

Travel Experience of Southeast Asian Solo Female Travelers

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Article Info

Submitted, 2 August 2022
Revised, 26 September 2022
Accepted, 1 October 2022

Keywords:

Southeast Asian travelers;
Solo travel;
Tourist experiences;
Sociocultural constraints

Kata Kunci:

Wisatawan Asia Tenggara;
Perjalanan sendiri;
Pengalaman wisata;
Kendala sosial budaya

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore travel experience of Southeast Asian solo female travelers. In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 Southeast Asian solo female travelers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that sociocultural constraints strongly influence Southeast Asian solo female travelers' travel experiences in terms of subject of gaze, being adjustable, and self-development. This study only represents a particular group of solo female travelers and could focus on one patriarchal society, where these women experience a similar degree of social-cultural constraints. However, travel associations and marketers should provide comprehensive services to address their concerns and target this growing market. This study contributes by addressing the lack of research on travel experiences of Southeast Asian solo female travelers and by providing perspectives through in-depth interviews.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman perjalanan sendiri wisatawan wanita Asia Tenggara. Wawancara mendalam dilakukan kepada 18 wisatawan wanita Asia Tenggara yang melakukan perjalanan sendiri dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kendala sosiokultural sangat mempengaruhi pengalaman perjalanan sendiri mereka dalam hal subjek pandangan, penyesuaian diri, dan pengembangan diri. Studi ini hanya mewakili kelompok tertentu dari wisatawan wanita yang melakukan perjalanan sendiri dan dapat fokus pada satu masyarakat patriarki, di mana para wanita ini mengalami tingkat kendala sosial-budaya yang serupa. Namun, asosiasi perjalanan dan pemasar harus memberikan layanan yang komprehensif untuk mengatasi masalah mereka dan menargetkan pasar yang berkembang ini. Studi ini berkontribusi dengan mengatasi kurangnya penelitian tentang pengalaman perjalanan sendiri wisatawan wanita Asia Tenggara dan dengan memberikan perspektif melalui wawancara secara mendalam.

D.O.I :
<https://doi.org/10.17509/jithor.v5i2.51021>

INTRODUCTION

A solo female traveler is a fast-growing market linked to demographic shifts and increased freedom (Teng & Lee, 2023). The increasing single population, single families, delayed marriage, and mainly individualist cultures have influenced this travel trend. Over the past few years, traditional family ideologies and societal expectations have changed (Berdychesky et al., 2013), creating more opportunities and resources for Asian women to travel independently for leisure purposes (Yang et al., 2017). Female travelers travel to seek self-identity, empowerment, and a life-changing experience (Osman et al., 2020). Unlike general travel types, solo female travelers face certain limitations of accessibility and constraints such as socio-cultural, personal, practical, and spatial constraints (Wilson & Little, 2008b), reducing their leisure participation. Practical examples may include limited budget, restricted movement, and unwanted attention (Wilson and Little, 2008a; Yang et al., 2018a). The home society's socio-cultural norms and the host community can also affect solo female travelers' experiences, such as mental pressures from their friends or families. Despite those limitations, the number of solo female travelers keeps increasing, which requires further research to understand this emerging market.

Several studies have addressed the interest in the female tourism literature, especially the motivation, experiences, and constraints of solo female travelers from Western perspectives (Wilson and Little, 2008b, 2008a; Wilson et al., 2009). Meanwhile, few studies have focused on Asian female travelers (Chung et al., 2017; Yang and Tung, 2018; Yang and Ong,

2020). There are limited records of the Asian context because Asian women were not allowed to travel alone in the past (Wilson & Little, 2008b). It is essential to study Asian tourists due to the increasing number of inbound and outbound tourists (Osman et al., 2020). Most scholars focus on exploring the Japanese and Chinese female markets within these limited studies.

According to Klook Travel (2019), solo travelers increased by 10% in Hong Kong and mainland China in 2018. In 2018, the annual report showed that 60% of Chinese millennials traveled alone. Meanwhile, Klook Travel (2019) presents the annual growth percentage of the solo travel market among Southeast Asian countries. Vietnam has the highest growth percentage among Southeast Asian countries, with 84% in 2019, followed by Thailand at 83% and Indonesia at 79%. TripAdvisor (2015) states that 79% of Southeast Asia women plan to travel alone, while 48% of women reported going on a holiday trip.

Even though Southeast Asia is an emerging market with strong growing economies and the middle class, the information about Southeast Asian solo female travelers can only be found on local news, travel forums, and social media platforms where they share experiences and tips for other solo travelers. According to Yang et al. (2017), Southeast Asian women are mainly considered tourism suppliers in existing studies, especially in sex tourism and community-based tourism research. Ng & Chan (2020) study is one of the few that explores the influence of Korean TV dramas on tourism decisions, particularly among young adult women in Hong Kong, from travelers' perspectives, focusing on their motivation to visit South Korea because of Korean dramas. Asbollah et al. (2013) study about Malaysian Muslim female

travelers whose mobility is constrained by gender and religious practices. For example, Muslim wives need their husband's permission to participate in leisure activities.

Moreover, their sense of identity is formed and restricted to their society and "cultural bubble," which contains their nationality and social norms (Urry, 1992), affecting their leisure experience perceptions. These women generally tend to travel with family. Eventually, they will seek independent travel experiences in the future by expanding their "cultural bubble" (Asbollah et al., 2013). Osman et al. (2020) recently examined Vietnamese solo travelers' primary motivations and constraints. The significant restrictions identified in their study were gender and culture-specific, which related to the disapproving attitudes of family and friends towards solo travel and the tourist's perception of fear and vulnerability (Osman et al., 2020).

Although previous studies have focused on the constraints that solo women face during their solo journey, little research has paid attention to analyzing their travel experiences. Besides, more feminist studies from non-English speaking countries are encouraged (Henderson & Gibson, 2013), especially examining Southeast Asian women from travelers' perspectives (Yang et al., 2019). Therefore, this study aims to fill the literature gap by exploring Southeast Asian solo female travelers' travel experiences.

In-depth interviews are employed to achieve this objective. The qualitative methodological approach is suggested due to its ability to explore the complexities of women's travel behavior (Scheiner & Holz-Rau, 2017). The results of this study may also contribute to Asian qualitative tourism research.

This study will contribute to the emerging knowledge of Asian solo female travelers and provide valuable, practical implications for service providers targeting solo travel markets to design their tourism products accordingly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Solo Female Traveler

Pilgrims were the first form of female travelers who went to the Holy Land in 327 AD. For many centuries, women had limited access to funding and social positions, especially their contributions and participation, which have been ignored in travel history. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the number of female travelers has increased significantly in the current travel market due to economic growth and social changes (Wilson & Harris, 2006). Studies on women's leisure emerged from social justice concerns surrounding women's oppression and declining quality of life (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). A literature review of leisure for women did not appear until the early 1980s, even though leisure-related studies had been published more than a decade earlier (Henderson and Gibson, 2013).

Most scholars focus on the Eastern area, which is the center of socially constructed identities of Asia. However, the ideologies, socio-cultural norms, and religious values are diverse across Asia (Y. B. Zhang et al., 2006). Geert Hofstede's research on cultural differences identifies five dimensions: power distance index, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance index, and a long-term orientation, to provide insights into distinct cultures. Meanwhile, Schroeter also identified the two dominating ideologies within a patriarchal society: Confucianism and

Islam, where males have greater power than females. These societies expect Asian women to be obedient, domesticated, and family-oriented, which are the foundation of their behavior. The stereotypical image of women is formed by social expectations, which identify the critical responsibilities of women as family keepers and taking care of their husbands and children rather than social matters (Brugulat & Coromina, 2021; Wilson & Little, 2008a). Women often prioritized providing the needs of others first over their leisure pursuits. Thus, women even believed they had no right to leisure, severely limiting their ability to construct leisure time and their attitude toward leisure (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2017).

Based on the gender differences theory, it is no surprise that past studies have reported that the travel motivations of women are highly associated with their role as family keepers (e.g., Hieu, 2020; Zhang and Hitchcock, 2017). The most popular activity for women is shopping for their families during their time, especially for outbound Japanese female travelers (Hieu, 2020). Urry (1992) explained this phenomenon by asserting that “shopping is a sphere of social activity in which women are empowered. It links together the public and domestic and involves activity in which women are permitted to demonstrate competence” (p. 152). The safety concern is another crucial factor that influences travel decision-making by considering the welfare of their children (Y. Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017). It refers to the choice of transportation, type of accommodation, and destination selection.

Today’s society has placed less pressure on women, although the gendered presumption still exists (Wilson & Little, 2008a; R. Yang &

Tung, 2018). Since the end of the nineteenth century, the number of female travelers has increased significantly in the current travel market due to economic growth and social changes (Wilson & Harris, 2006). Since women have gained greater social autonomy and acceptance, they can engage in various leisure and tourism activities (Berdychovsky et al., 2013). Women start to travel alone for different purposes, such as education (Malik, 2018), business (Khoo-Lattimore & Prayag, 2015), or leisure purposes (Brugulat & Coromina, 2021). The increased level of freedom in leisure participation of women requires a change in tourism products and services to match their new travel behaviors.

Today’s women travel to seek independence, adventure, and self-values (Seow and Brown, 2018; Osman et al., 2020). They search for ways to escape social pressure and have more freedom for self-development and self-identification (Y. Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017). Similarly, solo female travelers are portrayed more as gusty adventurers with money, time, and the desire to escape from their daily routine (Ejupi and Medaric, 2022; Yang et al., 2018b). Solo female travelers yearn to experience feelings of independence and seek self-identity, self-empowerment, and many things related to one's self, especially with the hope of gaining self-confidence and personal growth (Ejupi and Medaric, 2022; Osman et al., 2020). Studies have indicated that women travel for various reasons. However, escape is the most common push factor for solo female travelers (Pereira and Silva, 2018; Seow and Brown, 2018). Middle-age female solo travelers state that they travel to escape their usual domestic environment and social pressures and be free from domestic responsibilities (Seow & Brown, 2018). Women who

travel in all-female groups also have opportunities to reconnect with their female friends and enhance their well-being (Gibson et al., 2012).

Female Solo Travel Experiences

Defined the tourist experience as a set of activities from leaving home until one returns home. Travel experience is not separate but reflects tourists' everyday life. Wilson and Little (2008a, p.182) stated that travel experiences are "gendered, sexualized, socially and culturally constructed, informed by economics, age and ability, and influenced by individual history and expectations." In the context of female travelers, the freedom from solo travel experience gives them space to discover themselves along the journey and reflect on their strengths and limits when returning home (Wilson and Harris, 2006). Some women do not recognize the meanings and benefits of their trips until they return and live their "normal" lives (Wilson and Harris, 2006). For many women, solo traveling is frightening; however, it is a way to experience new feelings and establish self-care (Pereira and Silva, 2018).

Travel experiences of women travelers are significantly influenced by social stigmatization (Zhang and Hitchcock, 2017), strict social norms, familial responsibilities, the opinions of their families and friends (Wilson and Little, 2008), the perception of risks and vulnerability (Brown and Osman, 2017; Yang et al., 2019). These women attract more unwanted attention from men with their vulnerable appearance, which negatively affects their travel experiences. Besides, the family's reputation also affects their experience while participating in public leisure activities (Seow and Brown, 2018). Their leisure participation is limited to the daytime to protect themselves and

avoid dangerous situations during nighttime. It proves their responsibility to protect themselves as they were socially constrained to participate in certain activities (Wilson and Little, 2008). Yang (2021) interpreted solo travel as a way to test their abilities and prove their independent characteristic.

Specifically, physical and Asian appearance also affect female travel experience (Seow and Brown, 2018). The physical differences between Asian and Western people make solo Asian female travelers especially vulnerable when traveling to Western countries (Yang et al., 2017; 2018). Being an Asian with an Asian heritage linked to socio-cultural expectations puts pressure on these women to travel in a company (Seow and Brown, 2018). Indeed, most Asian countries have once experienced western colonization, affecting people's behavior (Yang et al., 2017). In the study on Vietnamese female travelers, Osman et al. (2020) report that colonialism and war histories result in lower self-esteem, negatively affecting their travel experiences (Kani et al., 2018). A postcolonial lens assumes that all studies about Asian female travelers are socially and culturally influenced by western colonization (Yang et al., 2017). In addition, Asian tourism scholars have noticed an evolution in Asian tourism when Asian women have realized the importance of leisure activities and have shown a desire to step out of their comfort zone. Despite being portrayed as submissive, passive, weak, and dependent by society, Asian women are becoming more ambitious and employing various negotiation strategies to resist social pressure (Seow and Brown, 2018). Even though the practice may be considered inappropriate, Asian women still choose to travel alone (Seow and Brown, 2018).

Wilson and Harris (2006) also indicated these solo trips are "meaningful travel" for women who search for value over leisure, for self and identity; empowerment; and connection with society and others. While solo female travelers feel empowered to deal with challenges and negotiate constraints (Zhou, 2015), they also develop self-confidence in social skills when building personal connections with locals and other travelers (Pereira and Silva, 2018). In certain situations, solo travel can change their life direction, primarily when emotional bonds are formed between these women and the host community (Wilson and Harris, 2006). These solo experiences affect their perspectives on life and interpersonal relationships and stimulate their desire to contribute to their home or host community, such as charity or aid work (Wilson & Harris, 2006). These experience reflections involve their daily lives and existing relationships and contribute to forming their future abilities and long-term change.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data Method

This study explores how socio-cultural constraints influence the travel experiences of Southeast Asian solo female travelers. The best approach that allows the author to generate a detailed and in-depth description of human lived experience is the qualitative method (Riley & Love, 2000). This standard method provides access to in-depth data from a small number of individuals (Welch & Patton, 1992), mainly applied to listen to the women's lived experiences and travel experiences. The semi-structured interview was utilized as the primary data collection strategy due to its flexibility needed to access participant stories, identify general

patterns, and understand the complex behavior of participants. This strategy produces in-depth information and allows women's voices to be heard throughout the guided interviewing process. Generally, an inductive approach provides new theoretical insights by identifying themes and meanings based on the data.

Sampling

Sampling criteria are as follows: participants must be solo female travelers from Southeast Asian countries who have traveled solo abroad for leisure purposes. The purposive sampling method was used for the initial base sampling to search for Southeast Asian women with solo travel experiences through the author's network. The author used her account on Couchsurfing and Facebook group to access participants, and follow-up contact was made with interested participants via Facebook messenger and WhatsApp. The participants were chosen based on the selection criteria to identify "information-rich cases," ensuring an in-depth understanding of central issues (Welch & Patton, 1992).

After that, the snowball sampling technique identified further solo female travelers. New contacts were located through referrals from initial participants. The participants' profile is provided in Table 1. All the information, including nationality, age, background, ethnic origin, number of destinations, travel purposes, and level of travel experiences, is considered throughout the sampling process. Efforts were made to maximize diversity and emphasized leisure travel purposes rather than business purposes. Even though the research focuses on the solo travel experience, all participants were encouraged to share and compare their

other travel experiences during the interview.

Data Collection

As a result of these sampling techniques, 18 Southeast Asian women aged 22 to 44 were interviewed within three months starting from September to November 2020. All interviews were conducted online through calling apps (e.g., Facebook messenger and Whatsapp) and took place according to the participants' preferences, mainly around evening time and at the interviewees' accommodation. The interview setting allows interviewees to freely express their emotions and recall their past travel experiences. The first author conducted all interviews to ensure consistency. Sixteen interviews were conducted in English to minimize translation errors, and two were conducted partly in Vietnamese and translated into English. The translation was cross-checked by Vietnamese experts fluent in English to avoid any loss of meaning.

Data saturation was reached after 16 interviews; however, two extra interviews were conducted to ensure no other concepts emerged. All interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were audio-taped with participants' permission. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives concerning a relevant literature review. They covered personal information, the reason for solo travel, and their encounters and experiences at their destination and home country. Regarding ethical guidelines, all participants were aware of the research purposes and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. The personal information of these women ensured anonymity and remained confidential by using code and their age to identify their words. All interviews

were transcribed in full for coding and analysis.

Table 1: Participants' profile

Participant code	Age	Nationality	Career	Number of solo trips
P1	44	Brunei	HR manager	Multiple countries
P2	22	Indonesian	English tutor	Multiple countries
P3	25	Indonesian	Sales	Multiple countries
P4	30	Singaporean	High school teacher	Multiple countries
P5	29	Singaporean	Marketing	Multiple countries
P6	29	Thailand	Administration	Multiple countries
P7	35	Thailand	University lecturer	Multiple countries
P8	33	Myanmar	HR manager	Multiple countries
P9	28	Philippino	Administration	Multiple countries
P10	40	Vietnamese	Marketing Manager	Multiple countries
P11	31	Vietnamese	Administration	Multiple countries
P12	30	Malaysia	Bank auditor	Multiple countries
P13	25	Philippino	Freelancer	Multiple countries
P14	27	Indonesian	Freelancer	Multiple countries
P15	35	Singapore	Bank officer	Multiple countries
P16	42	Thailand	University lecturer	Multiple countries
P17	37	Indonesia	University lecturer	Multiple countries
P18	39	Singapore	Officer	Multiple countries

Source: Data analysis (2022)

To ensure the data validity, the member checks strategy, also known as

respondent validation, was applied by asking some participants to give feedback on the study's emerging findings. This strategy prevented biases and misunderstandings from observing and interpreting the meaning of participants' perspectives and expressions during the interview. The findings were sent back to all participants to check their experience through interpretation and encouraged to give better expression to capture their perspectives. To ensure consistency, the first author conducted and analyzed all interviews and cross-checked the findings with the tourism experts. The thematic analysis is applied to look for familiarisation by rereading the transcripts several times to note initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Subject of Gaze

When navigating alone, these women experienced the feeling of vulnerability and being gazed at by other people. Some experienced sexual gaze from males, and others received suspicious gaze from other people concerning their solo presence.

Suspicious gaze. These Southeast Asian women's common experience was being conscious of their solo presence in a new environment. They felt themselves being the subject of others' suspicious gazes. Some people directly expressed their curiosity through questions. The majority just stared quietly, perceiving traveling alone as a weird activity. P4 (30) explained.

"In my country, people do not usually travel alone. They do not even eat in the restaurant alone, but I do. I eat in the restaurant alone, but others find it embarrassing and funny. People will look at you and not understand why you go around alone. A few

people came to me and asked: "Why are you here alone?" "Where are your friends".. those kinds of questions. Maybe I look so pitiful."

Cultural differences and Southeast Asian unique appearance made these women stand out in the crowd. P5 (29) shared her experience during her European trip.

"When I first arrived there, everyone was looking at me. Some people tried to talk to me because I was different from them. One guy approached me and told me that he liked my skin color. Swiss people have a straight face, so at that time, I did not feel offended or racist."

Similarly, P17 (37) shared her experiences after being gazed at due to her Asian appearance: *"If I go to countries which are not common to see Asian people, they know you are not local, you look different. Then I have to be very careful because people are watching."*

Sexual gaze. The sexualized male gaze was a common experience for solo female travelers. Especially with Asian appearances, they were often mistaken as sex workers and caught unwanted stared. P3 (25) shared her situation when she encountered some guys in Thailand:

"Some guys mistook me for prostitution; they approached me and asked for one night. There was also a time when a guy offered me drugs. He stared at me and ...I could tell from his face, and then he came to me like that... I felt offended. I was just a tourist there. But I was quite scared, so I rejected them politely."

Another situation from P10 (40) when she encountered local people in Singapore

"...he looked at me so weird, you know... and asked me, "Are you here to find some guys to stay behind?". I

felt so offended even though I had already expected this situation might happen. There were many news and rumors about the high number of Vietnamese girls working as prostitutes in Singapore. Especially when I visited the Geylang area, that was daytime, not nighttime, but I still caught some male staring at me weirdly; some even whistled when I walked past."

Being Adjustable

Throughout the decision-making process, from pre-travel to during travel, others' perception of solo travel and gender roles have significantly influenced their travel choices and experiences. These women adjusted themselves according to society to take control of their solo travel. They claimed to compromise in their home society to get permission from their family members and accept any situations that might occur at their travel destinations.

Compromise in their home society. Most Southeast Asia countries share similar cultural values from a patriarchal culture, which type-casted Asian women with a vulnerable, submissive and obedient image. Their solo travel choices were perceived as a risky activities. Therefore, most women picked local destinations or neighboring countries as their first isolated destination to persuade and get permission from the family quickly, as emphasized by P6 (29) and P2 (22):

"They [parents] just asked questions to ensure I know how to look after me. I think the destination helped because I did not go somewhere really far. It was just a neighboring country." - P6 (29)

"My first solo trip was just to another island in my country. To be honest, I was scared. I heard many bad things that might happen if a girl wanders

alone in my country. [...] That island was near to my home... so after explaining what I planned to do there, my parents let me go."- P2 (22)

Some women worked hard to persuade their family members by showing them how they could handle things independently.

"What I did was... I brought my mom to travel with me to England. I planned the trip and booked everything myself. I showed her how I accessed the information, found directions, and communicated with local people. I proved to her how I could handle everything by myself. I think I gained her trust.... Maybe.... After that, she does not oppose my solo trips but does not support me. There are a few unspoken conditions for her to let me go. [...] As long as I do not do anything that makes her worry, I think it will be fine."- P11 (31)

"It was not easy to persuade my parents. They want me to get married and settle down instead of spending my savings on travel. They are not happy about that. And they do not like the idea of me... being alone. So I show them how I can manage and enjoy my life alone. I work hard... I have a good job, a good position, and high salary... I am also living on my own. I told them clearly about my life goals as well as the goal I want to achieve while traveling alone... and just hope that they will understand..." - P12 (30)

They eventually found a way to negotiate and persuade their parents to let them go on a solo trip. One of the common negotiating strategies was to ensure daily reports/communication with their family members and friends. However, some women concealed their

intention by lying to their families and refusing to share their solo plans beforehand. In P4 (30)'s situation, she said

"I bought flight tickets before I told my parents. Sometimes I say I will meet my friends over there...but you know... when you are aboard, you do not have to report everything."

Resistance versus Acceptance in different societies. These women believed that gender ideologies and social norms in host communities also constrained their mobility and choice of leisure activities and reduced the degree of their experiences.

Some women resisted the social norms and religious practices as they remained anonymous and decided to experience their trip liberally. They thirsted for experience and deep senses of curiosity, as emphasized by P3 (25) and P2 (22):

"I am Muslim, but I do not care. I drink and eat pork because I want to try everything when traveling to new places. As a girl, I should not go out at night. But when I travel away from home, I go out at night, to the pub and club [...] I am not following any rules because these rules do not make sense. They are from old times. They do not make sense to me, to us, because the world is different now. But I cannot choose my religion; anyway I do not follow". - P3(25)

"I accepted the dinner invitation from the guy I just met at the airport. It sounded crazy, but I had fun. It was one of my most memorable moments. I was always told not to hang out with strangers, especially men... but I did. I did not think much and just wanted to do something I have never done before." - P2(22)

Meanwhile, some women accept those social and Asian constraints,

resulting in terrible travel experiences, which may also affect their revisit intention. With mixed feelings, P18 (39) shared her encounters with local teenagers in Italy.

"They ran towards me and poured.... Kind of like soap liquid on me. The drink that made balloons... You know... I was so surprised, and they just laughed at me and spoke in their language [Italian]. I did not know how to react, so I just walked away. I am not sure if it is called racist. But at that time, I did not feel good. I was thinking, "is it because I am Asian? Or because of my tiny body, I looked like their friends?"

Similarly, P8 (33) experienced racist situations while checking in at the hotel in Vietnam. The hotel receptionist left her alone during check-in to attend to the white couple who came after her. She said:

"So I felt a bit... Ok, I am from Southeast Asia. I felt like that guy did have a preference for white people. He should finish the business with me first... so I did not say anything and just walked out of the hotel, and he did not even stop me, you know...."

Whether they resist or quietly accept social constraints at host destinations, they all set personal rules for self-protection in new places. Some standard practices include not going out late at night and do not accept drinks from strangers.

Self- Development

A sense of self-development is associated with these women's travel motivation and experience. Solo travel was described as a transformative experience and a learning experience that allowed these women to experience liberation and empowerment by overcoming socio-cultural constraints.

Liberating experience. Traveling alone allowed these women to spend valuable time for themselves. In their daily lives, these women mostly spent time on their careers and families as part of women's responsibility in their home society. Therefore, these women valued their solo travel experience emotionally, which provided them space to be free from traditional gender roles. These women mostly perceived it as "me-time: a time for me." As P1 (44) emphasized:

"For me, solo travel time is quite precious. It is not just traveling alone. At the personal level, it is the moment to spend time for yourself. Because I stay with my parents, I mostly absorb my work. It [solo travel] works mentally like once I step out of the country border and am not with anyone, I tend to feel that I left everything behind for a while... On the surface, I seem like I still interact, but mentally I have already switched off. The burden somehow lightens and returns when I head back home. Sometimes on the plane, I already feel anxious about coming back home, back to work".

Freedom and flexibility emerged as P6 (29) also shared, *"Sometimes I plan my trip, sometimes I just let it happen."* By traveling alone, these women made their own decisions and their travel plan without following or compromising with others. Once women experienced the liberating feeling of solo travel, they became addicted to this type of travel. As P2 (22) shared

"... the feeling I experienced during my solo trip was..... so hard to explain but I felt so free. Like no parents around, I could just be myself. That feeling is addictive".

These women focused on self-reflection as they were away from their gender roles and social responsibilities. For instance, P10 (40) shared

"Whenever I visit new places, I will try to visit as much as possible. But sometimes, I just find a nice coffee shop and sit there. I do nothing. My mind just goes somewhere... maybe time for self-reflection. I mostly think about myself at times like that. I guess I love myself too much... I want to spend time for myself; maybe that is why I have not gotten married yet."

Empowering experience. These women empowered themselves to resist the social judgments of individuals and overcome difficulties. Through the solo travel experience, a sense of personal power occurred, from negotiating socio-cultural constraints to dealing with troubles during their solo trip. Unconsciously, they experienced a sense of empowerment as P2 (22) expressed her feelings after overcoming difficulty, *"Wow, I did it. I feel so cool".*

They mainly stated, *"I can feel myself become more confident after each trip."* With the mindset of wanting to conquer their limitations, these women gradually made bolder decisions, wanted to be seen, and described themselves as *"independent women."*

As they became more independent and conscious of their power, this transformative experience made it difficult for them to fit back into their home society's traditional role. Their former lifestyles and relationships were affected, as P8 (33) shared,

"... We broke up because my ex-boyfriend's goals were to get married and settle down. But I did not want to, and they told me I was too Western. They wanted me to depend on them, get married, stay at home, have children, and care for them. Those were all they wanted me to do, but I could not accept that..."

Besides, these women also wanted to change the perception of solo female travelers in their social circle by

actively sharing their transformative experiences on their blogs and other social media. As [P6 \(29\)](#) shared,

"I like to take pictures and share my travel experiences with friends and families. I also want to be a travel blogger. It is not like I want to be famous. I just want to share my solo experience... I hope that I can inspire someone the way my idol inspires me".

As inspired by others, these women also wanted to encourage and empower other women to travel alone. [P4 \(30\)](#) revealed that

"The perception of solo travel is still new to people around me. They admire me, but they do not support what I am doing. Traveling alone is not a common thing in my society. So I often share my travel experience with others. I want more people to know about the positive side of traveling alone. Make it become a common thing, so it will be easier to be accepted by society."

For theoretical implication, this study contributes to the emerging body of research on Asia solo female travelers by exploring the travel experience of Southeast Asian solo female travelers. The results of this study show that Southeast Asian women's roles are still firmly tied to their social norms and gender inequalities with the patriarchal ideologies even in the contemporary era. Their travel experiences were more constrained at the host destination, directly limiting their participant movement and creating fear for personal safety.

With the vulnerable image, these women experienced themselves as a subject of gaze from others, which conforms with the surveillance theme. These women also claimed that the stereotypes about the immigration waves

from developing countries to developed countries in general, particularly from Asia to Western, created unpleasant situations. Especially when their visit intentions had always been questioned with a suspicious gaze from the host community, negatively affecting their return intention. Moreover, their risk awareness was raised when their cultural perceptions could not fit into the context. Furthermore, leisure participation choice depends on how people negotiate constraints ([Yang et al., 2018b](#)).

With the solo status, they experienced the sense of "off-limits" places" ([Chung et al., 2017](#)), which made them avoid certain areas or hesitate to participate in seemingly risky activities. These women had limited destination options due to their family members and friends' disapproving attitudes towards this dangerous travel activity. They learn how to compromise with others while deciding to travel alone. Domestic destinations or neighboring countries were the standard negotiation options for their first solo trip. As [Wilson and Little \(2008a\)](#) pointed out, sociocultural constraints emerged at home and abroad; therefore, these women also struggled in the host community. Mainly their home socio-cultural constraints restrict them to invisible "cultural bubbles", which reduce their authentic cultural travel experience at their destination ([Asbollah et al., 2013](#)). [Asbollah et al. \(2013\)](#) pointed out whether women leave their bubble and step into other cultures or expand their bubble to include more elements. From the finding, some women have clear self-perception about their sociocultural practices while on the trip and easily accept all the situations.

[Yang et al. \(2018a\)](#) also revealed that acceptance was the way that Asian women choose to overcome risks. Eventually, some women left their cultural bubbles because these surfaced

experiences could not satisfy their ultimate motivations. Depending on their levels of risk tolerance, some women resisted these constraints. However, more research needs to analyze the words used to express acceptance and resistance (Yang et al., 2018a).

The more constraints they perceived, the riskier their experience, especially for Southeast Asian women whose roles have been treated unjustly. They had a strong desire to redefine gender identities through solo travel. The meaning of risk-taking was stated to bring out the sense of empowerment, confidence, and freedom of solo female travelers (Hosseini, 2022). Especially in a patriarchal culture in Southeast Asian countries, women had limited opportunities to make their own decisions and experience autonomy. All these critical characteristics contributed to these women's self-development process, which helped them develop and assess their abilities to achieve their travel goals and maximize their potential—starting from how these women empower themselves by taking an active role in negotiating their constraints (Zhou, 2015) and achieve a greater sense of achievement after overcoming these constraints. Cases are how these women negotiate in unfamiliar destinations, respond to unknown surroundings without fully understanding the host culture, or find solutions when facing challenging encounters (Yang et al., 2018b).

Gradually, their travel experience reached an advanced level as they gained more experiences from diverse destinations with different cultures. These women became more independent and confident in dealing with social constraints while seeking individualistic experiences. Mani and Jose (2020) stated that solo travel

provides a transformative experience in which individuals can reconstruct and transform their identity, views, and social positions. However, these transformations did not fit into their home societies when they returned, principally when culture clashes occurred since Western and Asian cultures were not compatible. These women were torn between tradition and modernity. They felt reluctant to maintain the traditional belief and norms and guilty about rejecting taking over their parents' cultural values. From individual empowerment, these women intentionally empowered their social circle to create a greater acceptance of solo female travel. These personal transformations may lead to social transformation (Yang et al., 2018b).

For practical implications, travel associations or tourism providers could offer educational workshops and programs to address some personal concerns related to socio-cultural context and provide emergency contacts for travelers' self-protection. Marketing strategies with comprehensive services should be developed to bring valuable experience to this rising market. More official platforms should be created throughout the solo female traveler's accommodation association, especially in places where this growing market is targeted. These platforms allow these women to connect, share their experiences, and travel tips that may boost others' confidence and lessen the potential constraints to increase the enjoyment of their experience.

CONCLUSION

Even though these 18 Southeast Asian women had the choice and ability to access solo travel freely, their solo travel experiences have been influenced by the existing socio-cultural constraints

in their home society and host destination. The restrictions were reported to partly affect the level of participation and experience instead of completely eliminating the experiences.

Eventually, their travel experience reached an advanced level as they gained more experiences from diverse destinations with different cultures. These women became more independent and confident in dealing with social constraints while seeking individualistic experiences. Mani and Jose (2020) stated that solo travel provides a transformative experience in which individuals can reconstruct and transform their identity, views, and social positions. However, these transformations did not fit into their home societies when they returned, principally when culture clashes occurred since Western and Asian cultures were not compatible. These women were torn between tradition and modernity. They felt reluctant to maintain the traditional belief and norms and guilty about rejecting taking over their parents' cultural values. From individual empowerment, these women intentionally empowered their social circle to create a greater acceptance of solo female travel. These personal transformations may lead to social transformation (Yang et al., 2018b).

LIMITATIONS

This study's limitation is the small sample size, which may not represent all Southeast Asian solo female travelers. Even though theoretical saturation and purposive sampling techniques were adopted to identify the participants and determine the number of interviews, the sample represents a particular group of solo female travelers with intermediate or advanced travel experiences and desire to take risks and

challenges. The study could have focused on one patriarchal society or country where all-female travelers would experience a similar degree of socio-cultural constraints. It would be beneficial to continue investigating the negotiation techniques and how Southeast Asian solo female travelers negotiate and overcome their socio-cultural limitations, which align with other feminist researchers' interests (Yang et al., 2018b; Yang et al., 2019). Other factors, including age, marital status, destination visited, and cultural background, influence their perceptions and experiences differently. Further research on women who cannot travel alone may provide detailed perceptions of current Asian cultural construction.

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