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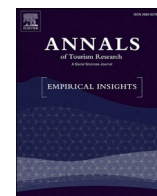
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## Stopovers as valued-based experience: A conceptual model

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### ABSTRACT

This study on stopovers, defined as consisting of a one to three-night transition to a destination featuring value-based experiences, uses a multi-site data collection approach of focus groups in six cities to examine stopovers during long-haul air travel in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Singapore and Hong Kong. It contributes to the literature on stopovers by defining and conceptualizing the term and identifying the key influences of stopover choice and value experiences of travelers from distant geographic areas, namely, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and New Zealand. The proposal of the conceptual model on stopovers offers a basis for destination marketers a greater understanding of stopover travelers and facilitates the destination's promotion from a practical perspective.

### 1. Introduction

Long-haul travel requires a stopover or layover on most routes, whether on westbound or eastbound flights. While stopping over was first recognized in the literature in 2001–2002 under the term ‘through traveler,’ many destinations discounted the through traveler concept as a peripheral market (Lew & McKercher, 2002; McKercher, 2001). The more recent focus on the break in long-haul travel as stopovers reflects the importance of this concept to tourism as governments and destination marketing organizations as they collaborate with airlines to promote their destinations. Stopover travelers differ from main-destination travelers, and long-haul travelers' characteristics and preferences differ from short-haul travelers (Bianchi & Pike, 2011; Ho & McKercher, 2012; McKercher, Chan, & Lam, 2008). Research has found that price sensitivity, frequent-flyer membership, trip duration, and sensation seeking can play a vital role in stopover visit intention of long-haul leisure travelers as first-time or repeat visitors (Masiero, Qiu, & Zoltan, 2019). However, further research is needed to understand motivations for taking a stopover, traveler habits and behaviors during stopovers, satisfaction with stopover destinations and services, and stopover destination experiences (Masiero et al., 2019; Pike, Pontes, & Kotsi, 2021). Little is known about the activities undertaken during stopovers and stopover destination image and preferences. Increased understanding of these issues relative to other travel situations would enhance marketing communications decisions among destination stakeholders (Pike & Kotsi, 2020b). This current study addresses this gap.

It aims to extend the understanding of stopovers during long-haul travel and revise the concept of stopovers. It proposes a comprehensive definition, providing the main motivations that travelers decide to stopover at an intermediary destination and the intended activities and experiences of such a preference and selection. It investigates two emerging stopover destinations, Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, compared to two traditional destinations, Singapore and Hong Kong. Possessing a distinctive identity and serving as the primary means of collecting qualitative data (see Morgan, 1997), focus groups with thematic analysis were chosen for this study. To achieve the research objectives, a series of six focus groups with forty-four long-haul travelers were conducted in top long-haul source markets, namely, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and New Zealand. This study addresses the following research questions: RQ1: How is a stopover conceptualized (definition, length of stay, logistics (outbound/inbound/ or both ways)? RQ2: What influences stopover choice, and which are the key trip characteristics of stopovers in terms of intended activities and experiences (positive/negative)? RQ3: What are traveler experiences and perceptions of stopover destinations (Dubai/Abu Dhabi/Hong Kong/Singapore)?

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, the literature context of previous work on stopovers is presented in section 2, identifying the research gaps and research questions guiding this study. Following this, the use of focus groups as the primary data collection and analysis procedures is discussed in section 3. Section 4 presents the findings, followed by the discussion of the study's contribution and implications

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in section 5. Finally, section 6 presents the limitations and recommendations for future research.

## 2. Stopovers

Although a stopover has been recognized as an important phenomenon, it has lacked conceptual clarity (Masiero et al., 2019; Pike & Kotsi, 2016; Pike, Kotsi, & Tossan, 2018). Previously studies have used different terms, such as 'dual-purpose destinations' or 'through traveler.' They reported that main destinations and through travelers were so significantly different that they could be considered discrete markets (McKercher, 2001). Lew and McKercher (2002) used the terms 'gateway destination' and 'egress destination' accordingly, referring to the first destination encountered after the traveler begins a multiple-destination itinerary and the last places visited before traveling home in a multiple destination tour itinerary. Definitions of a stopover have varied across the literature, differentiated as transit or layover, a stay of less than 24 h without accommodation at an intermediary port, and usually to change planes (Wang, Kotsi, Pike, & Yao, 2021). In 2018, Pike and Kotsi proposed a working definition representing a stay of one to three nights.

Stopover destination attributes and personal values (see Kotsi & Pike, 2021; Pike & Kotsi, 2016) that are salient to consumers when considering stopover destinations during long-haul travel were also investigated. The need for more investigations into the effects of travel context on destination attractiveness in a study on stopover destination image identified attributes deemed salient to travelers when considering stopover destinations during long-haul travel (Pike & Kotsi, 2016). It was also recommended that future studies could investigate whether stopover visits are more likely to happen at the beginning or the end of the trip (Masiero et al., 2019). Given the previous work suggesting the increasing importance of stopovers to destinations, what is not known is how long-haul travelers conceptualize a stopover. This leads to the first research question, RQ1: How is a stopover conceptualized?

Stopover destination image has been studied by Lund, Loftsdottir, Leonard, and M. (2017), Kotsi, Pike, and Gottlieb (2018), Pike and Kotsi (2020b), and Pike, Pontes, and Kotsi (2021). Lund et al., recognizing the wider network responsible for the multiple interpretations of destination image, discussed how a destination such as Iceland benefited from its geographic position as a stopover between the North American and Eurasian continents and as an extension of the exoticized Arctic North (2017). Destination image varies across travel contexts, and previous visitation positively affects destination image and attitudinal loyalty. It is suggested that there is a positive influence of brand awareness, brand image, and brand value on attitudinal loyalty to a destination (Kotsi et al., 2018; Pike & Kotsi, 2020a; Pike, Kotsi, Mathmann and Wang, 2020; Pike, Kotsi, Mathmann, & Wang, 2021). It is also found that travelers' perceived positive ambience and attitudinal destination loyalty are higher for traditional stopover destinations than for emerging destinations. It is argued that perceived ambience drives the effect of stopover type on attitudinal loyalty, and therefore stopover destination marketers should focus on ambience-related factors when constructing campaigns. The traditional stopover destinations could reinforce the positively held perceptions of ambience, and the emerging could do more to enhance perceptions of ambience by simultaneously maintaining the exotic atmosphere and creating a home-like feeling (Wang et al., 2021). Research into stopover preferences suggests that safety is the attribute of most significant concern for a sample of Australian consumers considering a stopover as part of a scheduled trip to Europe. (Pike, Kotsi, Oppewal, & Wang, 2022). Tourist preferences were also analyzed as a function of traveler price sensitivity, travel personality, and activity engagement (Masiero et al., 2019). However, what is not understood is the influences on stopover choice. This leads to research question 2 - RQ2: What influences stopover choice, and which are the key trip characteristics of stopovers in terms of intended activities and experiences (positive/negative)?

To be successful, places need more than just location (Lohmann,

Albers, Koch, & Pavlovich, 2009). Understanding how stopover tourism programs enhance tourism development is an important area of research (Lund et al., 2017; Tigu, Sanchez, Stoescu, Gheorghe, & Sabou, 2018; Tigu & Stoescu, 2017). Stopover programs, therefore, represent a new form of tourism products developed through partnerships between airlines, airports, and tourism organizations. The destination marketing organizations of the four stopover destinations investigated in this study propose stopover programs outside the primary purpose of the journey. 'Visit Dubai,' the destination marketing organization for the emirate, dedicates a section on how to plan a 'hustle-free' stopover (Visit Dubai, 2022). It collaborates with Emirates, providing a free 48–96-h visa (Emirates, 2022). Similarly, Etihad Airways, the national carrier of the emirate of Abu Dhabi, invites the traveler to 'Stopover in Abu Dhabi' with a complimentary two-night stopover in collaboration with 3-star and 4-star hotels (Etihad, 2022). The Hong Kong Tourism Board suggests a 'luxury Hong Kong Stopover' (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2022). 'Visit Singapore,' in collaboration with Singapore Airlines and Changi Airport, offers a 'breeze before your trip' with 'Stopovers in Singapore' that range from two-day-one-night stays to four-days-three-night stays with 'Free Singapore Tours' (Visit Singapore, 2021).

Singapore and Hong Kong have traditionally been stopover destinations in both directions between the northern and southern hemispheres, but in recent years, new stopover destinations have emerged on this route in Asia, such as Tokyo, Beijing, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and cities in the Middle East such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi (Wang et al., 2021). Traditionally, East Coast passengers taking a westbound flight (and vice-versa) were bound for Southeast Asia. Since 1935, Singapore has been a traditional stopover for Australian passengers when Qantas started flying to Singapore to connect with London-bound Imperial Airways (Qantas, 2020). Since 2013, passengers have had the choice between an Asian or a Middle East hub, and as part of an arrangement with Emirates, Dubai's airline, Qantas, began flights to London via Dubai (Qantas, 2020). In 2019, the Kangaroo route (between the United Kingdom and Australia via the Eastern hemisphere) saw 2.2 million passengers, with Emirates being the leader with 431,400 passengers, making Dubai the number-one connecting location, followed by Singapore Airlines (Airline Network News and Analysis, 2019).

Dubai's Tourism Strategy 2025 will attract 25 million visitors per year by 2025, aiming to position Dubai as the 'most-visited city in the world' (Langton, 2018). Similarly, the government Strategy Plan 2021 and the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 advocate strong tourism development (The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, 2022). Studies are needed to enhance understanding of how stopover destinations are positioned in different markets (Pike & Kotsi, 2016). This leads to the final research question organizing this study; RQ3 - what are the experiences and perceptions of the travelers of stopover destinations (Dubai/ Abu Dhabi/Hong Kong/Singapore)?

The following section details the method and research design to investigate these questions.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Focus groups

In this study, focus groups as a qualitative and interpretive method were held in six cities to answer the three research questions. The goal of the focus groups is to learn about participants' attitudes and opinions through the explicit use of group interactions to learn about their perspectives, experiences, and self-reported behavior (Morgan, 1997). Through thick description, focus groups are beneficial for exploring new research areas and understanding underlying motives and meanings that explain views and opinions and have historically been employed across many disciplines (Barbour, 2007; Denscombe, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Within tourism, focus groups have been conducted across various topics such as sustainability, optimizing hotel operations, and customer

brand relationships (Richard et al., 2021). Morgan (1997) argues that three to five focus groups per project are recommended; however, the most crucial determinant of the number of groups is the variability of the participants within and across groups. Within groups, projects that bring together more heterogeneous participants typically need more total groups because the diversity in the group often makes it more challenging to sort out coherent sets of opinions and experiences. Across groups, projects that compare several distinct population segments require more total groups to achieve saturation with each segment (Morgan, 1997). The optimum number of participants for each focus group is six to eight (excluding moderators) (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The focus group research design quality was managed using an interview protocol and analysis through independent checking by the other researchers. All focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription organization bound by a non-disclosure agreement.

### 3.2. Sample

The sample is drawn from four markets of interest, including the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and New Zealand. The first three markets were among the top ten long-haul source markets with 6.5%, 5.0%, and 4.8% market share, respectively, and outbound visitation with 22.1 million, 17.2 million, and 16.5 million, respectively (United States Travel Association, 2019). Participants for each focus group were recruited through Kantar, a British marketing research firm, and their respective collaborators in the different cities. Criteria used for recruitment included participants who had flown long-haul and had either flown in the last two years or intended to fly within the next two years. The market research company provided a profile (deidentified) for each participant to the researchers for final approval. Forty-four participants from four countries were selected in six cities (Auckland, Brisbane, London, Melbourne, Paris, and Sydney). A balanced representation of genders and ages (over 18 years) was required to ensure a diverse sample. All participants in the final sample had travelled on several occasions and represented both economy and business class travelers on holiday or business purposes. Table 1 summarizes the participant numbers in each location:

Of the 44 participants, half (22) had visited Dubai, while six had visited Abu Dhabi. Across the sample, participants had experiences in stopping over in a variety of destinations, including Singapore, Hong Kong, Bangkok, New York, and Tokyo, during their long-haul travel from Australia to Europe and vice-versa. Of the 44 participants, 23 were females, and 21 were males. Occupations varied across the sample, representing professionals (engineer, solicitor, teacher) and vocational streams (for example, student, hairdresser, retired, events manager, musician, wedding consultant).

### 3.3. Data collection

Two researchers moderated the first focus group together, and one moderated the following five focus groups. A research assistant managed the logistics of all focus groups, including catering and

**Table 1**  
Focus group location, participants, and gender.

| Country     | Location  | Participants |      |       |
|-------------|-----------|--------------|------|-------|
|             |           | Female       | Male | Total |
| UK          | London    | 2            | 4    | 6     |
| France      | Paris     | 4            | 3    | 7     |
| Australia   | Sydney    | 5            | 3    | 8     |
| Australia   | Brisbane  | 4            | 4    | 8     |
| Australia   | Melbourne | 4            | 3    | 7     |
| New Zealand | Auckland  | 4            | 4    | 8     |
|             |           | 23           | 21   | 44    |

administering questionnaires related to the demographics of each participant. Each focus group was conducted at specialized facilities suitable for focus groups in each country and was approximately two hours long. Participants signed a consent form to participate in the research study and received an incentive as compensation for their time. The moderator created a comfortable environment that fostered trust and confidentiality. Name cards (first names) were placed on the table in front of each participant. Even though the participants had never met, the moderator encouraged them to open up and speak freely about their opinions and experiences (see Denscombe, 2010). The moderator introduced the stimulus, kept the discussion focused on the topic, and ensured all participants had the opportunity to share their views. The moderator reassured participants it was safe for them to share their true feelings and that there were no right or wrong answers, only different points of view and experiences, and made sure to be aware of the body language around when someone needed to feel they could trust them to discuss a sensitive issue. There was low-moderator involvement, and the participants in all six groups showed a high level of engagement with the topic.

After introducing the topic at a general level, each session started with a ‘groupthink,’ where each participant had to write down three reasons for taking or not taking a stopover. This gave time for the participants to think about the concept of stopovers before asking the following questions in a consistent manner across all focus groups: How would you define a stopover? What is the ideal length of a stopover? What are the key reasons for taking or not taking a stopover? What influences your decision to choose a stopover destination? Share your most positive/negative stopover experiences. How do you spend your time on such a visit? Discuss your experiences and perceptions of destinations Singapore and Hong Kong, and Dubai and Abu Dhabi. All focus groups were audio recorded with transcriptions loaded into NVivo 12.

### 3.4. Analysis

Analysis commenced during the focus groups, with the lead researcher taking reflexive notes during and after each focus group. Participants were identified by a number and the city of data collection. (A-Auckland, B-Brisbane, L-London, M-Melbourne, P-Paris, S-Sydney). Coding was undertaken by one researcher, allowing for consistent interpretations of data. The research questions guided the initial coding at the word and sentence level, specifically focusing on conceptualizations and attributes of a stopover, influences on stopover choice, and experiences of destinations. Coding was iterative, following the stages of transforming data through description, analysis, and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994, 2009). The first level of coding identified topic words/phrases, while the second level of coding analyzed relationships between the nodes. A coding guide noting each node’s attributes (NVivo 12) was developed to ensure consistency and exclusivity in the coding process. The iterative coding resulted in a total of 417 codes organized in 8 higher-order (parent) topic codes. A second researcher performed confirmatory coding during the coding rounds to ensure the study’s internal and external validity. The complete list of codes (parent and children coding) is available from the first researcher on request.

The following section presents the findings from the thematic analysis.

## 4. Findings

The findings from the data are presented to align with the research questions guiding this study. The findings of RQ1 included how a stopover is conceptualized, how long a stopover is in terms of length of stay, and logistics (outbound, inbound, or both ways). Following this, the findings from RQ2 are presented and include the influences on stopover choice and the characteristics of stopovers in terms of activities and experiences (positive/negative). Finally, findings addressing RQ3 are presented relating to participant perceptions of stopover

destinations' (Dubai/Abu Dhabi/Hong Kong/Singapore).

#### 4.1. Conceptualization of a stopover

Stopovers were defined through a time and motivation lens, aligning with concepts of getting away without challenges and being in a new, interesting, secure place:

*Somewhere interesting to break the long journey. Stay the first night to sleep, then do some exploring. As long as there's easy transport, it's secure, and nothing too challenging. Then, maybe another night. Another night's sleep, and off to the destination. (S#1)*

The most recurrent words used to define the stopover were: 'Mini-break,' 'mini-holiday,' 'break,' 'break up journey,' and 'add-on.' While there was a lack of agreement and a bit of confusion by a few of the participants about the term to describe just stopping at an airport for a few hours to leaving the airport to experience the destination, the strongest, most consistent, and predominant theme to emerge from the data across all groups characterized a stopover as one-two daybreak with a few participants suggesting three nights as ideal in the long-haul flight that allowed enough time to explore a new place and experience something different:

*An ideal stopover would probably be two nights max because it isn't my final destination. It is on the way there, but I would like enough time to look around and do things. (B#3)*

Shorter stopovers of 8–12 h were not supported due to the lack of time to experience the destination. Longer stopovers (four days) were viewed as merging into a holiday rather than a stopover.

A strong theme and sentiment emerging across all groups was that a stopover, as a break, can be taken in any direction of travel. Stopover travelers express support for both inbound and outbound stopovers, guided by personal circumstances. An inbound stopover is considered a need to arrive fresh and relaxed before reaching the main holiday destination, but also an outbound stopover as an 'add-on' after the main 'big holiday':

*I'd definitely do it on the way there because I won't feel as tired for the main holiday, so I've got a holiday that I can rest somewhere else, then I'm off to my main holiday. (L#3)*

*I would start my vacation with this [a stopover] because when I go home, I just want to go home. (P#2)*

*I would probably do it on the way back because, to me, the stopover is like the add-on so that I would have my big main holiday and then have a mini holiday and come back. (L#1)*

Of less support was a stopover in both ways, and when it was noted, it was usually attributed to a logistical reason:

*I do it both times because I can't sit on the plane for twenty hours. I just can't do it. (L#2)*

Time availability is also a key influence for travelers choosing to stopover both ways. Logistical considerations such as the airport's proximity to the stopover destination, ease of ground transport, ease of organizing the accommodation, ease of entry in terms of visa requirements, and transfers are significant for the stopover choice and the overall value of the opportunity to extend a layover into a stopover. The stopover travelers want a safe environment, nothing challenging, first night relaxation, recuperation, then one day to two days exploring:

*Relaxation, recuperation, so it just means you get to your journey without that three-day jetlag. (B#1)*

Consideration of time needed to relax, minimize jetlag, and the

opportunity to experience a new destination and see something new were the dominant reasons for this time. The opportunity to experience a new destination and its culture, break up a long flight, improve health and comfort, and minimize jetlag are key motivations behind taking a stopover:

*I'd take a stopover to break up the flight, the length of the travel. Especially traveling with children, it's quite nice to break up but also take a stopover if the destination was of interest. (B#3)*

Experiences were central to the stopover – particularly those that align with needs, relationships, or culture. While participants agreed that a stopover was a 'destination on the way to [or from] your ultimate destination,' it was also viewed as an experience to explore a new place or culture. Many participants reflected that what is conceptualized as a stopover has shifted from a layover to almost a mini-holiday or mini-break, reinforcing the idea that the break is something to be experienced and consumed:

*The first one is to discover a new city and a different continent; the other one is to shop at the Duty-Free because I think Dubai is a well-known Duty Free, and the third one is to rest, but this could only be one night. (P#5)*

The cost was also a significant consideration, with many participants stating that bundling a stopover with a long-haul flight offered good value, but only if the costs could be managed:

*It's the cost, obviously, that's involved. Sometimes airlines can throw in hotel accommodation, and then you get off the plane, you go through customs, there's a shuttle waiting for you, it takes you to your hotel, and then, you do whatever you do, and then you catch a shuttle next day or two days later, and you come back. (A#4)*

*The price of tickets, I think, on the way back from Nepal was a couple of hundred dollars cheaper if I had a stopover in Bahrain. It was going to be about a day or so, and I thought, well, that's enough time to go in, have a swim and a beer and jump back on a plane. So, cheaper. (B#1)*

Participants recognized the flight route of the preferred airline carrier as a critical influence on stopover decisions. They acknowledged that compulsory stopovers were part of some flight routes – and sometimes airlines offered an incentive to a passenger to stay overnight:

*Compulsory stopover. A business class flight is an example; some of them will give you a certain price provided you stay over for 24 hours at a certain place. (B#2)*

At compulsory stopovers, participants saw it as an opportunity for a holiday:

*It's out of my control; I have to stop there but then make a holiday out of it as well – that's a compulsory stopover. (A#1)*

Participants cited several preferred carriers, with cost, comfort, frequent flyer status, and lounge access determining preferential status. They noted Emirates (code shared with Qantas) as an airline that offered reasonable pricing, service, and food:

*Emirates, I think you get a lot more bang for your buck with Emirates as an airline; you get a lot more for your money. (S#2)*

#### 4.2. Influences on stopover choice and intended activities and experiences

While many participants reflected that the preferred airline often limited the choice of stopover destinations, word of mouth was the most dominant influence when considering a stopover. This included recommendations by family and friends and their experiences in the



destination. Following this were reviews and comments on social media websites, forums, and travel sites, such as TripAdvisor, where travelers can get overall ratings and a better view than just one person who can have a good or bad experience. Many participants noted that they undertook significant secondary research on the internet based on their interests, relying on Facebook or Instagram to guide their decision-making and inspiration:

*When you see your friends' pictures on Instagram and some of the places they've been. My fiancé always does it, he sees one, and he's, like, 'Oh, we're going here... I feel like people do look at people's holiday pictures... and that does inspire you. (L#1)*

Travel agents were also a key influencer in stopover choice, with about one in four participants noting that they found booking accommodation, airport transfers, and activities more complex in short-stay stopover destinations:

*Because my last trip was a stopover in Hong Kong with my daughter, I did it through a travel agent because I wasn't confident about doing it online with the stopover. I've never done one. (A#1)*

Characteristics were explored through the activities undertaken while on a stopover and previous stopovers' positive and negative experiences. Activities included cultural, local sites, and shopping, with most participants stating they wanted to experience as much as possible at the stopover destination. Bus or taxi tours were a popular way of orientating to the location. At the same time, unique or bespoke activities, such as camel rides or visiting well-known sites to experience the local culture, were high on the agenda. Shopping, both in shopping centers and in markets, was also a highly desired activity.

Participants were asked to reflect on aspects of previous stopovers that they classified as positive. Overwhelmingly, those stopovers that were well organized, or were easy, were noted as positive:

*The whole process has to be smooth. The airport can't be a million miles away from the tourist center... The hotels have to be at a reasonable price. (L#1)*

This was due to the short time spent in the location and the perceived scarcity of time spent on logistical elements such as finding transport, booking tours, navigating new areas, and finding places to do activities. The next significant influence on a positive experience was that the stopover gave some type of new, unexpected, or authentic cultural experience, and the overall cost of the stopover was perceived as good value.

Participants were also asked to reflect on previous stopovers they classified as 'negative.' While a range of aspects was provided, those stopovers described as disorganized or chaotic were viewed as the most significant reason for the poor experience:

*The worst one was just very unorganized airports, like, in Asia, where you can't rely on anything... it's all just helter-skelter, and you've got to have a lot more time to do things because you're not sure. Things are irregular, and they're not reliably running things. (S#1)*

Airports also featured strongly in this theme, with delays at immigration, communication barriers, and problems with flights or ground transport influencing the perception of the stopover – before they arrived at their accommodation. Unmet expectations for accommodation were also a factor. Finally, a few participants noted they felt scared and nervous when communication and culture problems occurred at a stopover.

#### 4.3. Perceptions of stopover destinations- Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Singapore, and Hong Kong

Pike, Pontes, and Kotsi (2021) argued that essential aspects of stopovers need research attention, such as stopover destination experiences. Similarly, Pike and Kotsi (2016) noted that studies are required to enhance understanding of how stopover destinations are positioned in different markets. This section attempts a contribution to address this gap. The data analyzed and presented here explores experiences (as activities) or products consumed at the stopover and those that transport the traveler into another dimension of experience. Ideal experiences valued by participants during a stopover included cultural, local sites, and shopping, with most participants stating they wanted to consume as much of the stopover destination as possible. The stopover as a destination is limited to the flight path taken by the carrier. In this study, the flight path typically takes 24 h and requires a break in the flight at either Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Singapore, or Hong Kong, depending on the carrier. This section aimed to understand how participants differentiate, anticipate, and conceive these stopovers. Four spaces were identified from these data that aligned to a characterization of each stopover image – a luxurious movie set, a living museum, the pulsating heart, and a safe space.

**Dubai: A Luxurious Movie Set.** Dubai was perceived as modern and clean but expensive with various activities, including shopping (malls and markets), water parks, unique offerings such as desert tours (such as 4WD and camels), and the highest building in the world:

*Did everything! The Burj [Khalifa] is an amazing experience, going right to the top that's one of the best ones. Great photos, great views. In Dubai, they have an indoor ski place, which is huge, and it's really fun. They've got the dancing fountains. Everywhere you go, there's a beach... and then there are water parks. You can go and ride camels on the beach... You can also go to the dunes. I like going quad biking. Generally, the food is great; the shopping as well is quite good. (L#1)*

Wealth, extravagance, luxury, and lots of gold were used to describe Dubai's features. Although participants characterized this as luxurious, Dubai was also considered a costly destination, with 6-star hotels and facilities. Generally, Dubai was perceived as a created destination, like a movie set, offering unreal experiences like skiing in the desert and the palm islands. The heat was noted as a significant influence on stopover experiences, but the high standard of hotels and shopping malls counted the weather's impact, with most participants recognizing this experience as created for fun. Most participants acknowledged that Dubai's culture differed from theirs and understood that visitors to Dubai, or any foreign country, needed to be aware of different rules when exploring the destination:

*If I'm traveling in someone else's country, then I've just got to respect whatever it is they do. I don't want to create problems for anyone else, so I'll respect their ways and keep out of trouble. (S#2)*

Overall, participants viewed Dubai as a luxurious destination.

**Abu Dhabi: A Living Museum.** As a destination, Abu Dhabi was noted for its cultural relevance, scenic beauty, and range of cultural activities, such as visiting mosques, palaces, and Le Louvre museum. While most participants reflected that they did not know much about Abu Dhabi, those that did, reflected on its authenticity, signifying its solid historical links and that it was generally different. Participants valued historical and cultural qualities as important; reflecting on the experience was like stepping back in time:

*I just liked how different it was, how everyone dressed, and it was cool just to see the different world. (M#1)*

Overall, fewer participants had visited Abu Dhabi, with many relying on what others had heard about the destination. While many

participants reflected it was a destination they would like to go to – based on its cultural and historical features, many felt more could be done to help travelers understand the benefits of visiting the area.

**Hong Kong: A Pulsating Heart.** As a stopover destination, Hong Kong was viewed as the authentic pulsating heart of Asia, with strong connections, lots of choices, and an undercurrent of exhilaration (see also [Lew & Mc Kercher, 2002](#)):

*It's easy to get around. There are lots of interesting food options, and you can choose what level of exploring you want to do. You can get down and dirty, or you can go into some interesting market experiences..., and there's lots of cultural stuff, or you can just eat and lots of interesting places. (S#10)*

Hong Kong was conceived as a hectic yet easy-to-navigate destination and offered a range of activities and sites to satisfy. Participants regarded shopping as a strong drawcard for Hong Kong as a stopover regarding variety, choice and price, and the mixing pot of cuisine choices. However, participants also noted that the city was not as clean as Singapore or Dubai. The natural and cultural appeal of Hong Kong, combined with the easy ground transport options, and range of cultural, culinary, and immersive activities, was viewed by participants as an ideal destination for a shorter stopover.

**Singapore: A Safe Space.** As a stopover destination, Singapore was viewed as a more traditional option and considered a safe place to visit, one in which there were no surprises in that it was predictable, spotless, and easy to navigate. While participants shared views that Singapore was a city that presented as almost neutral in style (sterile and Western), Singapore was generally regarded as a good option for families due to its facilities, weather, and location. Depending on interests, there was no dominant regard for activities; however, a few participants recognized that it was no longer seen as a shopping destination. It was conceived as somewhere to go if traveling with family; it was safe and predictable.

The preceding thematic analysis presented the dominant themes relating to stopover experiences. The analysis suggests that each stopover destination was conceived as a particular type of destination image created through the traveler's anticipated and actual experience. A destination image is a perceptual experience that merges with other “mental experiences and attitudes the individual holds toward the destination ([Lai & Li, 2016](#), p. 1074). While studies on destination image have focused on destination attributes and consumer motivations ([Baloglu & McCleary, 1999](#); [Beerli & Martín, 2004](#)), few studies have explored stopovers, particularly the concept of value-based experience in influencing stopover image.

Following [Lai and Li \(2016\)](#), this study found that the expressed and held views of a stopover destination were created from a cumulation of promoted experiences, shared experiences, and valued experiences to create a stopover image that characterizes the expressed value from the stopover experience. For example, Dubai as a movie set that is modern and clean, Abu Dhabi as a living museum, Singapore as a safe space, and Hong Kong as a pulsing heart. More specifically, travelers unfamiliar with a specific stopover destination constructed their understanding based on one small piece of information.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to conceptualize and examine the characteristics of stopovers during long-haul travel by proposing a definition, providing the logistics that define on whether to make a stopover or not, the main motivations that travelers decide to stopover at an intermediary destination, and the intended activities and experiences of such a preference and selection. The findings from this study make several contributions to the emerging literature on the stopover phenomenon.

This study builds on previous work on stopovers. [Pike and Kotsi \(2018\)](#) conceptualized a stopover during long-haul international air travel as a stay of one to three nights duration at an intermediary port. In

this study, the preferred length of stay at a stopover destination was two to two and a half nights (following [Pike & Kotsi, 2018](#); [Kotsi et al., 2018](#)) and up to three nights if strong value-based experiences were perceived. This study supports this conceptualization of stopovers and extends it by identifying the key determinants of a stopover destination that can be differentiated beyond time. The following definition for a stopover is proposed:

A stopover consists of a one to three-night transition to a destination featuring value-based experiences. Taken in any direction of travel, a stopover is a break in the primary destination journey due to economic, logistic, or personal reasons and features valued, authentic, unique, or unexpected experiences. By breaking a long-haul trip, these transitory destinations offer value-based experiences differentiated beyond time and ultimately enrich and support travelers' transition through time zones to the primary destination.

The relationship between the motivation to undertake a stopover as a distinct extension of the travel is conceptually represented in [Fig. 1](#) as a stopover model.

The point of origin of the stopover can be either the **destination of origin** or the **final destination** or both ways (indicated by the arrows). Economic, logistic and personal indicators are the three motivation considerations found to influence a decision to undertake a stopover. **Economic motivation** relates to cost and motivation to save money or time or choose a stopover with an incentive to stay overnight. **Logistical motivation** relates to the logical flight break and minimizing jet lag, ease or simplicity of booking the stopover, ease of visa entry or relating airport proximity, the preferred airline lounge access, ease of ground transport, and organizing accommodation. **Personal motivation** relates to personal safety and health, good communication, and minimizing health affects from long-haul flights or previous positive experiences.

The *wheel* represents the three ‘categories’ of a stopover as perceived by the participants. Interestingly, some defined a stopover as a **break in the journey**, which is more of a logistical event, while others perceived it as a **mini-holiday**, a way to extend an existing holiday or take advantage of the stopover to have a mini-holiday. The third type of stopover is an **add-on** – which is viewed as something extra or different from a break or mini holiday. It was an opportunity realized. The valued experiences are at the core of the stopover experience. The *petals of value* that align with the perceived image of the stopover destination and are enacted through traveler experiences determine the stopover as **authentic, unique, unexpected, and valued**. The findings support nurturing stopover destinations' image *through value-based experiences*. Stopover destinations that manifest through value-based experiences extend beyond rudimentary transit breaks in journeys to create experiences that surprise, enrich, and delight. This is in keeping with the findings of [Pike and Kotsi \(2016\)](#), where it was found from a sample of Australian travelers that ‘interesting/different culture’ is the most common attribute theme in the travel context of stopover destinations. Similarly, [Pike et al. \(2018\)](#) identified ‘interesting culture’ as the attribute deemed salient to French travelers in the context of a stopover during a long haul.

Value-based experiences align with the destinations' emotional connection with travelers that emerges from the stopover experience. Novel, exciting, or cultural experiences are highly valued as travelers want to do something unique, but these need to be authentic and accessible to the traveler. Stopovers should offer value by incorporating cultural experiences that optimize and anticipate the needs of travelers without prior experience with the destination. For example, findings suggested that participants interchanged cities in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, often not understanding that these are different countries. The United Arab Emirates also has an opportunity to advertise or promote more cultural and sporting and special events such as Formula 1 and World Cup and highlight other key cultural aspects relating to history, arts, or architecture (see [Hinch & Ramshaw,](#)

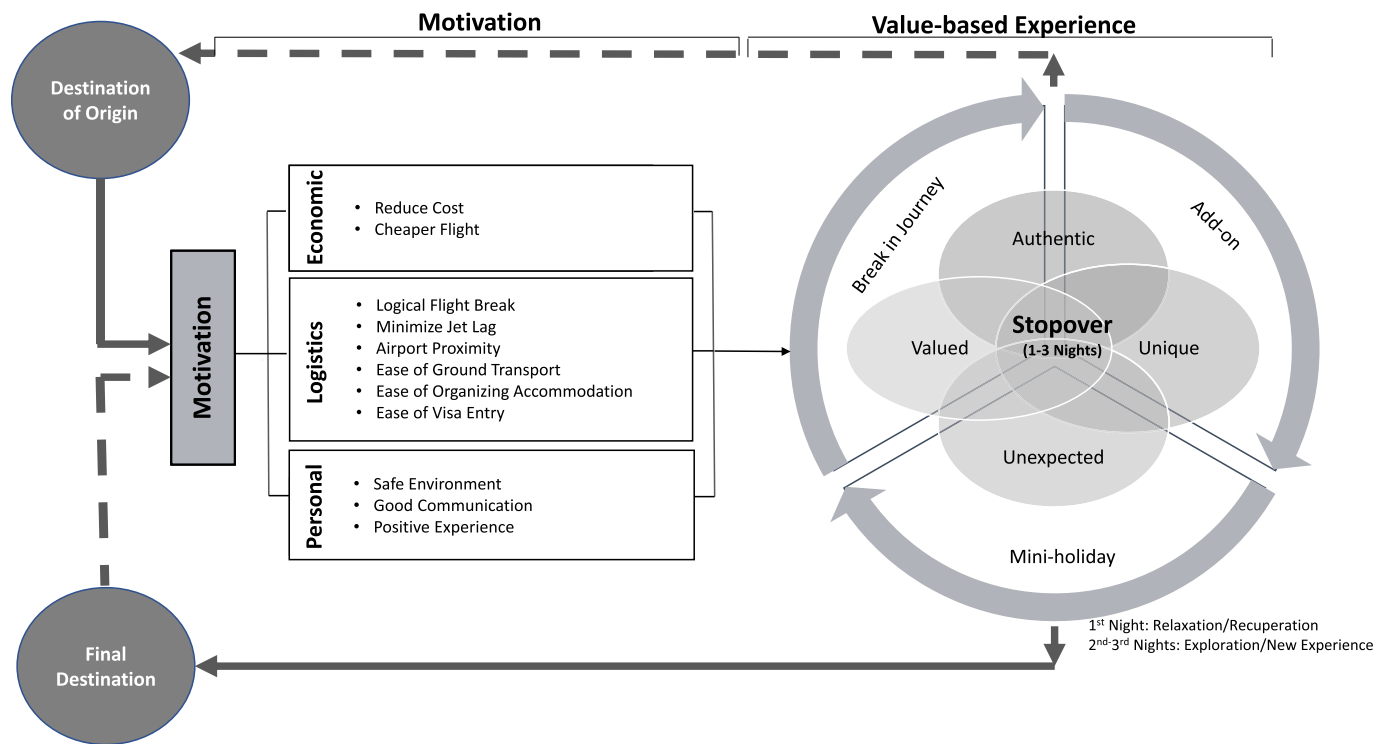


Fig. 1. Conceptual Stopover Model.

2014). An opportunity exists to package and promote cultural experiences ideal for a short stopover.

For destination marketers, an opportunity exists to deepen understanding of conceived and experienced shared realities that emerge from a stopover and to identify opportunities to reinforce or create value with experiences that are not naturally aligned with the stopover. Stopovers are an added extra and not the main point of the travel. It is, by choice or necessity, something extra. Therefore, a stopover should be marketed differently from the main/primary destination. There is an opportunity to profile the cultural or experience-based features of the stopover that align and extend the destination image. Overwhelmingly, the study found that a stopover needs to appeal to traveler motivators to be perceived as offering a value-based experience. Understanding the role of motivation within a stopover destination gives greater insight into the economic, logistical, and personal considerations that travelers may use to influence their decision-making. More importantly, the notion of valued experiences coupled with a stopover destination's image requires coherence between the marketing of the destination and subsequent expectations held by travelers, the suite of experiences available for stopovers, and the perceived value of those experiences by travelers.

This study offers destination marketers insights on stopovers that facilitate the promotion of stopovers as value-based experiences. Stopovers differ from destination tourism and call for a greater focus on authentic and accessible cultural experiences for stopover travelers. McKercher (2001) also found that through travelers are a significant market and may not respond favorably to marketing approaches designed to appeal to the main-destination traveler. He argues that developing a dual positioning approach under a common destination brand is beneficial for through travelers and main destination visitors. Such a strategy would highlight different features of the destination to appeal to the differing needs of each group. A strategy targeted at stopover visitors would highlight features, including culturally authentic experiences. Pike, Pontes, and Kotsi (2021) suggest that by using online behavioral targeting, managers can communicate more directly with those exposed to positive online reviews and use this opportunity to advertise local attractions and offer stopover deals.

Practically, a stopover package should address economic, logistic (relevant visas, airport transfers, accommodation -close to the airport), and personal considerations and a thoroughly planned itinerary that features unique cultural and cuisine experiences. Pike, Pontes, and Kotsi (2021) suggested that the more positive the perceived airport ambience, the more likely consumers, will consider and recommend Dubai as a stopover destination. It was found that advertising attractions can effectively overcome flight access discomfort; advertising stopover attractions enhanced travelers' likelihood to consider Dubai a stopover destination when flight times and flight schedules were perceived to be uncomfortable.

Variety and choice are essential to cater to inbound/outbound directions and budgets. Positioning stopovers as a value-based experience that can be conceived as a mini-break, a holiday, or a cultural emersion, has the potential to reposition the stopover as something more than a break in the journey and therefore offer more benefit to the traveler. Stopover destinations must address economic, logistics, and personal factors to allow travelers to focus on valued experiences. These findings align with Masiero et al. (2019). They found that stopover packages could be manifested with free destination cards or apps to facilitate the short destination visit, including a discount for transfers, hotel rooms, admission tickets, sightseeing tours, destination-specific experiences, and shopping and dining opportunities. These apps could work as a platform for bookings that could save travelers time and money. The separation of motivations from experiences has important considerations for how travelers view expenditure, value, and effort in experiencing the stopover. It also has important implications for the marketing of stopover destinations and the identity communicated to potential travelers. Similarly, Lew and McKercher found that strengthening the diversity of market segments can help a destination through market fluctuations (2001).

## 6. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Several limitations exist in this study. The study employed a multi-site data collection approach using in-person focus groups. Focus



group data may be limited by the facilitator's effectiveness in interacting with the group and posing questions that probe more deeply to provide an environment conducive to participants expressing their views and being heard, particularly within the time allowed. Limitations exist relating to the multi-site (different countries) locations as cultural norms and expressions may vary the interpretation and meanings associated with the study. This was addressed by having the first researcher as the facilitator for all, who checked and clarified the meanings of concepts for each group. Moreover, one theme that emerged in all focus groups was portraying women in the United Arab Emirates. This additional theme was not incorporated in this study, and it would be interesting to investigate the influence of social issues on tourism/destinations.

While the study conceptualized a stopover as consisting of a one to three-night transition to a destination featuring value-based experiences, future research is needed to understand if and how perceptions of value differ across each type of stopover. Additionally, more research is required to know whether the perceptions of value from experiences are conceptually linked or ranked based on social good measures or social responsibility. Further research to understand the impact of select airlines offering cheaper flights to encourage a stopover, particularly when the relationship with the stopover destination is not organized around supporting the traveler to transit through the destination. Future research can also explore differences between the direction of travel (eastbound versus westbound), targeting other essential source markets such as the United States and China, two countries that have a significant share in long-haul outbound visitation with 21% (71.8% million) and 6.5%, respectively (23.4 million) (United States Travel Association, 2019).

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## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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