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SOLO FEMALE TRAVEL: DESTINATION DESIRABILITY, EMPOWERMENT, AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF FEAR

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Abstract

This study examines how gender shapes solo female travel, focusing on destination desirability, perceptions of (un)safe spaces, experiences and spatial practices. Study combines an online survey of 818 women, mostly from Croatia with 11 semi-structured interviews. The findings show that perception of safety strongly influences destination choice and spatial behaviour, while women actively negotiate risk through planning, behavioural adaptation, and mental mapping. Solo travel does not eliminate fear but requires learning to manage it. Through this process, women assert autonomy, challenge gendered mobility constraints, and transform travel into a space of empowerment, resilience, and self-definition.

Keywords

solo female travel • gendered spaces • destination choice • destination desirability • spatial perception • empowerment

Introduction

Although solo female travel is not a new phenomenon, it has gained significant momentum and visibility in recent decades, becoming an increasingly prominent segment within the tourism industry (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Yang, 2020). Solo travel has grown rapidly in recent years, with women representing most solo travellers (Ejupi & Medarić, 2022), prompting

the tourism industry to adapt through a significant expansion of women-focused tour operators and tailored services designed specifically for female travellers (Junek et al., 2006; Khoo-Lattimore & Prayag, 2015).

Solo female travel has developed within broader social changes that have expanded women's access to mobility, leisure, and independence, although these opportunities remain uneven across cultural contexts

(Hidayati et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2023). Women may choose solo travel during transitional life periods (Dresler, 2025; Ejupi & Medarić, 2022), because of practical constraints (Yang & Tung, 2018), or a personal desire for autonomy, self-development, and meaningful experience (Wilson & Harris, 2006; Pung et al., 2020; Yang & Schänzel, 2023). At the same time, solo female travel remains shaped by vulnerability, loneliness, financial burden, and broader gendered constraints that influence women's mobility and access to space (Wilson & Little, 2005; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Wilson & Little, 2008; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008).

Research on solo female travel has emerged as a very fertile ground for analysing a range of gender and other social inequalities, which particularly come to the forefront when women navigate unfamiliar spaces alone (Yang & Schänzel, 2023). Although academic interest in solo female travel has increased, some gaps in the literature remain, particularly concerning the spatial and geographical dimensions of travellers' experiences. Specifically, the ways in which solo female travellers perceive and negotiate (un)desirable spaces, both within specific locales and across broader geographical contexts have received only limited scholarly attention (Wilson & Little, 2005; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a). This study aims to explore key aspects of solo female travel, particularly in relation to destination perceptions, risk mitigation, and gendered mobility. The following research questions guide the study: Which destinations (on regional or global level) are perceived (un)desirable and why? What challenges do solo female travellers face, and what strategies do they use to mitigate risks while travelling? How does gender influence mobility and spatial perception in solo travel? Does the safety-related behaviour of solo female travellers vary across age groups? Drawing on feminist geography, this study understands space as socially produced and gendered, where mobility, safety, and access to public space are unevenly experienced. From this perspective, solo female

travel becomes a valuable lens through which to examine how women negotiate power relations, fear and embodiment across tourism spaces.

Freedom and fear – Navigating gendered spaces through solo travel

Demographic and social changes, including later marriage, declining birth rates, higher divorce rates, and greater economic independence, have expanded women's travel opportunities (Bryson, 1994; Wilson & Little, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Kim & Beck, 2009; Dresler, 2025). Previous research results indicate that the motivation for solo travel mostly stems from specific psychological motives, such as fulfilling personal needs, gaining confidence, and achieving independence (Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2019; Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024). Solo travel is considered a profound personal experience that provides an opportunity for introspection and personal growth (Mani & Jose, 2020). Solo female travellers seek self-discovery, education, experiences of other cultures, freedom from their home constraints and usual routine, stress relief, and the development of independence (Cockburn-Wooten et al., 2006; Pereira & Silva, 2018; Hassan & Damir, 2022; Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024).

However, there are certain obstacles that limit women from embarking on solo travel. Women are regularly burdened with various roles, such as mother, wife, and daughter, which limits them concerning their own identity (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006). Sometimes it is challenging to gain family support for solo travel, which can result in persuasion or opposition from parents (in younger travellers), hiding travel plans, and sometimes even giving up on them (Mani & Jose, 2020). Other frequently mentioned obstacles to solo travel include financial constraints, lack of information, fear of getting lost, negative perceptions of local populations, and concerns about safety, stress, and other potential harms (Wilson & Little, 2005; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008;

Mani & Jose, 2020; Meliana, 2025). While these barriers play a significant role in limiting women's ability to travel solo, they are further compounded by the gendered nature of public space.

A feminist geographical lens highlights how fear and the threat of violence shape women's access to, and movement through public spaces. Public spaces are often seen as dangerous, dominated by the male gaze, violence, and harassment, which restrict women's access and freedom (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Listerborn, 2016; Roy & Bailey, 2021). Independent movement through touristic spaces, traditionally seen as a privilege of men, exposes women to risks of sexual harassment and unwanted attention (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a; Eger, 2021). However, as Wilson and Little (2008) emphasize, not all women share the same experiences, nor are their travels uniformly understood. Travel experiences and perceptions of fear are gendered, socially and culturally constructed, influenced by factors such as age, ability, personal history, and expectations.

Although age and life stage can shape women's experiences of solo travel, previous research does not establish a simple or linear relationship between age and perceived safety. Younger women may be more exposed to victimisation, particularly sexual harassment and stalking, while middle-aged and older women increasingly consider health, mobility, accessibility, and the consequences of facing an emergency without immediate assistance (Ceccato et al., 2024; Dresler, 2025; Maiurro & Brandão, 2025). Generational research also suggests that solo female travellers share motivations and constraints across age groups (e.g. they travel to relax and escape, have concerns about planning the entire holiday on their own), although younger women, particularly those belonging to Generation Z, place greater importance on personal safety than older cohorts (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024).

Safety concerns, particularly fear of sexual harassment, assault, and theft, are major factors influencing whether women choose

to travel solo (Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang, 2020; Ghadban et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2024; Dresler, 2025). Massey (2015) argues that space is often coded as masculine and associated with mobility and power, while place is coded as feminine and linked to stability and containment. This gendered spatial division shapes women's solo travel experiences, as social norms and historically male-dominated urban spaces have often restricted women's presence and mobility in public environments, reflecting broader attempts to confine women to the domestic sphere, which serve not only as a form of spatial control but also as a mechanism for regulating social identity (Massey, 1994: 179). Also, as Valentine (1989) noted, public spaces are frequently invaded by whistles, comments or actual physical assault from unknown men. Women who have experienced violence in public spaces often become more fearful, expanding their fear from specific attackers to men in general, transforming public spaces into masculine fields that further constrain their freedom and limit their mobility (Koskela, 1999).

Although men may also experience fear in public spaces, women experience such behaviour more frequently and with heightened fear, which has a lasting negative impact on their emotional well-being and leads to avoidance behaviours, limiting their use of public spaces (Bastomski & Smith, 2017). Furthermore, gender roles, shaped by socialization and media, encourage women to internalize the "woman as victim" narrative, limiting their sense of self-efficacy (Reid & Konrad, 2004). This fear, often exceeding the actual risk, shapes women's behaviour and restricts their freedom. Solo travel places women outside their familiar environments, making it a critical area for exploring the geography of women's fear (Wilson & Little, 2008).

Concerns about mentioned limitations influence the experience and satisfaction of solo travel (Yang, 2020). However, despite challenges and constraints, women use various strategies to achieve their solo travel goals through thorough planning of their trips, avoiding unsafe destinations and places,

attempting to fit into the local context and building connections with people abroad (Cockburn-Wootten et al., 2006; Wilson & Little, 2008; Wilson et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2018a; Kaba, 2021; Hassan & Damir, 2022). The many ways solo female travellers deal with risk demonstrates how, through gendered and embodied spatial practices, they construct a 'safe' space within a physical tourism space. While striving to construct a safe space, many women also accept risk as part of the solo travel experience (Yang, 2018a).

Methodology

The research employed both quantitative (questionnaire survey) and qualitative (semi-structured interview) methods. However, the primary focus of this study is placed on the qualitative data, which capture rich and nuanced insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and spatial practices. The questionnaire survey data serve a supplementary and secondary role, providing supportive information to the in-depth narratives.

The questionnaire survey was developed to investigate the destination preferences, safety perceptions and behaviour of women travelling solo. The questionnaire survey was conducted online using Google Forms between November 28th and December 6th, 2023. A purposive sampling approach was used, targeting women over 18 years old from Croatia and other European countries who had previously travelled solo. A total of 818 female travellers participated in the survey. The sample is predominantly composed of women from Croatia (69%), followed by Serbia (4%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (3.9%), Germany (3.6%), the UK (2.2%), Belgium (1.8%), Slovenia (1.5%), Austria (1.3%), and Spain (1.2%). Fewer than 1% respondents came from additional countries, including The Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Italy, Portugal, Estonia, Ireland, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, Czech Republic, France, Romania, Montenegro, Finland, Denmark, Greece, Lithuania, Hungary, North Macedonia, and Slovakia. The overrepresentation of respondents from Croatia can be explained

by the survey dissemination strategy, which relied partly on Croatian-language online travel communities. The survey in Croatian was posted in several well-known Croatian travel Facebook groups: 'Travel Consultant – Travel Advisor', 'Travelholic Guide to Budget' and 'Pleasant Travel', resulting in the highest number of responses from Croatia and the region. The survey in English was posted in Facebook groups: 'Females Flying Solo', 'Travel Lovers', 'Girl about the Globe group', 'Solo traveler', 'Single Women and Solo Travel'. The survey respondents were primarily between 26 and 35 years old (29%), followed by the age groups 36-45 (24%), 18-25 (20%), and 46-55 (19.5%). The smallest representation came from respondents aged 56-65 (7%) and over 65 (1.6%). In the questionnaire survey, Likert scale questions (five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) were used. The quantitative data was mostly analysed using descriptive statistics, with the results presented as response distributions (frequencies), means (M) and standard deviations (SD). Kruskal-Wallis H tests were used to investigate possible differences in safety-related behaviour when travelling solo across the age groups. For significant Kruskal-Wallis results, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were performed using Mann-Whitney U tests with Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels to control for Type I error inflation. Analyses were performed using SPSS 27. Responses to open-ended questions were coded into thematic categories, allowing for a structured analysis of qualitative insights. To visualize key findings, mapping of selected results (desired and undesired destinations) was conducted using ArcMap 10.7.1.

This study employed a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews to obtain a deeper insight into the experiences and practices of solo female travellers. The interviewees (all from Croatia) were selected based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the research theme using a snowball sampling. A total of 11 interviews were conducted at the end of 2023, with six conducted in person,

four via Zoom, and one via phone call. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent. The interviewees varied in age, with five interviewees in their 20s, three in their 30s, and one each in their 40s, 50s, and 60s (Tab. 1). The interviewees had varied solo travel experiences, ranging from one trip to more than five trips, with travel durations spanning from several days to several months. Most interviewees had primarily travelled within Western Europe; however, three interviewees had also travelled solo outside Europe. To ensure confidentiality, interviewees' personal names are not mentioned in the study. Instead, each participant was assigned an anonymous label (Interviewee from 1 to 11). Data from the interviews were transcribed based on audio recordings with prior consent from the interviewees. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was done in several stages, from inductive coding to identifying main ideas and progressing to the development of themes that were common across all the interviews. The results of the interviews are

presented through three main themes: Destination selection criteria and destination un(desirability), Negotiating freedom and constraint in solo female travel, Perception of un(safe) space and gender differences.

Questionnaire survey results

The initial section of the questionnaire survey examined the importance of criteria in destination selection for solo travel. Respondents were asked to rate a series of predefined criteria using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', with a higher value indicating stronger agreement regarding the importance of each criterion. To facilitate a more concise interpretation of the data, responses were grouped into broader categories: 'agree' and 'strongly agree' were combined, as were 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. The findings (Tab. 2) reveal that safety is the most significant factor (among the predefined ones) influencing destination choice among solo travellers, with 92.4% of respondents indicating agreement

Table 1. Interviewees general information

Interviewees	Age	Number of solo trips	Length of solo trips	Destinations
Interviewee 1	24	10+	2-3 days to a month	Turkey, Tanzania, Armenia, Serbia, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Poland, Denmark, Germany...
Interviewee 2	21	2	Several days to several months	Italy, China
Interviewee 3	22	1	2 weeks	Czech Republic, Belgium, Germany, Slovenia
Interviewee 4	56	6	From one week to a month	Colombia, USA, Canada, Turkey, UK, Spain, Germany, Cyprus, Malta, Iran...
Interviewee 5	23	2	4-6 days	Italy, Montenegro
Interviewee 6	22	2	2-7 days	Germany, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Slovakia
Interviewee 7	38	5	3 days	Italy, Germany, Croatia
Interviewee 8	60	10+	3-14 days	Scandinavia, France, UK, Germany, Austria
Interviewee 9	34	4	Several days	Netherlands, Germany, Bulgaria
Interviewee 10	33	8-10	7 days	Sweden, UK, Italy, Germany, Austria
Interviewee 11	44	4-5	Several days	Estonia, Czech Republic, Croatia

Table 2. Distribution of responses for the importance of destination selection criteria with means and standard deviations (%) (N = 818)

Scale	Safety [%]	Distance from home [%]	Cost of travel [%]	Contact person at the destination [%]
1 – Strongly Disagree	0.4	31.3	5.0	24.3
2 – Disagree	1.2	16.7	6.0	18.9
3 – Neither Disagree or Agree	6.0	28.6	24.7	28.1
4 – Agree	18.8	16.6	34.6	17.5
5 – Strongly Agree	73.6	7.0	29.7	11.1
Mean	4.5	2.5	3.7	2.7
Standard Deviation	0.7	1.3	1.1	1.3

or strong agreement with its importance. Cost of travel also emerged as one of the more important criteria, endorsed by 64.4% of respondents. In contrast, having a contact person at the destination and distance to the destination were not widely considered important.

The next section of the questionnaire focused on specific destinations that respondents would be most and least likely visit while travelling solo. When asked to select from a list of continents, the majority of respondents identified Europe (70.6%) as the continent they would be most likely to travel to solo, followed, albeit to a much lesser extent, by Asia (12.8%). Smaller proportions of respondents selected Africa (5%) and North America (4.1%) as preferred solo travel destinations. An open-ended follow-up question invited participants to name specific destinations they would most likely travel to alone, as well as the reasons for their choice. In total, 85 distinct destinations were mentioned, which were subsequently categorised by country and visualised in Figure 1. The most frequently mentioned countries were Italy (9.6%), Spain (9.4%), Portugal (8.3%) and the United Kingdom (6.5%). Among Asian countries, only Japan (3.7%) and Thailand (3.2%) were cited by more than 20 respondents. Within Africa, destinations such as Egypt, Tanzania (Zanzibar) and Morocco were mentioned by a small number of participants (up to six responses each). The primary reason

cited for choosing these destinations for solo travel was perceived safety, which was mentioned by 29.2% of respondents. Other commonly mentioned reasons included the 'cultural appeal of the destination' (9%), 'natural landscapes and environment of the destination' (8.5%) and 'geographic proximity' (7.6%).

In contrast, respondents were also asked to identify destinations they would be least likely or would never visit alone. When grouped by continent, the majority of respondents expressed reluctance to travel solo to Africa (35.6%), followed by the Arctic/Antarctic regions (27%), South America (20.5%) and Asia (10%). In response to an open-ended question regarding the specific destinations they would avoid, respondents often referred broadly to entire continents or regions rather than individual countries. The most frequently mentioned regions were Africa (15.3%), the Middle East (13.3%) and South America (9.2%). Among individual countries that respondents particularly emphasised as destinations they would avoid when travelling solo, those most commonly cited as undesirable for solo travel included: India (14.5%), Afghanistan (9.8%), the United States (6.3%), Brazil (6.3%), Iraq (5%), Mexico (3.7%), North Korea (3.7%), Israel/Palestine (3.4%) and China (3.4%). The predominant reason given for avoiding these destinations was concerns related to "insecurity and crime" cited by 39.3% respondents. Other frequently mentioned concerns included the presence

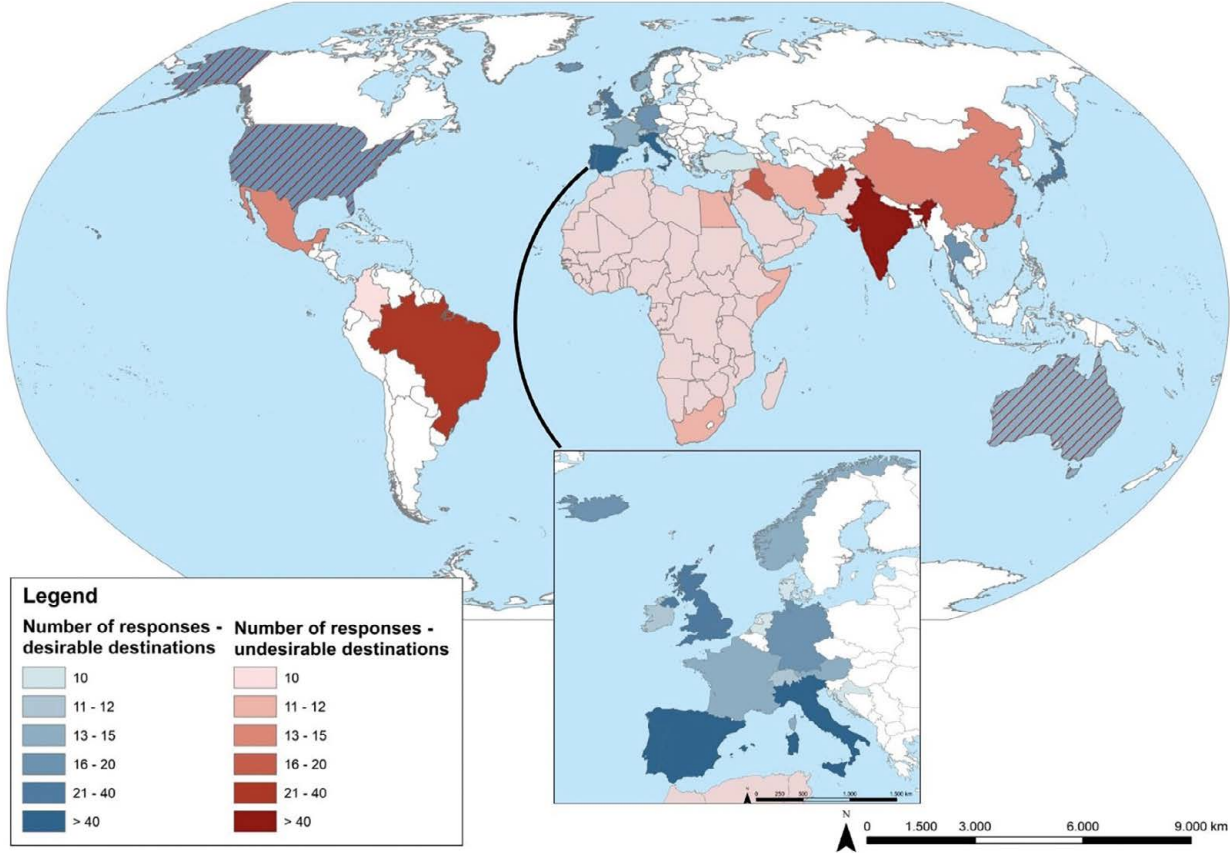


Figure 1. Desirable and undesirable countries by solo female travellers (N = 808)

*Australia and USA are shown in red and blue hatching as were marked both as desirable (Australia, N 13; USA, N 19) and undesirable (Australia, N 10; USA, N 10) countries

of ‘conflict or war zone’ (9.6%) and the perceived ‘status of women in society’ (8.9%).

The subsequent section of the questionnaire focused on safety-related behaviours adopted by women when travelling solo (Tab. 3. and Tab. 4). Respondents were presented with a series of statements and asked to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. Again, to facilitate a more concise interpretation of the data, responses were grouped into broader categories: ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ were combined, as were ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’. The results reveal that a significant proportion of female travellers engage

in precautionary behaviours to mitigate potential risks. Specifically, 61% reported that they avoid moving around at night, while 92.3% stated that they avoid unsafe neighbourhoods. Additionally, 70% avoid visiting large parks after dark and 50% indicated that they avoid public transport hubs (train, bus or metro stations) at night. Nearly half (48.2%) reported avoiding cafés in the evening. As a further risk-reduction strategy, 66.2% of respondents choose their routes based on perceived safety. Despite these precautions, the majority of respondents (68%) reported that they do not carry any means of self-defence (e.g. pepper spray) when travelling solo. Instead, many women

Table 3. Safety-related behaviours on solo travel: distribution of responses with means and standard deviations (%) (N = 818)

Scale	Avoid moving at night [%]	Avoid unsafe neighbourhoods [%]	Avoid cafés at night [%]	Choose route based on safety [%]	Carry self-defence [%]	Avoid public transport at night [%]	Avoid parks at night [%]
1 – Strongly Disagree	4.7	0.70	13.0	2.4	45.0	10.0	6.0
2 – Disagree	9.2	1.40	17.0	8.6	22.9	16.0	7.0
3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree	25.4	5.70	22.2	23	15.6	24.6	17.4
4 – Agree	29.4	18.70	22	33.6	9.9	22.6	26.8
5 – Strongly Agree	31.3	73.60	26.2	32.4	6.6	26.9	42.8
Mean	3.7	4.60	3.3	3.8	2.1	3.4	3.9
Standard Deviation	1.1	0.73	1.4	1.1	1.3	1.3	1.2

Table 4. Safety-related behaviours on solo travel – ‘I would feel safe...’: distribution of responses with means and standard deviations (%) (N = 818)

Scale	‘I would feel safe...’		
	Surrounded by people [%]	At famous tourist attractions [%]	At wide, well-lit streets [%]
1 – Strongly Disagree	1.50	5.2	2.0
2 – Disagree	3.90	13.3	7.4
3 – Neither Disagree or Agree	33.80	26.5	24.8
4 – Agree	36.50	31.3	31.2
5 – Strongly Agree	24.30	23.7	34.6
Mean	3.80	3.5	3.9
Standard Deviation	0.98	1.1	1.0

rely on environmental factors to enhance their sense of security, with 69% preferring to walk along wide, well-lit streets, 55% staying close to well-known tourist attraction, and 61% reporting that they feel safe when surrounded by other people.

In addition, a series of Kruskal-Wallis H tests were conducted to investigate whether safety-related behaviour when travelling alone differs by age group. The results showed no statistically significant differences for most behaviours. However, a significant difference was found for the behaviour "I carry self-defence items with me when I travel alone", $\chi^2 = 25.40$ $df = 5$, $p < .001$. Post-hoc pairwise Mann-Whitney U tests with Bonferroni correction (adjusted $\alpha = .0033$) were conducted to identify specific age group differences in the tendency to carry self-defence items when travelling solo. The results showed that participants aged 18-25 reported significantly higher self-defence behaviour than participants aged 26-35 ($U = 14,361.00$, $Z = -4.51$, $p < .001$), 36-45 ($U = 12,479.50$, $Z = -3.57$, $p < .001$) and 46-55 ($U = 9,847.00$, $Z = -3.89$, $p < .001$). No statistically significant differences were found between any of the older age groups (all $p > .0033$). These results suggest that younger adults are more likely to carry self-defence items when travelling solo compared to older peers. This could be due to increased safety awareness or anxiety among younger solo travellers or a different perception of risk and vulnerability. The lack of significant differences in the older age groups (26 and older) suggests a general decline in this behaviour with increasing age.

Respondents were also presented with an open-ended question inviting them to identify specific places within destination that they perceive as dangerous when travelling solo. A total of 70 distinct answers were collected from 809 participants and subsequently categorised during the analysis. The findings indicate that the most frequently cited places of concern were dark and poorly lit streets (33.2%), public transport hubs (such as railway stations, underground stations and bus

terminals) (26.7%), deserted or isolated areas (22.1%) and parks (16.5%).

In addition, respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced an unpleasant situation while travelling solo. The majority (86.9% of 818 respondents) reported that they had not experienced such incidents, while 13.1% indicated that they had. Among those who reported negative experiences, the most mentioned incidents included theft, sexual harassment, physical assault, and stalking.

The final section of the questionnaire survey focused on the benefits of solo travel. The three most frequently identified advantages were: stepping out of the one's comfort zone (79.1%), developing a sense of independence (74.3%), and cultivating openness and tolerance towards other cultures (37.6%).

A deeper insight into the solo travellers' experiences and practices

The qualitative findings presented in the next sections contextualise the patterns identified in the questionnaire survey, offering deeper insight into how perceptions of safety and risk are translated into lived experience and spatial decision-making during solo travel.

Destination selection criteria and destination un(desirability) of solo female travellers

When discussing motivations for solo travel, interviewees frequently highlighted a desire for freedom, self-development, and stepping outside their comfort zones. Beyond personal growth, solo travel was preferred for its organizational ease, avoiding the scheduling and interest conflicts typical of group travel.

The findings of the interview reinforce the critical role of pre-departure preparation in solo female travel. The most used resources during the planning phase included the Internet (e.g. Google), social media platforms, blogs, and peer recommendations (from other solo female travellers). This aligns with Chandrakala et al. (2024), who define social

media as an “informal safety infrastructure”. For interviewees, being well-informed translated into actionable safety strategies, such as selecting female-only spaces and identifying safe urban zones. Ultimately, these platforms provide both the logistical preparation and psychological support necessary for navigating unfamiliar environments with confidence.

The ability to move through space remains highly gendered and embodied, with women often experiencing restricted access to certain areas or entire regions due to concerns about safety and cultural constraints (Yang & Schänzel, 2023). For example, one of the interviewees expressed her desire to visit South America, but also her hesitation: *‘I would really love to go to South America alone, it is a big desire of mine, but I don’t dare because of the safety. This insecurity limits my freedom of choice in travel’* (Interviewee 1). Safety is, once again, identified as the most important criterion for interviewees when selecting a travel destination, followed by personal passion or interest for a particular destination, budget considerations (especially among younger participants) and work-related opportunities. Other relevant criteria included proximity, cultural similarity, popularity of the destination, and presence of robust tourist infrastructure. Interviewees consistently described constructing mental maps of destinations, categorising countries, cities, and neighbourhoods into ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe’ zones prior to and during travel, which aligns with previous research (Valentine, 1989; Wilson & Little, 2008; Kaba, 2021; Kumar et al., 2024). These mental mappings closely mirror the spatial hierarchies identified in the survey data, where Europe, particularly Western Europe, is positioned as familiar and secure, while other regions are perceived as risky or restrictive for women travelling alone.

Regions that most interviewees would avoid visiting alone included Africa, South America, parts of Asia (particularly India), and the Middle East, mainly because of perceived safety risks and concerns about the status and treatment of women in these

regions. As one interviewee explained: *‘I wouldn’t visit Central Africa and maybe some of those Asian countries, generally less developed ones. They are known for having higher crime rates, and in some of these countries women still face greater marginalisation in society compared to Europe’* (Interviewee 6). Similarly, another participant noted: *‘There are many news stories, such as the one about the kidnapping of a tourist...’* (Interviewee 5). These findings align with previous research suggesting that such regions are often perceived as most challenging for solo female travel (Wilson & Little, 2005; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang, 2018a). However, the research also suggests that perceptions of safety can evolve through direct experience. For instance, Interviewee 4 reported initial concern about travelling to Iran, but later described the trip as unexpectedly positive due to the hospitality and respect shown by the local population, which significantly altered her view of the destination. This supports Kaba’s (2021) argument that travellers may re-evaluate previously perceived “dangerous” destinations after a favourable experience. Other concerns raised by interviewees included the fear of contracting diseases, inadequate tourism infrastructure, and unwelcoming local populations.

Negotiating freedom and constraint in solo female travel

The benefits most highlighted by the interviewees include freedom and flexibility, openness to different cultures and people, peace, improved navigation skills, and language learning. They particularly emphasized a greater focus on the destination, easier networking and better connecting with other people, which is an important aspect of the experience (Cockburn-Wootten et al., 2006; Bianchi, 2016; Ejupi & Medarić, 2022). Furthermore, the participants highlighted the benefit of having more time to pursue individual interests, such as diary writing (Interviewee 9) or attending dance events (Interviewee 1). For mothers, the advantage of peace and time

for themselves is particularly noticeable: *'The advantage is that you can set aside some time for yourself, that you can devote yourself to activities that you normally don't have in your usual time environment'* (Interviewee 8). For younger respondents, learning life lessons and preparing for further life are highlighted. *'It prepares you for life, teaches you how to function in different circumstances, how to deal with stress, gives you some adaptation to time and space'* (Interviewee 5).

The benefits of solo travel persist post-trip, as participants felt more independent and comfortable engaging in solo activities. They also highlighted self-reflection and the ability to push personal boundaries as lasting positive outcomes of their experience. As one of the interviewees said: *'Solo travels are, in my opinion, key to self-discovery. People are afraid of their own loneliness, and loneliness actually connects with people. The decision to go on a solo trip is the hardest, but coming home happy and fulfilled is the most beautiful experience that no one else can give you, except yourself. Hardly anyone will return from a solo trip unchanged'* (Interviewee 1). Other studies have also shown that many female travellers associate solo travel with a sense of personal development and education and that such travel opens space for self-reflection (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006). As all our interviewees emphasised that overcoming potential challenges of travel and embracing the unknown fosters a deep sense of confidence and empowerment. This positive feeling very often extends beyond the current trip and into their everyday lives (as also shown in Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Lagier et al., 2023).

As for the challenges that travellers face when planning their trips, the most common mentioned one is resistance from family members who are concerned about the safety of the travellers (*'Why can't you be like everyone else and travel with friends?'* (Interviewee 5), which has led some of the interviewees to hide their intention of solo travel. It has been observed that family and friends express anxiety and surprise about women's desire

for solo travel, reflecting and reinforcing the belief that it is not safe for women, and support is often lacking (Wilson & Little, 2008; Mani & Jose, 2020; Chen et al., 2023; Hidayati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, interviewees who are mothers mentioned feel guilty when leaving their children when going on solo trips. *'Every time I feel guilty, and I often look, for example, at the children's playground and think to myself, oh, it would be really nice to be here with my kids'* (Interviewee 7). Higher budgets also pose a challenge for solo travellers, leading many (especially younger travellers) to choose hostels or *Couchsurfing*. For instance, one interviewee frequently used *Couchsurfing*, but only after a rigorous host selection process to ensure safety. *'Most of the time I stayed with men, and I can't say I was completely comfortable staying with men, but sometimes I couldn't find a woman to host me. When I stayed with men, I always checked the reviews first, making sure that male hosts had as many reviews from women as possible. That way I made sure everything would be okay'* (Interviewee 1). This strategy is also reflected in the research of Rostami et al. (2024), who note that safety remains the primary concern for solo female travellers when selecting accommodation, with a particular focus on service quality and staff friendliness.

Participants also described interpersonal tactics, such as mentioning a partner, regularly updating family members, or improvising protective narratives in uncomfortable situations. One of the interviewees recounted how she once used local beliefs to ensure her own safety. *'In Tanzania, in one situation, I said I was a witch and threatened that if they didn't take me to the right place, something bad would happen to them. They value cows very much, so I told them that if they did something to me, they wouldn't see their cow anymore'* (Interviewee 1). The same

¹ In many Tanzanian communities, cattle symbolize wealth, status, and spiritual security, so threats to them may be perceived as especially serious.

interviewer noted that, in other situations, claiming diplomatic connections could also function as a protective strategy. Women learned these strategies from the experiences of other solo travellers and by consulting specialised travel literature. Douglas and Barrett (2020) showed that many articles aimed at women explored concern for safety or the presence of restrictive gender norms in certain destinations. Almost all articles for women, as opposed to only half of those for men, mentioned at least one negative experience that can be expected when travelling solo. Therefore, most solo female travellers are well informed about the risks because safety advice is found in most guides and on social media platforms intended for them (Rodriguez Williamson, 2007; Wilson et al., 2009; Seagrave, 2016; Reid, 2017; Eubanks, 2019; Chandrakala et al., 2024), reflecting the importance of this topic.

Perception of space and gender differences

Gender risk, which includes personal safety attacks, violence, and sexual harassment, as well as catcalling, uncomfortable stares, and stalking during travel, represents the dominant risk for solo female travellers (Yang et al., 2018b; Yang et al., 2018b; Karagöz et al., 2021). It also implies social disapproval and stigma in spaces that privilege male movement, where women traveling alone may face intrusive questioning about their marital status or reasons for traveling without a partner (Karagöz et al., 2021; Rostami et al., 2024). Stephens (2020), for example, mentions that on her trip to Morocco, despite trying to 'follow the rules' by dressing conservatively and ignoring unwanted attention, she was constantly confronted with inappropriate behaviour from men. Yang et al. (2018b) conclude that solo female travellers are at risk of sexual harassment in various destinations around and outside of Asia and in various places and settings, including accommodation and public transport. Rostami et al. (2024) further document that this

often extends to discriminatory treatment in service environments, such as restaurants, where staff may show hesitancy or provide poor seating to solo female customers, leading to feelings of "unwantedness." However, some female travellers normalize street harassment and view solo travel's benefits as outweighing its risks (Thomas & Mura, 2019).

In this regard, most interviewees recognize stark gender disparities and believe that women and men do not have equal opportunities in solo travel. One participant (Interviewee 6) compared her experiences with those of a male friend, noting that "men move through space more easily, make friends more easily, and therefore also save more money." She added: *'Women face certain limitations and are much less likely to form friendships compared to men. Because whenever he (a male friend) goes somewhere, he just starts talking to someone and makes friends, and, I don't know, he gets offered accommodation or a meal or a drink, or an evening out. Whereas, in my situation, it would be unlikely to happen. If some guy offers me accommodation and drinks and stuff, they would probably offer it for some not good intentions...He often relies on being offered accommodation. And he travels by hitchhiking and saves money that way. As a woman, I would never dare to hitchhike alone'* (Interviewee 6). Men are generally less concerned about safety, making them more open to meeting new people and socializing (Yang, 2020). Consequently, women's experiences can be limited because they are women (Wilson & Little, 2008). The perception that some places are "off limits" restricts many female travellers from freely exploring spaces and communicating with locals.

Other respondents emphasized that they believe that being a woman has brought them more advantages and positive outcomes. *'You have more luck. You get some things for free, they let you in somewhere (for free)'* (Interviewee 2). *'In Turkey, a lot of men approached me because they thought I was easy because I'm from Europe. But I know*

how to handle that and make the most of it. I used it to my advantage' (Interviewee 1).

In this study, only three interviewees reported negative experiences, such as property theft, sexual harassment, and stalking. This aligns with the broader findings of both the survey and previous research (Chandrakala et al., 2024), which indicate that solo female travel experiences are predominantly positive or neutral, regardless of travel motivations. However, this varies by destination and the local population.

The research also identified safe and dangerous zones as perceived by women. As places where they feel most secure and to which they stick to on their routes, interviewees highlighted city centres, vibrant public spaces and popular tourist sites, essentially places where they are surrounded by people. These areas represent an intangible safety sphere for women, a zone 'where they are meant to be' (Wilson & Little, 2008). On the contrary, the greatest fear among interviewees arises in isolated streets, parks and public transportation hubs, especially at night. These places were also identified as risky in the questionnaire and previous research on the geography of women's fear, i.e. the geography of woman's travel fear (Valentine, 1989; Pain, 1991; Bialeschki & Chapel, 1999; Koskela & Pain, 2000; Wilson & Little, 2008; England & Simon, 2010; Yang et al., 2018a; Johansson & Haandrikman, 2023). Participants also reported avoiding places with suspicious groups or loud male voices, such as bars full of intoxicated men. One participant stated, *'I try not to put myself in a dangerous situation'* (Interviewee 8). As Wilson and Little (2008) note, many women feel obligated to avoid 'dangerous' places and spaces where they might be more prone to some kind of attack, thus taking responsibility for the inappropriate behaviour of others (mostly men).

Despite these risks, all interviewees employ certain strategies to mitigate challenges, with the primary approach being the restriction of movement and the adaptation of behaviour in space. Primarily, this involves

avoiding potentially dangerous parts of the city and limiting their movement at night. In other studies, the majority of women also stated that they avoid moving around and exploring destinations at night as well (Koskela, 1997; Wilson & Little, 2008; Wilson et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2018a; Kaba, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022; Ghadban et al., 2023). However, moving mostly during the day can be quite limiting for travellers, as one of the interviewees stated, *'I only have limited sight-seeing time, I like to sleep longer, but when night falls, I don't feel comfortable exploring alone anymore'* (Interviewee 6). Valentine (1989) termed such woman's spatially and temporally inhibited movement practices as the 'geography of women's fear', claiming that women are confronted with images of fear and learn about the gendered divisions of space at a young age (Valentine, 1992). Consequently, women learn to avoid certain places, to fear strangers and the night, and to stay within the safety sphere of home (Wilson & Little, 2008). These extensive efforts to protect themselves, especially on public transport, can be described as "safety work" (Ison et al., 2024). This work involves constant strategizing and journey planning, which takes considerable time and effort, often leaving women feeling stressed as they try to "make themselves as small as possible" to avoid harassment and violence (Ison et al., 2024). Coping strategies that women use involves accommodating techniques to distract attention away from the meanings their female bodies create (Wilson & Little, 2008). This includes attempting to blend in with the local population in appearance and dress, as the interviewees mentioned, i.e., trying to look as little like tourists as possible (being careful not to take out their phone and map on the street, not speaking in their native language, appear more confident, etc.). Interviewees further emphasized that they constantly try to be aware of their surroundings, for example, not sleeping while travelling on public transport and not listening to music when walking so as not to distract them from their surroundings.

Discussion: Negotiating safety and empowerment in solo female travel

This study provides empirical evidence on how solo female travellers from a (mostly) Croatian context perceive, negotiate, and manage safety across different destinations and spatial settings. Safety emerges as a central organising principle shaping solo female travel, influencing destination desirability, everyday mobility, and embodied spatial practices. By combining large-scale survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews, this study demonstrates that women's travel decisions are deeply embedded in gendered perceptions of space and risk rather than being driven solely by leisure preferences or economic considerations.

The findings reveal a clear spatial hierarchy in destination desirability, with Europe (particularly Western Europe) overwhelmingly perceived as the most secure and attractive region for solo travel. Countries such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, and the UK ranked highest, suggesting that familiarity, advanced infrastructure, and ease of communication significantly enhance women's confidence and sense of control. Conversely, regions in Africa, South America, parts of Asia, and the Middle East were frequently perceived as unsafe or culturally challenging. These perceptions are shaped not only by material concerns, such as crime rates or political instability, but also by restrictive gender norms and broader socio-cultural narratives that can make women feel exposed or unwelcome in unfamiliar environments.

Travel perceptions are not formed solely through direct experience but are often mediated by socially constructed representations of place, or imaginative geographies. This concept captures the ways in which regions are narratively framed as dangerous or unsuitable through media portrayals, popular discourse, and inherited cultural assumptions. Such narratives frequently lead to a reductionism of diverse spaces into simplified categories of 'safe' and 'unsafe', as evidenced

by respondents who referred to entire continents or broad regions rather than specific countries. In this study, the participants cited "insecurity and crime" as their primary reason for avoiding certain destinations, often reflecting selective negative media coverage rather than actual safety statistics. To navigate these risks, travellers engage in extensive pre-departure research via digital platforms and social media. This "informal safety infrastructure" (Chandrakala et al., 2024) allows them to implement practical strategies, ranging from first-hand accommodation and safety recommendations to mapping secure parts of a city. However, the findings suggest that direct personal experience can effectively challenge these media-driven stereotypes; for instance, some interviewees reported feeling unexpectedly safe and welcomed in destinations initially regarded as high-risk, such as Iran.

While safety concerns influence travel choices, they do not necessarily act as deterrents. Instead, the study illustrates that navigating and overcoming perceived risks can contribute to a profound sense of empowerment, independence, and self-confidence. These findings support previous research suggesting that risk is not inherently negative but can act as a catalyst for personal growth (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Bianchi, 2016). In this context, fear is not passively endured but actively negotiated through a range of adaptive and embodied strategies.

The participants in this study demonstrated a high degree of self-regulation, frequently opting to avoid perceived unsafe neighbourhoods, large parks at night, and movement after dark. These practices, such as sticking to well-lit, populated areas and familiar tourist sites, reflect how solo travel does not suspend gendered fear, but rather relocates it into new spatial contexts. This constant situational awareness aligns with Koskela's (1999) concept of women as "radars," constantly scanning their environments to detect and avoid danger. Similarly, Yang and Schänzel (2023) argue that travel experiences are co-constructed through the interaction between

the body and its surroundings. Moreover, these embodied experiences are shaped by how a woman's presence is perceived within spaces that are often coded as masculine (Massey, 2015). To navigate these gendered environments, participants reported modifying their behaviour, dress, and movement to blend into local contexts and reduce visibility. The results of the statistical analyses (Kruskal-Wallis H tests) indicate that most safety-related behaviours when travelling solo do not vary significantly across age groups. These results suggest a relatively uniform approach to safety precautions among solo travellers, regardless of age. The only significant difference concerned carrying self-defence items, which was more common among participants aged 18-25. This pattern may reflect generational differences in perceived vulnerability, risk awareness, or attitudes towards personal protection. Younger women may be more concerned about sexualised threats, and more exposed to contemporary safety discourses circulated through social media, online travel communities, and peer experiences (Chandrakala et al., 2024; Maiurro & Brandão, 2025), which could heighten awareness of potential threats and encourage the use of self-defence items. This interpretation resonates with the findings of Alonso-Vazquez et al. (2024) who found that Generation Z solo female travellers place greater importance on personal safety and crime rate of destinations compared to travellers from other generations.

Findings further reveal that solo female travellers construct detailed mental maps, labelling countries and neighbourhoods as safe or risky even before arrival. Such mappings, which mirror the behavioural adjustments and "spatial mapping" employed in their everyday lives, directly shape their travel routes, accommodation choices, and daily movement. Ultimately, these practices show that women are not passive recipients of risk; instead, they are active agents who co-create their safety and manage these geographies of risk to navigate unfamiliar environments more confidently and on their own terms.

Beyond spatial constraints, social pressures (particularly from family members) also play a significant role in shaping women's solo travel experiences. Resistance from parents and relatives often reflects protective norms and gendered expectations regarding women's mobility. In parts of Central and Southeast Europe, where family ties remain strong and women's autonomy is shaped by family expectations, solo travel may be perceived as risky or socially inappropriate. These concerns reinforce broader societal narratives that frame women as vulnerable and in need of protection, further complicating women's efforts to assert autonomy through travel.

Despite these constraints, solo travel is still framed as transformative and empowering, contributing to self-confidence and a changed relationship to space. It functions not only as leisure, but also as a challenge to restrictive gender norms by allowing women to assert autonomy, resilience, and the right to personal time and space.

Conclusion

This study examined how solo female travellers perceive and navigate safety, space, and empowerment within contemporary tourism. By integrating quantitative survey findings with qualitative interview data, the research demonstrates that safety is not a secondary concern, but a decisive factor shaping destination choice, everyday mobility, and embodied travel practices.

The findings reveal that solo female travel is characterised by ongoing adjustment rather than unrestricted freedom. Gendered perceptions of risk persist across destinations and are reproduced through preventive tactics and the construction of mental maps that distinguish between safe and unsafe places. From a predominantly Croatian perspective, these maps are often influenced by cultural stereotypes and "imaginative geographies" that code Western Europe as safe, while frequently perceiving Africa, the Middle East, and parts of South America as risky. Rather

than preventing travel, however, these perceptions prompt women to adopt adaptive strategies (such as dressing to blend in, spatial and temporal restrictions) which enable them to navigate unfamiliar environments while maintaining a sense of autonomy.

This research challenges simplified narratives of empowerment by showing that empowerment emerges not from the absence of fear, but from women's capacity to manage vulnerability and assert their right to occupy public space. Solo travel therefore functions both as leisure and as resistance to gendered limitations on movement.

The findings also point to a broader need for structural change. To make tourism more inclusive, there is a clear necessity for gender-sensitive urban planning, such as improved street lighting and surveillance in high-risk areas. Furthermore, tourism industry should provide targeted services, such as removing single supplements, providing women-only accommodation options, and developing digital platforms tailored to solo female travellers,

as these are essential steps toward empowering this growing market segment.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that solo female travel is less about overcoming fear than about learning to travel with it. Through repeated exposure to unfamiliar environments, women reassess their assumptions about danger, develop confidence in their own judgement, and redefine their relationship to space and mobility. As one interviewee reflected, '*Travelling solo has changed my way of thinking – the world is not as scary as I thought before*' (Interviewee 8). This statement captures the transformative potential of solo travel: it enables women to move beyond inherited fears and socially imposed limitations, redefining not only where they travel, but also how they understand the world and their place within it.

Editors' note:

Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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