

### ***Limitations***

One limitation of this study is the sample involved only 200 people in the UK, due to resource constraints. Also, while we did ensure that half of the sample had previously visited Dubai, we did not control for when visitation had occurred. There might or might not be different perceptions of the Dubai experience between recent visitors and visitors from decades ago for example. Also, we did not control for length of stay during previous visitation. There might or might not be different perceptions held of Dubai between short and long stays. A further limitation of this study is that we only investigated perceptions of one destination in isolation. This does not provide any relative measures of competitiveness in relation to other stopover destinations, both on the UK/Australia route and on other long-haul routes in other parts of the world.

### ***Future research***

Following the point about the limitations of the sample in this study, it would be worthwhile in future research about the influence of previous visitation on stopover destination loyalty to test for differences around when visitation took place, and for how long. Also, future research could test the findings by replicating the study in southern hemisphere source markets on this air route, such as Australia and New Zealand. Following the point about the limitation of measuring perceptions of only one destination, future research could test the findings by replicating this study using other stopover Middle East destinations on the UK/Australia

route, such as Abu Dhabi. In relation to Regulatory Focus Theory, future qualitative research is needed to explore what underpins the perceptions of Dubai held by those previous visitors who have a high prevention focus. Finally, we argued that market perceptions of a relatively safe and conflict-free destination in this region, such as Dubai, might suffer from the ongoing negative media reporting of the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula. For example, if a consumer only sees negative news reporting from the Middle East, has never visited Dubai, and has little cognition of the Emirate, their perceptions of the destination could be negative. One theoretical explanation for this is plot value (see Reynolds, 1965), where from just a small amount of information about an object, an individual can construct a more detailed plot, such as a stereotypical image of a Middle East destination. There is a need for research investigating the extent to which negative media editorial dominates positive publicity for regions that have experienced terrorism, conflicts and other devastating natural events, and the extent to which this might explain less than favourable destination images for places that have a track record of safety such as Dubai. This not only includes the Middle East, but South America, Africa, the sub-continent, and the Pacific Island for example. In relation to the practical implication of the potential for user-generated content on social media as an organic means to improve destination image, sentiment analysis would be useful in identifying what is being said about Dubai and the Middle East on social platforms.

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