

The quarantine hotel experience: travel diaries of compulsory confinement

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During the summer of 2021, 14 days of quarantine at designated hotels was a mandatory Covid-19 restriction for all travellers entering Taiwan. This study employs the duo-ethnographic method to investigate the implications of quarantine hotel confinement on the emotional, physiological and psychological state of individuals. The emic approach of autoethnography provides a reflexive and evocative source for describing the feelings, emotions, perceptions and challenges during compulsory isolation in designated lodgings. Goffman's (1961) typology for total institutions served as the conceptual tool to examine the characteristics of the social arrangement in quarantine hotels. The empirical data revealed the profound consequences of isolation. This paper outlines the detrimental implications of role dispossession, deprivation of personal freedom, programming and controlling, and disruption of key spheres of life, along with the imposition of acceptable behaviours regarding the mental health and emotional state of guests during confinement.

Keywords: *quarantine hotel, duo-ethnography, compulsory isolation, pandemic, travel restrictions, Covid-19*

1 INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of Covid-19 brought about an unprecedented situation around the world, affecting most economies negatively. For instance, international tourist arrivals fell by 73% in 2020 (UNWTO 2022). Given that the spread of the disease caused international and domestic travel to gradually decline, the entire tourism, travel and hospitality industry was affected.

Covid-19 also challenged governments, which were faced with a rapid increase of infections in early 2020. However, densely populated East Asian countries better understood the nature of the virus, specifically after experiencing SARS between

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2002 and 2004 (Wong/Yang 2020). Hence, these nations created mechanisms to prepare for the crisis. In Taiwan, the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) drafted the national pandemic policy, developing a strict yet effective monitoring system. This entailed closing the borders for inbound travellers (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2021), concurrently with the implementation of a quarantine hotel system (Haire et al. 2022). The CDC's well-organized epidemic policy successfully kept Taiwan as a Covid-19-free destination. As a result, residents enjoyed a normal life until the more contagious variants appeared in May 2021. Following international procedures, citizens and residents who entered Taiwan were required to complete a mandatory quarantine at designated hotels. These venues were transformed into 'isolation centres for quarantined tourists' to prevent the spread of the disease (Wong/Yang 2020: 1).

Several studies investigated the psychological and mental impact of quarantine on travellers, indicating that compulsory confinement caused feelings of fear, despair, frustration and depression (Fan et al. 2021; Fu 2020; Fung et al. 2020; Ghaderi et al. 2022; Girish et al. 2022; Haire et al. 2022; Pratt/Tolkach 2022; Sharma/Lahav 2022; Wong/Yang 2020; Yousaf 2022; Zheng 2020).

However, most studies followed a deductive approach based on pre-determined variables or indicators to analyse the impact of compulsory confinement on travellers. In contrast, our research adopts an inductive standpoint, providing a reflexive, holistic and profound interpretation of the quarantine experience. The contribution of this study stems from the utilization of the methodological tool, duo-ethnography, to explore, capture and comprehend the emotional, physiological and psychological nuances as well as the practical implications of compulsory isolation in a quarantine hotel during the summer of 2021.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Quarantine refers to a period of compulsory physical separation of healthy individuals or groups who have been possibly exposed to a contagious infection or disease (Barbera et al. 2001). The Taiwan CDC highlights the importance and efficacy of quarantine as a measure to avert the threat of cross-border infectious diseases for international tourism and trade (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2021). At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020, the Taiwanese Government imposed an obligatory quarantine for citizens, permanent residents and legal foreigners, and all tourist visas were suspended. The Government provided a list of designated quarantine hotels in major Taiwanese cities, where the main airports are located. Anyone entering Taiwan was required to reserve an individual hotel room prior to arrival. During the two-week quarantine period, travellers were strictly prohibited from leaving their rooms.

The restriction of physical movement, the compulsory nature of confinement and the temporary separation from the outside world characterize a quarantine hotel as a form of mandatory social isolation. Social isolation has been defined as the state of complete or nearly complete physical separation of an individual from others (Cacioppo et al. 2011). There are two main types of social isolation: objective, which is described as the 'lack of contact with others due to a situational factor, such as small social network, infrequent social interaction, or lack of participation in social activities' and subjective, 'a shortage in one's social resources, such as companionship or social support' (Cornwell/Waite 2009: 33). Previous studies have examined the impact of subjective and objective social disconnectedness on human

health, specifically when conducting research at mental institutions, hospitals or asylums (Cornwell/Waite 2009; House 2001). This study explores compulsory isolation in a different context, that of a quarantine hotel. In addition, it offers a novel approach in evaluating the content of this experience by applying the underrated scholarship method, duo-ethnography.

The rapid spread of Covid-19 forced many countries to impose a quarantine for international travellers, with several implications for public health, economy, safety and travel mode choices (Chen et al. 2021; Fan et al. 2021; Grout et al. 2021; Jordan-Martin et al. 2020; Teng et al. 2020). Although many studies have investigated the psychological consequences of quarantine on humans, they overlook the particularities of cultural, economic, political and social context in different countries (Jurblum et al. 2020; Pietrabissa/Simpson 2020). Additionally, their findings, based on pre-determined indicators or oversimplified hypotheses, were unable to reflect the reactions, behaviours and perceptions of different individuals during quarantine.

Following an emic approach, this paper analyses the emotional, experiential and psychological impact of hotel isolation on travellers and is based on duo-ethnographic research. Duo-ethnography has been defined as the dialogue between two or more researchers regarding their experiences of a shared socio-cultural phenomenon (Norris/Sawyer 2012). Within this dialogic text, the authors become the researchers and the researched. They thus explain their situations with similar or different meanings, as they are ascribed to a common condition, event or situation (Norris/Sawyer 2012). Because of its transient and conversational nature, duo-ethnography reveals the fluidity of knowledge by challenging the validity of positivistic notions of truth (Norris/Sawyer 2012). Duo-ethnography is a relatively new form of duo-ethnographic narrative (Mair/Frew 2018), and there is scant tourism research that has utilised duo-ethnography (Mair/Frew 2018; Pung et al. 2020; Zheng 2020). Duo-ethnography was chosen because it provides a deeper, reflexive and critical understanding regarding the consequences of quarantine on travellers.

With the aim of combating the spread of Covid-19, governments transformed certain hotels into designated institutions for quarantine. Hotel confinement can be examined as a form of provisional institutionalization, since the compulsory separation from society constituted the norm for all inbound travellers. Institutionalization refers to an intended process to regulate and control supra-individual actions and behaviours within certain organizations or society (Keman 2017). In addition, the institutionalization theory suggests that human activity should follow, adjust, adapt and manifest rules and procedures in a certain social, political, cultural and economic environment (Keman 2017). Weber (1978) claimed that institutionalization is a process of implying normative regularities of action within legitimate orders imposed by organizations, institutions, economic structures, ethical doctrines, tradition and forms of domination.

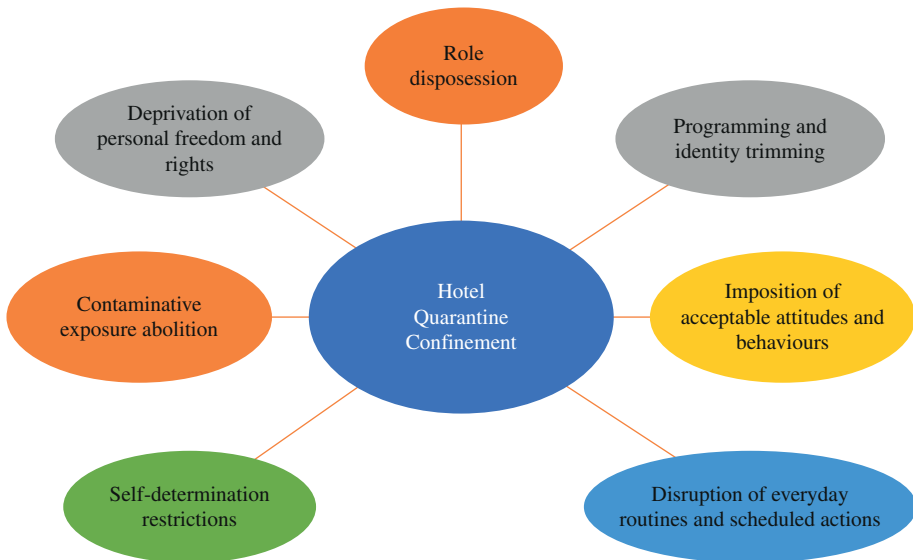
However, the most influential contribution to the conceptualization of this study is Goffman's typology for asylums (1961). Goffman (1961) described five different types of institutions, namely boarding schools, orphanages, prisons, juvenile detention centres and military branches as places of social arrangements where similarly situated individuals are secluded from wider society for a considerable amount of time (Goffman 1961). He argued that in these institutions, several daily activity spheres of civic life, such as eating, sleeping, working and playing, lose their distinct boundaries in multiple ways (Goffman 1961). However, there are fundamental differences between asylums and the quarantine hotels, not only in terms of duration and purpose of confinement, but also in reference to the intension of people to be

isolated (guests versus inmates) and the degree of coerciveness of the authority (hotel management versus prison personnel). Nevertheless, there are several similarities between the total institutions studied by Goffman and the quarantine hotels involving totalitarian features, including residents’ routines, regulatory systems and adaptation alignments.

Using the characteristics of total institutions identified by Goffman, we developed a conceptual framework for this research (see Figure 1). According to his analysis, the transformation of the self of each resident in any type of asylum entails the following processes:

- Self-determination restrictions;
- Contaminative exposure abolition;
- Deprivation of personal freedom and rights;
- Role dispossession;
- Programming and identity trimming;
- Imposition of acceptable attitudes and behaviours;
- Disruption of everyday routines and scheduled actions.

This conceptual framework uses Goffman’s typology as an analytical tool to study the social arrangement of hotel isolation. However, our study is deployed inductively. Furthermore, the observations derived from our empirical research during quarantine are examined and interpreted through Goffman’s lens regarding social life in total institutions. Beyond any obvious differences between asylums and quarantine hotels, the purpose of developing the conceptual framework is to investigate the impact of temporary confinement according to Goffman’s insights about institutionalized settings.



Source: Goffman (1961).

Figure 1 The conceptual framework of quarantine hotel confinement

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Weaving the ethnographic 'self' through the traveller 'self'

The objective of this paper is to provide a critical, comparative and dialectical interpretation of quarantine hotel experiences from different researchers. To this end, we employed the duo-ethnographic technique as a subtype of autoethnography. The auto-ethnographic gaze offers a methodological tool to contest, judge and reconsider perceptions as an integral and interdependent component of the social and cultural context in which it emerges (Sikes 2022). The confining state of a quarantine hotel provided a unique space for retrospective and interpretative analysis of a travel experience within the condition of social isolation. Simultaneously being the researcher and researched entails a constant endeavour of offering an ethnographic nuance to personal travel and tourist narratives. Through this process, the duo-ethnography becomes a transformative, expressive, performative and critical canvas for interpreting the feelings, thoughts and reactions during our confinement.

The data of this study is based on the auto-biographical diaries of three foreign faculty members who work at a private university in Taiwan. Before returning home for summer vacation in 2021, we decided to conduct auto-ethnographic research by keeping a record of the quarantine experience when returning to Taiwan. Being quarantined for 14 days in designated hotels was a mandatory obligation for permanent residents and citizens who entered the country. One professor stayed in a three-star hotel for the first two weeks of August, whereas the other two completed their quarantine in a four-star hotel at the end of August. Both hotels were located in the centre of Kaohsiung city. The three diaries were collected by the main author at the end of September 2021, while the analysis commenced one month later. Following several meetings and discussions, we agreed to use an open coding process to identify patterns, feelings, emotions, opinions and views presented in the biographical diaries. This process unfolds the self-revealing power of a duo-ethnographic narrative to capture the aesthetic, emotional and experiential cues of plot and scene development (Noy 2008).

In several parts of the paper, we decided to use first person to facilitate a direct engagement with the audience. This method increased the authenticity of the narrative and allowed readers to make their own judgements and interpretations about the duo-biographical stories. Hence, each reader becomes a critical evaluator. Here, they acknowledge the positionality and subjectivity of the researcher to describe social practices, values and norms through a meaning-making process, which are based on personal views and opinions (Adams et al. 2022). However, this sensemaking mechanism lies beyond the boundaries of language, taking a form of a play script through which the duo-ethnographers discover their hybrid identities while also comparing their experiences via a dialogic text (Norris/Sawyer 2012).

The exploration of the senses, emotions and encounters of our personal experiences constituted a focal point of our narratives, supplying an effective approach to this study. This perspective is underrepresented in tourism research. More specifically, the duo-ethnographic method is often criticized and characterized as simplistic, narcissistic and self-centred, being of neither a literature genre nor a scientific essay (Sparkes 2000). Bearing in mind the importance of describing our feelings and emotions during confinement, we opted to produce a readable narrative, free from academic underpinnings, to foster an evocative insight of our stories. We interpreted our lived and extraordinary moments of a quarantine hotel by analysing the non-linguistical elements of

ever-present moods, ambience and feelings, following the principles of affective duo-ethnographic research (Adams et al. 2022).

The reflexivity of the duo-ethnographic approach allowed us to examine the marginalization we experienced throughout the confined space of a hotel room. We therefore used the personal stories to position ourselves in relation to others. Thus, this duo-ethnography became a performative vehicle for experiential brokerage between the individual and the collective self. As Spry (2018) explained, ‘performative duo-ethnography is not about the self at all; perhaps it is instead about a wilful embodiment of “we”’ (2018: 628). ‘Performances could raise public awareness and even, incite action’ (Sikes 2022: 24). Hence, writing about the quarantine hotel diary is not primarily about the duo-ethnographer’s self, but rather a narrative to address ‘how do we feel and act’ during a pandemic. Our duo-ethnography uses the performative-I of each researcher to compose an ‘ensemble text’, where individual knowledge, opinions and experience become an idiosyncratic dialogue between self, the other and the culture, arguing that ‘there is no self without Others’ (Spry 2018: 629).

To increase the validity and credibility of our research, we employed multiple triangulation strategies. These methods may enrich the rigor of the qualitative research, ensuring the trustworthiness, confirmability and comprehension of the study. More specifically, it helps to overcome ‘personalistic biases from single methodologies’ (Denzin 2017: 300). We therefore requested the contribution of four researchers from another institution to examine the process of developing, analysing and transcribing our diary testimonies to meet triangulation requirements of the study. Using and comparing different quarantine hotel duo-biographies rendered a methodological triangulation of our inquiry in two interrelated layers of data input. The first involves the participant observation through our personal duo-ethnographic narratives, where the observers are simultaneously the actual informants. The second refers to the analysis and interpretation of individual diaries through interviews and field notes.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Pre-quarantine anxiety

The imminent isolation in a quarantine hotel for 14 consecutive days generated a certain degree of stress and anxiety for all of us. It was the first time that we would experience a mandatory confinement in a designated establishment. As a result, we felt a surge of uneasiness about surviving the restrictions practically and emotionally. It was also the first time that we had considered a hotel stay, not as an accommodation option of travelling, but rather like a social arrangement in a total institution. The quarantine process was perceived as a closed social system of strict rules, norms and schedules. The temporary separation from society meets most of the characteristics of the total institutions outlined by Goffman (1961). The dispossession of the roles played in the key spheres of everyday life, such as work and leisure and the disruption of routines and programmes was combined with the deprivation of personal freedom to shape emotional response prior to quarantine. The description of *A* captures this feeling:

I was really worried how I would survive for 14 days in a hotel room. I started before my trip to Taiwan to prepare a schedule for everyday make sure that I bring everything I need. My laptop, mobile phone, 4 or 5 books to read, my favourite green tea and a mug, olive oil, salt, pepper, oregano, and a big bottle of single malt whiskey (although not allowed) to fight

boredom. Isolated from the outside world for such a long period of time following all kinds of restrictions wasn't an easy task. (A Diary)

Several days before travelling, we collected the necessary information, such as the required polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, and regulations and restrictions regarding Covid-19. Using the Taiwanese Government official website in English, we completed the designated hotel booking and the transportation from Taoyuan airport to Kaohsiung. However, *P* experienced some glitches in the online system when reserving his hotel, but finally managed to resolve the issue when he landed in Taiwan. He did require the assistance of airport ground officers who were waiting near immigration and customs.

Upon arrival, the countdown process began. After completing several online forms, we had to give the hardcopy of the health certificate and negative PCR test to the officials. We were then guided to a designated area, outside of the arrival lobby of the airport, to take another PCR test. While going through the process of monitoring, checking and health profiling, we felt the government's control, along with our obligation to comply with set regulations. During isolation, all inbound travellers had to activate a smartphone tracking system. This allowed the government to monitor each person and for travellers to report their health status on a 24/7 basis. The strict requirements of hotel confinement aimed to foster obedience to the authorities by imposing certain acceptable attitudes and behaviours, which was a key characteristic of Goffman's typology (1961) for total institutions. Quarantine hotels essentially function as designated establishments, where the primary concern is to protect society from people who may pose a threat to public health. This element meets another feature of our conceptual framework, that of contaminative exposure abolition.

Controlling the virus transmission during isolation presupposes several self-restrictions and a major constraint of personal freedom and rights. This fact caused frustration for us and is generally a stigmatisation for all travellers. In this regard, we were treated as a potential threat to the public. *P* described this feeling of unease by comparing the confinement with dark moments of history. He stated, 'staying in a quarantine hotel seems like being sent to a Nazi Germany concentration camp'. The objective of the government to impose strict measures on inbound travellers to avoid contamination essentially increased fears of spreading Covid-19. *A* expressed his concerns about the protocol for those who tested positive and their stigmatisation. Also, he argues that the procedures were rather unclear:

My primary fear though was what it would happen if before starting my quarantine the PCR test was positive?? Then, you will be sent to a special hospital for who knows for how long, where they treat you as a lepper...I wasn't concerned only about my health, but more about the hassle of going through constant surveillance, testing, and monitoring. (A Diary)

4.2 Arriving at the quarantine hotel, the first shock and 'the moment of truth'

Our last contact with the outside world was getting out of the taxi and entering the hotel. The thought of being isolated for 14 days increased the nervousness and tension already present:

Just before stepping into the elevator to go to room 3053, *A* turned to look at the receptionist, as she was the last person he would see before being confined. (A Diary)

The biographical journals suggest that the social arrangement of a quarantine hotel comprises the characteristics of our conceptual framework, those involving the deprivation of

personal freedom, self-determination restrictions, programming and contaminative exposure elimination, as well as the disruption of social life and imposition of acceptable behaviours. Our empirical observations support the findings of previous studies regarding the impact of a quarantine hotel on the mental state of the individuals, which cause several behavioural disturbances (Brooks et al. 2020; Dinh et al. 2021; Tang et al. 2021). As Turner (2020) claimed in his study, we also experienced feelings of anxiety, monotony, stress and boredom in isolation. Anxiety is a very common symptom for people in quarantine, and it can be defined as ‘a temporary elevation in a combination of emotional and physiological symptoms, such as tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry’ (Doby/Caplan 2017: 1107). The intension of the hotel staff was to eliminate infection and put into action the restrictions and regulations imposed by the Government. However, this environment perpetuated the montage of emotions we experienced while being restricted in the hotel. Following specific rules and giving up our liberty created a sense of imprisonment, as *P* explains:

I was shocked by the security measures, and the sanitary precautions. A piece of nylon in front of every door, a chair, and a box with wet tissues, masks, and several packages with rapid test kits. I must take the box and enter my prison cage, aka, my domain for 2 weeks. (*P* Diary)

Quarantine facilities follow strict rules and regulations regarding food and beverages, room service, concierge, room maintenance and housekeeping (Sorooshian 2021). When the hotel staff provided a leaflet with the Government’s instructions, guidelines and policies to follow for fourteen days, it was shocking. While reading about the limitations and restrictions, we realized that our confinement encompassed the features of Goffman’s typology (1961) for total institutions. This specifically involved the imposition of certain acceptable attitudes, programming and identity trimming, deprivation of personal freedom and contagion exposure eradication. To avoid contamination, there was no room maintenance nor housekeeping provided during isolation. Going out of our room, even into the corridor, was absolutely forbidden. Furthermore, violators would receive a fine of up to 100,000 NTD (\$3,300 USD).

One of our daily obligations was to send an SMS message to the Taiwanese Government and report if we had any coronavirus symptoms. Each person did however receive three meals per day, without any extra charge. Nevertheless, meals were set and dietary restrictions were not considered. On the eighth day of quarantine, we took a self-administered PCR test in our room, and later, informed the hotel staff about the results. On day ten, a taxi, paid for by the Government, transported us from the hotel to a designated hospital for another PCR test. Thereafter, we were brought immediately back to the hotel.

4.3 Living conditions: room design, comfort and the view to the ‘outside’ world

The importance of a nice view on mental health and the emotional state of individuals during quarantine is highly significant (Brooks et al. 2020). Two of us stayed in a hotel in front of Central Park in Kaohsiung, located in the city centre. Handani et al. (2022) looked at the positive influence of quarantine hotel locations and the room view on the mental health of the guests. As Lin and Chen (2021) argued, looking at a beautiful landscape suppresses the claustrophobic, grey and emotional trauma-generating effects of isolation. The scenic view of the park helped *P* and *R* maintain a connection to the ‘outside world’. While spending hours gazing at bamboo trees in the park and children

playing, *P* 'felt happy having a room connected, at least visually, to the external world'. *R* also describes in his diary the positive impact of the view on his well-being:

I was lucky because my room has a breath-taking view. I have a very big balcony and can clearly see most of the south side of the park. Looking outside helps me to relax and cheer up, a little. The view gives me a feeling of serenity, like having vacations in a luxury resort. (*R* Diary)

In contrast, *A* expressed concerns about the impact of the view on his mental health by stating:

OMG. The moment I entered the room and I saw the two small windows facing a parking lot, I almost cried. For 2 weeks this will be the view to the outside world. I started feeling depressed. (*A* Diary)

The contradictory descriptions about the view reveal major differences in the accommodation options for quarantine. Travellers had to book rooms online through the official Taiwanese government website. However, the availability during the peak period of August was very low. Most of the accepted hotels were also in Taipei and Taoyuan, with very few choices in Kaohsiung.

The diaries indicate the importance of size, design, ventilation and comfort of the room for our emotional state. However, there is ambiguity in the opinions and evaluations of these features among us. The description by *P* about his room was very positive:

The room is great. Yes, it was a long process selecting the hotel, but I am pleased to see that the room meets my expectations. Spacious enough and with original design. These two features are important for me and my survival. Enough space is needed because I have never been inside a room without going out for more than 3 days. Design is required to give me a feeling of being in a resort, on holiday. (*P* Diary)

Similarly, the impression of *R* on the size and the design of the room was quite positive except for the floor:

The room had a hard mattress, king size bed, which I liked so much. The plastic floor was a small disappointment, and I didn't feel comfortable doing exercises on that. (*R* Diary)

A was rather disappointed with the size and space arrangement of the room. In his words:

The room is so small. Nothing like how it appeared on the website. Not much natural light and very limited space between the two single beds. Also, because of the humidity, I could not open the windows for a long time to get fresh air. I had to keep the aircon on all the time, which I don't think is very healthy. The room looks like a prison cell. How am I going to survive here, I don't know. I should have chosen another hotel. (*A* Diary)

Our observations suggest that adequate space, functional interior design, view quality, good ventilation and substantial comfort are decisive factors for psychological and physiological health during quarantine. Although these features are not included in Goffman's typology for total institutions, we believe that future studies should investigate the impact of these characteristics on the transformation of the self and the emotional status of inmates in other social arrangements, such as hospitals, prisons and military compounds.

4.4 Regimes and rituals for surviving quarantine

Adjusting to pandemic regulations and temporary Spartan-like living conditions entailed bearing the loneliness of being locked into a tiny space for a fortnight.

Having endured such circumstances, daily rituals were altered to make the stay enjoyable. As quarantine was a new experience for everyone, activities were the only way to deny boredom, the most common symptom of being locked-in (Turner 2020).

We developed different routines to survive quarantine. For example, A 'woke up around 10:00 am, prepared a pot of hot green tea, opened his laptop, checked emails, surfed the news and watched videos. He then exercised for 30 minutes'. However, P was more concerned with 'waking up every morning, not later than 9 am because the National Prevention Centre sent a message', which he had to reply to immediately, otherwise they would start worrying. The same pattern was followed for beverages. As R argued, 'they provided three types of drinks with each meal: these were box milk teas or canned fruit and veggie juices'.

The size of the room helped to dissipate claustrophobic feelings; however, the limited space and scant services had a negative impact. Although the daily routine helped to avoid boredom, the monotonousness of that routine increased. Meanwhile, the separation of days and dates vanished, as A explicitly mentioned:

To be honest, after the fifth or sixth day, I lost track of time. It was like being trapped in a time loop that repeated the same day over and over. It reminds me of the movie 'Groundhog Day'. (A Diary)

4.5 Hygiene and sanitation: handling quarantine with a box

Maintaining a hygienic environment and staying healthy were the main factors for curtailing the pandemic effects. The fear of the unknown, the virus and its uncertain aftermath, along with being locked in for fourteen days increased anxiety. Meanwhile, tourists worried about getting infected (Haire et al. 2022). In addition, safety concerns appeared while occupying the rooms. According to Wong and Yang (2020), anxiety has two major sources: health concerns (Gudmundsson et al. 2005) and social isolation (Gierveld et al. 2018). Both aspects occurred when entering quarantine, and they deeply impacted the travellers. The remarks from A demonstrate these aspects:

Two weeks without cleaning services? Well, yes!! It is true. The hotel provided no cleaning services for the entire quarantine period. I was waiting for 6 days. I saw no action regarding my room cleaning. I called the reception. (A Diary)

P also questioned the feasibility for cleaning his room with what the hotel provided. He argued:

A bottle of bleach. Hey, why did they give us bleach? What am I going to use it for? Do they expect me to disinfect the space around me? (P Diary)

To avoid any contaminative exposure between guests and housekeepers, the hotel did not provide any cleaning services. This resulted in sanitation becoming an issue, specifically since we had very limited resources to clean our rooms.

4.6 Gastronomic limitations and dietary preferences

Food and beverage options play a crucial role regarding customer satisfaction in quarantine hotels. Here, alimentation quality has an impact on travellers' mental health and vitality during their isolation (Landaeta-Díaz et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2021). The type, quality and portion of the three meals provided by the hotel varied.

Ordering food online was an option 24/7. However, as *A* emphatically stated ‘if you didn’t speak Chinese, it would be nearly impossible to place an order either by using a delivery app or by simply calling the restaurant’. Based on our testimonies, the nutritional value, food options and taste of the meals and beverages during isolation were rather poor and were largely aligned to the gastronomic preferences of the Taiwanese. *A*’s description indicates:

Food was full of emulsifiers and taste enhancers. Simply trash food. From a health perspective, I have a serious problem since fruit was absent, whereas veggies were limited to a few pieces of broccoli or cabbage. (*A* Diary)

Since the bookings were made months in advance, we expected to have a more standardized international menu. Unfortunately, we experienced several major issues with the quality and the types of food. *R* argued, ‘the meals were typical Taiwanese local cuisine’, whereas *P* complained that he ‘could only eat a few of the ingredients in each meal’. The lack of Western food or any alternatives to local cuisine, concurrently with the same meals being served every day, generated feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction and unpleasantness. *P* felt really frustrated and stated, ‘every day I have the same meal for breakfast and every second day the same meal for dinner’.

Our descriptions support the findings of previous studies regarding the importance of food options based on religious, personal or cultural preferences for the psychological well-being of travellers in quarantine (Yousaf 2022; Zheng 2020). However, the empirical data of our research indicate that the appreciation of food, types and ingredients, as well as the enjoyment of the meals are manifestations of a more profound difference between Taiwanese and European culture. Our perceptions about food quality, nutritional value, ingredients, cooking types and the taste of food are culturally embedded elements, which reveals the issue of cultural heterogeneity. Arguing about the meals, *A* wondered, ‘why the hotel didn’t provide of options, like pizza or pasta, types of food popular for most people all around the world?’. Another indication of cultural embeddedness about food quality was found in *P*’s diary: ‘although I was accustomed to Taiwanese cuisine, I felt that our meals were rather basic, of average to low quality, little variety and relatively unhealthy. I guess I have a different opinion about what is good and tasty’. Cultural heterogeneity is also reflected in *R*’s statement: ‘I like rice but I cannot have it every day. I am not Asian. I really miss freshly baked, whole-wheat bread, a juicy sirloin steak and a salad. Or, a nice Tiramisu for a desert’ (*R* Diary).

From the analysis of the diaries, it can be seen that cultural heterogeneity affects not only gastronomic preferences but also the evaluation and interpretation of several issues related to service quality, communication, compliance with quarantine restrictions, as well as interaction between local hotel staff and guests. Cultural heterogeneity echoes a diversity in the shared meaning of social values, beliefs, behaviours, social systems, lifestyles and preferences of people in various cultural contexts. In the social arrangement of quarantine hotels, where international and domestic travellers share the same facilities and services, cultural heterogeneity becomes a vital feature for confinement quality. Our narratives suggest that it is quite possible for other, non-Taiwanese guests to experience similar challenges during their isolation. Cultural heterogeneity could be an important factor for the transformation of the self in other restricted establishments, including prisons, rehabilitation centres and mental hospitals, giving another dimension to Goffman’s typology about total institutions. However, future research needs to be conducted to investigate such a claim.

4.7 Developing a Pavlovian conditioning for food

Meal delivery at a scheduled time each day comprises the characteristics of programme setting, identity shaping and trimming, as well as self-determination restrictions, which are outlined in our conceptual framework. Programming the provision of meals at three set times per day generated an instinct response towards food for us. To avoid any contact with the hotel staff, individual food containers in a closed plastic bag were placed on a table outside our rooms. Minutes later, a bell rang, and this was the signal to open the door and take our food. The description of *A* is indicative:

From the second day and onwards, I developed a type of reflex to the doorbell. I caught myself waiting to hear the bell around the delivery time of each meal. This reaction was more intense in the evenings when I was feeling hungrier. It was amazing how fast I adjusted my daily routine to the meal schedule. (*A* Diary)

Prearranged eating times affected *P* and *R*'s attitudes to food. The habituation process of eagerly waiting for each meal and the detailed description of food type, quality and portions were apparent in several parts of *R*'s diary. Despite his dissatisfaction about the variety, *P* anxiously craved each meal at the scheduled time and mentioned:

Usually, I am very hungry in the mornings. I was expecting breakfast every day at exactly 8:00 a.m. It became a habit for me to wait until I heard the doorbell to open the door and take the food left outside. Although I can eat only a few ingredients, on the fourth day there was a 15-minute delay. I was longing for the food delivery. (*P* Diary)

Meal programming was a totalistic characteristic of the social arrangement in a quarantine hotel. According to Goffman (1961), this constitutes a common process for the transformation of the self in various asylums. For us, food timing fostered a type of Pavlovian conditioning towards eating. The sound of the doorbell functioned as the stimulus for our response to food, creating a certain behavioural routine throughout the fourteen days of isolation.

4.8 Eyes on the guys – strict security and extreme safety

The main reason for quarantining inbound travellers was to control the spread of the virus. Thus, contact with hotel staff was strictly prohibited, especially if travellers arrived in a country with a low number of confirmed cases (Wong and Yang 2020). Taiwan Centres of Disease Control therefore followed the international security protocol for quarantine (Haire et al. 2022) and emphasized the regulations. Furthermore, they checked on individuals several times a day (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2021). Another way of checking the whereabouts of the quarantined was infrequent phone calls from the police, who overemphasized the fact that nobody could leave the room under any circumstances, and they must follow the health protocol. Non-compliance with Government restrictions could result in serious consequences, as *P* explains:

I checked my phone and suddenly realized that I had several missed calls. Not long after, I received another call. The guy didn't speak English but somehow, I understood that it was from the police. I realized this because I missed answering the SMS from National Prevention Centre. (*P* Diary)

The system of control was designed to foster obedience to the authorities and to discourage breaking the rules. The components of the conceptual framework regarding the imposition of acceptable attitudes, self-determination restrictions and deprivation of personal freedom set a totalistic nature of control terms and living conditions during our quarantine.

4.9 Communication breakdown: lost in translation

Hospitality, a manpower-based industry, is where human interactions are strongly anticipated. During the pandemic, however, hotel services contributed to the spread of Covid-19, drastically reducing host and guest interactions (Gössling et al. 2020; Teng et al. 2020). In quarantine hotels, the compulsory isolation left guests to rely on telephone calls or platforms, such as LINE, (a popular Asian app) to communicate with friends and relatives, as well as authorities and receptionists. Taiwan closed its borders to non-residents at the beginning of the pandemic to provide a safe bubble for its residents. When hotels transformed into quarantine venues, they had limited amenities and did not expect large numbers of foreign visitors (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2021). English-speaking employees were scant, making communication a major challenge. The following dialogue between *A* and the receptionist vividly captures this aspect:

It was the third night when I felt like drinking some whiskey.

- Me: Hello! I would like to buy a bottle of whiskey and some ice. Is it possible?
- Receptionist: You no out. No out.
- Me: Yes, I know. I am asking if you can provide a bottle of whiskey and I will pay for it.
- Receptionist: Ok. Ok.
- Me: So, are you coming up to get the money?
- Receptionist: no can out. 7-11, me go.
- Me: I understand. Can you go to the 7-11 on the corner to buy me a bottle of scotch whiskey and some ice? I will leave money outside my door on the table. Ok??
- Receptionist: No, no, Me work. No go out. (*A Diary*)

4.10 The importance of interconnectivity and social media

During the pandemic, there was a lack of interaction between employees and their guests, while using hotel facilities was not allowed. This generated dissatisfaction and disappointment among quarantined individuals. Given that the internet connected the confined guests to other people, Wi-Fi was a crucial and basic service. Going online to converse with family, friends and employers helped quarantined guests maintain a positive mood (Ma et al. 2021). The significance of internet connectivity was clear in the testimony from *A* below:

I don't know what I would have done without internet. I spent every day, at least 6 hours, surfing the internet to check emails, chat with my friends on FB or watch videos on YouTube.
(*A Diary*)

Without interconnectivity, the enforced isolation increased the feeling of loneliness, as it was paired with physical and virtual disconnection from loved ones (Turner 2020; Wong and Yang 2020). As *R* pointed out 'these friendly talks kept me connected

to the world'. Any internet interruption or Wi-Fi malfunction increased anxiety and frustration for the quarantined guests. This incident was described by A:

I called the reception and the guy replied 'no internet, wait one hour they fix'. I was relieved, but at the same time, I realized how addicted I was to the internet. Especially now during my quarantine. (A Diary)

During lockdowns and quarantine periods, face-to-face social relationships suffer from a condition termed 'loneliness epidemic' (Klein 2020). The absence of physical contact with others increased the level of solidarity with newcomers who entered nearby rooms. The fact that someone else was in the next room eased the feeling of loneliness, as P commented:

Well, in the room, one can hear some noises from our neighbours ... And this overheard conversation suddenly makes me understand that I am not alone. (P Diary)

4.11 A whiff of freedom: going for a PCR test

Taiwan managed the pandemic by guaranteeing public health safety based on the quarantine hotel system. On Day 12, those in quarantine left their cage to take a PCR test, via a pre-organized designated quarantine taxi (Wu et al. 2021a; Taiwan Centers for Disease Control 2021). Obviously, this was the most exciting day for the participants. They could leave the room, while the result would determine the end of quarantine. During this short trip to the hospital, the evaluation of the urban environment changed. Endorphins were produced and the pseudo-freedom superseded the prior melancholic psyche. The authors' comments clearly demonstrate this moment:

I left my room, the floor, and the hotel for the first time in almost two weeks ... The birds were greeting me as I left my cage for a short journey and meanwhile, I experienced these amazing feelings as I was getting into the taxi. I had never been so happy visiting a hospital until that time. (R Diary)

I was happy going to the outside world, even for a while. (A Diary)

From the taxi, the otherwise known sights are passing by and I just cannot believe that this is my city. And suddenly, I realize how happy and excited the life is here, outside, in the same place which before I thought is modest and grey. (P Diary)

This hospital trip gave us a slight sense of freedom, alleviating the boredom, monotony and stress, feelings which govern the emotional state of people during isolation (Jurblum et al. 2020; Pratt/Tolkach 2022; Teng et al. 2021).

4.12 Post-traumatic period: the end of anxiety and reappraisal of everyday routines

Environmental psychologists suggest that the isolated environment of quarantine leads to confinement distress, a status in which the individual experiences multiple biopsychological challenges (Jurblum et al. 2020). Several studies claim that the static and restricted settings are associated with hypo-stimulation, a state of a reduced level of stimulation from the natural and social environment, which increases the risk of depression and the cumulative nature of stress (Pratt/Tolkach 2022; Teng et al. 2021; Wu et al. 2021b). Isolation-induced stress factors are common implications of the cognitive hypo-stimulation phase, with immediate effects on the psychological

health of individuals (Kim et al. 2019). Much research on the psychological consequences of quarantine connects hypo-stimulation with increased rates of depression, sadness, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. These symptoms can last for months after isolation (Jurblum et al. 2020; Pratt/Tolkach 2022; Teng et al. 2021; Wu et al. 2021a). The feelings of anxiety and stress, directly after quarantine, were temporary. However, one of our colleagues complained that the post-quarantine obligations of texting the Taiwanese government every day delayed getting back to normality: ‘The following days and weeks were a slow adjustment to the new situation in Taiwan, the step-by-step decreasing of strict regulations, and more freedom’ (*R Diary*).

The fourteen days of social isolation fostered a process of re-appreciation of several elements of our daily life, hitherto perceived as tedious and monotonous. The quarantine hotel provided the space for deconstruction of the perceptions regarding our urban environment and its features. The forced two-week confinement offered time for re-evaluating the relations between the self and the cityscape, appraising the quality and the beauty of our homes. The agoraphobic feeling we experienced coming out of the hotel was combined with a new gaze of the previous dull and insignificant details of our daily life. It was like re-discovering the city again or as *P* described: ‘this is what people mean when they say “first impression of one place” – when everything is somehow bright, alluring, desirable’.

The temporary spatial separation from the outdoor environment functioned as an agent for appreciation of personal freedom, generating positive feelings for features we missed, sentiments we forgot and senses we ignored during the confinement. The following statement encapsulates this notion:

The sun is so lovely bright, the sky is so blue, the green is so bright. Suddenly I realize how happy and excited life is here, outside, in the same place which before I thought is modest and grey. (*P Diary*)

By using phrases, such as ‘entering the cage’, ‘incarceration is over’ and ‘the day of escape’, we all emphasized a negative mood, one characterized by a loss of liberty, violation of privacy, escalation of anxiety and elevation of stress. This finding supports the arguments of previous studies regarding the psychological sequelae and the effect of stressful confinement situations on the daily life of individuals (Jurblum et al. 2020; Pratt/Tolkach 2022; Teng et al. 2021; Wu et al. 2021a).

5 CONCLUSION: IS THE ‘NEW NORMAL’ LEADING TO THE DE-DEMOCRATIZATION OF TRAVEL?

With the purpose of protecting society from coronavirus infection, quarantine hotels became temporary social arrangements for tourists, who were perceived as a potential threat to public health. For fourteen days we were obliged to comply with certain regulations and follow the guidelines imposed by the government. Based on biographical diaries, this study explores the quarantine experience of three foreign travellers in Taiwanese government designated lodging establishments during the summer of 2021. The strictness of the measures, the absolute control and the compulsory nature of the confinement transformed quarantine hotels to a hybrid type of a total institution. Our empirical observations reveal that this isolation entails all the features of Goffman’s typology for total institutions. The confinement period exhibits the dispossession processes of everyday roles played out in civil society. These include the

deprivation of personal rights, meal programming, imposition of certain acceptable behaviours, self-determination constraints and contaminative exposure eradication. These aspects are outlined in the conceptual framework of this study. However, we further acknowledged the importance of cultural heterogeneity, room size, comfort and communication ability of hotel personnel as important factors for surviving quarantine.

The unprecedented Covid-19 crisis engendered radical changes for the global tourism landscape. Numerous researchers have argued that travellers, visitors, entrepreneurs, local communities, destination management organisations and civic society should seize opportunities or adjust to the ‘new normal’ of the post-pandemic world to regenerate tourism (Ateljevic 2020; Brouder et al. 2020; Prayag 2023). Thus, they suggest that the transformation could involve the reconsideration of travel patterns and consumption habits, expansion of global consciousness for environmental issues, fast implementation of sustainable practices in tourism destinations, upgrading of health services and increasing state intervention to promote socially oriented tourism (Ateljevic 2020; Brouder et al. 2020; Prayag 2023). However, other studies focus more on legal, social and ethical implications regarding privacy protection loss, health record confidentiality, unauthorized mobile technologies and tracking apps for tackling Covid-19 cases, along with human rights violations under the ‘new normal’ (Kaplan 2020; Lenert/McSwain 2020; Mbunge et al. 2021; Repucci/Slipowitz 2020; Sharma/Bashir 2020).

The empirical data of this study indicate that the compulsory isolation in facilities controlled by the government eventually leads to a temporary deprivation of personal freedom, violating privacy and ignoring basic civil liberties. Our diaries revealed the importance of cultural heterogeneity for the evaluation of service quality, food options and communication with the staff. Hotel isolation has an impact on our emotional and psychological state, causing feelings of anxiety, boredom, stress, uncertainty and fear. Discussing and sharing opinions about our quarantine experience enabled us to conclude that the confinement, as a measure to stop the spread of Covid-19, creates the conditions for governments and international organizations to impose authoritative power and excessive control over people with amazing ease and speed. Beyond any debate or conspiracy theory about the origin of the virus, the effectiveness of the vaccines, the success of treatments or the appropriateness of measures and regulations to control the pandemic, one thing is certain: this health crisis has shaken the very foundations of democratic nations. Hence, there was a major infringement of articles 1, 3, 12, 13 and 25 of the human rights declaration regarding the right to liberty, equality, dignity, privacy, freedom of movement, speech, spirit of brotherhood and personal physical and psychological health (UN General Assembly 1948).

Mobility and freedom are the core elements for travel and tourism. Unfortunately, public authorities, government agencies and security services in many countries have used the pandemic ‘as a justification to grant themselves special powers beyond what is reasonably necessary to protect public health’. They therefore overstepped legislation, while also perpetrating unnecessary violence and extreme surveillance when detaining civilians (Repucci/Slipowitz 2020: 3). Our autobiographies should serve as a testimonial of the negative implications of a quarantine hotel on emotional and mental health, posing the question: how ‘normal’ is it to abolish the democratic values of personal liberty and privacy, force compliance to unprecedented travel restrictions and remove individual rights for tourists in the name of public health? Would that signify a de-democratization of future travel?

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