Airports as liminal space

Wei-Jue Huang[a],[*], Honggen Xiao[a], Sha Wang[b]

[a] *School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 17 Science Museum Road, TST East, Kowloon, Hong Kong*
[b] *Department of Tourism, Fudan University, 19F, West Main Building, Guanghua Twin Tower, No. 220 Handan Road, Shanghai 200433, China*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

More than a mere transport facility, airports serve as a multifunctional space for social interactions and individual/personal experiences that break geographical boundaries and secular distinctions. This study explores the liminal nature of airports as a micro-destination and presents a phenomenology of passenger experience in accordance to their familiarity with the space. The nature of airports as a liminal space ranges from touristic experience of first-timers to consumer rituals of frequent visitors. Liminality is derived from passenger watching and assistance offering to strangers, whereby a sense of communitas is felt in a secure and often facilitating environment. For frequent flyers, airports are utilized as mobile office space or "free time", indicative of contemporary travelers' need for slow life and quality alone-time.

Introduction

As a place of transit, international airports have the most global yet placeless environment (Rowley & Slack, 1999; Kellerman, 2008). Their standardized facilities and similar shops and restaurants can easily let passengers forget where they are. Within the last decade, however, more airports have realized the importance of incorporating local culture and a "sense of place" into terminal design (Farchaus, 2012). Many airports bring local flavors to passengers by offering airport branches of high-profile restaurants and creating displays of local attractions and heritage (Stokes, 2014; Williams, 2016). As airports are the key places of arrival and departure, they need to showcase what the destination has to offer (Wattanacharoensil, Schuckert, & Graham, 2016). Moreover, the role and function of airports are also evolving. Besides representing a destination, some airports try to become destinations in their own right (Freathy & O'Connell, 1999; Lohmann, Albers, Koch, & Pavlovich, 2009). There is a growing trend for airports to develop one-of-a-kind leisure facilities, such as movie theaters, casinos, aquariums, butterfly gardens, skating rinks, beach volleyball courts, and four-story slides—all of which serve to create unique airport experiences. The question is: can airports truly become destinations in themselves? Will passengers be inspired to visit or transfer through a particular airport?

Despite increasing efforts of airport management to entertain passengers, there is another socio-psychological dimension of airport experiences which is not necessarily based on airport facilities. Passengers may experience a wide range of emotions at airports, such as the thrill of travel (Farchaus, 2012; Inkinen, 2014), anxiety and fear of flying (Melrose, 2004; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2016), and the joy and sorrow of hellos and goodbyes (De Botton, 2009). These intense emotions are grounded in the process of travel and personal relationships of the traveler, rather than the shops, restaurants, and attractions in airports. Furthermore, as flights have become increasingly convenient and affordable, flying is no longer "magic" but "almost as natural as a morning coffee" (Inkinen, 2014, p. 28). Specifically, there is a group of frequent business travelers that Walter Kirn described as "road warriors" in the novel *Up in the Air* (2001). These road warriors travel so much that they live in "Airworld", where they feel comfortable, at ease, and a sense of belonging to this "nation within a nation" (Kasarda & Lindsay, 2011). As such, airports have transcended their transport and

---

tourism functions, and become unique social spaces, where people can work, relax, and feel at home. Airports are also an "in-between" space between one's point of origin and destination. The liminal nature of airports allows for unique interactions and experiences that break the boundaries between home and away, and between work and leisure.

Previous studies on airport environments have examined airport design and passenger preferences, with greater emphasis on functionality (Ashford, Mumayiz, & Wright, 2011; Dempsey, 2000), commercial facilities (Edwards, 2005; Graham, 2008; Kasarda, 2008), and shopping (Geuens, Vantomme, & Brengman, 2004; Lin & Chen, 2013; Lu, 2014; Topping, 2010; Torres, Domínguez, Valdés, & Aza, 2005). Wattanacharoensil et al. (2016) argued for the importance of understanding airport experiences from three perspectives: sociological, psychological, and service marketing. As the role and functions of airports evolve, however, it is possible to think beyond airports and beyond tourism. Can airports become a "micro-destination" that people *want* to visit, or spend more time there? Can airports be more than a place for tourism, but also a work space, home space, or social space?

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it aims to examine if and how passengers experience international airports as a micro-destination—as a place for touristic behaviors and consumptions. Second, this study also explores how passengers utilize airports as a unique social space, by describing the behavioral patterns of travelers inside airports under different traveling occasions, and analyzing how they interact with airport environments and fellow passengers. Turner's (1967; 1969) theories of liminality and communitas are used to examine the nature of international airports as liminal spaces and interpret passenger's airport experiences.

Rather than conducting case studies on specific airports and the facilities they provide, this study focuses on passengers and examines their experience in the general airport environment. While airports vary in design and décor, there are commonalities in passengers' interactions with international airports, as a unique type of environment and public space. Moreover, the same airport can be perceived differently: as a *familiar or home airport* for frequent patrons and a *destination airport* for other passengers. This study investigates the depth of passengers' interactions with airports at the passenger level, in the context of their own travel experience across different airports. The scope of this study is limited to international airports and terminals. While air traffic within a country is also transitional in the sense that passengers are moving from point A to point B, domestic airports have fewer ritualized steps (e.g., customs and immigration) and passengers do not experience the legal state of being *in-between* nations. Thus, this study focuses on international airports to highlight the liminal nature of airports and passenger experiences.

Airport management and passenger experience

The first and foremost function of airports is to transport passengers. As such, earlier studies on airport management evolved around terminal operations and passenger flow. Tošić (1992) reviewed 30 years of research on passenger terminal operations and models, and identified key research topics, including demand forecasting, service facilities (i.e., ticketing, check-in, immigration, customs, and security check), waiting areas, baggage processing, gate assignment, and passenger orientation. Another line of research examined passengers' airport choice, which found accessibility and flight frequencies to be the two most important factors in determining airport choices (Loo, 2008; Pels, Nijkamp, & Rietveld, 2001). Differences were also found between business and leisure travelers. For example, leisure travelers tend to be more fare sensitive, while business travelers are more willing to continue to use the same airport (Hess & Polak, 2005; Marcucci & Gatta, 2010).

Although the primary function of airports is transportation, due to the waiting time involved, airports are also "in the business of killing time" (Kasarda & Lindsay, 2011, p. 96). According to Torres et al. (2005), the more time passengers spend in the airport, the higher their expenditure. Moreover, as ownerships gradually shift from government-owned to private, airports are transforming into commercial enterprises (Graham, 2008). Commercial facilities within airports received increasing recognition as an important source of income (USGAO, 2013). Edwards (2005) identified the dilemma of airport terminals to position themselves as a commercial facility to generate income or a public facility for airport users. Freathy et al. (1999) developed a typology of airport retailing management, including concessionaire based, authority managed, management contract, and joint venture retailing. Dempsey (2000) discussed the role of airports as suburban shopping centers, due to the increase of air travelers, customer convenience, and impulse purchasing. Kasarda (2008) analyzed the sales data in selected hub airports in the United States and argued that new commercial development would lead to the emergence of "aerotropolis"—a combination of airport, planned city, and business hub. Castillo-Manzano (2010) also suggested that the airports have become sophisticated malls, offering a great variety of products and services to different types of consumers, including passengers, their friends and families, airport staff, and local residents in surrounding areas.

As commercial activities became an integral part of airport operations, researchers explored beyond shopping activities and considered the overall airport environment and servicescape. Hess (2010) examined passengers' preference of different types of airports and found that passengers prefer larger to smaller airports as well as airports closer to their home. Bogicevic, Yang, Cobanoglu, Bilgihan, and Bujisic (2016) suggested six airport servicescape factors (i.e., design, scent, functional organization, air/lighting conditions, seating, and cleanliness) and found them to be related to traveler satisfaction, enjoyment, and anxiety. Caves and Pickard (2001) investigated the gaps between airport design "handbooks" and actual user needs, with an emphasis on space, way-finding, and time to move through terminals. Using Hong Kong International Airport as an example, Tam and Lam (2004) examined the visibility index of various facilities and provided ways to improve service level and passenger wayfinding. Likewise, Brida, Moreno-Izquierdo, and Zapata-Aguirre (2016) identified "airport information" (e.g., orientation and signage) as a significant predictor of airport service quality. However, "image perception" and "terminal servicescape" were found to be more important than "airport information" in predicting perceived service quality. Their findings suggested that passengers' perceptions of airport environments also shifted from a purely functional perspective to greater attention on image and servicescape.

To enhance airport image and service quality, many airports realized the importance of connecting with the host city and local culture. As Martín-Cejas (2006) argued, being the first and last points of tourists' contact with the destination, airports should reflect