The Travel Motivations and Experiences of Female Vietnamese Solo Travellers

ABSTRACT

Solo travel is a growing trend, a significant proportion made up of international students who take solo trips during their study abroad. However there is limited empirical research on the Asian proportion of this growing market. This study explores the main motivations and constraints of ten female Vietnamese students' solo travellers through in-depth interviews.

The findings indicate that travel motivations can be categorised into personal factors, such as freedom and flexibility, self-empowerment, independence and exploration; and social interaction factors including a lack of companions and meeting new people. Travel constraints relate to being female and alone and being of Asian descent. This research extends understanding of this important market segment. As a result, tourism providers and Destination Marketing Organisation (DMOs) can capitalize by developing their products and marketing.

Key words

Solo Travel- Female Travellers- International Students- Gender and Travel-Vietnam

Introduction

There has been an increase in the number of tourists who travel solo caused by changes in lifestyle and social structures (Jordan and Gibson 2005; Brown and Osman 2017). According to the Visa Global Travel Intention study (2015), one in five people travel alone. The 'Holiday Habits Report' by ABTA (2016) indicates that 79% of solo travellers cite the main reason for traveling alone as the 'opportunity to be able to do what I want'. It must be noted however that the solo traveller is not necessarily single. Indeed, 40% of solo travellers travel solo without their partners (Rosenbloom 2015). Furthermore, more than 50% of the world travel traffic is predicted to come from Asia Pacific by 2030 (Budde et al. 2013; Brown 2015; Cohen 2003; Seow and Brown 2017). Therefore, more research on the Asian travel market is recommended (Dioko 2016).

There has been a steady growth in women travelling solo (Jordan and Atkinson 2008), as well as interest in the tourism literature about female solo travellers (Wilson & little 2008, Seow & Brown 2017). Motivations of the solo female travellers have been addressed in the literature with a focus on the challenges and benefits gained (Gibson, Berdychevsky &Bell 2012; Khoo-Lattimore & Prayag 2015). This study contributes to such literature by offering a focus on the female Vietnamese international students who travel solo during their academic sojourn.

50% of the growth in global travel is predicted to come from the Asia-Pacific region by 2030 (Budde et al. 2013). As Asia is becoming a significant destination for both inbound and outbound tourism it is important that motivation of Asian tourists is studied. Asian international students account for 60% of the world's millennial market, which will help drive a new wave of international tourism growth. Although the pacific Asia Pacific region is an attractive destination for Western tourists, it has grown to become a leader for outbound travel, representing 11% of international outbound tourists in 2016 (**World Travel Monitor** 2016).

Vietnam has the youngest population in Southeast Asia with nearly half of the population being under 25 years old (**International Consultants for Education and Fairs** 2014), potentially constituting a high demand for studying abroad and for travelling during their study. According to HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2016), the number of Vietnamese students studying for a UK higher education qualification in 2016 reached 7,160 students. Furthermore, it

is reported that international outbound Vietnamese tourists have the second highest growth rate in Southeast Asia, which was estimated at 4.8 million in 2016, a figure predicted to rise to 7.5 million in 2021 (Choong and Wong 2016).

International student travel has increased (Kim et al. 2012), and international students are likely to travel to as many countries as possible during their study break (Babin and Kim 2001). They have more free time to travel being away from families and often have restricted work permits (Hsu and Sung 1997). To exploit this emerging segment, it is vital to examine and understand its travel motivations (Josiam et al. 1999; Klenosky 2002). Kim et al (2007) argue that the motivations of students are different from those of the general tourist. They identify seven push factors that motivate students to travel internationally: education, connection, thrilling experiences, scenery, friends and family, fun and relaxation. Other motivating factors include: seeking adventure, discovering new cultures, and exploring nature have also been identified (Chadee and Cutler 1996; Morgan and Xu 2009; Bicikova 2014; Ryan and Zhang 2007). In addition, according to Carr (2003), student travellers at university level prefer to organise and arrange their travel vacation independently rather than take a package tour. Every year, thousands of students leave home to pursue their education abroad. In 2015, 437,000 international students went to the UK to pursue higher education (Reidy 2017). In the past, travel and tourism scholars paid little attention to this tourism market, which was viewed as an unprofitable market (Field 1999), compared with other segments. However, international students are increasingly being seen as an important market segment in the global tourism market (Phau et al., 2010). Furthermore, this market is argued by Xie and Ritchie (2019) to be the most substantial market in the tourism industry and one that performed well during the global economic crisis. In addition, researchers have become more interested in the travel motivations and consumption behaviours of international students, though they are still under-represented in the tourism literature despite the huge market potential. This study contributes toward filling a gap in the literature with its focus on the reasons why female international Vietnamese students choose to travel alone. Our study aims to investigate their travel motivations and restrictions. It was observed through contact with Vietnamese students in the UK that the majority of females who travel do so alone. This is further supported by the Women's Travel Survey indicating that 60% of women from Southeast Asian women travel solo. Students can also be motivated by the recent phenomenon of Asian women solo travellers making headlines in the media such as the first solo Muslim traveller Anita Yusof riding her bike around the world and Petrina Thong hitchhiking to Europe from Kuala Lumpur (Zafigox 2018). This research is also informed by the

personal situation of one of the co-authors, an international Vietnamese student studying in the UK who has a passion for travelling solo during her study breaks. The findings of this research will be useful for travelling marketers who have the task of designing and promoting travel packages for the student market generally and solo student travel specifically.

Literature review

The literature for this research is rooted in gender studies with tourism and leisure as context. It focuses on the motivations of solo Vietnamese female student travellers and the constraints faced by them while accessing leisure spaces.

Solo Travellers: motivations and challenges

Cohen (1973) pointed out three primary motivational factors for the drifter: namely culture, economics and politics. Cultural motives come from the need to escape from duties, responsibilities, the routine of daily life and modern life, whilst economic factors relate to young people's desire to gain travel experience before settling down into their careers. Furthermore, young people often consider travelling as a chance 'to search for an 'anarchistic existence in some far-off quarter of the world' (p.94). While the drifter does not necessarily constitute the solo traveller, Cohen's work helps us understand the latent motives of our chosen segment for this research. Indeed, drifting aids in the 'loosening of ties and obligations, the abandonment of accepted norms and the search for sensual experiences' (p.93) principles likely to be associated with young female Vietnamese travellers.

On the other hand, Teas (1988), in his work on western wanderers in Nepal, indicated that the solo traveller regards travelling as an opportunity to get away from society. In another study by Vogt (1976) on middle class youth, freedom was identified. Moreover, the solo traveller tends to be more willing to take risks when planning their itinerary and has a desire to explore new cultures (Hyde and Lawson 2003). The key motivations of solo travellers involve exploring new cultures, opening-up new horizons, relaxing, seeking novelty and more authentic experiences (Moscardo 2006; Paris and Teye 2010). Similarly, Laesser, Beritelli and Bieger (2009) argue

that people who prefer to travel alone, rather than in groups, are apt to search for something new and have a desire to expand their social network .

The travel motivations and travel behaviour of solo tourists have been shown to be distinct from those of mass tourists (Larsen et al. 2011). The solo traveller can travel on their own freely and take part in different types of activities that are of special interest to them (Laesser et al. 2009; Kozak 2010). Solo travellers, are motivated by push factors as they long to discover new cultures and experience feelings of being independent (Chiang and Jogaratnam 2006). However, without a partner to travel with, the solo traveller can, potentially, be more vulnerable to crime and other problems (Wilson and Little 2008). Brown and Osman (2017) reported unwanted male attention and sexual harassment against female travellers. Despite the awareness of such risk, in some cases, women engage in travel, seeking empowerment and autonomy (Yang et al. 2018).

As tourism is a socio-cultural phenomenon, the experiences of the traveller are impacted upon by their gender as a socially structured factor shaped by cultural norms (Gibson et al.2013). The understanding of solo travellers mostly comes from studies with a gender-related perspective (Wilson and Little 2008). This is because there is an increasing number of women tourists travelling solo or in all-female groups who are recognized as a growing segment within the tourism industry (Henderson 2000, Cockburn et al. 2006). Wilson and Harris (2006) argue that women solo travellers tend to have the opportunity for reassessing their perspectives on life and society including their own relationships with other people. Women who are self-assured enough to travel alone in search of 'adventure, social interaction, education and self-understanding' tend to feel more autonomous and independent (Bond 1997, McArthur 1999, Khan 2017). As more women engaged in travelling in the 20th century, despite solo female travel being seen as a lack of modesty (Robinson 1994), they became a significant market to consider. However, many leisure spaces are still mainly dominated by men (Brown and Osman 2017).

Chiang and Jogaratnam (2006) argued that female solo travellers' experiences are different from those of men's and called for the need to understand their distinct travel behaviour. They went on to explain that women solo travellers 'confront and challenge a narrative of domesticity, dependence and confinement that is a recurring theme in women's lives' (page 61). Some

studies have also differentiated travel characteristics based on gender: men prefer adventure travel, not free from risks while women seek cultural and educational experiences taking safety into consideration. (See Waters 1988; Mieczkowski 1990; Stanford 2017; Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Berdychevsky 2016; Khan et al. 2017). This research however does not suggest that these differences should be accepted as common features of patriarchy, but as a way to understand the female solo travel experience and how it is negotiated through social structures. Understanding women's solo travel motivations and challenges is paramount for the travel industry given the economic value of the female tourist market.

Much of the literature on the female tourist experience focuses on the female solo traveller. Butler (1994) states that female travel during the 19th and 20th centuries was characterised by the notion of permitted escape from conformity and familial duties and allowed for independence and personal creativity. However, Durko and Petrick (2013) argue that the solo trip is not just a source of escape, but can be related to work duties requiring separate trips. Moreover, in their paper on female independent tourists, Cockburn et al. (2006) attributed the sizable growth in women travelling alone to self-discovery, enlightenment, educational purposes and/or respite from the confines and responsibilities of their domestic environment.

Another theme in the literature relates to liberation from social norms. Berdychevsky et al. (2013) reveal that the sexual behaviour of female tourists was a motivating factor in their findings from 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews. They noted that the trip was perceived as an opportunity for women to recreate their selves and explore alternative sexual behaviours with casual or steady partners. This travel motive was seen as an expression of resisting gendered expectations of women's social and sexual behaviour.

Meanwhile, the challenges faced by women solo travellers have been documented in the literature. For example, Brown and Osman (2017) cite sexualised male attention, sexual assault, and vulnerability as important constraints. In addition, feelings of fear and visibility due to the male gaze were reported by Berdychevsky et al. (2013). Cockburn et al. (2006) observe that female tourists often view men with suspicion and emphasise danger and security as two key themes. Jordan and Gibson (2005) also reported that women's noticeability and fear of harassment act as a driver for self- surveillance, as women face unwanted male attention. Jordan and Aitchison's (2008) study on female solo travellers view gendered power affecting the experiences of women travelling alone as being exerted via surveillance stemmed from the

objectification of women. They explore the exercise of power through the sexualisation of women as objects of the male tourist gaze. The focus is on unwanted, uninvited and sexualised male attention which signifies sexual harassment. Described as a kind of sexualised surveillance, the gaze is, according to the study's participants, always exercised by local men on female tourists. Furthermore, in their study of female solo travel, Wilson and Little (2008) note that negotiating movement through unfamiliar places can be intimidating for those who travel alone. This is particularly true for women travelling in patriarchal societies, where attitudes towards women may inform the way they are treated or perceived (Brown and Osman 2017).

In a study based on in-depth interviews with a group of solo female travellers, Wilson and Little (2013) explore Valentine's (1989) concept of the 'geography of women's fear' based on the notion that solo travel is relatively unsafe and may be seen as inappropriate in certain cultures. Their study found that participants attributed their feelings of fear to the perception that travel was more difficult for women who typically are perceived as more at risk of sexual harassment or instances of attack than men. Such a perception of vulnerability restricted women's interaction with the local culture and reduced their enjoyment of the travel experience. Moreover, Wilson and Little (2013) note that women were also restrained by their thoughts of what other societies' attitudes toward solo female tourists might be, which added a sense of vulnerability leading women to think that access to some tourist destinations was limited and to others was off-limits altogether. This is of particular interest to the current study as the socio-cultural background of the Vietnamese female student travellers in terms of gender expectations and societal challenges is a key influence on their travel experiences.

Furthermore, Wilson and Little (2013) state that personal experiences and stories of attacks on women in the media contribute to their feeling of fear, and as such Valentine maintains that women strategise their use of public space, often by restricting their movements to certain areas and certain times of the day. Moreover, in a foreign country, it may even be difficult to determine the safety of a place, thus women may retreat even more. While Wilson and Little's (2013) argument is mainly based on attributing women's fear of violence and sexual attack to perception, this is justified as women continue to be the primary victims of rape and sexual attack around the world (World Health Organisation, 2002). The perception of fear still prevails among women travellers as their use of public space continues to remain regulated by a patriarchal system dictating what is 'appropriate' female travel behaviour (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Little, 2005, Yang et al. 2018b; Brown and Osman 2017).

To cope with harassment and to ease their fears, women adopt coping strategies, all intended to deflect attention away from their status as a woman. These include modifying their dress, fitting to local (female) norms of behaviour, remaining constantly alert for their safety, or distancing themselves away from places where they feel apprehensive (Brown and Osman 2017). Although these negotiation techniques allow women to observe cultural norms and be able to travel, they may become weary of having to constantly monitor their environment. Cockburn et al. (2006) agree that whilst covering their hair may help ward off male attention, it also challenges women's own independence and sense of identity.

Furthermore, Jordan and Aitchison (2008) note that self- surveillance can lead to women removing themselves from public view and decreasing their opportunities for walking alone or becoming the flaneuse they would like to be in order to avoid the male sexualized gaze. This places the responsibility on women to be aware of their potentially problematic status as a woman alone.

Research has paid more attention to the constraints faced by western women than Asian female solo travellers. Exceptions include research conducted in recent years by scholars, who studied the influence of Asian cultural norms on female travel behaviour (Teo and Leong 2006; Zhang and Hitchcock 2017; Yang 2016; Yang 2018a; Yang 2018b;Seow and Brown 2017). Asian women have been cast as vulnerable and dependent in comparison with western women; thus, they seem to participate less in independent travel (Yang 2016). This perspective however is contradicted by the recognition of an increase in solo female travellers from Asia (eglobaltravelmedia 2014). This suggests therefore that Asian travellers resist the pressures placed on them to conform to sociocultural norms for expected female behaviour, as reflected in a study by Yang (2015).

The Asian Traveller

Tourism research shows Asia as a desirable destination for Western travellers (Westerhausen 2002). While a range of literature has examined Western tourists and their encounters with Asian hosts (Winter et al. 2009), little has shed light on the experiences of young Asian travellers (Cohen 2003; Moaz 2007; Bui et al. 2013). Furthermore studies of solo travellers have predominantly been Western. Among the studies that have focused on Asian female travellers is

that by Seow and Brown (2017) who looked into the motivations of Asian female solo travellers and their experience. They found that women were motivated by the desire to be alone and to escape from mundane responsibilities. Their study, contradictory to previous research, revealed that a sense of independence and accomplishment was a benefit that emerged post travel rather than being push factors. The current study adds to Seow and Brown's findings by investigating a specific group of Asian female travellers.

The literature on solo female Asian travellers acknowledges risk, whether as a negative element of a trip or as anomalous behaviour (Yang et al. 2018a). In their study based on 35 in-depth interviews with solo female travellers from East and Southeast Asia, Yang et al. (2018b) explored risk perception and mitigating strategies among Asian female solo travellers. They found that in addition to violence, in particular of a sexual nature, discrimination and unfriendliness were two elements of risk faced by participants. Yang et al.'s contributions are a welcome addition to the western-dominated travel literature with important revelations of the intersectionality of gender and race and their influence on the perception of risk during solo female travel. Our paper expands on this by focusing on solo travel experiences of young and educated female Vietnamese students living in the UK, away from familial support and protection and how they dealt with fear during their travels.

Mohsin and Ryan (2003) studied the motivations of backpackers in terms of push and pull approaches in Australia. They stressed that Japanese and other Asian travellers are more likely to take advice from friends and relatives before their trips. However, it can be argued that backpackers, who may not all be solo travellers, are motivated by a certain type of travel different than that of similar groups, for example students. King and Gardiner (2013) highlighted the differences between backpackers and the Asian student travellers. They found that the two groups differ in terms of travel motivations, style and duration of trips, accommodation and activities. Unlike the Asian student traveller who prioritises education over travel, the backpacker views travel as a rite of passage. Asian student travellers prefer independent travel, normally accompanied by others, while backpackers engage in unplanned, independent travel. Furthermore, Asian student travellers travel for day trips or short breaks, they stay at hotels and focus on sightseeing, backpackers tend to take long extended travel, staying in hostels and focus on adventures. While this categorisation may be too general, it serves as a useful framework to understand the type of travelling experiences sought by each group.

Other work focused on the Asian traveller in general includes that by Muzaini (2006) who implemented an auto-ethnographical method to examine Asian traveller experiences in Southeast Asia. Teo and Leong (2006) focused attention on the experiences of independent tourists from Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore within the landscape of Thailand. In addition, Chen (2014) reveals the marginal differences of travel motivations between Chinese and Western solo travellers. Interesting though is the finding by Bui et al (2015) that Asian travellers seek travel away from home in order to escape social and work pressure. Travellers from Western countries tend to satisfy their inner need for personal growth, whereas young Asians desire for short term freedom from societal constraints (Huang 2008). Bui (2013) explains further that young Asian travellers from developing countries view travelling to western countries as a symbolic event, which improves their self-image and shows their uniqueness.

While the above studies offer insights into the Asian travellers' motivations in general, this study focuses on the experiences of female Vietnamese students living in the UK and travelling solo abroad for leisure purposes. It aims to shed light on their travel motivations as well as the constraints they face during their travels. .

Methodology

As the goal of this study is to explore the experiences and motivations of Vietnamese student solo travellers, a qualitative approach gave best access to participant stories. The interpretivist paradigm used in this study allowed us to capture the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al. 2013). Although many researchers have conducted quantitative surveys with descriptive data about solo travellers, these types of basic data do not provide the depth knowledge of the experiences and feelings of such travellers. Insight into the behaviour and attitudes of tourists are difficult to gain in a quantitative approach (Riley and Love 2000).

The interview was chosen as a suitable method for collecting data about the experiences of solo Vietnamese student female travellers, allowing for the exploration of experiences, motives and opinions and to observe the world from others' perspectives (Rubin and Rubin 2011). A semi-

structured interview was used and an interview guide was created, including the following topics: participants' background, the reason for solo travel, their feelings about their solo trips and their encounters at their destinations. The researcher remained open and flexible during the interview process and used prompt and probe questions to encourage interviewees to share as much rich data as possible.

Sampling criteria are as follows: participants should be female Vietnamese students studying in the UK who have travelled solo abroad for leisure purposes. The Vietnamese co-researcher made use of her membership of the Vietnamese Students Association on Facebook to access participants and follow-up contact was made to interested participants via email, phone and messenger. Data saturation was reached by the completion of ten interviews.

Participant profile

Pseudonym	Age	Number of solo trips	Destinations
Anh	25	Multiple	Italy, Netherland, Spain
Truc	25	Multiple	Republic of Ireland, Belgium, Portugal, France, Austria and Italy
Hieu	25	Multiple	Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg
Thuong	26	Multiple	France, Monaco, Italy, Greece
Chi	23	Once	France
Hao	29	Multiple	Leeds, York, France, Italy
Phuong	24	Once	France
Linh	24	Multiple	France, Spain, Italy
Dung	27	Multiple	Denmark, Switzerland, Canada, France
Nhung	24	Multiple	France, Spain, Italy, Czech Republic,

			Portugal

Interviews took place in venues according to the participants' preference, including in university offices, coffee shops and at their home. Interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and were digitally recorded. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Vietnamese and translated into English in preparation for analysis. Translation was conducted by the Vietnamese co-author who is fluent in English and special care was given to avoid any loss of meaning. The transcripts were read over by all three authors to ensure that the translated interviews made sense and were relevant to the research aim.

Ethical guidelines were adhered to. As such, participants were informed of the aim of the project and of their right to withdraw. They were given assurances that anonymity would be preserved and that confidentiality would be guaranteed. Pseudonyms are used to protect identity.

Thematic analysis was used to treat the data (see Braun and Clarke 2007), which required rereading the transcripts several times in the process of familiarisation. Then, the data were coded and grouped into different categories. 155 codes (e.g. Vietnamese culture, empowerment, fear, women's positon, etc.) were produced which were separated into two main themes: travel motivations and travel constraints.

Findings

Travel Motivations:

Getting to know the 'other'

The participants' travel motivations were characterised by their curiosity and desire to learn about cultures different than their own. They were driven by feelings of excitement about exploring different ways of life and novel experiences, as Linh stated:

> "I like to go and discover the typical culture of a country and desire to know how their life goes on daily and what is different from my country."

Some of the participants opted to stay with locals instead of in hotels in order to immerse themselves into the culture. It appeared that taking a trip alone enhanced their chance to get to know locals:

"*I usually choose to stay with host residents simply because local people can show me many typical and outstanding things related to their culture that I wouldn't have if I stayed in a hotel. In this way, I fully experience their lives.*" Dung

The freedom to explore a land different than their own with its distinct civilization and local norms was a deciding factor to travel solo. There is an argument that solo travellers have a tendency to engage in more contact with locals and with other fellow travellers (Murphy 2001; Plog 2001). Most of the participants revealed that travelling without companions gave them a chance to interact with people from different countries, different religions and different cultures, as emphasized by Dung:

"*During my solo trips, having no one travelling with me offers a better opportunity for me to meet many interesting people from over the world.*"

This finds echo in work by Moscardo (2006) and Paris and **Taye** (2010) who attributed solo travel motivations to freedom to explore new cultures. It also agrees with Chiang & Jogaratnam, (2006) findings with regards to gaining new knowledge and experiencing what it is like to be in a different place in the world.

It is interesting to note that some of the participants viewed the Western destination as a superior place and hoped to gain a sense of belonging to it even for a short time:

"*I want to see how civilized those countries are. It's just like, you know, being a part of this civilization.*" Hieu

The above quote reveals an inferred superiority associated with the European countries visited by the participants.   It challenges the notion that tourism often benefits the host community, typically women, economically and socially (Tucker, 2007).   In this case the tourist views herself as the one to benefit from this host-guest encounter.   It can also be argued that the participant does not perceive her exchange as mutual but rather a one-way relationship between the host and the guest leading only to her empowerment. In her study on culture, tourism and gender, Jiménez-Esquinas, (2017) challenges the common perception that tourists are supposed to empower the hosts with economical gain and freer gender roles. She cites Tucker (2009)

"tourism inevitably works to define and fix both the tourist and the toured 'other' in a relationship that is always inherently colonial in nature" (pp. 454, 455). The feeling of inferiority implicitly stated in the above example could stem from a history of colonisation by the French (1858-1954), a period characterised by violence and brutal abuse informed by the idea of race superiority (Rydstrom, 2015). In addition, being a Vietnamese woman, the participant feels a high power distance, a cultural dimension (Hofstede 1984) where a hierarchy of order is observed.

Connecting with fellow travellers: 'solo but not alone'

An interesting notion put forward by Chi is that she 'travelled solo, but not alone' simply because there were always people she could meet:

"I feel more like a traveller than a tourist during my trip due to the fact that I not only manage everything by myself but also have time to chat with the locals as well as other nationalities."

Meeting other travellers was recognised as a benefit of travelling alone as Myers (2010) also found.

"I usually choose to stay in dorms, which is such a great chance to meet other solo travellers. We make friends and go out together. We talk, we share our experience."- Nhung

Furthermore, travelling alone was not only about building friendships but also about receiving kindness from strangers, as Thuong described:

"I r*emember the days I travelled to Greece. Unfortunately, I had a very serious fever so I couldn't go out. One of the dorm roommates stayed by my side all night because I couldn't sleep. Another one was a nurse for the WTO who was on his vacation, helping reduce my fever. I really appreciated what they did for me, they are not just friends but like my family*."

Human interaction improved the travel experience and satisfaction of all the participants interviewed. Indeed, Will and Harris (2006) stressed this factor as a primary motivation for people to travel alone.

Autonomy, empowerment and self-discovery

Freedom and flexibility emerged as important factors in deciding to travel solo, confirming similar notions in the tourism literature on the non-institutionalized traveller (Hyde and Lawson 2003; Hyde 1999). Solo travellers do not have to follow others' schedule; they are not rushed as Truc stated:

"I am totally uninhibited when I travel on my own; I do not depend upon the schedules of others. In a group, sometimes you must try to please others, do what they want, but I am free to do what I like."

Hieu mentioned that solo travelling allows her to make her own decisions about travel plans as well as activities that she wishes to pursue without having to compromise with anyone:

"I feel free and in control as a solo traveller. I can go wherever I want to go and do whatever I want to do. I do not have to make a deal or negotiate with others."

As Myers (2010) states, solo travellers are responsible for planning, decision-making and organizing their own schedules. This is reinforced by Thuong who commented:

"I prefer travelling alone to travelling in a group because I feel more comfortable and free. Simple examples are differences in wake-up time, or where to go. That causes trouble and inconvenience not only for me but also my companions."

It is confirmed by many researchers that solo travellers face less constraints in the decision-making process than travelling in groups due to the fact that they don't have to negotiate travel decisions with other people (Ariely and Levav 2000; Kozak 2010). Furthermore, none of the participants thought about joining a package tour. Chi explained that:

"It is such an annoying travel experience taking a package tour because you have to follow a boring schedule. You don't have time for yourself to discover beautiful and historic small streets in Paris, for example, to taste local cuisine or to talk to wonderful local people."

While feelings of autonomy can be seen as a motive for any solo traveller, in the case of female Vietnamese travellers, it is of a greater benefit. This could be due to a prior greater attachment to group cultural norms in their home country where group identities prevail and women are limited in decision-making (Hofstede 2001). While the Vietnamese culture typically imposes a higher level of gender constraints on women (White 1987), Vietnam witnessed a social advancement beyond most developing countries. A legal framework based on gender equality has been adopted with programmes to promote women's rights (Schuler 2006). For example, The Vietnam

Women's Union supports women's educational, political and economic advancement but as long as the Confucian role of maintaining family hierarchy and harmony are being respected (ibid).

Furthermore, empowerment and independence were cited as important factors in the decision to travel solo, related to the challenges involved in solo travel and the need to negotiate the constraints they faced on their own. Riley (1988) stated that women in particular are likely to increase their sense of independence and self-control by travelling alone. Facing and overcoming difficulty was empowering, as Nhung commented:

"Solo travel gives you an opportunity to become more independent and to develop more self-esteem. For instance, when I travelled in Denmark, my cellphone suddenly died, so I couldn't use my phone to search for directions. Consequently, I had to learn to use a paper map or I asked people directly. It was tough but I became more confident and independent."

A further example is provided by Phuong who developed a sense of personal power that she did not know she had:

"When I travelled in Paris for few days, I nearly got pickpocketed on the street. As a pickpocket was about to take my phone out of my bag, I grabbed his hand quickly, pointed my finger into his face and yelled: 'Why are you trying to steal my phone?' He ran away, and I kept my phone safe. I don't know where I got that strength and bravery from!"

Participants found such challenging incidents to be ultimately rewarding. This is particularly powerful for women from a patriarchal culture such as Vietnam who generally have had few opportunities to experience autonomy. Previous studies have also cited a growth in confidence as a result of negotiating unexpected challenges (Jordan and Gibson 2005; Myers 2010). However, in Asian culture, women are seen as indecisive and dependent on others (Yang 2016), therefore the Vietnamese women in this study valued their increased sense of confidence and independence.

Despite having friends, participants chose to take solo trips simply because they had a better time travelling alone. Although Asian women are commonly viewed as vulnerable and dependent in Asian culture (Yang 2016), most of the participants perceived themselves to be independent and self-sufficient. As Tseng and Li (2004) found, Asian women who travel solo deviate from the gender stereotype imposed on them in Asian culture. As Hieu proclaimed:

"I love to spend my own time instead of in groups!"

Although the participants were concerned about potential feelings of isolation and boredom on their first solo trip, they changed their minds as soon as they became immersed in a new culture. They found the solitude a way to become reacquainted with themselves (Despres 1997). For many participants, their very first solo trip occurred unexpectedly, as was the case for Hau whose first solo travel to Spain made her determined to undertake future trips on her own. The more pleasure derived at the destination, the greater desire they had to repeat their solo trip, reflecting the relevance of the Travel Ladder Career (Pearce and Lee 2005). As Hao stated:

"My perceptions about solo travel absolutely changed after my first trip. I was a bit worried that being alone could cause boredom and loneliness, but I was so wrong I almost forgot that I am alone because of the beautiful scenery and the gorgeous people I meet."

As Jang and Cai (2002) argue, as travellers gain experience, their motives for travelling can change overtime.

Travel Constraints:

The stigma of the solo female traveller

Despite the numerous benefits of solo travel, there were many constraints that participants were challenged by during their solo trips. The first constraint cited by participants regarded the disapproving attitudes of friends, as articulated by Linh:

"Many friends of mine tried to persuade me not to travel alone because it is very dangerous for women to take solo trips without any bodyguards, like family or friends."

As all the participants are Vietnamese students they are therefore influenced by Asian culture, which is tends to be conservative and traditional (Yang 2016). Travelling alone is unacceptable in a traditional culture and women are advised to stay safe at home rather than risk travelling to the danger of the outside world. Women described being afraid, or at least reluctant, to share their solo trip plans with their family or friends beforehand, as Hau stated:

"Definitely, I don't tell my parents about my solo trips because, you know, my parents are very traditional and difficult. Certainly, they won't allow me to travel alone without my friends if I mention the trip in advance. My mother, who is an Asian traditional woman, would be worried about my safety."

Friends and family were fearful of the potential risks faced by solo female tourists; however, this study notes that such viewpoints changed over time with reports of successful solo trips, as Truc notes:

"*After coming back, I just told my parents about my solo trips. And then my parents changed their attitudes and started to receive it more positively: 'it's ok then, **because** it's not the first time she travels alone'.*"

Thus the influence of travel on future plans as observed in the travel ladder model applies to both travellers and their family and friends. It is interesting to note that despite the efforts to advance Vietnamese women instigated by a number of private and governmental agencies, these efforts are not sufficient to allow for a complete transformation of the strict gender and societal norms, and a strict adherence to household values is still expected.

Perception of fear and vulnerability

This is not to say however that fear was misplaced, as participants who are all women, revealed feelings of fear and vulnerability to be a constraint on their ability to fully enjoy and profit from their trip. As Mehta and Bondi (1999) assert, the potential threat of violence or harassment instils a sense of fear tends to constrain women's leisure activities. In this study, and as reported elsewhere, interviewees felt responsible for avoiding danger. Phuong mentioned that she always took precautions:

"*I heard a lot of bad things, so I always keep my eyes on my belongings. I know I become a target for robbers easily because I travel alone and therefore must carry a lot of cash.*"

Time of day was also a factor as participants felt that night time and the associated darkness were unsafe for and to be avoided by women. This has also been observed in other studies of female travel experiences (Seow and Brown 2017). Participants agreed that perceived danger at night was one of the primary constraints they faced, leading them to stay close to their accommodation and to set a time restriction for themselves. Nhung gave a specific example:

"*My primary principle when travelling alone is to never go home later than 10pm. I have to start moving home at 9pm and check in at my accommodation at 9:30 or just a little bit later.*"

Making sure to get back to their accommodation early was '*a good habit*' in order not to '*become a prey for harassment*'. It must be noted that fear for personal safety is an issue not only for Asian women but also for Western women when they take part in leisure travel away

from home (see Little 2002; Brown and Osman 2016). It was apparent that participants managed their perception of fear well and used the experience to build confidence in their skills and self-care (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006).

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Moreover, women in this study were constrained by their choice of destination, which was determined by its perceived level of danger for women travelling alone, as commented on by Truc:

> "*I always take safety into account when I choose the destinations to travel alone to. I look for information and read reviews about safe destinations for women. My priority is to choose the safer countries for travelling alone. I don't dare to travel to dangerous countries.*"

The perception of the potential risks posed by certain countries therefore stems from their reputation for being dangerous for solo female travellers, indicated by their treatment of women more generally.

Conclusion

This study examined the solo travel motivations of female Vietnamese student solo travellers, and found that the important factors to them were: freedom and flexibility, self-empowerment and independence and exploration, as well as the ability to interact with local people and learn about other cultures. These findings support earlier studies by Jordan and Gibson (2005) and Bianchi (20116), which cite freedom and self-development as important motivations for women to travel alone. The participants in this research are all young women, who were inspired to travel alone based on the ideas of being free, being autonomous and being curious about the world outside. Solo travel was cast as an inner journey of self-growth. Social interaction with local people and other solo travellers was also significant, enabling cultural exchange and the creation of new friendships. This is reinforced by Murphy (2001), who suggests social interaction to be a prime motive for travelling alone and a central experiential attribute of the solo trip. **The relevance of the Travel Ladder Career theory of Pearce and Lee (2005) is corroborated in this study as participants grew in confidence as they gained more travel experiences as solo travellers.**

The constraints identified in this study are gender and culture-specific. They relate partly to being a solo female traveller in terms of awareness of the risks posed by being alone and in particular at night. In this respect, the findings echo the work of Brown and Osman (2017) and Seow and Brown (2017). In addition, as agreed by (Yang 2016), Asian cultural norms mean that women may face disapproval and fear mongering regarding the safety and appropriateness of travelling alone.

Our study contributes to the current body of literature on solo women travel with the experiences of a unique segment of young and educated Vietnamese women. An unanticipated finding from our research reveals that contemporary Vietnamese women who enjoy a high level of education and freedom are still influenced by a history of war and colonisation which accompanies them on their travels and lends a sense of lower self-worth. It's interesting to note that historical baggage can affect the tourist experience and the relationship with the destination. This is a notion worth exploring in future studies.

This study carries some implications for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and travel providers, which need to capitalise on the growing solo traveller market in bespoke marketing campaigns, focusing on the factors that draw tourists to travel solo. The personal safety concerns of solo travellers should also be addressed by local DMOs by providing relevant information about self-protection and emergency contacts. This study reveals a degree of travel behaviour and a certain mind set specific to young Asian women travellers: a growing segment that merits attention by tourism marketing organisations.

There are limitations to this study that need to be addressed. First, the sample size was small, as is common in a qualitative study, and it focused solely on the experiences of Vietnamese female tourists. This study has filled some gaps in the tourism literature regarding why Vietnamese female travellers travel alone and what constraints they encounter in their solo trips, but further research is required in order to build a fuller picture of why Asian tourists choose to travel solo. It is recommended that further research could be undertaken utilising a larger sample that better captures the experiences of the Asian international student body, including a cross-section of nationalities, and both genders. This could help categorise the international student market into sub-segments, which would enable travel companies to design better products to meet the needs of this important and growing group of travellers. Using a quantitative approach will assist in the study of a much larger sample size. The themes generated by the analysis of this study's data will help to inform the design of the questionnaire.

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