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“Seriously, shit has to change.”

Spatial Constraint Negotiation among Solo Female Travelers

Tourism and travel for women is considered a gendered, sexualized, and politicized space. In *The Solo Female Travel Experience: Exploring the ‘Geography of Women’s Fear,’* Wilson and Little (2008) explore solo female travel from a lens of leisure constraints and feminist discourse. The article describes solo female travelers who experience fear based on their own and others perceptions of safety, a sense of vulnerability, limited access, and feeling self-consciousness or conspicuousness. Wilson and Little and other authors call for additional research that looks at how women resist fear and danger, and from a poststructuralist lens that examines women’s constraint negotiation from a lens of empowerment and agency (Aitchison, 2005; Bialeschki, 2005).

In the tourism and leisure literature, travel spaces have often been considered masculinized, and ‘built for the movement and enjoyment of men,’ (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). This sexualized landscape is sometimes blatant, such as the sexualization of women’s bodies in tourism marketing materials (Pritchard & Morgan; Small, Harris, & Wilson 2008), to the less public, such as women’s reports after their travels of behavior changes they make when traveling (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Wilson & Little, 2008). Studies have found that women are aware of places and behaviors that could open them to unwanted attention or physical harm, ranging from an unwanted male gaze or inappropriate comments, to physical or sexual assault (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Wilson, Holdsworth, & Witsel, 2009; Wilson & Little).

To be a solo female traveler is to intentionally move into and throughout that sexualized, gendered landscape, and negotiate the constraints therein. Studies have found that women travel solo in order to feel self-determined and autonomous, to meet new people, challenge themselves, feel empowered, self-reliant, to extend themselves beyond their comfort zone, for a sense of individuality, and for personal growth (Chiang & Jongaratnam, 2006; Durko & Stone, 2017; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010; Wilson & Little, 2005; 2008). These studies have asked women about the reasons they travel, benefits they gain, risk taking behaviors, and perceptions of safety. Several studies used Wilson & Little’s constraints framework to examine behaviors. In this framework, constraints include sociocultural, such as gender roles and expectations; personal limitations, such as lack of confidence in one’s ability to travel solo; practical constraints, like lack of money or knowledge of the area; and spatial constraints, of lack of safety.

Yet looking at women’s leisure through the lens of constraints and as limited by gendered, social or structural norms and has to be negotiated, assumes there are still oppressive structures in place and that women have, are, and will continue to be subjects of oppression. While important to understand constraints, it may be a limiting lens. Poststructuralist feminist philosophy suggests that power is located throughout relationships, not as a top down structure. This assumes that power is within and part of everyone, which means women have agency and power, as well as cannot remove themselves from power dynamics or relationships (Beal, 2018). In contrast to critical feminism, which sees power as an issue of access to and control of resources and thus change happens when access and control change, post-structuralism sees social change as coming from the creation of different discourses in which power is “more diffuse, fluid and contextually bound,” in which “a multitude of gendered subjectivities are legitimated,” (Beal, p. 235). A shift from looking at women’s travel from a critical feminist perspective to a poststructuralist perspective means moving away from research focused on constraint negotiation to one of a dynamic discourse in which women recreate themselves through dialog, in which their self is fluid depending on context, and they are equal in creating power dynamics and relationships.

Some research on women’s travel has sought to do this. Recent studies have examined women’s travel experiences and focused not on constraints but on empowerment. Harris and Wilson (2007) suggest acknowledging that women should “be seen as active participants who make their own choices and actions, rather than as passive victims of circumstance and constraint” (p. 240). In the mid-2000s, several studies looked at women’s leisure purely from a standpoint of empowerment. Wilson and Harris examined women’s “search for self” in travel; Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely (2013) looked at women’s sexual behaviors as empowerment while on holiday; and McNamara and Prideaux (2013) suggested a typology of solo female travelers, and their findings did not support previous research that solo female travelers were fearful, cautious, and unadventurous. They found that when solo females

viewed a destination as safe, they were more likely to plan a trip there, and engage in (usually physical) risk-taking activities. In contrast, however, Thomas & Mura (2018) found a ‘normality of unsafety’ in the blogs of solo female travelers in India. The authors found that women had accepted and internalized unsafety and potential physical harm as existing most anywhere, and when traveling alone. The authors question whether solo travel is really a space of empowerment and one that “challenges gendered structures of power,” (p. 38).

While the lens of constraints has been useful as a starting point to investigate women’s travel experiences, it does not explore the full range of their experience, particularly the ways in which they may feel empowered or agentic to negotiate or ignore constraints. Or, drawing from Thomas & Mura (2019), perhaps the constraints still exist. The purpose of this study was to examine women’s perceptions of physical safety and harassment when traveling and how they might address, negotiate, or ignore perceived constraints.

Method

Drawing from a poststructuralist approach to research, this study listened to women’s voices as they expressed their travel experiences in writing. Discourse is at the heart of poststructuralism, and through writing, actors can generate new life forms, disrupt old meanings, and “eclipse the gendered discourses and regulatory practices through which we are constituted,” (Davies & Gannon, 2009, p. 319). Writing and reading are pathways to agency, not always through resistance, and are ways to resist, subvert, and breakdown old discourses, and then perhaps social structures and processes. Writing and discussing to create a new discourse leads to greater agency and “a recognition of one’s love of, immersion in and indebtedness to that discourse, and also a fascination with the capacity to generate life,” (Davies & Gannon, p. 319).

Data were gathered from the discussion posts of solo female travelers in an active social media group for solo female travelers. The researcher is also a solo female traveler and a member of this closed group. To become a member, one must request to join and answer a few questions about her solo travel. This study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and deemed of minimal risk. The researcher did not ask participants to do anything, did not post questions, and had not been part of the discussions in the analysis. While the social media group is closed, it has some 212,000 members with more than 150 posts daily. The IRB determined that privacy *could* be a reasonable expectation of *some* members, while other members may recognize that Internet ‘privacy’ is fallible. On many social media platforms, for example, anyone could create a fake profile and join a group. Any post could be copied, or a screenshot taken and posted elsewhere. The study was reviewed for risk, and found that extracting themes from existing data, without any identifying information, was not harmful to participants. In order to directly quote someone, consent was obtained via the social media’s messaging function. In this group, with some 212,000 members around the world, women share their stories, ask questions, and seek guidance about solo travel from other solo female travelers. Most women appear to engage in independent travel, booking their own hotels and excursions, with occasional comments about arriving solo but then joining larger tour group.

For the topic of spatial constraints, discussion posts were searched using the terms harassment, harassed, unwanted male attention, and male attention. All discussion posts in the analysis were from a woman who had recently experienced too much unwanted attention or physical harassment and wanted advice or suggestions as to how other women handled that. Posts were from three to 18 months old.

Discussion posts were copied to a spreadsheet and each idea in a comment was coded, per Charmaz’s initial coding approach. *In vivo* terms were used in the first phase to identify all ideas, then focused coding was applied to select and re-name the most apparent and frequently occurring codes into broader themes. Three student assistants, all females, and the researcher coded the data. The author and students discussed emergent themes, collapsed themes as needed, agreed on meanings, and chose quotations to best illustrate each theme. A total of 287 comments were analyzed (~7,000 words).

Results

The themes were into two broad areas: Dealing with Unwanted Attention and Dealing with Physical Harassment. Quotes that illustrate the theme, or sometimes multiple themes, are given here to best represent the data.

Dealing with Unwanted Male Attention.

This topic discussed unwanted male attention via behaviors such as persistent flirting, talking too much, cat-calling, whistling, and generally hitting on the woman. A total of 108 comments related to this topic. and from those, five themes emerged; Lie, Firm Rejection, Avoid or Act Ugly, and 'Damn this is Disheartening.'

Lie. The general sentiment toward unwanted male attention was that, while very annoying and inappropriate, it will continue to happen, no matter where one travels. By lying, the women meant to do or show something that indicates you either not available, not interested, or not worth their time. Many women suggested wearing a fake wedding ring to send the message you're taken. Other women suggested telling the man right away that you have a boyfriend. Others suggested a more personal lie, such as telling the man you have an STD, Ebola virus, or are transgender. One comment illustrates the planning that can go into lies:

Yup, I sometimes wear the 'Deterrent Ring' as well, and go as far as picking various professions for my 'spouse' ! So depending on the situation, he can be a Police Officer, which is the one that i found over the years works the best, sometimes Lawyer and that his uncle is a Judge!

Firm Rejection. Many women said it should be enough to firmly say no. They suggested that other women ignore the man, state no in a firm voice, and keep walking not even making eye contact.

I don't even waste my time to explain - I just put up my right hand (stop sign) and firmly say No.

He asked for my number, I just said no thank you. It's funny how shocked men get (to a) direct no, why do we feel the need to cater to their egos and lie to them.

Avoid or Act Ugly. This theme was characterized as simply avoiding men all together and not start conversation or engage in interactions with men, and/or dress is unattractive clothing, engage in socially 'gross' behaviors such as burping or farting in public, wearing bagging clothing, or not wearing make up or deodorant.

'Damn this is Disheartening.' Comments in this theme often followed lie-related tactics to dissuade men, and is a general disappointment or irritation that men cannot respect a woman when she says no. It was surprising to many women that persistent and unwanted attention was something they still dealt with.

Damn this is disheartening ... all of us who deal with unwanted attention and have to resort to faking things to get away from it. Seriously, shit has to change.

There was further irritation that the lie had to invoke another man.

... male dominated society where another man is the only thing that makes a man act right. They have more respect for another man's claim in you than they do for you.

Dealing with Physical Harassment

On how women dealt with physical harassment, 179 comments were coded, and four themes emerged including; Empathy & Encouragement, Avoid Becoming the Target, Violence & Draw Attention, Understand Social Customs.

Empathy & Encouragement

Empathy and Encouragement were heard over and over when a poster reported she'd experienced harassment. Empathetic responses took the form of caring, understanding words, often sharing personal stories, and then encouraging the woman to continue to travel.

It literally could happen anywhere so I'd rather take the risk of experiencing it in a beautiful country and growing from the experience instead of it bringing me down. So sorry this happened to you, but do your thing and remember all the wonderful and sincerely good people you have met and will still meet! Much love!!

Know that what happened was not your fault. Know you are a strong powerful woman. I want you to tell scream out loud roar like the lioness you are.

Avoid Becoming the Target

In this theme, women gave general travel advice for safety, suggesting ways to avoid or prevent harassment from happening in the first place. This included behaviors to avoid and actions to take to stay safe. Behaviors to avoid included: do not walk alone, especially after dark, do not get drunk, do not take rides or drinks from strangers, do not show too much skin when not culturally appropriate, do not look lost, and do not wear headphones. Safety behaviors included: walk with confidence, in well-lit areas, be alert, aware, stay near other tourists, and trust your gut. Most comments were preceded with a comment in the theme of empathy.

My best advice is to perfect your bitch-face. Walk tall, look a little mean and men won't bother you as much. They will still look ... but they won't try to take advantage.

Draw Attention & Get Violent

The next theme was around how to protect and defend oneself when harassment happened. The comments were detailed and specific to certain countries. Responses in this theme included screaming and yelling to make a scene and draw attention and help, and to learn physical fighting skills or carry violent objects to protect oneself. Objects to carry included to carry mace, a stick, pepper spray (where legal), or sharp keys. A knife was not recommended as that could be used against the woman. Many others suggested hitting, punching, kicking a man in the crotch, or, before traveling, learning self-defense from YouTube or a class.

Self defense classes if you haven't already, boosts your confidence and keeps you safe. And remember that you are a badass! You are a strong independent woman, no one can take that away from you.

Don't be afraid to scream and make a scene... I carry my keys in my hand in such a way that the key sticks out in between my second and third digit in case I need to punch someone.

... get prepared! Go take a self-defense class and learn how to defend yourself in many different kinds of situations. Krav Maga is good... and learn how to defend yourself in real-life situations. Also, carry whatever kind of self-defense item you're allowed in whatever country you're in. Obviously you can't carry anything on the airplane, so research before you go as to what is legal in that country, and when you land in that country, go get it, and carry it with you always. For example, if you're visiting the United States, you can get a little bottle of pepper spray...inexpensive, and could come in handy.

I wouldn't carry a knife. And even using pepper spray in the UK you could get charged. Spray deodorant or perfume works like pepper spray not as well – but it's legal to carry and wouldn't be considered "pre-meditated" (if) you used it.

Understand Social Customs

Another theme was that women should be knowledgeable in the social norms for the host country, with suggestions to dress and act like local women. Specifically, many women suggested they 'assimilate' and dress conservatively if in a conservative country. Though many women admitted they did not like this approach, they said female travelers, as guests in a foreign country presumably there to learn or experience the host country, should dress and act as is acceptable for that culture. Many women simply said 'cover up if that's the norm,' such as covering shoulders and legs. Though right after

suggesting a woman cover up, several posters added ‘sad but true’ or ‘you may not agree with this but it works, or ‘even though how you dress shouldn’t matter... it does.’ Other comments around learning social norms were about body language, such as; *in some cultures, making direct eye contact with a man is considered a sign of interest on the woman's part.*

Discussion

This study sought to understand how women’s perceptions of physical safety and harassment when traveling and how they might address, negotiate, or ignore perceived constraints. Women’s responses are almost on a continuum from carefully, almost passively avoiding spatial constraints or threats, while at the other end, suggesting violent reactions to (or preparing to react to) physical space and threats. Some research has also heard these conflicting narratives, such as Wilson, Holdsworth & Witsel’s analysis of guidebooks, but the extent of the retaliatory actions heard in this study have not been previously reported. Yet they begin to make sense when interpreted in light of recent feminist movements.

The women who suggest simply lying and avoiding behaviors that could make one a target, are acknowledging constraints yet allowing them to continue to happen. While the women have resisted gendered norms by venturing out to solo travel at all, they are still seeing or operating in a tourist space that they recognize is still a male-dominated space, one that must either be avoided, or carefully negotiated via lies or more conservative choices. In this and previous research, women talk about navigating their geography of fear and spatial constraints by staying in after dark, walking with friends, and dressing modestly.

In sharp contrast, other women suggest aggression, the ability to engage in violent retaliation, drawing attention to the act, and grooming oneself for general ugliness. These women seek to resist the submissive female archetype ascribed to them and act to reclaim their bodies and travel space. Reversing the external threats often reported and perceived by women, these solo travelers suggested becoming threats themselves, and becoming physical spaces of danger and aggression. While some authors have suggested that unsafety is accepted by women (Thomas & Mura, 2018), the voices heard here do not entirely agree on that and are using travel as a place for resistance. The women who suggested violence or ugliness decided to de-masculinize their female bodies or expected gendered norms and turn them into a space of violence and ugliness. Like the #MeToo movement, and women speaking publicly out and against harassment of women, this group took a physical stand to reclaim themselves and their desired travel space. Some women in this study are taking an active role in social change by demanding and create the power structures they want. This movement toward personal traveler agency and power also aligns with fourth wave feminism, which is often described a focus on empowerment and seeking gender equality, and with reliance on technology to call out behaviors and spread messages (Phillips & Cree, 2014).

The other voices and themes, such as lie, assimilate, or ignore it, allow oppression to continue and for males to continue to dominate public spheres. It is sometimes said that if you’re not resisting, you’re complicit. But for women on vacation- wanting perhaps to vacate stress and pressure, ethical dilemmas, confrontation — these actions mitigated conflict, lessened the battle fatigue of constant constraint negotiation, and allowed her to enjoy a vacation. While some women did not agree with their own suggestions to assimilate, it was seen as a simple way to individually move on.

Limitations. This study used previous discussions posted in a social media group to understand solo female travelers’ experiences with spatial constraints. The posts were all in English, but the poster may not have been a native speaker, and different English-speaking cultures may have different connotations for words. Women were from around the world and constraints may be perceived or interpreted differently by different cultures.

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