AIRPORTS AS AN ATTRACTION: A CASE STUDY OF CHANGI AND INCHEON INTERNATIONAL AIRPORTS

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Abstract

Airports in Singapore and the Republic of Korea have higher passenger traffic than those in neighboring countries. This may be because Changi International Airport in Singapore and Incheon International Airport in Korea are not only functional but also attractions. Such airports are beneficial during national crises, such as pandemics and economic downturns, because they serve as tourist attractions. This study examines the services offered by these two airports to identify factors that could help Vietnamese airports enhance their services. The results indicate that Vietnamese airports should provide cultural amenities consistently across all terminals. However, as Changi and Incheon International Airports are larger than Vietnam’s airports, future studies should focus on smaller airports, such as Tan Son Nhat Airport, to investigate methods to attract tourists.

Keywords: Airport; Attraction; Changi International Airport; Incheon International Airport; Passenger volume.
1. INTRODUCTION

Investigating how the Vietnamese tourism industry can achieve robustness and steady growth during and after the COVID-19 pandemic is important, as a large percentage of Vietnam’s workforce is employed in the tourism industry and related fields. The tourism industry is vulnerable to outbreaks of communicable diseases and other national crises, as they can influence tourist perceptions and reduce tourist volume. For instance, in Croatia, the war for independence in 1995 and subsequent safety concerns led to a downturn in tourism (Rivera, 2008). However, Croatia’s tourism industry recovered through its government’s efforts to revitalize the nation’s image.

Enhancing the national image can have a positive effect on domestic political problems. The national image operates as an aspect of citizenship in Southeast Asian countries, and people tend to think about past kings when they discuss their countries (Suryadinata, 2014). Nations in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, are culturally and ethnically diverse, creating the potential for cultural conflict, and most cultural conflicts are domestic (Croissant & Trinn, 2009). The harmonious integration of diverse citizens into a national whole (i.e., nation-building) is a priority for politicians, who may seek to construct concepts of nation and community for political purposes (Anderson, 2016). Another source of domestic conflict is the occurrence of national crises that cause economic hardship for local communities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Vietnam’s need for strong, steady economic growth is clear. However, the country’s tourism industry is dependent on foreign capital, which may be problematic due to a lack of availability during national crises. We argue that airports in Vietnam could help enhance the national image and fortify the economy against the effects of national crises. Airports could serve as both waiting rooms for flights and sources of entertainment and motivation for people to travel to Vietnam. In this regard, Singapore and South Korea offer learning points for Vietnam and other nations in Southeast Asia.

Singapore Island, formerly called Singapura or Temasek, is located to the south of Peninsular Malaysia. Singapore has long been a trade hub, even before the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles, the founder of the port city. Evidence suggests that Singapore Island played an important role in Southeast Asian history. Singapore was attacked by the rival expanding empires of Majapahit and Thailand when the ancient Srivijaya Empire loosened its hold overseas (Turnbull, 2020). Following the arrival of Sir Raffles, some Chinese people settled in Singapore, seeking work and fleeing political issues in mainland China, such as the Taiping Rebellion (Frost, 2005). These conditions caused Singapore to become a multiracial nation with a population of Indians, Straits Chinese, Westerners, and Malaysians. Eventually, the government of Singapore recognized its multiracial nature as a potential source of social problems (Singh, 2022) and a threat to the nation’s existence. Hence, the government introduced citizen-friendly policies, such as multi-language education, and created symbols easily recognizable as Singaporean, such as the Merlion statue, to enhance national identity.
These political initiatives led Changi International Airport to become a tourist destination. Attractions within the facility include Jewel, a nature-themed shopping center located in front of Terminal 1, and Heritage Zone, a duty-free shopping area in Terminal 4 with video performances based on the traditional shophouse and Singaporean architectural style (Figure 1). Such displays of a nation’s historical and cultural characteristics can promote the national image (Raguraman, 1997), including citizens’ perceptions of their country. Changi International Airport was constructed partly to achieve the Singaporean government’s nation-building goals.

Similarly, Incheon International Airport near Seoul, South Korea, provides opportunities for passengers to experience Korean culture inside the airport with performances, exhibitions, and cultural spaces, including the “Walk of the Royal Family” and “Changing of the Guard” (Figure 2).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Changi and Incheon International Airports enjoyed considerably higher passenger volumes than the airports of neighboring countries, with the number of passengers reaching briefly 11 million. These airports could achieve
this during the pandemic due to their status as attractions. Therefore, the concept of an airport as an attraction could support the nation-building process of Vietnam and its tourism and creative industries. This study examines the advantages of modeling the development of the existing Tan Son Nhat International Airport and future Long Thanh International Airport in Ho Chi Minh City on Changi International Airport in Singapore and Incheon International Airport in South Korea.

1.1. International passenger volume at Singapore Changi and Incheon International Airports in 2019–2020

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, 68.3 million and 11.8 million international passengers passed through Changi International Airport in 2019 and 2020, respectively (Figure 3). Incheon International Airport recorded 71.1 million international passengers in 2019 and 12 million in 2020. However, these numbers were significantly smaller for several other Asian airports. In Southeast Asia, the Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Thailand recorded 29.4 million passengers in 2019 and 9.8 million in 2020. The number of international passengers at Kuala Lumpur International Airport was 29.2 million and 6 million in 2019 and 2020, respectively. In Northeast Asia, Haneda International Airport in Tokyo saw 15.5 million passengers in 2019 and 3.1 million in 2020, whereas Beijing Capital International Airport had 23.91 million passengers in 2019 and 2.5 million in 2020.

![Figure 3. International passenger volume](image)

Note: Units are millions of passengers.

Sources: Airports of Thailand PLS (n.d.); Changi Airport Group (n.d.-b); Malaysia Airports (n.d.); Incheon airport (n.d.-b); Statista (n.d.); Tokyo International Air Terminal (n.d.).

International passenger volumes in 2020 indicate that some countries had an advantage in attracting travelers despite travel difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is useful to examine development options for Tan Son Nhat International Airport and Long Thanh International Airport based on Changi and Incheon International Airports.
This study examines whether airports in Vietnam could be considered attractions. The facilities at Tan Son Nhat International Airport in Ho Chi Minh City and Noi Bai International Airport in Hanoi are not appealing for transit passengers with long waits. According to the Tan Son Nhat Airport webpage (Tan Son Nhat International Airport, n.d.), the services provided by these airports are limited to free water, medical services, duty-free shops, complimentary Internet, playgrounds, restaurants, lounges, and airline information services. Moreover, the English-language information on their page is more difficult to find than the Vietnamese-language information (Figures 4 and 5). Although such services may seem adequate for an airport, they may not provide sufficient motivation for international travelers to opt for trips with layovers in Vietnam. Framing policies that promote the airport as an attraction could help attract international passengers. Furthermore, essential facilities and services must be of high quality, as they influence tourists’ satisfaction and motivation to revisit the country (Freestone, 2009).

Figure 4. Tan Son Nhat Airport’s service information on the Vietnamese version of their webpage
Source: Cảng hàng không Quốc tế Tân Sơn Nhất (n.d.).

Figure 5. Tan Son Nhat Airport’s service information on the English version of their webpage
Source: Tan Son Nhat International Airport (n.d.).
1.2. Airport as an attraction

“Airport as an attraction” is the concept of an airport as an enjoyable waiting area between flights (Hong & Woo, 2012; McNeill, 2010). Such airports establish themselves as tourist destinations (Lee & Jeong, 2021). Changi and Incheon International Airports are designed to serve and entertain the modern traveler. A common feature of such airports is their free cultural facilities and services, which are available to everyone and provide national publicity. Thus, such airports form local tourism clusters and increasingly meet consumer preferences as their attractiveness grows (Bae, 2016). If tourists visit an airport on a layover before transferring to another airport and are offered interesting and informative experiences, they may favor that airport for future trips. Furthermore, cultural and tourism products are interdependent (Vanhove, 2022) and cannot provide economic value separately (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). I also found that foreign language education supports tourism and the national image (Kim, in press). The concept of an airport as an attraction could help achieve economic targets and goals related to the national image.

There are two further reasons to focus on the airport as an attraction. First, this concept can motivate tourists to revisit a location. M. Kim (2013) examined the impact of service quality factors at Jeju International Airport on national image and showed that the provision of facilities and cultural services had the greatest impact, with the ability of airport personnel to respond to travelers’ questions and concerns also playing an important role. Another study on Jeju and Incheon International Airports suggested that airport users’ satisfaction positively affects the national image (Choi et al., 2017). Second, providing passengers with activities or entertainment other than shopping to engage in while waiting enhances their airport experience. A study by Oh et al. (2017) suggested that aesthetics and the ease with which facilities can be used are essential for raising an airport’s competitiveness and could generate positive feelings among travelers, leading to repeat visits in the future. Compared to the Republic of Korea and Singapore, Vietnam had lower economic growth in 2021. The per capita gross domestic product was $97,798 in Singapore (Macrotrends, n.d.-a), $18,303 in South Korea (World Bank, n.d.), and only $3,694 in Vietnam (Macrotrends, n.d.-b). This may be an indicator that airports with facilities that offer cultural experiences, such as those at Incheon and Singapore, can improve the local economies even in times of national crises, such as pandemics and economic trouble. Therefore, the government of Vietnam should use local cultural assets to promote the national image at its major airports.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have examined the impact of travelers’ experiences at Changi International Airports. Tang et al. (2017) discovered that Changi International Airport and Singapore Airlines provide evidence that stopover-to-stayover conversion strategies are viable, particularly for specific market segments. Chutiphongdech and Vongsaroj (2022) analyzed the factors contributing to the success of Changi International Airport. They argued that the airport is unique due to its collaborative partnerships and its implementation of various proactive measures to increase revenue, such as the use of e-
commerce channels and commercial platforms to engage with airport stakeholders. As such, Changi International Airport is considered a “noteworthy tourist attraction.” The concept of the airport as a tourist attraction has played a significant role in the development of Singapore as a nation and served as motivation for tourists to extend their stay in the country.

Other studies have examined Incheon International Airport in South Korea. Kwon (2013) demonstrated that the cultural and artistic offerings at Incheon International Airport are the primary factors in securing its global competitiveness. With his forward-thinking perspective, he highlighted the significance of creating a program tailored to a specific target language and evaluated its unique characteristics. This analysis appears to be feasible, as Incheon International Airport is primarily managed for efficiency, in contrast to Changi International Airport. According to Lee (2018), favorable consumer assessments of cultural performances and exhibitions raise the standard of airport services. Therefore, cultural performances and exhibitions must be explored. Furthermore, according to Kang and Lee (2018), the spatial image of a global hub airport is a crucial consideration when examining its characteristics. Thus, it is essential to establish a meaningful space by fostering a relationship between functionality and mobility while reducing boredom and energizing the environment. Heo and Lee (2022) reported that technical service has the most significant impact on customer satisfaction, whereas employee service quality has little effect. This is important for elucidating the transformations that have occurred at airports during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the technical service quality discussed in their study is limited, as it does not address the issue of using cultural technology at airports.

Park and In (2021) compared Gwangju and Muan airports and found that physical environmental factors, accessibility, and flight services of the airports were considered important by airport users. However, their study found that user satisfaction was low. The findings presented by Park and In (2021) contributed significantly to the field and could inform future investigations, suggesting that the provision of essential services and facilities must be prioritized before transforming the airport into an attraction. Nonetheless, the study of Park and In (2021) has limitations due to the unique features of Gwangju and Muan International Airports.

Studies have examined the impact of various factors on the development of airports in Vietnam (Pham et al., 2022; Quyet et al., 2022; Tran & Nguyen, 2020). However, these studies have failed to consider the interconnectedness between the airport, tourism, and the nation’s image. This study endeavored to tackle these concerns.

Although Incheon and Changi International Airports may share similarities, Incheon International Airport places more emphasis on cultural performances and exhibitions. However, a limitation of existing research is that it does not include a comparison of Vietnam’s airports with Incheon International Airport and Changi International Airport, which share similar impact factors and favorable reputations in their respective regions. Initially, academics did not anticipate that the airports in Vietnam would be comparable to the world-renowned Incheon and Changi International Airports.
Moreover, they did not establish a direct correlation between the use of cultural technology and its impact on the process of nation-building at airports. Hence, it is imperative to emphasize the concept of the airport as a tourist attraction by examining Incheon and Changi International Airports.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study compared the cultural services provided by Changi and Incheon International Airports. Examining the cultural service factor allowed us to assess the airport model from the perspective of an airport as an attraction. Changi and Incheon International Airports feature services and facilities that allow transfer passengers to experience local culture. Moreover, both airports enjoy a good reputation with Skytrax. The Skytrax World Airport Awards (2022) ranked Changi and Incheon International Airports as third and fifth, respectively. In contrast, Vietnam’s airports were not ranked by the Skytrax World Airport Awards (2022). Therefore, we compared the available services based on the expected effect versus the economic cost input. Additionally, we investigated the airport websites, as favorable information delivery systems can create a better reputation among passengers.

4. RESULTS

The results revealed that Changi International Airport provides cultural services that emphasize both nature and the cosmopolitan culture of Singapore, whereas Incheon International Airport only emphasizes services that allow passengers to experience Korean culture. These results provide learning points for future practice in Vietnam. First, it is necessary to provide cultural services at Tan Son Nhat and Long Thanh International Airports to encourage overseas visitors to return. Cultural services should provide an experience of Vietnamese culture and an expression of the national identity the government wishes to promote. For instance, passengers at Incheon International Airport can experience the Korean royal palaces using a virtual tour while they are in transit and unable to visit the actual site.

Passengers at every terminal of Changi International Airport can experience Singaporean culture and the national image while waiting for connecting flights. The efforts of the government of Singapore to encourage the meetings, incentives, conventions, and events industry can be clearly seen at Changi International Airport through installations such as the Shiseido Forest Valley and Enchanted Garden. In another part of the airport, the government’s efforts to promote its multicultural society are evident at the Heritage Zone and Singapore Rojak mural.
Vietnamese airports should provide cultural services at every terminal, allowing all passengers to experience the culture of the country. As shown in Figure 6, different types of cultural services at Incheon International Airport are concentrated at different terminals. Specifically, Terminal 2 does not have a museum or exhibition facility, and there is considerably less artwork in Terminal 1 than in Terminal 2 (Figure 6). This represents a problem, as passengers who use terminals without cultural services miss the opportunity.

Singapore has developed cultural aspects in all terminals at Changi International Airport to ensure design integrity. For instance, Terminals 3 and 4 focus on artwork, whereas Terminal 1 displays content related to nature (Figure 7). All content at Jewel is related to the main theme of nature.

An airport is a place where many tourists encounter a region’s image for the first time. Therefore, tourists can sense a nation’s image through its airports, which could affect their motivation to return. In this relationship, the airport can be considered an attraction. Vietnam should consider the two developed Changi and Incheon flagship airports when renovating their existing airports or constructing new ones. First, visitors to Vietnam often buy Vietnamese tourist products. Second, out of patriotism, Vietnamese people prefer consuming Vietnamese tourist products, especially when they see overseas
visitors enjoying performances or exhibitions of Vietnamese culture at major airports. Creating an airport as an attraction requires experiential exhibits.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the planning and development of international airports in Vietnam and presented suggestions for the government of Vietnam to develop its tourism economy and increase its sustainability by promoting airports as attractions. Tourism in Vietnam depends on foreign capital; however, Vietnam is prone to epidemics and other national crises.

To examine how Vietnamese airports can promote tourism, this study analyzed Changi and Incheon International Airports. The role of contemporary international airports is to encourage visitors to return. To achieve this goal, the airport must include presentations of local culture. For instance, if they are not able to experience Korea’s royal palaces physically, passengers at Incheon International Airport can take a virtual tour of the palaces. Similarly, Changi International Airport displays local attractions in each terminal.

This study has academic and practical contributions. From a practical perspective, the study findings inform governments and other entities regarding useful methods to develop new airports or renovate existing ones with the aim of increasing visitor attraction and sustainability. From an academic perspective, this study suggests that future research should examine small airports in Southeast Asia and developing countries. For instance, Tan Son Nhat International Airport in Vietnam is smaller than many international airports, which could pose challenges in developing it into a tourist attraction. The findings of this study indicate that promoting national culture in international airports is critical and should be adopted and incorporated into administrative policies to attract visitors.

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