

**Discipline Guide:**

# **Tourism Studies**

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**Written by  
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**Research with  
International Students**

## About the author



**Josef Ploner** is Senior Lecturer in International and Comparative Education at the Manchester Institute of Education. His research, qualitative and often biographical in method, focusses on international student mobilities into and across Europe, and how these intersect with concurrent forms and sensibilities of migration, diaspora, and cultural uprooting. With an academic background in cultural anthropology and critical tourism studies, Josef has also a keen interest in tourism, heritage and the cultural industries as sites of learning, memory formation, and cultural contest.

## About this series

Research with international students is an interdisciplinary field and there are a wide range of research disciplines which can add to our thinking about this subject. This series brings together global experts to present different research disciplines and their application to this research topic with the aim of encouraging more interdisciplinary thinking.

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# The field of tourism studies

Tourism Studies is both an inter- and multi-disciplinary field, including a wide range of both 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines, including economics, management, planning and development, geography, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, and linguistics. At the same time, it ties in with other academic 'fields' such as heritage, hospitality, leisure and events studies and, more recently, has been folded into the paradigmatic field of mobility studies (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Whilst the history of human travel and mobility spans over millennia (Löfgren, 1999; Zuelow, 2015), the study of tourism, understood as a modern phenomenon of leisure-travel, initially emerged from national economic interests in tourism as an economic catalyst and development tool in inter- and postwar 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Vuconić, 2012). It was, however, the emergence of Western 'mass tourism' in the 1960s and 1970s which prompted a significant boost in critical theoretical engagement with tourism, particularly, but not exclusively, in sociology (Turner & Ash, 1975; Cohen, 1979 ) anthropology (MacCannell, 1976; Smith, 1989), and social psychology (Plog, 1974; Crompton, 1979). This pioneering scholarship was characterised by the critical analysis of socio-economic, ecological, and cultural complexities that unfolded in a then fast-growing and globalising phenomenon and would profoundly shape the field for years to come. With the continuing rise of tourism to become one of the most significant and widespread global industries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, tourism studies have continued to grow and diversify significantly over the past decades. The field encompasses numerous academic degree programmes worldwide, a host of professional bodies, learned societies and international research networks, as well as near 150 Web-of-Science-listed journals, covering world regions, disciplinary perspectives and sub-fields, as well as special-interest and niche tourisms. While educational tourism is a recognised, albeit vaguely defined, sub-field of tourism studies, and although tourism scholars have repeatedly emphasised the shared historical roots of international tourism in educational travel (Zuelow, 2015), intellectual exchanges between tourism studies and higher education research remain few and in-between. This Discipline Guide thus seeks to narrow this gap by mapping out some of the common language, concepts, and potential avenues for future research with international students.

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## International students as tourists?

Surprisingly, research with international students has, so far, largely failed to connect with the rich and rewarding field of tourism studies (and, to a lesser degree, *vice versa*). This blind spot may relate to prevailing discourses around the marketisation of global higher education, which tends to downplay the tourist-like 'student-as-consumer' as a seemingly banal or passive figure which exists in stark contrast to the 'nobler' academic and life-transforming experiences gained through an international 'sojourn'. Stone and Petrick (2013) argue that the most obvious parallel between study

abroad and tourism is that travel is a central (and historical) component of each. They continue to map out a host of touristic motives that guide study abroad decisions, such as searching new experiences; creating new opportunities to travel; cultural immersion and learning; the desire to be somewhere different; exposure to a different culture and language, as well as inconspicuous consumer behaviours such as shopping and sightseeing. Comparing the distinctive mobilities and geographies of international students in Austria, Latvia, and the UK, Prazeres et al. (2017) found that touristic motives such as quality of life, attractiveness of place, experiential (urban) landscapes, lifestyles and local amenities often outweigh seemingly more calculated considerations about the 'world-classness' and international prestige of host institutions. Lorraine Brown (2008; 2009), among few scholars exploring the interconnectedness between tourism and the international student sojourn, has likened international students to 'long-stay tourists' in that they share similar experiences of cultural transition and adaptation, the exposure to new cultural norms and ways of behaving, learning, and personal transformation. By developing independence, future aspirations and intercultural competences, the international students in Brown's ethnographic study also felt a profound sense of freedom from familial and cultural expectations – a common experience associated with doing tourism. Bringing in yet a different dimension, my own work (Ploner, 2018) has re-iterated the significance of 'academic hospitality' in the context of international student transitions and explored the complex reciprocal processes, rites of passage, and modalities that emerge between academic 'host' and 'guest' cultures, tourism being one of them.

In a recent seminal synopsis aimed at further consolidating international sojourner and tourism research, Selby (2021) argues that, while the international sojourner literature has made strong contributions in researching issues around international transition, culture shock, acculturation, adjustment, and intercultural competence among international students, tourism studies seem to have the upper hand when it comes to gaining a more holistic understanding of the performative, 'ground-level', and informal educational experiences salient to being a mobile student. To this end and perhaps owing to 'educational tourism' (or 'edutourism') being a rather well developed sub-field of tourism studies (Jernsand et al., 2023), some attention has focussed on international sojourners' tourism mobilities and leisure travels from economic, cultural and social perspectives. For example, tourism economists have emphasised the long-overlooked economic contributions international students make in terms of national tourism revenues, particularly in popular anglophone study destinations, which increasingly view international students both as tourists and 'ambassadors' for local or national tourism brands. Based on a survey with 500 international students in New Zealand, Liu and Ryan (2011) found that international students invest a considerable amount of time, resources, and money travelling within their host country and often act as hosts and tour guides for family and friends visiting them. In a similar study on Chinese international students in Australia, King and Gardiner (2015) found that the independent leisure travel behaviour of these 'study tourists' differs greatly from well-established Western conceptions and typologies of youth travellers such as backpackers. Rather than seeking risk, unplanned fun, and serendipitous adventure in extended trips, and choosing cheap and basic accommodation, this new '*avant-garde*' of Chinese student/tourists tend to travel both independently and with friends, avoid risk and serendipity, book into safe and clean accommodation, prefer short breaks, and highly value the educational value of travel. Linked to that, tourism sociologists have highlighted the symbolic cultural capital accumulation that comes with international students' leisure travels

and the acquisition of informal educational capital, which, particularly among Chinese students, acts as a marker of social and cultural distinction in their native societies (Dong and Blommaert, 2015).

A recent volume, edited by anthropologists Bodinger de Uriarte and Di Giovine (2021), also recognises the many overlaps between tourism and study abroad (i.e. not degree mobility), defining the latter as *'a form of mobility in which students voluntarily and temporarily travel elsewhere – off campus, and most often, outside of their familiar cultural settings and formal educational institutions – to supplement their education through cross-cultural learning.'* (p.7). Interestingly, and unlike previous accounts, they conceptualise many forms of study abroad as a quest for 'anti-tourism' in that internationally mobile students tend to counteract some of the more problematic aspects associated with industrial mass- or over-tourism. Students do so by performing reflexive and ethical mobilities like 'going native' or 'behind the scenes', 'living like a local', cultural/local immersion, etc. While Bodinger de Uriarte and Di Giovine consider education and learning to be 'anti-tourist' motives *per se*, the authors also argue that students' quest for culturally immersive and meaningful experiences is always accompanied by contested discourses linked to cultural othering, differentiation and border-making, conflicting interpretations of global citizenship, or contested performances of class and postcolonial identities.

Other scholars (McGladdery and Lubbe, 2017) emphasise the close alignment between educational tourism and international education by borrowing from Kolb's experiential learning model. They argue that, through reflective learning, international sojourners actively engage in 'global learning' by developing cultural sensitivity, openness, tolerance, global-mindedness and competence. Such educational benefits of travel are also corroborated by Stone and Petrick's review of tourism and study abroad literature, arguing that the 'out-of-class' portion of the study travel experience generates significant self-directed, experiential, and independent learning outcomes such as personal growth, increased 'life skills', and the acquisition of knowledge which are often perceived to be more memorable and impactful than formal/in-class learning experiences. They recommend that more research is needed to determine in which specific ways travel is educational (and vice versa), how study tourism shapes lifelong educational goals, and how more formal types of 'travel learning' (i.e. excursions, field and study trips, museum visits, etc.) can be effectively integrated into disciplinary curricula.

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## International students' journeys between education and lifestyle mobilities

Following on from the above, the more recent advent of the 'mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry, 2006) seems to have generated both a more relaxed and nuanced exchange of ideas between tourism studies and research with international students. Indeed, Selby argues that the mobilities paradigm has blurred the boundaries between international education and tourism research, leading to the *"...de-differentiation of tourism from other social domains, including those associated with studying and learning."*

(Selby, 2021, 2). Synthesising both tourism and sojourner literature, Selby proposes a 'Place Practice Model of Mobile Student Experience' which puts emphasis on international students' performative practices and spontaneous interactions within the cultural environments they traverse and inhabit on their journeys – a contested field of struggle between different 'home' and 'host' actors, cultural discourses and capitals. Within in these fields (or 'practice arrangements'), they argue, it is the everyday embodied and performative practices that shape the relationship between place and identity and impact on students' adjustment, adaptation and the development of intercultural competences. While Selby somewhat overstates the absence of 'on the ground' performance and place theory in existing research with international students (c.f. Sidhu and Dall'Alba, 2012; Beech, 2014; Cockayne, 2025), his model is useful in conceptualising and operationalising the spontaneous, serendipitous, contextual, in other words 'tourist-like' cultural (learning) experiences that shape international students' mobile identities.

In a similar vein, Cohen et al. (2015) have coined the term 'lifestyle mobilities' to define new emerging forms of global mobility where concepts like 'home' and 'away', 'routes' and 'roots', 'work' and 'leisure', become blurred and increasingly subjected to aesthetic/touristic consumption choices among mobile workers and students, often independent of their class, cultural and financial capitals. In the authors' own words, *"tourism can 'tip' into an ongoing lifestyle, wherein extended episodes of touristic experience, or temporary mobility, blur into conceptions of geographic migration."* (p. 158). With regards to international students, it is worth noting that such lifestyle mobility choices also seem to be bound up with other 'emotional geographies' such as existing social ties with family and friends, postcolonial imaginaries and memories of place, or embodied feelings of safety and comfort (Beech, 2014; Ploner & Nada, 2020; Lee and Waters, 2024).

Clearly, as a mutual and inclusive meeting ground, the (new) mobilities paradigm has allowed for increased exchanges of ideas, concepts, and methodologies between tourism studies and higher education research with international students. However, while tourism researchers seem to engage in this dialogue more actively, higher education researchers tend to be more reluctant doing so – perhaps, again, due to the slightly frivolous, marketized, and non-educational connotations the term 'tourism' may suggest. Thus, and in line with the aim of this disciplinary guide, I would like to encourage further dialogue between the two fields and will outline some possible, and by no means exhaustive, avenues for future research:

## **Understanding the travel behaviour of international students**

Apart from a handful of existing studies exploring the economic dimensions of international students' (leisure) travels and tourisms (as outlined above), and besides a more well-established 'gap year' and 'study abroad' academic literature (Bodinger de Uriarte and Di Giovine, 2021), we still know next to nothing about how international students use their degree mobility to engage in tourism and travel (and 'leisure') more widely, or if this could be indeed a prime motivational factor for an international sojourn. Provided that most academic programmes entail a series of non-teaching periods, holidays and breaks, and working from the assumption that mobile students bring with them significant economic, social and cultural capitals, it would appear only commonsense that students use this opportunity to travel and do tourism. As previously discussed, the tourism literature has

identified a diverse set of travel motivations among internationally mobile students such as curiosity, wanderlust, education, experiencing something 'new', spending quality time with friends or family members, and not least, self-exploration. This ties in with more recent market research on 'Gen Z' consumer cultures and experience economies, which, albeit being overtly generalising in places, consistently argues that leisure, travel and tourism rank high on young people's agendas and are constitutive of their ethical beliefs, values, and cultural identities (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). A simple, yet suitable starting point could be to look at the spatiotemporal nature, frequency, and scale of student travels, i.e. a macro-scale (the international sojourn 'as a whole'), a meso-scale (international and national travels during study) and a micro-scale (local forms of leisure travel, trips and excursions) to gain a more holistic understanding of the significance and value of travel among students as potentially transformative (learning) experience.

### **Embodied and emotional dimensions of student travel**

As indicated by Selby (2021) tourism studies has a well-established and credible track record of exploring the 'ground-level', performative, embodied and emotional geographies that are constitutive of travel and 'being a tourist'. In this respect, tourism studies offer valuable insights as to how international students perform and dwell in place, experience the 'other', construct hybrid cultural identities and sense of belonging across limonoid spaces, and in relation to their mobile, exploring selves (c.f. Cockayne, 2025). For example, the complex notion of 'authenticity' in the tourism experience has occupied tourism researchers for decades, and generated objectivist, constructivist, and existentialist interpretations of the ways in which toured objects, places, and people are encountered, engaged with, performed and sensed (Wang, 1999). One such concept, introduced by anthropologist Hom-Cary (2004), is the 'tourist moment' - a serendipitous, instantaneous and liminal state of Being that, often spontaneously 'activated' through an encounter, a gaze, a dance, etc., can condition intense instances of self-discovery, reflexivity, and communal belonging. Given the currency of 'authentic' and 'transformative' student experience (and learning) in ongoing debates about student mobilities (Verbree et al., 2025), there is much to learn from the field of tourism studies, particularly from such phenomenological approaches envisaging the formation of reflexive, embodied, authentic experiences, as outlined here.

### **International student travel as in/non/formal learning**

A key, yet hitherto under-researched, question relevant to both tourism and higher education researchers relates to the different modes of learning that occur through international degree mobility and/or study abroad. Whilst there is an abundance of literature exploring international students' learning experiences in formal classroom settings (e.g. internationalisation of curricula, intercultural learning and communication, etc.), we still know very little about the in- and non-formal learning that takes place and the role travel and tourism play in this context. Both tourism and educational researchers have previously employed Kolb's experiential learning model as a common reference point when

exploring such in-/nonformal learning processes (refs), but alternative approaches such as Bennet's (2012) differentiation between self-directed, incidental, tacit and integrative learning, might be equally applicable. Whilst knowing about students' travels and tourism may provide more holistic and longitudinal insights into their learning biographies and aspirations (we tend to use the 'journey' metaphor quite frequently in this respect), it may also be relevant for forms of 'edutourism' offered at university, such as field- and study trips, excursions, volunteering, placements, or empirical field work, etc., which are often considered to be among the most powerful and memorable learning experiences in the student lifecycle (Stone and Petrick, 2013). In this context, both tourism and education researchers have previously engaged with volunteer/voluntourism study components offered by many universities which are designed to provide students with short-term service opportunities (mostly in 'developing' countries) and to instil 'global citizenship' and other transferable 'life skills'. Whilst such volunteering programmes may hold value for many students and their hosts, they are also frequently criticised for their potentially exploitative neo/post-colonial overtones (Rodrigues and Abreu, 2023). Likewise, and considering international students' 'micro-mobilities' within their study destination, their localised travels, culture and leisure activities, may be relevant when thinking about universities' service learning, outreach, and civic engagement programmes. Besides adding substance to universities' and urban tourism boards' desire to engage international students as destination 'brand ambassadors', this may also enhance international students' role in building meaningful interactions and exchanges between universities and their local communities.

## **Cultural imaginaries of students/tourists and study destinations**

Considering the increased marketization of international higher education and the vital financial income international fee-paying students contribute to many higher education institutions, an interesting additional aspect here are the quasi-touristic narratives and visual language universities employ in marketing themselves (Bamberger *et al.*, 2020). While some authors have analysed different marketing platforms such as university websites or social media, more critical research in this area is still scarce. As indicated in a previous section, and at least from a UK and wider anglophone perspective, the joint place branding of both host universities, cities/regions, and country is well-acknowledged by national destination management organisations as well as economic think tanks (Cannings *et al.*, 2023). From a Western/Anglophone perspective, this progressing 'touristification' of international higher education becomes evident if one looks at common and formulaic marketing mix such as ivy-clad gothic or classicist architectures and heritage, students relaxing on picturesque university greens, etc., all framed by narratives promising inclusiveness, uniqueness, safety, sense of place, and, not least, a certain study/leisure lifestyle. Seen from this angle, it comes as no surprise that universities also increasingly operate like tourist destinations, inclusive of gift/souvenir shops, guided tours, or the promotion of heritage attractions or film locations on their premises. From a reverse perspective, it would also be interesting to learn more about international students' existing imaginaries and constructions of (national/local) study destinations as relayed, for example, via social media, film and television, video games, literature, or other forms of popular culture. For example, and given the ongoing popularity of Western/Anglophone study destinations among Asian students, one could perhaps also analyse 'occidental'ist

popular culture narratives that, besides well-rehearsed 'excellence' discourses, may shape students' destination choice. Not least, and related to that, it is also worth noting that the international student-as-tourist themselves has become recurring characters across a host of movie genres including coming-of-age, love and romance, comedy, as well as horror. To sum up, the cultural imaginaries and representations of study destinations as well as the heuristic figure of the international student/tourist are worthy of further exploration in both the tourism and international higher education literature.

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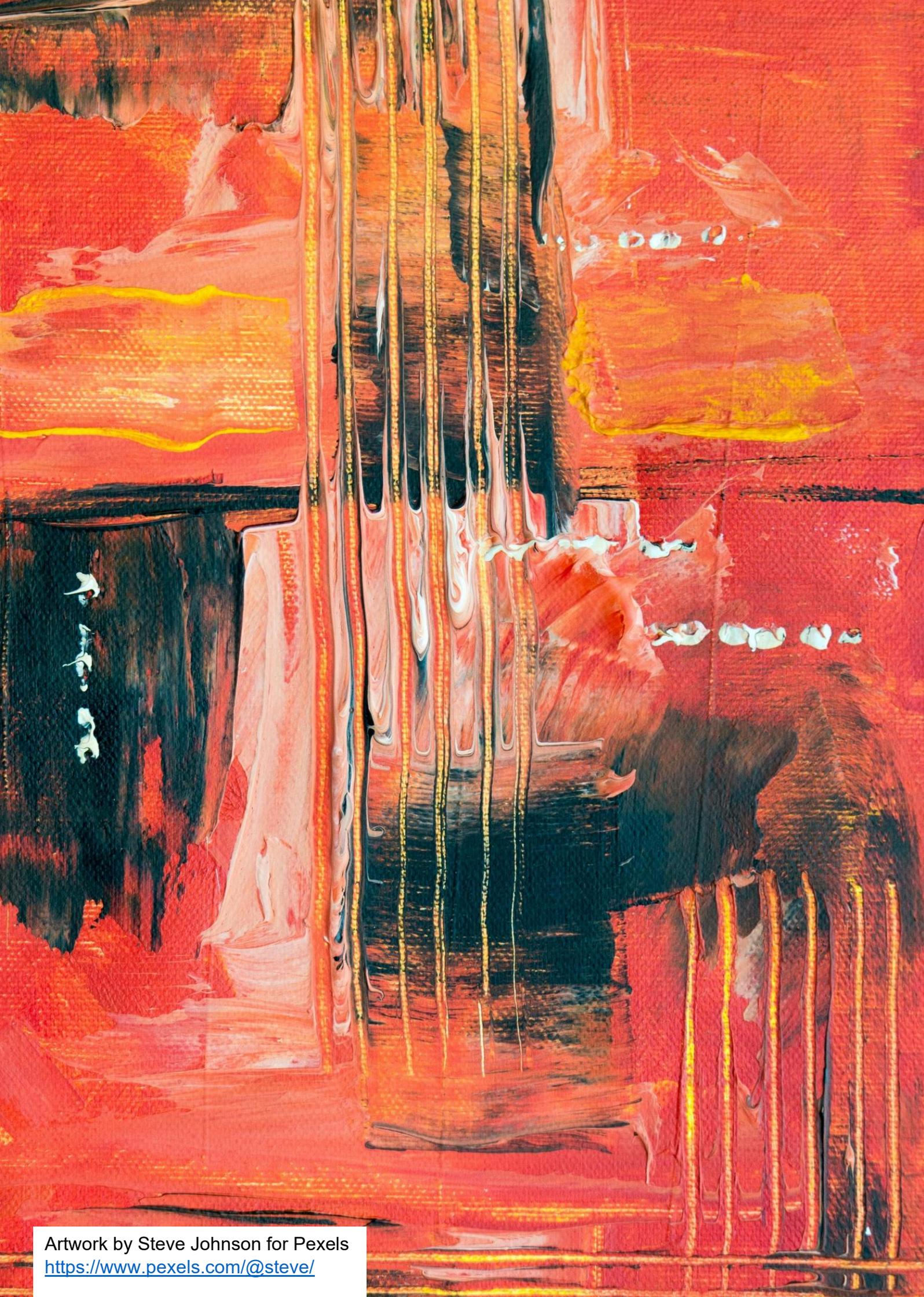
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