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LIMINALITY AND FESTIVALS—INSIGHTS FROM THE EAST

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Abstract

This research extends our knowledge of liminality through investigating how the liminal experiences of festival-goers are constructed in a Chinese music festival context. The research employs a multi-site data collection approach undertaking field observations and 68 in-depth semi-structured interviews at seven music festivals across three years. The study contributes to the theoretical development of a liminality framework by providing empirical evidence of the nature of liminality. It extends our understanding of event tourist experiences by highlighting the development and role of three types of *communitas* and identifying six stages within a rite of passage. The resulting multifaceted coexistence of liminal behaviours and identity with everyday routine life provides a new approach to the critical understanding of the role of liminality.

Keywords

Liminality, *Communitas*, Rite of passage, Music festivals, China

1. INTRODUCTION

Festivals have long been seen as major attractions and are therefore an important aspect of the tourism industry (Graburn, 1983, Gibson & Connell, 2007). For younger people, in particular, traveling to and taking part in a music festival takes on additional significance in its association with self and social identity and as a rite of passage (Jaimangal-Jones, Pritchard & Morgan, 2010). The distinctiveness of festivals in terms of consumption experience alongside their contribution to the visitor economy creates a need for further research into this still growing tourism phenomenon (Kim, Boo & Kim, 2013; Pielichaty, 2015).

Research taking a sociological perspective is limited in this area with little discussion of the concept of liminality in music festivals (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010). Liminality, a transitory and betwixt space and experience where people detach themselves from social norms and their everyday self (Turner, 1969, 1974), has been widely discussed in the tourism context (Foster & McCabe, 2015). While a number of studies discuss how liminality and *communitas* are used in sporting events or 'festivals' (e.g. Chalip, 2006; Lamont, 2014; Welty Peachey, Borland, Lobpries & Cohen, 2015; Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015), there are few empirical studies into how they are constructed in festivals (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010; Szmigin,

Bengry-Howell, Morey, Griffin & Riley, 2017).

Event tourism is unique in that the event space and programme are both created and consumed within a delimited temporary timeframe (Getz & Page, 2016; Li, Wood & Thomas, 2017). This, together with the symbolic, ritualistic and celebratory meanings of events (Getz & Page, 2016) is likely to lead to differing manifestations of liminality for visitors. The physical proximity of like-minded others in a liminal space also creates potential for the development of *communitas* and, therefore, the opportunity to address the lack of research on co-created or collective liminality experience in tourism (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006; Varley, 2011; Szmigin et al., 2017).

Many events, at least in the western context, are seen as spaces where visitors experience an escape from everyday lives and social obligations (Wilson, 2006). Getz (2007) identifies their role in creating a 'time out of time' liminoid zone and others have found empirical evidence to support this sense of escape from normal social conventions, alongside a spiritual dimension comparable to 'a pilgrimage' or 'a rite of passage' (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010; Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015). However the conceptualization of liminal event space and experience remains problematic and underexplored (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010) and little is understood of how "*communitas* form and evolve at and after events" (Getz & Page, 2016, p.610) therefore further research is necessary (Fairley & O'Brien, 2018).

Music festivals now play a significant role in China's tourism industry, attracting over three million visitors in 2016 (Daolue Music Industry Research, 2017). Although there have been a few studies focusing on the Chinese context (e.g. Dewar, Meyer & Li, 2001; Li & Wood, 2016; Li et al., 2017), none have explored the liminal aspect and research remains dominated by a western perspective. It is therefore unclear whether visitors within a more collective-dominant Chinese culture would experience liminality similarly to those in the West.

This study attempts to address these gaps through an investigation of liminal experiences at modern music festivals in mainland China.

2. LIMINALITY AND TOURISM

The concept of liminality in social sciences originates in the study of rites of passage by Van Gennep (1960 [1908]). Focusing on rites that mark the transition of an individual or social group from one status to another, Van Gennep (1960) identified three stages: separation (from normal routines and practices), transition/liminal stage ("when the subjects of ritual fall into a limbo between past and present modes of daily existence", Turner, 1979, p.467),

and (re)-incorporation (in society, with a new status/identity). The term 'liminality' characterizes the passage through the threshold which occurs in that middle stage.

The concept of liminality was rediscovered and largely developed by Turner (1969, 1974, 1979, 1982). Turner defined liminality as "a state or process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states and processes" (1979, p.465) and extended its use beyond traditional small scale societies to describe the process happening in public rituals, carnivals or stage drama (Rowe, 2008).

The extension of the concept of liminality to cover 'out-of-the-ordinary' experiences led to its increasing adoption in tourism studies (Thomassen & Balle, 2012). For example, Graburn (1983) proposed that tourists go through a process of ritual inversion and Wagner (1977) suggested that tourists 'abandon' their home social hierarchy as they interact with others during their travel. Gottlieb (1982) found similar changes to social hierarchical systems during travel.

Since then, liminality has been studied within various tourism contexts such as sea kayaking (Varley, 2011), surfing (Beaumont & Brown, 2016), beaches (Preston-Whyte, 2004), hotel space (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006), airport space (Huang et al., 2018), residential activity camps (Foster & McCabe, 2015), periods of long-term travel (White & White, 2004) and general tourism and travel (Ryan & Martin, 2001). For example, sea kayakers were found to experience a reflective journey beyond the excitement and challenges, feel self-separation from mainstream society, obtain satisfaction and a deep spiritual meaning from the adventure activity, and be part of an especially meaningful liminal world (Varley, 2011). Similar phrases are used to describe surfing activities, where participants take part in a 'surfing ritual' (Beaumont & Brown, 2016) and newcomers are required to participate in a rite of passage (Preston-Whyte, 2004) creating a surfer community (Beaumont & Brown, 2016). During the liminal state, tourists can experience radical emotional and moral changes that are rarely actualised in their normal life (Park, 2016; Picard & Di Giovine, 2014; Wagner, 1977).

Others have seen liminal experiences as being closely associated with existential (or activity-related) authenticity (Wang, 1999, 2000; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Szmigin et al., 2017) in that during such experiences "people feel that they are themselves much more authentic and more freely self-expressed than they are in everyday life" (Wang, 2000,p.49). Kim and Jamal's (2007) study within a festival setting found that "the attainment of existential authenticity...is closely related to the liminal characteristics of the festival"(p.184). This highlights the potential of liminal experience for personal transformation albeit these studies

have not considered the lasting post-trip effects resulting from the feelings of existential authenticity felt during the experience.

Similarly, a number of studies within sport and serious leisure look at how participation in sporting events contributes to the development of social identity. Green & Jones (2005) suggest that participants in sporting events are able, through travel, to escape their enduring identities. Shipway & Jones (2007) show how liminality and a sense of community associated with the act of travelling to an event allows participants to undergo a shift in identity salience and, although not explicitly referring to liminality, Shipway (2012) suggests that running events are a 'third place' where runners become part of a different world away from their ordinary life, strengthening their feeling of belonging and thus reinforcing social identity. Lee, Brown, King & Shipway (2016) explore this further, finding that sporting events shape social identity through value co-creation, liminality and *communitas*, flow and authentic experience: liminality and *communitas* facilitates a transformation from work or family related identities to a serious sport identity and allows for the generation and celebration of a subculture. Fairley & O'Brien (2018) also show how the liminal state created by an event enabled participants to develop a deeper connection with the sport subculture and to accumulate subcultural capital. However, it is unclear whether *less serious leisure*, such as attending a music festival, could provide a significant social identity transformation (Stebbins, 2001).

3. COMMUNITAS AND RITE OF PASSAGE

Turner (1982) suggests three forms of *communitas* within liminality: spontaneous, ideological and normative. Spontaneous *communitas* does not suggest a permanent state but spur-of-the-moment relationships (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Turner 1982), deep personal interactions in which individuals "become totally absorbed into one synchronized fluid event" (Turner, 1982, p.48). Ideological *communitas* embraces the optimal social conditions, and shared views and beliefs that are not normally expressed, a transformative experience which goes to the root of an individual's being (Turner, 1982). This goes beyond the incidental and temporary narratives, and represents a longer and deeper bonding on shared beliefs. Normative *communitas* is maintained by new or different social roles, rules, status and structures, which govern relationships on a more permanent basis (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Turner, 1982). According to Turner (1982), love, caring and intimacy are the key elements bonding individuals within normative *communitas*.

There are studies in tourism and leisure which describe the existence of *communitas* generally (e.g. Goulding & Shankar, 2011; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Varley, 2011) and literature

looking at how *communitas* in sporting events and festivals contributes to the development of social capital or social identity (Shipway & Jones, 2007; Lee et al., 2016; Fairley & O'Brien, 2018) or 'hot' authentication (Lamont, 2014). Other studies have linked *communitas* to shared music tastes bringing festival visitors together with a feeling of equality (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010; Kim & Jamal, 2007). In the festival carnivalesque setting, *communitas* is likely to involve detachment from society and a change of original identity and usual social status (Getz, 2007). However, the transient separation state created by travel to events "enables (but does not guarantee) the creation of 'communitas' among fellow travellers" (Getz, 2007, p.178). The construction and the role of *communitas* in the creation of liminal experience remains unclear, and empirical evidence for the three different categories of *communitas* is limited (Getz & Page, 2016; John, 2001).

There is also, as yet, little empirical research on the process of rites of passage in event tourism (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010). Jafari (1987) conceptually developed van Gennep's (1960) three stages of separation, transition and incorporation into a five-phase process to explain liminal experience and transition within a tourism context. These stages are *corporation*, where tourists recognize the need to escape from routine; *emancipation*, where they separate from their home environment physically and psychologically; *animation*, where they experience a liminal state, adopt a different identity and behaviours; *repatriation*, where they travel back to their home environment and; *incorporation*, where they fully regain their 'normal' identity and go back to routine behaviours.

More recently, McKercher & Lui (2014) proposed a revised framework which attempts to explain the complexity of transferring to and from a liminal state through the introduction of an *engagement* and a *disentanglement* stage (replacing the emancipation and repatriation stages in Jafari's (1987) model, respectively). They found that engagement is a progressive process of detachment from everyday life and an entering into touristhood, starting before tourists embark on the journey and continuing after they arrive at their first destination. The disentanglement phase is also an extended process starting before departure and finishing after they return home. To better understand tourists' liminal experience, it is therefore important to recognize the emotional changes taking place at home as they start to engage in the preparation for travel, as well as their emotional state as they disentangle themselves from being a tourist and prepare for home.

Getz (2007) summarises this as a three-stage process delineating 'separation', 'liminal zone', and 'reversion'. He emphasises an important signature point at the reversion stage—a sense of change. This could be a feeling of gaining something, going back to ordinary life, regaining the usual *inauthentic* self (Wang, 1999), or a sense of loss (Getz, 2007). The sense of loss

might entail a loss of protected space or of *communitas*, and is a novel perspective on the returning to the original noted in the main discourses.

These frameworks provide a useful starting point for our research which aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the construction of liminality in and around music festivals. To do so, the first two objectives are therefore to explore the stages of rite of passage that visitors to Chinese music festivals go through and, to analyse the role of *communitas* in shaping visitors' liminal experience.

Previous studies suggest that Chinese culture and growing societal tensions impact on attendees' motivation and interactions (Li & Wood, 2016; Wu & Dai, 2018). This raises a question of whether the more collectivist culture shapes Chinese visitors' perception of *communitas* differently from in the West. The context is made even more complex due to the coexistence of traditional behaviours alongside growing individualism and aspirations to western lifestyles. This calls for a more critical view of how Chinese visitors experience events. A third research objective, therefore, is to critically explore how the Chinese socio-cultural context influences the manifestation of liminality. An investigation of the culturally-shaped construction of *communitas* and rite of passage in our study provides a more comprehensive conceptual understanding of such experience.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study employed a multi-method reflexive ethnographic approach to data collection, which is particularly appropriate within the event context (Getz, 2008; Holloway, Brown & Shipway, 2010), as it enables exploration of participants' interactions and a deeper understanding of the meanings ascribed to the experience (Holloway et al., 2010). Data was collected through field observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews (Holloway et al., 2010), supported by photo analysis, netnography and secondary data (participants' personal records of the festival, media reports, documents and magazines). As the most widely cited and effective approaches for ethnographic study (Ervin, 2000), these allowed the researchers to get close to the research participants, observe their behaviours over time (without unduly influencing them), and record ongoing interpretations (Black & Champion, 1976).

The context for the research centres on Midi Festival which is the longest running and most widely known festival of its type in China (Li & Wood, 2016). It was initially held in Beijing in 2000 and has taken place 44 times (up to 2018) with up to three festivals taking place at different locations each year attracting millions of tourists over its lifetime (Baidu Baike, 2017). Each festival lasts two to three days and is run by a grass-roots underground rock

music school (Baidu Baike, 2017). The stated purpose is to create a paradise for rock music fans to enjoy freedom, happiness and to dream (Zhang, 2011). In mainland China, where rock music has been politically and socially constrained, as it is seen as rebellious, anarchical and aggressive (Zhang, 2011), Midi attempts to promote an alternative lifestyle, earning it the label 'the Chinese Woodstock' (Wu & Dai, 2018). The performers at the Festival express the spirit of freedom and attendees tend to be idealistic with a concern for social issues, and a desire to feel *free* (Li & Wood, 2016; Wu & Dai, 2018). This radical reputation has brought significant government pressure and restrictions on the development of the festival over the years (Wu & Dai, 2018; Zhang, 2011). The restrictive political environment means that this type of festival is relatively rare in China and, therefore, attending it is seen as more of a subversive act and a form of escapism than in many other countries (Li & Wood, 2016). Midi was therefore chosen for its established history, reputation, frequency, and its significance within China.

In order to capture festival-goers' experience of liminality over a five-stage process (Jafari, 1987; McKercher & Lui, 2014), multi-site data collection took place at seven Midi festivals over a three-year period from 2014 to 2017 covering the pre-, during, and post-event phases. This began with the immersion of the first author (a Chinese national) in the cultural context, experiencing the world of the participants prior to any systematic enquiry and examination (Wolcott, 2009). This process entailed engaging with festival-goers as a fellow attendee using participant observation in order to better understand the interactions between them and the festivalscape (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) during the first three festivals, as well as being a member of several festival-related online chat groups. This 23-month immersion, engagement and observation continued over subsequent festivals, where the majority of interviews were conducted, and included time at the festival sites as well as online pre-and post-festivals. This in-depth fieldwork enabled fuller understanding of the norms, values, and structures within the research context, as well as the meaning behind participants' behaviours, and their interview responses (Robson, 2002; Walsh, 1998). It also helped with the identification of the first 39 interview participants and interview question development.

During the field work at the final two festivals in the third year of data collection, participant observation notes and informal conversations notes were also utilized to reflect and triangulate what had been understood before. This was in addition to the main interviews and prior observation and was used to support a more comprehensive understanding of what was understood previously. The notes were also found to be useful in uncovering the deeper meanings that were not fully revealed or understood in the interviews and previous observation (Finn et al., 2000). For example, after understanding from the interviews that some attendees pogoed at the festival to express their frustration, the first author went with

them to observe this behaviour, the music and environment in which it happened, and used informal conversations to understand the links between their frustration, behaviours, and the music/environment.

Netnography was also used to observe festival-goers' pre-, during-, and post-event thoughts, emotions and behaviours online (Kozinets, 2015). This was conducted via major online discussion groups related to the festival, i.e. Wechat, QQ, Douban and the Midi official forum. The online fieldwork helped develop understanding of the festival context, its atmosphere, culture, visitors' behaviours and behavioural changes, and their perception of the festival and its impacts. The main data that inform this study were then gathered through 68 in-depth semi-structured interviews. Data collection is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of data collection

Festival	Time of festival	Number of interviews	Field work and observation	Netnography--number of groups; time length
Sanjiagang Midi	2014.10.1-3	5	Participant observation	2 groups; 2 months
Suzhou Tai-lake Midi	2014.10.5-7	1	Participant observation	2 groups; 2 months
Shenzhen Midi	2014.12.31-2015.1.1	2	Participant observation	2 groups; 3 months
Suzhou Tai-lake Midi	2015.5.1-3	22	Observation	6 groups; 5 months
Suzhou Tai-lake Midi	2015.10.1-3	25	Observation	11 groups; 5 months
Shenzhen Midi	2015.12.31-2016.1.1	8	Participant observation	11 groups; 5 months
Shenzhen Midi	2016.12.31-2017.1.1	5	Participant observation	11 groups; 3 months

Through purposive sampling undertaken during the observation, an initial 39 interview participants were selected at the first three festivals, using the criteria that they had been to the festival more than three times, always stayed overnight at the festival campsite, and belonged to a festival online social group. This made it more likely that they had a high level of engagement with the festival and could provide rich information (Patton 1990). Snowball sampling, using the same criteria, was then employed to identify a further 29 interview participants. The sample size was finalized after data saturation was reached. The participants were between 20 and 40 years old, consisted of 31 females and 37 males, and all had travelled from other towns, cities or provinces. Within the 68 interview participants, 33 of them were observed over more than one festival (two across five festivals, two across four, 13 across three and 16 across two).

The audio-recorded interviews were conducted on the festival sites and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes with semi-structured questions designed to explore how their liminal

experiences were constructed. These included, *'what did you experience at Midi'*, *'how did you feel at Midi (and why)'*, *'how do you see Midi (and why)'*, *'what impressed you at Midi (and why)'* and *'what are your special memories of Midi'*. Follow-up questions were also used to explore communitas and rite of passage informed by the pre- and post-liminal stages suggested in the literature. These included *'how did you feel about people there'*, *'why did you interact with others and who were they'*, *'describe the interactions and how you felt about them'*, *'what was your Midi group like'*, *'how did you imagine Midi before you went'*, *'what was a typical day like before you went to Midi'*, *'how did you prepare for Midi'*, *'how was the journey to Midi'*, *'how did you feel after Midi'*.

To ensure the reflexivity of the study, during the data collection and analysis, the first author continuously and systematically reflected on her positionality in the study, and the extent to which her values, perception, involvement and behaviours could influence the studied groups and environment (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Holloway et al., 2010). Distance from the participants was adjusted by withdrawing from participant observation when undertaking the main interviews at the fourth and fifth festivals (whilst having been an 'insider' helped to encourage responses from participants). Reflexive notes were taken on her dual role as a researcher and as a festival-goer which were utilised to understand festival-goers' experience more comprehensively.

A thematic analysis was conducted utilising the interview transcripts alongside the observation notes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were analysed and coded around the construction of liminal experience and what constitutes changes to visitors' identity and behaviours in all stages of that experience. The findings highlight six stages in the visitors' overall journey, characterised by changes in their experience and behaviour, from anticipation before the event to identity-reconciliation afterwards, helping us understand how liminality is constructed and its possible lasting effects. The findings also outline the importance of communitas in constructing visitors' liminal experience and identity change, and identify key factors supporting three types of communitas in music festivals, the influence of which transcends the liminal stage. These findings are discussed below and structured chronologically to reflect the different stages of rite of passage in the visitors' journey.

5. PRE-LIMINAL PHASES: ANTICIPATION, EMANCIPATION

The netnographic data indicate that anticipation of the festival begins around one month before attendance. For example, the group discussions on WeChat increased significantly, from the usual 20-50 daily contributions to 100, and jumped to 500-1,600 comments daily

when it was closer to the festival start date. Most of the discussions centred on ‘travel to the music festival’, ‘the “uniform” to wear’, ‘tents’ and the memories of past Midi experiences. Some participants even started a daily countdown. Anticipation was revealed in these online discussions focused on preparation and impatience. This was also evident in interviews:

“I can still remember how excited I was. I packed everything one month before the festival started. I was very excited and was looking forward to the days at the festival during that month. It’s a pilgrimage for me!”(Interview9)

“I was so excited before I came to Midi, I even felt more enthusiastic about my work in those days too. I thought I’d go mad when the date was close.”(Interview24)

Rather than simply recognising a need to escape, as in Jafari’s (1987) corporation phase, during the anticipation phase emotions, attitudes and behaviours gradually changed in expectation of and preparation for the festival experience. Such changes, e.g. early packing, growing excitement, enthusiasm and impatience, were readily observed as the festival start date approached.

Arguably, the Chinese social environment may have contributed to the emergence of this important anticipation phase. The rarity of the Festival due to government constraints and the suppression of individualistic ideas and behaviours by society undoubtedly play some part in this (Wu & Dai, 2018). There is, therefore, a strong motivation for spiritual release (from a restrictive society), and a desire to discover ones ‘inner authentic self’ (Li & Wood, 2016; Kim & Jamal, 2007). The greater contrast between festival life and everyday life in the Chinese context creates an intensified anticipation and emotional response in attendees pre-trip.

Following the anticipation phase, festival-goers leave their home, their ‘normal’ lives and embark on a journey to the festival, travelling from all over the country. During this time there was an excitement and a happiness about being ‘on the road’. This journey-related excitement was identified in the interviews, but also in the videos of ‘travel to the music festival’ uploaded to the Internet. For example, a vlog script says,

“We are singing and discussing our favourite music, drinking beers and sitting for 16 hours on the hard seats [cheapest] on the train, only to hurry to our beloved music festival.”

It can be argued that during this phase, participants were physically away from their home, and their emotions were no longer those felt in ordinary life but centred on the joy and excitement of the road moving into festival mode even before their arrival. Some of the key

factors of *communitas* (e.g. shared music taste, togetherness) start emerging, paving the way for the liminal phase. This illustrates the emancipation phase (Jafari, 1987), which seeks to explain festival-goers' physical and psychological separation from their ordinary life. Both anticipation and emancipation were therefore found to be important pre-liminal phases in this context.

6. LIMINAL PHASE: ANIMATION

From the start of the Festival, visitors began to adopt different behaviours and identities:

"When I go to work I have to hide my tattoos. But here at Midi it's not a problem. This identity is actually my favourite one, it's my most real identity. I even have to hide it from family, I have to compromise, I cannot express these emotions, it's tiring. I cannot be as real as I am at Midi." (Interview13)

"I feel quite different [here] than in normal life, which is regular work, 8am to 5pm, living a plain life, you close your eyes and can see what tomorrow is like, plain and dull...But at Midi, it's releasing myself, expressing my inner self, expressing feelings." (Interview32)

"In ordinary work life, you wear a mask, even with my parents, my wife, I cannot truly be myself...but at Midi it's different, being together with others like me, we like the same music, have the same interests and dreams, so I can say anything, no more pretending." (Interview41)

The comparison they made between their normal life and their time at the festival, illustrates what they felt and experienced differently there. Whilst there seems to be so much to 'hide' in their routine life, they no longer felt the need to at the festival. They could release their true self and express themselves freely. It can be seen that they transformed into *festival-goers* behaving quite differently at the festival, emphasising a sense of existential authenticity and revealing their *true* selves (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Wang, 2000). This was not through the formation of a *new* identity but through the (re)discovery of a hidden one, their *real* self, one that has always been there but was suppressed by the social norms and structures of ordinary life. The belief that they are their true selves at the festival emphasises the importance of the liminal process in self-identity (Currie, 1997; Ryan & Kinder, 1996; Kim & Jamal, 2007) and indicates a deep discontent with their everyday lives which may be exaggerated within what they see as an oppressive society.

This adoption of different behaviours and identities from their day-to-day life is made

possible by their liminal experience and can be seen as a crucial part of the animation phase (Jafari, 1987). During that phase (from the start to the end of festival) participants also exhibited anti-structure views and acts. *Others* provided the space and permission for these different behaviours and identities to be actualised at the festival. The importance of 'others' was further explored through the concept of *communitas*. The three types of *communitas* emerging from the data helped to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how festival-goers' liminal experience is constructed and are discussed below.

6.1. Spontaneous communitas

The data show that spontaneous *communitas* was constructed incidentally in the ludic interaction between visitors. For example, there was a feeling of intimate bonding between visitors when they were pogoing in the circle pit, stage diving and moshing. They expressed a feeling of mutual inner passion aroused by the rhythms and lyrics of the music. An instantaneous, spontaneous and transient *communitas* was formed, which began and ended with the music. Excerpts from the interviews illustrate this:

"All the people were united there together by this song, and all of them were pogoing, so the rapport was more intense. It's like, not only me, all of us, when we pogoed, we shared the same feelings and emotions together." (Interview12)

"Everybody sang and pogoed together, we really felt rapport, felt encouraged...The music expresses our minds, our inner dreams of love and an ideal life, and especially anger. When I pogoed with friends around, the violent body bumping expressed my inner unruly self, my resistance to numbness, my defence of the purity of my spiritual territory." (Interview7)

The festival-goers' interactions went beyond physical bonding, stimulating a deeper connection through a perception of shared views about the world, life and values (e.g. 'shared', 'rapport', 'our mind' and 'dreams'). Such shared views were illustrated by the lyrics of the music they listened to, often calling for a change in society. It is important to highlight that such rebellious music is widely banned in China, and almost only available at Midi in a live performance format (Zhang, 2011). The role of the music, therefore, goes beyond mutual taste, providing a rare opportunity for attendees to exhibit their inner deep agreement with the anti-structure message creating a deeper bond with the festival environment and the others immersed in it.

Music, shared attitudes and beliefs provided a space where participants experienced physical

and emotional bonding with others and a spontaneous *communitas*. In line with other tourism studies on liminality (Getz, 2007; Goulding & Shankar, 2011; Varley, 2011), such spontaneous *communitas* was a moment where participants released their true selves with others and shared nonconformity to the social norms experienced in daily life. This was stimulated by the music which was felt to portray their shared views and attitudes as well as bringing them together in physical proximity and synchronised dance styles creating a powerful collective experience.

6.2. Ideological communitas

Ideological *communitas* goes beyond the music and presents a more enduring space in the festival. At Midi festival this was formed on mutual anti-structure views and attitudes. This has become a well-developed cultural aspect or symbol of the festival, resulting in a space within which the perceived problematic social and cultural norms in China can be challenged.

As revealed in the interviews and both field and online observation, in this liminal space, participants' social identities were abandoned and inversionary behaviours exhibited (Currie, 1997). For example:

"If you like the music then age, appearance, height, status, power all vanish. I can scream at any moment, I even kissed the strangers next to me when the music touched me deeply, I can leave my tattoos uncovered freely around people. No one would look at me strangely."(Interview15)

The participant perceived kissing strangers and showing tattoos in public as unacceptable in Chinese society yet something they can 'freely' do at Midi, without constraint from social expectations. The liminality created by the transformed social space allows for more flexible social rules and changes in the acceptability of non-traditional behaviours (Picard & Di Giovine, 2014). This is further illustrated by the quote:

"It would be very strange to do some of these things in ordinary life. For example, when I headbang with anger, pogo, it's in my own room. We can rarely do it with people in public places, but here is not the same. Sometimes I'm really angry about injustice in life. I can't just go and fight with someone but those emotions can't always be suppressed. When I come to the festival, we follow the music, shake our heads and pogo together. At least for me that's a kind of release. In the festival, where many like-minded people get together to express resistance to injustice and unethical behaviour in society, it has strength, it may be sent out to society, and then there will be changes."(Interview26)

Based on the data, such ideological communitas allowed visitors to release the negative emotions accumulated and 'suppressed' in their ordinary life, and to powerfully express themselves in a way that would be unacceptable outside of the festival space. The perception of having like-minded people at the festival who disobey traditional social norms and rules, and resistance to perceived injustice, reflects the attendees' shared anti-structure attitudes, and evidences ideological communitas.

Anti-structure is a key feature in liminality where the dissolution of everyday social norms and structures can create alternative approaches to life such as a utopian model (Turner, 1969, 1982). This is more complex than initiatory passage rites which tend to simply invert hierarchical structures (Weichselbaumer, 2012; Bakhtin, 1984) as distinctions between individuals and their outside social status are reduced in liminality, leading to greater egalitarianism (Preston-Whyte 2004; Shields, 1991).

Anti-structure art forms embodied by festival-goers also contributed to the forming of ideological communitas. For example, Mohican hairdos, dreadlocks, tattoos, punk clothes, and T-shirt slogans such as 'fight all inequality forever', 'justice, freedom' were commonly seen.



Photo 1: Dreadlocks and tattoos rarely openly displayed in Chinese society; by author



Photo 2: T-shirt slogans 'Justice', 'Freedom'; by Shanyao

Other performing arts used sarcasm to criticize societal problems. For example, 'walking the cabbage' (see photo 3) symbolises young people having too much pressure and few friends in real life. They are left with only the company of a cabbage which is seen as lonely and ordinary. Other slogans such as 'Marriage-seeking' satirize the utilitarianism of marriage in Chinese society and 'Free hug' points to the lack of love and trust between people particularly in cities.



Photo 3: 'Walking the cabbage' to signify social isolation in everyday life; by Wuhujun

All these depict a festival space where ‘resistant bodies’ challenge social conventions and norms and traverse social boundaries (Shields, 1991). These illustrate that, through actions in this ‘transitional dwelling space’ (Shortt, 2015, p.636), festival-goers generate alternative models of living often involving radical change (Turner, 1982).

Anti-structure as a theme constantly emerges in the interviews and observation of the festival space, and in the wider social perception of Midi (Li & Wood, 2016). Again, it is argued that the restrictive Chinese society, for example, authoritarian traditional parenting styles, and hierarchical guanxi-oriented work environments (Wu & Dai, 2018), have led to a stronger desire to ‘rebel’ in these young attendees. This rebellion against the dominant social norms and the pursuit of freedom, of independence and equality (Li & Wood, 2016), contributes significantly to the anti-structure sub-culture at the festival. This desire is also magnified due to the lack of other rebellious opportunities and the uniqueness of the Midi festival in China (Wu & Dai, 2018).

Data from the interviews and observations reveal a further important contributor to the construction of ideological *communitas*, the concept of Midi as ‘utopia’:

“It’s loving, free, ideal and dreamlike, a utopia!...Midi is the representation of utopia.”(Interview33)

“[Midi] is a utopia, there were friends everywhere, there were no barriers to interactions, people spent happy times with each other”(Interview16)

“[Midi] embodies utopia. It’s not utilitarian, it’s different from the outside world. It seems independently exist here[...]In Midi, every stranger is ‘family’, when we are here, everybody is brothers, and are trustworthy”(Interview22)

The perception of a utopian environment at the Festivals shaped the intimate and loving relationships between attendees, their behaviours and interactions, and constructed their faith in the event environment and community (e.g. free, loving, everybody as family). Midi has come to symbolise *utopia* (Wu & Dai, 2018), reflecting attendees’ hope for a more peaceful and egalitarian society (Li & Wood, 2016). The sharing and appreciation of anti-structure attitudes, the shared subversive behaviours alongside a perception of ‘utopia’ create an emotional bond between festival-goers resulting in ideological *communitas* that goes far beyond a mutual love of the music.

6.3. Normative *communitas*

Normative *communitas* is maintained by new or different social roles, rules, status and structures, where a perduring social system governs relationships on a more permanent basis (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Turner, 1982). The longitudinal data collected from festival-goers who had been to the festival more than once and the online observations reveal the formation of Midi groups (begun in 2008, ten years on some now have more than 500 members). New social rules and structures were observed gradually evolving within these groups, indicating the formation of normative *communitas*. These included quite formal roles such as group leader, accountant, and trip operator. About one month before the festival began, those with designated roles started to organise activities within the group such as publishing information about the festival, designing and purchasing uniforms for the group, arranging transportation, food, drinks, camping etc. These new structures however reflected an environment of anti-structure with each semi-formal role being voluntary, unpaid and of equal status, ensuring the longevity of the group as *communitas*.

Beyond the new set of structures, it was observed that normative *communitas* is indeed maintained through an environment of *love*, *care* and *intimacy* (Turner, 1982). For example:

“We were sharing the same beer, and cigarettes were always passed to everyone. If you had any problems like finding toilets or your phone died, there was always someone who was willing to help you out.”(Interview29)

“Every time I went to Midi and saw these old friends there, they provided enthusiastic hospitality. If I needed help, I only need to ask. They are like family, I feel very warm and close”(Interview31)

Sharing the same drink denotes an intimate interaction and the helping behaviours reflect a level of care and love, which is emphasised by their assimilation to family, and feeling warm and close. Distinct from the discourse of anonymity and ambiguity in dance music venues (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010), night clubs (Goulding & Shankar, 2011) or the seaside context (Malbon, 1999), the connections among these participants were strong. Perhaps it is worth noting that these younger people at the Festival see Chinese society as becoming more problematic under the influence of commercialisation and materialism, where coldness, distance, selfishness and a lack of trust is increasingly exhibited (Wu & Dai, 2018). This wider social context might have also contributed to the impact that the perception of friendship had on the development of normative *communitas*. This is given space to develop during the animation phase due to the liminality of the festival experience.

It can be argued that the three types of *communitas* provided a *safe* place, and a motivation,

for festival-goers' different behaviours and identities to be actualised at the festival. This *communitas* is a vital part of the animation phase and helps to reveal the complex construction of festival-goers' liminal experience. Although *communitas* is not a new concept, most research in events and tourism tends to focus on temporary *communitas* and emphasises its ephemeral nature (e.g. Szmigin et al., 2017). This study provides empirical evidence of all three types within one research context, illustrating how they are constructed (the factors of anti-structure, music, utopia and friendship) and their respective roles in rites of passage, beyond the liminal phase.

7. POST-LIMINAL PHASES: ENHANCEMENT, SEQUELA, IDENTITY RECONCILIATION

As the festival finishes, emotional attachment reaches a peak:

"In that moment we had the emotion of not wanting it to end. I can remember I hugged someone who was nearby and cried and cried. I didn't want to leave this place."(Interview29)

"On the last day, after the last band everybody just stayed there. Everybody was emotional, not willing to depart but having to. Many people were hugging each other and crying in the rain, immersed in it and not wanting it to end."(Interview25)

Festival-goers' emotions did not fade, as in Jafari's (1987) 'recovery' stage, but instead appeared at their most intense. When the official goodbye was announced, many participants were deeply absorbed, they cried and hugged, had difficulty in letting go and were unwilling to say goodbye. This sense of loss (Getz, 2007) enhances their deep inner attachment and feeling of *communitas*. We conceptualise this as the *enhancement* phase which extends our existing understanding of rite of passage. The restrictive nature of Chinese society and the scarcity of such liminal experiences may also contribute to this profound unwillingness for the experience to end.

The participants eventually did have to physically return to their lives, however their thoughts remained drawn to the festival experience:

"I had very serious Midi sequela. I felt very unreal in my everyday life. Even when I had started to work, it felt like I was just a body there. All of my mind was on those wonderful experiences I had at the festival. It was a month later before it started to come to normal."(Interview5)

"In normal life I seldom pogo. But when I return from Midi, every time I listen to my music, I

cannot help but shake my head, even when I'm walking the corridors, I pogo along to the music."(Interview37)

The participants seem to still mentally 'live in the festival' and behaved as if they were still there, even when they had physically left and returned to their normal life. This is the *sequela* phase where they exhibited, as they defined it, 'Midi sequela' in their everyday environment. The symptoms included continuing with behaviours they had engaged in at the festival, such as wanting to shake their bodies, making a thumbs-up sign for things they like, and the angry finger gesture for things they dislike, and continually playing the music heard at the festival.

Eventually the participants returned to their ordinary state but with noticeable changes. The longitudinal online observation and interviews reveal that many participants felt normative *communitas* through the Midi online groups after the festival. They were more than fans, feeling part of a family with a strong symbolic and ritual attachment to the festival. They formalised this group identity with the term 'Midier':

"After I returned, I became a Midier. I joined the group so we can chat a lot, and meet and have fun together at the next festival."(Interview25)

"Having fun with them there at the festival felt so great, much better than my imagination. When I returned [home], I became a Midier. I have a Midi friend in a group, so I became a member of that *family*."(Interview29)

"Every time, after each festival finished, [we] would still keep in touch. After it ended, it was like an illness, I was obsessed by the Midi atmosphere. In the group we'd use the instant video calls to sing, chat and drink together, pretending we were at the Festival, reliving the feeling. In ordinary life, it's very rare to meet likeminded people like them."(Interview46)

It can be seen that the new social identity of 'Midier' maintains a sense of attachment to the festival and a continued opportunity to interact with other Midi fans through the persistence of normative *communitas*. Whilst, ostensibly, they return to their ordinary lives, go back to work or study, they also carry with them this new social identity of 'Midier'. Through this they relive their profound shared Midi experience and memories enjoying a sense of belonging, intimacy, caring and love from the community. It can be argued that both the liminal experience and their new social identity as Midier contribute to a longer term transformation of their lives. This is reflected in alternative wider social connections,

alternative social interactions and greater emotional attachments. Post-festival behaviours exemplified this such as watching alternative grassroots live performances together, travelling together, and the development of lasting personal relationships and even marriage within their new social group. The new social identity coexists with their ordinary identity (usual self) and is conceptualised here as the *identity reconciliation* phase of their rite of passage thus extending the theory in this area.

A typical rite of passage often ends with an enhanced and clearly defined social status (Turner, 1982), however, Jaimangal-Jones et al. (2010) argue that this is unlikely to be fixed in a tourism context. Other studies also emphasize the temporary nature of any new identity developed during tourists' liminal state and a return to their 'usual' self at the end of travel (Berdychovsky et al., 2013; Currie, 1997). Although research on serious leisure shows that liminality and *communitas* in international events help participants develop a lasting social identity (Lee et al., 2016), this identity was pre-existing. Here the data indicates that participants uncovered a new identity at the end of the rite of passage and that their liminal journey, influenced by *communitas*, played a vital role in the development of this identity (Park, 2016). Their new social identity is incorporated into everyday life using it when communicating with the fellowship groups they built at the festival. This social identity, perceived as a reflection of their true self, coexists with a *displayed* identity seen as more acceptable within mainstream Chinese society.

8. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis of the pre-, during and post-liminal phases supports the development of a conceptual framework for understanding the core of festival-goers' liminal experience. This framework is presented in Figure 1, and illustrates how liminal experience centred on a festival context is constructed via an extended rite of passage and through three forms of *communitas*.

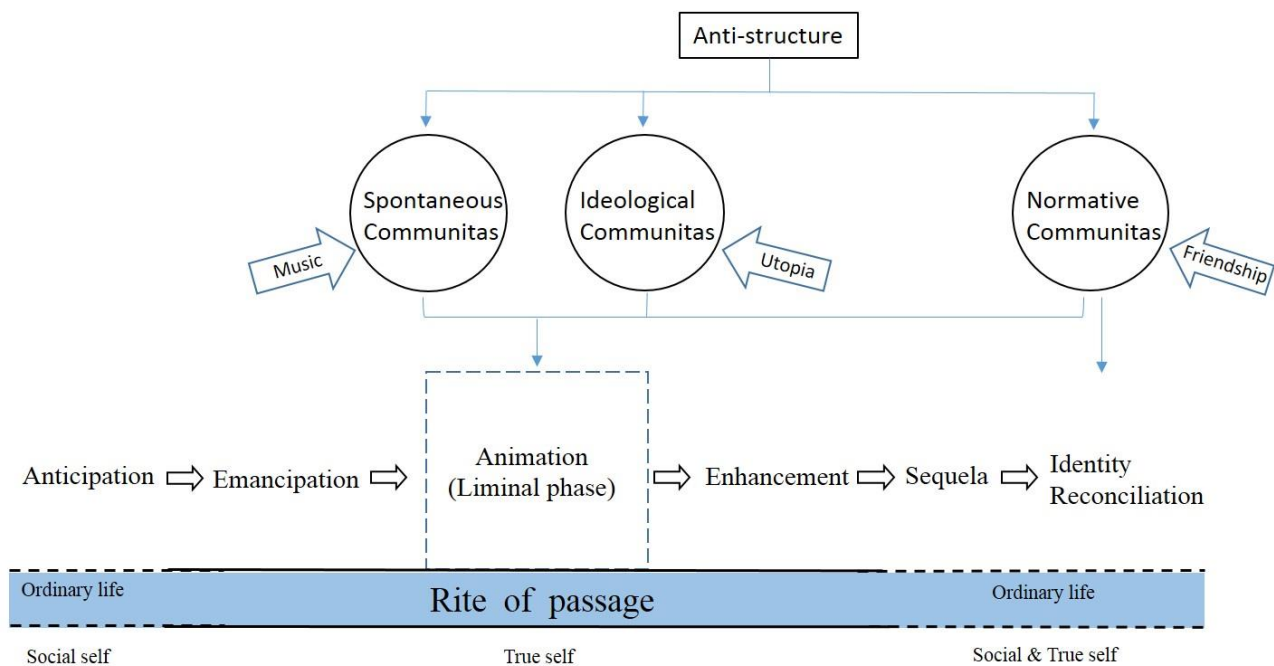


Figure 1 Framework for the construction of liminal experience centred on a festival context

Source: authors

The framework incorporates six phases to fully explain the process of liminality and rite of passage and illustrates the complexity of the construction of such liminal experiences. There are two pre-liminal phases—anticipation and emancipation, the liminal phase of animation, and three post-liminal phases—enhancement, sequela and identity reconciliation. By extending and revising Turner's (1982), Jafari's (1987), Getz's (2007) and McKercher & Lui's (2014) frameworks, four new stages were identified in this study, namely, *anticipation*, *enhancement*, *sequela* and *identity reconciliation*. These better depict the complex nature of the pre- and post-liminal periods reflecting the more complex physical and psychological changes inherent in the travel context (McKercher & Lui, 2014).

Unlike the simple recognition of the need to escape (Jafari, 1987; McKercher & Lui, 2014), participants actively engaged with, prepared for and developed expectations of what was to come at the festival. Previous studies show that the sense of anticipation influences the development of emotions, contributes to stronger feelings of release and impacts visitors' experience and feelings during the event (Wood & Moss, 2015). The phase of anticipation identified in this study reveals similar effects but also illustrates how this contributes to the intensity of the liminal experience at the festival.

After the end of the liminal stage, instead of simply returning home, going back to normal routines and accepted identities (Jafari, 1987; McKercher & Lui, 2014), participants exhibited connected emotions and distinct sequela effects which they managed to merge into normal life. While Getz's (2007) sense of loss was also evidenced in this study, a sense of gain is also revealed partly through the accumulation of 'subcultural capital' (Fairley & O'Brien, 2018). A new identity was adopted which did not take-over their ordinary social self but coexisted with it. Such complex coexistence of 'liminal behaviours and identity' and normal routine life critically extends our understanding of rite of passage experiences and extend our knowledge of liminality within tourism more generally.

The construction of three types of *communitas* and their respective roles in the rite of passage add further depth and complexity to the framework. Anti-structure serves as a common basis for the construction of all three types of *communitas* whilst music, utopia and friendship create the initial basis for each respectively. Whilst the three types of *communitas* all play a significant role in constructing the animation phase, the impact of normative *communitas* extends into the final stage of the rite of passage.

A further finding emerging from this study is that the perception of *communitas* and of liminal experience became an attraction and motivation to attend for new visitors:

"The first time I knew about Midi is when I saw the images of the festival. The scene, people pogoing to music, and the free and brave spirits infected me. Young people were eager to show their inner-self without fear. That's attractive, and I swore to myself, I must go there, that's a place I belong to." (Interview7)

Perceptions of *communitas* and visitors' liminal experiences reached the wider public through word-of-mouth, videos and magazines, and attracted others, particularly younger festival-goers. The desire to release a 'different' self and be part of the community encouraged others to attend the festivals and to seek 'membership' of the groups. The journey to Midi festival thus becomes a *pilgrimage* of self-discovery and belonging.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

To conclude, this study has two important contributions to make to the general theoretical framework of liminality and has specific implications for tourism studies.

Firstly, this study empirically identified the three *communitas* forms developed by Turner

(1982), spontaneous, ideological and normative, and revealed how they were constructed in a liminal space. Although previous tourism studies have evidenced the existence of *communitas* (Foster & McCabe, 2015; Goulding & Shankar, 2011), there has been no examination of how the three forms are constructed and evolve (Getz & Page, 2016). Our study suggests that *communitas* can be developed through transient event attributes, shared beliefs and pursuits, or friendships made during tourism encounters. Moreover, we found that *communitas* in itself may be an attraction in event tourism and that, through creating an image of *communitas*, a tourism destination would be more attractive. While previous research in tourism suggests that in liminal spaces people are pursuing mainly individualised experiences and meanings (Varley, 2011), this study argues that, due to the attractiveness of *communitas*, collective group experience can have greater meaning.

Secondly, we have found evidence to extend the conceptualisation of rite of passage by identifying a six-phase journey with four new phases, anticipation, enhancement, sequela and identity reconciliation. This extends previous frameworks and depicts a more complex picture of the pre- and post-liminal periods with implications for our understanding of tourist experience. Unlike general tourism, event tourism is more temporary and fixed in terms of time and space (Getz & Page, 2016). Such scarcity and uniqueness contributes to the tourist experience through a stronger anticipation before the journey starts. Following liminality, a sense of loss (Getz, 2007) enhances the deep inner attachment and emotions tourists have through *communitas*. Once back home, visitors go through a phase of sequela and subconsciously enact behaviours embraced during the festival. Finally, a sense of gain is revealed at the identity reconciliation phase where a new social identity is adopted and maintained through a sense of *communitas*. The resulting multifaceted coexistence of liminal behaviours and identity with normal routine life provides a new critical perspective on the role of liminality.

Rather than identities being reshaped and ideology being contested through tourism (Huang et al., 2018; Pritchard & Morgan, 2006), this study proposes that other identities are being unveiled and actualised (Kim & Jamal, 2007). Previous literature suggests that tourists return to their original patterns and identities at the end of travel (Currie, 1997), although Park (2016) proposes that their experience may encourage them to develop new beliefs. Our study identifies the potential coexistence of both the original and newly discovered identities after the travel ends. Previous studies, in the context of serious leisure, have shown that pre-existing social identities may be reinforced by participation in international events (Fairley & O'Brien, 2018). However, it is the first time that this has been observed outside of the serious leisure context and for identity uncovered during the tourism experience itself.

The Chinese socio-cultural context provided a unique and advantageous setting for this research. The prevailing social norms in China which value conformity and, to some extent constrain freedom and equality (Li & Wood, 2016), further accentuate the contrast between everyday life and festival life leading to more overt anti-structure behaviours and a stronger feeling of discovering one's true self (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Wu & Dai, 2018). The limited opportunities for a festival experience may also be the cause of stronger anticipation at the beginning of the rite of passage, much deeper attachment during the experience and an intensified unwillingness for it to end. This context, therefore, provides a concentrated microcosm of wider tourist experience resulting in a more nuanced conceptual framework of how liminal experience is constructed.

There are, of course, limitations to our study. Firstly, the study provides valuable insights into event tourism visitor experience, and may be generalisable to similar events, but is unlikely to fit with all tourism experiences due to the particular carnivalesque, utopian, spiritual and escapist nature of festivals of this type (Li & Wood, 2016). Secondly, although the study reveals a coexisting status of new identity and their ordinary social self in their everyday life influenced by the liminal experience, it is unclear whether their new identity influenced their ordinary behaviours and ways of thinking in their family life or workplace.

Additionally, further studies are recommended to explore how liminal experience impacts on visitors' quality of life and wellbeing, an area that has become increasingly important to social welfare and received growing research attention (Wood, Jepson & Stadler, 2018; Wood & Moss, 2015). Building on Getz's (2007) discussion of a sense of loss after a liminal experience, it would also be valuable to investigate how liminal experience impacts their post-trip consumption and intention to visit/re-visit.

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