

## **The Pull Towards “Between-ness”: How Reddit Users Interact with Photographs of Liminal Spaces**

In early 2019, a photograph of a large room with yellow wallpaper, fluorescent lights, and old carpeted floor was submitted to the paranormal discussion board of the website 4chan. This photograph, later called “the Backrooms”, was the beginning of a new movement that consists of pictures that are “a type of emotional space that conveys a sense of nostalgia, lostness, and uncertainty” (Kock, 2020, para. 2). These spaces, void of activity and difficult to locate, making them transcend time and place, have become known as ‘liminal spaces’.



*Figure 1 The Original Backrooms Photo (4plebs, 2019)*

Pictures of such ‘liminal spaces’ quickly became popular across discussion platforms such as 4chan and Reddit. The subreddit r/LiminalSpace is one of the top 1% biggest communities on Reddit, with over 900 thousand members, and has been active since August 2019. The subreddit, dedicated to posting pictures of liminal spaces and hosting discussions about them, states that “A liminal space is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.' It is a place of transition, waiting, and not knowing. Liminal space is where all transformation takes place, if we learn to wait and let it form us.” (r/LiminalSpace, n.d.). As reddit users bond over the feelings they get whilst looking at photographs of liminal spaces, a relationship

is formed between the photograph and the user. Hence, this article aims to answer the following question: how do users interact with photographs of liminal spaces? This intends to discover, using the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, how users create meaning by reacting and bonding with both the image and with other users as well as the types of discussions created due to these photographs.

## **Methodological framework**

### ***The Origin of Liminality and Liminal Space***

The concept of liminality was principally introduced in Victor Turner's 1969 *Liminality and Communitas*. The liminal phase was when the ritual subject was ambiguous and was a phase of transition into a state of between-ness. Turner linked liminality to other concepts such as death, invisibility, darkness, the wilderness, and more. Simply put, liminality is the uncertainty (amongst other emotions as well) that is experienced in a stage or space of transition. Schnugg (2019) argued that liminality eliminates formal structures and processes followed by individuals in social environments and that liminality was based on the simultaneous presence of the familiar and unfamiliar. She defines a liminal space as a space of the "in-between" or a "time between times" (p. 56). Furthermore, Ginter-Agreda (2024) defines the liminal space as two main ideas: an architectural perspective and a psychological perspective. Architecturally, a liminal space is often a literal space of transition, such as hallways and staircases. From a psychological perspective, a liminal space evokes the sentiment of uncanniness and uncertainty.

### ***Liminality and Nostalgia***

The concept of liminality and nostalgia are often tied together as the feeling of nostalgia is often evoked or represented with photographs of liminal spaces. The concept of

nostalgia being evoked is due to the characteristic of “*déjà vu*” that is presented in liminal spaces (Baltimore, 2023). Hence, the nostalgia element of feeling as though one could have been in that space before is presented.

### ***Relationships in Photo Sharing and Reddit***

Previous research displays that there is a correlation in the act of sharing photos having a moderate effect on levels of social connectedness. Maclean, Al-Saggaf, and Hogg (2022) found that Instagram photo sharing influenced levels of social connectedness, loneliness, and well-being, and found that social connectedness as the desire to connect with others was positively impacted through photo sharing. In regards to Reddit, the same theory may be applied to photo sharing, allowing for a community around (liminal) photographs to be built. An important aspect of the Reddit community is the algorithmic process of upvotes in comments. Comments are upvoted, by either a large number of like or a few number of dislikes on a comment, which pushes certain comments that perform well to the top of the comment section. Hence, comments that are seen as more relatable are seen first and maintain higher social value.

### ***Symbolic Interactionism and Method***

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical framework in which language and symbols are used by individuals in communication with others, and hence how individuals make sense of society from their perspective (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Furthermore, meaning constantly changes cyclically from “interactions with other individual and with society [...] meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others” (p. 2).

The symbolic interactionism framework will be applied to analyse how reddit users interact with two chosen reddit posts, each containing a photograph of a liminal space. This specific framework was chosen to allow meaning-making to be uncovered from between photographs and users and between users themselves, allowing for meaningful discourse in relation to symbols to be analysed. Two reddit posts from the subreddit r/LiminalSpace were selected due to their high engagement and contain a photograph of what is described as a classic liminal space, meaning it exemplifies key characteristics of the liminal space movement and aesthetic. The photographs act as a symbol, and the symbolic interactionist framework will allow to analyse how reddit users attach specific responses, such as concepts of nostalgia, to the symbol. Furthermore, the framework will allow to explore how the users interact with each other in the presence of such symbol and hence the constructed shared meanings users create through such symbol(s).

### **‘The decade that never ended’**

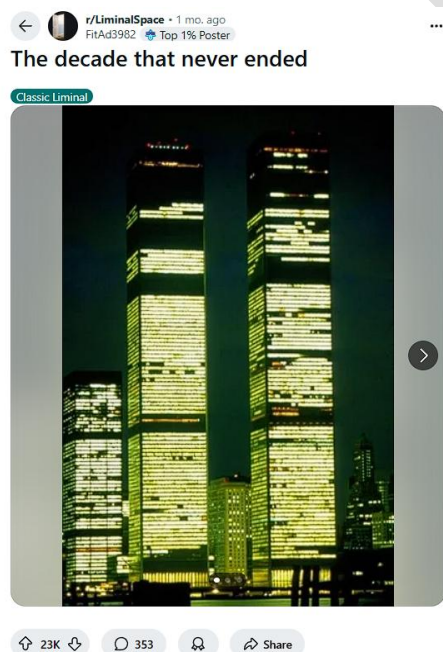


Figure 2 Liminal Photograph #1 of the Post

The post title ‘The decade that never ended’ consists of three pictures of the Twin Towers in New York City before the events of 9/11. These pictures symbolize not only the stages of early transition between the 1990s and 2000s, but also symbolize the USA and American society before and after the events of 9/11. They represent a threshold between the familiar past and uncertain future effected by the events of 9/11 and the users interact with each other to encourage the

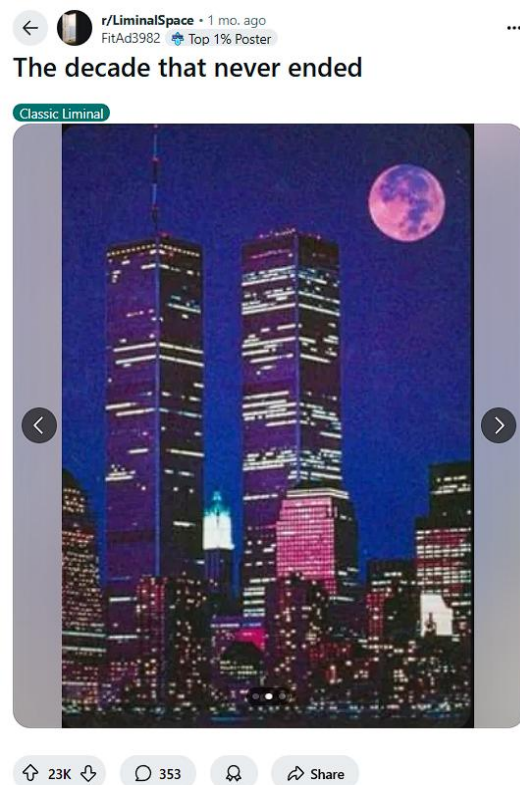


Figure 3 Liminal Photograph #2 of the Post

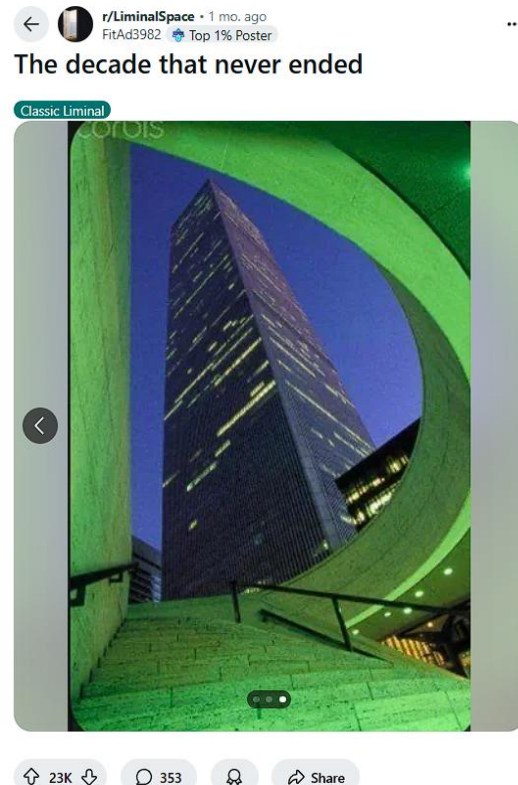


Figure 4 Liminal Photograph #3 of the Post

symbol of nostalgia associated with that time period. Generally, the Twin Towers symbolized economic freedom and capitalism pre-2000s. The peak capitalism in the USA during the 90s hasn't been replicated since, leading to nostalgia of that time period as people, and society, were generally doing better financially.

By sharing their historical interpretations for a pre-9/11 era and society, users engage in meaning-making. Users interact with the photographs by acknowledging the historical impact of the Twin Towers and its international influences, such as an increase in security measure in airport that now every user can relate to.

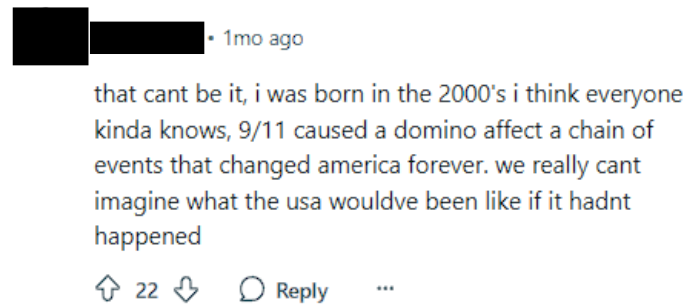


Figure 3 User Addressing Historical Impact in Post

Users create meaningful discourse by expressing their feelings on how society has changed due to 9/11. Seen in figure five and figure six, reddit users engage in meaning-making by addressing historical impact and assigning a 'lost-era' symbolic representation to the Twin Towers.

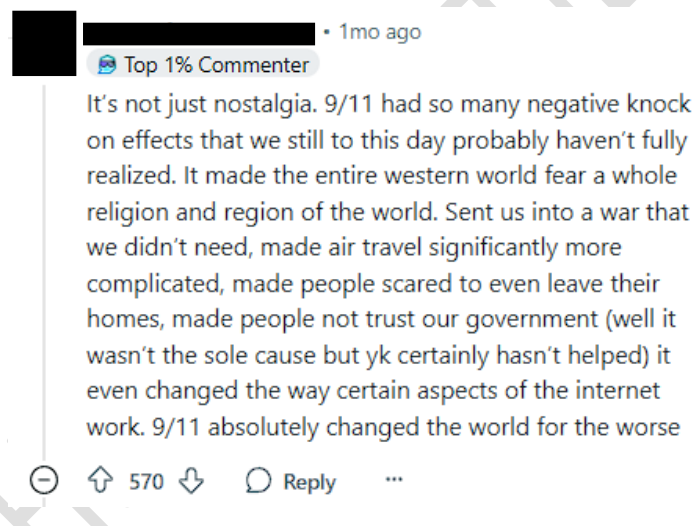


Figure 4 User Addressing Historical Impact in Post

Many users imagine that society would've been different today if 9/11 hadn't taken place, which correlates to Schnugg's idea of the simultaneous presence of the familiar and unfamiliar. Users bond with each other as they share different ways in which society has been influenced by the symbol of the Twin Towers. Together, users share a collective perspective where they validate and expand on each other's posts, reinforcing a collective memory of the perceived simplicity of the pre-9/11 era, and hence also reinforce a collective identity.

Another way found on how users engage in meaning-making discourse is through nostalgia and longing for the pre-9/11 era. Seen in figure seven, the users attach a symbolic meaning of an optimistic and positive lifestyle to the Twin Towers, and share how the liminal space enforces nostalgia surrounding lifestyle before the 2000s. This nostalgic longing for a pre-2000s lifestyle is further expressed by a user in figure eight, where the user engages in symbolic interactionism with the liminal space despite it being a place never visited and having no memories about. As the users uphold the Twin Towers as a symbol of a better and improved life before the event of 9/11, they make sense of a society that they may not have necessarily participated in yet still hold a nostalgic attachment to, leading to users bonding over these emotional and personal discourses.

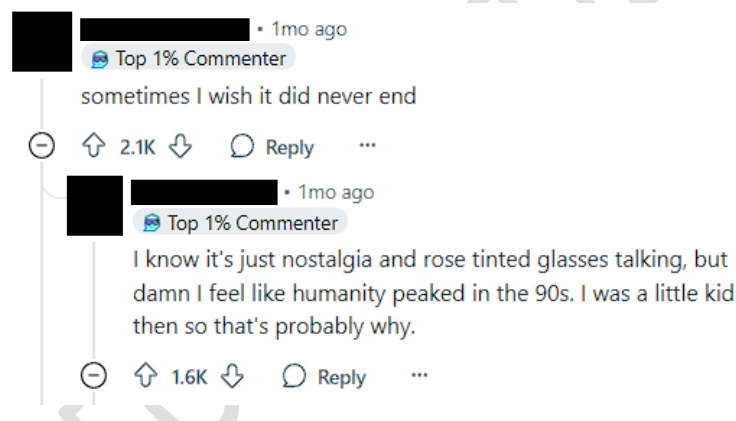


Figure 5 Users Bonding over Nostalgia

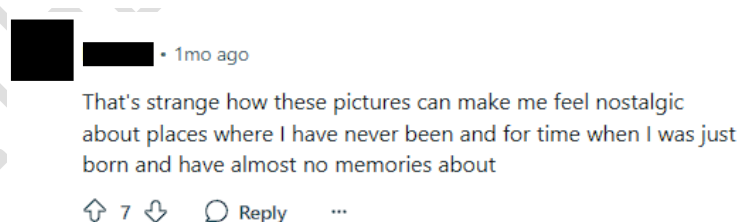


Figure 6 User Expressing Nostalgia

To summarize, users engage in meaning-making by symbolizing the Twin Towers as a peak era that is associated with nostalgia of the unfamiliar and the possibilities of a better future.

### Liminality in a Petrol Station

In the post '*Petrol station after a good downpour*', a petrol station is represented as a liminal space. With this liminal space, the architectural perspective introduced by Ginter-Agreda plays an important role as the petrol station is a literal space of transition towards a

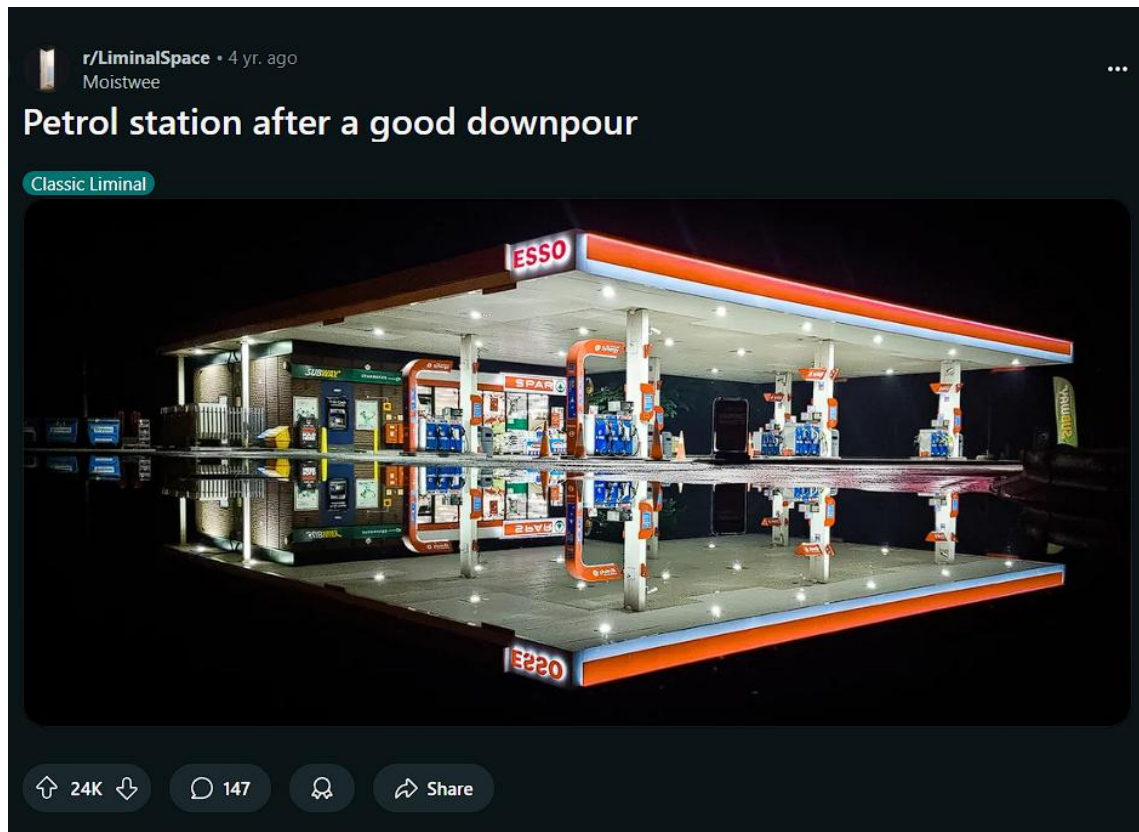


Figure 7 Liminal Photograph of a Petrol Station

destination. Turner's association with darkness also is present within this photograph: the petrol station is entirely surrounded in it. The image itself, the petrol station, does not carry meaning on its own and its meaning is constructed through Reddit user's interactions with it. Users interact with the photograph of the liminal space by expressing comfort and appreciation, relating to the connection of liminality, nostalgia, and the feeling of "*déjà vu*".

In figure ten, the first commenter associates the symbol of the petrol station with the emotion of comforting nostalgia, and also associates this emotion with other experiences such as coming home from the airport. Tied to Baltimore's concept of nostalgia evoking the

feeling of “déjà vu” and Schnugg’s concept of a liminal space, the user expresses the familiarity of the location despite its unfamiliarity. Meaning-making from this photograph is then expanded on by the second and third commentator who replies to the first commentator. Together, they agree upon the emotion interpreted, and share their own thoughts. Altogether, figure 10 depicts how reddit users interpret an emotion tied to a symbol, in this case the liminal photograph of a petrol station, and establish communication and bonds with each other through interactions with the photograph and each other.



Figure 8 Users expressing comforting sense of nostalgia and discuss liminality

In figure ten, a user argues that the petrol station is not liminal, but rather the world around it, and that photograph evokes a feeling contradictory to ones often associated with liminal spaces. For this user, the petrol station is a space holder rather than a transitional space. This example of discourse provides insight on Reddit user’s interactions: reddit users are allowed to negotiate what they interpret as liminal spaces, and all user’s interpretations are accepted and valid.

This is further represented in figure eleven, which depicts reddit users associated the petrol station of a symbol of memory and solitude, with one user describing it as “just me and the clerk, the local mayor of this island of humanity”. The reddit users do not see the petrol station as a symbol of functionality, but rather create a collective identity based of their emotions of nostalgia and memories tied to petrol stations.

Both figure ten and figure eleven depict a reoccurring trend in meaning-making on reddit: they reinforce and expand upon each other’s interpretations. Simply put, the users interact with the liminal space and firstly engage in meaning-making through their own interpretation of the photograph. Meaning-making and discourse and then expanded on through interactions between users and meaning is co-created between the members of the digital community.



Figure 9 Reddit Users engaging in meaning-making discourse

### Reddit Users and Liminal Spaces Photographs

With Reddit’s participatory culture, emotional resonance allows for users to bond and connect with each other. The relatability of experiences or emotions allows users to engage in

discourse together, which would not be possible if no interactions were present between the users and the photograph(s).

To conclude, symbolic interactionism was used to analyse various comments on two posts containing photographs of liminal spaces. Reddit users interact with photographs of liminal spaces by interpreting and substituting the photograph(s) as symbols that are associated with feelings of comfort, nostalgia, memories and personal experiences. Users create meaningful discourse as the photographs allow for users to communicate and make sense of their emotions tied to the liminal space. Users interpretations, and sharing of interpretations, is what allows users to co-construct meaningful discourse in which users find social connectedness.

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