Power and empowerment: How Asian solo female travellers perceive and negotiate risks

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Asian solo female travellers are challenged by gendered and racialised risks.
- Gender intersects with race in amplifying Asian women's perception of risk.
- Risks are conceptualised as the unequal power relations underlying tourism space.
- Female travellers gain empowerment and reconstruct identities through risk-taking.
- Individual empowerment may extend to social transformations at a micro level.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In response to the emergence of the solo female travel market in Asia, this study explores how Asian women perceive and negotiate the risks of travelling alone and the meanings of these processes. The lived experiences of 35 solo female travellers from 10 East and Southeast Asian countries were analysed using constructivist grounded theory. The findings reveal that Asian solo female travellers were concerned about gendered (e.g. sexual assault and street harassment) and racialised (e.g. discrimination and social disapproval) risks, which imply the unequal power relations underpinning the gendered and racialised tourism space. The findings also reveal evidence where gender intersects with race in amplifying and constructing Asian women's perception of risk. The study demonstrates how Asian solo female travellers gained empowerment and experienced self-transformations through negotiating the risks and further reveals how these individual transformations may extend to social transformations at a micro level in an Asian context.

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1. Introduction

Recent advances in gender equality have greatly improved women's employment in both developed and developing countries. With their increased economic independence, women now have greater opportunities to, and choices about, travel. A growing number of women have begun to embrace this newly gained autonomy and independently travel in search of freedom, independence, and empowerment (Elliot, 2015; Jordan & Gibson, 2005). A survey by TripAdvisor reveals that 91% of women in Germany and France and 81% of women in Australia are interested in travelling alone (ETB Travel News., 2015). This trend is also evident in Southeast Asia with 79% of women planning to travel alone and in 2015, 48% of Southeast Asian women had actually taken a solo holiday, an increase from 36% in 2014 (Elliot, 2015; The Star, 2015). While the exact figures are not available, industry reports have pointed to the growing market of Asian solo female travellers (Amadeus, 2013; Pacific Asia Travel Association, 2016). In contrast to the emerging trend, only a handful of tourism studies have been published on solo female travel (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010; Wilson & Little, 2005, 2008). Because most of these studies have focused on a western perspective, little is known about the experience of solo female travellers from Asia.

In response to the dearth of research in this area, this study

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investigates the solo travel behaviour of Asian women and, specifically, the risk perception of Asian solo female travellers. When travelling alone in the tourism space that privileges (white) men's travel experience (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000), women are exposed to gendered risks, such as sexual harassment and unwanted attention (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Little, 2008). Some scholars suggest that the effect of risk can be amplified in Asian women because of the different cultural values underlying the social expectations of what it is to be a respectable woman in an Asian society (Muzaini, 2006; Teo & Leong, 2006). Several industry reports also indicate that safety is a top priority for Asian female travellers (Pacific Asia Travel Association, 2016; The Star, 2015). While the risk associated with solo female travel has been frequently mentioned, few studies have conceptualised risk as an independent subject of investigation, and even fewer have investigated risk perception from gender and non-western perspectives. Therefore, this study contributes to this knowledge gap in the area of solo travel by providing an in-depth understanding of the risk perception of Asian solo female travellers.

In summary, this study seeks to explore how Asian women perceive and negotiate the risk of travelling alone and whether their resistance to risks and the underlying power relations will lead to empowerment. The outcomes of this study are expected to advance existing knowledge of the solo female travel market, an increasingly significant yet under-researched area. By taking into account gender and racial identities and their mutually constitutive relations, the study contributes an intersectionality perspective to tourism research, a field that has been criticised for being androcentric (Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Pérez, Morgan, & Villacé-Molinero, 2015) and western-centric (Winter 2009). Furthermore, this study expands the understanding of risk, a prevalent notion in contemporary society, by deconstructing it from gender, culture and power perspectives.

2. Situating the research

2.1. Travelling alone in the gendered and racialised space

Tourism space is "a powerful cultural arena and process that both shapes and is shaped by gendered (re)presentations of places, people, nations and cultures" (Aitchison, 2001, p. 134). Nevertheless, existing tourism space has been predominantly shaped by the experiences of male tourists from the developed western countries, which renders it a gendered and racialised industry and space (Aitchison, 2001; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Vandegrift, 2008; Winter 2009). This is not surprising because the knowledge construction of tourism has evolved around a western-centric viewpoint that often overemphasises the western beginnings of contemporary tourism which traces back to the elite excursions of European travellers who were predominantly white upper-class males (Chambers, 2010). This perception has overlooked the presence of non-western travellers and travel practices. With the rise of the female and other emerging markets in the past few decades, several tourism scholars have begun to critique the colonial and patriarchal legacy in the field and call for different approaches, such as postcolonial and intersectionality approaches to the understanding of contemporary tourism practices (Aitchison, 2001; Winter 2009). Responding to this call, this study offers an alternative interpretation through the experiences of Asian solo female travellers. In particular, this study asks if tourism space is gendered and racialised, will Asian women encounter a different experience when travelling alone in such a space? While existing literature does not provide a definitive answer to this question due to the absence of research concerning Asian solo female travellers, prior

studies on western solo female travellers and Asian backpackers have offered some important insights.

From a gender viewpoint, existing literature has demonstrated how travelling alone provides women with a space away from home where they can explore and reflect on the self, which may eventually lead to transformative and empowering experiences (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006). In particular, solo travel is regarded as one way of expressing women's agency because travelling alone was considered inappropriate for women in the past, and this disapproval still lingers, although to a lesser extent in contemporary society (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Little, 2005). While this liminal space emancipates women from the social expectations and responsibilities of their home society, this space is not entirely free from social constraints because women are still bounded by the gender norms and power relations in the host society (Bui, Wilkins, & Lee, 2014; Heimtun, 2011). As documented in prior research, women's bodies and their solo presence often invite uncomfortable attention and sexual advances, which expose them to the risk of sexual harassment when travelling alone (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). The social disapproval imposed on women travelling alone and the resulting social constraints in the forms of sexual risk point to the gendered double standards that prevail in the contemporary tourism space and practices, which have continued to privilege men's pleasure and experiences (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015a; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). This situation is exacerbated when gender intersects with race.

Past studies have reported an amplified effect on Asian female backpackers because of their gender and cultural background (Teo & Leong, 2006). Comparable to many other travel practices, backpacking, a subset of independent travel that is closely related to the interest of this study, is widely portrayed as a tourism practice with a western origin in which travellers (mostly men at its inception) from the developed West travel to the less developed South and East, including Asia in search of exotic, adventurous, and life-changing experiences (Bui, Wilkins, & Lee, 2013; Noy, 2004; Teo & Leong, 2006). Although a number of recent studies have investigated the experiences of non-western backpackers (Berdychevsky, Poria, & Uriely, 2010; Chen, Bao, & Huang, 2014; Chen, Yu, Chang, & Hsieh, 2014; Ong & du Cros, 2012), few studies have critically examined the flipped host-guest relationships (e.g., Asian backpackers travelling to the West or within Asia) and the meanings of backpacking from Asian perspectives. One of the exceptions is Bui et al. (2013) who found that for Asian backpackers, backpacking continues to be perceived as a westernised practice dominated by "imagined" western values such as independence and freedom. While little is known about the experience of Asian female backpackers, earlier studies (Muzaini, 2006; Teo & Leong, 2006) reported that Asian female backpackers had been mistaken as local sex workers when travelling in some Asian countries where sex tourism prevails. These studies suggest that Asian female backpackers fail to fit into the typical image of backpackers, who are supposedly white and male, though this image is changing. Their findings not only exemplify gendered double standards but also racial double standards that exist in the contemporary tourism space. The resultant double *othering*, where Asian women are marginalized because of their gender and also because of their Asian identity, can contribute to the risk perception of Asian female backpackers. In summary, existing research has inferred a distinctive set of risks in the independent travel experiences of women and in particular, Asian women. This study seeks to expand on this understanding by conceptualising risk as an independent subject of investigation.