

AIRPORTS AS TOURISM GATEWAYS: PASSENGER PERCEPTIONS AND COMMERCIAL REVENUE AT BUCHAREST HENRI COANDĂ INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

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Abstract

Airports have evolved from simple transit points into complex tourism gateways that shape the travel experience and generate significant non-aeronautical revenues. This study provides an innovative perspective by highlighting how each airport's unique operating context affects the strategies available to airport managers for increasing non-aeronautical revenues while enhancing passenger satisfaction. The paper presents an empirical, passenger-based analysis by examining how passenger perceptions of terminal commercial offerings, perceived dwell time, travel frequency, airline type, and demographic factors influence commercial spending behavior at Bucharest Henri Coandă International Airport (OTP). A structured questionnaire based on the ACI Airport Service Quality (ASQ) framework was administered to 315 passengers, and the data were analyzed using Spearman correlations, chi-square tests, Mann-Whitney U tests, binary logistic regression, and MANOVA. The results show that perceptions of commercial space attractiveness correlate positively with overall airport experience valuation ($\rho = 0.247$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the strategic importance of retail environments in airport tourism appeal. A counterintuitive finding indicates that passengers who perceive more available time after security are less likely to make purchases, suggesting that time pressure may trigger impulse buying at this airport. Travel frequency is the only globally significant predictor of post-security purchasing ($p = 0.011$), with occasional travelers showing a higher spending propensity than frequent flyers. Airline type (low-cost vs. full-service) has no statistically significant influence on purchasing behavior. The logistic regression model achieves an overall accuracy of 65.7%, demonstrating that perceptual and situational variables outweigh traditional traveler profile indicators in explaining airport consumer behavior. These findings have direct implications for airport managers, tourism planners, and commercial concessionaires seeking to optimize non-aeronautical revenue streams while enhancing the tourist passenger experience.

Keywords: airport tourism, non-aeronautical revenue, passenger behavior, commercial spending, airport service quality, dwell time, Bucharest airport

JEL Classification: L93, Z33, M31

1. Introduction

Aviation is a critical enabler of global tourism, with one in three travelers reaching their destination by air (ATAG, 2019). The industry supports over 86 million jobs worldwide and contributes approximately 4.1 trillion USD to the global economy (ATAG, 2024). Within this ecosystem, airports play a dual role: they serve as essential infrastructure providers facilitating aircraft operations and as economic engines driving trade, tourism, and regional development (Cioranu et al., 2025; Gibbons et al., 2019; Tveter, 2017).

In recent decades, airports have evolved beyond their traditional function as transit nodes to become complex commercial ecosystems – destinations in their own right. Major international airports now generate substantial revenue from non-aeronautical sources, including retail, food and beverage, car parking, advertising, and real estate concessions. These non-aeronautical revenues (NaR) are essential

for financial sustainability, especially given regulatory pressures that limit aeronautical charges (ACI World, 2023). The changing operating environment requires airport management to adopt sophisticated, data-driven strategies to keep pace with shifting traffic patterns and rising passenger expectations.

Despite the growing importance of NaR, the literature reveals a persistent gap: current revenue management approaches often treat passenger behavior, operational performance, and commercial strategy separately (Cioranu et al., 2025). There is limited empirical evidence linking the perceptual and situational factors that influence passengers' commercial decisions at airports – particularly at medium-sized European airports – to actionable revenue optimization strategies. Additionally, the relationship between the tourism aspect of air travel and in-terminal spending behavior remains underexplored.

This paper addresses this gap by presenting an empirical investigation of passenger perceptions and commercial spending behavior at Bucharest Henri Coandă International Airport (OTP), Romania's primary international gateway. With over 17 million passengers annually (Compania Națională Aeroporturi București [CNAB], 2026), OTP is a vital link between Romania and the global tourism market. The study examines how variables such as perceived commercial space attractiveness, available time after security screening, travel frequency, airline type, and passenger age influence spending intentions and overall airport experience valuation.

The research is guided by five objectives: (1) to investigate the relationship between passengers' perceptions of expanded commercial spaces and the overall perceived value of the airport experience; (2) to assess how the time available after security screening influences passenger purchasing behavior; (3) to determine the effect of travel frequency on the likelihood of airport purchases; (4) to compare purchasing behaviors across airline types (low-cost versus full-service); and (5) to analyze the influence of age on passengers' perceptions of airport services and facilities.

The findings contribute to the academic literature on airport economics and tourism management, as well as to practitioners seeking to develop targeted strategies for enhancing non-aeronautical revenues and improving the tourist passenger experience.

2. Literature review

2.1. Airports as tourism gateways and economic engines

The role of airports in promoting travel and tourism has been extensively documented. Cristureanu & Bobircă (2007) show that airports generate multiple economic effects – direct, indirect, induced, and catalytic – that extend well beyond their operational boundaries. Today, travelers expect seamless, technology-driven experiences that prioritize well-being and convenience (ACI World, 2024; IATA, 2024). Airports that meet these expectations position themselves as attractive tourism gateways rather than merely operational facilities. It is also important to acknowledge that airports display significant regional variability worldwide, with differences in passenger behavior and local economic conditions influencing these dynamics (Orsini et al., 2019).

The concept of airports as “experiancescapes” builds on the servicescape framework introduced by Bitner (1992) and expanded by Rosenbaum & Massiah (2011). From this perspective, the physical environment, signage, social density, and commercial offerings of a terminal all contribute to passengers' psychological experiences. Airports that create environments fulfilling passengers' psychological needs tend to enhance perceived satisfaction and encourage longer dwell times with associated spending (Nicholls, 2010; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011).

2.2. Non-aeronautical revenues and commercial spending

Airport revenues are generally classified as aeronautical revenues (landing fees, parking charges, terminal usage fees) and non-aeronautical revenues (retail concessions, food and beverage, car parking, advertising, real estate). The ACI World Airport Economics Report (2023) highlights the growing importance of non-aeronautical revenues for airport financial sustainability, noting significant regional variation worldwide in the proportion and structure of these revenue sources.

Several factors influence passengers' commercial spending at airports. The size and attractiveness of commercial areas have been found to maximize revenue potential (Huai et al., 2025). Chen et al. (2019) show that about two-thirds of travelers do not have a predetermined shopping plan and stop only at establishments within their immediate line of sight in the terminal. This finding underscores the critical importance of commercial space design and positioning for capturing spontaneous spending.

Nascimento et al. (2022) report a somewhat paradoxical finding: higher passenger satisfaction with pricing tends to coincide with lower non-aeronautical revenues, indicating that airport shoppers display classic price-sensitive behavior. These dynamics are further influenced by dwell time, whether airports pursue profit-maximizing or welfare-maximizing strategies, and the relationship between international flight operations and non-aeronautical revenue generation (Huai et al., 2025; Nascimento et al., 2022).

2.3. Passenger satisfaction and service quality

The Airport Service Quality (ASQ) program, managed by Airports Council International, is the leading global benchmarking tool for assessing passenger satisfaction. ASQ surveys collect direct passenger feedback at the point of experience, covering areas from check-in efficiency to boarding comfort. Fodness and Murray (2007) identified airport service quality as a multidimensional construct best evaluated from the passenger's perspective. Bogicevic et al. (2013) distinguished between satisfiers and dissatisfiers at airports, identifying terminal cleanliness, signage, and ambiance as key drivers of positive passenger perceptions.

Research consistently shows that queuing time affects passenger satisfaction, with prolonged delays causing stress and dissatisfaction (Bakir et al., 2022). Terminal signage quality is positively correlated with satisfaction (Bakir et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2024), while seating comfort significantly impacts the passenger experience (Zheng, 2014). Tigu et al. (2024) found that airports aligning sustainability initiatives with clear passenger communication tend to achieve higher satisfaction and increased commercial revenue. Furthermore, Tigu et al. (2024) showed that airport service providers who actively support Sustainable Development Goals through structured governance, waste management, and employee well-being practices contribute meaningfully to the operational quality framework that underpins passenger satisfaction.

2.4. Traveler profiles and generational differences

Generational cohort membership affects travelers' expectations, purchasing behaviors, and perceptions of service quality (Gürler et al., 2019; Li, 2023; Richardson, 2012). Younger adults view technology as efficient and empowering (Pant, 2022), while frequent travelers typically have higher expectations and may be more critical of service quality (Antwi et al., 2022). The distinction between business and leisure travelers is also significant: demand elasticity differs considerably between these groups, with price considerations being central for low-cost carrier passengers (Morlotti et al., 2017; O'Connell & Williams, 2005).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and instrument

This study employs a quantitative approach using a structured questionnaire administered to passengers at Bucharest Henri Coandă International Airport (OTP). The instrument was developed based on the rationale and dimensions measured by the ACI Airport Service Quality (ASQ) survey, ensuring methodological consistency with industry standards.

The questionnaire consisted of 19 closed items organized into three categories of variables: control variables (age, sex, disability status, travel purpose), independent variables (airline type, travel frequency, waiting time at check-in, perceived importance of security, signage quality, seating comfort, accessibility, time available after security, size of commercial area, attractiveness of commercial offerings), and dependent variables (passenger spending behavior, satisfaction, perceived value, and dwell time). Response formats included nominal, ordinal, Likert (1–5), and binary scales.

3.2. Population and sample

A QR code-based distribution method was used to maximize reach. Approximately 6,000 QR code stickers were printed and attached to boarding passes by ground-handling staff at check-in counters. Additional distribution occurred through digital channels targeting academic communities and frequent traveler groups. The questionnaire was administered in April 2025 via the freeonline surveys.com platform.

A total of 315 valid responses were collected, corresponding to an estimated response rate of about 4.7% from approximately 6,700 reached travelers. The sample consists predominantly of passengers aged 18–60 (95%), with a slight female majority (55.9%). Most respondents traveled for tourism purposes (80.6%), and 64.4% reported using low-cost airlines. Table 1 summarizes the sample structure.

Table 1. Sample structure (N = 315)

Control Variable	Variable		% of Total
	Category	n	
Age	18-28 (Gen Z)	113	35.9%
	29-44 (Millennials)	90	28.6%
	45-60 (Gen X)	95	30.2%
	61-79 (Baby Boomers)	14	4.4%
	≥ 80	3	1.0%
Sex	Female	176	55.9%
	Male	139	44.1%
Disability	Yes	17	5.4%
	No	298	94.6%
Travel Purpose	Tourism (leisure)	254	80.6%
	Business	61	19.4%

Source: Author's survey data

3.3. Analytical methods

The data were analyzed using SPSS v26. To address the five research objectives, several complementary statistical techniques were used: Spearman's rank correlation for ordinal associations, chi-square tests of independence for categorical associations, Mann-Whitney U tests for group comparisons on ordinal data, binary logistic regression for predicting dichotomous outcomes from multiple predictors, and MANOVA for assessing multivariate effects of age on perceptual variables.

Because this study is exploratory and based on a non-probabilistic sample, the findings should be interpreted as indicative behavioral patterns relevant to the OTP context, rather than as population-level estimates generalizable to all passengers, regardless of the airport. Nonetheless, the practical application is highly relevant to all airports, as the variables can serve as levers in a model that each airport can fine-tune based on its operating conditions.

The statistical results provide valuable insight into how commercial behavior is influenced by perceptual and situational variables, airport experience valuation, and the potential for non-aeronautical revenue generation. The analysis aims not only to identify statistically significant relationships but also to derive context-sensitive implications for airport managers to consider when calibrating decisions regarding terminal design, passenger flow management, and optimal commercial strategies based on their specific operating environment. Since every step in the passenger flow throughout the airport is subject to time-related constraints, a failure to meet the required level of service by any sub-system within the airport ecosystem can cause disruptions (Orhan et al., 2020).

Airports can implement strategic operational changes to reduce delays and maximize the use of commercial spaces by employing predictive analytics to more accurately forecast passenger flow and behavior. Artificial intelligence (AI) can also help airports allocate gates more effectively to maximize non-aeronautical revenue by considering operational limitations, aircraft type – whether departure, arrival, or transfer – and proximity to shops (walking distance) (Silva et al., 2023).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive findings

A substantial proportion of respondents (63.5%) reported purchasing products or services at the airport while traveling, indicating significant commercial potential within the terminal. Among key perceptual variables, 67.3% of passengers agreed or strongly agreed that having additional time after security encourages shopping, 65.1% agreed that expanding commercial spaces would create more shopping opportunities, and 62.8% indicated they would spend more time at the airport if commercial offerings were more diverse.

Regarding overall satisfaction, 41.5% of respondents reported that airport services exceeded their expectations, while 35.2% were neutral and 23.2% expressed dissatisfaction. The perceived organization of the airport was rated more positively: over 84% agreed or strongly agreed that good airport organization enhances their perceived value as passengers.

4.2. Objective 1: commercial space perception and airport experience value

Spearman's correlation analysis revealed a positive and statistically significant relationship between passengers' perception of commercial space expansion and their overall perceived value of the airport experience ($\rho = 0.247$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 315$). This indicates that passengers who view the expansion of the commercial area as beneficial are generally more satisfied with the overall airport experience, supporting the hypothesis that commercial components shape the perceived value of the tourism gateway.

4.3. Objective 2: post-security time and purchasing behavior

Binary logistic regression was used to examine the effect of perceived available time after security on purchasing behavior. The model was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 10.039$, $p = 0.002$), and the Hosmer-Lemeshow test indicated a good fit ($p = 0.980$). The coefficient for perceived time was $B = -0.323$, $p = 0.002$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.724$, indicating that for each one-point increase on the Likert scale (i.e., greater perception of available time), the odds of making a purchase decrease by approximately 27.6%.

This counterintuitive result suggests that, at OTP International Airport, a sense of time pressure may prompt impulse purchases, while perceiving abundant free time may reduce the urgency to buy. A complementary Mann-Whitney U test supported this pattern ($U = 9,307.5$, $Z = -2.945$, $p = 0.003$), showing that passengers who make purchases consider time availability a stronger shopping incentive than non-purchasers.

4.4. Objective 3: travel frequency and purchasing behavior

The chi-square test of independence showed a statistically significant relationship between travel frequency and purchasing behavior ($\chi^2 = 12.303$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.015$), with Cramer's $V = 0.198$, indicating a weak to moderate association. However, the Spearman correlation was negative ($\rho = -0.111$, $p = 0.049$), suggesting that more frequent travelers do not necessarily spend more at the airport; instead, they tend to be more selective or cautious.

Binary logistic regression further clarified this pattern: while the overall frequency variable set was significant ($p = 0.011$), the strongest effect was observed for passengers traveling 3–5 times per year ($B = -0.855$, $p = 0.060$, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.425$), who were substantially less likely to make purchases than occasional travelers. These findings indicate that occasional travelers are more likely to engage in exploratory or impulse purchasing, whereas frequent travelers exhibit more functional, pragmatic behavior at the airport.

4.5. Objective 4: airline type and purchasing behavior

The chi-square test showed no statistically significant relationship between airline type (low-cost vs. full-service) and purchasing behavior ($\chi^2 = 1.429$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.232$), with Cramer's $V = 0.067$, indicating a very weak association. This suggests that airline type does not significantly influence passengers' spending at the airport, consistent with O'Connell & Williams (2005), who found similar attitudes and perceptions across carrier types regardless of region.

4.6. Objective 5: age and perceptions of airport services

MANOVA results indicated a significant multivariate effect of age group on passengers' perceptions of airport services (Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.892$, $F(16, 938.5) = 2.244$, $p = 0.003$). Univariate follow-up tests confirmed that age significantly influenced preferences for travel mode ($F = 3.183$, $p = 0.014$), the importance of terminal signage ($F = 2.909$, $p = 0.022$), seating comfort ($F = 2.438$, $p = 0.047$), and the perceived added value of airport accessibility ($F = 2.748$, $p = 0.028$). However, effect sizes were small (adjusted R^2 between 1.8% and 2.7%), indicating that while age has an impact, other situational factors also contribute substantially to these perceptions.

4.7. Predictive model: logistic regression for post-security purchasing

A composite binary logistic regression model was estimated using all five predictor groups. The model was statistically significant (Omnibus $\chi^2 = 27.198$, $p = 0.001$). It explained approximately 11.3% of the variance in purchasing behavior (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.113$) and showed good fit (Hosmer-Lemeshow $p = 0.476$). The overall classification accuracy was 65.7%. Table 2 summarizes the significant and near-significant predictors.

Table 2. Logistic regression predictors of post-security purchasing behavior

Predictor	B	p-value	Exp(B)	Interpretation
Time after security	-0.234	0.114	0.792	Not significant; trend: more time → less purchase
Commercial space	-0.187	0.205	0.829	Not significant; directional trend
Tourist purpose	-0.244	0.458	0.784	Not significant
Flights 3–5/year	-0.855	0.060	0.425	Near-significant; frequent = less buying
Full-service airline	0.336	0.206	1.400	Not significant; positive trend
Frequency (overall)	-	0.011	-	Significant predictor set

Source: Author's logistic regression output (SPSS v26)

When controlling for the full predictor set, the time-after-security effect remains negative, yet loses statistical significance. This suggests an overlap with other perceptual variables, indicating that time pressure may operate contextually rather than as an independent driver.

5. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study have several implications for understanding the airport's role within the tourism ecosystem and for designing strategies to optimize non-aeronautical revenues. First, the confirmed positive correlation between commercial-space perception and overall airport experience value highlights that the terminal retail environment is not merely a revenue-generating addition but an integral part of the tourism experience. Passengers who view the expansion of commercial offerings favorably also rate their airport experience more highly. This aligns with the servicescape literature (Bitner, 1992; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011) and indicates that airports investing in diverse, well-designed retail spaces can enhance both passenger satisfaction and commercial performance - a dual outcome of strategic importance for tourism-oriented airports.

Second, the counterintuitive finding regarding post-security time deserves careful consideration. While the prevailing assumption in the literature is that more dwell time leads to higher spending, the OTP data suggest the opposite: passengers who feel more rushed are more likely to make purchases. This may reflect specific contextual factors at Bucharest Airport, such as limited commercial appeal compared to major hubs or a cultural tendency toward impulse purchases under time constraints. This finding should be replicated at other airports to determine its generalizability, but it raises important questions about the optimal management of perceived time in terminals.

Third, the significance of travel frequency as the strongest predictor of purchasing behavior has direct implications for tourism strategy. Occasional travelers, who make up the majority of the tourism segment, are more likely to engage in exploratory consumption and often view the airport experience as part of their overall journey. In contrast, frequent travelers take a more utilitarian approach to the airport environment. This suggests that commercial strategies should prioritize the needs and preferences of occasional and first-time travelers, who represent both the largest segment and the highest spending potential per visit.

Fourth, the lack of significant differences between low-cost and full-service airline passengers in spending behavior challenges the conventional assumption that carrier choice reflects disposable income or willingness to spend at the airport. This finding, consistent with O'Connell & Williams (2005), indicates that airports should not segment commercial strategies primarily by airline type, but instead focus on perceptual and situational variables that more directly influence consumer decisions.

Finally, while age has a statistically significant effect on certain perceptual dimensions, its explanatory power is limited. The generational differences identified - such as transport preferences, signage importance, comfort expectations, and accessibility valuation - provide useful input for targeted service design but should not overshadow the more influential role of situational factors.

Conclusions

The paper establishes a strong link between tourism and aviation, derived not only from the airport's gateway role but also from the fact that the sample of respondents was predominantly leisure-oriented, making the terminal experience part of the broader tourism consumption chain.

This study provides empirical evidence that passenger perceptions of the terminal environment - particularly the appeal and extent of commercial spaces - are positively associated with the perceived value of the airport experience, reinforcing the airport's role as a tourism gateway. The research shows that commercial spending behavior at Bucharest Henri Coandă International Airport is driven mainly by situational and perceptual factors, rather than by traditional traveler-profile indicators such as airline type or demographic characteristics.

The paper further contributes by positioning these findings within the airport-as-tourism-gateway perspective and by deriving practical implications for non-aeronautical revenue management. It does not propose a new theory of airport retail behavior. Instead, the empirical analysis of OTP shows that perceptual and situational factors within the terminal environment are more relevant for explaining post-security purchasing behavior than commonly assumed profile indicators such as airline type.

The key findings are as follows. Nearly two-thirds of passengers (63.5%) report purchasing products or services at the airport, indicating substantial commercial potential. The perception of expanded and attractive commercial spaces is positively correlated with passengers' overall evaluation of the airport experience. Time pressure, rather than leisure time, may trigger impulse purchases - a counterintuitive finding with implications for terminal flow management. Occasional travelers show a significantly higher propensity to purchase than frequent flyers, suggesting that the tourism segment is the primary commercial target. Airline type has no significant influence on spending behavior, challenging carrier-based segmentation approaches. Age affects certain perceptual dimensions but accounts for only a small proportion of the variance in satisfaction and spending.

The patterns observed after the OTP study indicate that the commercial performance of an airport cannot be fully understood or determined solely by examining passenger profile variables. Spending behavior appears to be shaped by the interaction between the passenger and the terminal environment.

From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that airport managers and tourism planners should prioritize investments in commercial space attractiveness, diversified retail offerings, and experience-oriented terminal design. Strategies should focus on occasional and tourism-oriented travelers, who show the highest receptivity to commercial stimuli. Managing passenger flow and perceived dwell time in the terminal through efficient processing and transparent information emerges as a lever with direct revenue implications.

The study has several limitations. Data were collected at a single airport during one period, which limits generalizability. The sample, while adequate for the statistical methods used, is relatively small and skewed toward leisure travelers and low-cost airline users. Future research should replicate this investigation across multiple airports, incorporate seasonal variations, and use advanced analytical techniques, such as machine learning, to improve predictive accuracy. Longitudinal designs would allow assessment of changing passenger expectations in the context of rapid digital transformation and evolving tourism patterns.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide a solid empirical foundation for understanding the behavioral dynamics underlying non-aeronautical revenue generation at tourism-oriented airports and offer actionable insights for enhancing the airport's role within the broader tourism value chain.

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Abbreviations: The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript: Airports Council International (ACI), Bucharest Henri Coandă International Airport (OTP), airport service quality (ASQ), and non-aeronautical revenues (NaR).

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