

Aerotainment – towards a research agenda merging airports and theme parks in the experience economy

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HIGHLIGHTS

- This is the first study to posit the concept of “aerotainment”
 - Urban tourism destinations can benefit from joint strategic marketing by airports, theme parks, other attractions and tourism cities.
 - Airports help to increase the market power of theme parks
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- Future research avenues for “aerotainment” concept are discussed

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, air traffic reached 88.6% of pre-pandemic (2019) levels (IATA, 2024), with global tourism cities as key beneficiaries (Graham, 2023; Marchesani et al., 2023). Similarly, theme parks have been found to be a major attractor for urban destinations globally (Liang and Li, 2023; Luo & Li, 2024) and catalysts for economic development (see Raihan et al., 2024). Research by Tan and Huang (2020) has shown that, unlike other tourism destinations, theme park visitors have particular expectations, which tend to focus on elements of existential authenticity, such as recreating socio-cultural experiences offered by foreign destinations, without the need to travel to those destinations. In turn, a number of key global tourism cities host some of the world’s most visited theme parks (see Figure1). For instance, Disneyland Paris has become France's most popular tourist destination, ahead of some of the city’s iconic attractions, including the Cathedral of Notre-Dame and the Eiffel Tower.

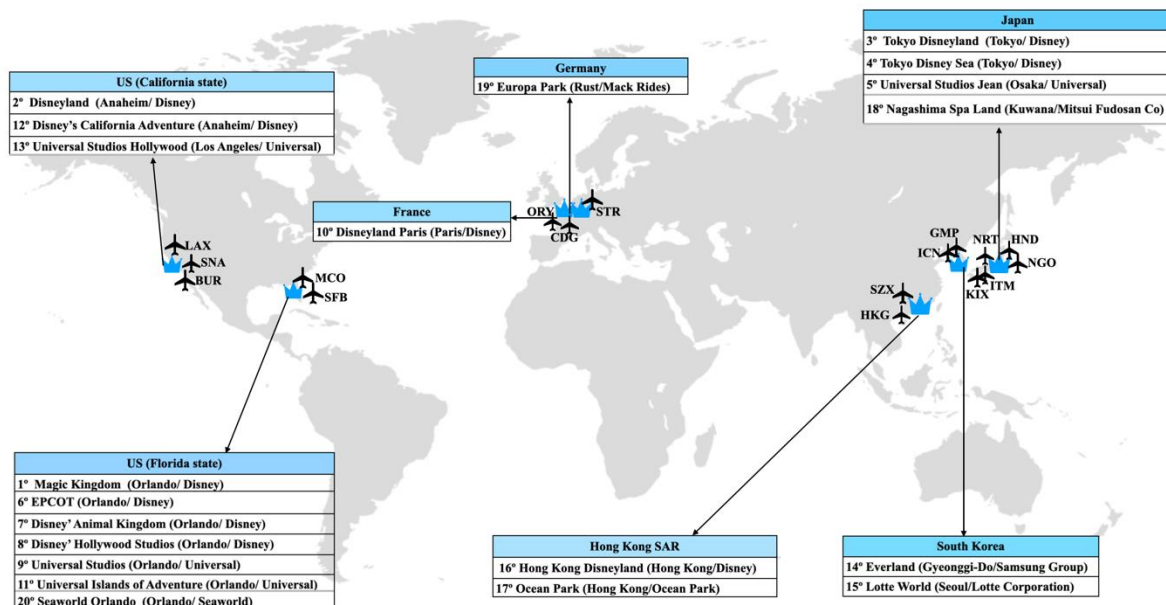


Figure 1. Top 20 theme parks worldwide and airport proximity map (2012-2023). Source: Authors.

The importance of air transport has been researched extensively by tourism scholars (Papatheodorou, 2021), including the links between air travel and urban tourism (Coppola *et al.*, 2024) and visitor attractions such as museums (Florido-Benítez, 2023). Visitors who frequent theme parks also may be interested in experiencing other nearby attractions. Yet, there is a gap in our understanding of how airports and nearby theme parks can jointly deliver higher levels of competitiveness for urban destinations within the context of the experience economy.

In order to address this knowledge gap, “aerotainment” is suggested here as a means of conceptualising a systems-based interpretation (Park *et al.*, 2016) of the interaction between airports, tourism cities, theme parks and nearby visitor attractions within the experience economy. Local residents and destination management organisations (DMOs) are key to this ecosystem.

AEROTAINMENT IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM

The advent of COVID-19 was a watershed event for the tourism sector, with post-pandemic tourists favouring open spaces, nature, personalised itineraries (Hsu *et al.*, 2024), the use of new technologies to deliver memorable experiences and travel/destination-related information readily available digitally on mobile devices (McClanahan, 2024). Parallel to this, studies in urban tourism (Zhong *et al.*, 2024) have shown that post-pandemic visitors favour experiences that deliver a seamless interaction among air transport, tourist attractions, accommodation, and hospitality activities (Rasheed & Balakrishnan, 2024). Also, the role of airports in the tourism system is changing rapidly from a functional one to a much more strategic level in the marketing and branding of destinations. This is supported by recent research (e.g., Raad & Rajendran, 2024), which demonstrated that the proximity of airports to cities, theme parks and museums is key to the competitiveness of urban destinations. Table 1 suggests this, with Figure 2 expanding the data further to show trends of passenger arrivals at key international airports versus visitor numbers in nearby theme parks during the period 2012-2023.

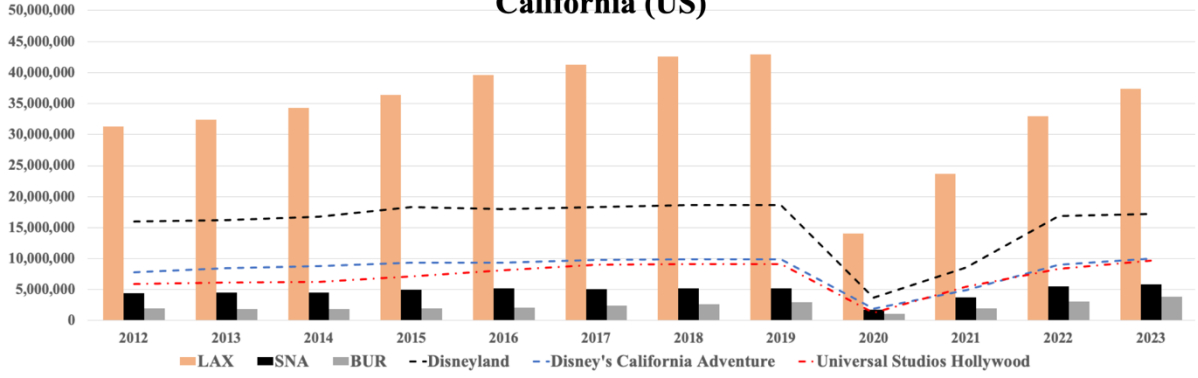
Table 1. Airport arrivals (2012-2023) versus number of visitors to nearby theme parks (2012-2023), showing the world’s top 20 theme parks. (Author elaboration using data from TEA/AECOM (2023)).

City/Country	Airport Name/IATA code	Passenger arrivals (2012-23)	Nearby theme parks	Theme Park attendance (2012-2023)
Tokyo/Japan	Tokyo Haneda (HND)	839,366,970	Tokyo Disneyland	172,477,000
	Narita International (NRT)	356,478,895	Tokyo Disney Sea	143,836,000
Izumisano/Japan	Osaka Kansai (KIX)	243,023,438	Universal Studios Japan	143,619,000
Itami/Japan	Osaka International (ITM)	159,974,044		
Tokoname/Japan	Chubu Centrair International (NGO)	109,241,979	Nagashima Spa Land	61,540,000
Paris/France	Paris Charles de Gaulle (CDG)	710,357,987	Disneyland Paris Park	106,028,000
	Paris Orly (ORY)	330,291,191		
Hong Kong/China	Hong Kong International (HKG)	686,737,751	Hong Kong Disneyland	67,395,000
Shenzhen/China	Shenzhen Bao'an Inter. (SZX)	494,471,021	Ocean Park	62,786,000
Incheon/South Korea	Incheon (ICN)	523,818,508	Everland	73,046,000
Seoul/South Korea	Seoul Gimpo (GMP)	272,179,624	Lotte World	69,206,000
Los Angeles/US	Los Angeles International (LAX)	408,974,858	Disneyland	187,165,000
Santa Ana/US	John Wayne Airport-Orange (SNA)	56,185,325	Disney's California Adventure Universal Studios Hollywood	99,108,999 85,741,000
Orlando/US	Orlando international (MCO)	240,547,219	Magic Kingdom	213,100,000
Orlando/US	Orlando Sanford (SFB)	14,747,215	EPCOT Disney's Animal Kingdom Disney's Hollywood Studios Universal Studios Universal Islands of Adventure Seaworld Orlando	128,120,000 121,659,000 118,915,000 106,789,000 105,961,000 50,951,000
Stuttgart/Germany	Stuttgart (STR)	106,753,428	Europa Park	59,670,000
Total		5,553,149,463		2,177,112,999

One of the striking issues that Table 1 suggests is that the ratios between passenger arrivals and theme park visitors vary considerably from one destination to another. Though competition from other modes of transport may be part of the reason, or the fact that in some cases (e.g., Orlando in Florida) some airports can serve several theme parks at the same time, they may be behind some of these discrepancies. More research into this issue may result in further insights related to causes involved.

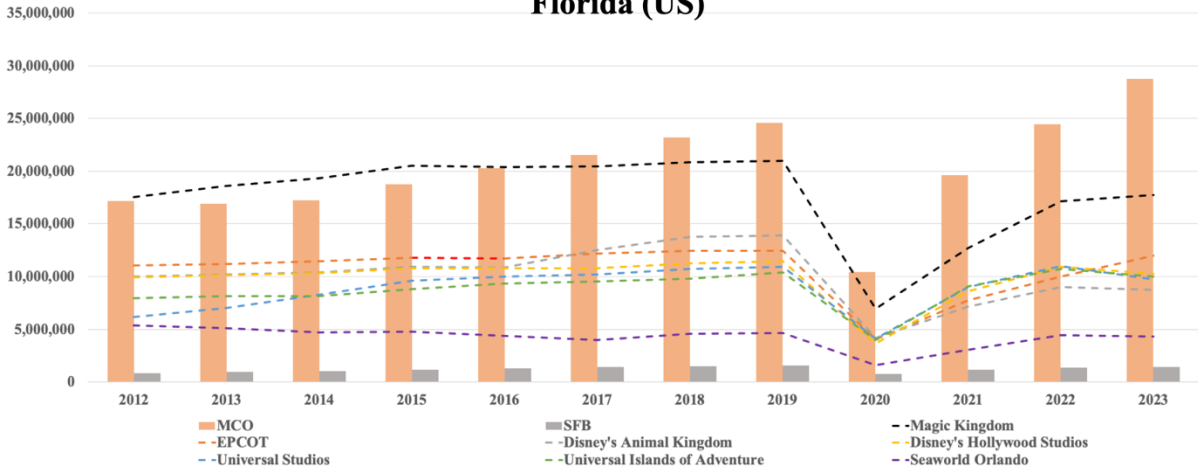
Million passengers and visitors

California (US)



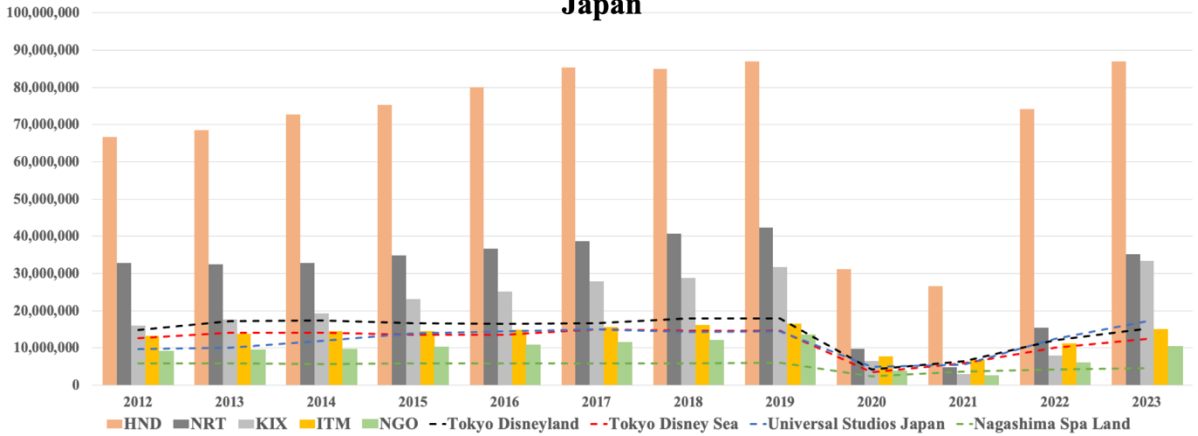
Million passengers and visitors

Florida (US)



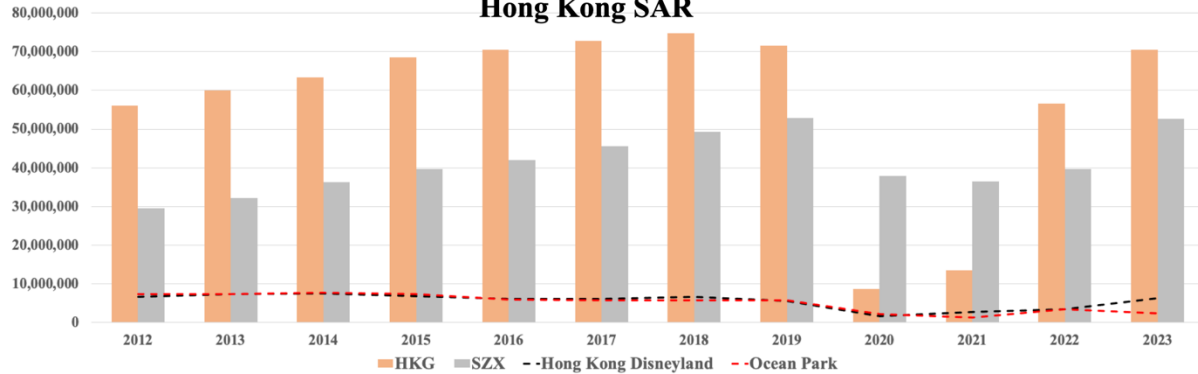
Million passengers and visitors

Japan



Million passengers and visitors

Hong Kong SAR



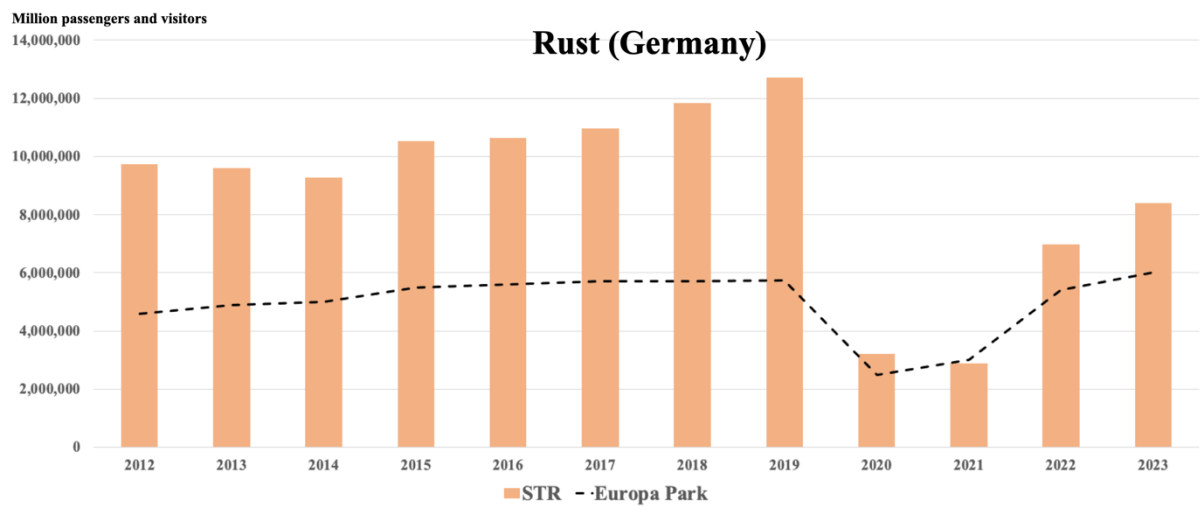
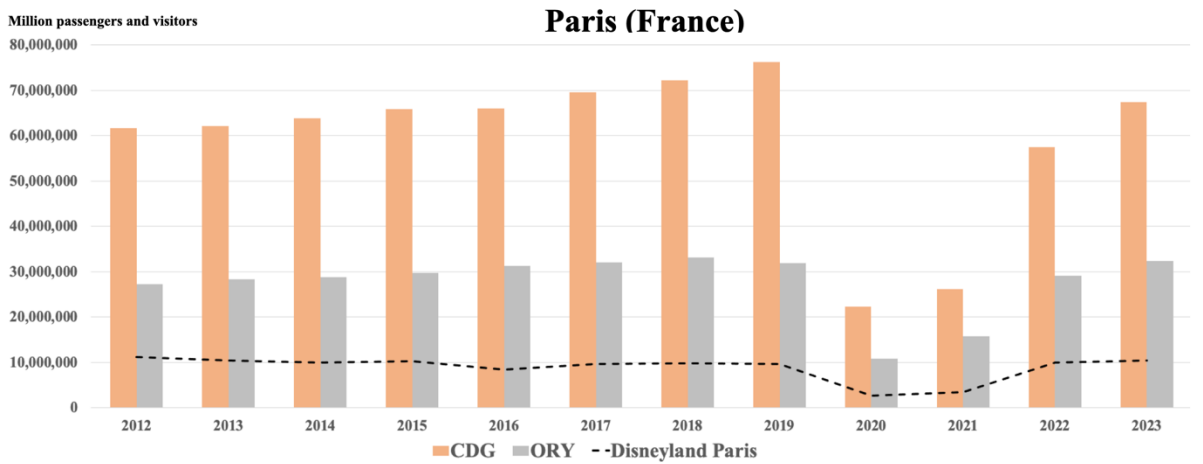
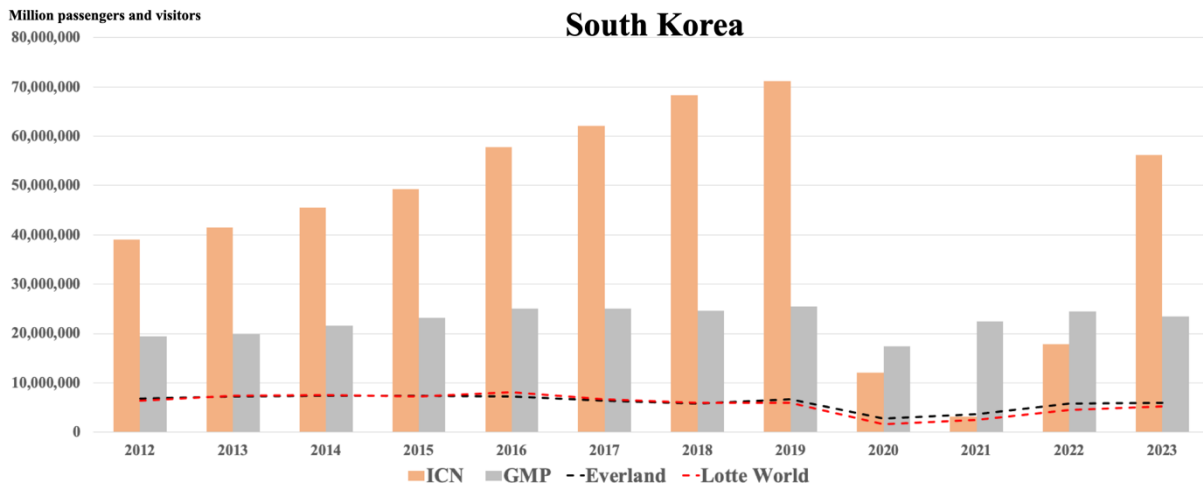


Figure 2. Passenger arrivals at international airports versus visitor numbers at nearby theme parks (2012 to 2023). (Author elaboration using data from TEA/AECOM (2023)).

Similarly, although there appear to be parallels between airport proximity, passenger arrivals and theme park visitor numbers, especially in locations where theme parks enjoy a dominant position over other tourist attractions (e.g., Florida, California, and Rust in Germany), this is not necessarily the case for other parts of the world, as shown in Figure 2. For instance, theme parks in Paris, South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan did not have visitor trends matching those of passenger arrivals from 2012-2023. This may be due to competing transport modes (e.g., rail) or the fact that these airports are hubs for flight connections in the region. However, the reason is likely to be more closely linked to the fact that the parks in those areas do not have such a dominant position over other visitor attractions. This is something that merits further comparative research.

Nevertheless, in broad terms, the proposed concept of "aerotainment" would appear to apply conceptually to many destinations of this type and can be posited as the interaction of airports with nearby theme parks and other visitor attractions (e.g., casinos, sporting venues, museums) as part of a destination's stakeholder network with the aim of enhancing the overall visitor experience and competitiveness of that ecosystem. The concept builds on research by Graham (2023), which found that there is a high level of reciprocity between entertainment and passenger transport, as well as other research studies (Rohini & Meenakshi, 2024), which show that tourist decision-making is affected by the proximity of airports to destinations.

Similarly, other studies have shown that air passengers tend to align airport performance with destination image (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2022). For instance, marketing campaigns by airlines have been shown to have a significant and positive impact on destination image (Zhang & Kim, 2021). Parallel to this, other studies (Wu et al., 2024) have found that time, space, and nearby attractions form an integral part of the experiences of theme park visitors.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The concept of "aerotainment" calls for a systems-based view that merges the strategic role of airports, theme parks, tourism cities and nearby tourist attractions to explore their combined contribution to tourism development. In essence, "aerotainment" could be posited as a binding agent for the experience economy in urban destinations within close proximity of airports and theme parks, with key players such as Air Canada already offering personalised packages to

visitors to Disney World (Florida) that include integrated *en-route* offers throughout, from departure to destination. Future scholarly research in “aerotainment” should explore collaborative approaches in terms of strategic branding and promotions involving key actors in the “aerotainment” business ecosystem. Similarly, data-sharing could lead to more innovative immersive experience design during travel, leading to improved passenger profiling, which could then be capitalised on at the destination level, contributing to more authentic experiences that reach beyond the staged authenticity offer of theme parks (Tan & Huang, 2020). Crucially, studies to assess the causality of the relationship between airports and theme parks within urban tourism is still required to better understand the nuances involved. Similarly, although airports play a key role in influencing traveller choice beyond simplistic location-related issues, further research is required to discern the role “aerotainment” packages play in this decision-making, adopting a systems-based approach that incorporates airline fares, routes, hospitality and other services.

Furthermore, experience-based visitor itineraries could be designed in a way that personal visitor preferences are explored before reaching the destination through online and en-route channels, validated at the airport and the theme park, and expanded upon (depending on real-time visitor feedback) at nearby tourism cities and other tourist attractions, leading to much more sophisticated levels of co-creation between visitors, airlines, airports, theme parks and other key actors in the experience economy business ecosystem of the destination. DMOs are key to this process in their capacity as strategic leaders in the stakeholder management of destinations. Furthermore, a cloud-based data-sharing platform that incorporates these actors would deliver much better opportunities for developing not only memorable experiences, but altogether transformational ones by encouraging reflection whilst at the destination and on the return flight. For instance, transformational triggers could include exploring the effect of climate change-induced sea level rise on tourism cities during and after the visit, with resources offered for more sustainable lifestyles. Aerotainment research can contribute substantially to growing knowledge related to the digital transformation of destinations toward more sustainable models (Gretzel, 2022). Similarly, the future-proofing of the visitor experience offered by urban destinations could be enhanced by engaging younger generations of visitors in becoming architects of their own virtual “aerotainment” experience through gaming mechanisms that then generate further data related to intentions and preferences. This would position “aerotainment” as a key approach to futures-based research in tourism, including longer-term scenario planning.

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