



Constraints of solo female backpackers in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Backpacking is becoming a popular way to travel, and solo female backpackers are a particularly interesting group in this travel segment. This article focuses on solo female backpackers' experiences of precedent and in situ sociocultural, practical, personal and spatial constraints (Wilson and Little 2005) in Southeast Asia. The study is based on qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews with 37 solo female backpackers who have visited the region. Results show how solo female backpackers develop strategies to address the various constraints they encounter. These results are in line with other similar studies, and have useful implications for destination managers.

Keywords: solo backpackers, travel constraints, risk perception, women, Southeast Asia, travel intentions, personal constraints, practical constraints, spatial constraints, qualitative methodology

Introduction

Throughout the 21st century, perspectives of tourism have changed. Nowadays people are not only travelling to visit places, they also want to discover new cultures and enjoy new experiences. New travel trends are constantly evolving, and one such example is the concept of "backpacking" (Spreitzhofer 2008). This travel trend first developed in the late 1960s, but is gaining popularity and interest among backpackers, as well as tourism planners and travel experts. In the past, backpacking was considered a kind of adventure travel for so-called hippies. Nowadays, however, it is widely accepted and even deemed trendy for young people. Backpacking is linked to freedom, fulfillment and personal development, and seen as an authentic way to immerse oneself in a new culture compared to mass tourism (O'Reilly 2006). Backpackers, or budget travelers, are a tiny, but meaningful section of the tourism market, and over the past three decades, have been considered a market niche (Larsen, Øgaard, and Brun 2011). The global growth of backpacking is difficult to calculate due to lack of data; however, it is known that between 1996 and 2005 the number of international backpackers in Australia doubled (Ooi and Laing 2010). Additionally, solo traveling is becoming more and more popular as solo travelers' bookings increased globally by 7% from 2018 to 2019 (Solo Traveler World 2020). There is also evidence that the number of female travelers is increasing within this tourism segment (Wilson and Little 2005) which is one of the reasons why the tourism industry keeps growing despite difficulties such as terrorism, safety, security or financial slowdown (Khan, Chelliah, and Ahmed 2017).

Perceived risk is seen as a key determinant in the consumer's decision of whether to visit a particular destination or not (Adam 2015; Fuchs and Reichel 2011) as it is specific to a certain location (Khan, Chelliah, and Ahmed 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to determine the barriers solo women travelers encounter so that destinations can improve their travel experience by increasing safety measures and making themselves more attractive to women. Although women

have been solo travelers for centuries, little research has been carried out on their experiences or the travel barriers they face (Wilson and Little 2005; Khan, Chelliah, and Ahmed 2017). The lack of information on this segment of travelers might underestimate the importance of this groups of travelers on the tourism policies implemented by Destination Management Organizations (DMO) and tourism professionals (Dayour, Adongo, and Taale 2016; Ooi and Laing 2010).

Southeast Asia is one of the main backpacking regions in the world. However, safety is an issue, and it is increasingly common to hear about backpacker's deaths, which creates a negative image of the region, and prompts some experts to advise being cautious when travelling to these countries (Morris 2016).

The main purpose of this study is to understand solo female backpackers' travel experiences by focusing on precedent (pre-travel) and in situ (during travel) sociocultural, practical, personal and spatial constraints (Wilson and Little 2005), as well as strategies solo women backpackers adopt to avoid seeming vulnerable.

Qualitative methodology was used to gather information from 37 solo female backpackers in Southeast Asia. Results of the study will prove valuable information for Destination Management Organizations in order to determine their tourism policies, particularly those linked to the female solo traveler niche.

This paper is structured as follows. First, the literature review gives an understanding of the main topics of the paper, and defines the terms “backpacker”, “solo female backpacker” and “constraints”. This is followed by the methodology section, which presents qualitative data gathered from 37 solo female backpackers who have visited Southeast Asia. This includes the study method, research instrument used, data collection method and sample profile. In the results section constraints have been divided into four categories (sociocultural, personal, practical and spatial) following Wilson and Wilson and Little's (2005) theory, which divides

the characteristics of each category into pre-travel (precedent) and during travel (in situ). Finally, the conclusions are presented.

Literature review

Over the past decade, conceptualizations of the term “backpacking” have been blurred in relation to social, demographic, economic, travel-related and psychographic characteristics of individuals (Dayour, Kimbu, and Park 2017). However, although researchers have a general comprehension of the term, there is still no international consensus on its definition (Hampton and Hamzah 2016) making it harder to collect data about this niche (Dayour, Kimbu, and Park 2017).

One of the most common existing definitions of backpacker is the one suggested by Pearce (1990) who describes backpackers as young travelers on long-stay holidays with a preference for budget accommodation, flexible itineraries, willing to meet people and take part in casual activities (Ooi and Laing 2010) and they tend to have minimum expectations (Moisa 2010). For some, this style of travelling can even be considered a way of life (Cohen 2011).

The term “backpacker”, therefore, is more of a socially constructed identity than a defined category. It has differing degrees of intensity, although all backpackers appear to share a common philosophy, a sense of belonging, values, meanings, norms and conduct; all of which enable them to differentiate themselves from conventional mass tourists (Larsen, Øgaard, and Brun 2011; O’Reilly 2006; Sørensen 2003).

Thus, the definition of a backpacker is rather blurry, yet distinct from that of a mainstream tourist, even though in many cases backpackers behave in much the same way as tourists who choose mass tourism. Some backpackers book organized tours, which opposes the backpacking idea of self-organization and flexibility. Moreover, what is considered a "long-term" trip can be

understood subjectively, as the adjective "long" is limitless. Another significant travel segment is "short-term backpackers" who also travel backpacker style, but for shorter periods of time (Sørensen 2003). Some studies contend that backpackers look for relaxation, whereas others state the opposite (Larsen, Øgaard, and Brun 2011). Although backpackers are usually seen as low-budget travelers, research suggests that they spend more money than mainstream tourists and also tend to carry expensive electronic devices (Martín-Cabello and García-Manso 2015). Also hearing-impaired backpackers and their motivations have been studied (Ho and Peng 2017). These examples are only a few of the long list of characteristics which fog the concept "backpacking". Uriely (2009) points out that if backpacker subgroups were better classified, homogenous categories of individuals could be provided. Thus, this article focuses on one of the many backpacker subgroups: solo female backpackers.

Tourism has always been linked to risks and uncertainties. Different definitions of risks are included by Adam (2015), who suggests that risk creates concern and fear due to the uncertainty and the undesired consequences of a purchase decision. Absolute or real risk is the common one among service suppliers, who try to minimize it through safe practices and procedures. However, perceived or subjective risk is the individual perception of loss or negative outcomes after making a purchase decision. It should be noted that the tourism experience is full of risk and uncertainties, and this combination varies depending on where and when it occurs, however, the risk is sometimes underestimated as it is impossible to have fully comprehensive information on a destination (Gray and Wilson 2009; Williams and Baláž 2015). Risk, however, is not always related to worry, so although a destination may be considered risky, not all tourists worry about the threat to the same extent (Larsen, Øgaard, and Brun 2011; Lepp and Gibson 2003; Seabra et al. 2013; Wilson and Little 2008).

In the case of tourism services, risk is high due to the intangibility, variability, perishability and simultaneity between consumption and production (Seabra et al. 2013) and the complexity to

standardize (Hales and Shams 1991). However, other factors can also be influential such as weather conditions, the behavior of local residents, political instability, disease, terrorism or natural disasters (Adam 2015; Reichel, Fuchs, and Uriely 2007). These risks can be considered constraints, or factors interfering with individuals' freedom, desire and involvement as they do not allow them "to participate in leisure activities, [...] or to achieve a desired level of satisfaction" (Jackson 1988, 203). In fact, perceived risk influences the destination choice (Adam 2015).

Even though over 62% of backpackers travel back home from their trips with diseases or injuries, some researchers suggest that there is no clear definition of the specific risks linked to backpacking (Jablonkowska 2015; Elsrud 2001; Seabra et al. 2013). It is also commonly believed that backpackers set out to face risks rather than actively avoiding them. These "accepted risks" are self-imposed by the traveler, and under their control to some extent (Adkins and Grant 2007). It is also reasonable to assume that backpackers have their own perception of risk, and that variables such as gender or past experiences can impact them differently compared to tourists choosing mass tourism (Reichel, Fuchs, and Uriely 2007).

Solo female backpackers

Solo female backpackers travel alone to a destination and are not part of a group or package tour (McNamara and Prideaux 2010). Backpackers have been categorized into subgroups of homogenous individuals (Uriely 2009); however, so far tourist organizations have paid little attention to solo female backpackers as they are considered part of the general backpacking group (McNamara and Prideaux 2010). Consequently little academic research has been carried out on this travel segment.

Female solo backpacking is a growing market segment in the tourism industry (McNamara and Prideaux 2010). Statistics from Solo Traveler World (2020) show that women travel solo more

than men do and their interest keeps growing as online searches for “solo women travel” increased up to 230% in 2019. This boost stems from new trends in social and family organization which have contributed to transformations in women’s behavior (Junek, Binney, and Winn 2006). Women’s responsibilities have changed and they have become more independent, at least in Western countries, and this has provided them with new opportunities for entertainment and travel (Wilson and Little 2005). Women who choose independent travel are mainly motivated by the desire to challenge and empower themselves, to experience autonomy and self-determination, to get to know more people, and step outside their comfort zones, allowing women to feel less limited regarding values of femininity and attractiveness (Wantono and McKercher 2020; Wilson and Little 2008). Moreover, in comparison to male travelers, female travelers are more likely to take part of adventure or educational travel, eco tours and backpacking trips (Su and Wu 2020). Despite having more opportunities than women in previous decades before them, women today still encounter constraints in their travel experiences, as stated by Wilson and Little (2005) these are mostly temporarily and spatially. Although travel risks are part of the backpacker identity and solo female travelers might adopt a voluntary risk-taking behavior, perceived risks still limit their experiences (Reisinger and Mavondo 2005; Wantono and McKercher 2020).

Classification of solo female backpackers’ constraints

Kelley (1992) found that 77% of the solo female travelers who took part in their study had felt threatened while traveling alone. Nonetheless, some researchers suggest that both gender and risk perceptions influence tourism decisions although no links have been found between them (Lepp and Gibson 2003).

Generally speaking, risk taking is linked to masculinity whereas risk management is related to femininity. Society instills fear in women by discouraging them from going beyond the

boundaries of safety (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia 2018), especially in patriarchal systems ruled by fear and social control, and where female travel behavior is judged for appropriateness. The concept of fear is a social and shaped by many elements, including media and film, which together reinforce the vulnerability of women and the need to be protected and cautious (Wilson and Little 2008). Women are usually more concerned about physical risks and personal safety. They view some leisure activities as riskier than men would, and this lowers their participation (McNamara and Prideaux 2010). Perceptions of women traveling alone, including those of relatives or friends, influence the female mindset, and this lack of support makes them more fearful and doubtful. Consequently, being vulnerable equates being limited (Wilson and Little 2008). However, taking risks is a good opportunity for women to confront social beliefs and re-evaluate gender identities (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia 2018).

Tourists in general tend to be victims of crimes due to their carelessness, lack of local knowledge, self-indulgence and unfamiliarity with the place. Nonetheless, women are probably easier targets because they are more noticeable when they are alone (Su and Wu 2020) and they often face gendered risks (Karagöz et al. 2020) ranging from undesired attention to being physically assaulted (Wantono and McKercher 2020). Therefore they unconsciously learn to be afraid of strangers, to avoid going to specific places alone (Wilson and Little 2008), to avoid some periods of the day (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia 2018) or to choose same-sex groups when gathering with people they have just met (Wantono and McKercher 2020), which results in being constrained (Wilson and Little 2008). Some secluded places such as forests, national and public parks or large cities are considered dangerous for women traveling alone (McNamara and Prideaux 2010; Wilson and Little 2008) and have been labeled "landscapes of fear" (Wilson and Little 2008; Curson and Kitts 2000). This perception of "wrong" place and "wrong" time is personal and depends on the background of each one (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia 2018). In fact, this strategic use of space is a common risk reduction strategy in

which the consumer tries to decrease the uncertainty or the negative impact of a decision.

There are two types of risk reduction strategies: consumption behavior modification and information search. Consumption behavior modification means to alter the behavior to avoid certain risks or diminish its consequences. Whereas information search is based on exposing oneself to information about the destination or on how to stay away from a risk which results in a reduction of the risk perception (Hales and Shams 1991; Adam 2015). However, when women are victims, they often blame themselves for being vulnerable and for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or by acting in an inappropriate way. Therefore, using common sense is their foremost strategy (Wilson and Little 2008).

Crawford and Godbey (1987) developed one of the best known classifications of constraints, categorizing them into structural, intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints. Structural constraint factors intercede in leisure preferences and participation such as lack of time; intrapersonal constraints are physiological circumstances or behaviors that limit participation such as fear; and interpersonal constraints stem from interaction with others; for example, the lack of a traveling companion. Participating in an activity means overcoming all these barriers. This classification, however, is only based on constraints encountered before participating in an activity (precedent restraints). Thus, the aim of this article is to analyze both precedent and in situ constraints, following the constraints' classification of solo female travelers' outlined by Wilson and Little (2005, 2008), which is based on four categories of constraints: sociocultural, personal, practical and spatial

Constraints affecting decision making while planning the trip are labeled "Precedent Constraints". These are perceived by each individual in a different way, (Wilson and Little 2005, 2008) and they are not always seen as limitations as for some backpackers risk might be seen as a motivator (Adam 2015). In many cases, some women have an anticipatory sense of dread before their trip as they foresee their vulnerability because of their own internal

perceptions or the opinions of others. Moreover, constraints can also emerge and be present during the trip, narrowing or attenuating the travel experience. These are labeled "in situ constraints". Although the criterion is alike for both, each one is experienced in a different way, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Methodology

The methodology is divided into two main sections. The first describes the qualitative method used to undertake the study and the research instrument used. The second outlines the data collection strategy and characteristics of the sample.

Study method and research instrument

A qualitative analysis has been designed to gain a deeper and wider understanding of the topic and to “have better potential to explore the increasing complexities of leisure and travel behavior [...], particularly dealing with the lives and constraints of women” (Wilson and Little 2005, 156). This study is therefore based on qualitative analysis as an in-depth analysis of the experiences and constraints of each woman is required (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005).

Data used for the research were collected from semi-structured interviews. The questions enabled participants to give detailed responses of their trajectories according to their values, points of view and experiences they wanted to focus on, providing the opportunity to identify new ways to understand the topic. As participants were encouraged to talk about many

destinations in the region, they could refer to one of their experiences or all of them within the boundaries of the research.

The semi-structured interviews were divided into three sections. The first was introductory, focusing on the interviewee's background and experience such as nationality or previous experiences traveling alone. The second was related to issues pre-trip such as how they planned the trip or whether they had preconceived ideas about the destination. The third section related to experiences during the trip, for instance, whether they changed their usual behavior or if they trusted others.

Thematic analysis was the method used for analyzing those semi-structured interviews, since the themes of interest were to identify the experiences and constraints in the pre-trip and during the trip for solo female backpackers. Oral answers were recorded with the women's consent using a voice recorder, after being made aware that the data would be used for academic purposes only. Interview data was transcribed and categorized using open software using open software EdEt (Kaliszewska 2015).

Data collection and sample profile

The sample was based on solo female backpackers who had visited Southeast Asia. Since this sample is very specific, the interviewer first carried out a convenience sampling using acquaintances where respondents were encouraged to voluntarily contribute to the study. Requests were sent through social media and those who accepted taking part of the study were reached by the interviewer with more details regarding the interview. This was followed by snowball sampling where names were provided by respondents, as well as volunteer sampling. Due to the geographically dispersed sample, the interviews were conducted via online meetings and e-mail. The interviewer increased the number of participants until reaching saturation point, when enough rich data had been gathered to cover all the topics and support the analysis

(Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005). The interviews were conducted between February and April 2018 on 37 women who had experienced solo backpacking in Southeast Asia.

The women participating in the study are listed in Table 2. All participants except two gave permission for their first names to appear in the document. Accordingly, all the names in the table are real, except for Laia and Ari, which have been selected randomly. The final sample comprised 37 women of between 22 and 44 years old, the average being 28. The majority are European, especially Spanish and German. The length of the trip varied from 2 weeks to 15 months. The most visited country in Southeast Asia was Thailand (29 out of 37), followed by Indonesia (19) and Cambodia (18), and the least visited were Myanmar, Singapore and the Philippines. Regarding the number of countries visited, 10 women visited 1 country, 10 visited 3 countries and 2 women visited 7 countries, which was the maximum number of countries visited by one person.

Table 2

Results

The findings are structured following the model put forward by Wilson and Little (2005). The results have therefore been divided into sociocultural, personal, practical and spatial constraints, and each of these into precedent and in situ situations.

Sociocultural constraints

Sociocultural constraints are divided into precedent and in situ. Precedent constraints, such as taking the decision to travel alone, are not always approved by people surrounding these solo female backpackers. Almost all backpackers in the sample stated that their relatives did not accept their decision to travel alone because of the dangers, or because it involved giving up their jobs. These women were called "crazy, immature and imprudent". Amber states:

"They lost their minds, most of them freaked out, they said it was dangerous, joked about being kidnapped, murdered, drugged... all kinds of crazy things".

Only a few with siblings who had already traveled in a similar style, or those with parents who traveled received some support. Some hid their travel plans, or lied, saying they would travel with someone else to avoid worrying their family. In contrast, friends who had already traveled appeared to be supportive, and were more likely to provide useful, encouraging advice rather than cautions, as they saw the backpacker as a strong, admirable and brave individual. As suggested by Wilson & Little (2008), the perceptions of others make individuals more afraid and doubtful, and this limits their enjoyment of the experience.

However, these perceptions rarely influenced what the interviewees had in mind. In some cases, this lack of support gave them even more strength to believe that they could do it. On the other hand, some felt more worried. Eugenia, for example, explained that she was upset because her friends and relatives bid her farewell as if she was never going to return. Many of the women said that during the trip these worries disappeared once they realized it was not as bad as their friends and family had imagined. Viktoria stated:

"People should not let their friends/family change his/her mind. If you want it, you have to go for it. It sounds like a motivational speech, but it is very important. People are going to put a lot of useless thoughts and worries into your mind, [...] but they do not do it. They just stay at home; they do not go on an amazing adventure. They do not consider doing what you will do. [...]. I thank God I was successful ignoring these

comments".

Most of the women in the sample also believe that the media in male-dominated societies contributes to the fear instilled in them. For instance, Joanne said:

"I personally think the media are responsible for a lot of fear in general through biased stories about religion, race, countries, gender, etc. I think women are portrayed as the weaker sex and therefore not expected to be able to be strong and independent".

As Fernanda explains, the media tends to create a big fuss over something that has happened without telling the whole story. Mari claims that if there is a crime against a woman traveler, news is likely to focus on the fact that the woman was traveling alone, and this type of news should not be trusted. On the other hand, Lina mentions that there are powerful media outlets such as blogs and movies that encourage women to travel alone and be more self-assured. As Sara mentions, the more women travel alone, the less society will ask why they are doing it. Concerning in situ constraints, receiving unwanted attention is relatively common, which is one of the gendered risks suggested by Su and Wu (2020) . However, Mariella explains that this attitude is not considered a risk as much as an irritation. Zoe explains that:

"As a solo traveler it is common and, unfortunately, sometimes unavoidable. I ignored it".

Physical appearance or having specific features such as a pointy nose surprises people from the less touristy areas. Amber explains:

"In Vietnam they might have never seen a white or a tall person, so they would run inside the house, grab their babies and ask us to hold their babies and take pictures with us. It's just a cultural difference, it's not unwanted attention, it's just that you are surprised. [...]. You have to understand that it's something new for them".

Some behavior, such as smoking in the street can even shock locals, as very few Asian women

smoke. As a risk reduction strategy (Adam 2015; Hales and Shams 1991) Lina recommends a consumption behavior modification which is being friendly and keeping a distance to avoid any problems. However, Zoe explained:

“I perhaps wasn't as friendly as I normally am because I need to take care of myself first. Being overfriendly and naïve puts you in danger of being taken advantage”.

Clothes can also attract attention. Miriam admits that she felt constrained because some women's tops could be considered inappropriate, and wearing them attracts unwanted attention from men. Amber suggests another consumption behavior modification which is covering up when visiting temples and only wearing a bikini in tourist areas. Miriam felt annoyed by the stares of older men in public areas and Marina mentioned that some local men got too close to her; however, she never thought they could harm her. In contrast, Lina explains women may have some advantages in Southeast Asia:

“Being a woman always means being more vulnerable [...]. However, people trust you more and they tend to protect you more”.

Anna believes local people in these regions believe in 'karma', therefore they try to behave well to avoid punishment. Wilson & Little (2008) suggest that women tend to blame themselves for not behaving appropriately if something undesirable occurs. When Joanne's bag was stolen in Vietnam, she thought it was her fault because she fell asleep with it in view, which is something she could have avoided. Marina felt, however, that no one should steal. Miriam said:

“I never blamed myself for anything that happened to me unless I did not plan it properly or forgot to take precautions”.

There are many things that are out of the traveler's control, and being aware of the sociocultural characteristics of local residents at the destination is crucial which is related to the

risk reduction strategies that belong to information search (Adam 2015; Hales and Shams 1991). Along these lines, Camille mentioned:

“Actually, while traveling you just have to take everything easy: you didn’t get your bus, you’ll take the next, that’s part of the adventure, take the time to visit more, to get to know other people [...]”.

From a sociocultural viewpoint, Southeast Asia is generally viewed as a region which is well-prepared for tourists and usually just as safe as their countries of origin. Nevertheless, some women complain that public transport is unpunctual, overcrowded, without air-conditioning, and taking longer than expected to reach the destination. Both the roads and vehicles are in poor condition and the sleep-deprived drivers sometimes invade the oncoming lane or behave improperly. Many of the interviewees commented on how risky it can be to rent a motorbike as no one follows the traffic regulations. Sara explains that many tourists drive motorbikes under the effects of alcohol and without a helmet, driving license, or any experience.

Personal constraints

Personal constraints are also divided into precedent and in situ. Precedent personal constraints are "personal limitations and restrictions based on the women’s self-perceptions, beliefs and attitudes" (Wilson and Little 2005, 164). For instance, when women were asked about the first risk that came to their minds before traveling as a solo backpacker, their responses included scams from taxi drivers or tour guides. Although this was not exactly considered a threat, it was viewed as bothersome. Others mention robbery, losing important documents or being short-changed, which in fact are risks applicable to both men and women. Yet others commented that sexual risks were in their minds before backpacking for the first time, but their perception changed as they realized that sexual crimes are no more common in Southeast Asia than in Western societies.

Many, but not all, interviewees said that as a risk reduction strategy they researched the destination before traveling. Penny and Lina explained:

"I realized quickly that you need some sort of advice to make the most out of it"

(Penny); *"I read a lot of blogs because I liked to be prepared [...] because it makes me feel more relaxed"* (Lina).

A few claimed not to have searched much for information before the trip as the destination was chosen once they were already in Southeast Asia, or because they wanted to travel spontaneously. Some backpackers only looked for general information or asked friends for tips; others read blogs and forums, watched online videos, or joined Facebook groups to get more personalized tips, or to look for travel mates. Information search is, therefore, a common risk reduction strategy for them.

Concerning in situ constraints, some of the women contemplated personal worries before starting out on the journey, but these mostly disappeared once the trip began. Katharina explains:

"I wasn't really worried [...], because a part of traveling for me is to go with the flow and to adapt to every new situation. [...] I knew that worrying too much is mostly unnecessary".

The most common fears faced during their trip concerned food, accommodation, being robbed or having to seek medical assistance.

Despite not worrying much about the local food, many admit to having had food poisoning.

They were aware that food is different from what they were used to, but as Laia and Viktoria said:

"You have to think that if others eat it, you can too. The body is stronger than we think"

(Laia); *"Food issues are very connected to your immune system and I think people*

sometimes overworry. You just have to pay attention" (Viktoria).

Ari points out that street food can be safe enough to be consumed, but it might have bacteria that Westerners are not used to, which could result in having diarrhea. Lina explains that she had allergies and specific dietary needs, so she learnt how to explain these in the local language to avoid complications.

Water is also a cause for concern as the travelers were aware that it could cause gastrointestinal diseases or other illnesses therefore they modified their behavior to mitigate the risk. As a risk reduction strategy, they tended to drink bottled water and some even brushed their teeth with it. In fact, some only drank coffee because they knew it was made with boiled water, or they were in areas where even the locals have to boil water to make it safe to drink. However, perceptions changed after staying in the same location for several days. Some worried less and used tap water to brush their teeth, or even ate salad that had been washed with it.

Backpackers' accommodations, which are normally dorms, can also be a cause for concern. However, expectations are easily met as it is cheap. Some dorms have security guards, whereas others do not even have lockers or room keys. In fact, some women remark that they followed some risk reduction strategies based on consumption behavior modification, as they kept their valuables with them at all times, sometimes even inside their sleeping bag, and some gave their passport and money to the reception for safe-keeping in their safe box.

A common worry among solo women backpackers is being robbed. Sandra was walking on the streets of Indonesia making a video call when someone on a motorbike suddenly snatched her phone. She said that she felt extremely unprotected as not having a phone meant she was unable to even see the time. Amber, however, had a different point of view:

"You are traveling in a country where people are very poor and they see us as an opportunity. So, if you don't keep things safe and close to you, they think "I'm going to take your phone because you made it easy for me, for you would be easy to get a phone,

but it will allow me to feed my family for a month". So, I think stealing is terrible, but at the same time you should be aware of all these things when you travel".

In general, these women tended to trust the locals, and Amber points out that when she was worried she went close to locals, where she felt safer, and in fact, received a great deal of help from them on several occasions. However, some backpackers mentioned that they know they are vulnerable and therefore a good target for a scam, so it is essential to know about the most common rip-offs, and how to avoid them. Generally speaking, taxi and *tuk-tuk* drivers, tour guides and buskers are not seen as trustworthy.

Even though solo backpackers are motivated by the opportunity to make their own decisions without the obligation to suit others, some state that they were concerned about not getting on well with new people or not connecting with other travelers. In fact, in situ personal constraints such as traveling alone might have drawbacks compared to traveling with others. For example, if something adverse happens to the backpacker there is no one who can help her; or no one to share experiences with, or the fact it can be more expensive as it is difficult to share costs. Sara points out that if you are alone there are fewer ideas in mind and all actions depend on the decisions of only one person, and not having to deal with these types of surprises is something she values. Alternatively, some women mention that if you want to socialize, you are always going to find others to get together with.

Practical constraints

According to sample, two of the most common incentives to backpack are having the chance to travel inexpensively and having the opportunity to authentically experience in depth the local culture and the area. As Viktoria says:

"I prefer to travel slowly and to experience it as well, not just see, but do things".

Many of those interviewed suggested that solo backpacking is about being spontaneous and independent, to escape daily routine or take a break after a difficult period in their life. In fact, backpackers rarely make itineraries, and if they do it, they end up changing their plans.

Precedent practical constraints that may influence their itinerary are visas or the weather.

Accordingly, only few backpackers book accommodation or transport in advance, and those who do make sure it can be cancelled at no cost. Others book only the first night and go with the flow thereafter. In fact, some women regret not having been able to extend their trip due to having flights booked. Victoria, for instance, explains that she considered accidentally missing her flight back home.

One practical in situ constraint is not knowing the local language or the cultural differences, therefore developing some risk reduction strategies is frequent. For example, Eugenia realized she had to make sure residents understood her as they sometimes said “yes” despite not understanding anything. However, the participants are aware that the lives of residents are completely different to theirs. Therefore, local beliefs, culture and customs have to be respected. Local residents are welcoming when travelers are curious and respectful. However, Eugenia states that she was shocked by injustices such as child prostitution, or children being kicked by parents just because they were crying. Common techniques to relax and reduce anxiety are yoga and mindfulness. Many of the women expressed that they tried to avoid worrying, because overthinking means being more scared.

Additionally, another useful risk reduction strategy among backpackers is information search, which usually takes place through word-of-mouth. Many of these women benefitted from asking other travelers for advice. When backpackers meet at a hostel, they generally start conversations which can provide reliable information. As all backpackers are in the same position and behaving similarly, this information source is easier to trust than others. It is common to share tips on accommodation, places to visit, rips-off, etc., and this may influence

other backpackers' itineraries. In fact, some stated that their itineraries were dictated by those they met along the way; not only because of their recommendations, but also because they decided to spend time traveling together

Spatial constraints

Knowledge of security issues in their destination is a relevant precedent spatial constraint.

Before their trip, many of the backpackers imagined Southeast Asia was a safe region; in addition they coincided in the idea that each country in the region is different. In fact some countries are considered as straightforward for even the less experienced backpackers.

However, as Amber feels, this makes the destination less authentic:

"It feels like [...] the government has told them to be good to backpackers because they are bringing money. [...] in Thailand, no one is going to reprimand you if you do something which is out of the cultural norm. [...] Vietnam is kind of the opposite. If you are rude to a Vietnamese shopkeeper they will just tell you to get out, whereas in Thailand they would smile. In Thailand they don't sacrifice their pride, it is not that authentic."

Buddhist societies are also seen as calm and safe, and their way of life attracts travelers. Anna thinks that as Buddhism is practiced in these countries, the actions of local people are influenced by "karma".

Terrorism is not something that generally worries them much, as this can happen anywhere, and they believe that some Western countries are even more vulnerable to terrorist attacks than those in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, the risk of terrorism can determine the choice of destination. Judith commented that she had to choose between Indonesia and the Philippines, and a terrorist attack in the Philippines prompted her to book a flight to Indonesia.

Interviewees explain that, in general, they do not avoid destinations because of the fear of risk. Their decisions are mostly influenced by their budget, time available, tourist attractions and the political situation. There is no consensus about which are the safest places to visit, some destinations, however, make them feel particularly aware and cautious.

Concerning the spatial in situ constraints, the interviewees perceive that tourist regions are the safest, and many considered Thailand or Bali, in Indonesia, were safer than isolated areas of Myanmar or Laos. Despite cultural, governmental and historical differences between the countries, Southeast Asia was mostly considered to be a safe destination. As Lina stated:

"There are few places in the world where you can be as relaxed as a woman than Southeast Asia."

Even though there are many stereotypes and stories going around, there was no consensus amongst the respondents on what constitutes a dangerous place. Thailand, for instance, is seen as one of the worst places for tourist scams, but it is also viewed as one of the safest places according to those interviewed. Stories about rape and assault in Koh Tao (Thailand) made the women more alert. Vietnam is said to be dangerous regarding robbery and corruption, and Cambodia is said to be relatively unsafe because of corruption, pick pocketing and crime stemming from poverty. Nonetheless, none of the women travelers thought that Cambodia was a dangerous country, but suggested it was less safe than the other countries in SEA despite not having personally experienced any dangerous situations. Others mention that the Philippines or some islands in Indonesia are riskier because residents have no respect for women. Lina explains that she avoided some areas of Myanmar and Thailand because of safety issues unrelated to being female.

The women mentioned four places they regarded as dangerous: the North of Nong Khiaw in Laos, Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville in Cambodia, and Sabah in Malaysia, mainly because of kidnapping and robbery.

They normally tried to avoid large cities, but if this was not possible, they usually stay in the tourist areas. Some felt that Bangkok was extremely safe, but others felt the opposite because of the crowds. They also avoided crowded areas with a party atmosphere as these tended to have more prostitution and drunk people. It is worth mentioning that three women in the sample referred to the famous Full Moon Party in Koh Phangan, Thailand, which they avoided because of its reputation for drugs. This relates to "landscapes of fear" and about being in the "wrong place" in the "wrong time" (Wilson and Little 2008; Curson and Kitts 2000; Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia 2018). Nonetheless, risk perception is personal to each individual. Although the majority of participants modified their behavior as a risk reduction strategy (Adam 2015; Hales and Shams 1991) and avoided going out alone after sunset, a small number took the risk and went out anyway. However, they used so-called risk reduction strategies (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia 2018) and eluded secluded, dark alleyways, or sometimes took a taxi rather than returning on foot. Amber stated that every time she went out partying she took the following precautions:

"I did not leave my drink anywhere, not even with a person in a group. I am in a foreign country and I am not going to take that risk. When I took a drink it was glued to my hand. I also let people know at home which city I was in, with who, and my plans".

Marta pointed out that she was not particularly worried because she avoided alcohol, and her trip led her to other leisure pursuits based on yoga, meditation, nature and sports. It is clear, therefore, that both a person's mindset and traveling style play a role in the degree of danger they face. The opinions of the interviewees suggest that trips centered on partying and alcohol may be more dangerous.

Conclusions

The experiences of solo female backpackers in Southeast Asia are extremely diverse, and that makes this niche difficult to define. Despite this heterogeneity, it is reasonable to assume that they all share one common identity. The participants provide information that enables to provide the constraints they encounter before and during their solo travel experiences in Southeast Asia, in addition to the strategies they follow to overcome these constraints.

The findings have been divided into sociocultural, personal, practical and spatial categories (Wilson and Little 2005). In terms of sociocultural constraints, family, friends and the media play an important role in instilling fear in women. Some women travelers focus on the power of the media, blogs and movies to encourage other women to travel alone and redress the gender balance in society. This follows in the line of Yang et al., (2018), who state that taking risks allows women to reconstruct gender identities and modify social beliefs. Moreover, women also take advantage of this source of information, as information search is a risk reduction strategy (Hales and Shams 1991; Adam 2015). In reality, many of the women in the sample explained that men tend to have riskier, crazier and more reckless behaviors, which as pointed out by McNamara and Prideaux (2010). Regarding in situ constraints, women were aware of the so-called accepted risks (Adkins and Grant 2007) in some situations (e.g. renting a motorbike). Additionally, they often consider the gendered risks described by Wantono and McKercher (2020) to be more of an irritation rather than a threat.

Concerning personal constraints, the majority of risks and fears relate to daily activities such as eating food, using transport, etc. In fact, women developed risk reduction strategies by modifying their behavior to avoid being victims, most often following their instincts. Even though solo backpacking is about traveling alone, for some of the interviewees it has some disadvantages such as not sharing costs or experiences. On the other hand, it is believed that most problems occur among backpackers and that residents are not normally involved.

Therefore, some of the women mention getting closer to locals when they need some sort of

help.

Practical constraints are uncommon on solo backpacking trips. These travelers are motivated by the opportunity to travel spontaneously on a low budget, so avoiding planning their trips is common. In some cases, their itineraries may be modified depending on whom they meet along the way, which in itself questions their degree of freedom. In terms of local knowledge, they are aware that showing respect towards the locals is key to receiving a warm welcome. As their trips tend to be unplanned and on a limited budget, these precedent practical constraints mentioned by Wilson and Little (2005) could be considered motivations for solo women backpackers.

Regarding spatial constraints, it is clear that there is no consensus on this aspect. Even though Southeast Asia is a diverse region, it is considered by most to be safe to travel around, and one of the most popular destinations for female solo backpackers. "Landscapes of fear" (Wilson and Little 2008; Curson and Kitts 2000) exist in their minds, which makes them more aware of risks, and drives them to develop risk reduction strategies (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia 2018), for example, by taking a taxi instead of returning on foot at night. In fact, risk only stopped the participants from visiting a destination on a few occasions, and sometimes they even sought out accepted risks, for instance going out after the sunset.

The study shows that although the women are aware of the potential risks, they adjust their behavior and follow different strategies to mitigate them. Actually, they develop various risk reduction strategies; both modification of consumption behavior and information search and combine both of them (Hales and Shams 1991; Adam 2015; Khan, Chelliah, and Ahmed 2017). Some modifications of behavior take place at the beginning of their trips as they are more cautious, but they disappear after spending some time at the destination and realizing it is not really necessary, which is the case, for example, of brushing their teeth with tap water. On the other hand, some learn from their experiences and modify their behavior throughout the trip to

reduce the risk, for example, by making sure locals understand these travelers. Although media can be useful to gather information, it can also address female solo traveling in a way that awakes fear into them. In fact, their experiences are mostly based on being cautious and not over worrying about risks, rather than being afraid of them.

The qualitative analysis in this study cannot generalize the constraints of this Southeast Asia travel segment. In the end, their livings and perceptions vary from individual to individual as their past experiences, nationalities, moods, motivations, etc. can determine their decisions and feelings. Although there is a diversity of nationalities and ethnics, most of the participants are German and Spanish, which may influence the results. Additionally, this research suffers from the information being obtained from individuals who narrated their trips; therefore reality might have been distorted due to memory decay, social appeal or avoidance of some sensitive matters. However, the characteristics and experiences obtained from the sample are of interest for Destination Management Organizations (DMO) in order to address the needs of this growing tourism niche.

Even though women's state of mind plays an important role, certain women faced undesirable situations due to the behavior of some locals. In this respect, DMOs could host workshops or educational programmes for local residents involved in the service sector at the destination, and show them best practices and appropriate behavior towards solo female travelers. This would provide them with more knowledge of the potential differences between residents and travelers. Issuing a certificate for standards of service quality would also recognize and motivate the actors who partake in these courses. This means that backpackers would be aware of the good practices behind these certifications and would choose them before others. For example, drivers would need to take part in workshops in order to understand the importance of getting enough sleep, or not invading the opposite lane. On completion, they would get a certificate from the DMO and an easily recognizable sticker for their car or van to prove they follow the guidelines

imposed by the DMO.

As previously mentioned, some problems only involve a certain type of backpacker. Therefore, it would be useful to change advertising campaigns for some destinations, such as Koh Phangan, to attract backpackers looking for relaxation, nature or sports, instead of the partying and alcohol associated with the Full Moon Party.

Experienced travelers could lead workshops, sharing personal experiences, and passing on reliable advice, thus contributing with valuable knowledge and information. This could take place at the destination or in their countries of origin.

Moreover, DMO websites could include a section on potential risks or specific problems in that particular area, thus preventing travelers from having to face unpleasant or undesirable situations. They could also have a section where locals and travelers could provide suggestions, or report issues, so that recurring problems could be examined in depth, and countermeasures to solve them imposed by DMOs. Furthermore, online applications providing tips, or that could be used to report bad behavior would also be useful for solo female travelers.

This research has focused on the perspectives of 37 female solo backpackers visiting Southeast Asia. However, further research is needed to explore the mind-set, perceptions and opinions of local residents in Southeast Asia in order to gain a global view of the situation, and to introduce appropriate tourism policies for the various DMOs involved.

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Table 1. Precedent and in situ constraints impacting women's solo travel

Subcategory	Precedent constraints (pre-travel)	In situ constraints (during travel)
Sociocultural	Social expectations Roles and responsibilities Perceptions of others	Host attitudes Unwanted attention
Personal	Doubts and fears	Fear and vulnerability Loneliness
Practical	Lack of time and money	Lack of local knowledge Travelling with others Stress and fatigue
Spatial	Limited destination choice	Restricted movements Conspicuousness

Source: Wilson and Little (2005, 162)

Table 2. Sample profile by age, nationality and countries visited

Name	Age	Nationality	Countries visited in Southeast Asia (Solo Travel)										Total countries visited
			Cam odia	Laos	Myan mar	Thai land	Vietn am	Singa pore	Indon esia	Malay sia	Phil ippin es		
Joanne	29	British	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			7
Catarina	44	Portuguese	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓		6
Sarah	26	German								✓			1
Melissa	23	German								✓			1
Dafna	43	Dutch	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓		5
Laia	29	Spanish				✓	✓			✓			3
Carla	23	Spanish				✓							1
Mariella	24	German	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓		5
Ester	29	Spanish	✓			✓					✓		3
Ari	40	Spanish								✓	✓		2
Penny	22	German	✓	✓		✓	✓						4
Lina	27	German	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓		6
Miriam	24	Polish	✓			✓					✓		3
Eugenia	26	Spanish	✓			✓							2
Sandra	24	Spanish				✓				✓		✓	3
Helena	34	Spanish	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			6
Rina	26	French	✓		✓	✓							3
Sanne	28	Swedish		✓		✓					✓		3
Mari	23	Ecuadorian								✓			1
Marta	28	Spanish	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓		6
Anais	30	Spanish				✓							1
Alba	24	Spanish				✓					✓	✓	3

Lillian	35	Canadian		✓		✓				✓		3
Kelly	26	Belgian				✓						1
Alexandra	24	Swiss						✓	✓	✓		3
Judith	24	Spanish	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			5
Georgina	30	Spanish							✓			1
Zoe	23	Canadian				✓						1
Amber	34	American	✓	✓		✓	✓					4
Katharina	25	German		✓		✓	✓		✓			4
Sara	28	Spanish							✓			1
Camille	25	Swiss	✓			✓						2
Viktoria	28	Hungarian							✓			1
Hanae	28	French	✓			✓	✓					3
Anna	26	Spanish	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					5
Fernanda	31	Brazilian	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	7
Marina	22	Spanish				✓		✓	✓	✓		4
Total sample in each country			18	14	5	29	10	7	19	15	3	

Source: Own elaboration from data obtained in the interview