Authenticity in Travel Servicescapes: Examining Sense of Place Stimuli in Airports

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Abstract

This study explores *sense of place* within airport settings, examining how cultural elements contribute to travelers' perceptions towards airport image. While existing research predominantly focused on functional aspects of airports, such as service quality, the emotional dimensions of authenticity within traveling servicescapes gained less attention. Addressing this gap, a conceptual framework was designed and tested using sequential mixed-methods consisting of a survey with 534 international travelers, and a focus group with senior managers of a European airport. Findings from the moderation analysis reveal sense of place stimuli to accentuate the effects of architecture, amenities and signage towards airport image. Qualitative data delineate the challenges faced by the airport industry in employing sense of place stimuli while posing questions on the effectiveness of its current measurement. We expand discussions on authenticity and provide evidence-based guidelines on the construct's future and how artifacts, artworks and uniforms, reflecting the country's identity, can enhance travelers' image evaluations.

Keywords: Sense of place; Authenticity; Airport Image; Airport Environment; Mixed Methods

1. Introduction

As travelers' first and last interactions with a country, airport environments are nowadays designed to generate lasting experiences. Changi Airport's *Jewel*, the world's tallest indoor waterfall, is one example of how airport designs seek to create lasting memories to tourists. Another example includes the *Airstar* robot assistant at Seoul's Incheon Airport who walks guests from their terminal, provides information and offers a selfie menu. Such attempts aim to create memorable destination experiences for tourists, allowing airports to stay true to their characterisation as *'destination ambassadors'* (Prentice & Kadan, 2019, p. 40).

Servicescape research aimed to dissect such elements within an environment that influence visitors and facilitate predictable behaviors and perception synthesis capitalizing on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) paradigm (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Investigations of stimuli like ambiance (Bezerra & Gomes, 2019) design (Moon et al., 2017), accessibility (Ali et al., 2016) and smell (Park et al., 2019) promoted practices that capitalize on the

individual's five senses. Anecdotal evidence on how the use of popcorn smell in malls and perfumes in airports capitalizes on our senses, nudging us into making a purchase without the need of a sales pitch, further accentuates the importance of the latter.

The number of available stimuli is vast and a significant portion of tourism development research aimed at disentangling the relationship between environmental stimuli and responses within traveling servicescapes of airports (Bezerra & Gomes, 2019; Bogicevic et al., 2013). For example, Ali et al., (2016) identified cleanliness, functionality, and accessibility to favorably impact passengers' delight and satisfaction with the airport. Conceptual models like the latter, positioned satisfaction as the end response and main dependent variable (i.e. Bezerra & Gomes, 2019; Piancatelli et al., 2021), yet fewer papers focused on how airport image is influenced by servicescape models and how emotional dimensions, other than functional ones, moderate such interactions. Even fewer are the cases that utilize sense of place, an emerging construct in tourism development research, when examining airport servicescapes (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2021).

Image, contrary to satisfaction, affects long-term airport goals including the probability of returning to the airport (Bogicevic et al., 2013) and has been shown to increase traveler loyalty in hospitality (Han et al., 2019), an important dimension for tourism planning. The fact that loyal travelers return to the airport and recommend it to others (Park & Park, 2018) further builds a case for examining airport image perceptions while fostering valuable prospect implications for tourism developers. This research's originality lies with the examination and positioning of sense of place in the environment-image process, a gap that, to the best of our knowledge, remains unfilled. Sense of place, also known as national identity, includes symbols that reflect the destination's physical, social, cultural, and historical traits communicated through stimuli depicting local icons, the uniforms of airport staff, traditional culinary experiences and is closely linked to the theme of authenticity (Ali et al., 2016; Ariffin & Yahaya, 2013). Location-reminding stimuli were theoretically positioned to improve memorable traveling experiences (i.e. Farmaki & Antoniou, 2017) yet empirical investigations are pending as to how exactly they affect airport image perceptions specifically. Such stimuli can be geographical imageries featuring famous landscapes (i.e. Alpes of France), mini museums about local history (i.e. Korean Cultural Street Museum), and even local art installations with sculptures reflecting cultural heritage (i.e. The David by Michelangelo in Italy). Hence, the addressed gap is situated at the intersection of airport image research and sense of place where the latter has only seen some applications, primarily in satisfaction-focusing models.

The paper explores three areas using mixed methods: 1) how international tourists assess airport environmental stimuli and their impact on airport image; 2) how sense of place affects this relationship; 3) industry views, practices, and challenges to enhance sense of place and airport image. Our investigation considers both tourists and industry professionals. The first phase involved quantitative research with an online survey of 534 foreign travelers. In the

second phase, a focus group with four marketing executives from an international airport discussed their views on airport environments and sense-of-place designs. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Thematic Analysis (TA) were used to analyze each dataset respectively.

Clarity of signs, ambiance, and cleanliness enhance airport image perceptions while sense of place moderates the airport environment-image relationship. Focus group results align with quantitative data but reveal industry challenges in utilizing sense of place stimuli. We explore new research pathways based on the current model to test image-influencing stimuli and expand the theoretical understanding of sense of place. We offer destination planners and tourism practitioners strategies to shape airport environments that promote national identity and authenticity, enhancing tourist experiences. This study aids in understanding how airports can improve their image and support tourism development through sense of place stimuli.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section analyzes environment design literature, airport image research, and sense of place applications, concluding with the proposed conceptual framework. Section 3 discusses quantitative and qualitative research strategies, including confirmatory checks, EFA results, hypothesis tests, and focus group data collection, analysis, and theme development. Section 4 provides the main discussions. The final section presents the emerged implications and conclusions as well as research limitations.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Airport Servicescape and Image

The idea of creating an impactful atmosphere extends back to Kotler's (1973) introduction and popularisation of the term atmospherics, deliberate designs of an environment as part of a marketing device. Loureiro (2019) followed on Kotler's work by viewing environments as compositions of not just atmosphere but surroundings and personnel. Subsequent research expanded their analysis to encompass classifications of such stimuli. For example, Taheri et al.'s (2020) investigation of servicescapes classified sense-related stimuli under the banner of *ambient* while introducing additional constructs like layout, quality, and atmosphere. In an earlier study, Turley and Milliman (2000) created such a classification by involving exterior and interior variables, layout, point of purchase and other human-related variables. These classifications were specifically investigated in the context of airports, by Batouei et al. (2020) and others who focused on psychological functions like tourists' emotional processes within airport servicescapes.

A portion of tourism literature adopted the views of atmospheric research and aimed to identify stimuli stemming from airport environments. Ambiance is a widely accepted construct on airport grounds that encapsulates primarily lighting, music, and odours (Yerimou & Themistocleous, 2023; Kim et al., 2016). As Krishna (2014) would put it, a well-maintained ambient environment can generate a relaxing and enjoyable experience, hence improving

individuals' ratings. The application of ambiance in airport environments was done in conjunction with other parameters including signage and signals aiming at improving navigation and providing useful information to travelers (Kim et al., 2016). Hong et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of signs in directing passengers through several airport processes, such as check-in and boarding, while Ali et al. (2016) emphasized the significance of signs in enhancing the usage of self-service technology at airports. The latter had considerable effects on both passenger experience and procedural efficiency in tourism management settings.

Airport environments were also assessed based on their cleanliness. Lee et al.'s (2017) results, not surprisingly, show travelers admitting their severe dislike of uncleanliness and, linked to the aforementioned, their dislike for bad signage on airport grounds (Batouei et al., 2020). Results from further research echoed the perceived importance of cleanliness (Bezerra & Gomes, 2019; Lee et al., 2017) with the high implications of the construct demonstrated through a link between cleanliness and traveler spending (Moon et al., 2017). In essence, a clean environment is linked to safety and hygiene, both of which are crucial for obtaining favourable evaluations from passengers, especially in the post COVID-19 era (Untaru et al., 2024).

Measurement of the aforementioned predictors focused on satisfaction (Yerimou & Themistocleous, 2024), delight (Ali et al., 2016), and revisit (Batouei et al., 2020) on airport grounds yet their impact on image is underexplored. Stemming primarily from business research, a favorable corporate image of branded restaurant chains, for example, is driven by environmental stimuli like design, decoration and cleanliness (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019). Literature theorizes that an environment as a whole improves the overall image of a place (Milliman & Fugate, 1993) yet applications of the latter are relatively limited within airport servicescapes. Mainardes et al. (2021) through their work answered a similar question on how service quality affects airport image. They focused on constructs like service reliability, convenience and employees, but such predictors are different to those of a physical environment that captures, for example, elements of ambiance. The meanings of servicescapes are no longer fixed in postmodernity; rather, they are free-floating, as each individual may assign distinct meanings to the locations (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999).

From the aforementioned, the measurement of airport environment perceptions is hypothesized to be constituted by three dimensions of signs, ambiance and cleanliness. In relation to image, we adopt the flow of effects of previous research that measured satisfaction and hypothesize that ambiance, signs and cleanliness individually have a favorable impact towards the airports' image (H1-H3). We further examine their combined effects when the three dimensions constitute the airport environment construct (H4). We note that the phrase *environment* refers to the setting in which a service operation takes place, encompassing both the physical and ambient elements. Formally:

H1: Ambiance has a positive effect on airport image

H2: Signs have a positive effect on airport image

H3: Cleanliness has a positive effect on airport image

H4: Airport environment has a positive effect on airport image

2.2 Authenticity and Sense of Place

Consistent examinations in tourism research promote the importance of authenticity for tourist experiences (Gardiner et al., 2022; Rickly & McCabe, 2017) linking the latter with tourist loyalty and destination revisit (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010). For example, literary and dark tourism have authenticity embedded in the motivation and purpose of travel (Jiang & McCabe, 2023; Ingram et al., 2021). Researchers have correlated the term of sense of place with authenticity in heritage sites and hotels (Ariffin et al., 2015) yet it is important to reflect on previous attempts made to define what the term encapsulates.

Stedman (2003) indicated that sense of place has in its basis the symbolic meanings portrayed through the setting. The common attribute that the literature gives to the term are meanings given to a place which arise from lived experiences (Campelo et al., 2014). In essence, sense of place embeds authenticity in servicescapes and promotes unique country characteristics that differentiate an environment from that of another country. Symbols, images, and artworks convey sense of place stimuli through cultural artefacts, historical artworks and nature representations among others (Rowley & Slack, 1999). Importantly, a place needs to be recognizable and communicate an identity, in order to transfer a sense of place to travelers (Lynch, 1998). As such, sense of place can be the medium towards an experience, with the atmosphere of a place being the instrument through which the spirit of the visited country is communicated. Airports are commonly characterized as placelessness spaces following the widespread architectural style of white boxes (Relph, 1976). Augé (1995) also discussed the concept of placelessness in relation to environments constructed for functionality rather than identity. Based on his work, such environment lack historical and cultural importance, classifying airports as non-places. In the tourism and marketing literature, related to airport servicescapes specifically, Ali et al. (2016) identified the moderating effects of sense of place in the environment-satisfaction relationship of Malaysian airports. Further examinations found interior design, sculptures and general cultural artefacts to be a reflective form of object-authenticity (Wang, 1999), a finding that Volgger (2020) complements with architecture designs.

Research shows that sense of place moderates the relationship between a physical environment and airport satisfaction and delight (Ali et al., 2016; Ariffin & Yahaya, 2013) a flow of effects based on which we position H5. A moderating investigation expands previous

mediating examinations (Wattanachareonsil et al., 2021), by providing linkages between constructs that enhance the precision and efficacy of respective interventions (Hayes, 2022). Evaluating moderating influences allows the identification of parameters that enhance positive airport image perceptions and we thus hypothesize that the relationship between physical servicescape and airport image is moderated by sense of place. H5 Formally indicates:

H5: Sense of place has a moderating effect on the relationship between airport environment and airport image

Figure 1, summarises the proposed conceptual model along with the hypotheses.

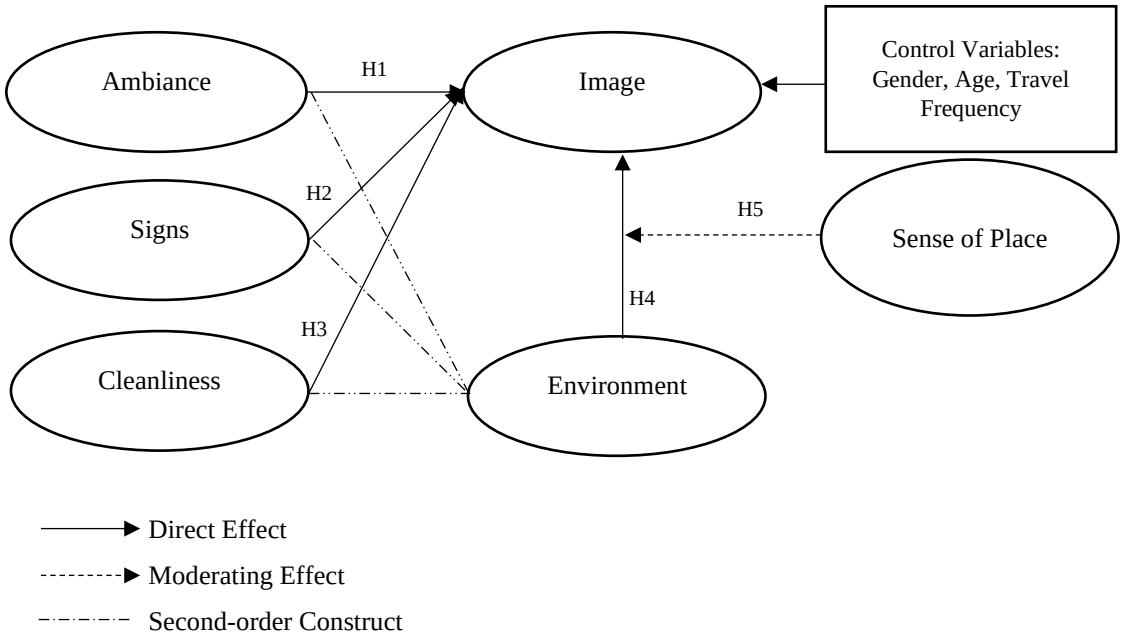

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

3. Method

To test the proposed conceptual model, we followed a sequential mixed-method approach, conducted in two phases: one quantitative and one qualitative. In the quantitative phase, using an online survey, we recruited travelers from different airports concerning their airport evaluations and the role of sense of place. In the second phase we proceeded to a focus group with marketing executives of Larnaca's International Airport, to gain a deeper understanding on how sense of place stimuli are utilized.

3.1 Quantitative phase

3.1.1 Survey Design

An online structured survey instrument was developed to test the model and hypotheses. Prolific was utilized to collect a field sample of foreign travelers who had travelled the previous month. All constructs were measured based on validated scales in the literature. The airport environment items were adapted from Ali et al., (2016), Moon et al. (2017) and Bitner (1992). This construct was divided into four sub-constructs: ambiance, signs, functionality, and cleanliness. The measures for the sense of place variable were based on Ariffin & Yahaya's (2013) research. The scale developed by Park and Park (2018) was mirrored to measure the airport image evaluations. All the scales were measured using the seven-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) aligned with scale preference literature (Preston and Coleman, 2000; Themistocleous et al. 2019). The total number of items was 34. The survey took an average of 20 minutes to complete, and after the respondents finished the survey, they were compensated.

3.1.2 Demographic of the sample

A sample size calculator was used at the 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, using the European commissions of 976m of air passengers (Eurostat, 2024) as the population statistic. The generated minimum sample size was 385. We oversampled and contacted 686 people of which 152 were excluded for failing to respond to the control check or withdrawing. The main requirement for inclusion was that they had travelled within a period of one month. This was to address recall bias and enhance result reliability. The final sample included 534 (n=534) international travelers. The sample was evenly split with 49% females. In terms of age (m= 43), the two largest groups were 26-35 years of age counting a percentage of 41.8%, and 18-25 years of age with a percentage of 35.8% and, based on nationality, they represented over 40 countries. Table 1 indicates the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Characteristics	**n**	**%**
Sex		
Male	270	51%
Female	264	49%
Age		
18-25	191	35.8%
26-35	223	41.8%
36-45	70	13.1%
46-55	37	0.6%
More than 56	13	8.7%
Education		
High School Graduate	73	13.7%
College Graduate (diploma)	83	15.6%
Undergraduate (bachelor's degree)	196	36.7%

Postgraduate (master's degree)	161	30.1%
Ph.D. (philosophy's degree)	9	1.7%
Other	12	2.2%
Nationality (grouped by area)		
European	459	86%
Asian (Chinese)	7	1.3%
Asian (Indian)	9	1.7%
Middle Eastern	15	2.8%
American	6	1.1%
Other	38	7.1%
Travel Frequency		
0-2 trips in a year	278	52.1%
3-5 trips in a year	186	34.8%
More than 5 trips in a year	70	13.1%

Total N = 534

Table 1. Sample's Demographics

3.1.3 Measurement model

Prior to examining the relationships between travelers' evaluations of airports, each construct with its corresponding items was subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Using IBM SPSS v.21, both Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Barlett's test of sphericity were consulted. The KMO of all factors were more than the threshold of 0.60 and all the Barlett's test of sphericity values were statistically important at .01 level (Field, 2018). An EFA (Table 2) was conducted with all 27 items using principal axis factoring extraction with varimax orthogonal rotation. Items that loaded onto multiple factors or items that did not load onto factors with coefficients less than 0.50 were removed (temperature, music, interior decoration). This resulted in 27 items. Hence, the first factor, ambiance, was composed of three items (m= 4.77, σ=1.48). The second construct, signs, included 8 items (m=5.26, σ=1.25). Functionality was made up of 4 items (m=5.06, σ=1.33) and cleanliness was consisted of 3 items (m= 5.67, σ=1.12) while the construct of image was made up of 4 items (m= 4.97, σ=1.32). Finally, the moderating variables of sense of place had 5 items (m= 4.08, σ=.1.55). To determine the reliability of each factor, Cronbach α estimates were assessed. In this case, all the constructs met the threshold value (DeVellis, 2012) with reliabilities being more than 0.70, except functionality. We conducted quantitative measures to validate and analyse the research hypotheses pertaining to the foregoing variables. Specifically, as shown in Table 2, ambiance scored Cronbach α of 0.88, signs had a measure of 0.76, functionality scored 0.62 and cleanliness 0.76. Additionally, the construct of image scored Cronbach α of 0.89 while sense of place 0.90. Skewness and kurtosis values were used to test the normality of the data. The skewness values for the measurement items ranged from –1.07 to –0.154, while

the kurtosis values ranged from –0.290 to 1.546, thus satisfying the criteria for the data to fit the assumptions of a normal distribution.

After purifying the scales, confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was undertaken to establish a measurement model followed by Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine the relationship between the factors using IBM AMOS v.21. The CFA (Table 2) began with the addition of each factor and its corresponding items one after the other to develop an ideal model. Though this model had numerous cross-loaders and error covariances specified, it was trimmed to remove error items and arrive at the final acceptable measurement model meeting all respective thresholds. Items were removed from the model if the standardized factor loadings fell below 0.50 (Hair et al., 2020) or if they loaded onto incorrect factors. Using these criteria, 7 items were removed from the CFA and specifically 2 from the construct of signs, the whole construct of functionality (4 items), and 1 from the construct of image. The final measurement model contained 20 items: ambiance concerning 3 items (m= 4.77, σ=1.48); signs comprised of 6 items (m=5.38, σ=1.22); cleanliness consisted of 3 items (m = 5.67, σ=1.12); image concerning 3 items (m = 4.85, σ=1.35); and sense of place consisted of 5 items (m= 4.08, σ=.1.55).

First, the measurement model was tested for convergent validity and reliability. These were assessed through factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Table 2 indicates that all item loadings exceeded the recommended value of 0.50 (Chin et al., 2008). Composite reliability values, which depict the degree to which the construct indicators indicate the latent construct, exceeded the recommended value of 0.60. In Table 2, the construct of signs has an AVE below 0.50 but as composite reliability is more than .60 it is acceptable (Lam, 2012).

EFA					CFA		
Factor and Corresponding Item	**m**	**SD**	**Factor Loading**	**α**	**Factor Loading**	**AVE**	**CR[1]**
Ambiance	4.77	1.48		0.88		0.76	0.88
The color schemes were attractive	4.73		0.88		0.86		
The architecture was appealing	4.74		0.94		0.88		
The brightness was welcoming	4.83		0.88		0.88		
Signs	5.26	1.25		0.79		0.44	0.67
The airport's signs clearly directed me to parking services	5.46		0.69		0.70		
The airport's signs clearly directed me to terminals	5.96		0.73		0.72		
Layout was properly designed to cater passengers with special needs	4.91		0.60		0.60		
Well-known retail and dining options were available	5.26		0.60		0.61		
Layout was properly managed to avoid passenger crowding	5.05		0.69		0.66		
The signs and electronic displays provide information accurately and clearly	5.66		0.63		0.67		
*The airport's signs clearly directed me to ATM services**	4.70		0.60		-	-	-
*Baggage trolleys were available and conveniently located**	5.09		0.63		-	-	-
Cleanliness	5.67	1.12		0.76		0.53	0.64
Restrooms and bathrooms were kept clean	5.75		0.81		0.67		
Retail, dining and entertainment were kept clean	5.55		0.85		0.78		
Walkways, exits and baggage claim areas were kept clean	5.72		0.82		0.70		
Airport Image	4.97	1.32		0.89		0.67	0.80
I have a favorable image of the airport	4.99		0.86		0.84		
The atmosphere of the airport was excellent	4.83		0.90		0.85		
The airport gave a sense of friendliness	4.72		0.82		0.75		
*The overall image of the airport was satisfactory**	5.33		0.90		-	-	-
Sense of Place	4.08	1.55		0.90		0.60	0.82
The airport reflected the national identity of the host country	4.24		0.81		0.78		
The interior as well as the exterior of the airport were designed using the host country's distinctive character	4.14		0.81		0.72		
The uniform of customer service's staff was designed using the host country's distinctive character	4.11		0.87		0.80		
I could 'feel' the host country while in the airport	3.77		0.83		0.78		
The host country's 'flavors' could be sensed almost everywhere in the airport	4.14		0.89		0.79		

Note: EFA = Exploratory Factor Analysis | CFA = Confirmatory Factor Analysis | AVE = Average Variance Extracted | CR[1] = Composite Reliability | (*) denotes item removed | Cron. **α**

Table 2. Validity and Reliability of the constructs

The next step was to assess the discriminant validity. Table 3 shows the square root of the AVE (diagonal values) of each construct to be larger than its corresponding correlation coefficients pointing towards adequate discriminant validity. Although some of the correlations were over 0.70, the square root of average variance extracted for each construct exceeds the correlations between constructs, hence the result indicates discriminant validity as per the respective literature (i.e., Prentice & Kadan, 2019; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The weights of the first-order constructs on the designated second-order construct indicate that an airport's environment is a second-order factor with three significant first-order dimensions including ambiance (0.75), signs (0.89), and cleanliness (0.67).

Constructs	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Ambiance	**0.872**				
Signs	.657***	**0.661**			
Cleanliness	.438***	.681***	**0.725**		
Airport Image	.670***	.777***	.605***	**0.816**	
Sense of Place	.455***	.269***	.184***	.566***	**0.778**

Values on the diagonal (bolded) are square root of the AVE while the off-diagonals are correlations.
***p<.001

Table 3 Discriminant Validity

3.1.4 Hypotheses testing

The hypotheses of the research model were tested with two structural equation path models. The first model involved testing H1-H3. Another model tested H4 and H5 which considered the direct effect of airport environment as a second-order construct on airport image, and sense of place as an environment-image moderator. The hypothesized relationships in the model were tested simultaneously using SEM. The proposed model provided an adequate fit to the data, as it yielded $\chi 2/df=2.92$, with the following fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI)=0.94; Tucker–Lewis index (TLI)=0.92; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)=0.06; and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)=0.05. According to Browne and Cudeck (1992), a TLI and CFI of at least 0.90, indicates an acceptable incremental fit of the data. Also, RMSEA and SRMR values below 0.08 are deemed acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Within the model, the estimates of the structural coefficients provided the basic tests of the hypothesized relationships (see Table 4). The effects of each environmental stimuli on airport image were first addressed (Hypothesis 1-3). The expected relationship between ambiance and airport image (Hypothesis 1) was supported by the positive path coefficient (standardized $\beta=.33$), statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. Signs affected airport image (standardized $\beta=.43$, $p<.001$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3 proposed that cleanliness affects

airport image. Results showed that signs positively affect airport image (standardized β=.15, p<.05) thus supporting H3. Next, the effect of the airport environment as a whole on airport image (i.e., Hypothesis 4) was also supported (standardized β=.72, p<.001).

3.1.5 Moderation model results

We hypothesized that sense of place would have moderating effects on the airport environment-image relationship. To test this moderating effect, airport environment (predictor) with sense of place (moderator) was multiplied to create interaction constructs (airport environment x sense of place) to predict passengers' airport image. As Table 4 shows, the estimated standardized coefficients for the effect of sense of place on airport image (standardized β = .20, p <.01) were significant. This indicates that portraying the cultural identity in international airports moderates the relationship between airport environment and airport image. H5 was supported.

Finally, several demographic-oriented and travel-oriented variables were controlled on passengers' airport image. The study demonstrated that passengers' whether are female or male, age, and travel frequency are important determinants of satisfaction. However, both females and males (β=.04, p=.252), age (β=.03, p=.443), and travel frequency (β=.03, p=.359) had no significant effect on travelers' airport image.

Hypotheses	**Beta**	**p Value**	**Decision**
H1: Ambiance → Airport Image	.33	p<.001	*Supported*
H2: Signs → Airport Image	.43	p<.001	*Supported*
H3: Cleanliness → Airport Image	.15	p<.05	*Supported*
H4: Airport Environment → Airport Image	.72	p<.001	*Supported*
H5: Airport Environment x Sense of Place → Airport Image	.20	p<.01	*Supported*

Fit statistics: χ2/df = 2.92; TLI = .92; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .05

Table 4. Hypotheses Testing

Based on the above, the conceptual model portraying the results is as shown in Figure 2 below.

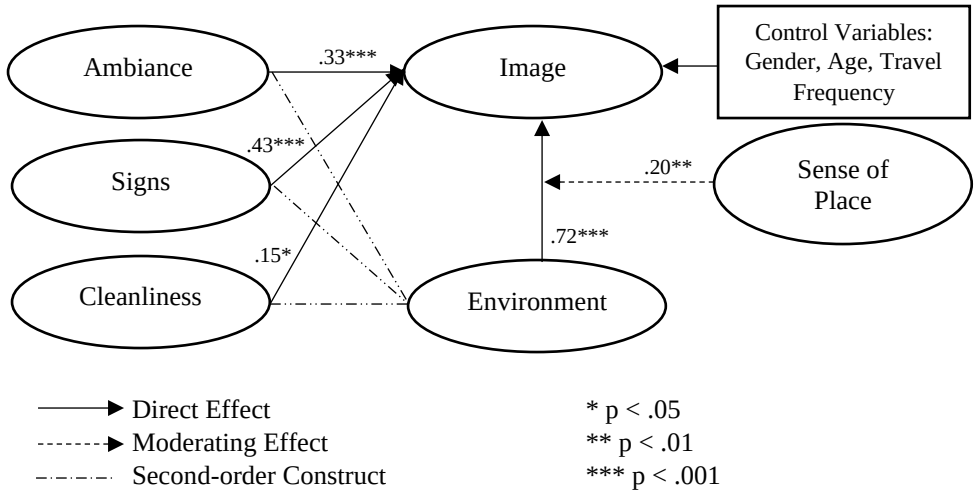

Figure 2 Conceptual model with results

3.2 Qualitative phase

3.2.1 *Focus Group*

Based on the sequential explanatory method adopted in this study, qualitative research was performed to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative results and specifically the concept of sense of place (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). We note that previous research demonstrated a systematic examination of the sense of place construct through quantitative methods by borrowing knowledge from the authenticity literature. As such, practical implications of certain stimuli that are more effective than others, and thus need to be prioritized by authorities, remain unanswered. For this purpose, a qualitative method in the form of a focus group was employed to advance our understanding on how authorities understand, interpret and apply sense of place stimuli in airports. Specifically, we aimed to evaluate the challenges faced by management pertaining to the use of sense of place stimuli, the creation of an effective airport environment and the impact these elements have on its image.

Contrary to individual interviews, the focus group allowed for a better mapping of how a managerial team addresses the above points collectively and as a team. In terms of the focus group structure, due to the complexity of the sense of place topic, a small yet specialized group with four marketing executives was chosen to address our goals. This choice aligned with literature on focus group design and size (i.e. Litosseliti, 2003; Babbie, 2007) based on topic specialization. A comprehensive literature analysis (i.e. Park & Park, 2018; Rowley & Slack, 1999) served as the basis for the interview questions that were flexible enough to promote in-depth conversations.

In terms of airport location, Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean and represents an important and tourist destination in the region. Cyprus has attempted in recent years to enhance its image through the development of an array of tourism products that emphasize authenticity, local culture and history (Farmaki et al., 2017), thus representing an

appropriate case to examine the concept of sense of place within an airport environment. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, enabling the identification of suitable participants. Three contact stages were followed. First participants were contacted over the phone and asked to participate in the study after explaining its purpose, ensuring their confidentiality throughout the process. Secondly, upon agreement of participation, a follow-up call was made to schedule the focus group. Finally, the focus group took place, was recorded upon permission and signed consent was obtained. The focus group took around 90 minutes, was conducted in Greek and was translated by a professional translator in English. Participants were coded from P1 to P4 to ensure confidentiality. P1 was a Marketing and Communications Director (55). P2 was a Marketing and Communications Manager (34), P3 was the Senior Marketing Communications Officer (30). P4 was a Marketing Specialist (27).

During the focus groups, the first author acted as the moderator. Following a list of pre-determined questions, the moderator first inquired about the expertise of participants to establish their experience with airport environment designs. Then, general questions about the airport's operations preceded ones about passenger experiences due to the complexity of the latter. A random prioritization of responses per question was used in an attempt to minimise authority effects (Nicolau et al., 2020) and the potential of agreeable responses of participants to opinions preceded by more senior colleagues. The moderator asked participants of their viewpoints on the concept of sense of place as well as current attempts made for its implementation and reinforcement. The aim was to obtain more comprehensive and in-depth information about airport executives' interpretation of the concept. Lastly, participants verified their responses and were debriefed signalling the end of the focus group meeting.

3.2.2 Qualitative data analysis

Two researchers examined the translated transcripts for accuracy and then analysed them thematically using Gioia et al.'s (2013) three coding rounds. To maximise analytical integrity and identify theory-driven important themes (1st order indicators) based on environmental psychology and SOR paradigm, the researchers reviewed the transcripts individually. In the second round of coding, themes were combined and compared to improve data interpretation (2nd order concepts). Thus, researchers categorised issues into interrelated themes and refined them into subcategories following protocol. Sub-categories and themes were joined in a third phase of coding to confirm linkages and evaluative rigour ensured data reliability (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process yielded three main themes: a) airport environment, which includes passenger views and perceptions of airport environment, b) sense of place, which includes application of sense of place stimuli in airport settings as well as ways of implementation, and c) airport image, which includes passenger perceptions and airport image monitoring. Figure 3 shows the data structure and the process yielding the three main themes.

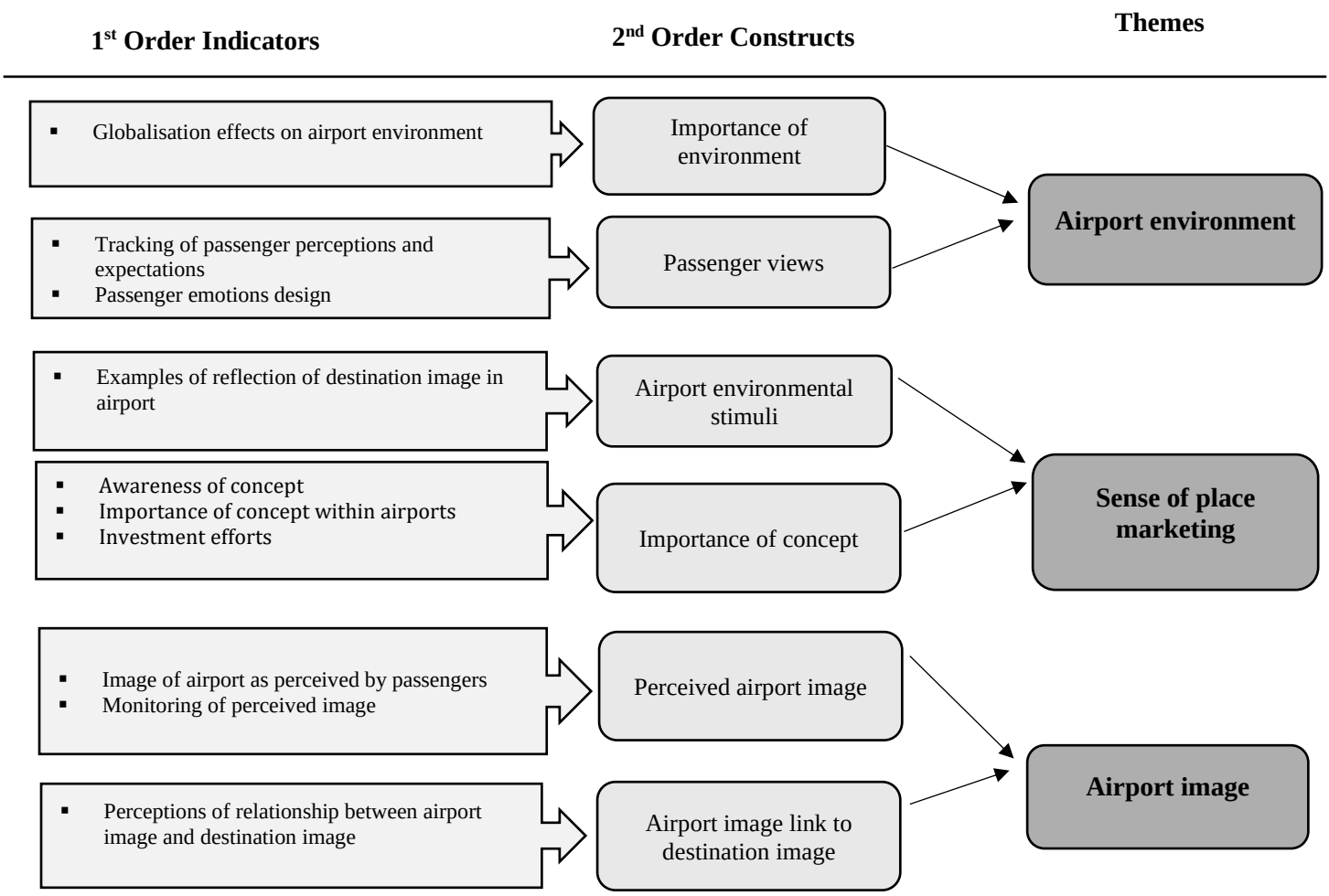

Figure 3. Thematic analysis through three coding rounds

3.2.3 Focus Groups findings

The participants were first asked to share their views on the importance of the airport environment in light of globalization. P1 elaborated:

> "This may be the case in the USA but in Europe most airports reflect local cultural characteristics…in European airports there is a commercial evolution due to the commercialization of air travel, so airports are regarded as traveling commodities." [P1, marketing and communications director]

With regard to airport monitoring tactics of passenger views, participants argued that passenger satisfaction surveys were conducted on an ad hoc basis, however, passenger expectations are not directly monitored. Participants mentioned that a survey on visitor tracking

using sensors was conducted recently to examine the route of passengers within the airport settings.

The discussion then moved to the concept of sense of place which all participants were aware of. Specifically, the participants were asked to explain how different stimuli are being managed within the airport to reflect the destination image, in this case Cyprus'. Various examples were shared including natural environment elements, local food options in the airport restaurants and visual displays and artifacts (i.e., photos, lacework) depicting the destination. A participant described:

> "We included local plants (olive trees) in common areas and use audio with the sound of waves and birds that remind passengers when they land that they have arrived on an island." [P4, marketing specialist]

Another participant added that with the aim of visually depicting the heritage of Cyprus:

> "…medieval artifacts were placed at the check-in desks as well as other objects from different historical periods of the destination." [P3, senior marketing and communications officer]

In this context, the participants agreed that sense of place was highly important in airport settings as it:

> "…differentiates an airport from another." [P2, marketing specialist]

During the discussion participants explained that efforts are being undertaken in recent years to invest on the sense of place of the Larnaca airport and thus were asked to describe the airport image as perceived by passengers. The airport executives admitted to not having a clear idea of the perceived airport image due to a lack of relevant surveys and, instead, argued that emphasis was placed by airport management on promoting a hospitable, modern destination that reflects important assets of Cyprus:

> "Destination image and airport image are not completely independent but not necessarily connected. Airport experience is not the only factor influencing destination image as a visitor may have a positive airport experience but negative accommodation experience." [P1, marketing and communications director].

4. Discussions

Airports are crucial entities to a destination's tourism products, with worldwide airline passenger numbers exceeding 8.5 billion in 2023 (ACI, 2024). Based on the notion that environmental signals shape perceptions, this study focused on how travelers' interactions with stimuli can affect perceptions of airport image. Through the quantitative phase the significant

effects of environmental elements on airport image imply that travelers appreciate and respond to environmental signals, ultimately improving airport image evaluations. Specifically, clear signage that assists with navigation and provides clear and informative nudges to airport travelers enhances perceptions towards airport image. High scores on ambience items relating to well-led and appropriately bright spaces, appealing architecture and soothing-colored schemes were also found to improve image evaluations. Finally, cleanliness throughout the servicescape (i.e. corridors, restrooms) is important for favourable image scores. This multivariate approach suggests that the reciprocity of the environment-image relationship is not determined by a single environmental stimulus but by the airport environment as a whole.

Our findings here align with previous satisfaction-focusing research. For example, the precise and right use of brightness, color and architecture, all of which constitute the construct of ambiance, solidifies its prominence as a servicescape construct (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2021; Bitner, 1992). The significance of signs also indicates that if tourists and travelers perceive signs to be clear and layout to be managed properly and well communicated, improves airport image scores, thereby supporting previous studies arguing that the clarity of signs and ease of navigating are important contributors on travelers' evaluations (Taheri et al., 2020). Results from the cleanliness sub-dimension indicated that cleanliness aligns with previous servicescape examinations (Mainardes et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2016).

5. Theoretical Implications

Importantly, our results expand previous knowledge and identify that portraying a country's character and culture within an airport environment moderates favourably the relationship between the airport environment and airport image. As also mentioned in the work of Adey (2007), efforts need to be made for the incorporation of locally inspired architecture into an airport, which is something that needs to be done in order to embrace regional identity. Additionally, this has the potential to mitigate the non-place effect that is present in a variety of airport settings.

In the qualitative phase, a focus group with the airport executives of Larnaca's International Airport was conducted, based on the island of Cyprus, the home country of the researchers. Focus groups provided qualitative insights that enhance the quantitative results regarding the complex sense of place. Results revealed that airport executives frequently encountered the impact of the airport environment on travelers' assessments. They appeared to be cognizant of the importance of cultural identity and employed artefacts, wave and seagull sounds (aligned with the summer island image of Cyprus) as well as specific local plants like olive trees, to communicate the country's identity. They shared their scope for future expansion and inclusion of additional stimuli yet, interestingly, we noted that the choice of the next sense of place stimulus followed a heuristic approach in the decision-making process instead of an empirical one. Specifically, choosing between displaying the country's flag or introducing traditionally dressed staff for serving tourists in dinners is made by reflecting on examples they witnessed

from other airports they visited and thus was not motivated by empirical investigations and based on travelers' scores of what they would like to see next. As such the group found justifications challenging on whether to prioritise traditional staff uniforms or displays of the country's flag, both of which are examples of sense of place stimuli.

As portrayed from both the qualitative and quantitative phase, airport environment underlined its important effect on airport image, where the more positive the interactions are with the airport environment, the more positive the airport image evaluation is. The findings extend to other travel servicescapes, like touristic ports and train stations. Emphasizing environmental stimuli—such as ambiance and signage—highlights the importance of optimizing these elements to create an inviting atmosphere. These improvements not only enhance travelers' perceptions but also boost the destination's reputation, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth about travel servicescapes.

6. Practical Implications

The identified link between the airport environment and image provides valuable insights to airport administrators for targeted marketing initiatives that elicit positive appraisals of the airport's image. First, focus group results demonstrate that emphasis should be put on the country's identity in airport surroundings. Specifically, thematic artworks and sculptures can be incorporated in the service environment while, more invasive approaches, can include architectural designs and alterations that remind underlying destination landscapes such as seascapes for islands.

Secondly, airports with a strong sense of place were talked about extensively by the focus group members, and included Vancouver's, Singapore's and Seoul's airports. These airports shared a common denominator in their sense of place designs; that of technology. Technological stimuli can capitalize on national identity and enhance interactivity. For example, Airstair's robot assistance, dressed in the colors of Korea, not only reminds travelers of their current destination but also enhances navigation through the provision of helpful information, assistance, and other functions. Such attempts promote sense of place and simultaneously improve travelers' functionality and navigation experiences, both essential elements for airport image enhancement. The results can assist destination and airport managers in the design of travel servicescapes. Destination managers can assess each environmental construct (e.g., ambiance) to determine how it can better represent the destination country.

Thirdly, interviewees witnessed practices employed at Fiji Island's airport and how authorities transformed staff to sense of place communicators by wearing traditional clothes at key service points, effectively showcasing the distinctive cultural history of the region. This method not only improves the traveler's experience by offering a distinctive sense of place, but

also encourages culture awareness. Other airports can utilize their unique attributes or even gastronomic offerings to greet travelers upon their arrival at the airport. One possible example could be the provision of food, such as preserved products, as a gesture of hospitality towards tourists. This outcome pertains to both airport authorities and destination managers. The airport can be enhanced beyond its operational capacity. It is essential for the environment to mirror the country in which it is situated, with airport authorities spending in enhancements such as: adornments of the airport with sculptures, colors, artworks and collaboration with destination boards, local authorities, and hospitality partners to ensure the airport aligns with and supports the destination's comprehensive marketing plan.

Given that sense of place has been identified as a significant moderator affecting airport image, it is crucial to note that several measurements have been used to study image in the context of airports. However, the impact of these measurements on this concept remains uncertain. Overall, this study's findings offer significant insights to destination planners that may lead to an improved destination marketing approach as well as more efficient tourism development.

6. Limitations and Future Research

In this study, our framework aimed to establish a connection between environment and image, and thus was not expanded to include behavioral intentions. Future studies can use the current model and incorporate constructs like airport revisit, positive word of mouth, and even airport loyalty. These were previously tested in retail and other corporate environments and found to have links with corporate image (Fuentes-Blasco et al., 2017), thus providing fertile ground for applications, specifically in travelscape settings.

Importantly, our qualitative attempt to capture the practices of industry professionals on the sense-of-place applications gives rise to avenues for enhancing the measurements of sense of place in the future. Current measurement items in the literature focus on generic formats, for example, the level of agreement to the following statement: *"The airport reflected the national identity of the host country,"* yet arguably, the latter lacks depth as to what exact stimuli are covered as well as which ones are found to be more effective over others. Future research can expand the sense of place construct through the inclusion of multiple stimulus-specific items including "The airport had sounds (artefacts/uniforms/plants) reflecting the country's identity" to more thoroughly capture effective practices of sense of place and delineate the decision-making process as to what stimuli need to be prioritized over others when communicating authenticity. As such, investigating servicescapes in postmodernism "could lead us to question the future of the concept of evidence" (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999, pp. 43–44).

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the handling editor and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback that led to this final version of the paper.

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