

TRAVELLERS' ACTIVITIES AT MODERN TRAIN STATIONS: A STUDY OF KYOTO STATION, JAPAN

Bình Nghiệm-Phú*
University of Hyogo, Japan

Abstract

Within the existing literature, transportation-related sites as travel and tourism attractions have been a neglected topic. In addition, the activities that travellers do at the starting and ending points of their holiday, such as at train stations, remain largely under-researched. Therefore, this study aims to identify the activities that travellers do at train stations, and the factors that may affect these activities. The setting of this study is Kyoto station, one of the most popular train stations in Japan – a country with a very developed railway system. By thematically analysing 344 reviews posted on an online platform in 2018, this study found that the main activities are sightseeing, eating, and shopping. The factors that can affect travellers' activities include station architecture, restaurants, stores, signage, navigation, staff, and information centre, among others. Implications for station management are discussed based on these findings.

Keywords: text-mining, case study, tourist destination, entertainment complex, transportation hub

*Corresponding Author: Bình Nghiệm-Phú ; E-mail- binhngkiem@gmail.com

Introduction

Transportation is no doubt a critical element of travel and tourism activities (Bieger and Wittmer, 2006; Rey, et al., 2011). The development and dispersion of travel and tourism are significantly contributed by the development of transportation (Gyr, 2010). Therefore, the role that transportation has with the development of travel and tourism has been thoroughly examined. However, transportation-related sites as travel and tourism attractions have been a neglected topic despite the fact that these sites are used by a great deal of travellers and tourists (Nghiem-Phú, 2017).

Generally, travellers have a variety of reasons to choose one or another method for transportation, for example, the availability of transportation hubs, the price and convenience of transportation modes, time limits, personal characteristics, and personal preferences. Regarding personal preferences, some travellers follow certain routes of transportation because there are other attractions along these routes (Halsall, 2001; Singh, 1999). Other travellers go to a destination to experience the riding of a particular mode of transportation, such as snowmobile (Davenport and Borrie, 2005). Additionally, some train fans go to certain places to watch and take pictures of the vehicles, and to study the history of and collect the mementos of the vehicles (Nghiem-Phú, 2017). The above listed niches of research, however, only examine the activities that travellers undertake en-route and at the destinations. The activities that travellers have at the starting and ending points of their journeys (e.g., train stations), which importantly contribute to their total experiences, remain largely under-investigated.

Therefore, this study aims to identify the activities that travellers do at train stations, and the factors that may affect these activities. The setting of the study is Japan. The reasons for this selection are twofold. First, the railway systems in Japan are usually regarded as the most developed ones in the world (Schwab, 2016). The first section of railways in Japan was opened in 1872 between Shimbashi (Tokyo) and Yokohama (Kanagawa) (Saimyo, 2010). In 1964, the first line of shinkansen (bullet train) started its operation between Tokyo and Osaka. The latest shinkansen line, which was inaugurated in 2016, connects Tokyo and Hokkaido. Second, shopping malls and other business activities have been integrated in train stations in Japan for a long time (Tatsukami, 1986). Consequently, train stations in the country can definitely provide other activities alongside transportation.

As a result, an investigation of traveller activities at train stations in Japan can provide helpful implications for the management and promotion of station-based businesses in the country. Additionally, findings of this study are also useful with station-based businesses in other countries, especially those that are developing or restructuring their railway systems.

Literature Review

Unless they drive on their own, travellers need to go to transportation hubs to board the vehicles. While waiting to be served, travellers may undertake or participate in many activities. For example, at airports, affluent passengers, such as business passengers and frequent fliers, may enter and take a break at airport lounges (Han, et al., 2012). Transfer passengers may get out of the airports to visit the host cities (Tang, et al., 2017). However, the majority of passengers remain inside the airports to use their facilities or services (Han, et al., 2015; Tang, et al., 2017).

At sea ports, waiting passengers of cruise-ships usually get around to do some sightseeing and shopping (Andriotis and Agiomirgianakis, 2010). At bus and train stations, the activities are limited

to using the facilities, and engaging in conversations with friends (Iseki and Taylor, 2010; Tardieu, et al., 2008). Overall, the actual activities are controlled by the amount of time that passengers and travellers spend at a given transportation hub. Waiting time at airports may be long while that at bus and train stations is usually short.

The activities undertaken by travellers and by tourists help form their impressions with the destinations (the perceived images). In the case of Jamaica, for example, the most favourite tourist activities could be observed at the most popular attractions (Baloglu, et al., 2014). Specifically, swimming and water sports were closely associated with beaches and water falls. In the case of Litchi Bay (China), tourist activities were the major components of tourist involvement with the destination. Involvement, in its turn, significantly affected tourists' perceived images (Lu, et al., 2015). The role of tourist activities as the most organic form of information input (Gartner, 1993), therefore, has been well established.

In addition, satisfaction with tourist activities is an important contributor of overall tourist satisfaction with a destination (Danaher and Arweiler, 1996; McDowall, 2010). Satisfaction, in general, is no doubt a significant determinant of future tourist behaviors, such as revisit and recommendation (Ladeira, et al., 2016). Therefore, the management of tourist activities, regardless of the size of the destinations, always requires careful planning and undertaking efforts.

Research Method

Traveller and tourist activities are usually examined using structured questionnaires or semi-/unstructured interviews. In recent years, the development of social media platforms and computer-based analysis techniques has introduced a novel method of text-mining to understand travellers' and tourists' activities or experiences. For example, Capriello, et al. (2013) analysed reviews taken from tripadvisor.com to have insights into tourists' activities at farms in Australia, Italy, the UK, and the US. The findings suggested that food and environment-nature were two of the most favourite activities. In another study, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) focused on videos about New York posted on YouTube. Their analysis helped identify several popular activities that tourists do in New York, for example, biking, partying, playing with water (children), and visiting popular sites in the city. From another approach, Mkono (2012) analysed reviews retrieved from websites of two restaurants near the Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe). The outcomes revealed that the visits had contributed to the formation of an authentic cultural experience, in which tourists could enjoy an African-ness of food. Alternatively, Bosangit, et al. (2015) extracted from travel blogs three elements of tourism experience: risk, challenge, and novelty/learning. These values are considered the identifiers of memorable travel and tourism activities.

Following the abovementioned attempts, this study collects and analyses travellers' reviews of their experiences to make use of the organic and uninduced nature of this database (Cadotte and Turgeon, 1988). Tripadvisor.com was employed as the source of the review data given the fact that this platform houses a vast ranges of review topics, including those involving train stations. Kyoto station was selected as the focus of this study since it was the most famous one in Japan on tripadvisor.com at the time of data collection (January 2019). A total of 344 entries (each entry includes the review and its title) posted in 2018 constituted the database. Contributors consisted of 98 male reviewers (28.5%) and 62 female ones (18.0%); the remaining did not reveal their sexes. Forty-nine, thirty-nine, twenty-two, and thirteen reviewers were in the age brackets of 50-64, 35-49, 65+, and 25-34 respectively; the remaining did not register their ages. Many of the reviewers came from the US (71, 20.6%), Australia (43, 12.5%), the UK (42, 12.2%), Canada (13,

3.8%), Singapore (11, 3.2%), and Malaysia (10, 2.9%). A dominant majority of the reviewers rated their experiences at Kyoto station as excellent (210, 61.0%) and good (105, 30.5%). The remaining had less positive evaluations, including average (27, 7.8%), poor (1, 0.3%), and terrible (1, 0.3%).

To benefit from their richness, the data were thematically analysed. In the first step of the analysis, three major topics (sightseeing, eating, and shopping) were determined (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a reference to the keywords identified by tripadvisor.com regarding the Kyoto station thread. In the second step, the critical elements which helped contribute to the undertaking of each activity were searched for and added to the outcome of the analysis (Weber, 1985). Again, the keywords listed on tripadvisor.com were referred to ensure the external reliability of the practice. In addition, the analysis of the data was implemented twice to achieve the intra-coder reliability (Kassarjian, 1977).

Findings

Sightseeing

The most important and popular non-transportation activity that travellers do at Kyoto station is to see its architecture. The trademarks of the station are the grand escalators, the sky garden, the sky walk, and the light show.

'The station itself has amazing architecture and lots of fun features like the elevated walkway, rooftop garden, and light up grand staircase.' (Nickname LV)

However, the modern design may bring in opposite reactions from travellers. Those who like modernity usually have positive evaluations (e.g., Nickname HC). Otherwise, those expect a traditional atmosphere may be disappointed (e.g., Nickname MG).

'Architecturally, this building is truly impressive... evoking a huge sense of spaciousness within its limited confines in the city center.' (Nickname HC)

'The building is the source of some controversy. While to some it is a great modern architectural beauty, to those who prefer a more austere and serene facility, they may be unhappy.' (Nickname MG)

The factors which greatly contribute to the sightseeing activity of travellers at Kyoto station include signage, staff, information centre, lockers, toilets, and seats. Evaluations of reviewers of such elements, interestingly, had both the positive and negative aspects (Table 1).

Eating

Kyoto station has many restaurants and eating areas to cater to all the needs of both travellers and local residents, ranging from fast-food and convenience stores (e.g., McDonald's, Mr. Donut, and bento – lunch box) to traditional outlets (e.g., sushi, ramen, and tonkatsu). Here at Kyoto station, tourist travellers not only can eat Japanese food but also learn the Japanese ways to consume the food (e.g., buying ticket at vending machine, and queuing).

'At the top has a bunch of ramen restaurants, but know these are packed during peak times so you may not have time to wait in line during peak hours.' (Nickname JB)

'Recommend the popular Ramen restaurants on level 10. Yes it takes a lot of fiddling around as you order and pay, take a ticket and then lineup... but it works and that's the main thing.' (Nickname FR)

Table 1. Factors affecting travelers' sightseeing activity

Element	Positive review	Negative review
Signage	'The layout was such that I never got lost. I could always tell which way to go and which way I would be headed.' (Nickname LV)	'The signage here is confusing as something that Japan needs to improve on drastically...' (Nickname BT)
Staff	'After walking for a distance, we saw the rain and realized that I had left my umbrella at the train station. Walked back and made enquiry with the cleaner at the station and she greeted me with a smile and brought me to a corner of the station and showed me an array of umbrellas left behind by some of the passengers. I recognized one of the umbrellas belonged to me, took it, thanked her and left. I was not able to communicate in Japanese but she understood what I was asking just from my gestures and attended to me promptly. Her courteous smile and promptness to serve customers left in me an indelible first good impression of Kyoto and her lovely people.' (Nickname SK)	'Unfortunately not all people speak English, worst to find someone who speak Spanish.' (Nickname RS)
Information center	'Eventually we found tourist information. Helpful and efficient. English spoken and easily understood.' (Nickname MC)	Not applicable
Lockers	'Plenty of lockers around for storage of bags. There is also a baggage delivery service on the McDonalds side of the station.' (Nickname BB)	'The place is so big we got lost and frustrated trying to locate the coin lockers where we placed our luggage. *Sweat*. Was late for our next destination because of this.' (Nickname CL)
Toilets	'Everything in the train building was so clean. You don't see a speck of trash anywhere. The restrooms are immaculate.' (Nickname DS)	'One other defect with this station is the lack of rest rooms in the public non ticketed area. We could only find one and that was in front of the tourism office and that was a handicapped [...] ready one person at a time [...] toilet usually with lines of people waiting to use it.' (Nickname ML)
Seats	'The structure that encloses all these places is a work of art and brings art alive with a huge lighted staircase with illumination and light show that doubles as a seating area facing a performance stage.' (Nickname ME)	'As with most public places in Japan though... very little seating!' (Nickname JF)

Source: Created by author based on tripadvisor.com reviews.

The one factor that may influence travellers' eating at Kyoto station is the price. Some travellers stated that the prices were good. Yet, some wrote that the prices were high.

'Ramen alley at 10th floor is a must visit place for ramen lovers. We found some delicious ramen at affordable price there.' (Nickname JL)

'I found the cafés in here quite expensive compared to other places.' (Nickname AB)

Shopping

Kyoto station has a huge department store (Isetan) and many other shops. Travelers, therefore, can do some shopping while going through the station.

'You can find everything you need: food, clothes, souvenirs, coffee and tea shops, convenience store... You can spend all day seeing and shopping.' (Nickname LP)

'Cosmetics, clothing, household goods, flowers, travel bags, children's wear, shoes, beauty salons, and food mart are just some of the categories of establishments to be found here. ATMs, foreign currency exchange machines, and even baby care lounge can be found here, as well.' (Nickname ME)

Many reviewers mentioned that they bought souvenirs in the shops located inside Kyoto station. However, the shopping options (e.g., cell phone cover, and socks) seem to lack the traditional products of Japan, in general, and of Kyoto, in particular.

Conclusion and Discussions

Throughout history, train stations have been important transportation hubs. However, the investigation of Kyoto station in Japan has proved that a modern train station can be a tourist destination and an entertainment complex in and of itself. In addition to using transportation services, travellers at Kyoto station can participate in several activities, including sightseeing, eating, and shopping. These offers have differentiated Kyoto station and other mega-stations in big Japanese cities from the old-fashioned and small train stations in other areas and countries (Iseki and Taylor, 2010; Tardieu, et al., 2008). They help create an airport-like image to modern train stations such as Kyoto (Han, et al., 2015; Tang, et al., 2017).

In addition, the analysis has revealed that activities at train stations are predetermined by the available facilities. With Kyoto station, the sightseeing activity is supported by the modern design of the architecture, while the eating and shopping activities are endorsed by the restaurants and stores. However, the actual activities vary among travellers, times of visits, and even service providers (e.g., station staff). Nonetheless, travellers tend to generalize their impressions to the whole station at all times, although they might visit the station at one time or only experienced certain areas in the station. This shows how significant first impressions are with perceptions and behaviours of people, in general, and of customers, in particular (Chan, et al., 2011).

Moreover, this study has observed two issues that managers of Kyoto station should take care of. The first is the information about and direction to the facilities in the station. The availability of an information centre, and the helpfulness of the staff are highly appreciated. Yet, some travellers were still confused about where to go and what to do in the station. To improve this service,

station managers may also consider distributing leaflets and maps at station entrances. The second involves the language ability of the staff, which is a nation-wide problem in Japan, and needs more time and effort to address. At the present time, station managers may consider using multilingual automatic instruction devices to make travellers more comfortable regarding the language issue. They may also develop an application for Internet-based devices so travellers can locate and approach the facilities that they want to use in a friendlier manner.

From another perspective, big and modern stations in Japan and other countries can refer to the practices of Kyoto station to maintain and improve their performances. Particularly, architecture, business units, signage, navigation, information centre, staff, lockers, toilets, and seats should be thoughtfully planned and provided to guarantee positive offers to travellers. The first impressions at transportation hubs, especially those that serve as the entry point to a city, are very important to the consequent perceptions and behaviours of travellers. The publicity of these images on social media and other Internet-based platforms, whether it is done by station staff or by travellers, may promote the popularity of the city on the one hand, yet may worsen the overall impression of the city on the other. Therefore, image and reputation management should always be included in the managerial and promotional agendas of such transportation hubs.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study only examined one station. Consequently, the situations in other big and modern stations in Japan were not covered. To address this issue, future studies may want to include other settings, for example, Osaka station, Shibuya station, Shinjuku station, and Tokyo station, among others. Future attempts may also extend the context to other countries which have developed railway systems to have a comparative insight. In addition, quantitative efforts (questionnaire-based) to understand travellers' evaluations of train station facilities and services, and their consequent behaviours could also be considered.

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