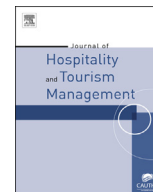




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An analysis of the airport experience from an air traveler perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the nature of airport experience (AE) from the perspective of air travelers. This study elaborates experiential components within the airport context and highlights the associations among the components of this experience through text analysis. This study also aims to clarify how air travelers perceive airports in relation to destinations. The analysis of passenger reviews on Skytrax indicates that AE differs from the concepts of customer and tourist experiences, because hedonic and aesthetic consumptions are not primarily associated with the memorable feelings of consumers and tourists, but with aspects of functional experience and service personnel. This study reviews three aspects that air travelers associate airports with a destination. First, an airport is a representative of a destination. Second, an airport exhibits the positive characteristics of a destination. Finally, an airport is perceived as an internal component of tourism experience. This study provides theoretical and managerial implications for airport and tourism industries.

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1. Introduction

Airports are an essential part of air transport system and an important mode of transfer for air travel; airports enable air travelers to switch from the ground to the air and vice versa (Ashford, Stanton, & Moore, 2006). The airline deregulation in the 1970s and the commercialization of the airport industry increased the importance of air travelers to the development of airports because they generate large non-aeronautical revenues and have increased the demand for air services (Brilha, 2008; Graham, 2008, 2014). This finding demonstrates the significant role of airports for travelers and how airport experience (AE) crucially affects a trip. An airport is regarded as the first and last place visited before travelers leave a destination to travel to by air.

Several existing studies laid the foundation for the concept of AE. For instance, service and operational management theory was used to examine airport efficiency, airport service quality, and

passenger satisfaction (Correia & Wirasinghe, 2007; Fodness & Murray, 2007). In sociology, the concept of sense of place was applied to the context of airports to create meanings and enhance one's cultural attachment to a place (Losekoot & Wright, 2011). Airport anxiety is considered a psychological concept primarily related to stress levels and frustration of air travelers (McIntosh, Swanson, Power, Raeside, & Dempster, 1998). The retail shopping experiences of passengers and the effects of airport environment on the psychological aspects of passenger shopping behavior were also explored (Rowley & Slack, 1999).

Nevertheless, existing literature on AE, particularly in the context of tourism, remains limited. From the facts that airports act as the first and last contact points of air travelers who arrive and depart a destination, and the study by Kirk, Harrison, Popovic, and Kraal (2014) revealed that negative AE can potentially influence travel plans for future visits to a destination, these notions imply the association between destinations and airports from the viewpoint of air travelers. Nevertheless, tourism studies did not adequately discuss the experience of air travelers in airports although the potential of travelers' AE contribute to destination experience.

Moreover, existing research on AE *per se* is still in early stages. Harrison, Popovic, Kraal, and Kleinschmidt (2012) and Popovic,

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Kraal, and Kirk (2009) highlighted that airport authorities and aviation-related organizations, such as International Air Transport Association (IATA), usually approach AE from the viewpoint of management rather than from the perspective of customers. Their claim supports the findings of Yen and Teng (2003) who determined that the time and space of airports and travelers differ, but they are treated as a single entity by airport management or authorities.

These findings address two unexplored yet crucial issues which become the research questions of this study:

- 1) How is AE understood from the perspective of passengers?
- 2) How do air travelers view AE in relation to a tourist destination?

These questions are addressed by adapting the literature on service and tourist experiences to investigate AE. The key experiential components are identified and applied in the context of airports. This study focuses on the association between the dimensions of experience and the experiential outcomes derived from the comments of air travelers. The opinions of air travelers about AE in relation to destinations are also investigated.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections, namely, the literature review, which describes the conceptual framework of the study, the methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusions, including implications.

2. Literature

2.1. Experience as a concept

An experience involves an individual's personal interpretations and responses to stimuli as he/she participates in or perceives the flow of a series of touch points (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007; Johnston & Kong, 2011; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Schmitt, 1999, 2003). Experience is a subject of human perception (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Dube & Helkkula, 2015), and can be interpreted by the reflection of individuals who experience specific settings (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). According to Volo (2009), experience consists of all events that occur between sensation and perception, which can be modified and conditioned by subsequent occurrences. Apart from being subjective and holistic in nature (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Otto & Ritchie, 1996), an experience is inherently personal for each individual (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thus, two

people may have different experiences of the same phenomenon (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The last point is demonstrated in the seminal work by Arnould and Price (1993) on the river rafting experience, in which an experience combines a multitude of feelings and emotions that differ, depending on a person's likes, dislikes, and even their fears.

Contemporary management literature emphasizes the importance of experience consumption since Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) invoked the idea of hedonic elements and noted the importance of fantasies, feelings, and fun, which are the aspects customers seek during consumption. Further ramification of experience is also observed in service experience and marketing literature (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Dube & Helkkula, 2015; Helkkula, Kelleher, and Pihlström, 2012). According to Helkkula (2011), experience in the service context based on different ontological and epistemological backgrounds is categorized in service literature into three, namely, process, phenomenon, and outcome. Experience as a process entails the understanding of service as different phases of process elements that include interactions with employees, technology, and facilities (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). Experience as a phenomenon implies that experience is "internal, subjective, event-specific, and context-specific" (Helkkula, 2011, p. 375). This finding incorporates imagined experience to reflect on service phenomenon and identifies the importance of value that a person perceives (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). The phenomenology of service experience perceives service consumption as highly related to hedonic experiences (Caru & Cova, 2007; Dube & Helkkula, 2015; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), emotions, and senses; these aspects are immersed and highly emphasized in service experience (Caru & Cova, 2007). Experience as an outcome is composed of functional and emotional outcomes (Berry, Carbone, & Haackel, 2002), which reflect total service experience. According to Helkkula (2011), outcome-based service experience literature generally measures experience as different variables, such as pleasure, satisfaction, value, and relationships; quantitative approach is normally adopted to serve the nature of this category.

On the other hand, the study of tourist experience, which connects the concept of experience to travelers and tourists, has been extensively discussed and has been part of tourism literature for more than 50 years (Boorstin, 1964; MacCannell, 1973; Quan & Wang, 2004; Uriely, 2005; Jennings et al., 2009). Similar to experience literature, tourism scholars attempted to classify the different dimensions of experience (Table 1). Cutler and Carmichael

Table 1
Categorization and field or discipline of the literature related to experience.

Field/Discipline	Characterization	Relating Author(s)/Studies
Service literature	<p>Process: Service provision, which includes interactions with the employees, the technology and facilities, and the servicescape.</p> <p>Phenomenon: The consumption experience, including hedonic responses, aesthetic criteria, and subjectivity.</p> <p>Outcomes: Functional and emotional outcomes or the total service experience.</p>	<p>Helkkula (2011); Dube and Helkkula (2015); Edvardsson et al., 2011); Helkkula (2011); Dube and Helkkula (2015); Holbrook and Hirschman (1982); Caru and Cova (2007); Helkkula (2011); Dube and Helkkula (2015); Berry et al. (2002); Clawson and Knetch (1971); Botterill and Crompton (1996);</p>
Tourism literature	<p>Phases of experience: Tourist phases identify the time during which all tourist events can occur from anticipation to recollection</p> <p>Modes of experience: Modes of experience refer to the different points along the spectrum of experience between the experience of tourists as travelers in pursuit of mere pleasure or in a quest for meaning.</p> <p>Outcomes of experience: Five outcomes of the tourist experience are classified as knowledge, memory, perception, emotion, and self-identity;</p> <p>Influential realms of experience and phenomenological aspect: The four realms of experience can be applied to the motivation or influential factors, namely, escapist, educational, aesthetic, and entertainment.</p> <p>Dimensions of experiential modules: The five dimensions include sensory, emotional, thinking, operational, and related experiences.</p>	<p>Cohen (1979); Otto and Ritchie (1996);</p> <p>Cutler and Carmichael (2010); Hudson and Ritchie (2009); Tung and Ritchie (2011); Pine and Gilmore (1999); Hayllar and Griffin (2005);</p> <p>Schmitt (1999);</p>

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