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Mission Impossible: An autoethnographic account of tourist visa application experience

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Objectives | For many, visa requirement is a key factor when deciding to visit a destination (Juma & Douglas, 2023). Given its significance, it is surprising to find that the research on tourist visas is very limited. Although the freedom to travel should be considered as a normal condition of human life (Hasselberg, 2012), the visa-free privilege is mostly reserved for tourists from wealthy democratic states (Whyte, 2008), while the rest of the world faces various levels of visa-related constraints. This, to some level, has been reflected in tourism knowledge creation, where scholars from developed countries, in many cases, have visa-free access to most countries in the world, control the narratives and hold the authoritative power in knowledge production. As a result, the important voices of visa and border crossing in tourism are neglected in the literature (Zare & Ye, 2023).

The existing literature on tourist visas mainly focuses on how visa regulations influence inbound tourism flow. Strong evidence has supported that a more friendly visa policy has an active role in facilitating positive destination images (Çakar et al., 2018), significantly increased tourist numbers (Bangwayo-Skeete & Skeete, 2017) and stronger visiting intentions (Juma & Douglas, 2023). On the one hand, seeing the great economic benefits of visa liberalisation, interest groups actively lobby the government to encourage travel-friendly policies; on the other hand, governments use tourist visas as a management tool to regulate the tourism flows and mitigate the negative impacts in the destination, such as overtourism (Cheung & Li, 2019). Although studies have mentioned challenges of obtaining a visa, such as high cost, long queues, and extended waiting time (Whyte, 2008), no studies have explored the embodied experiences of obtaining a tourist visa. This study, thus, aims to fill the research gap by providing an autoethnographic account of first-hand experiences in applying for a Schengen visa in the UK.

Orientalism (Said, 1978) and affordance theory (Gibson, 1977) serve as the theoretical lens of this study. Orientalism offers perspectives to critique and investigate the visa application process, particularly the power imbalance, economic disparities, cultural hegemony, and security concerns stemming from the notion of the 'Oriental Other'. The affordance theory, on the other hand, shifts away from a human-centric focus, and help to identify not only the constraints that the visa

application online system and application centre impose on me but also how Chinese netizens actualise social media and other technologies to negotiate these challenges.

Methodology | An autoethnography was conducted between February and April 2023. I, as a researcher, recorded my visa application experience. Data including screenshots, voice memos, detailed reflection diaries and photographs. The autoethnographic approach enables me to provide a contextually detailed description by drawing from my own experiences, personal narratives, and emotions to provide a nuanced understanding of the visa application experiences.

Main Results and Contributions | The findings reveal the strict and illogical tourist visa requirement, and its negative impact on tourists' experience. For instance, confirmed accommodation and return ticket bookings are the compulsory documents for visa application. In addition, the online platform for visa appointments made it technically impossible to book an appointment slot (after trying for 2 months) and ask to register a new account every 20 days. Furthermore, the servicescape in the visa application centre is very hostile and intimidating. This uneven power relations and hostile treatment of the tourist visa application process reflect on today's visa policies in the West, predominantly for the reason of border security and controlling illegal migration (Bianchi, 2006), without considering this process plays an essential part in visitors' pre-trip experience.

Interestingly, this study also uncovers when facing these challenges, Chinese netizens living in the UK collectively started an online community to support each other. For instance, chat groups were created, and each member was assigned a designated slot to refresh the screen and check slot availabilities. When there are slots available, they will share in the group chat. The support also extends to developing sophisticated add-ins to the browser to make available slots more visible and refresh the screen automatically. All of these were shared within the community. In addition, they provide strong support through encouraging each other, sharing tips, and complaining about the system.

Conclusions | Although Chinese netizens developed the negotiating mechanism for these challenges, and some did manage to get the visa eventually, this study still aims to challenge and question the unfair and hostile tourist visa application system, and how such system damage all the efforts of DMOs and local communities put in to develop tourism in the local economy. Through the theoretical lens of orientalism and affordance theory, this study contributes to the limited yet important studies on visa and immobilities in the tourism context, and revealed power and geopolitical issues in tourism through embodied experiences. I urge policymakers and governments to revisit the visa requirement policies and the experience design of visa application, and develop a more humane, hospitable approach for the future visa application process.

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