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INVISIBLE YET PRESENT: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING OPEN MARITIME BORDERS IN THE CROSS-BORDER TOURIST EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The research examines how tourists experience the German-Polish maritime border as a symbolic boundary which exists beyond physical separation because of memory, movement, and meaning. The research addresses a gap in border and tourism studies by using a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to analyse 116 tourist narratives through the lenses of the bordering-debordering-rebordering concept, liminality and emotional geography. Tourists experience the border as an invisible yet tangible presence which serves as a historical reflection zone with fluid identity and ambiguous emotional responses. By theorising concepts like floating thresholds and symbolic permeability, the study reconceptualises maritime borders as dynamic spatial imaginaries in post-Schengen Europe.

Keywords

maritime border • cross-border tourism • border perception • emotional geography • liminality • bordering processes • German-Polish border • post-Schengen mobility • border tourism

Introduction

Scholars have shown increasing interest in border evolution in Europe since the Schengen Agreement established how previous barriers turned into tools for everyday mobility, cultural exchange, and tourism. Traditionally seen as barriers or geopolitical markers (Guichonnet & Raffestin, 1974), borders are increasingly conceptualised as flexible functional areas of interaction (O'Dowd, 2001;

Sohn, 2014; Więckowski, 2019, 2025; Fernandes & Cravino, 2022). Within tourism studies, this shift has led to a growing interest in borders as resources that structure and enrich cross-border travel (Timothy et al., 2016; Więckowski & Timothy, 2021; Prokkola, 2022), especially in East-Central Europe since post-socialist transitions and EU integration introduced new dynamics of regional cooperation (Basboga, 2020; Medeiros et al., 2021; Nemes & Happ, 2024).

Despite these advances, existing literature on border tourism remains predominantly focused on land borders, where tourism encounters are shaped by visible demarcations, historical landmarks, and terrestrial infrastructure (Gelbman & Timothy, 2011; Leśniak-Johann, 2023; Więckowski 2023; Więckowski et al., 2024). Maritime borders, in contrast, have received less scholarly attention even though they present different experiential and symbolic dimensions (Borschberg et al., 2010; Hung & Lien, 2022). These borders are often invisible, experienced through movement across open waters rather than through checkpoints, and felt through emotional experiences rather than physical territorial markings (Prescott & Schofield, 2004; Pezzani & Heller, 2013; Cerić, 2023). As such, tourists crossing maritime borders may not encounter the same cues of separation or transition common in land-based travel, raising important questions about how such borders are recognised, felt, and represented.

The rising significance of maritime regions in European cross-border tourism, specifically along the Baltic Sea coast, creates a noticeable research gap. The German-Polish maritime border stands as a suitable research example because it transitioned from a Cold War division to a borderless maritime tourism pathway after Schengen implemented its liberalization policies. Although this change has been observed in policy and infrastructure development (Więckowski & Cerić, 2016), the understanding of how tourists experience and interpret the border in everyday travel remains limited.

This research investigates how tourists perceive the German-Polish maritime border by analysing their emotional, symbolic, and functional interpretations of the border. Based on a mixed-methods approach, including a structured questionnaire administered to 116 tourists (private sailors and boat passengers), the research investigates how these individuals view the border: Do they notice it? Do they perceive it as an attraction, a relic of the past, or an invisible line? What emotions or expectations do they associate with

crossing it? The main research question is: *How do tourists experience and interpret the German-Polish maritime border, and in what ways do their narratives contribute to a distinct conceptualisation of maritime border tourism in open-border settings?*

To answer this question, the paper proposes and develops a maritime bordering framework, grounded in three theoretical strands: (1) the dynamic processes of bordering, debordering, and rebordering (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021; Paasi & Ferdoush, 2022); (2) the notion of liminality, which describes border areas as transitional and ambiguous spaces (Prokkola, 2010; Elías, 2021); and (3) emotional geography theories that show how feelings like nostalgia and curiosity and indifference influence border experiences (Więckowski, 2020; Timothy, 2020; Duruz et al., 2022). This framework extends existing land-border theories to maritime areas by showing that maritime borders exist as hybrid emotional and symbolic geographical spaces beyond their legal and physical dimensions.

The research offers empirical insights about maritime border interactions between tourists, which serves as an original contribution to both border research and tourism studies since this topic remains understudied. The study conducts a specific analysis of the German-Polish maritime border while establishing theoretical foundations for further comparative research. The findings underscore the need to differentiate between land and maritime border experiences and call for greater scholarly attention to the fluid, hybrid, and affective nature of sea-based frontiers in tourism.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The literature review discusses existing work on border tourism and introduces key conceptual debates around maritime and land borders. The methodology outlines the mixed-methods design, sampling strategy, and analytical approach. The findings section presents both quantitative summaries and thematic qualitative insights into tourists' perceptions. In the discussion, the empirical results are interpreted through the lens of the

proposed framework. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications of the study, its limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature review

This section critically reviews key literature, which builds the study's theoretical framework. It addresses core theories about borders and tourism and explores how land-based borders differ from maritime borders to establish the study's research focus and identify the specific research gap that this paper seeks to fill.

Rethinking borders in tourism: from barriers to bridges

The understanding of borders has evolved from being strict, immovable barriers that enforce national authority to becoming active areas that promote unification and create possibilities for development. The traditional view of borders depicted them as permanent lines which maintained territorial sovereignty and national security (Kolossov, 2005; Wilson & Donnan, 2012). However, since the 1990s, scholars have introduced a new "processual" understanding of borders, which shows that borders exist as active zones that change through social practices, decision-making processes, and negotiation activities. Researchers describe these evolving constructs as "bordering" because politics, culture and mobility influence their development (Kolossov, 2005; Tambassi, 2018). The current border studies literature demonstrates borders as spaces which enable interaction and innovation and serve as places where identities develop (Cappellano et al., 2022). The term "borderscapes" effectively describes borders as entities that exist in multiple dimensions and maintain their relational connections (Brambilla, 2015; Timothy, 2020).

Border regions in Europe have evolved into exchange zones due to European policies such as the Schengen Agreement, which supports cross-border movement and cooperation (Timothy et al., 2016; Więckowski & Tim-

othy, 2021), increasingly framing borders as resources that shape experiences, rather than obstacles. Central and Eastern European countries show through their examples how border opening and EU enlargement changed regional identities and sparked tourism growth (Kolosov & Więckowski, 2018; Kondrateva & Shlapenko, 2021; Carril-Caccia et al., 2022). Nonetheless, challenges persist, including mental boundaries, institutional fragmentation, and conflicting interests, highlighting the need for more nuanced, interdisciplinary approaches to cross-border governance (Berzi & Ariza, 2018; Krüger et al., 2024). Future research should further explore the symbolic and material interplay in border dynamics and recognise local agencies in shaping these evolving spaces (Newman, 2006; Brambilla, 2015).

Theoretical anchors: bordering, emotional geography, and liminality

Contemporary borderland studies view borders as active processes that emerge from bordering activities and subsequent debordering and rebordering operations. This triadic framework shows borders exist in a state of continuous construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction, which corresponds to political, economic, and social system changes (Herzog & Sohn, 2016; Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). The bordering process creates territorial boundaries and identity-making; debordering signifies the removal of boundaries through integration or cooperation (Prokoka & Lois, 2016); while rebordering reintroduces separation in response to crisis or change (Böhm, 2021). The border processes manifest in a non-linear fashion, thereby producing border zones defined by contradictory components and fluctuating dynamics. This framework shows high potential for maritime border research because legal, symbolic, and affective boundaries commonly overlap in less obvious yet highly significant ways.

The emotional geography perspective extends our understanding by showing how

borders exist as lived experiences. People's border-related emotions, including nostalgia, curiosity, and indifference, influence their border perceptions, which create feelings of belonging, estrangement, or ambivalence (Parla, 2009; Campos-Delgado, 2021; Griffiths, 2023). The emotional geography approach reveals how people experience border interactions through their personal feelings, which helps explain their reactions to spatial divisions (Wanner, 2016).

Liminality functions as a theoretical framework to explain the ambiguous nature of border areas. Borders exist as liminal spaces because they represent areas where established rules lose their meaning while identities remain in limbo and spatial rules become unclear (Eliás, 2021; Contreras et al., 2024). The threshold nature of maritime spaces becomes most visible when physical markers are absent because this creates maximum uncertainty and symbolic disputes. Liminality serves to describe physical movement while simultaneously defining the political and existential circumstances of people who live or move through these areas (Wilkinson, 2010; De Vincenzo & Zamperini, 2023).

Together, the bordering-emotional-liminal triad creates an effective conceptual structure for studying maritime borders as dynamic, transitional and effective spatial formations.

Land borders as strongholds and maritime borders as under-theorised frontiers

Tourism research has traditionally focused on land borders as the main point of study to understand how territorial boundaries shape tourist behaviour, destination identity, and cross-border collaboration. The physical presence of checkpoints, signage, and infrastructural markers enables researchers to study processes of bordering, ordering, and othering (Gelbman & Timothy, 2011; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). Case studies from towns like Zgorzelec-Goerlitz and EU-supported cross-border programs such as Interreg demonstrate the importance of terrestrial

borders in both academic inquiry and policy design (Nilsson et al., 2010; Mayer et al., 2019). In contrast, maritime borders remain a significantly under-theorised domain within tourism studies. While related fields such as marine spatial planning have scrutinised aspects such as ferry routes, port infrastructure, and coastal attractions (Backer, 2011; Kropinova, 2021), they infrequently engage with the experiential, emotional, or symbolic facets associated with maritime boundary crossings. Unlike land borders, which are frequently marked by visible indicators such as checkpoints or signage, maritime borders tend to appear as invisible fluid thresholds which lack clear geopolitical markers (Cerić, 2023). According to Tsoni (2019), the Aegean Sea border exists as an "affective border-scape" because it derives its character from ambiguous boundaries rather than fixed lines. Menon (2022) explains that the ocean resists territorialisation because it exists as a natural dynamic and circulating system. These perspectives underscore how maritime borders challenge traditional land-based understandings of bordering and need further investigation in tourism research. The non-perceptible nature of maritime borders contributes to their experiential ambiguity; however, it does not diminish their importance, particularly in post-Cold War areas such as the Baltic Sea, where these crossings have transitioned from being zones of securitised division to becoming uninterrupted leisure corridors (Więckowski & Cerić, 2016). The limited studies on this subject call for a reorientation in border tourism research – one that acknowledges the distinctive attributes of maritime borders and integrates these elements into more extensive discourses concerning mobility, spatiality, and the construction of identity within tourism contexts.

Maritime border narratives: perceptions, emotions, and symbolic significance

Maritime borders serve as socially constructed and symbolically charged spaces

that combine physical bordering processes with discursive and affective elements. According to border studies and critical tourism geographies, borderspaces function as performative areas that generate meaning through the combination of narratives, emotions, and spatial practices (Newman, 2006; Brambilla, 2015). The ambiguous spatial nature and symbolic power of water borders create emotional engagement and interpretive possibilities which make them fertile ground for the performance of identity, memory, and imagination (Borschberg et al., 2010; McGrath et al., 2023; Konrad et al., 2025). Maritime border crossings create transformative experiences because of their liminal nature, which elicit both intrigue and discomfort, influenced by factors that extend beyond mere physical transit (Duruz et al., 2022). Empirical examples underscore how infrastructures like the Cross-Border Promenade between Świnoujście in Poland and Heringsdorf in Germany operate as spatial narratives of post-socialist reconciliation and European integration, symbolising openness through design and everyday use (Więckowski, 2020; Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). Similarly, the Griffins' Route in the South Baltic exemplifies how tourists engage emotionally with cross-border heritage, evoking shared memories, nostalgia, and feelings of belonging (Duda, 2022; Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024).

Tourism in politically disputed maritime areas like the South China Sea serves to create emotional connections that strengthen state-backed stories and patriotic feelings (Huang, 2022; Huang & Liu, 2023). Meanwhile, coastal leisure spaces like the Jersey Shore reveal how emotional atmospheres are co-produced by environmental uncertainty and cultural performance (Zalot, 2024). The cases demonstrate that maritime borders function as active spaces where historical memories unite with emotional responses and spatial imagination to form an essential framework for understanding cross-border tourism development and maritime place creation.

Framing the research gap

A theoretical framework integrating subjective tourist experience, interpretive theory, and spatial context is proposed to ground the study conceptually. The framework's foundation is phenomenological philosophy, which prioritises direct lived experiences and personal interpretations. The starting point is tourists' perceptual and emotional engagement with the maritime border, ranging from recognition and symbolic association to indifference or the experience of an affective dissonance. These experiential inputs are analytically interpreted through three inter-related theoretical lenses: the dynamic processes of bordering-debordering-rebordering, which illuminate how the symbolic status of borders evolves; the concept of liminality, which contextualises maritime borders as threshold spaces marked by ambiguity and transition; and emotional geography, which captures how affective responses influence the construction of spatial meanings.

These interpretive lenses operate within a set of broader contextual factors that affect yet do not determine individual experiences. These include the post-Schengen open-border regime that legally enables freedom of movement between countries; the unique spatiality of the maritime environment, characterised by fluid, often invisible boundaries; and the historical memory of the border as a former geopolitical division. Together, these components coalesce into an experiential understanding of the maritime border – one that is shaped equally by emotional impact and symbolic significance as by physical or institutional existence. The conceptual diagram (Fig. 1) presents a visual representation of the theoretical model, demonstrating the essential factors that influence maritime border tourism experiences.

The diagram presents three main domains: (1) experiential inputs that consist of tourists' perceptions and emotional responses; (2) the mediating theoretical lenses: bordering-debordering-rebordering, liminality, and emotional geography, that provide analytical

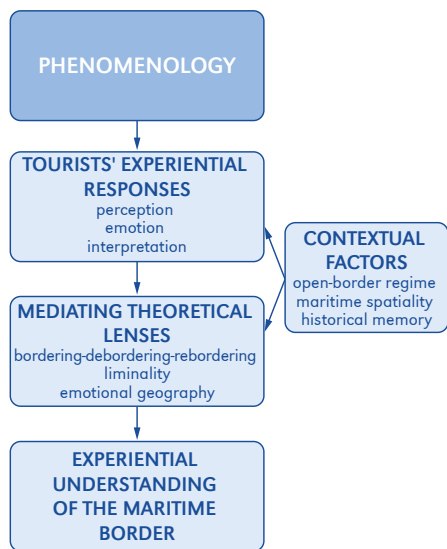


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the relationship between key elements shaping the tourist experience of maritime borders

structure; and (3) contextual factors that include the open-border mobility regime, maritime spatiality, and historical memory. These domains unite to produce the study's analytical result, which delivers an experiential and symbolically rich maritime border understanding. The framework not only guides the empirical analysis but also extends the theoretical scope of border tourism research by integrating underexplored maritime elements and dynamics with perception and place-based phenomenological approaches.

Methodology

Research design

This study employs a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design, integrating descriptive statistical analysis with a strong emphasis on qualitative insights to explore tourists' experiences with the Polish-German maritime border. Given the exploratory nature of this research and the relatively limited existing studies on maritime border tourism, the approach is designed to provide rich, narrative-based insights rather than

purely statistical correlations. This methodological framework aligns with contemporary social science research that prioritizes in-depth understanding over generalizability (Silverman, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

This qualitative-dominant design is also epistemologically aligned with phenomenological research philosophy. Phenomenology emphasises the importance of studying personal experiences through first-person perspectives to understand how people interpret everyday phenomena. In this context, the study investigates how tourists perceive and emotionally engage with the German-Polish maritime border, which exists as an invisible yet meaningful boundary. The research investigates border experiences through tourist narratives, emotional responses, and symbolic interpretations to uncover the fundamental nature of border experiences according to phenomenological principles, which emphasise subjective meaning and affective depth.

Study area and justification

The research was conducted in the Polish-German maritime border region, one of the key areas within the Baltic Sea Region as a transboundary tourism zone. This borderland was selected due to its unique maritime characteristics, which shape tourist experiences in ways distinct from land borders (Więckowski, 2023). The Schengen Agreement has played a crucial role in enhancing cross-border mobility within this region, enabling fluid movement and fostering regional tourism (Nilsson et al., 2010; Timothy et al., 2016).

Historically, the Polish-German maritime border was a restricted zone during the Cold War, characterised by strict travel limitations. However, European integration and Schengen liberalisation have transformed the region and the Usedom Island, divided between two countries, into an open tourism corridor, connecting marinas, ferry terminals, and tourist boat routes across both nations (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). The Usedom Island case study demonstrates this transformation by showing how previous divisions in this specific

area have evolved into a model for cross-border tourism cooperation (Mayer et al., 2019; Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). The maritime transport infrastructure of the region further underscores its importance as a research site, facilitating seamless tourist travel across national waters (Więckowski & Cerić, 2016; Cerić et al., 2024).

Data collection

The study focuses on tourists travelling by private sailing vessels and tourist boats, as these travellers engage with the border through natural and experiential experiences. Unlike land crossings, maritime border crossings are often unstructured and shaped by personal choice, making them particularly relevant for an investigation into the symbolic, emotional, and experiential aspects of borders (Prokkola, 2010).

A structured questionnaire was used to obtain descriptive quantitative data from tourists crossing the Polish-German maritime border. To maximise participation, the

survey was conducted at key marinas, ferry terminals, tourist boat embarkation points on both sides of the border, and on trans-border tourist excursion boats regularly sailing between German and Polish tourist destinations on Usedom island during the high tourist season (summer 2022). Altogether, the survey was conducted at 12 different locations (Fig. 2). The sample included 116 respondents: private sailors (N = 59) and tourist boat passengers (N = 57); when divided by nationality, 50.9% were German respondents, 30.2% Polish, and 18.9% were from other nationalities.

The questionnaire provided in German, Polish or English was designed to gather both structured and in-depth insights into tourists’ experiences with the Polish-German maritime border. The closed-ended questions not only collected demographic data, such as nationality, age, gender, education level, and travel group composition, but also provided valuable insights into tourists’ perceptions of the border. These questions allowed respondents to choose from a set

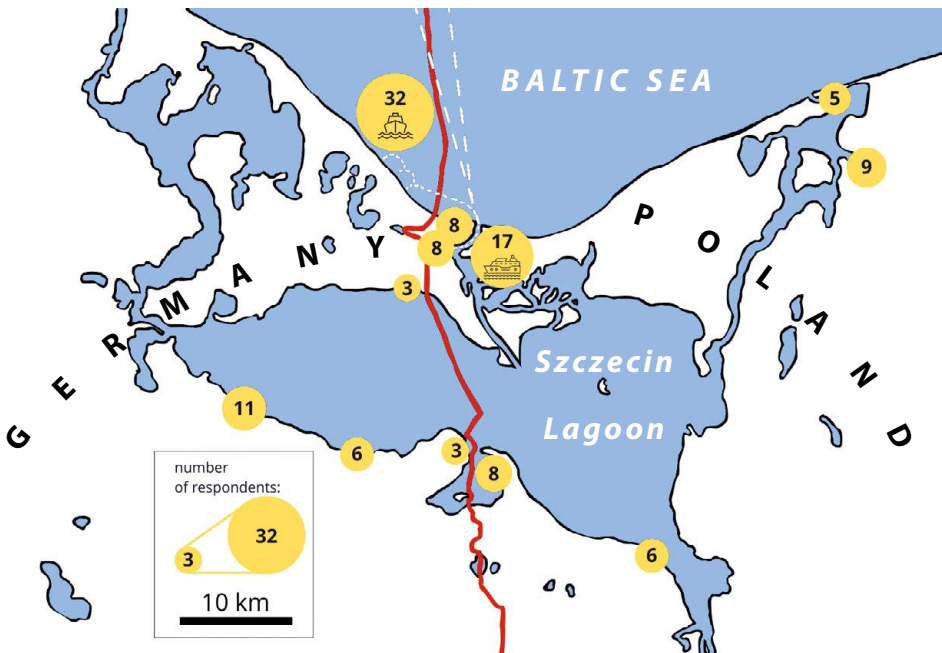


Figure 2. Survey locations and respondent distribution

of predefined answers, offering a clearer understanding of their perspectives. Among the key inquiries, respondents were asked if the presence of the border influenced their decision to visit the area, if they found the border to be noticeable, and if they considered the national boundary as an attraction. Other questions were aimed at the most attractive elements of the border infrastructure, the importance of heritage elements, and the intention of using attractions on the other side of the border. The survey also explored whether tourists experienced any emotional response to the presence of the maritime border, thus allowing for the assessment of the symbolic and affective meaning of the border.

Apart from these structured responses, open-ended questions were included to provide a deeper understanding of tourists' subjective experiences. These questions asked respondents to elaborate on why they perceived the border as an attraction, describe their attitudes and emotions towards the presence of the national boundary in maritime space, and describe their emotional reactions using descriptive words or explanations. The questionnaire combined both quantitative and qualitative elements to provide a comprehensive analysis of how tourists engage with the maritime border, integrating statistical patterns with rich, narrative-based interpretations.

Data analysis

The data collected through the structured questionnaire were analysed using a mixed-methods strategy that integrated quantitative summary with qualitative interpretation. The closed-ended responses were processed through descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, to outline demographic patterns and general trends in tourists' perceptions of the German-Polish maritime border. The collected statistics demonstrated how different variables, like nationality, age group, and gender, influenced respondents' responses. While

no inferential statistical tests were applied, the descriptive data enabled a nuanced portrayal of how different tourist segments perceived the border's visibility, symbolic appeal, and emotional significance. In the case of multi-response items (e.g., perceived attractions of the border), each answer option was tallied to illustrate popularity and variation across demographic categories. This approach, widely used in exploratory tourism research (Bryman, 2016; Agresti, 2018; Field, 2018), allowed for the detection of notable patterns beyond statistical generalisation. Instead, these quantitative results served as a contextual background for the qualitative thematic analysis conducted in the study.

The qualitative data were analysed using a theory-informed thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, which provided a structured yet flexible framework for data interpretation. The researcher performed multiple readings of open-ended responses to familiarise themselves with the data while developing inductive initial codes that extracted significant semantic and latent content. These codes were then developed into themes through a process akin to focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) while following a pre-established analytical framework grounded in three inter-related theoretical strands: the dynamic processes of bordering, debordering, and rebordering, liminality as a condition of spatial and experiential ambiguity, and emotional geography that focuses on spatial affective interactions. Rather than aiming for theory generation, coding techniques from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) were employed pragmatically in the early phases to detect subtle conceptual elements in participant language, together with emotional expressions. The thematic organisation under the three theoretical categories involved multiple cycles of development and structuring that followed both theoretical guidance and inductive pattern discovery. The methodology corresponds to "template analysis" (King, 2004) by using pre-existing theoretical concepts to build themes but allowing

modifications based on the collected data. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, several steps were taken. First, coding was conducted iteratively, with multiple rounds of data immersion to minimise interpretive bias. Second, a coding journal was maintained to document analytic decisions and evolving theme definitions, enhancing transparency and reflexivity. Third, a re-code analysis of selected data segments was performed after an interval to verify the stability of theme identification results. Although a single researcher conducted the analysis, these procedures align with best practices in qualitative rigour, as outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), supporting the credibility and dependability of the findings.

In accordance with best practices in qualitative research, theme frequencies were used solely as a contextual tool rather than a central analytical focus. They were briefly summarised in narrative form and presented in a table to indicate the relative prominence of themes without detracting from the interpretive richness of participants' narratives (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). Such a strategy allowed themes, such as nostalgia, ambivalence, and spatial fluidity, to be understood not merely as descriptive categories but as conceptually grounded insights within the proposed maritime bordering framework. By integrating structured thematic analysis with theory-driven interpretive lenses, the analysis

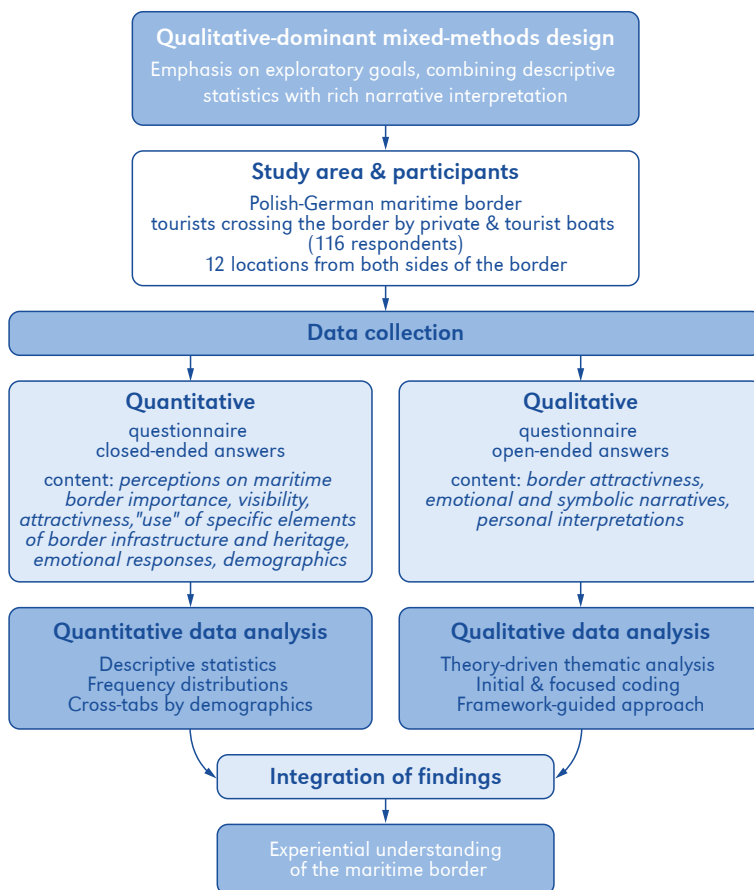


Figure 3. Qualitative dominant mixed methods design of the research

maintained both analytical transparency and interpretive depth, offering a coherent yet reflexive understanding of how tourists experience and conceptualise the German-Polish maritime border. The research design along with analytical framework is presented in Figure 3 as a complete summary of the study's methodology.

Ethical considerations

This study maintains ethical standards through its procedures which protect participant privacy while keeping all information anonymous. The questionnaire was designed to be fully anonymous, with no collection of personal identifiers including names, addresses, or visual data. Respondents participated voluntarily and were informed about the research purpose before completing the survey. Data handling complied with standard ethical research practices, ensuring that all responses remained confidential and were used exclusively for academic purposes.

Methodological contribution

This study contributes to the emerging field of maritime border tourism by prioritising qualitative depth over quantitative generalizability. The findings are exploratory in nature, aiming to provide a conceptual foundation for future research rather than drawing definitive empirical conclusions. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, this research advances the understanding of how tourists engage with maritime borders and offers valuable insights for border studies and tourism research.

Findings

This study explores tourist experiences of the German-Polish maritime border through their emotional responses, symbolic meanings, and practical aspects of border crossing in a post-Schengen era. The study results demonstrate a diverse range of reactions among maritime border zone visitors who exhibit fascination alongside indifference and reflective

behaviour in this formerly restricted yet now fully open border zone. In general terms, the quantitative findings show that while the border is not a decisive factor for most tourists in planning their travel, it is still noticed by many and even perceived as an attraction by a significant portion. The statistical data creates a foundation which supports the detailed narratives found in the qualitative analysis. The qualitative data highlight a spectrum of tourist experiences, from emotional responses and historical reflections to perceptions of liminality and spatial fluidity.

The following section consists of two distinct parts. First, a summary of key statistical results obtained from survey questions with closed-ended responses is presented. Although these findings are not central to the interpretative thrust of the study, they help contextualise and reinforce the thematic patterns revealed through qualitative inquiry. Second, the qualitative findings are analysed according to the study's theoretical framework which includes three sub-sections about bordering processes and liminality and emotional geographies.

Quantitative insights into tourists' perceptions of the maritime border

Of the 116 respondents surveyed at 12 maritime locations along the German-Polish coast, just over half identified as German (50,9%), followed by Polish (30,2%) and other nationalities (18,9%). The majority were male (60,3%), with nearly half born before 1971. The sample was evenly split between private sailors (50,9%) and tourist boat passengers (49,1%), offering perspectives from both independent and structured travel experiences within this open maritime border region.

Quantitative data revealed that although the border's presence did not influence travel plans for most respondents (64,7%), over a third (35,3%) acknowledged that it played a role in their decision to visit the area (Fig. 4). Similarly, while 55,2% reported not noticing the border during their journey, a substantial minority did, indicating that the border

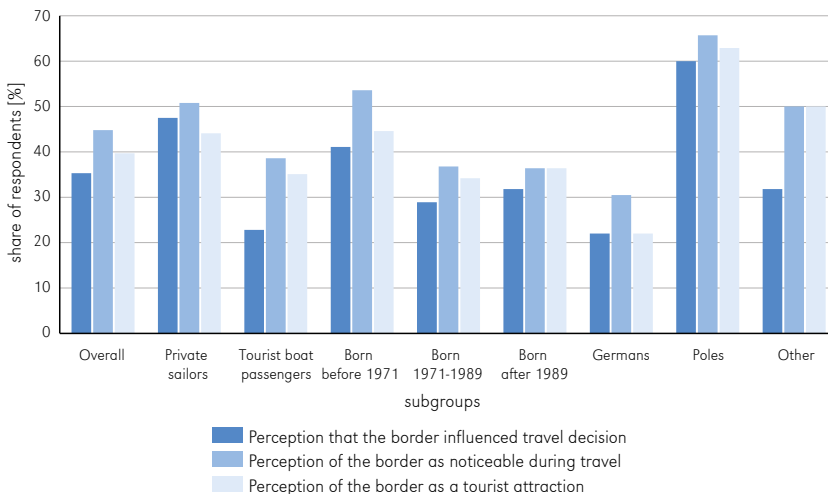


Figure 4. Perceptions of the border’s influence on travel decisions, salience during travel, and appeal as a tourist attraction: overall and subgroup analyses

maintains perceptual relevance even in the absence of formal controls. This perceptual sensitivity was especially pronounced among Polish respondents. Respondents who had been adults before the Schengen liberalisation were notably more attuned to the border’s presence and significance, suggesting that historical memory still shapes contemporary perception.

The border was viewed as a tourist attraction by 39,7% of respondents, and this perception was reinforced by specific elements of the experience. The most compelling feature, selected by 83,6% of tourists, was the opportunity to be in two states at, more or less, the same time – an idea particularly appealing to younger tourists. This was followed by the symbolic intrigue of a border crossing open water (35,3%) and, to a lesser extent, visible border markers, heritage border infrastructure or the plaques with country names, emblems and flags (Fig. 5). These findings point to a conceptual and experiential engagement with the border rather than one based on administrative functions.

Heritage elements played a significant role in shaping tourist perceptions of the maritime zone. Cultural heritage was considered important by 68.1% of respondents, closely followed

by natural heritage (65.5%). Among demographic groups, older tourists expressed the highest regard for cultural landmarks, while natural features were broadly appreciated across all ages (Fig. 6). However, one in five respondents (21.6%) found heritage elements irrelevant to their experience, suggesting diverging expectations of borderland tourism.

Tourist intentions across the border reveal a preference for fluid and immersive experiences. Three-quarters of respondents planned to explore both sides of the border, engaging in activities such as sampling local cuisine (51.7%), walking, riding or sailing along transboundary trails (48.3%), or just visiting the neighbouring country (44.8%). Roughly one-third expressed interest in taking photographs or experiencing linguistic and cultural contrasts (Fig. 7). Notably, only 13.8% of respondents expressed interest in cross-border shopping, and an even smaller proportion (5.2%) in accessing non-gastronomic services in the neighbouring country. These findings suggest that the maritime border primarily facilitates recreational and symbolic mobility, while utilitarian forms of cross-border mobility, such as shopping, are of lesser significance for contemporary tourists crossing maritime boundaries.

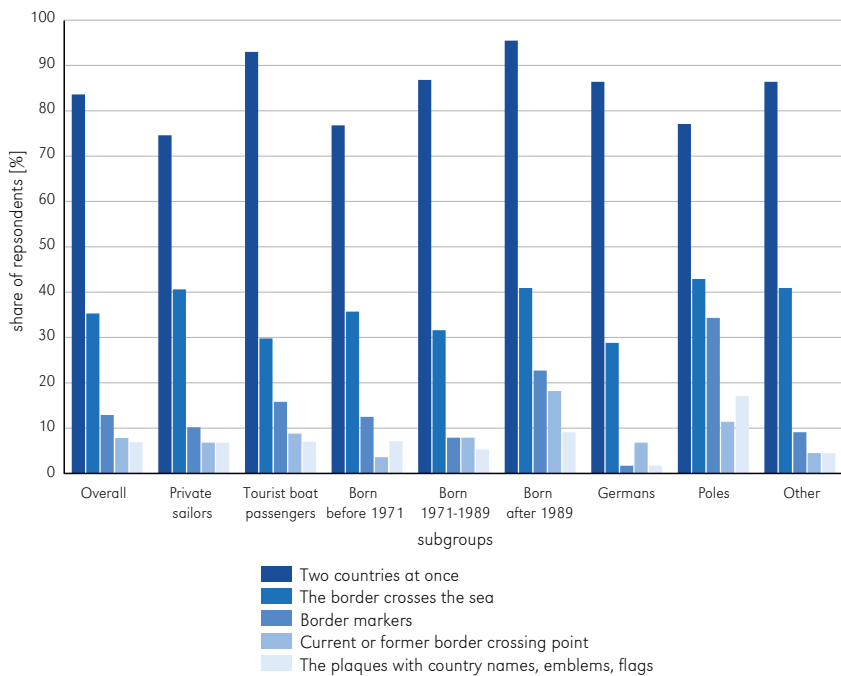


Figure 5. Perceived attractions of the maritime border: overall responses and breakdowns by tourist type, age group, and nationality

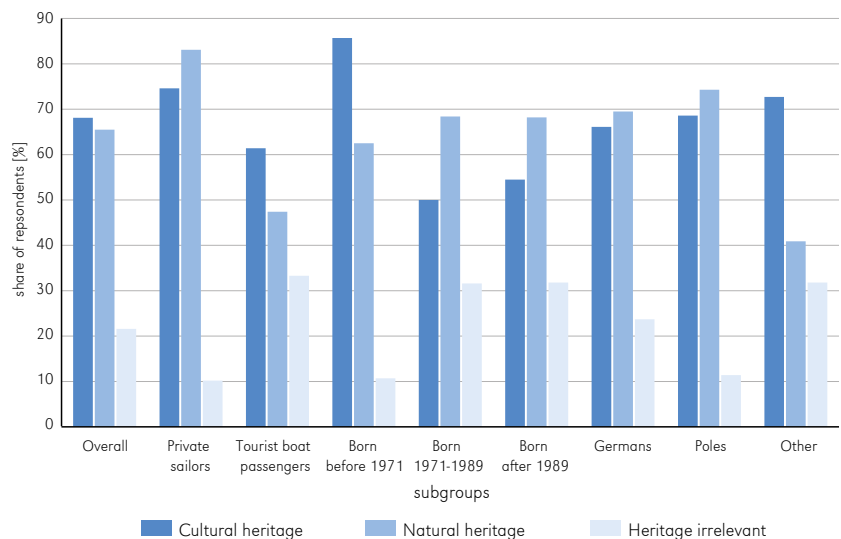


Figure 6. The importance of heritage in the maritime borderland: overall responses and breakdowns by tourist type, age group, and nationality

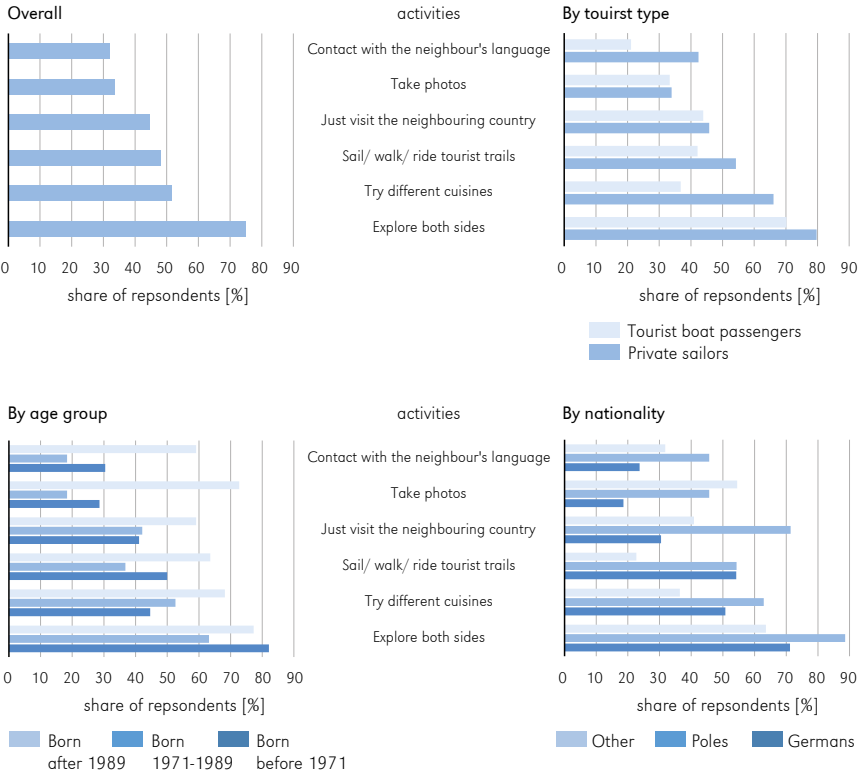


Figure 7. Interest in activities across the maritime border: overall responses and breakdowns by tourist type, age group, and nationality

Emotional responses to the border were relatively rare. Only 18.1% of respondents reported feeling emotionally affected by the border's presence, and 16.4% considered crossing the border or being near it to be an emotional experience. Notably, older participants – those with lived memories of a divided Europe – were more likely to express affective engagement (Fig. 8).

These quantitative findings suggest that, despite its openness, the German-Polish maritime border retains a layered presence – experienced not only as a passageway but also as a symbolic and occasionally emotional threshold within the evolving geography of European cross-border tourism.

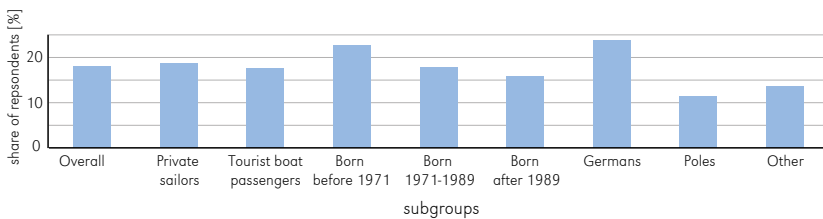


Figure 8. Emotional response to border presence: overall responses and breakdowns by tourist type, age group, and nationality

Qualitative insights into tourists' narratives and experiences of the maritime border

This section delves into the qualitative dimension of the study, examining how tourists describe and understand their experiences with the German-Polish maritime border. The analysis focuses on the emotional, symbolic, and experiential aspects of these cross-border movements to reveal diverse perspectives that result from historical memory, spatial ambiguity and personal interpretation. The open-ended questionnaire responses reveal how tourists process border presence or absence while interacting with symbolic changes and expressing their emotional responses. Table 1 provides a summary of the themes that emerged from the analysis, offering an overview of the narrative motifs and their relative prominence among the 116 respondents. These themes are explored in depth through the three theoretical lenses of the study: bordering processes, liminality, and emotional geographies, each of which receives a dedicated sub-section that follows.

Dynamic processes of bordering, debordering, and rebordering

Tourists in this category depict the maritime border as a place where history produced dramatic changes from a Cold War dividing line to a European integrating and open border. *Historical reflections* were frequent and showed a profound emotional impact. One German private sailor born before 1971 observed, "This was once a geopolitical barrier – now it's just part of the landscape." This sentiment was echoed by another, who recalled, "I remember when this was a hard border. It still amazes me how easy it is now" (German, male, born before 1971). Many of the interviewees linked their memories to the changes that occurred across Europe. A German tourist boat passenger born between 1971 and 1989 shared, "This border reminds me of how much Europe has changed. It used to divide, now it connects."

For others, the border served as a reminder of multigenerational memory, such as a German female private sailor (born after 1989), who stated, "Memories of experiences from grandfather." Through the combination of personal and collective memory layers, it becomes evident how strongly historical awareness connects to the border's symbolic meaning.

The *transformation of borders* was the most frequently referenced theme, with many respondents appreciating the enhanced freedom and simplicity of moving between nations. A Polish private sailor (female, born before 1971) emphasised, "We enjoy unrestricted navigation." For others, the absence of formalities was particularly striking: "It is amazing to cross the borders and dock in ports without showing a passport – super feeling" (Swedish, male, born before 1971). The contrast with past restrictions emerged as a dominant narrative. As one Polish private sailor (male, born before 1971) put it, "Sailing across the border without stopping is a satisfying experience – it wasn't always this easy." These observations highlight how the physical and procedural aspects of border crossing have undergone a perceptual shift from constraint to liberty.

Institutional debordering through the EU and Schengen agreements featured prominently in shaping perceptions. Several tourists referred to themselves as "citizens of Europe," expressing a transnational identity that moves beyond national boundaries. "For me, borders are unnecessary as a European, and borderless travel is normal," noted a German private sailor (male, born before 1971). Others underscored the bureaucratic disappearance of borders: "Schengen deleted the borders" (Swedish tourist boat passenger, male, born before 1971). The European framework not only enabled seamless mobility but also reshaped how individuals emotionally and cognitively positioned themselves in relation to national divisions.

Overall, the findings in this category depict a border transformed through historical progression, functional openness,

Table 1. Frequency of themes within categories based on coded survey responses

Category	Theme	Frequency (n)	Share of total mentions in category (%)	Brief theme description
Bordering, debordering, and rebordering	Historical reflections	20	32.3	Tourists recognize the border's shift from division to connection, highlighting historical change and appreciation.
	Transformation of borders	24	38.7	Tourists celebrate the ease of crossing borders on water as a significant transformation, enjoying unrestricted movement.
	Institutional debordering through EU/ Schengen	18	29.0	Tourists feel a sense of unity and indifference to borders due to European integration and Schengen agreements.
Liminality	Symbolic border experiences	15	19.0	Tourists find maritime borders symbolic, enhancing feelings of adventure and seamless transition.
	Borders as artificial or outdated concepts	10	12.7	Tourists consider maritime borders artificial, prioritizing natural experiences over geopolitical divisions.
	Fluidity and liminal experiences	16	20.3	Tourists enjoy the fluidity of crossing borders, relishing experiences beyond rigid national distinctions.
	Seamlessness of movement	17	21.5	Tourists emphasize the joy and freedom of unhindered navigation across maritime borders.
	Focus on the journey or landscape	6	7.6	Tourists focus on the journey and scenic beauty rather than the border's significance.
Emotional geography	Fluid identities and belonging in border zones	15	19.0	Tourists embrace fluid identities shaped by cultural exchange across the German-Polish border.
	Joy and gratitude for freedom	25	30.9	Tourists express joy and gratitude for the newfound freedom in maritime border crossings.
	Curiosity and adventure in exploration	12	14.8	Tourists possess a curious spirit, eager for adventure in exploring new cultures and landscapes.
	Personal connections to place and family	4	4.9	Tourists reflect on personal and familial connections that enrich their experiences of the border.
	Hope and shared responsibility	6	7.4	Tourists voice hope for cooperation and shared responsibility across the maritime border.
	Absence of affective connection	15	18.5	Tourists feel indifferent, viewing border crossings as routine without emotional significance.
	Emotional normalization through repetition	19	23.5	Tourists experience emotional normalization, viewing border crossings as a routine part of travel.

and institutional integration. Tourists' narratives are shaped by both memory and mobility, producing a collective recognition of the border as a former barrier turned conduit for freedom and unity.

Liminality – ambiguous spaces and fluid crossings

Tourists often encountered the border as an as an uncertain symbolic boundary rather than an actual geographical separation.

The theme of *symbolic border experiences* illustrates how many perceived the maritime boundary as an abstract or invisible presence. "The sea border is invisible – without GPS, I wouldn't even know it existed," remarked a German private sailor (female, born before 1971). The lack of tangible indicators contributed to this perception. One Polish tourist boat passenger (male, born before 1971) observed, "The border exists legally, but in everyday life, it feels invisible," while another from Denmark described it as "fun to cross a border in the middle of the sea without realizing it" (male, born after 1989). In such instances, the process of border crossing lost its geopolitical significance and turned into either a symbol or an exciting new experience.

Perceptions of *borders as artificial or outdated* were also common. Many respondents challenged both the legitimacy and relevance of the maritime boundary. "At sea, borders just don't exist for tourists; you feel completely free," explained a German private sailor (male, born before 1971). A Polish sailor added, "Seeing a border on the water makes me reflect on how artificial and changeable borders can be" (female, born before 1971). These reflections highlight the way maritime settings disrupt conventional notions of territoriality.

A sense of adventure and mobility marked *experiences of fluidity and liminality*. Tourists frequently described the crossing as a unique or exciting moment. "Standing on the deck and knowing I'm crossing a border feels interesting, even though nothing really changes," stated an Austrian tourist boat passenger (male, born before 1971). Others, such as a Polish private sailor (female, born before 1971), emphasised novelty: "Because I have never crossed a border on the water." These responses show that the border experience functions as a liminal state – one that dissolves boundaries and distinctions, and fosters reflection on identity, space, and movement.

The theme of *seamlessness of movement* overlapped closely with these experiences. Many travellers expressed satisfaction at how easily they could move across the border. "Fascination that the national border

can be crossed without obstacles" (German private sailor, female, born between 1971 and 1989) and "Freedom to explore without restrictions" (German private sailor, female, born between 1971 and 1989) typified such responses. For these tourists, crossing became a fluid continuation of the journey, not an interruption.

Aesthetic and experiential elements were highlighted in the theme *focus on the journey or landscape*. Here, the border faded from view as people focused on the natural scenery and the scenery itself. "The sea and nature here are what make this trip special. The border doesn't change that" noted a Polish tourist boat passenger (female, born between 1971 and 1989). Likewise, a Danish sailor (male, born before 1971) reflected, "It's more about the journey than the boundary itself."

The final theme in this category, *fluid identities and belonging in border zones*, reveals how tourists navigated cultural hybridity. Several participants mentioned that the cultural diversity of their experience made the trip more exciting: "The cultural mix makes the trip interesting" (Polish private sailor, male, born before 1971) and "I like experiencing different cultures so close together" (Polish tourist boat passenger, female, born after 1989). Others described themselves as transnational or bicultural, as in the case of a German respondent who noted, "Grew up German / Polish" (female, born between 1971 and 1989). Such identities blur traditional national affiliations and merge different national identities into one, which matches the border space's liminal nature.

Altogether, the liminality strand of the findings underscores how tourists experience the border not as a fixed line but as a porous, symbolic space imbued with movement, ambiguity, and intercultural connection.

Emotional geography – felt experiences and (non)affective journeys

Emotional responses to the border varied widely, reflecting both celebration and indifference. Memories of past restrictions and appreciation of present freedoms shaped the

dominant theme of *joy and gratitude for freedom*. "Gratitude that I live in times when the borders are not barriers" was a common sentiment, as shared by a German private sailor (male, born before 1971). Others emphasised the joy of seamless movement and the emotional impact of formerly unimaginable mobility: "Freedom!" exclaimed a German tourist boat passenger (male, born before 1971), capturing a succinct yet powerful sentiment shared by many. These narratives expressed strong emotional connections which stemmed from the political evolution of the border and its effects on daily travel.

Curiosity and adventure in exploration was another prominent emotional theme. Tourists often associate the border crossing with an exciting experience which brings new experiences. "I like exploring new areas and places," said a Polish tourist boat passenger (female, born between 1971 and 1989), while another added, "Curious about how things look on the German side" (Polish, female, born after 1989). For some, the opportunity to discover new languages, foods, or traditions served as a motivating factor.

In contrast, the theme of *absence of affective connection* appeared frequently. Several respondents saw the border as uninteresting or emotionally insignificant part of their journey. "No different than travelling within Germany," remarked a German private sailor (male, born before 1971). Others expressed outright indifference: "It's just a formality, nothing emotional" (Swedish private sailor, female, born between 1971 and 1989). These accounts suggest that routine exposure to open borders may lead to emotional disengagement.

The theme of *emotional normalization through repetition* reinforced this pattern. For many tourists, the regularity of border crossings diminished their emotional salience. "I cross borders often, no special feeling," stated a German tourist boat passenger (female, born before 1971). Similarly, a Polish private sailor (male, born after 1989) noted, "Traveling is just routine now." These responses suggest that for experienced travellers,

maritime borders may become invisible or emotionally neutral because they become accustomed to crossing them.

Finally, while less frequent, themes related to *personal connections* and *hope for shared responsibility* offered more intimate or idealistic interpretations. One respondent reflected on cross-border travel as a link to familial history: "Family comes from Poland. As children, we were often on vacation at the Baltic Sea" (German tourist boat passenger, female, born between 1971 and 1989). Another pointed to broader political and environmental hopes: "Shared responsibility for nature; Recent history; Hope for peace" (German private sailor, male, born before 1971). These narratives illustrate how emotional geographies transcend personal emotions to include social memories and dreams about unity.

Together, the emotional geography findings reveal a wide range of feelings – from gratitude and adventure to routine and neutrality – that animate tourist experiences of the German-Polish maritime border, thus showing the complex emotional aspects of maritime border tourism.

Discussion

This study investigated how tourists perceive and understand the German-Polish maritime border under the current open-border regime that eliminated formal controls but preserved symbolic and emotional meanings. The research used a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to study how tourists notice, narrate, and emotionally engage with a maritime boundary that is mainly invisible yet historically charged. The analysis used bordering processes together with liminality and emotional geography as theoretical frameworks to study the complex nature of cross-border experiences. The findings suggest that the border maintains its significance as a meaningful spatial boundary despite the disappearance of physical barriers. By applying this triadic framework, the analysis not only captured how tourists understand the maritime border but also revealed the

conceptual areas where mobility meets memory and identity. Notably, the research demonstrated how maritime borders exist as emotional and symbolic constructs.

Bordering, debordering, and rebordering in maritime contexts

The tourists' narratives reflect dynamic bordering processes shaped by both historical consciousness and contemporary freedom of movement. Several respondents described the border as a relic from the Cold War era, now transformed into a unifying European landscape. This perception reflects broader shifts in Central and Eastern Europe, where the "opening of borders" and intensified cross-border cooperation since 1989 have profoundly altered how boundaries are experienced – not as rigid barriers, but as dynamic, symbolic interfaces of interaction (Kolosov & Więckowski, 2018). The stories demonstrate that borders serve dual purposes as political boundaries and social constructs, which people modify through physical migration and their collective memory and storytelling. This echoes Paasi and Ferdoush (2022), who emphasise that globalisation creates simultaneous processes of debordering and rebordering. In this research, tourists celebrated the symbolic opening of the border, even while recognising remaining national distinctions. Such symbolic persistence aligns with Więckowski and Timothy's (2021) findings that border markers, heritage signs, and local tourism infrastructure continue to create feelings of separation even though official borders no longer exist.

The quantitative findings support these observations. Approximately 35.3% of respondents indicated that the border influenced their decision to visit the area, and nearly 40% saw it as a tourist attraction. This suggests that while legal barriers may have dissolved, the border continues to play a significant experiential and symbolic role. This aligns with the concept of symbolic rebordering, where cultural and heritage infrastructures sustain perceptual and emotional distinctions.

Furthermore, older participants were more likely to recognize the historical transformation of the border and to express gratitude for current freedoms, suggesting a generational lens on bordering processes.

Maritime borders display unique forms of debordering. Respondents repeatedly emphasized the ease of crossing: sailing between ports without controls, and encountering only minimal variations in signs and prices, if any. These elements underline the maritime border as a permeable threshold, one that aligns with Prokkola and Lois's (2016) idea of bordering through soft-symbolic expressions. However, rebordering was occasionally noted, too. Some tourists observed minimal national distinctions through visual cues and language usage together with port rules and cultural norms that restored national borders. Such selective permeability, as discussed by Herzog and Sohn (2016), is amplified in maritime contexts where the absence of formal control is contrasted by a heightened awareness of national difference when one docks.

Maritime border zones present bordering processes which differ from traditional bordering patterns seen in land-based areas. Land-based tourism literature (Gelbman & Timothy, 2011; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017) often discusses border crossings through visible physical structural indicators, traditional border markers, and historical landmarks. By contrast, maritime crossings lack such cues, so bordering practices emerge cognitively – through mental processing and symbolic interpretation. For example, tourists in this study often described the sea border as a mental map rather than a line, indicating a unique experiential bordering process that is less bureaucratic, more fluid, and frequently emotional.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a reminder that even open maritime borders are subject to rebordering during crises. Temporary border restrictions, noted by some participants, revived the perceptions of the border as a barrier while breaking the smooth border experience many had developed for sailing between countries. This aligns with Böhm (2021) and Więckowski and Timothy

(2021), who both emphasize the fragility of open-border perceptions in times of geopolitical tension or public health crises.

Liminality and the floating threshold

The fundamental understanding of tourist perception toward maritime borders stems from the concept of liminality. Unlike terrestrial borders with customs posts and signage, maritime borders are often invisible, leading to a state of symbolic uncertainty among travelers. Tourists' comments such as "I only knew I crossed the border because of the GPS," or "Nothing really changes, but you know you are in another country," reflect the non-material, atmospheric nature of the maritime boundary.

This ambiguity characterises the maritime border as a "floating threshold" – a term that describes both physical and symbolic transition across space. A floating threshold lacks permanent material demarcation, yet retains significant emotional and symbolic charge. Unlike terrestrial thresholds, which rely heavily on gates, signs, roads or paths, and checkpoints, maritime thresholds are enacted through movement, memory, and perception. Travellers sail into and out of spaces without clear transition points, yet still articulate a sense of crossing, belonging, or strangeness. This concept builds on Elías (2021), Wilkinson (2010), and Contreras et al. (2024), who all examine liminality not merely as spatial ambiguity but as a condition of emotional and cognitive negotiation.

Maritime liminality also includes a temporal and historical dimension. During their travels, tourists frequently discussed their past experiences as well as their family members' experiences with border crossings and divisions. This reflects the broader affective and intergenerational liminality discussed by De Vincenzo and Zamperini (2023), where the sea acts not only as a route of travel but also as a symbolic medium for historical memory.

Moreover, this study reveals that the experience of liminality is heightened in maritime tourism. Unlike on land, where border

transitions can be routinised and infrastructural, the absence of visible cues on water requires passengers to interpret and frame their crossing actively. Border interpretive activities produce both imaginative and emotional responses that result in the concept of "symbolic permeability" – a term we use to describe maritime border openness to narrative construction and emotional engagement. Symbolic permeability demonstrates how border meanings adapt to situations where physical boundaries remain undefined or unclear.

Emotional geography and the maritime border

The third theoretical strand – emotional geography – finds strong resonance in the empirical findings. A considerable number of tourists expressed feelings of nostalgia, gratitude, curiosity, and adventure regarding their cross-border experiences. Emotional reactions were particularly strong among older participants, who remembered the once-impermeable nature of this border. They described the joy of seamless movement, the symbolism of peace, and the emotional relief of no longer being surveilled. These responses align with Prokkola and Lois (2016) and Paasi and Ferdoush (2022), who both emphasize how borders become emotionally coded through personal and collective memory.

However, this study revealed two different emotional reactions from participants. Younger tourists, alongside frequent travellers, showed a tendency to view the border as ordinary or unremarkable. Certain people compared border crossing to the same experience as travelling between different locations within one country. This normalisation suggests that emotional permeability, like symbolic permeability, is contingent on personal background, frequency of travel, and historical consciousness.

Importantly, maritime borders may provoke more pronounced emotional responses than their terrestrial counterparts (Pezzani, 2015). The unpredictability of the sea, the open horizon, and the act of crossing an invisible

line contribute to distinct affective sensations. In contrast to land boundaries, where established crossing protocols may diminish the emotional impact, maritime boundaries preserve an atmosphere of ambiguity, uncertainty, and exploration. Several respondents described their experiences using terms such as “freedom”, “fluidity”, and “limitlessness”, terms that are, in fact, infrequently encountered within the scholarly discourse concerning land boundaries, as well as being rarely linked to terrestrial border crossings.

Therefore, this study introduces the idea of “emotional permeability”, which measures how a border affects people emotionally, even though it remains open and non-restrictive. The maritime context generates emotional permeability through symbolic ambiguity and historical memory, together with physical movement across water. Emotional responses in maritime boundaries certainly operate distinctively compared to terrestrial borders, as these responses arise from both the lack of physical demarcations and the symbolic significance attributed to water as a boundary. The lack of tangible barriers engenders emotions through the liminal space that is constituted between sovereign states.

Theoretical contributions

The research enhances border theory development through its analysis of maritime borders as emotional and symbolic domains that operate differently from their terrestrial equivalents. In contrast to land borders with visible crossings and institutional rigidity, maritime borders foster imaginative bordering processes, where memory, emotion, and mobility intersect in complex ways. By extending the bordering-debordering-rebordering model into maritime tourism, the study confirms the applicability of this framework across non-terrestrial geographies and contributes empirical evidence supporting its relevance.

Furthermore, the research expands the understanding of liminality by creating a new concept called “floating threshold”, which describes maritime border experiences that

differ from other border experiences. This adds conceptual depth to the tourism-border nexus, highlighting how spatial ambiguity, hybrid identity, and emotional ambivalence operate in sea-based mobility. This concept expands upon De Vincenzo and Zamperini (2023) and Prokkola (2010), who stress the theatrical, performative, and affective dimensions of cross-border spaces.

Finally, the incorporation of emotional geography adds a human-centred perspective to border tourism studies, by showing how nostalgia, curiosity, and even detachment influence tourist experiences. Therefore, the study positions emotional engagement as a fundamental dimension of maritime cross-border mobility. The analytical triangulation of bordering, liminality, and emotion matches the approaches proposed by Więckowski and Timothy (2021) and Herzog and Sohn (2016), affirming the complexity and multi-layered nature of modern border experiences. These contributions collectively suggest that maritime borders are not only legally open or administratively soft, but emotionally and symbolically significant.

Implications for policy and tourism destination planning

The findings have several implications for policymakers and tourism planners. First, the symbolic significance of the border suggests that destination marketing could benefit from integrating narratives about transformation and shared heritage along with emotional historical elements to enhance visitor experiences. As Więckowski and Timothy (2021) argue, borders can be turned into tourist attractions when symbolic markers receive preservation and storytelling takes place.

Second, infrastructural investments should support cross-border experiences without overtly reinforcing national distinctions. The example of Cross-Border Promenades (Więckowski & Cerić, 2016) shows how design can facilitate integration while respecting local identity. Local planners should implement additional soft-border initiatives that

include bilingual information boards, heritage trails, and shared cultural events to reinforce symbolic openness without removing unique characteristics. Paasi and Ferdoush (2022) and Prokkola (2010) both advocate for “border softening” through tourism that respects the emotional and cultural contours of borderlands.

Moreover, tourism planning should consider the affective landscape of the border. Emotional geography offers tools to shape visitor experience not just through infrastructure, but also through affective storytelling, memorials, and sensory design. Drawing from De Vincenzo and Zamperini (2023), integrating affective markers, including art installations and historic references along with audio guides, can deepen emotional engagement that bridge symbolic borders.

Finally, policy responses to future crises (e.g., pandemics) should take into account the emotional significance that border tourism holds. Böhm (2021) and Contreras et al. (2024) show how re-bordering under crisis conditions can provoke affective responses ranging from anxiety to nostalgia. Recognising the symbolic and emotional role of maritime borders can help mitigate negative perceptions during such transitions and maintain cross-border solidarity. This reinforces the argument made by Prokkola and Lois (2016) that border resilience requires more than logistical coordination – it demands emotional coherence and symbolic inclusivity.

By placing the tourist experience at the centre of analysis, this study suggests that the success of maritime border regions depends not only on legal openness or logistical integration but on the ability to foster emotionally resonant, symbolically inclusive, and culturally fluid experiences.

Conclusion

This study investigated tourist perceptions and interpretations of the German-Polish maritime border by asking: *How do tourists experience and interpret this maritime boundary, and how do their narratives contribute to*

a distinct conceptualisation of maritime border tourism in open-border settings? The findings clearly show that tourists engage with the border not as a bureaucratic and physical checkpoint, but as a symbolic, emotional, and fluid threshold. While the physical border has largely vanished due to Schengen liberalisation, it remains significant to their sense of identity, memory, and spatial imagination, especially for those who experienced its restrictive nature during past times.

This study offers new conceptual tools for understanding maritime border tourism by applying a triadic framework that includes bordering processes, liminality, and emotional geography. It introduces the notions of “floating thresholds”, “symbolic permeability”, and “emotional permeability” to explain maritime border operations that extend past physical and legal limitations. The research extends border tourism theory by adding maritime contexts that have been overlooked in both conceptual and empirical research.

Future research should consider longitudinal studies that track how perceptions of maritime borders evolve over time, especially in response to geopolitical shifts or crises. Comparative research is also needed to contrast the experiential responses of tourists crossing maritime borders with those crossing land borders, to advance knowledge about how physical environments influence understanding and interpretation. Broader cross-border studies across multiple regions could test the generalisability of this study’s framework. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration with marine spatial planners, cultural geographers, and policy-makers could further enrich insights into the relationship between borders and tourism.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on one particular open border location in the Baltic Sea region during a single tourist season. As such, the results are not generalisable across all maritime border contexts. The reliance on self-reported narratives also introduces subjectivity, and future research could benefit from observational or longitudinal methods to triangulate insights.

In practical terms, destination managers and policy-makers should recognise the layered meanings tourists attach to maritime crossings. Tourism destinations could implement interpretive tools that respect historical memories, cultural blends, and emotional responses, to create border experiences that benefit visitors. This calls for a form of tourism planning that is not only spatially integrated but also emotionally and symbolically responsive.

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Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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