Airports as Liminal Space

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.

Keywords: airport, passenger experience, liminality, communitas, consumption rituals

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 and O'Connell (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, wayfinding, 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 the service quality of the city. Similarly, Wattanacharoensil et al. (2017) found that passengers perceived airports as an ambassador or representative of a place. Fodness and Murray (2007) divided passengers' expectations of airport service quality into three dimensions: services, service personnel, and servicescape. Specifically, the "services" dimension included "An airport should have current décor" and "An airport's décor should match the local culture of the city in which it is located". Brida and colleagues (2016) also incorporated the item "identification with local culture" as a measurement of airport "image perception". Another study by van Oel and van den Berkhof (2013) on Amsterdam Airport Schiphol revealed that passengers preferred no decoration

reflecting Holland over decorations showing the distinctiveness of Holland. Ariffin and Yahaya (2013), however, found that the interaction between airport image and the use of national identity in airport design had a positive effect on passenger delight.

A review of the literature sheds light on how the role and functions of airports have evolved over the years, from a mere transit facility, addition of commercial activities, attention to service quality and servicescape, to the incorporation of a local "sense of place" in terminal design. While there is increasing emphasis on linking airports to the host city, an airport is regarded as representative of the destination, but not a destination in itself. According to Wattanacharoensil et al. (2016), the airport industry tends to view passengers as customers. They argued that passengers are also tourists, and the sociological and psychological dimension of their experience should be taken into consideration. Due to the unique boundary-crossing nature of airports, it is necessary to investigate passengers' perceptions and utilization of airport environments. This study will go beyond commercial activities and local culture to examine passengers' interactions with the airport environment, as a tourism space and social space. Turner's (1969) theories of liminality and communitas provide a theoretical foundation to explain the unique structure of the airport environment. The next section will discuss the concept of liminality within tourism and specifically airports.

Liminality and Tourism

Originating from the Latin word *limen*, "liminal" refers to the state of being in a threshold or in an intermediate condition (Thompson, 1995). In anthropology, liminality is conceptualized as a part of the ritual process. Van Gennep (1960) first proposed that life is made up of a series of changes. These transitions are rites of passage consisting of three phases: "preliminal" rites of separation, "liminal" rites of transition, and "postliminal" rites of incorporation (p.11). Building upon the work of van Gennep, Turner (1967) turned his attention to the liminal period and discussed the nature of liminality during initiation rites. First, subjects are in the state of *ambiguity*, being "neither this nor that, and yet is both" (p.99). They no longer belong to the previous social group, but are not yet classified as their new role. Second, there is complete *equality* among those who participate in the rite of passage together. Previous distinctions between people (e.g., social class) are eliminated, and the group develops a sense of equal and collective comradeship, which Turner later identified as "communitas" (Turner, 1969). In the state of communitas, people "place a high value on personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions" and can "relate directly to another person . . . in the here-and-now" (Turner, 1982, p.48). Finally, liminality connotes a sense of *freedom*. Liminal personae can temporarily break free from social norms and disregard social hierarchy. They have the liberty to mix with different people and exist without structure. In general, Turner's works on liminality offer a basis for understanding rituals and the process of socialization.

Built on Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967, 1969, 1973), notions such as rituals/rites, liminality, and communitas have been extensively explored in tourism studies. In fact, the relationship of tourism to ritual, play, and pilgrimage has been a longstanding focus in the anthropology of tourism (Graburn, 1977, 1983; Smith, 1977; Smith & Brent, 2001). Viewed as a "necessary structured break from ordinary life which characterizes all human societies" (Graburn, 1983, p.11), tourism is referred to as a "sacred journey" (Graburn, 1977, p.17) and tourists as pilgrims to the "center out there" (Turner, 1973, p.191). The physical separation from everyday instrumental life has brought tourists into a liminal state of being "in which mental, expressive, and cultural needs come to the fore" (Graburn, 1983, p.11). Subsequently, in light of

the alternation of, and transition between, the dualistic states of the sacred (non-ordinary/ touristic/liminal) and the profane (ordinary/workaday/at-home), Graburn (2001) further develops "secular ritual" into a general theory that applies to all forms of tourism, in which "the special occasions of leisure and travel stand in opposition to everyday life at home and work" (p.42). Through a ritual of reversal, tourists experience the period or state of liminality in the non-ordinary places they have visited, the communitas where "they believe they will experience something positive that they cannot easily experience at home" (p.43).

Such conceptualizations of liminality and communitas have been explored or alluded to in a number of studies on tourist experience. Kim and Jamal (2007) explored the experience of visitors participating in the Texas Renaissance Festival. The authors reported that the ambiances and milieu of the cultural festival allow its participants "to feel less restrained, to temporarily suspend conventional norms and to play out carnivalesque illusions and fantasies" (p.182). Such an attainment of existential authenticity is akin to the liminal state of visitors dancing with the locals, as described by Daniel (1996) in the case of "Rumba in Cuba". In Sharpe's (2005) ethnographic study of wilderness adventure trips, she observed how communitas was formed among participants of varied backgrounds. After a three-day canoe trip, participants were amazed by the profound sense of togetherness they felt, and described their group as a "kaleidoscope", "mosaic", and "quilt"—"We were woven together in this experience, even if briefly" (p.255). These interpersonal relationships among the committed tourists can be described in terms of communitas or touristic communitas (Wang, 2000).

Additionally, in the study of a public nude beach in Chersonissos (Crete), Andriotis (2010) reported some prominent and uncommon uses and actions in the beach as a liminal space, where visitors have the potential to "enjoy experiences and feelings that are often repressed in conventional public spaces" (p.1092). In another study of antinomians traveling to the Greek island of Gavdos, Andriotis (2013) observed that many of these visits are due to the absence of drug policies and community tolerance towards nudism in the beaches, which function as a liminal space, variously described as "marginal paradises where no laws exist" or "utopias for travelers who perceive them as an ideal society" (p.56). According to Turner (1969, 1973), once individuals are out of the structural context of their society, they go through a ritual process of a spatial and social separation, liminality, and reintegration. In analogy, by traveling to destinations peripheral to their usual place of residence, tourists have removed themselves both physically and mentally from their normal structured home environment and social networks, resulting in a state of antistructure where liminality can be experienced (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006). According to American writer Hakim Bey, "The real place of the tourist is not the site of the exotic, but rather the no-place place . . . of median space, liminal space, in-between space— the space of travel itself, the industrial abstraction of the airport, or the machine-dimension of plane or bus" (Bey, 1999). While all travel involves a temporary relocation from one's usual environment, some tourism experiences are considered more liminal than others (Brooker & Joppe, 2014). For example, the beach is a liminal space because it is neither land nor sea (Preston-Whyte, 2004; Shields, 1991) and could function as "heterotopic erotic oasis" or marginal paradise for deviant tourist behavior (Andriotis, 2010, p.1076). Anecdotally, liminality in tourism has also been explored in unique social and leisure settings such as striptease clubs (Ryan & Martin, 2001), cruise ship vacations (Yarnal & Kerstetter, 2005), as well as in liminal forms of activities or experiences such as adventure tourism (Buckley, 2012).

Conducive to this inquiry, international airports are also liminal spaces. Once passengers pass security and immigration, they enter the state of liminality, being legally outside the country

while still physically in the airport (Di Giovine, 2009). Pascoe (2001) argued that the idea of "border" loses its physicality in airports. Airports "functions as a national frontier . . . in the middle of a country", thus creating a different spatial dimension that goes beyond the constraints of time and space (p.34). Airports are liminal in the sense that passengers are in between countries and time zones, and become structurally invisible in the land of "nowhere" (Kasarda & Lindsay, 2011, p.97). In Rowley and Slack's (1999) analysis of airport departure lounges, they found a high degree of "sameness" across different airports, such as similar facilities, low load environments, a consistent range of retail outlets, and the dominant presence of international brands. As airport lounges lack uniqueness, passengers may easily forget where they are and experience a sense of timelessness and placelessness (Kellerman, 2008). In this time-free and place-free zone, they are exempt from certain obligations and enjoy "duty-free" when making purchases. Dodge and Kitchin (2004) further argued that air travel, combined with modern communication technologies, transforms existing space-time relations. In this unique configuration, time and space become fluid, creating simultaneous presence and timelessness.

Over the past century, airports have evolved from a transport facility into a multifunctional commercial and public space (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2016). The concept of liminality sheds light on some of the unique characteristics of airport environments, particularly of international airports. While airports have been identified as a type of liminal space, previous studies focused more on the ritualized process and space-time distortions in airports. Other dimensions of the liminal experience, such as equality, freedom, and communitas, have not been explored. This study examines how passengers experience airports as a micro-destination and social space. The researchers have adopted liminality and communitas (Turner, 1969) as a theoretical framework to obtain an in-depth understanding of air passengers' perceptions, behavior, and interactions in this liminal space.

Methodology
This study explores how passengers interact with airport environments through the use of transcendental phenomenology. Phenomenology is the science of phenomena and the study of lived experiences (Laverty, 2003). It is the appropriate method to describe the essence of a phenomenon as lived and experienced by individuals (Creswell, 2007)—in this case, how passengers experience the evolving role of airports, from a transit facility to a tourism and social space. Specifically, transcendental phenomenology is adopted, which aims to reduce and synthesize individual experiences to understand the universal "essence," so as to develop a thick description consisting of what and how participants experience the life world (Moustakas, 1994). In tourism research, phenomenology has been commonly used to describe the lived experiences of tourists and hosts, as well as other stakeholders in the tourism system (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010; Shim & Santos, 2014).

To achieve the research objectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted, with questions designed to capture participants' tourism and social experience in international airports. An interview guide was developed based on relevant literature to elicit different dimensions of passengers' airport experience, including commercial activities (Geuens et al., 2004; Lin & Chen, 2013), placelessness and sense of place (Farchaus, 2012; Rowley & Slack, 1999), and liminality and communitas (Turner, 1969). The interviews consisted of four sections: perception of airport environments, behavioral patterns in airports, unique experiences and activities, and interaction with other passengers (Appendix 1). To ensure that the questions were valid and comprehensible, the interview guide was reviewed by two academic experts and pilot-

tested among a convenience sample of university students with international travel experience. Questions were revised based on expert opinions and feedbacks received from the pilot-test participants.

In addition to the interview guide, a short, one-page questionnaire was developed to gather information on participants' demographics as well as airport experiences. Questions include: average number of trips by plane per year, number of business trips and leisure trips (per year), number of trips traveling alone and traveling with others (per year), number of airports ever visited (lifetime), whether they have access to airport lounges, and whether they shop and dine in airports. Participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire prior to the interview, and the questionnaire served as a quick reference and facilitated the dialogue between the researchers and research participants.

Data Collection

In phenomenological research, data must be collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon which is the focus of the study, and who are diverse enough "to enhance the possibility of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (Creswell, 2007; Laverty, 2003, p.30). Hence, purposive sampling was used to select participants who have utilized international airports as a passenger before. Moreover, to be able to capture diverse airport experiences, such as business trips, leisure trips, traveling alone, and traveling with other people, participant selection included both frequent travelers as well as less-experienced travelers. Efforts were made to recruit some frequent business travelers, as they were more likely to have experience with both leisure trips and business trips, traveling alone versus traveling with others, and access to airline private lounges as well as common departure lounges.

Participants were recruited in three ways: in airport departure lounges, through Facebook pages, and through the personal networks of the researchers. First, participants were intercepted in the departure lounges of three international airports in Asia, and one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted on site. Second, people who have "liked" Hong Kong International Airport's Facebook page and were living in Hong Kong at the time of data collection were contacted through Facebook messages and invited to take part in the study. Interviews were arranged in local cafes at the convenience of the participants. Third, frequent business travelers were likely to have access to airline VIP lounges, which made it difficult to interview them in the common departure lounges. Therefore, researchers utilized their personal networks to identify frequent travelers and then used snowball sampling to get in touch with additional "frequent travelers" who might be able to take part in the study.

A total of 28 interviews were conducted from March to June 2015. All interviews were conducted in English. Interview length ranged from 15 minutes to almost two hours, with an average of 46 minutes. Data collection ended after reaching the point of saturation. Table 1 presents the profile of research participants as well as their airport and travel experiences. While many airport studies divided passengers into leisure travelers and business travelers (Brida et al., 2016; Hess & Polak, 2005; Marcucci & Gatta, 2010), this study explored airport experiences in the context of different types of trips, rather than different types of travelers.

[Table 1]

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the interviewees, and recordings were transcribed verbatim after each interview. To process the data, the transcripts were analyzed

through systematic classification and synthesis. Phenomenological data analysis consisted of three steps (Creswell, 2007). First, researchers read through the interview transcriptions multiple times to get a sense of the whole phenomenon being studied, and highlight significant meaning units within the data. Meaning units include participants' feelings towards the airport environment (e.g., excited, nervous, familiar, relaxing space, safe environment, leave ASAP), activities in airports (e.g., explore, walk around, similar products, unique airport products, work, check email, stay in the lounge, business trip vs. leisure trip), and behavioral patterns in airports (e.g., special habits, routines, interactions with other passengers, initiate the conversation, people-watching). Second, meaning units and significant statements were clustered into themes or "clusters of meaning" based on research objectives and their interrelationships. Third, significant meaning units and themes were synthesized and written into a consistent statement of participants' experiences, known as "the structure of the experience" (Laverty, 2003, p.20). Overall, the purpose of the analysis is to identify and describe the essence of participants' common experiences.

A Phenomenology of Airport Experiences
Data analysis revealed several patterns of meaning in how passengers utilize airport environments. Based on research objectives, finding were originally discussed under two overarching themes: airports as a *tourism space* and airports as a *social space*. However, a third theme emerged from the data, as some passengers also see airports as a *personal space*, where they can think, work, relax, and be "free". Therefore, passenger experiences are portrayed in these three themes, with interrelated sub-themes, to provide a holistic understanding of the evolving role of airports, as well as to untangle the complexity of airport experiences based on one's international travel experience and circumstances.

Experiencing Airports as a Tourism Space
First, despite the efforts of airports to become a destination in itself, most participants would not purposely spend more time there. As Participant 24 described: "*I guess the airport is not a place I remember very well. It's just a place for you to go through*". In general, participants preferred to arrive at the airport later and board the plane sooner. At best, some participants did not mind if they encountered flight delays at certain airports. Participant 25 emphasized that he was "not angry at all" with flight delays: "*last time when we flew from L.A. to New York, the flight was delayed for 8 hours, and I was not angry at all. I just spend those 8 hours with my wife, doing our own thing, and I was not angry at all*". Participant 15 also explained: "*If I got delayed in Shanghai or in Hong Kong, 3 hours is okay. I can just walk around. But I would not purposely spend more time at airports normally, just to walk around, no*". At airports with more facilities and things to do, participants might be less upset about flight delays. Nonetheless, airports may have a long way to go for passengers to willingly spend more time there.

First-time micro-destination
While airports may vary in what they provide to keep passengers entertained, whether participants felt or behaved like a tourist in an airport was largely dependent on their level of familiarity with that airport. Many participants commented on the difference between familiar and unfamiliar airports. When traveling through familiar airports, participants were more likely to engage in individual activities, such as reading and playing games on mobile devices: "*If it's a familiar airport, maybe I'd read a book, WeChat, or some Facebook news. If it's not a familiar*

airport, probably I'd walk around to see the stores, the restaurants, even though I'm not buying anything" (P7). According to Participant 1:

> *If I were there for the first time, I'll walk around the shops and see what they offer, and we just look around. But if I had been there before, then I won't. . . . I would generally spend more time if I am in a foreign place, maybe try something new, like snacks. I would go see what local snacks there are and buy some of them. Maybe I will spend a little bit more.*

Participant 12 also stated that "*for unfamiliar airports, definitely I will walk around. I like bookstores and if there is a little gift shop, you can get a couple of nice items and a gift for yourself*". Moreover, some participants have heard about specific airports before, and were curious to take a look: "*When I went to Dubai airport for the first time, because I heard so much about Dubai, I am so curious what this airport is and why people talk about it, so I just walk through the airport and to experience the atmosphere*" (P27). For passengers, traveling through an airport for the first time has its appeal, and they are more likely to look around, experience the atmosphere, and purchase snacks and small gifts. These experiences are similar to tourists visiting a destination.

Airport-only products
Besides snacks and souvenirs, the items that participants purchased in airports included alcohol, perfume, cosmetics, and luxury goods (Table 2). The duty-free shopping available in international airports allows passengers to buy higher-priced items at airport-only, tax-free prices. In addition to duty-free shopping, some participants also developed their personal shopping "rituals" in their home airport and other familiar airports. Participant 7 was originally from Beijing, and she had the habit of buying snacks from Beijing Airport to share with her friends: "*I always go to one souvenir shop to buy something, and take it with me. That's what I do. I think that's one special habit I usually do in my home country. I will buy some snacks and give to my friends*". Participant 27 found Kiehl's products to be the cheapest in Bangkok Airport, and "*always go there and buy the Kiehl's SFP50 sunblock lotion*". Participant 28 was also very specific about the one product that she would purchase:

> *Most likely is the makeup remover, because I use Shu Uemura, and in the Hong Kong duty-free, they have the traveler size. 100ml is not available in retail stores. They usually give it as a free gift when you buy something else. But I can buy it from the airport duty-free. If you ask me what I get at the airport, that's the only thing.*

In some cases, participants' airport consumption rituals were not necessarily airport exclusive. They were relatively commonplace items, yet had become a personal "treat" that participants associate with airports. Participant 16 explained that she didn't normally drink iced coffee, but: "*on vacation, while in here [at the airport], relaxing, I can do something like that. I don't usually drink iced coffee at home. It's kind of a special thing. I feel like I can do it here because it's a special time and special treat for myself*". Participant 15 had a special magazine that he always bought when traveling via airports in China:

> *In China, there's a magazine I like to read when I'm traveling. It's called Blog Weekly. I don't know why, I don't see it outside, so normally I would buy it in airports. I like the length of the reports, the articles, I think it's good for people. But other than that—it's airport only. Maybe it's available elsewhere too, but it's just not available to me. So to me, it's like a reflex. Every time I arrive at the airport, it's time for me to buy that magazine.*

Findings revealed a dichotomous pattern in how passengers engage with familiar and unfamiliar airports. Although participants did not perceive airports as a destination in itself, some of their airport activities included touristic activities such as shopping and sightseeing. Moreover, passengers' activity patterns for familiar and unfamiliar airports resemble the findings of previous studies on first-time and repeat visitors to a destination (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Li, Cheng, Kim, & Petrick, 2008).

[Table 2]

Experiencing Airports as a Social Space

Airports have landside and airside. While the landside is open to the public, the airside can only be accessed by passengers and staff. Specifically, in international airports, passengers must go through strict security and immigration procedures to enter the restricted zone, which is relatively safe, sterile, and "in-between" countries. This process has become ritualized, with the same formalities and steps required in every airport. Many participants expressed their anxiety with the preliminary rites of separation, particularly the security check process. After entering the liminal zone, most participants felt relaxed and free as they waited to board. Upon arrival, passengers also undergo the postliminal rites of incorporation. While some participants complained about the long wait for baggage claim, there was generally less anxiety associated with the arrival process. The following sections will discuss passengers' experience as they enter the liminal space and the unique social interactions within.

Entering liminal space

When asked about their experience "before" and "after" entering the restricted areas, most participants described the "before" as: *panic*, *anxious*, *pressure*, *stressed*, *annoyed*, *troublesome*, *nervous*, and *confused*. The "after", however, was: *relax*, *calm*, *relieved*, *freely*, *have time*, and *feel a lot better*. As Participant 4 described: "*sometimes I feel like it's a bit too troublesome to pass through those security checks, inspection stuff. After the inspection, I can really enjoy my time in the airport*".

The feeling of being "inside" is generally positive. Many participants perceived the restricted areas of airports as a safe place: "*Here of course is safe, I am sure nothing bad will happen*" (P20). According to Participant 8: "*Airports give me a relatively safe image*". He explained that airports have good hygiene, air-conditioning, heating, and charging stations for cell phones, all of which made him feel: "*it's a warm and safe environment to wait*". While the security measures in airports can keep people safe, they also exercise a form of restriction. A few participants mentioned feeling trapped: "*you have to feel trapped because you can't get out anyway. So you are stuck there and you have to wait*" (P14). Participant 19 also expressed that "*if you're in transit you can't go to the city, you need to stay in the airport*", but he understood that "*it is necessary, I think it's ok, no problem*". Security and restriction are two sides of the same coin. Some passengers may feel annoyed by the security checks and trapped inside airports, but they understand that: "*I think it is for our safety, they have to*" (P12).

Within the airside, some additional zones are off-limits to some or all passengers, such as staff-only areas and airline lounges. Airline lounges may offer another level of liminality to "privileged" travelers. Participant 27 explained that he usually stayed in the lounge "*because that is another environment different from outside environment. It is more exclusive. You feel safer and more relaxed*". For Participant 28: "*Inside the lounge, it's more comfortable. You can sit and*

get a drink. But near the gate you can see people queuing and trying to be the first to board the flight, I feel stressed immediately". Another frequent business traveler was Participant 15, who had access to airline lounges. However, he found them to be too exclusive and preferred to observe other passengers in the departure lounges:

> [in the VIP lounge] *there are not many people to observe. They are very similar people: the business type or those very rich people. I don't like to watch them very much. There's nothing really fun to watch. Normally I like to watch young people, kids, people wearing very different clothing. Obviously they are not rich people.*

Participant 15 presents an interesting case. His interest in observing different types of people reflects one important characteristic of the liminal phase: temporary equality and absence of social class (Turner, 1982). Nevertheless, the presence of VIP lounges and other privileges in airports show that social class distinctions may be reduced but still exist in liminal spaces.

People-watching
The unique nature of liminal spaces allows passengers to interact with fellow passengers from all walks of life. When asked if they would observe other passengers, most participants said yes: "*Of course, that's very interesting! I love to look at what other people do. People from different countries and observe them to do different things. I tell you that that's the fun part of the trip*" (P2). Participants also pointed out that they observed other passengers because: "*There's not a lot to do in the airport. So you end up just kind of sitting back in the lounge, seeing how people interact with each other, just kind of looking at the dynamics*" (P18). In addition to people-watching, Participant 25 would exercise his imagination and write stories about them:

> *I do a lot of writing. It's very easy for me to pass the time. And I also like to observe people. When I observe people, I will write different kinds of stories about them (haha). So I really enjoy that. I don't like to interact with other people. I just like to observe.*

Participants provided examples of the unusual behaviors they observed: "*you'll see some people polishing their nails. This is just an example, something so special that normal people, maybe the majority of the population wouldn't do. It's always interesting to see. Those people taking crazy selfies, funny or with extreme poses, that will catch my attention*" (P2). Participant 4 noticed other passengers playing musical instruments: "*After you check in, some airports they put some music instruments. Therefore passengers are free to play music. At that time I might look at those volunteers who play those musical instruments. But for other normal passengers, I won't pay much attention to them*". Participant 18 also described a memorable incident that he observed when traveling with his wife:

> *We were coming out of L.A., and this couple in front of us must have had 14 or 15 DFS bags in their hands. The poor people at the gate were like: 'you have to check these.' They had like 13 or 14 each. It was just a massive amount of stuff they bought at duty-free. We were thinking: 'what the hell are you thinking? why would you do that?'*

In general, participants paid more attention to the funny and unusual behaviors, passengers with flashy outfits, and families traveling with kids.

Besides observing others, participants are also objects of the gaze in airports: "*I think people behave a little better than the outside, because they control the environment. Obviously there are many cameras to see what is going on. The security of the airport can see everything, so someone who does something bad is likely to be caught*" (P12). One participant noticed

himself being watched by others:

> *Usually I got people watching me. They try to be sneaky. Seeing me with a computer, they want to see what I'm doing on my computer. So they'll walk around and they'll do that spy look. I can see that. I know they want to get a look. Instead of walking this way, they walk all the way around. That's fine. I know what they're doing, but I'm not mad.* (P23)

Adey (2007) argued that airports are architectures of spectatorship, where passengers are the spectators (e.g., watching aircrafts) as well as the spectacle (e.g., watching each other). With airport surveillance and the presence of others, some passengers may be more conscious of the gaze and control their own behavior.

Serendipitous and meaningful encounters

Passengers may engage in conversations with other passengers, especially near the gate area as they wait to board. When asked if they would chat with strangers, most participants would not initiate the conversation, but wouldn't mind if other passengers approached them. The topics would generally start with: "where are you from, where are you headed", and may develop into sharing of travel experiences:

> *I've met several backpackers and they always love to tell you where they've traveled to and where's their next journey. I'm interested in talking to them because I can absorb their experience and sometimes their story is inspiring. And they are always curious about Asia. I always tell them: Singapore is a really good place that you should go and visit, Hong Kong is really great so you should come over.* (P2)

Occasionally there would be random topics that participants found unique and memorable. Participant 28 described how a man sitting in front of her asked if she knew how to write the word "sock" in Chinese: "*I recognize the word but I forgot how to write it. I only remembered the left-hand side. Then I checked the dictionary. He laughed at me, that I am Chinese and you are Chinese, but we need a dictionary. I remember it was a funny conversation*". Participant 3 remembered talking to an American girl in an airport gift shop:

> *One time I talked to a little girl. We were looking at stuffed animals, and she told me: 'this is a platypus.' She said the beak of a platypus looks like a tail, so the platypus looks the same from both sides: head or tail. At that time I didn't know the word 'platypus,' but later I checked, and now I always remember this word!*

In addition, several participants provided vivid stories of how they assisted other passengers, such as offering Kleenex to a girl who was crying, helping a man who dropped his glasses into the chair, and lending her cell phone to a girl who was about to reunite with her father after 20 years. When asked if they were more likely to help strangers in airports, some participants felt that they were representing their country: "*I think when you travel, especially when I'm going to my country, you have to be an ambassador*" (P12). Participant 28 once met an older lady: "*she said it was her first trip to Asia, so I think I should behave better to show our sincerity. We talked for a while because it was her first trip to Asia and to Hong Kong, so I wanted to be nice*". Passengers know they will cross paths with others for the time being, in the waiting area as well as on the plane. Participant 1 felt "*more comfortable talking to someone, strangers*" in airports because "*it's just being nice. Because this is someone who is going to travel with you for some time, just be nice*". The airport environment is also restrictive, which facilitates social interactions:

> *I think the reason is we're all trapped in a space, with nothing else to do. Normally if you*

are waiting for the bus, you have to be very cautious about what is going on, things are constantly changing. But when you're at the airport, things are pretty stable. So if you happened to sit close to somebody, it's easier to initiate the talk with foreigners. (P15)

The liminal nature of airports allows passengers of varied backgrounds to cross paths. In this temporary community, they may step outside of their comfort zone and interact with people that they might never have met otherwise. Participants felt a sense of responsibility to represent their country, as well as a sense of comradeship with fellow passengers, which might increase their tendency to assist other passengers.

Experiencing Airports as a Personal Space

In general, participants agreed that they were more likely to chat with strangers inside rather than outside the airport. However, based on the comments of several frequent travelers, as participants became more experienced with airports and international travel, their likelihood of talking to strangers at the airport decreased. According to Participant 15, sometimes he was too tired from traveling to talk: "*Normally I don't mind. I think the more time I spend in here [at the airport], the more I travel, the less likely I talk to people*". Participant 27 explained that he might talk to passengers near the boarding gate, but: "*Not in the lounge, because in the lounge people are busy, occupied with their things, eating, drinking, or talking on the phone. If I go and ask something, no, it will be very rude if I do that*". Participant 28, who remembered chatting with an older lady at the airport, also commented that she would not chat with other business travelers: "*Most of the time if people sitting next to me are foreigners and business travelers, they don't want to talk with strangers. If they are wearing a business suit, I won't initiate the talk at all. But that lady was traveling for leisure and it was her first trip to Asia, so it was more relaxed and easier to approach her*". For frequent travelers, their familiarity with the airport environment allows them to perceive airports as not only a tourism and social space, but also a personal space, which might be why they are less likely to talk to people.

Mobile office

The availability of mobile technology and instant messaging changed the balance between work and life spheres (Nam, 2014). As a result, airports have become places where people can work: "*You know nowadays, people work with Facebook messaging and Whatsapp and also partly email. So I have to check everything, because sometimes my colleague or my client, they will send me messages other than email*" (P26). Comparing business and leisure trips, it's not surprising that participants worked more during business trips, such as responding to email and preparing for presentations: "*I usually go to the lounge, just relax and surf the net. If I'm going for a business trip, then I'm most likely preparing for my work. I look at the documents related to my work stuff*" (P1). Participant 24 also mentioned that she was more likely to work if traveling by herself: "*I usually do my own thing. If I travel by myself, I will work, read the newspaper, reply to email*". According to Participant 23, even when he was traveling for leisure, he still replied to work emails: "*No, I'll still be working. I would have a lot of work. I have on average a couple hundred emails a day so, I am not kidding, so I have to go through those emails*". Participant 18 was another frequent business traveler. When asked if he had any memorable airport experiences, his response was: "*Sorry, I'm just away too much, I don't even think about it. If you didn't say it was at the airport, if you said it was just another office, I would feel the same way*". Airports have become "another office" for frequent business travelers.

Quality alone-time

Airports are also a place for passengers to enjoy the bliss of solitude. When traveling alone, Participant 2 enjoyed "day-dreaming" in airports: "*I'll just relax and read, day-dreaming. I like places that are spacious. Singapore is definitely a very spacious one. If you're waiting for transit they usually have some fascinating views, the facilities are great, and you can really enjoy yourself there*". Being a frequent business traveler, Participant 15 found airports to be a relaxing place and "*the best place for me to read*", because: "*I give myself excuse not to do anything. Then for that half an hour I can listen to music or just walk around. Normally I do not do anything. There're no tasks for me to accomplish within that time. So it's a relaxing time for me*". Participant 24 emphasized that she enjoyed having her personal time when traveling: "*when I travel I want to have time for myself. When I travel by myself, I am very productive, because it's my own space. Thinking time, working time, reading time, sleep time, it's just my time, nobody can call me*". In some cases, participants went on business trips with colleagues, but would not meet up at the airport: "*Sometimes I just want to relax. I don't want to travel with my colleagues. We will pretend not to know each other, because we want to relax, and we won't have a meeting at the airport. Some colleagues are very intense, and if we sit next to each other, they keep chatting about business*" (P28). Like Participant 24, Participant 28 shared the same feeling about the need for personal time:

> *Yes, I want to have more personal time. Even if I travel during office hours, it's still my personal time. I can choose to work or not work. I can feel that there is only me, by myself. It's quiet, I can do some thinking. Sometimes I will do a call, if it is necessary to take a business call. But under some situation, it is difficult to get the call after the immigration.*

At airports, passengers are never physically alone. However, unstable phone or internet access may make passengers temporarily out of reach. Being in transit may also give passengers an excuse to not work and disconnect, which is why they can feel alone and enjoy some personal time.

Discussion

Can airports become destinations in themselves? Findings suggest that passengers do not perceive airports as destinations. At most, some passengers do not mind flight delays, yet they would not opt to arrive at the airport earlier. While passengers may not necessarily *want* to visit airports, their interactions with airport environments depend on their experience and familiarity with specific airports. When traveling through an airport for the first time, passengers are more likely to walk around and explore. With familiar airports, however, passengers head straight for the lounge. First-time airport visitors may purchase more snacks and souvenirs, while repeat visitors frequent specific shops/restaurants that have become a part of their airport routine. Previous studies found that first-time and repeat visitors to a destination vary in their motivations and activity patterns (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Li et al., 2008). As passengers perceive airports as a means to an end, it's difficult to compare their motivation. Nevertheless, the activity patterns of first-time and repeat passengers parallel that of the visitors to a destination. Furthermore, Lew and McKercher (2002) classified destinations into five types based on their level of importance in one's travel itinerary. Specifically, there are "gateway destinations" and "egress destinations", which are the first and last points of access in a multiple-destination trip. They argued that gateway and egress destinations are liminal points of transition, where travelers can get the first

sense of a non-home experience at the beginning of the trip and a sense of closure at the end. While airports may not function as main destinations, they provide similar transitional experiences.

Moreover, among the different activities in airports, shopping has received considerable attention. Previous studies explored passengers' shopping motivation (Geuens et al., 2004; Graham, 2008; Lin & Chen, 2013) as well as different types of airport products (Echevarne, 2008). Besides *what* passengers buy, the next question is *how* they buy. This study revealed that at "destination" airports, passengers are more likely to purchase snacks, gifts, and souvenirs. At "home" or familiar airports, in addition to snacks and souvenirs, travelers may have their own shopping routines. Some habits are based on passengers' knowledge of favorable prices and exclusive airport-only products (Echevarne, 2008; Lin & Chen, 2013). Other routine purchases are ordinary items, which have developed into consumption rituals that passengers associate with flying (Rook, 1985). Holt (1995) identified four types of consumption practices based on structure and purpose. In the context of airports, buying gifts (for others) and souvenirs (for oneself) can be "consuming as play" or as "experience", depending on its social or individual meaning. The ordinary items that remind passengers of the joy of flying is another type of "consuming as experience" (Wang, 2000). For expatriates, buying snacks from their homeland can be "consuming as integration"—as a way to reinforce their identity. Buying airport exclusive products may be a form of "consuming as classification", as it allows frequent travelers to demonstrate their familiarity with airports. According to McKechnie and Tynan (2006), most collective consumption rituals are associated with holiday celebrations. This study illustrates the existence of consumption rituals in the context of airports.

In addition to touristic consumptions, passengers experience airports as a liminal space, where "secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized" (Graburn, 2001; Turner, 1969, p.360). In airports, passengers can observe and interact with people outside of their normal environments. On one hand, passengers are sometimes surprised at the bizarre behaviors of others. The absence of structure and disregard for personal appearance in liminal spaces (Turner, 1973) may account for some of the irrational behaviors of passengers. Due to tight security and surveillance, the liminal behaviors of passengers may not be as uninhibited as tourists in other liminal spaces (e.g., strip clubs, nude beaches) (Andriotis, 2010; Ryan & Martin, 2001). Nevertheless, passengers have the chance to break from routine, and eat differently, dress differently, and shop differently. On the other hand, the temporary equality and absence of rank allow liminal entities to develop communitas—a sense of comradeship and egalitarianism that transcends distinctions of rank, age, and kinship position (Graburn, 2001; Turner, 1967). As Brooker and Joppe (2014) pointed out, the distinction between individuals and separation of social class may be reduced in liminal spaces, but not eliminated. Airports, certainly, are not free of social class distinctions (e.g., lounge access, priority boarding) (de Botton, 2009). In common departure lounges, passengers are more likely to interact with strangers, while airline lounges are perceived as personal spaces where people keep to themselves. In departure lounges, passengers remember serendipitous encounters with different people and helping strangers in need. The safe and stable environment inside airports and the comradeship of traveling together make it easier for passengers to reach out to strangers (Andriotis, 2010). Chamber (2010) argued that liminality involves interacting and sharing experience with other group members. Liminal spaces can also function as "third places" for people to escape, interact, and develop a sense of communitas (Oldenburg, 1999; Yarnal & Kerstetter, 2005).

As one's travel experience increases, passengers may begin to consider airports as a

personal space and free time, which sheds light on another interesting dimension of liminality (Daniel, 1996). Previous studies have examined airports as places of authorities and control (Kellerman, 2008). Passenger movements are guided by signage, restricted to certain areas, and under constant surveillance (Adey, 2004). However, perhaps it is such control that provides an excuse to travelers—allowing them to take a break, catch their breath, and be free *to do nothing*. For frequent business travelers, the waiting time they spend in airports is the perfect time to read, think, and relax. Some may choose to work, as the loss of mobile access allow them to fall off the grid and concentrate on work. Brida et al. (2016) also found that business travelers tend to have lower evaluations of airport service quality, which could be due to their frequent travel experiences, or due to their "demand" for "high-speed Internet connection, battery plugin, or a silent space where to read or work" (p.212). Anonymity and suspension of kinship obligations are characteristics of the liminal stage (Turner, 1969). In this digital age, people have to enter liminal spaces to be liberated from their hyper-connected lives. The use of airports as personal space and alone time constitutes an important aspect of contemporary airport experiences. Heikkinen's (2014) analysis of the travelers in Helsinki Airport identified the slow life phenomenon as an important force shaping consumer preferences. Likewise, this current study has revealed some passengers' use of airports as "personal time," which demonstrate the same desire *to slow down* in this hectic world.

Conclusion
This study examines the phenomenological experience of passengers in international airports. The nature of airports as a liminal space ranges from the touristic experience of first-timers to consumer rituals of local and 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 also utilized as mobile office space or free time, indicative of contemporary travelers' need for slow life and quality alone-time. Findings contribute to tourism literature by investigating the evolving role of airports. First, this study explored the possibility of airports as a destination and discussed the behavioral patterns of passengers, focusing on consumptions rituals and patterns rather than motivation, typologies, and products. Second, previous research on passengers' airport preference and experiences focused more on specific airports, rather than considering international airports as a type of environment. This study used the theory of liminality to analyze airport experiences and make sense of the dynamic social interactions in airport environments. Third, while some studies have identified the difference between business and leisure travelers with regard to their movement patterns and shopping preferences, not many studies have considered airports as a personal space. As ordinary consumers become more experienced with flying, their needs will change. Airports may become less associated with the thrill and anxiety of flying, but regarded as a familiar and comfortable environment.

Findings also have practical implications for airport management to improve airport facilities and passenger experience. Retail activities are key in airport revenue generation. In addition to developing airport exclusive products, it is also possible to create unique consumption rituals that people associate with airports. Consumption rituals are effective because they ensure repeat purchases. Airport management can consider targeting local departing travelers who use the airport as a home airport, identify their habits and special airport memories, and find ways to reinforce their habits. Moreover, many airports attempt to attract and entertain passengers by providing more facilities and attractions. However, for busy travelers who want to

slow down, perhaps all they need are comfortable chairs with a nice view, in a spacious setting with more privacy. Through marketing communication, airports can also try to change passengers' mindset about waiting, and depict their time in airports as personal, liberating, and energizing.

This study has several limitations. First, this study focused on passenger experience within major international airports. Domestic airports and private jet airports were not considered. Based on study findings, future research can examine domestic airports, specifically their status as home airports and passengers' consumption rituals in home and familiar airports. Passengers' use of airports as personal space is another important issue, and future research can explore the need for personal time/space in the context of private jet airports, which may offer another level of personal airport experiences. Moreover, this study focused on passengers' departure experiences. The arrival process and transiting experiences were not explored. Although participants expressed how they felt *before* and *after* going through security and immigration checks, the airport environment considered in this study is mainly the airside, departure lounges, and gate areas. The landside area, such as airport hotels, were not included. As many airport hotels offer meeting venues, more empirical studies are needed to examine the experience of MICE travelers whose meeting place is an airport hotel. In this case, the airport itself would be the primary destination for their trip, and meeting attendees may spend multiple days inside the airport. The combination of airports and MICE events creates unique destination experiences, and allow travelers to have extended interactions with the airport environment well beyond that of average passengers.

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