Solo Travel:  
A Transformative Experience for Women  

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Abstract

The activity of travel is a positive act of self-fulfilment. Solo traveling provides individuals the opportunity to explore their own limitations and new territories; besides it enhance feelings of independence and freedom. This present study, qualitative in nature, was conducted to study about the experiences available to women engaging in solo travel in Kerala. Kerala being a patriarchal society, freedom to indulge in themselves and travel is restricted for women. For the purpose of the study, data was generated from five women solo travellers using a semi-structured interview guide. The themes were explored included reasons for selecting solo travel, analysis of the push and pull factors influencing solo travel, constraints encountered by women solo-travelers in the course of their solo-travel, and transformation they experienced on account of engagement in solo-travel. The findings of the study indicate that, restrictiveness of organised travel as well as the unavailability of a suitable partner to be the reasons for selecting solo-travel. Destination features “pull” women into travel solo as an alternative to escaping mundane worries. Social constructs on gender, financial constraints and harassment at the point of

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immigration are the major challenges they face. The focus of the study being on the transformative power of solo travel, findings of the study indicate that women became more confident, bold and independent on account of their travel experiences; further, they gather a better understanding of life through travel, and become able as well as better disposed to take crucial decisions regarding their life and execute them as they wish.

**Key words:**
Solo Travel, Push Factors, Pull Factors, Constraints, Transformation

Sreedevi Jeevan, a woman solo-traveller articulates,

“……I decided I won’t back out at any cost…I took a bus (from here), and had to change two more buses to finally reach the Island. It was afternoon by then, but I took it as a positive, adventurous twist to my first solo journey!” - (Soman, 2017)

Humans have always travelled. Yet it is only since the end of World War II that we have witnessed phenomenal growth in the numbers of people travelling (WTO, 2004). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) estimates that internationally there were just 25 million tourist arrivals in 1950. 68 years later this number has increased to 1.4 billion international arrivals per year (Roser, 2017).

Chai (1996) used a broad definition that travel as a “multi-faceted phenomenon which involves movement to and stay in destinations outside the normal place of residence; comprises dynamic, static, and consequential elements.” The activity of travel is presented as a mobilizing influence that encourages new perceptions and understandings which are embodied and enacted. Travelling has been argued a way of enlightenment and transformation of perspectives (Wilson, 2004).

When the travel becomes alone as an individual, it differs from travelling...
in a group and been termed as new tourism as it has become the trend of this era. A new type of tourist is driving it: more educated, experienced, independent, conservation-minded, respectful of cultures, and insistent on value for money. Furthermore, they are well read and know what they want and where they want to go (Harris & Wilson, 2013). Travel brings them some healing for they continue to travel and explore new frontiers.

**Concept**

Solo travellers travel alone, choosing to journey without family, partner or friends. They neither travel on a fully inclusive package nor in a group (Chai, 1996). The solo traveller may or may not be a fully independent traveller, but from limited empirical research on people who travel alone, it may be suggested that solo travellers are also likely to be independent travellers, preferring freedom and flexibility to the more structured nature of the packaged, organised holiday (Wilson, 2004)

Solo travel in women is trending now. They travel without the companionship of any other, bringing in uncertainties and opportunities for lot of changes in them. Engaging in the pursuit of new experiences, learning and self-awareness, these travel experiences allow “…a personal space which permitted the rewriting of the script of what it is to be a woman” (Bond, 1997); in other words, a space for perspective transformations.

A combination of psychological (push) and material as well as physical (pull) factors motivate a tourist to plan a trip. Push factors are the motivational factors or needs that arise due to a state of disequilibrium or tension in the motivational system (Dann, 1977), whereas pull factors are external, situational or cognitive aspects to the tourist that compel the latter to travel to a destination (Cohen, 1972). Distinct from these, constraints are the factors which hinder ones ability to participate in desired leisure activities, to spend more time in those activities, or to attain anticipated levels of satisfaction (Jackson, 1988).
Transformation is the process to change our perspectives or structure of beliefs and assumptions through which we assimilate our perspectives (Meizrow, 2000). Transformative tourism as research demonstrates that travelling solo is a way to transform dysfunctional premises which attach feminity to traditional female roles like family and motherhood or which constantly question female capacities, personal freedom and self-determination (UNWTO, 2016).

Solo travel isn't just about having adventures; it's also about the personal transformation that you feel during and after your trip. Regardless of when you decide to travel alone, taking a solo trip gives you just what you need at that very moment (Angelica, 2012).

**Statement of the problem**

In 1970, women represented only 1% of the business travel. By 2000, half of all business travellers were female. Women around the world have been engaging in solo and independent travel for leisure as avid participants. Even though research on this unique segment has appeared gradually, it is still limited (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2005).

The growing body of literature on travel experiences of women not only testifies uniquely to motivations and hindrances that women face while travelling solo but fails to recognize the non-western women as a traveller especially as independent agents and decision makers. Existing studies on women travel experiences exclusively observe female travellers from the West, such as Australia, Great Britain, Sweden, and United States (Terán, 2016). Given this dearth, there is need of studying the motivation behind solo travel undertaken by women, the constraints they experience in so doing, and the transformative experiences they encounter.

Being a woman in many societies has been intimately related to staying at home revolving on imaginaries of domesticity. Masculinity, on the contrary, has been attributed to travel, adventure and exploring (Wilson, 2004). Generally, women in Kerala enjoy limited freedom of travel. Most of them are...
expected to remain at home and maintain all the household activities. There are elements of surprise and shock and usually, a big question before women who opt to travel alone. Such gendered expectations have largely been driven in the background by religions, wherein women are asked to stay away from outdoor activities.

It is in such a constraining scenario, that certain women break all the shackles and decide to explore the “taste of travel and further more of even going” solo. They have pioneered their way to freedom, as active agents, as female solo travellers (Wilson, 2004). Just about the time when women in Kerala started travelling in group or alone, social media as well as blogs having wide consumption in daily life have started quoting their experiences. This opportunity made other people also ponder on such attempts. The study will be highlighting the experiences of solo women travellers in Kerala. The researcher is exploring whether solo travel gives a transformative experience to women and if what they are.

**Review of Literature**

According to Chai (1996) Solo travel is the travel by which the person travels alone, choosing to journey without family, partner or friends who neither travel on a fully inclusive package nor in a group. Solo travellers travel, for most of the part, on their own. They leave home alone, they travel primarily by themselves although they meet up with others along the way or use tours from time to time, and they alone are responsible for their travel activities, choices and itineraries (Wilson, 2004).

Plog developed a psychographic typology based on a bell-curve continuum ranging from allocentric to psychocentric personality types. Allocentrics (other centred individuals) are individuals who seek novel and unique travel destinations, they are intellectually interested in the host cultures they visit (Plog, 1974) and are usually the first types of tourist to visit a country, in terms of a destinations tourism development. In contrast, psychocentrics (self- cen-
tred individuals) are more anxious and self-inhibited, preferring destinations that offer familiar types of accommodation, activities and food. Mid-centrics make up the bulks of the travelling population, and these tourists display a more balanced combination of both allocentric and psychocentric traits.

“While independent itineraries, are tied up with male connotations of bravery and exploration, women did negotiate to find ways to travel and to travel independently” (Harris and Wilson, 2006). Solo and independent travel in women is a growing trend characterized by females who are choosing to travel without the companionship of any partners or the support of mainstream commercial tourism services (Wilson, 2004). Solo travel allowed these women a sense of freedom and control over their own time and decision making. Many of the women were travelling alone to escape ties at home and to simply prove to themselves that they could travel in a country by themselves (Elsrud, 2004)

Independent travel provides a fruitful lens for examining aspects of meaning and life change, as it is through time on ones own – away from partners, families or domestic responsibilities

– that people, particularly women, are able to locate the time and space for reflection and self-development (Harris & Wilson, 2006). The benefits of travel are transferred to other contexts of these womens everyday life (home, work, leisure, relationships, etc.) (C. Gisele, 2014).

**Methodology**

This research utilizes a qualitative methodology as the main foundation in order to address the “transformative experiences of solo travel by women”. It also includes a study on the push factors and pull factors of solo travel and the challenges faced by the respondents before, during and after their solo travel. Thereby case study approach is the core methodology of the research; a semi structured interview guide is used to obtain fundamental knowledge on the women solo travellers in Thiruvananthapuram in order to understand where this research is standing. A pilot semi structured interview guide was tested
with the first respondent, where the questions were adjusted and modified for the following interviews.

The sample of the research is comprised of five women from Thiruvananthapuram between the age of 25 and 40 years, traveling solo for pleasure, recreation or leisure purposes, to various destinations out of Kerala but not necessarily out of India. The interviewees were selected based on convenience. A self-constructed interview guide was used as a tool for data collection. In-depth semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection and the interviews were recorded after obtaining informed consent. Data is been analysed on the basis of various themes.

**Analysis and discussion**

1. Unlike solo travel, travelling in a group has a different nature like very structured and organised, concern for safety over budget, uninterested destinations, rigid time schedule, less spot decisions, particular role in group, safety of group members, group regulations, etc. These are some reasons for them to select solo status for travelling whereas each one could satisfy own interests while travelling. Wilson (2004) stated that solo travellers prefer freedom and flexibility to the more structured nature of the packaged and organised holiday, and they tend to differ from the packaged, mass group of tourists (Poon, 2003).

2. The family resisted solo travel for safety concern and the society has a different construct over the gender. Parents in a patriarchal society restrict their adult daughters to take their own decisions in order to control them, or performances of male jealousy through domestic violence (Teran, 2016). Women in general found ingenious ways to get around these hurdles. These women had to find out enough money to travel through different ways like part-time job. They always prefer to have minimum budget for their traveling. So they prepare an itinerary which includes destination, mode of traveling, route, budget for the whole travel, duration of stay in each place and will search for affordable accommodation, arrangement for food and travel.
3. Every respondent had some experiences of travel in childhood with the family and showed interest in different ways like reading travelogues and movies. Three among them had some experiences of travel with the family from their childhood itself while two started travelling as part of their higher education and related projects.

4. Four respondents had an opinion that they did not travel for getting any relief instead travel is passion for them. They even enjoy every day travel from the workplace while one respondent often travel to get rid of academic pressure. Places with historical importance, rural areas, water bodies, forests where trekking can be done are most common destinations of respondents wish list. One respondent travel to other countries and does voluntary works so as to upgrade her profile thereby better job opportunities. Graham M.S. Dann presented tourist motivation as pull factors like destinational attributes such as climate, natural features and local people (Dann, 1976/1977).

5. These women had to face various constraints on behalf of solo travel. Resistance from the family because of social constructs on gender and safety, financial support, unfit body, holiday from the workplace were the constraints they faced before travelling. They were affected by immigration harassment in airport regarding solo status of travel and appearance, and comments from other travellers in the public transport services. Smith (1987) said that environmental constraints include external barriers imposed by the social or physical milieu in which a person lives, like societal attitude and Wilson (2004) examined coupling constraint which includes constraint of money resources. Even though they had to face certain constraints, they negotiated with the family for permission, bargaining for cheap accommodation, with the harassments, they were able to feel confident for themselves. Here comes the transformative power of travel and empowerment.

6. No respondents of this study updates travelogues or blogs, instead they love to keep in the memory. For these women, solo travel is a better platform for self-reflection. Solo travel makes them realise their strength inside and how efficiently managed the problems while travelled. They were able to...
realise the meaning, take decision, adapt to things, understand the uniqueness of each place, to observe and listen, and arrive at their own conclusion. It made them more humble and conscious. Travel made them updated, novelty brought youthfulness, freshness, not boredom, inspiration and motivation to live, to take up adventure, to accept things, and to think of multidimensional perspective of a single matter. Little (2000) found that negotiation of constraints stemmed from range of issues included either „exit, or „access, with the latter response including strategies such as „compromise, „acceptance, „anticipation, and „restructuring.

7. All the respondents had opinion of necessity of women to travel. Solo status for traveling was not at all a compelling factor by them. Travel itself can bring about changes in life. But if it is done solo, its impact will be something different. There are so many women who love to travel but supress the wish and hurt the dignity. Let women travel and discover the meaning of their life. Gisele (2004) examined that independent travel offers women an alternative „lens to examine their lives, away from spouses, family members or domestic responsibilities; a moment in which they are able to find time and space for their own reflections and self-development. These benefits are transferred to other contexts of these womens everyday life (home, work, leisure, relationship, etc.)

Findings

1. Dissatisfaction and disillusionment with group travel, unavailability of compatible travel partners are the main reason for the women to select solo status for travelling. Solo travellers expect more casual, risky and adventurous travels and solo travel allows more satisfactory output of fulfilling interests of women.

2. Due to the social constructs, family of these women did not allow them to travel solo. They had to convince or defy their parents, hide about their travel, and sometimes abandon plans to travel, etc. So they had to resort to other means to meet travel expenditure. These women went to great lengths
to plan their flexible and very economic itineraries;

3. Childhood experiences of travel with family and venturing away from home for higher studies became a point at which they experimented solo travel.

4. Destination features like greenery, rurality, adventure, cool weather etc are the motivational factors to travel while some factors like academic pressure push to travel.

5. Women solo travellers face constraints due to safety concern and social constructs being woman. Being physically unfit, holidays from job, financial crisis are some constraints face before travel while harassment by immigration officials, verbal harassment and refusal of getting accommodation are faced while travelling. 

6. Whenever the solo female travellers faced constraints, they negotiated to solve problems and found ways to cover up their targets. These negotiation paved way to feel confident and capable.

7. Solo travel brought the women notable transformation in their life, realising self, problem solving and decision making, bold and independent, made them to observe and listen, to be updated and novel, to be inspired and motivated, to keep the youthfulness and freshness.

**Conclusion**

„Solo travel is something that emerged as a popular discussion in media in the year 2018 in Kerala which presented cases of three married women in Kerala who „fell in love with solo travel. This study noted that solo travel conceptually meant „travelling alone to a destination. Under the term solo traveller, many typologies come according to the mode of travelling, choice of destination, itinerary preparation, objective behind travel, etc. Every individual have their own reason for substantiating the reason for travelling solo. For them, the need of more flexibility, spontaneous decisions, risk taking and adventure gets fulfilled when they travel „solo.
Findings of the study show that more than any push factors which compel women solo travellers is a passion to travel; experiences of self-discovery and transformative experiences during previous solo travel became the pull factors for these women to travel solo. The researcher noted that some women were predisposed to travelling given their “positive childhood experiences with travel; those experiences were enriching and “opened their eyes wide in wonder.

The society being non-supportive to women given the gender expectations and inability to enjoy the freedom as men do, these women had to face many constraints before they travel. During their travel also, attitude of people, financial instability, prejudice shown and the harassment by immigration officials were constraints for them. Nevertheless, this transformed group of women solo travellers negotiated these constraints which were to the point of empowerment.

Travel enabled them to become bolder, confident, liberal and self-reliant. It empowered them to take bold decisions concerning their life, empathised better with others, add values to life and to become optimistic in life. The study clearly substantiates the necessity of women to travel, self-care and to keep the well-being. As an underlying aspiration, the researcher desires that the study would be an inspiration for the women in Kerala to travel not only in the temporal context, but also in the spiritual.

References


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poses of leisure? USA.


