

The stories of the unheard: travel border-crossing and mobility injustice

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Objectives | Cross-border travel or overseas travel, facilitated with low-cost airline, has become the contemporary reality of the tourism industry. Travellers' experiences of crossing the airport border, however, vary depending largely on their backgrounds (such as nationality, religion, appearance, and even accents) as well as the geopolitics of the border they are crossing in relation to the passport they are holding (Zare & Ye, 2023). To safeguard sovereignty, dehumanising practices, such as racial stereotyping and risk profiling have become normalised at airports, leaving many negative encounters unnoticed (Stephenson, 2006). The nuanced nature and impacts of these encounters were largely underexamined in the tourism literature, which gave birth to this study.

The assemblage theory will serve as a conceptual lens to understand the different components (human/non-human) that come together and influence social processes (Volo & Wegerer, 2023). Thus, this study aims to explore the various encounters of travellers passing through airport border control upon arriving at the destination airport. Through stories and associated memory journals, we hope to unpack the discourses that underpin the unequal and differentiated traveller experiences at the border.

Methodology | This study used a qualitative interview approach (Small, 1999; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) to examine the multi-faceted nature of travellers' border-crossing at airports. By engaging with multiple voices and memories, this approach enables multiple meanings and understandings of a continuously constructed border-crossing reality to emerge, with aims to address and resist certain expressions of power, especially for those who were marginalized in terms of travel freedom (Torabian & Miller, 2022). Thematic and discourse analysis will be used to analyse data.

Main Results and Contributions | Preliminary findings have shown that international travellers undergo tremendous physical strains standing in long immigration queues and a broad range of negative emotions from fear, anxiety, and intimidation to anger, shock, feeling of intrusion, and shame. Some of these emotions continue during the trip and long after the holidays. Despite questioning the process of treatment at the airport border, many travellers opt to not voicing their concerns.

At times, travellers expressed strong reactions towards the often uncertain identities being questioned at the border. In some extreme cases, travellers were placed into immobility, such as being taken to the inspection rooms or being asked to wait without an estimated indication of time or reasons. Another observation was the constant rationalization and self-blame amongst some participants. Some stated that the reputation of their passport or stereotypes associated with certain ethnicities justified the treatments they have to endure at the border.

This study responds to the growing attention related to freedom of movement within the tourism industry and seek to address concerns faced by many travellers. The usage of assemblage theory to unpack the overlooked discriminative border treatment expands our understandings of border encounter as more than the spatial definition (visible borders) and extend to the socially constructed and non-literal context of border. This study also recognizes the airport border as a problematic, ethical and power-infused space. Travelers endure emotional, social, physical, and cognitive challenges that require further academic & industry attention.

Conclusions | Understanding tourists' border encounter at the destination is of great importance for industry and policymakers. Problematising the border space is the first step in surfacing the experiences and challenges crossing airport border. Through such understandings, more humane and dignified approaches to border policing could be adapted.

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