A 'journey of her own'? the impact of constraints on women's solo travel

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Abstract
Women are increasingly active in the participation and consumption of travel, and are now recognised as a growing force within the tourism industry. This trend is linked to changing social and political circumstances for Western women around the world. Within Australia specifically, women's opportunities for education and for earning equitable incomes through employment have improved. Furthermore, traditional ideologies of the family have shifted, so that social expectations of marriage and the production of children do not yield as much power as they once did. As a result of these shifts, women living in contemporary Australia have a wider range of resources and opportunities with which to access an ever-increasing array of leisure/travel choices. It appears that one of the many ways in which women have been exercising their relatively recent financial and social autonomy is through independent travel. The solo woman traveller represents a growing market segment, with research showing that increasing numbers of females are choosing to travel alone, without the assistance or company of partners, husbands or packaged tour groups. However, little empirical research has explored the touristic experiences of solo women travellers, or examined the constraints and challenges they may face when journeying alone. 'Constraints' have been described variously as factors which hinder one's ability to participate in desired leisure activities, to spend more time in those activities, or to attain anticipated levels of satisfaction and benefit. While the investigation of constraints has contributed to the leisure studies discipline for a number of decades, the exploration of their influence on tourist behaviour and the tourist experience has been virtually overlooked. Research has shown that despite the choices and opportunities women have today, the freedom they have to consume those choices, and to access satisfying leisure and travel experiences, may be constrained by their social and gendered location as females. Although theorisations of constraint have remained largely in the field of leisure studies, it is argued and demonstrated in this thesis that there is potential in extending constraints theory to the inquiry of the tourist experience. Grounded in theoretical frameworks offered by gender studies, feminist geography, sociology and leisure, this qualitative study set out to explore the impact of constraints on women's solo travel experiences. Forty in-depth interviews were held with Australian women who had travelled solo at some stage of their adult lives. Adopting an interpretive and feminist-influenced research paradigm, it was important to allow the women to speak of their lives, constraints and experiences in their own voices and on their own terms. In line with qualitative methodologies, it is these women's words which form the data for this study. Based on a 'grounded' approach to data analysis, the results reveal that constraints do exist and exert influence on these women's lives and travel experiences in a myriad of ways. Four inter-linking categories of constraint were identified, namely socio-cultural, personal, practical and spatial. Further definition of these categories evolved, depending on where the women were situated in their stage of the solo travel experience (that is, pre-travel or during-travel). The results of this study show that there are identifiable and very real constraints facing solo women travellers. These constraints could stem from the contexts of their home environments, or from the socio-cultural structures of the destinations through which they travelled. However, these constraints were not immutable, insurmountable or even necessarily consciously recognised by many of the women interviewed. In fact, it became increasingly evident that women were findings ways and means to 'negotiate' their constraints, challenges and limitations. Three dominant negotiation responses to constraint could be identified; the women could choose to seek access to solo travel...
when faced with pre-travel constraints: they could withdraw from solo travel because of
those same constraints, or they could decide to continue their journeys as a result of
their in-situ constraints. Evidence of women negotiating suggests that constraints are
not insurmountable barriers, and confirms that constraints do not necessarily foreclose
access to travel. Furthermore, a focus on negotiation re-positions women as active
agents in determining the course of their lives and the enjoyment of their solo travel
experiences, rather than as passive acceptors of circumstance and constraint. Linking
with the concept of negotiation, solo travel was also shown to be a site of resistance,
freedom and empowerment for these forty women. Through solo travel, it was apparent
that the women could transgress the structures and roles which influenced and governed
their lives. This thesis shows that, through solo travel, the women interviewed found an
autonomous and self-determining ‘journey of their own’. At the same time, the extent to
which this really was a journey of their own was questioned and revealed to be
problematic under a feminist/gendered lens. Thus a more appropriate concept of
women’s solo travel is that it is a ‘relative escape’. That is, their journeys, escapes and
experiences were always situated relative to the societal expectations and perceptions
of home, relative to the gendered perceptions and ideologies of the destination, and
relative to the limited spatial freedoms as a result of a socially constructed geography of
fear.

The women’s solo travel constraints will be presented and defined in this article, and practical implications for the tourism industry will also be discussed. Discover the world’s research.

Purpose The purpose of this paper is to gain more insight into the phenomenon of solo travel to city destinations and attain more knowledge on the topic.

Design/methodology/approach The study employed a questionnaire consisting of qualitative and quantitative items. In all, 21 individuals (12 women, 9 men) responded. Findings The most important reason for solo travel was their own free choice and in some cases, difficulty finding companions.