

Evaluating Service Marketing in Airline Industry and its Influence on Student Passengers' Purchasing Behaviour-using Taipei-London Route as an example (Published by the Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing Vol.25, No.1 pp.149-160)

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Abstract

This paper reports an empirical study into airline consumer purchase behaviour on a major global route, that between the United Kingdom and Taipei. It focuses on the factors influencing airline choice for a sample of 60 Taiwanese students based at UK Universities and travelling on five airlines: British Airways, Cathay Pacific Airways, China Airlines, EVA Airways and Royal Dutch Airways. Several stages of data-gathering were undertaken and a well-established analytical framework for services marketing was used to identify gaps between the desired and received service. The main findings suggest that service quality, including in-flight entertainment, cabin crew attitude and seating comfort, can be as important as, or more important than, price in student purchase decisions for long-haul flights. Other important factors in carrier choice included student discounts, baggage allowances and airline safety record.

Key Words: Service Marketing, Airline Industry, Consumer Behaviour, Taiwan, Tourism

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Introduction

“Competition [between airlines] has increased... Service is becoming more important is this competition. (Morrison and Winston, 1995)

The airline industry has evolved rapidly in recent decades. It was a luxurious form of travel in the early of the last century but has become one of the most common methods of travel today. By 2003, there were 590 air million travellers in Europe alone (Eurostat News, 2005). Globally, world passenger traffic (measured in passenger-kilometres performed by scheduled airlines of ICAO contracting states) was estimated to have increased by a factor of 3 from 1,367 billion to 3,807 billion between 1985 and 2005 (Hanlon, 1999, p.14). There was a phase when most airlines were state-owned, followed by a period of oligopoly, before we entered a stage when competition is as intense as any other commodity goods (Shaw, 1999). Partly because of these changes, the service quality and marketing of the airline industry also changed rapidly. In the early days, airlines placed a heavy emphasis on service quality because it was a luxurious leisure pursuit. Then, it became a secondary focus when it entered the oligopoly stage. During this stage, price and price wars were the primary concern of the travellers and the airline companies. This tide shifted again during the 1990s, as some airlines started to reemphasise and improve their service to attract travellers (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). However, the focus of existing studies is on the industry rather than the traveller.

The purpose and contribution of this research is to capture the essence of contemporary airline service marketing through 60 overseas student passengers and their evaluation of five world-classed airlines' performance on the Taipei-London route. There are existing studies on airline service performance and studies on travelling behaviour. The originality of the present study lies in its attempt to combine the two through a qualitative interpretive approach.

Despite the limitations, the findings reconfirm some existing literature on the issue, such as the importance of safety, but also produce some new suggestions about how airlines can improve customer satisfaction through understanding what passengers in the large and important student passenger market regard as a quality flying experience. In addition, the findings of this research can also bring new thoughts to other travel, tourism and hotel industries because the focus of this research is on marketing and service instead of aviation.

Literature review

Previous Studies in Airline Service Quality and Related Issues

The literature that helped to develop this study is primarily about the airline industry, the overseas student market of Taiwan, service marketing, consumer decision making, research methods and philosophical frameworks. In this section, we will sample a couple of representative studies from each category and point out the potential gap within the current studies.

According to Williams (1994), the deregulation of the airline industry has influenced several regions besides the US. Before deregulation, market structure and price were two important features in competitive environment (Shaw, 1999; Doganis, 2001). Gaps between provided service and the perceived service were also noted (Gourdin and Kloppenborg, 1991) although some of these have been resolved post 9/11 by the development of electronic ticketing and other innovations in response to environmental and safety issues. Proussaloglou and Koppelman (1995) in Chen (2003) point out that there are three issues which can influence the passenger's decision in airline choice: the purpose of travel, the passenger's attributes and the airline's incentives. One of the reasons why the present study used an Asia Pacific-Europe route is due to its significance in today's airline industry. Shaw (1999, p.127) describes how 'both Boeing and Airbus agreed that the crucial market for new large jets is that from Asia/Pacific markets to Europe'. Airline companies have to be competitive in the Asian market in order to be competitive worldwide. The student market travelling between the UK and Taiwan is a significant segment of this larger market.

According to Kim et al. (2006), the studies on student travellers are primarily US based and its history is between two to three decades, therefore, there are further opportunities that can be explored. Since Taiwan (formally known as the Republic of China) entered the WTO in 2002, the government called for the 'Internationalisation of higher education' as part of the drive to enhance the competitiveness of Taiwan by empowering its citizens to seek new knowledge overseas (Tsai, 2002). The numbers of Taiwanese overseas students reached 33,000 in 2005 and the UK is the second most popular destination after the United States. This number reached 9,248 in 2005, a figure which has doubled over ten years according to the Taiwan Ministry of Education. This means that the UK is becoming more attractive since the number of students in the US remained relatively constant during the same timeframe. Some airlines have become aware of this potential market, while others have not.

Airline service marketing and consumer decision making

Airline service marketing throws up some issues specific to the industry. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1993) describe how an expectation of service in general can be divided into desired service and adequate service. Adequate service means the actual service that the customer received, while the desired service is the quality of service for which the customer wished. Palmer (1994) states that 'pure' services have characteristics of intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability. Airline customers regard intangibles such as the service encounter and cabin crew friendliness and service performance levels as important, but they also place a high value on tangible aspects including food, seating and entertainment programmes (Rust, Zahork and Keiningham, 1996). The extent to which different customer segments place higher or lower values on different aspects of service depends to some extent on nationality.

Chiang (2003, p.149) suggests that "Passengers select different airlines based on service quality, travellers' socioeconomic characteristics and the purpose of the trip". Sultan and Simpson (2000, p.188) agreed and elaborated further by writing: "Major airline industry competitors, seeking to gain or expand market share globally or regionally, provide an opportunity to explore the service expectations and perceptions of customers of different nationalities".

The above scholars highlight the need to consider the consumer's background when assessing service quality and airline's performance during the service interaction (Natalisa and Subroto, 2003). Shaw (1999, pp12-14) emphasises consumers' personal characteristics and separates them into roles in the decision making process, such as deciders, gatekeepers, users, buyers and influencers. So consumer behaviour in airline choice is not entirely individual, it may be influenced by other members of their group. In the generic model of consumer behaviour there are five stages within the decision making process: problem recognition, the search for alternative solutions, the evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase use and the re-evaluation of the chosen alternative (Peter and Olson, 1999). This model is useful since it allows this research to examine individual consumers' mindsets during different stages of consumption. Combining these two models of consumer behaviour will allow this research to have a dynamic view of how and why Taiwanese student passengers select airlines in the way they do.

Within the context of the airline industry, Kaynak and Kuchkemioglu's (1993) found

that the reliability of the airline, consumers' their past experience with the airline, the price of the tickets, service quality and safety are the five most important factors when selecting airlines. Chen (2003) also identifies connection to the destination, price, emergency handling, services and special discount for frequent flyers as important choice criteria in European flight destinations.

This section reviewed a selection of the literature on the airline industry, the Taiwanese overseas student market, service marketing and the consumer decision making process. With this literature presented, the following section will focus on this research's data collection procedure and analytical approach.

Research method and analytical approach

In brief, this research adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach based on a convenience sample of 60 Taiwanese students at UK universities. The interviews explored the participant's previous experiences as well as their attitude towards future consumption. The core framework for this research was developed by Zenthaml and Bitner (1996). Customer expectations are the standard reference points for performance against which service experiences are compared, and are often formulated in terms of what a customer believed should or will happen. In addition, the 7Ps of service marketing, the generic model of consumer problem solving and the roles involved in consumer decision making were also incorporated as guidance for this research.

Data gathering approaches

To reiterate, the objective of this study was primarily to identify the airline carriers' service attributes that are important to Taiwanese students who are/were studying in the UK. Given this, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable, since its nature is to explore and identify a phenomenon (Malhotra and Birks, 2003). In addition, the interpretive technique was a useful analytical tool in this genre of qualitative studies. It is an approach that tries to 'generate rich descriptions of everyday events and issues' (Hackley, 2003, p.25). This approach could improve the understanding of the participants' decisions and their rationale behind them.

60 overseas students who were regular users of the Taipei-UK airline route were recruited during the first stage of the research and asked to fill in a questionnaire adapted from on Kaynak and Kuchkemiroglu (1993) and Chen's (2003) studies. The questionnaire was used to identify the five most commonly used airlines when travelling to the UK. The most

popular was Cathay Pacific, followed by EVA Airways, British Airways, China Airlines and Royal Dutch, in that order.

With the five most popular airlines identified and their specific service attributes analysed, 40 participants were recruited from the original 60 Taiwanese students for the second stage. In terms of the demographics and other information regarding these 40 interviewees, this research tried to balance its mix without setting a strict quota. Of the 40 interviewees, the average age was 27, gender balance was 15 males and 25 females, average stay in the UK was 20 months, 37 were postgraduates and 3 undergraduates, and on average each had flown this route 3.4 times. The potential influence of these characteristics will be discussed separately.

The second wave of 40 respondents was subject to semi-structured in-depth interviews. This is a popular method that can aid the data gathering and analysis (Fontana and Frey, 1994; May, 1998), especially when designed to 'reflect the interviewee's view of world' (Hackley, 2003, p.121). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are a useful way to gain, sometimes unexpected, feedback. They were suitable for this research because they allowed the interviewer to have some control over the topic and direction, while not dictating the discussion.

The interviews explored the preferred airline service attributes of respondents based on their considerable flying experience. Finally, respondents were shown an organised table-Airline Comparison Chart. This table showed five selected airlines' products and service information, which include duration, travel kit, transfer point, price and frequency of flying. After letting the interviewees reflect on the given information, the researcher then asked ask them whether they noticed these differences or not, what attributes are important to them and whether they will consider changing their decision in their future purchases.

This structured approach was designed to provide a dynamic insight into the Taiwanese students' preferences when selecting an airline. With the literature and research method presented, the following section will present the passengers' experiences.

Findings: Student passengers preferred airline service attributes

The student passengers discussed several interesting topics throughout different stages of the interviews. The following are the major emerging themes inferred y the researchers from the data sets. During this section, partial transcripts will be presented to exemplify the points being made.

The Unique Class (Elite Class) Offered by EVA Airways

A number of respondents referred to a particular service offered by EVA Airways which has a specially designed configuration. This airline offers four classes of service, a unique differentiation among Taiwanese airlines (Shaw, 1999). The four classes are First, Business, Evergreen Deluxe (Elite class for Boeing 777 only) and Economy class. According to EVA airways, all EVA intercontinental services offer a unique class called the Evergreen Deluxe Class cabins or Elite Class. It offers a very high quality service and many enhancements that can only be found in other airlines' business class. For example, it has a large seat configuration and individual video systems. This class received massive praise from the passengers.

I always choose EVA because of its Elite class which was called Evergreen Deluxe in Boeing 747. I can enjoy the better facilities which are like Business Class offered by other airlines, but [at a] cheap price. (respondents AC)

However, not every participant who travelled with EVA bought an Elite Class ticket. Amount the 13 participants who collectively flew with EVA 22 times, only five mentioned they would always travel Elite Class. Others would travel in Elite Class after they accumulate enough mileage and received a free upgrade or were given it as a gift by someone else. The participants' feedback agreed with Calder's (2003) view that price is one of the most important attributes that passengers consider. However, it is still possible to charge a premium price through providing a better service mix. The impact of these favourable opinions and how they can be transformed to a positioning strategy will be discussed later.

The Web Service

With the progression of the technology and the emergence of the hyper-competitive environment, e-commerce and information systems play essential roles in the airline industry as well (Shaw, 1999). Web service is a key part of information systems. The companies applied these systems to enhance their competitiveness, such as improving product quality and customer services. In the airline industry, many airlines use internet services to attract more customers by making the transaction more customer-friendly. Laudon and Laudon (2002) point out that information systems are not only essential for management, but that most organisations also need it to prosper or even survive in today's competitive environment. In this research, passengers agreed that they will take an airline's web service into account

while shopping for and selecting airlines:

The convenient web service is the most important issue to me. I always choose Cathay Pacific Airways because of their online booking and checking-in service. I don't have to arrive at the airport two hours early to queue in front of the counter. It is quite time saving and convenient for me. (Respondents AF)

According to other participants, Cathay Pacific Airway's convenient web service, on some level, contributed to the user's favourable attitude. On the other hand, the web service's influence should not be overstated. Even though nearly all of the participants used the internet to search for alternatives, only a handful bought his/her ticket without the assistance of a travel agency. Chaffey et al (2003) proposed that a good internet service is not only a good source of marketing but also of relationship building which is essential in today's deregulated airline industry. With the high development of internet technology and communication facilities, the web service is becoming a necessity for airlines. At the same time, student passengers and other consumers who are already familiar with this instrument will expect the airlines to provide this service at some level.

In-flight Service

The unique class and web services certainly are important, but the in-flight service is the fundamental aspect that will be evaluated by the student passengers. They pointed out three main criteria: the flight attendant's service attitude, the food and the environment.

Flight attendant's service quality

Because of the booming service industry in recent years, corporations have started to provide additional and sometimes less noticeable services that were not available before (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). In addition, the emphasis on marketing started to shift from the product itself to the overall impression that it gives to consumers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985; Li, 2003). The following quote is one participant's view:

I choose Cathay Pacific Airways because of their good service. The flight attendants are all kind and polite. Even if I push the call button several times requiring water because I felt sick. They were still very patient. (Respondents AN)

From the passengers' perspective, they cared very much about the service they received

from the cabin attendants. Perhaps more importantly, sometimes it is not only the formality of the service, but whether the flight attendants were sensitive, caring and patient. Berry and Parasuraman (1991) assert that both service quality and customer satisfaction are positively correlated. Therefore, the quality of the flight attendants is crucial for airlines since they are the people who will have direct contact with the passengers.

Quality of food

In Chinese and perhaps some other Asian-Pacific cultures, dining has other social meanings apart from basic physical needs (Deng, 1997 in Li, 2002). In the Chinese saying, dining, clothing, living and travelling are four vital parts in people's lives. Hence, the quality of the food served during the flight can also be a unique selling proposition. A couple of respondents described their experience of the in-flight meals service and how much they cared about the food quality.

In my experience, many airlines do not care about the quality of the in-flight meals. However, Cathay Pacific Airways' in-flight meals are provided by Hyatt Hotel. Even though I am sitting in Economy Class, I still can enjoy high quality food from a five star hotel on the airplane. (Respondents AN)

Based on general observations during the interviews, although passengers cared about the quality of food, it was not the single most important issue. On the other hand, there are some who care about this a lot, based on the examination of their texts. If airlines intend to attract more Taiwanese or Chinese international students, these companies have to pay more attention to the quality and style of the in-flight food service, because it could affect customers' satisfaction and re-purchasing intention.

Environment: the type of aircraft, seating comfort, and entertainment system

The Skytrax magazine (2006) describes how the in-flight environment is an essential issue for long-haul flight passengers. The environment of the aircraft involves the comfort of the seats and the entertainment system. A number of participants gave a rather detailed description of the features of the cabin and the following comment was made by one participant:

I had used EVA AIR a few years ago when they used Boeing-747s, but that flight was awful because they didn't have a personal TV service. I can only choose a few music programmes during the flight. I haven't used EVA since then. However, since EVA uses Boeing-777s to fly from Taipei to London. I decided to try again. I find that the new type aircraft is good. They offer a 3-3-3 seat arrangement, so the space of the seats is wider. I also have a personalised movie channel, a music programme as well as video games. (Respondents BD)

According to these international students' views, they are concerned about and well-aware of the in-flight environment that the airlines offered. If the price is similar, they would choose the airline that can make them more comfortable, depending on their travel needs. During this research, food and seat comfort ranked the highest, while entertainment systems and service quality were rated slightly lower.

This once again suggested that price is not the only indicator for passengers but can be affected by multiple issues; therefore, airlines should make efforts to improve their offer since this is an effective way of building long-term relationships (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

Special Offers and Loyalty Programmes Targeted at Students

Kotler et al (2005, p.393) specify that segmentation is about adapting a company's offerings so that they more closely match the needs of one or more market segments. The respondents mentioned a couple of offers that can attract their attention:

Being a student, I would like to choose the airlines which offer special discounts on student tickets. Some airlines offer very good prices to students. Otherwise, I also would consider the baggage allowance, because I may have to carry some necessary things from my home country. That is why I choose Royal Dutch Airlines because it offers a 30 kg baggage allowance which is also the best deal for students. (Respondents BG)

Due to the special needs of the students, they would like to choose the airlines which provide a tailor-made service for them. Student-fares and a baggage allowance are the two aspects that mostly concern student travellers. This information will allow airlines to form their targeting strategy if they wish to tag onto the student market.

Apart from the tailored offer, some other loyalty programmes can also offer additional incentives. Rust, Zahork and Keiningham (1996) explain that defensive marketing could help

companies to maintain a long-term relationship with their customers, which is generally more cost-effective than pursuing new customers.

I always choose Cathay Pacific Airways or British Airways to London. The reason is that I can earn more miles based on the benefits of the Asian Mile system. No matter which I choose, I can accumulate the mileage and enjoy the upgrade service. This is an important issue to me because I also can have other benefits while booking a hotel or shopping using this Asian Mile system. Even when I want to travel to another country, if I choose the airline within this system, I still can accumulate the miles I fly. It's quite good. (Respondents AF)

From the passengers' point of view, they think that earning benefits by taking flights is attractive. They enjoy the services and benefits, such as upgrades, discounts and shopping, as long as they fly with airlines within this Asian Mile system. British Airways and Cathay Pacific Airways are also members of the oneworld alliance, and passengers who join the AsianMile programme also can have the benefits of the oneworld members' airlines. One observation made during the interviews was that loyalty programmes only attract those who travel most frequently. For less regular travellers, an immediate discount is sufficient. Airlines must consider their objectives and their consumer profile before deciding on which strategy to implement.

Good Connection to the Destination: the Number of Transfer Points

Long-haul flights can be a tiring experience regardless of the quality of the service; therefore, many passengers like to choose airlines that can take them to their destination fast (Shaw, 1999, p.124). At the moment, it is difficult drastically to decrease the flight duration due to technological reasons; however, too many transfer points and regular delays will be a disadvantage.

I will pick the flight which will let me arrive at my destination the quickest. I remember I have taken Royal Brunei Airlines once, because of a cheap ticket, however, it took me over 24 hours. I had to transfer four times to London. I almost went crazy during the trip. Since then, I do not like to spend too much time on a flight which has too many transfer points even if the ticket is cheap. (Respondents AJ)

Long-haul flights certainly are not an experience they enjoyed, especially those who travelled often. Nearly all of those who travelled often tried to share a story about their

painful encounters with delays and flight cancellations. So a long-haul flight is a negative purchase, like a new car tyre- consumers would not buy it if they didn't have to. Consequently, airlines and passengers have to come up with solutions that are acceptable to both sides.

Safety

Although it may sound obvious, passengers can accept a reasonable trade-off between airlines' offers, but safety is the most important feature that cannot be compromised:

Safety is the most important issue for me when selecting airlines, because life is precious. If I knew that China Airlines have had so many accidents in ten years, I would not ever take China Airlines! When I saw the number of fatalities, it frightened me seriously. I could not believe that I choose China Airlines just because of the cheap tickets. I think other services are not important compared to life. Nothing is more important than life itself. (Respondents AH)

Through the passengers' views, even though they think that good service is a necessity in their experience, nevertheless, the safety record is still a priority without dispute, and this can have a crucial impact on the passengers' decision-making process (Morrison and Winston, 1995).

From the above, it appears that safety is a priority as well as a bottom line that an airline has to provide. It is not only important to student travellers but most other travellers as well. Since 911, airlines are facing additional and sometimes very difficult challenges from within the industry and the macro-environment. All of the above topics are individual offers provided by airlines, but the last topic of the analysis section will look at the sum of these parts - brand image and reputation.

Brand Image and Reputation

Kotler et al (2005, p549) assert that brand includes a wide range of offers and that 'brand names tell the buyer something about product quality. Buyers who always buy the same brand know that they will get the same quality each time they buy'. In other words, all the different offer criteria discussed above could be summarised through brands and the meanings associated with brands. In the interviews, several respondents stated that they would buy tickets from certain airlines due to the recommendations of their friends. On the other hand, the importance of recommendation and word of mouth in travel and tourism industry although is confirmed in some studies, but it is not without debate. Some of the interviewees would

actively advocate the airline with which they flew. For example, five respondents said that, when they saw or heard about EVA airways, they would think that it is the safest airline, while other respondents stated that Cathay Pacific Airways would remind them of the good service quality.

Cathay Pacific Airways always gives me a good impression because of their reputation. The majority of my friends also choose Cathay to travel. They told me that they choose Cathay Pacific Airways because that they saw some reports about the good service and safety provided by Cathay Pacific. I also agree with them due to the enjoyable flying experiences with Cathay. (Respondents AO)

Moreover, the fact that all of participants can remember which airline they travelled with last time and could name their favourite airline reconfirmed the importance of brand and branding to consumers as well as airline companies.

Summary of Main Findings

To summarize, the major themes which emerged as key to customer airline choice in this study were as follows. 1) having a fourth class with added benefits was perceived positively 2) an efficient and user-friendly web interface allowing ticket purchase was an important pre-requisite for many consumers 3) in-flight service quality was highly important, particularly the attitude and professionalism of cabin crew, the quality of food and the in-flight entertainment 4) special offers and loyalty programmes targeted at particular market segments were viewed very favourably 5) convenience in terms of proximity to end destination and transport links from the airport were also important 6) respondents were very aware of each airline's safety record and regarded it as a key factor 7) overall, respondents seemed to be very aware of brand reputation as a symbol of all these themes collectively.

Managerial Implications

In this section, the existing literature will be combined with some of the above findings to suggest how airline companies can improve their competitiveness in the short-, medium- and long-term. This research realises that there are many alternatives but here only presents those that were routinely pointed out by the participants.

Short-term improvement: the in-flight service

The first important lesson from this research relates to the kind of in-flight service that

the airline provided. These are the areas where airlines can improve within a relatively short period of time. The first issue that concerns the respondents is the flight attendants' service. Some respondents worried about their language skills and chose EVA Airways, China Airlines and Cathay Pacific Airways, which have Chinese-speaking cabin crews. Another issue relates to the choice of food. Although other factors should not be undermined, however, airlines can add value to their services if they can appreciate their passengers' dining habits. This effort will be positively acknowledged by the passengers. The third factor concerning the interviewees is the in-flight entertainment programme. They care about that whether airlines can offer up-to-date and the newest movies, music as well as video games because long-haul journeys are long and tiresome. Additionally, the majority of the student participants are members of generation X (1965-1979), who are curious, adventurous, enjoy challenges and like to pursue fashionable things (Li, 2003).

Medium-term: the Inspirations from EVA Airway's Elite Class

During this research, the respondents' favourable attitude towards EVA's Elite Class confirmed the study by Johnson and Nunes (2002). They propose that there is a gap between the upper and the middle-class that was not recognised by the corporations.

The background of the students can be used to explain their purchase decisions and travelling preferences. These participants mainly are funded by their slightly above middle-class families at some level. They find business class too expensive and unnecessary, but also find economy class unattractive. Currently, only EVA has pioneered this type of in-between class and it seems quite successful in terms of capturing this marketing segment. Apart from EVA, only Virgin Atlantic Airways has a Premium Economy Class which is similar to EVA's Elite Class, but it is only offered on a limited scale. On the other hand, having an extra class will require a wide range of activities, such as new seating arrangements, service, marketing and financial obligations.

Long-term: Airlines' Safety and Branding Image

As mentioned in the previous chapter, safety cannot be replaced by any amount of service (Shaw, 1999). Therefore, it is essential for airline companies to be safe and have an image of being safe. Because airline's actual safety is more of an aviation safety subject, hence, this section will explore two suggestions about how airlines can use a service marketing strategy to acquire an image of being safe. As demonstrated by some of the participants in this research, they do have an existing belief about which airline is safer.

According to weak theory (Ehrenberg et al, 2002), airlines should not expect to alter the travellers' existing beliefs within a short period of time.

Airlines with a superior safety record, like EVA Airways and Cathay Pacific Airways, could stress their records in their promotional kits as a reinforcement and reminder to travellers. For airlines with inferior safety records, like China Airlines, one suggestion to improve their image is through public relations and endorsements by aviation specialists, especially through the channels of newspapers and specialised travel magazines. These channels can be perceived as credible due to their nature (Hackley, 2005). In Hsieh and Chang's (2005) study on the Taiwanese travellers, it confirms that advertising through endorsement can be an effective approach in hotel and hospitality industry. This research proposes it should also be effective when applied to airlines due to their nature are similar in many areas.

However, in another travel and tourism marketing study by Boo and Busser (2005), it demonstrated the essentialness of considering the affective image as well as its cognitive image. In other word, travel and tourism industry can not treat the consumers as naïve.

Concluding comments: limitations of this study and future research opportunities

This study, based on a representative and convenient sample of airline travellers and focussed on a single route, has limited generalizability. Nevertheless, it does generate insights which carry immediate implications for competitive strategy in the airline market. There are limitations as regards the data gathering and analytical method. Due to the number of respondents, it is difficult to establish a correlation between service attributes and behaviour. Furthermore, interview respondents' accounts of their behaviour are not always accurate. For example, one respondent initially claimed that she had bought an economy class ticket but later admitted that she flew business class because she did not want to be viewed as showing-off or different, despite the interviews being conducted individually and privately. However, in general, responses based on individual interviews tend to carry a high degree of integrity, especially when responses are probed in depth interviews lasting a considerable time period. The study could be extended and its findings deepened by adopting the same methodological approach to other typical students routes, and also by extending the study to other, non-student consumer segments.

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