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Research note

## Contested tourists' border-crossing experiences

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## Introduction

Airports as borders signify critical thresholds of tourism experiences – arrival and departure. They are also highly contested spaces that produce vastly different and controversial encounters. Tourists legally entering destination airports have expectations of being treated equally until the first segregating lines for home and foreign passports. Here, various levels of mobility rights are bestowed on different passport holders, which requires intersectional scrutiny (Adey, 2017). The inequality in mobility rights derives from an intersection of factors, including identities, social contexts, and power relations (Mooney, 2018). The hierarchy of passports intersects with appearance, gender, religion, disability/ability, and class, producing unequal treatment at borders (Torabian & Mair, 2022). When entering the West, non-Western tourists become the target of additional questioning, checks, and micro-aggressions despite carrying correct travel documents. These tourists endure stress, overt or covert biases, and a myriad of negative emotions, such as humiliation and intimidation (Villegas, 2015). The current research note presents a conceptual discussion concerning tourists' experiences at airport borders. This is an issue largely under-examined in tourism studies, both conceptually and empirically, due to three main reasons.

First, tourism research has long been dominated by Eurocentric ideologies and institutions (Ateljevic, Morgan, & Pritchard, 2007). Theories have predominantly been produced and reinforced by scholars from the West (Wijesinghe, Mura, & Culala, 2019), who benefit from greater global mobility by being on the higher end of the hierarchy of passports. Such positionality renders border hostility and inequality of mobility rights invisible to them (Ateljević, 2014; Wijesinghe et al., 2019). Second, the airport border is an assemblage of national security, technological surveillance, and economic interests from both public and private

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sectors (Mohl, 2019). The interplay of “contradictory flows and desires” (Mohl, 2019, p3) leads to stress and tension. Thus, conducting research at airports presents methodological challenges, such as limited access due to security, compromised data quality from fatigued travellers, and disruption to movements. Third, since the media often over-glamorises tourism experiences (Bandyopadhyay, 2011), travellers often neglect the discriminative encounters and comply with extensive questioning to gain quick entry, as negativity contradicts the pleasure and fantasies tourism marketing promises.

This research attends to the recent call for the decolonisation of tourism scholarship, especially Anglo-Western-centric knowledge, and surfaces under-represented voices of travellers (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015; Yang & Ong, 2020). Neo-colonial domination goes beyond the coloniser's political and economic dominance over the colonised. Tourism still inherits colonial mindsets and practices for the privileged (McCabe & Diekmann, 2015). This study focuses on the unequal mobility rights for tourists from different regions (Torabian & Mair, 2022), a prime yet understudied example of such a colonial mindset.

### Conceptualising airport borders in tourism

Airport borders are contested spaces with physical (legal demarcation between countries) and socio-psychological elements where identities are shaped and reconstructed (Bulley & Johnson, 2018). Experiences at the border vary, depending on factors including nationality, race, and appearance (Salter, 2012). The extreme power imbalance between immigration officers and travellers extends border-crossings beyond bodily movements to collective performances of rules, processes, and authority for the sake of defining citizenship and legitimacy (Villegas, 2015). The asymmetrical power dynamic defines borders as paradoxical spaces where gateways and barriers, hospitality and hostility, inclusion and exclusion, and mobility and immobility co-exist (Mezzadara & Neilson, 2013). To ensure national security and sovereignty, dehumanising practices and technological algorithms such as racial stereotyping and risk profiling become normalised, reflecting social and political priorities (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). Consequently, certain travellers fall victim to onerous, intimidating and sometimes humiliating border-crossing experiences (Villegas, 2015). In our conceptualisation of the issue, tourists are defined as individuals who legally cross international borders for tourism purposes, excluding migrants. We also recognise the states' need for screening measures to protect borders from illegal activities such as human and substance trafficking. However, these normalised border control measures are unethical and need to be changed. Therefore, we problematise airport borders as the intersections of liminal non-place, ethics, and othering processes.

#### *Airport borders as liminal non-places*

Liminality depicts an in-between phase that departs from the known and the familiar yet within reach of the unknown and the new (Conti & Cassel, 2020). The concept of liminality has gained prominence in tourism research, particularly in the contexts of airports, beaches, and hotels (e.g., Varley, Schilar, & Rickly, 2020). These liminal tourism spaces feature ambiguity, freedom, and anonymity (White & White, 2004). Despite being located within a country, international airport borders operate as unique liminal non-places in which travellers remain physically inside yet legally outside the country (Huang, Xiao, & Wang, 2018; Varley et al., 2020). The high level of sameness (security procedures, facilities, retail brands, etc.) in airports breeds an illusion of placelessness that blurs identity and suspends conventions (Rowley & Slack, 1999). With this unique configuration of airports, social borders, hierarchy, and obligations may disappear, allowing people to dwell and behave differently. Enabled by the liminal and placeless nature of airports, power and vulnerability are amplified for borders to perform sovereignty and assess the legality of citizenship (Salter, 2012). Individuals become temporarily atomised and objectified as mere information on passports to justify unethical and dehumanising practices (Bulley & Johnson, 2018).

#### *Ethics at airport borders*

Airport borders are spaces where various values, beliefs, policy interpretations, and enforcement interact. The liminal nature of the airport creates ethically compromised situations in which extreme individualisation and powerlessness are experienced. For example, ‘selective’ double checking of documents after one has passed customs’ electronic gates. Stopped travellers do not refuse, argue, or question the act, no matter how much they feel discriminated against, shocked or concerned. No other passenger pauses, interferes or interacts with the ceased individual (Bulley & Johnson, 2018). With societal rules suspended, human dignity is often undermined when passengers stand powerless in front of the immigration officer, submitting to interrogative practices (Agnew, 2008). This classic case of consequentialism - justifying dehumanising treatments to maintain national security - triggers negative emotions and ethical concerns in the minds of tourists (Solomon, 2003). Therefore, tourists perceive airport borders as political and power-infused spaces where they hold authorities accountable, at least in their minds, for moralising unjust actions in the name of safeguarding national security (Olson, 2016).

#### *Othering at airport borders*

Sovereignty and state power at airport borders are exercised to allow or block the movements of people and substances (Knox, O'Doherty, Vurdubakis, & Westrup, 2008; Paasi, 2013). The key performative aspect of borders is, therefore, assigning the notion of insiders or outsiders to humans and objects through a set of procedures, rules and screenings. The concept of ‘Othering’ (‘us’ versus ‘them’) has taken root in various academic inquiries, from philosophy and cultural geography to critical theories (Brons, 2015; Said, 1979). Othering in the context of crossing airport borders is largely a negative and exclusionary approach that has

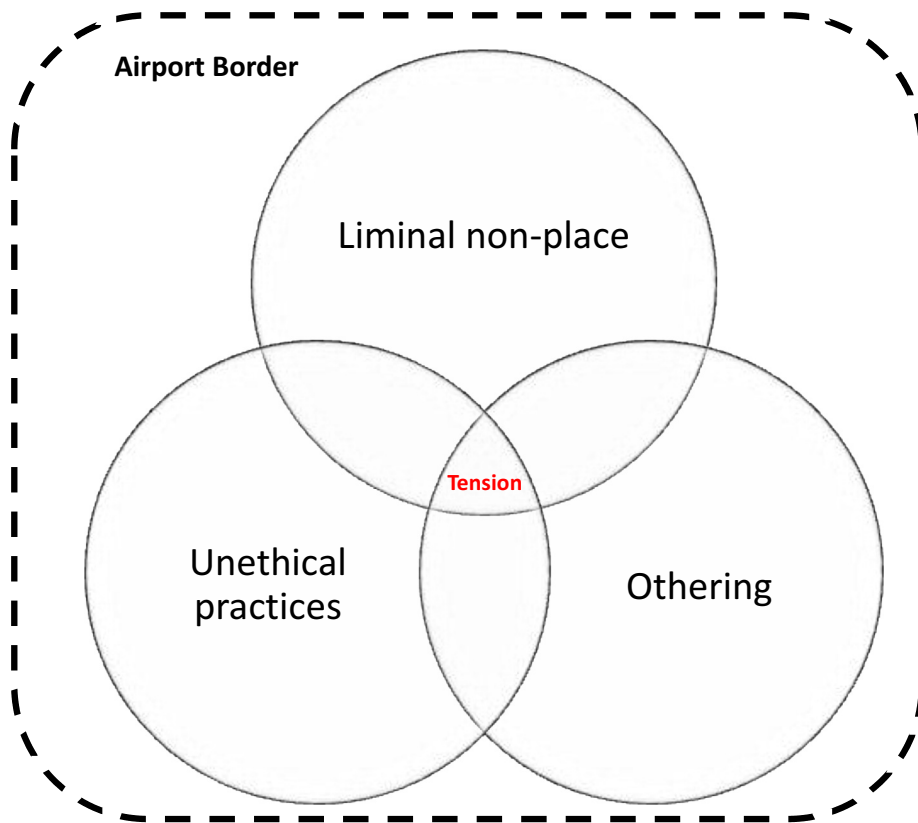


Fig. 1. Tourists' border-crossing experiences framework.

been normalised and legitimised. Western practices have power over those perceived as the 'others' in airports (Said, 1979). Othering creates significant inequality in mobility rights and freedom to travel as well as dramatic variations in border-crossing experiences. According to Salter (2007, p.62), "who is travelling, on what documents, in what class, and with what sociocultural political baggage" creates compounding impacts on border-crossing experiences. Hence, borders are no longer fixed, neutral or linear landscapes but fluid spaces with a host of subtle emotions, discourses, and symbolic practices (Paasi, 2013).

Thus, we present a conceptualisation of airport borders that mobilises three interacting forces: liminal non-place, othering, and varying degrees of unethical practices. Fig. 1 illustrates how the three forces create an intensive travel touchpoint, where interactions between authorities and tourists result in negative emotions. Negative emotions, then, influence travel outcomes such as memory, satisfaction, recommendation, and intention to revisit (Kim, Guo, & Wang, 2022).

## Conclusion

This conceptual discussion posits airport borders as power-infused political spaces, intersecting liminality, ethics, and othering. Travellers' multiple identities intersect at the border encounters, revealing unequal mobility rights across diverse traveller groups. Although this research note emphasises the experiences of non-Western tourists at Western airports, we acknowledge that negative emotions could equally be created in reverse contexts. Therefore, this framework can be applied to all travellers. We intend to conduct further empirical studies regarding tourist border-crossing experiences across the hierarchy of passports. Theoretically, the recognition of various tourist border-crossing experiences contributes to the decolonisation of tourism research. It also highlights the need for a research agenda on the importance of borders as key touch points in tourists' journeys. Practically, this study provides timely implications for managing the rapid return of international travel post-pandemic. Tourists experience emotional, social, physical, and cognitive challenges at borders, necessitating further scholarly attention. Problematising the border space is the first step in surfacing the experiences and challenges of the unheard. This is in line with the United Nation World Tourism Organization's code of ethics for border crossing procedures to be continuously improved to facilitate maximum movement (UNWTO, 2001). By doing so, more humane and dignified approaches to border policing could be adopted.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Samira Zare:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Isabella Qing Ye:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103571>.

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