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# **What motivates and hinders people from travelling alone? A study of solo and non-solo travellers**

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## **Declarations of Conflicting Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## **Funding Acknowledgement**

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article: This work was supported by the 2019 Griffith University New Researcher Grant Scheme. The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in Current Issues in Tourism since 28 October 2020.

URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13683500.2020.1839025>

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# **What motivates and hinders people from travelling alone? A study of solo and non-solo travellers**

Contemporary lifestyles and social changes have precipitated the popularity of solo travel. Despite the growing prominence of the solo travel market, it remains an underresearched area. This study explores the definitions, motivations, and constraints of solo travel, taking into consideration both existing and potential solo travellers, and provides a gender-balanced investigation and subsequent in-depth understanding of the underlying factors that drive solo travel motivations and constraints. Interviews were conducted with 14 solo travellers and 14 non-solo travellers. The findings suggest that solo travel as an evolving and fluid concept, varies according to individual travel experiences and personal circumstances. Solo travel motivations can be broadly categorised into “solo by circumstances” and “solo by choice”. Transformative experience, freedom, and flexibility are key motivators for solo travellers, while anticipated self-discovery and freedom inspire the potential solo travellers. Safety, cost, and social constraints emerged as the top three inhibitors impeding or constricting solo travel participation and experience. The findings reveal the institutionalisation of solo travel and proclivity to join tours as strategies to build confidence and overcome safety and social constraints. Recommendations for the travel industry to cater to the solo travel market were also examined from the travellers’ perspectives.

Keywords: solo travel; motivation; constraint; tour; Australia

## **Introduction**

Solo travel has been a steadily growing market, especially in the past few years, as the popularity of solo travel soared by 42% between 2015 and 2018 (Karantzavelou, 2018). A global survey in 2019 with 21,000 respondents reveals a 76% interest in solo travel (Klook, 2019). Solo travel is estimated to account for 18% of global travel bookings (Travelport, 2019), and is appealing to both women and men from generation Z to baby boomers (Booking.com, 2018, 2019; Klook, 2019). Increasingly individualised lifestyles, changing perceptions of relationships and marriage, and the growing number

of solo dwellers are some frequently cited explanations for the rise of solo travel (Klinenberg, 2012; Yang et al., 2019).

Solo female travel contributed substantially to this trend at an early stage. The progress of gender equality enables women with social and financial means to travel independently, which subsequently empowers women with transformative experiences and broadened life perspectives (Wilson & Harris, 2006). Being able to travel alone carries profound symbolic and socio-cultural meanings for women, which gives rise to converging research on solo female travel (e.g., Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Su & Wu, 2020; Yang et al., 2019). Contrastingly, relatively less research has extended beyond the gender lens to provide a holistic understanding of both female and male solo travellers, although solo travel has gained comparable interest from women and men (Booking.com, 2019; Klook, 2019).

Apart from descriptive statistics provided by travel companies such as Booking.com and Klook, only a handful of scholarly studies have offered a non-gender-focused examination of the emerging solo travel trend. Some representative works include the seminal research of Goodwin and Lockshin (1992) and later, of Laesser et al. (2009) and Bianchi (2016). These studies have established the significance of the solo travel market and laid the groundwork for future research. Several solo travel studies have surfaced in the past three years, focusing on the constraints to travelling alone in an Asian context (Chung et al., 2017; Yang & Tung, 2018). Overall, the extant literature has provided preliminary insights into the motivations and constraints of solo travel. Nonetheless, there is lack of an in-depth understanding of the underlying factors that drive people to, or prevent them from travelling alone. Additionally, extant studies have predominantly focused on actual solo travellers. Little is known about the latent

solo travel market, comprising travellers who may have an interest in solo holidays but are yet to attempt one.

Furthermore, existing research has commonly adopted a narrow definition of solo travel, one based on solo arrival (McNamara & Prideaux, 2010) or single relationship status (Chung et al., 2017), while other research has assumed a solitary, adventurous or non-institutionalised form of travel (Elsrud, 2001; Mehmetoglu et al., 2001; Wantono & McKercher, 2019)—a detailed discussion of the definitions of solo travel will be provided in the *Literature Review* section. However, recent industry reports suggest an increasing interest in group tours and social activities among solo travellers (Kutschera, 2019; Lisella, 2019). The changing trend warrants updated research into the current definition and perception of what constitutes a solo holiday and the need for solitude vis-à-vis social experiences.

Based on the gaps identified above, this study provides an in-depth exploration of solo travel from existing and potential solo travellers, both males and females. Specifically, the study aims to explore the contemporary meanings of solo travel and the underlying factors that drive solo travel motivations and constraints. Strategies for the travel industry to enhance solo travel participation and experience are also examined from the travellers' perspectives.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The evolution of solo travel***

Existing studies have adopted inconsistent definitions of solo travel. Some studies defined solo travel based on arrival status (McNamara & Prideaux, 2010) or relationship status (Chung et al., 2017). Others considered solo travel as travelling alone (Bianchi, 2016) or mostly alone (Wilson, 2004) throughout the journey. More recent solo travel

studies have not discussed the definition of solo travel (Osman et al., 2019; Seow & Brown, 2018; Yang et al., 2019). The varying and ambiguous definitions have resulted in a body of solo travel literature covering diverse travel experiences, ranging from visiting friends and relatives (VFR), city escape, volunteer tourism, resort holiday and backpacking, to frontier expedition (Campbell, 2009; Heimtun, 2012; Laesser et al., 2009; Laing & Crouch, 2009; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010; Wantono & McKercher, 2019). This inconsistent conceptualisation of solo travel has to some extent hindered theoretical advancement and meaningful comparison of solo travel research findings.

Solo travel, however, is a moving target. The meaning of “being alone” has evolved in recent times (Yang et al., 2019). Aloneness, for a long time in human history, signified social exclusion and being outcast, and was associated with deviant and pathological behaviour (Lai et al., 2015), although it was also evident in the history that some individuals would seek solitude for self or spiritual cultivation (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992). Public display of solitude has only become acceptable with recent social changes, including changing family structure and increasingly individualised lifestyles, and has been further bolstered by contemporary urban design and technology advancement (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Yang et al., 2019). These changes have progressively normalised solo activities in public space. Despite these positive changes, hedonistic solo consumption such as travel is subject to enduring social stigma. Existing studies have reported negative stereotypes and discriminatory practices against solo travellers, including unwanted attention (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008), inferior service (Bianchi, 2016), and single supplement charges (Rosenbloom, 2013).

The development of solo travel resembles that of aloneness. Solo travel in the past was evident in pilgrimage (Genoni, 2011), an example of self and spiritual cultivation through solitude. More recently, solo travel has been practised and

investigated within the realms of frontier expedition (Laing & Crouch, 2009) and backpacking (Wantono & McKercher, 2019). Note, however, that although “backpackers” and “solo travellers” have been used interchangeably in the literature for their shared emphasis on independence (Elsrud, 2001; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010), the two terms are not equivalent, as backpackers do not necessarily travel alone. Just as backpacking is becoming a tourism mainstream (O’Regan, 2018; O’Reilly, 2006), solo travel has progressively transformed from a travel niche to an increasingly popular holiday option. The meaning of solo travel has evolved and expanded in response to recent social changes. Klinenberg (2012) noted the emergence of solo consumption, including travelling alone, as a result of the increasing single population. This has given rise to a different type of solo traveller. Unlike their predecessors who chose to travel alone to exotic destinations for spiritual and self-discovery, some solo travellers today go on a solo holiday because they have no one to travel with, and they do not necessarily seek to avoid touristy places (Yang et al., 2018). Laesser et al. (2009) cautioned not to assume all solo travellers as independent travellers as some may prefer a more structured, organised holiday (Haugen, 2018). The motivations and travel experiences of these solo travellers are likely to be different from those of the traditional solo travellers and hence, warrant an updated investigation into the contemporary solo travel experience.

### ***Solo travel motivation and experience***

The reasons for people travelling alone can be broadly divided into two categories: by default and by choice (Mehmetoglu et al., 2001). “Solo travellers by default” refers to individuals who lack travel companions (Mehmetoglu et al., 2001; Osman et al., 2019; Seow & Brown, 2018). Chung et al. (2017) limited solo travellers by default to those living alone, while other studies considered a wider range of living arrangements and

relationship status for individuals who have no one to travel with (Bianchi, 2016; Laesser et al., 2009).

Existing studies have found that many solo (female) travellers choose to travel alone despite having family or friends to travel with (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2019). Transformative experience appears as a key motivator for solo travellers by choice (Pung et al., 2020). Transformative experience is described as self-change resulting from the inward journey taken by travellers when encountering an unfamiliar environment and experience, and the transformation is amplified in solitude (Pung et al., 2020). The self-change or transformation includes transformative learning, existential transformation, and behavioural change (Pung et al., 2020). Past studies have alluded to transformative outcomes of solo travel using other terms, including self-discovery, self-development, emancipation, empowerment, becoming autonomous and confident, and learning something new (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2019; Pung et al., 2020; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2019). Solo travellers by choice are also motivated by freedom, flexibility, and escape (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Mehmetoglu et al., 2001; Osman et al., 2019; Seow & Brown, 2018; Wilson & Little, 2005); relaxation (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Laesser et al., 2009; Seow & Brown, 2018); and personal indulgence (Bianchi, 2016).

Existing research has also suggested social motives for solo travel, where solo travellers seek to meet and connect with locals and other travellers (Bianchi, 2016; Laesser et al., 2009; Osman et al., 2019). Meeting and travelling with others for a short period is common among backpackers as the hostel setting encourages social interactions, and being alone makes it easier to meet people (Murphy, 2001). A similar motive was reported among solo travellers. The notion of 'solo but not alone' (Osman et al., 2019, p. 257) suggests social interactions, including connecting with other travellers,



talking to locals, and receiving kindness from strangers as key motivators for and benefits of solo travel. Likewise, Bianchi (2016) identified social interaction as an important source of satisfaction for solo travellers and recommended tourism businesses provide social-oriented activities for solo travellers. Some studies, however, underscored that not all solo travellers are interested in social activities; some travel solo for solitude (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Laing & Crouch, 2009; Yang et al., 2019).

Past solo travel studies have predominantly focused on women's motivation and experience. For instance, empowerment, transformative experience, and escape were found to be especially important among solo female travellers (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Wilson & Little, 2005; Yang et al., 2018). Pung et al. (2020), one of the few exceptions to have investigated both genders, identified gender differences in that transformative solo travel experience for females focused more on self-consciousness and embodied feelings, while for males, on sense of community and adaptation. That study, however, was based on the experience of two individuals using a duo-ethnography approach. In terms of social interactions, sexual encounter was identified as a motivation for solo male travellers (Mehmetoglu et al., 2001), whereas romantic experience was identified for solo female travellers, and was less important (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006). Prior researchers have thus highlighted the need for further investigation into solo holiday experience with a gender-balanced perspective (Bianchi, 2016; Pung et al., 2020).

### ***Challenges encountered with solo travel***

Solo travel is a relatively new uptake by average travellers (Yang et al., 2019). Existing tourism space and travel offerings have been conventionally designed for couples and families, and have not kept abreast with recent social changes, including the increasing

single population (Heimtun, 2010; Klinenberg, 2012). This is evident in the persistent challenges faced by solo travellers such as having to pay a single supplement (Bianchi, 2016; Rosenbloom, 2013). As the default setting of existing accommodation is double occupancy, solo travellers are often charged extra for packaged tours and cruises (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Rosenbloom, 2013). Rosenbloom (2013) identified the notion of singlism to explain the discrimination against solo travellers.

Safety concern is another challenge widely cited in previous solo travel studies. Most studies agreed on the predisposition of women to perceive a greater risk when travelling alone. For instance, the fear of sexual harassment has been underlined as the top concern for solo female travellers (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Seow & Brown, 2018; Su & Wu, 2020). The paper by Bianchi (2016), one of the few non-gender-focused studies, extends the finding to male solo travellers who also reported vulnerability and concerns for safety without a travel companion. Other challenges reported in the extant literature that affect both female and male solo travellers include unfriendly service providers (Bianchi, 2016; Yang et al., 2018) and loneliness (Bianchi, 2016; Seow & Brown, 2018).

Two gaps arise from the existing research around challenges and constraints pertinent to solo travel. First, existing research has fixated on women's experiences; the challenges experienced by male travellers have received minimal attention. Two recent studies on solo travel constraints have included both female and male respondents but gender difference was not assessed (Chung et al., 2017; Yang & Tung, 2018). Second, there has been little discussion on the constraints perceived by non-solo travellers, even though prior research has substantiated the effect of constraints on solo travel intention (Chung et al., 2017). While insightful, past studies have mainly focused on the experience of experienced solo travellers, but the findings have limitations in extending

to non-participants. Therefore, it is important to provide a holistic investigation into what hinders people from travelling alone in order to effectively remove the barriers to participation.

## **Methodology**

This exploratory study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the meanings, motivations, and constraints of solo travel experienced by existing and perceived by potential solo travellers. To achieve this objective, a qualitative method guided by an interpretivist paradigm was employed to elicit rich descriptions of the social phenomenon (i.e., solo travel) and allow multiple perspectives and voices to be heard (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The participants were recruited via social media, where recruitment ads were posted on solo travel group sites on Facebook and the researcher's social network. A combination of purposive, convenient and snowballing sampling techniques (Creswell & Poth, 2016) was utilised to achieve balance in gender and solo travel experience – half of the participants had travelled alone while the other half, never. To investigate the contemporary meanings of solo travel, no specific definition of solo travel was included in the recruitment ads; the participants self-identified if they had or had not travelled solo.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 Australians either face-to-face, or through Skype to overcome geographical barriers. To protect the participants' identities, a code was assigned to each participant. For example, NF01 refers to female interviewee 1 without solo travel experience while SM01 denotes male interviewee 1 who is a solo male traveller. As presented in Table 1, the participants ranged from 19 to 73 years old. Nearly half of the participants in the solo travel group were single at the time of the interviews and three were living alone. Contrastingly, only one participant in

the group without solo travel experience lived alone and most were either married or in a relationship.

<Insert Table 1 Here>

The interviews comprised five stages: (1) building rapport; (2) encouraging the participants to share their perception of and experience with solo travel (for those who had travelled alone); (3) directing the questions towards what motivates them to travel solo and what the barriers and concerns of undertaking a solo holiday are; (4) seeking the participants' opinions of the changes they would like to see in the travel industry to facilitate their solo travel experience/participation; and (5) collecting personal information. Aligning with the core principles of qualitative research, the interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions, but the dialogues were allowed to emerge naturally, where the researcher listened attentively and followed up with probing questions for deeper insights (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2016). During the interviews, the researcher regularly summarised the responses and sought the participants' validation to ensure credibility. The interviews lasted 50 minutes for solo travellers and 30 minutes for non-solo travellers on average and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA, computer software that facilitates coding; organises, stores and retrieves codes and coded text; and records analytic memos (Woolf & Silver, 2017). The analysis began with the researcher reading and becoming familiar with the transcripts. The transcripts were then analysed inductively using a bottom-up approach guided by thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The transcripts were read several times and coded line-by-line, which was followed by focused coding to revise, integrate, and collapse emerging codes into meaningful themes. The researcher took detailed memos throughout the analysis

process to reflect on the development of the codes and themes. To safeguard authenticity, the findings are presented in the participants' own voices through the interview excerpts.

## **Findings**

### ***Contemporary meanings of solo travel***

#### *Imagining solo travel*

Non-solo travellers generally associated their imaginings of solo travel with a grand tour in Europe or backpacking. NM01 commented, 'When I think of solo travel, I think about just exploring Europe' while NM05 stated, 'The feeling I get around solo travelling is backpacking'. The imaginings of solo travel varied across gender. Male participants were more likely to ascribe a rigid definition of solo travel. For instance, NM06 imagined solo travel as 'travelling by yourself, going everywhere by yourself with no one else'. Contrastingly, non-solo female travellers generally considered joining a group tour without anyone they knew, as solo travel. The first thing that crossed NF01's mind was Contiki (a tour company that is famous among young Australians for tours in Europe): 'I'd probably go with a Contiki where I don't know anyone, so it's kind of travelling alone.'

#### *The evolution of solo travel*

Solo travellers adopted a fluid definition of solo travel, and gender difference was not obvious. In this study, solo travellers undertook a wide range of travel activities, and many included a combination of different activities within a single trip, encompassing train travel, self-drive travel, visiting friends and family, volunteer program, backpacking, packaged tour, day tour, and short city escape.

Most solo travellers opined that solo travel entails travelling with people they meet on the road. SF06 commented, 'I did the travelling on my own even though there were other people, it was just part of the experience . . . going and staying in a backpacker, you are there on your own, you meet everybody else.' This view was shared by a few participants who also underscored the independent organisation of the trip: 'I would say solo travel is booking for yourself your own itinerary, at your own pace' (SM02). Nonetheless, due to the remote location of Australia, several participants engaged travel agents to organise the accommodation and transportation for international trips. Other participants opined that solo travel is defined by arrival and departure status, with SF06 aptly summarising, 'You might be doing lots of travel with lots of different people, but you're still essentially when you arrive, you're on your own, when you leave, you're on your own.'

The definition of solo travel evolves with individuals' travel experience. SM07 reflected, 'it would have been different had I been asked this question like maybe at the start of solo travelling, but now you've done it for a while, you've kind of experienced a few things, that changes.' SM07 discerned different stages in solo travel: 'When you're a young solo traveller, it's a bit more hedonistic, you are going there for like fun, partying. But when you're a bit older, it's purely like achieving something.' A progression was also observed by SF07: 'In my early 20s, I wanted to do more the tour group things because I wasn't very confident and didn't feel very safe to do independent travel, but from my mid-twenties onwards, I've been doing independent travel.'

### ***Why travel solo?***

#### *Solo travellers: by choice and by circumstances*

Solo travellers reported a mix of motivations to travel alone. Lack of travel companion

is a common reason, underpinned by life stage and relationship status. SM02 proclaimed, 'I think it's a life stage thing, we sort of hit middle age and at this point, we're single. I'm not going to sit at home anymore on my own.' This is reinforced by SM03 who recounted, 'I didn't have a partner or anything. I guess I was at the age where a lot of my friends had a partner or even younger kids.' Several participants, however, admitted that they assumed no one was available, without asking. Major life transition is another reason why the participants travel alone. For SF03, solo travel was her way of overcoming grief: 'I was really grief-stricken when my husband died, and I didn't know how to cope with that. Then I started to plan for the trip.' SF03 chose to visit England where her husband was born for the healing trip: 'I just walked around by myself . . . getting over being really sad because that's where my husband came from . . . It was a very healing trip for me.' For SF01, her first solo trip was a celebration of adulthood: 'Well I was only 19. So, I was pretty young, fresh out of school. I just happily got on a plane and went about my business.'

However, many solo travellers intentionally chose to travel by themselves for freedom and flexibility. SF01 articulated, 'I quite enjoy being solo and just going ahead and doing what I want to do and not having to check in with anyone else.' SM02 also stated, 'I wanted to be able to commit my own time to my interests, at my own pace and take advantage to that opportunity I might not get again to indulge my interests and passions.' Many solo travellers reported negative experiences they had had travelling with other people, which motivated them to go solo.

When asked about their overall solo travel experience, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. SF04 aptly described her experience as 'illuminating'. SF07 concluded, 'Solo travelling is allowing yourself the freedom of movement and the freedom of adventure and experience. It allows you to develop yourself on a level that

non-independent travel does not allow. For me, it's very liberating and very empowering.' A subtle gender difference was observed, with solo female travellers reporting transformative experience, while male participants emphasised freedom and flexibility more strongly.

#### *Non-solo travellers: self-discovery and freedom*

Of those without solo travel experience, four participants planned to try it, and six would consider travelling solo. Self-discovery and freedom were the two main motivators that inspired these participants. NM01 imagined solo travel was about 'finding yourself', while NM07 depicted it as 'a soul-searching holiday'. NF02 was enticed by the anticipated freedom: 'freedom . . . the opportunity to be by yourself and really just experience more, like gain more world experience by yourself. You have to do it alone, so that's more liberating.' Resonating with the sentiment of freedom, NM01 believed that solo travel would release him from social pressure, stating, 'I think it would be quite freeing to go by yourself because there's no pressure to be who you were. You can just do whatever.'

Several participants were inspired by someone they knew. For instance, NF01 was inspired by her grandmother: 'My grandma did it recently, and she really enjoyed it. She met heaps of people along the way, and I thought that would be pretty fun.' Similarly, NM05 who was keen to try solo travel, was inspired by his cousin and friends who had backpacked around Europe. NF02 hoped to have stories to tell: 'I think mostly to have stories to tell, I guess, just to be able to say, I went to Italy and I did this. And just to see the world.'

#### *Barriers to solo travel participation and experience*

As reported, 10 out of 14 non-solo travellers showed an interest in solo travel. Safety,



cost, and social constraints emerged as the top three inhibitors preventing them from travelling alone. While these constraints did not stop the participants in the solo travel group, such concerns constricted their solo travel experience and satisfaction.

#### *It's expensive to travel alone*

For both solo and non-solo travellers, cost is the most significant constraint. Many complaints were related to accommodation in various settings, including hotel, cruise, multi-night tour, and sleeper train. NM02 commented, 'When you travel alone with the hotel, you normally have to pay per room. So, when you're with someone else, it's half the price.' NF04 shared a similar view: 'I've thought about doing a cruise by myself but it just a bit expensive like, I might just have someone come with me for the same price.' SF01 analysed that 'a lot of the accommodation is geared for couples and not really for singles.' Most participants mentioned that they understood why they have to pay extra but were not happy about it: 'Look, I get it, but it's kind of annoying' (SF04); 'I understand why it's so expensive, but when you add on those extra fees just because you're on your own, I don't think that's very fair' (SF02).

#### *Safety concerns of solo travel*

Non-solo travellers raised concerns about their physical safety, as commented by NF06: 'I wouldn't feel very safe being by myself.' While safety concerns have not deterred solo travellers from undertaking solo holidays, it has limited their experience. SF07 reported, 'I don't go anywhere in the evening if I don't have company.' For some, safety concerns have resulted in unpleasant experiences. SF01 recounted, 'the man on the [hotel] counter seemed to have a bit of a crush on me. And I found it a bit awkward because he knew that I was staying alone.' SF05, who joined a packaged tour to gain confidence and experience with solo travel found herself in a distressing situation when

she was assigned to share a room with a drunken male tour participant: 'I've also been roomed with a guy. I brought my concerns to the tour director and she really didn't do much . . . he's been drinking all night, I'm not comfortable. I didn't sleep properly for three days.' SF05 requested a room change to no avail, until her situation was eventually resolved by a couple from the tour who volunteered to swap roommates.

In contrast to the accounts of solo female participants where most concerns were related to sexual harassment or assault, solo male travellers were concerned about theft and petty crime. SM04 conjectured that his concern was shaped by his gender and ability to defend himself when confronted with danger: 'Maybe it's just this sort of being a solo man . . . If I was to find myself in an alley and someone was threatening me like I do think I could put up a bit of a fight.' SF04 believed 'there is a vast difference in the experience of moving through the world for men, as it is for women'. Albeit lacking actual solo travel experience, non-solo travellers observed a similar gender difference in their perceptions of safety. NM07 assumed 'there is a difference between a bloke travelling alone versus a girl travelling alone'. NM02 believed that safety concerns affect both genders: 'getting pickpocketed . . . that would be the same concern as a male or female', but he supposed 'you are just more likely to experience it as a female because you're seen as an easier target.'

*'Having no one' versus 'someone is always available'*

Social constraint was another concern, mainly among non-solo travellers. The constraint encompasses two dimensions: no one to share with or rely on, and someone who is always available. As commented by NM02, 'I like being with someone. . . to share the moment with. I don't think I'd have as much fun if it was just me.' NF05 expressed fear of getting lost and 'having nobody to fall back on'. In contrast to SFs and SMs who travelled alone as they had no one to travel with, several non-solo travellers explained

that they have not travelled alone because someone is always available: ‘Whenever I said I wanted to go somewhere, there’s always been other people wanted to do the same’ (NM07). Many participants in the non-solo-travel group self-declared as ‘people-oriented’ (NM02). Some participants also described Australian culture as social-oriented, as NF03 proclaimed: ‘we’re all very social people, we’re all extroverts. I’m pretty much surrounded by extroverts. We like to be together.’

### ***What can the tourism industry do?***

Many solo travellers felt that there is room for improvements in the travel industry for accommodating solo travellers, especially in the accommodation and cruise sectors. SF03 commented, ‘oh, I think there needs to be quite a lot of improvement. I think they mainly still caters for couples and families or groups.’ Interestingly, participants who have not travelled alone rate the industry’s performance better than actual solo travellers. Three main appeals emerged regarding how the travel industry could enhance solo travel participation and experience.

### ***A room for one***

In response to the perceived barrier around extra cost incurred by solo travellers, many participants demand the abolition of the single supplement. Several participants recognised that some companies have waived the single supplement but hoped to see this practice adopted more widely across the travel industry. Other participants went to the root of the problem and called for more single rooms: ‘They [accommodation providers] should start looking at having single rooms so then it encourages people to travel alone, maybe a little bit cheaper because you don’t need as much space, so a smaller room. They can make more rooms’ (NF01). This sentiment was shared by SF03 who stated, ‘I think they should always have some space for single people so that single

people don't have to pay double and don't have to share.' SF03 further indicated, 'If I couldn't afford it, sometimes that would mean then I wouldn't go. I just think more people are travelling on their own, so the companies are going to have to start taking solo travellers more into account.'

### *Solo-friendly marketing*

Numerous participants also called for marketing images and content that speak to solo travellers. SM04 commented, 'you look at TV commercials, it's always like families and young partners or seniors, always doing things together, maybe there's a big market there for solo travellers but we're not seeing that. I think images are really important.' NF07 shared a similar sentiment: 'They [solo travel marketing] are sort of not out there unless you're looking for them, in terms of solo like there's nothing that advertises like come by yourself, make friends sort of thing.' SM05 pointed out the important role travel marketing plays in addressing the social stigma around travelling alone:

There's that sort of stigma associated with solo or by yourself, so any tour packages maybe not branded as if like you're by yourself sort of thing, I know some people may be put off by that . . . maybe if they just changed the language of who a solo traveller is.

For both existing and potential solo travellers, solo-friendly travel marketing will help them to make an informed decision and know what to expect: 'Just something to show you that it can be safe and fun, and good to meet new people and things like that, just a little bit of extra confidence, like help with your confidence' (NF01); 'Probably more education around if you wanted to do independent travel, more education around where to go, and what to do . . . Just more information' (SF02).

### *A mobile app for solo travellers*

Meeting people is an integral experience of solo travel. However, for non-solo travellers, the uncertainty around social interactions has hindered them from solo travel participation. Apart from joining tours to overcome the social constraint, the suggestion for a solo travel mobile application emerged coincidentally among numerous non-solo travellers. According to the participants, the app could incorporate functions for connecting with other travellers: 'Could be like an app that people use. An app to connect with people' (NM02). NF03 echoed, 'We use Tinder all the time to travel, not because we want to hook up, but because we're asking, we need help, we need advice, we need guidance and we want to meet fellow travellers.' NM03 envisioned the app to serve as a virtual companion: 'My biggest thought about solo travelling was having like a companion app to help you through.' Concerning safety, NF02 proposed a 'walk with me' app: 'Design an app . . . you are worried about walking somewhere by yourself late at night, there could be an app or something where someone can meet with you and walk with you to the place.' NM02 supported the app idea but suspected that similar apps may exist, resonating the need for better marketing: 'It can be a great app but if no one knows about it and no one uses it, it doesn't have a good purpose . . . need to market them a bit better so everyone that travels independently knows.'

### **Discussion**

This study addresses the knowledge gaps pertaining to the growing solo travel market. Specifically, the study contributes a gender-balanced viewpoint, investigates both existing and potential solo travellers, and provides an in-depth understanding of the underlying factors that drive solo travel motivations and constraints. Furthermore, this study reveals the changing definition and imagining of solo travel. In doing so, it

provides an updated understanding of what it means to travel alone in the contemporary world.

The findings suggest that solo travel is an evolving and fluid concept that varies according to individual travel experiences, personal circumstances, and social changes. The study expands the existing understanding of solo travel by revealing the multifaceted interpretations and imaginings of solo travel spanning a spectrum of solo status, with ‘being by oneself for the entire trip’ at one end, and ‘joining a packaged tour alone’ at the other. One’s location on the spectrum is influenced by the intersection of travel experience, gender, and age. In contrast with those of many studies that have discussed solo travel within the realm of backpacking or other non-institutionalised forms of travel (Elsrud, 2001; Wantono & McKercher, 2019), the findings here reveal the institutionalisation of solo travel, which aligns with the mainstreaming of backpacking (O’Reilly, 2006). The proclivity of Australian solo travellers to engage a travel agent could also be partly explained by the remote location of Australia. The findings further identify gender difference in the normalisation of packaged tours among the participants, especially among female travellers with little to no solo travel experience. Contradicting previous solo travel studies that reported a negative attitude or lack of interest in tours (Mehmetoglu et al., 2001; Osman et al., 2019), tours are deemed by the participants as a strategy to build confidence. The findings underline the importance of understanding the contemporary imagining of solo travel from the perspectives of existing and potential travellers, as this underpins their motivation and need for travelling alone. It is also important not to presume solo travel is a homogenous market.

Findings on solo travel motivations echo the typologies proposed by Mehmetoglu et al. (2001) but further expand solo travellers ‘by default’ to solo

travellers 'by circumstances'. Past studies considered individuals who are single, live alone, and/or lack travel companion as solo travellers by default. The findings here reveal a similar pattern, with relationship status underpinned by life stage as a push factor to travel alone. 'Solo travellers by circumstances' extends to individuals experiencing major transitions in life such as grief, especially among senior travellers, and coming of age. Seow and Brown (2018) discussed life transitions under the motivation of 'escape'. This study conceptualises life transitions as circumstances that drive people to travel solo. Not all life transitions lead to escape. As seen in this study, the loss of partner has compelled the participant to travel, not to escape, but to engage and to rise above the unfortunate life events. Findings about 'solo travellers by choice' are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Mehmetoglu et al., 2001; Osman et al., 2019), with transformation, freedom, and flexibility emerging as key motivators. Nevertheless, gender difference is observed, with transformative experience being most prominent among solo female travellers. This finding supports the existing solo female travel literature (Osman et al., 2019; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2018) and offers evidence from the male's perspectives. Furthermore, this study extends the extant literature by investigating the motivations of potential solo travellers and reveals anticipated self-discovery and freedom as two main motivators, which is consistent with the motivations of experienced solo travellers who travel by choice. The main difference between the two groups is that existing solo travellers are also motivated by circumstances, while this was not observed in individuals without solo travel experience.

The study reveals a strong interest in travelling alone and provides insights into the perceived barriers to solo travel participation among non-solo travellers, including cost, safety and social constraints. Similar challenges, that limited their experience,

were identified among existing solo travellers. The reported barriers are in accord with the extant studies from the past three decades (Bianchi, 2016; Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Seow & Brown, 2018), indicating that little has improved. Above all, this study makes an important contribution by exploring safety concerns from both female and male perspectives. The findings show that male travellers face different safety challenges (e.g., theft and petty crime) in contrast to the gendered physical safety issues that confront female travellers. The study further reveals men's perception of the sense of security from the point of view of their being male, and how this contributes to the actual and imagined gendered experience of solo travel. This finding, therefore, adds to the existing solo travel literature that has predominantly focused on women's safety. Furthermore, previous studies have identified social constraints such as loneliness that hinder people from travelling solo (Bianchi, 2016; Seow & Brown, 2018). The findings of this study indicate that the availability of travel companion is a social constraint as to why some participants have not travelled solo, which is in contrast to the findings that some solo travellers travel solo because they have no one to travel with. A deeper investigation suggests that personality plays an important role in determining solo travel motivation and constraint. Likewise, the findings in this study also imply the socially oriented culture in Australia, which requires further investigation.

### ***Practical implications***

The findings of this study provide implications for solo travel experience design and marketing that speak to the need of contemporary solo travellers. More importantly, the recommendations for the travel industry to enhance solo travel participation and experience were examined from the travellers' perspectives.



Making solo travel more affordable emerges as the most prominent request from among the study participants. The default unit of consumption in the accommodation sector continues to assume double occupancy, which is out of sync with the growing single population. The room size has a flow-on effect to the price of tours and cruise holidays where solo travellers are often penalised by a single supplement fee, reflecting the discrimination perpetuated against single or solo travellers. Some service providers have experimented with solo rooms, such as the Norwegian Cruise Line (Rosenbloom, 2013), but we are yet to see widespread adoption in the travel industry. Having more solo rooms is a strategic move, given the rise of the solo travel market, fuelled by changing social structures.

Contradicting the conventional depiction of solo travel as autonomous and non-institutionalised, tours appear as a strategy to build confidence and overcome safety and social constraints among less experienced solo travellers and potentially, those travelling solo by circumstances. This presents a great opportunity for tour companies, but adjustments need to be made around pricing, room assignment, and marketing message to effectively attract solo travellers. Some tour companies attempt to resolve the price issue by matching solo travellers with a roommate (Rosenbloom, 2013). Nonetheless, as evidenced by the findings of this study, this may not be the best solution without responsible practices by the companies such as ensuring solo travellers are matched with a compatible roommate and being willing to absorb the cost if compatibility is unachievable. Setting up a process or even a digital platform or mobile application that enables tour participants to e-meet potential roommates prior to the trip, may be a way forward. This would also help create a travel community made up of new and existing customers.

Similarly, mobile travel applications that facilitate social connection were suggested by the participants. Other recommended features include a virtual travel companion and guide using artificial intelligence and safety functions through crowdsourcing, such as the proposed ‘walk with me’ app – a safety app proposed by one participant, that searches for someone in the proximity to walk with at night. There is a myriad of travel and social applications available in the market but still, the call for one accentuates the importance of effective marketing.

Both existing and potential solo travellers called for more solo-friendly marketing and specifically, marketing messages and images that destigmatise solo travel. Some suggestions include incorporating more images of solo travellers in the advertising materials to counterbalance the overemphasis on couples and families. The travellers also demanded more information and education on solo travel to help them make informed decisions. Predicated on the findings of this study, self-discovery and freedom could be featured in the marketing message targeting the latent solo travel market. As for the existing solo market, transformative experience is likely to strike a chord with female travellers, while freedom and flexibility would do so with male travellers.

## **Conclusion**

Solo travel has evolved from once being a niche, to a maturing market appealing to travellers in all walks of life and of all genders, stimulated by the individualised social structure of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the prominence of this market, it remains an underresearched area, within which most studies have focused on women’s experience. This study addresses the knowledge gap by exploring the contemporary meanings, motivations and constraints of solo travel from both genders and from the perspectives of solo and non-solo travellers. The investigation into what changes travellers need from

the travel industry to facilitate their solo travel participation and experience, bridges the gaps between research and practice. In doing so, the study provides not only practical implications about catering to solo travellers, but also strategies to convert non-solo travellers into solo travellers by removing the barriers.

This study, despite its contributions, is limited by the small sample size and constricted to Australian travellers. While the sample size is appropriate for a qualitative study, it has not been able to fully establish the different segments within the solo travel market. However, the qualitative findings of this study could be used to inform future research. For instance, a quantitative market segmentation study would be fruitful to establish the typologies and segments suggested in this exploratory study. More research is also needed to further examine gender and age differences suggested in this exploratory study. Similarly, further research is warranted to explore whether personality, and specifically social tendency, plays a more significant role than relationship and solo living status in determining solo travel motivation and intention. Another potential area to examine is cultural influence in shaping social tendency and the subsequent effect on the perceived barriers and proclivities to travelling solo. By the same token, a cross-cultural comparison may provide valuable insights into the determinants of solo travel motivation and constraint. Finally, an investigation of the adoption and usage of digital technology among solo travellers may also provide useful insights.

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Table 1. Participant profiles

Participant Code	Age	Relationship Status	Household Size
NF01	19	In a relationship	6
NF02	20	Single	5
NF03	25	In a relationship	2
NF04	19	Single	3
NF05	53	Married	2
NF06	29	In a relationship	1
NF07	27	In a relationship	4
NM01	25	Single	2
NM02	23	In a relationship	7
NM03	25	In a relationship	3
NM04	35	In a relationship	4
NM05	21	Single	3
NM06	58	Married	2
NM07	23	In a relationship	2
SF01	29	In a relationship	1
SF02	27	Single	2
SF03	73	Single (Widowed)	1
SF04	46	Married	3
SF05	27	Single	4
SF06	34	Single	2
SF07	49	Married	2
SM01	27	In a relationship	3
SM02	51	Single (Divorced)	1
SM03	35	Single	3
SM04	30	In a relationship	2
SM05	21	In a relationship	4
SM06	23	In a relationship	3
SM07	26	In a relationship	5