Is airport experience a critical antecedent for destination revisit? The role of environment in the Covid-19 era

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Abstract

Despite the significance of airport atmospherics and visitors' experiences, relatively few studies address the effect of both the airport environment and experience on the intentions to revisit the destination. This study draws new insights by examining (1) the influence of airport atmospherics on airport experience and willingness to revisit a destination, and (2) the effect of the overall experience evaluations on the intentions to revisit the host country. This study also examined the moderating role of sense of place on the relationship between atmospherics, experience and destination revisit. A mixed-method approach was employed; a qualitative study with focus group with industry professionals, and a survey comprised of 604 visitors. The results were analyzed using structural equation modelling. In light of the study's findings, it was revealed that airport atmospherics are a strong indicator of the overall experience evaluations as well as of the willingness to revisit the destination. Additionally, evidence from the study suggests that sense of place did not have any effect in the aforementioned relationships. The paper ends with several managerial implications concerning the use of atmospheric stimuli in the airport context, while recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: airport atmospherics, experience, destination revisit, sense of place, Covid-19

1. Introduction

A variety of factors lead to destinations' competitiveness (Tosun et al., 2015). Considering that tourism quality begins straight from the airport (Seetanah et al., 2020), the focus of experience is an indicator to gain competitiveness, hence repeat travelers (Tuchen et al., 2020). Airports are undoubtedly visitors' first and last point of contact with a destination (Seetanah et al., 2020; Nghiêm-Phú & Suter, 2018) considered as "destinations' ambassadors" (Prentice & Kadan, 2019, p. 40). With the outbreak of Covid-19, travelers' airport experiences have "changed drastically" (Tuchen et al., 2020, p. 1) since aviation has been strongly affected from the pandemic (Choi, 2021; Piccinelli et al., 2021). Such experiences are strongly influenced by the airports' environment· a reason for emphasizing on the "exciting atmosphere" for over-coming the anxiety in the post-Covid 19 traveling (Choi, 2021, p. 9).

The concept of atmosphere has attracted the attention of the research community for decades and since its significant influence on consumers' behavior, atmospherics as a marketing tool came to the fore and attracted the interest of several researchers (Roggeveen et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2016; Grewal et al., 2014). As a term, they mirror all the tangible and intangible stimuli placed in a context such as music, colour, temperature and scents (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008; Baker, 1986). In this essence, individuals' evaluation of experiences has been discussed to be influential on their behavioral intentions (Qi & Li, 2021). Revisit intention is a key research topic and an important component of behavioral intention (Allameh et al., 2015; Tosun et al., 2015). Lots of travel destinations count on repeat visitors since are counted as important factors in increasing destinations' revenues and are shown to be less costly (Seetanah et al., 2020; Jang & Feng, 2007). In the tourism marketing literature, the willingness to revisit a destination tends to gain a "greater attention" (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020, p. 336). Since many studies relied on destination revisit as an outcome of satisfaction, more recent studies examine the effect of new variables as satisfaction alone cannot predict future behaviors (Abubakar et al., 2017; Allameh et al., 2015).

Seetanah et al. (2020) support the call to further examine the way that airports' environment affect visitors' perceptions and choices for a destination, which call echoes an earlier argument by Jang and Feng (2007) and Chen and Funk (2010) who claimed that work on understanding tourists' revisit intentions and their antecedents is limited. At the same time, airports are servicescapes in which research on the implementation of atmospherics is considered minimal (eg. Moon et al., 2017; Ali et al., 2016; Geuens et al., 2004). Rare attempts have been made to link the evaluation of airport services on revisit intentions (Seetanah et al., 2020) thereby raising concerns over the influence of the quality of transportation services in the field (Loi et al., 2017). While transportation is part of travelers' experience, it remains an under-examined facet on consumers' future behaviors (Loi et al., 2017). At the same time, in the marketing literature, is stated that there is a "globalisation utopia" in airports (Urry et al., 2016, p. 13) where sense of place gives "a local structure of feeling" (Gustafson, 2001, p. 6). It is not difficult to understand the call for the integration of the above relationships. Hence, this paper aims to explore the synergy of airport atmospherics on

the intention to revisit a destination while also examining the mediating effect of experience evaluations and moderating role of sense of place.

2. Literature Review

2.1.1 Atmospherics and Experience

Numerous studies captured the effects of airport atmospherics on the experience evaluations. It is evident from previous studies that the use of atmospherics significantly influences airport experience (eg. Han et al., 2020; Nysveen et al., 2018; Bezerra & Gomes, 2016). Based on Bogicevic et al. (2013) findings, shops, restaurants and security have an important influence on experience evaluations. Kim et al. (2016) research results indicated that the sensory aspect of experience· which parts were the physical elements – atmospherics, strongly affected passengers' evaluations and overall satisfaction. In a more recent study, by Figueiredo and Castro (2019), it was found that architectural layout and design, artworks, service staff and artworks were marked as the most important with a high impact on the passengers' experience. Hence, the following hypotheses are thus tested:

H1: Facility ambience and aesthetics have a positive effect on airport experience.

H2: Functionality positively influence airport experience.

H3: Cleanliness has a positive influence on airport experience.

H4: Atmospherics holistically influence in a positive way experience evaluations.

2.1.2 Atmospherics, Experience and Destination Revisit

The issue of the atmospherics' influence on destination revisit has become an increasing concern. While there is sufficient empirical evidence in the literature, in the context of airports Prentice and Kadan's (2019) finding revealed that future behavioral intentions (i.e. destination revisit) are largely affected from the ambience sub-construct of atmospherics. More recently, Prentice et al. (2021) explored the synergy of the aforementioned relationship on both Indian and Australian airports. As found, the influence of atmospherics stimuli showed significant influences on the willingness of visitors to revisit a destination in both airports. Prior work also found the significant effect of the airport services' evaluation (e.g. signage, duty-free shops) on destination revisit. Precisely, Seetanah et al. (2020) in recent research indicated that the overall evaluation of the Mauritius airport's services significantly influenced travelers' destination revisit intentions. Future behaviour has been found to be largely affected by the evaluations of the experience. Findings also revealed that the airport experience made a unique contribution to revisit a destination (Prentice et al., 2021; Seetanah et al., 2020; Leri & Theodoridis, 2019). In a similar vein, results indicated that the airports' servicescape influenced the intention of passengers to revisit the host country (Seetanah et al., 2020; Prentice & Kadan, 2019). Therefore, it is plausible to hypothesized that:

H5: Atmospherics positively influence the intention to revisit the destination.

H6: The relationship between atmospherics and destination revisit is mediated by experience evaluations.

2.1.3 Sense of place as a moderator

The research findings introduced so far, generally suggest that sense of place acts as a moderating variable (Rowley & Slack, 1999a; Ariffin & Yahaya, 2013; Ali et al., 2016). Research of Ali et al. (2016) investigated the influencing role of a Malaysian Airport's physical environment, measuring at the same time the influence of the variable of national identity (i.e. sense of place). Linked with the research of Ariffin and Yahaya (2013), they found that portraying a country's culture and characteristics in the airports, is significantly influencing passengers' satisfaction and experience evaluations towards the airport. More recently, Nghiêm-Phú and Suter (2018) have discussed in their research the importance of cultural representation in the airports on passengers' behaviour toward the host country. As such, the following hypotheses are formed:

H7: Sense of place moderates the relationship between atmospherics and experience evaluations.

H8: Sense of place moderates the relationship between atmospherics and destination revisit.

Given the extant studies, the following proposed conceptual model is formed (Figure 1), which is an extension of the Stimulus – Organism – Response Paradigm (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Mehrabian & Russel 1974).
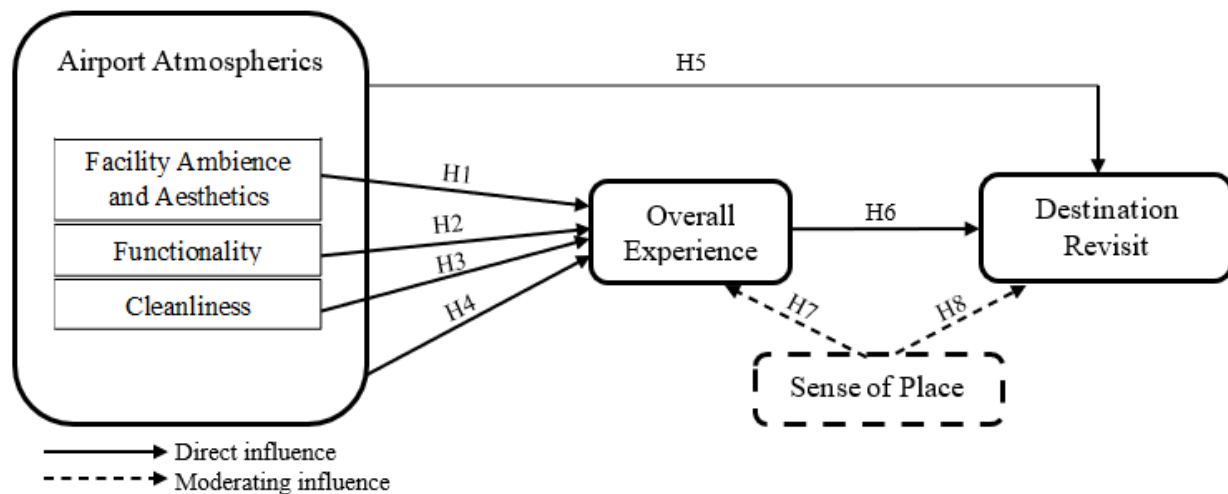
3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Instruments

All constructs were measured through a structured survey based on validated scales in the literature. The airport's atmospherics measure was adapted from Ali et al., (2016), Moon et al. (2016) and Bitner (1992). As shown in Table 1, this construct is divided into three sub-constructs; facility ambience and aesthetics, functionality and cleanliness. The measures for the sense of place

variable mirrored those Ariffin & Yahaya (2013) used in their research. Given the adoption of this scale in marketing research, these measurement items likely are relevant to the current research. The scale developed by Singh and Söderlund (2020) was used to measure the overall experience, while the scale of Prentice and Kadan (2019) was used to measure the destination revisit. All the scales were measured according to the seven-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree).

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

Due to security and safety restrictions in the airports' contexts, we used Prolific Academic, a commercial research panel provider to procure a field sample of individuals that travelled within the last month. It is important to note that Prolific Academic ensures "adequate data quality" (Peer et al., 2017, p. 158). Approximately, 686 participants were approached out of which 82 were eliminated based on failing to answer the control check or had withdrawn. The criterion according to which they could proceed on filling the questionnaire was based on having travelled within the last month. Therefore, the final sample (N) consisted of 604 international travellers. The average time to complete the survey was approximately 10 minutes, and since the respondents had completed the survey, they received a reward from Prolific.

The respondents were distributed approximately equally since 49.3% were male and 50.7% female. The majority of those was in the age group of 26-35 (41.6%), mostly Europeans (85.8%). More than half of respondents had low travel frequency (54.5%) with 0-2 trips in a year with the 46.2% indicated travelling for pleasure.

3.3 Evaluation of measurement model

Prior to hypotheses testing, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed (SPSS Statistics 25) to determine the scales validity. All variables were accepted except those of temperature, music, aroma and brightness under the construct of facility ambience and aesthetics due to the low factor loading. As a next step, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted (SPSS Amos 26) to verify the construct validity of the dataset, with the items less than .50 been discarded (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 1 all the questions met the threshold of .50 except three items under the functionality construct; WiFi, power sockets and mobility services.

Firstly, the four-factor model was subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the maximum likelihood estimation method to ensure construct reliability and validity. Model fit adequacy was assessed by several fit indices as suggested (Civelek, 2018; Hamilton & Tee, 2015). Results of the preliminary CFA indicated that the measurement model fit the data quite well. The ratio of chi-square to the degrees of freedom values <3 are acceptable while <5 indicates a reasonable fit (Marsch & Hocevar, 1985), thus the model's value was in line with the accepted criteria ($\chi2/df$= 3.51). In the same line, the goodness of fit index and comparative fit index had the appropriate fit key numbers >.90 and >.95 respectively (GFI= .926), CFI= .945). Furthermore, the root mean square error of approximation was less than .08 (RMSEA= .065), while the absolute goodness of fit index and normed-fit index were >.85 and >.90 respectively (AGFI= .894, NFI=

.926). The standardized root mean square residual was less than .08 threshold (SRMR= .049) which met the established criteria for accepted values.

Table 1 Reliabilities and Validities of variables

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Facility Ambience and Aesthetics (Alpha = .882)	1. The color schemes within the airport were attractive	.87	.89	.78
	2. The architecture of the airport was appealing	.86		
	3. The interior decoration of the airport was appealing	.92		
	No items dropped			
Functionality (Alpha = .683)	4. This airport provided comfortable and spacious seating in the waiting areas	.60	.64	.53
	5. The signs and electronic displays provided information accurately and clearly	.71		
	6. The electronic facilities (e.g. television screens, electronic billboards were informative	.85		
	Items dropped to improve validity			
	The airport's internet/WiFi connection had a good quality	.46		
	The airport provided adequate power sockets for charging electronic devices	.48		
	The mobility services (e.g. elevators, electronic walkways) were properly working	.49		
Cleanliness (Alpha = .799)	7. Restrooms and bathrooms in the airport were kept clean	.70	.67	.55
	8. Retail, dining and entertainment areas were kept clean	.81		
	9. Walkways, exits and baggage claim areas were kept clean	.72		
	No items dropped			
Sense of Place (Alpha = .880)	10. The interior as well as the exterior were designed using the host country's art and design	.72	.81	.63
	11. The uniform of customer service's staff was designed based on the host country's art and design	.71		
	12. I could feel the host country while in the airport	.86		
	13. The airport reflected the national identity of the host country	.87		
	Items dropped to improve model fit			
	The host country's "flavors" could be sensed everywhere in the airport	.77		
Experience Evaluations (Alpha = .826)	My overall experience at the airport could be described as…			
	14. Memorable	.73	.69	.57
	15. Personal	.72		
	16. Positively Charged	.81		

	No items dropped			
Destination	17. I intent to revisit the host country in the near future	.54	.74	.61
Revisit	18. My experience at the airport made it more likely to revisit Cyprus again	.93		
(Alpha = .732)	19. This airport destination will be my first choice over other airport destinations when to/from/within the host country	.82		
	No items dropped			

Note: Alpha = Cronbach's alpha, CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted. Model fit: $\chi2/df$= 3.51, GFI= .926, CFI= .945, RMSEA= .065, AGFI= .894, NFI= .926, SRMR= .049

In order to determine the discriminant validity for each dimension, average variance extracted (AVE) was firstly calculated (Table 1) with acceptable values being greater or .50. Composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's α values met the threshold. The square root of AVE (Table 2) for each construct, should exceed the inter-correlation of the construct (Civelek, 2018), thus the values are accepted.

Table 2 Correlations and Validity among constructs

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Facility Ambience and Aesthetics	**(.884)**					
2. Functionality	.521***	**(.727)**				
3. Cleanliness	.450***	.686***	**(.745)**			
4. Sense of Place	.449***	.309***	.220***	**(.787)**		
5. Overall Experience	.623***	.584***	.507***	.674***	**(.754)**	
6. Destination Revisit	.489***	.488***	.462***	.517***	.720***	**(.781)**

***p<.001, Note: the values written in brackets indicate the square root of the AVE values.

4. Results of hypothesis testing

The model developed within the scope of the study was tested with SEM. SEM tends to be a "powerful and versatile technique … to test substantive hypotheses" (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 2000, p. 201). Bootstrap technique was applied with 2000 resamples and 95 per cent confidence intervals. Bootstrapping is able to evaluate the parameters' accuracy (Civelek, 2018). Four regression models were run to test the hypotheses of the present study. It is worth mentioning that, if the beta coefficient is $\leq$.10 it is said to be small effect, if $\leq$.30 to be medium effect and if $\geq$.50 large effect.

Firstly, the three sub-constructs of atmospherics were tested individually for their effect on experience, forming hypothesis 1, 2 and 3. Results (Table ..) of Model 1 revealed that facility ambience and aesthetics have a positive effect on experience ($\beta=.399, p <.001$). In the same line, both functionality ($\beta=.271, p <.001$) and cleanliness ($\beta=.135, p <.05$) demonstrated that they positively influence airport experience evaluations. As such, hypotheses *H1*, *H2* and *H3* are supported. To continue with the next hypotheses and Model 2, a second-order construct model was developed for the construct for atmospherics (Table ..), as it offered better information upon the correlated items (eg Ali et al., 2016). Facility ambience and aesthetics, functionality and cleanliness were paired together to form holistic atmospherics, therefore *H4* posited that atmospherics positively influence the overall experience evaluations. The present results indicated that the hypothesis is supported ($\beta=.854, p <.001$) with atmospherics making unique contributions on experience evaluations. Furthermore, atmospherics as a whole showed that they positively influence destination revisit ($\beta=.827, p <.001$) with *H5* being supported. In addition, for Model 3, was proposed that experience mediates the relationship between atmospherics and destination revisit (*H6*). Results revealed that there is semi-mediator effect since the relationship is still significant and positive with a decrease in β coefficient ($\beta=.602, p <.001$).

4.1 Moderating effect of sense of place

Finally, it was hypothesized that sense of place acts as a moderator between atmospherics and both experience and destination revisit (Model 4). In order to test this effect, atmospherics was multiplied with sense of place to reveal the interaction between the two variables. The results of the moderating effects of sense of place indicated that neither the effect on experience ($\beta=.012, p >.05$) nor on destination revisit ($\beta=-.030, p >.05$) were found significant. Hence, it is plausible to admit that *H7* and *H8* are not confirmed.

Hypotheses	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
H1: Facility Ambience → Experience	.399***			
H2: Functionality → Experience	.271***			
H3: Cleanliness → Experience	.135*			
H4: Atmospherics → Experience		.854***	.765***	.557***
H5: Atmospherics → Destination Revisit		.827***	.258**	.229**
H6: Experience → Destination Revisit			.602***	.573***
H7: Atmospherics x Sense of Place → Experience				.012
H8: Atmospherics x Sense of Place → Destination revisit				-.030
Model Fit Indices	$\chi2/df$= 2.678, GFI= .969, CFI= .978, RMSEA=.053	$\chi2/df$= 4.39, GFI= .928, CFI= .936, RMSEA=.075	$\chi2/df$= 4, GFI= .934, CFI= .944, RMSEA=.071	$\chi2/df$= 3.72, GFI= .915, CFI= .932, RMSEA=.067
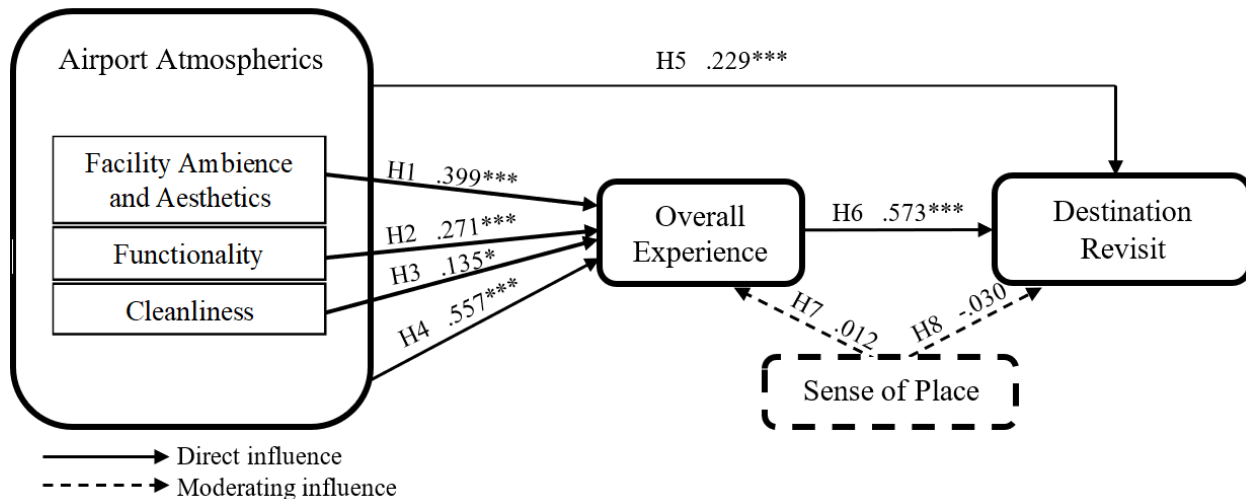
5. Discussion and implications

This study contributes to the existing body of literature in several ways. First, this research confirmed the relationship between airport atmospherics and overall experience evaluations in the airport context (eg. Batouei et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2016). Relatively few studies address the holistic examination of atmospherics on experience, although scholars call for further understanding of these concepts' interrelations. Facility ambience and aesthetics had a higher influence on the airport experience than the constructs of functionality and cleanliness. In the same vein, atmospherics as a holistic construct showed a significant and high impact on the overall experience evaluations. Second, this study advances the marketing literature by revealing the strong effect of atmospherics on destination revisit (Seetanah et al., 2020; Pentice & Kadan, 2019). In addition, results revealed that experience itself had a high impact on the intention to revisit a destination, supporting the results of previous studies (eg. Prentice & Kadan, 2019; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2021). Hence, since the significance among the constructs of atmospherics and destination revisit remained with a change on the coefficients value, the mediation of experience is in line with previous research (eg. Bogicevic et al., 2013; Figueiredo & Castro, 2019; Nghiêm-Phú & Suter, 2018).

Findings can be the starting platform for airport and destination authorities. Precisely, results imply that destination and airport managers should work to build on the sensory strategies so as to enhance visitors' overall experience and revisit intentions. Furthermore, the present study offers new insights on the role of sense of place on the airport experience. Previous studies showed that sense of place is an important indicator on enhancing travellers' experience, thus the behaviour towards the destination (Varley et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2016). However, the moderation analysis of the current research revealed that none of the relationships between atmospherics and experience

nor atmospherics and destination revisit were moderated in the presence of sense of places (Batouei et al., 2020; Van Oel & Van den Berkhof, 2013), meaning that authorities shall focus on other atmospheric stimuli.

6. Limitations and future directions

While this paper has shed some light on an integrative approach to understanding the effect of airport atmospherics on experience and destination revisit having as a moderator sense of place, it is not without limitations. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, online surveys were distributed, however this research method engages limitations. While it is considered as a convenient method ensuring "adequate data quality" (Peer et al., 2017, p. 158), visitors needed to recall their memories in order to answer relative questions (Prentice & Kadan, 2019). A random sample from the departure areas of the airport could give more insights. As such, future research could extend this study through collecting data in the airport's area where the experience is clear in travellers minds (e.g. Han et al., 2020; Taheri et al., 2020). Furthermore, expanding the qualitative research either with airport authorities or visitors, could enhance findings through a deeper understanding of the under-examination relationships.

Future research shall examine the role of destination image on destination revisit since it is considered as a critical antecedent (e.g.Tosun et al., 2015; Chen & Funk, 2010; Chuchu, 2020). Another dimension that might be taken into account for future research is the past experience visitors' hold of a country. According to Huang and Hsu (2009), visitors' past travel experience has been found as a significant indicator while studying the willingness to revisit a destination. What is more, it would be interesting to conduct the same research on specific airports, thus having clearer the influential role of airport atmospherics on each airport, hence conducting a comparative study. Since sense of place seemed not having any influence, the same investigations could be tested with specific cultures to test whether culture is a variable that plays a significant role in the aforementioned synergy. It would also be plausible to examine the same relationships with the end of pandemic in order to clarify any changes in the results.

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