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Understanding online tourist–tourist interaction in solo female travel: a self-determination theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the online tourist–tourist interaction within the context of solo female travel experiences. Data collected from solo travel forums on TripAdvisor are analysed using thematic analysis to examine how these interactions impact the solo female travel experience. The findings reveal that online interactions influence the perceptions and experiences of solo female travellers by fostering a sense of autonomy and control, building competence and confidence, and creating a sense of connectedness with others. This study applies the self-determination theory to offer insights into how online tourist–tourist interactions influence these psychological needs within the context of solo travel. It provides a theoretical contribution to the broader discourse on the motivations of solo female travellers, emphasising the critical role of online social support networks in enhancing the solo travel experiences.

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Introduction

Solo female travel has emerged as a prominent trend in the tourism industry (Terziyska, 2021). Many solo female travellers (SFTs) choose to travel alone in search of freedom, independence, empowerment, and exploration (Osman et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2018b). Although travelling solo is generally associated with being alone, women may frequently interact with others, thereby providing opportunities for both periods of solitude and social interaction during their journeys. Previous studies have examined the concept of tourist-to-tourist (T2T) interaction, identifying various forms of T2T interactions and exploring both the quantity and the quality of these interactions on the tourism experience (Lin et al., 2022; Reichenberger, 2017; Rihova et al., 2018). Researchers have examined the impact of both positive interactions (Lee et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2019) and negative interactions (Adam, 2021; Dolan et al., 2019) between tourists on the travel experience. Interactions between tourists can affect various aspects of the travel experiences, including destination choices, itinerary planning, safety perceptions, social connections, and emotional support (Bargeman & Richards, 2020; Koc et al., 2022).

Previous research has also emphasised the impact of online communication, leading to the emergence of numerous online communities (Karagöz et al., 2021; Okazaki et al., 2017). These online communities serve as valuable platforms to facilitate T2T interactions, including sharing travel experiences, recommending destinations, seeking advice, and connecting with others (Chen et al., 2020; Okazaki et al., 2017). Thus, online communities function as social support networks (Karagöz

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et al., 2021; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013). Although T2T interaction has gained recognition in solo travel studies, there remains a limited understanding of how SFTs interact with other tourists online (Karagöz et al., 2021). This research examines social interactions within TripAdvisor travel discussion forums of solo female travellers. Understanding online T2T interactions will provide insights into SFTs experiences. These insights may help to elaborate on why and how women engage with others in their solo travels, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how T2T interactions support solo travel and the interplay between solitude and social interaction in the solo travel experience.

Studying online T2T interactions will provide insights into solo female travel experiences. These insights can help elaborate on why and how women engage with others during their solo travels, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how T2T interactions facilitate solo travel and how both solitude and interaction are perceived and experienced.

Literature review

Solo travel motivation, solitude, and social interactions

The motivation of SFTs represents one of the most extensively researched topics within the field of solo female travel literature (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020; Seow & Brown, 2018; Terziyska, 2021). Motivations related to personal development, such as independence, empowerment, and exploration, are identified as the crucial factors influencing women's engagement in solo travel (Bianchi, 2016; Hosseini et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2018a). Other critical drivers for solo travelling include the freedom of choice in not having to consider the travel needs of others or compromise one's own needs (Abbasian, 2019; Bianchi, 2016). In addition to these motivations, solitude has also been identified as a motivation for solo travel (Leith, 2020; Somasiri et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). Solo travel is a specific context where individuals often experience periods of solitude, which can serve as a motivation for personal development through introspection, self-discovery, empowerment, and personal growth (Bianchi, 2016; Naor & Mayselless, 2020).

Researchers have examined solitary behaviour across various age groups and contexts, presenting differing perspectives on the conceptualisation of solitude (Hipson et al., 2021; Long et al., 2003; Nguyen et al., 2021). Many definitions of solitude often centred on the various states of aloneness and different levels of social interaction with others (Koch, 1994; Long et al., 2003; Nguyen et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2022). Some researchers, conceptualise solitude as a state of absolute physical aloneness (Nguyen et al., 2018; Weinstein et al., 2022). The solitude experience is viewed as "an experience of being alone without any communication with others, without any other activities, and without other types of active stimuli present" (Nguyen et al., 2018, pp. 92–93). Other researchers do not consider physical isolation necessary for experiencing solitude, as solitude can be experienced in the presence of others (Long & Averill, 2003). Thus, solitude is defined as "a state of being alone – either by oneself or, if in the presence of others, without any social interaction" (Long et al., 2003, p. 579). Across these perspectives, solitude is viewed as a psychological state, involving disengagement from others (Koch, 1994), which can remove constraints and provide freedom in one's behavioural choices.

Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory is a metatheory of human motivation which operates to achieve psychological health and well-being by aligning behaviour with a person's sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Self-determination theory explains that intrinsic motivation is supported by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for autonomy refers to individuals' desire for choice in determining their activities and goals. They seek the ability to participate in activities and behaviours that are of interest and

personal importance. The need for competence relates to the desire to be effective in one's abilities and skills, thereby exerting control over situations and outcomes within the social environment. It signifies one's capacity to achieve one's goals and perform tasks proficiently. The need for relatedness involves the desire to experience a sense of connectedness with others in social contexts. Social contexts that support relatedness have the capacity to foster connections with others in beneficial ways. The satisfaction of these three needs is associated with adaptive motivational orientations towards behaviours, which contribute to maintaining optimal functioning. Conversely, when these needs are frustrated, it leads to impaired functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Self-determination theory provides a comprehensive framework capable of explaining a wide range of domains and behaviours (Deci et al., 2017; Mallia et al., 2019; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006), thereby making it particularly relevant for examining motivation for female solo travel. Previous studies have highlighted the value of solo travel in fostering self-determination, independence, and empowerment (Bianchi, 2016; Hosseini et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2020). Additionally, studies have identified solitude as a motivation for solo travel (Leith, 2020; Yang, 2021). Chua and Koestner (2008) examined solitary behaviour within the framework of self-determination theory, emphasising the significance of autonomous social behaviour. As such, negative outcomes were associated with solitary behaviour only in instances where there was a lack of autonomy in one's behaviour. Related to autonomy, the experience of solitude may depend on the individual, their motivations, the level of personal choice, and the context (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2018). Averill and Sundararajan (2014) emphasise the importance of choice, distinguishing authentic solitude, experienced through personal choice, from unwanted isolation, which is perceived as pseudo-solitude. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2018) reported that choice significantly contributes to positive solitary experiences. Thus, the way individuals experience solitude, emphasising the importance of self-determination in relation to motivation, independence, and choice, can have a significant impact on their psychosocial outcomes.

Solo travel and tourist-to-tourist interaction

The perception, meaning, and significance of solo travelling have evolved over time (Benjamin & Schwab, 2023; Terziyska, 2021). Some studies have narrowly defined solo travel as travelling 'alone' rather than being part of another group of travellers (Bianchi, 2022; Yang & Tung, 2018). Other studies have characterised solo travel as being 'mostly alone', while also emphasising the social dimension through interactions with other tourists, locals, and service personnel (Karagöz et al., 2021; Su & Wu, 2021). These varying perspectives suggest that solo travel involves a spectrum of experiences, ranging from complete aloneness to moments of social interaction. Several studies have examined the social interactions experienced by SFTs during their journeys. Some studies focused on the risks women encountered during their solo travel due to these interactions (Thomas & Mura, 2019; Yang et al., 2018a), while others have emphasised various benefits derived from interactions, thereby enhancing the solo travel experience (Jin & Zhang, 2022; Su & Wu, 2021). Furthermore, social interaction has been identified as a motivation associated with solo female travel (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020; Wilson & Harris, 2006).

In the context of solo female travel, T2T interactions can shape the way solo travellers navigate their journeys and can impact social support and safety concerns, highlighting both risks and benefits associated with interpersonal encounters during solo travel. Furthermore, different forms of T2T interactions may influence SFTs' solo travel experience and how solitude is experienced. Onsite and online interactions may vary in social dynamics, relationship developments, and subsequent impacts on solo travel. Online T2T interactions have been transformed as technology has broadened social interactions beyond spatial boundaries. Thus, research focussing on SFTs participating online travel forums as a specific form of interaction may offer insights into the dynamic interplay of solitude and interactions in solo travels.

Online travel communities serve as social platforms where tourists with shared interests gather to share information, provide travel advice, exchange personal experiences, foster relationships

with other users, and create online communities centred around specific travel topics (Chen et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2020). Many studies have highlighted the social benefits of participating in online communities, where these interactions serve as valuable sources of information for other tourists, assisting them plan their trips, influencing their travel decisions, and enhancing their travel experiences (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Furthermore, some of these interactions involve providing and receiving emotional support within the online community (Chu, 2009; Karagöz et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2002). Women travelling alone often face gendered risks and encounter gender stereotypes (Wantono & McKercher, 2020; Yang et al., 2018b), highlighting the importance of other SFTs as a source of social support. SFTs can find this necessary support through online female travel communities (Karagöz et al., 2021).

This study aims to examine online T2T interactions to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature and dynamics of interactions among SFTs. The research question is: How do online interactions influence the solo travel experience of solo female travellers? This study contributes to the solo female travel literature by providing a broader understanding of how T2T interactions shape perceptions and engagement with solitude during solo travel, which has important implications for both researchers and tourism service providers.

Methods

This study is part of a larger research project examining female solo travel and solitude, with some methodological details being outlined elsewhere (Dresler, 2023). In this phase, a netnographic approach was adopted to capture and analyse online community conversations on solo travel (Tavakoli & Wijesinghe, 2019). This approach is particularly suited to providing meaningful analysis and gaining a deeper understanding of travel experiences, especially as contributors share their motivations, preferences, and challenges in solo travel. TripAdvisor is a popular online travel platform in the tourism industry that hosts reviews and discussions from a wide range of international travellers with diverse ages, cultural backgrounds, preferences, and expectations (Amatulli et al., 2019; Taecharunroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). Travel forum discussions, characterised by their informal nature, allow for a diverse range of personal viewpoints, factual information, and sentiments, presenting the discussions as narratives about solo travel experiences. We were interested in what women consider important to share on these forums, aiming to identify the essential components of solo travel. By analysing these discussions, we can understand the experiences and challenges associated with solo travel.

Given the high volume of data on solo female travel, the research team limited the data collection from travel forum discussions to the years 2019–2023. The key terms used in the search included 'solo female travel', 'solo female travellers', 'solo travel', 'solo journey', 'solo trips', 'travelling alone', 'travelling by myself', 'travelling on my own', 'being alone', 'alone', 'lonely', 'loneliness', and 'solitude'. A total of 85 discussion forums, consisting of 1094 replies provided by tourists, were collected to gain insights into how various international tourists experience solo travel. Non-English discussion forums were excluded because the research team felt more at ease analysing English language discussions, aiming to prevent potential misinterpretation of the non-English content. Additionally, male participants in the discussion forums were also excluded.

The travel discussion forums were analysed using thematic analysis to gain insights into the connections between interactions, solitude, and solo travel (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure the rigour of the findings, a process of member-checking functions was conducted. This involved three research members independently analysing the data and through group discussion, reaching consensus on the codes, themes, sub-themes, and labels. In the event of contradictions, the team re-evaluated and redefined the themes to ensure that the contents were accurately represented. This research analysed postings from TripAdvisor, which are publicly available to everyone. The research team neither participated in nor was involved in the communication within these travel

forum postings. Thus, it did not require human subject consent. To maintain anonymity, each direct quote from the post was assigned a random number. For example, 'Switzerland2' indicated the participant was from Switzerland, while 'X12' was assigned when the participant's country was not specified. Ethical approval was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Findings

This study revealed various reasons why women travel solo, indicating the sources of their motivation for travelling solo. The findings revealed four interrelated themes: (1) the need for solitude, (2) the need for autonomy, (3) the need for competence, and (4) the need for relatedness. The need for solitude in solo travel, linked with interactions on travel forums can fulfil the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The need for solitude

Solo travel is inherently linked to the experience of solitude, as women engage in journeying alone. However, the need for solitude can vary widely among travellers: "Some travelers embrace solitude and others can't even stand to eat alone. What's your travel style?" (Canada5). Women recognised the diverse preferences and comfort levels when experiencing solitude during solo travel: "To each their own comfort level" (X10). This acknowledges the importance of individual differences: "I don't mind my own company though and that may be an issue for some" (X5). One traveller expressed: "Not everyone is suited for solo travel. There are some people who just don't like spending time alone" (UK2). Another claimed, "Once you start traveling alone, it's hard to go back to traveling with someone" (USA22). These exchanges on the travel forums illustrate the complex interplay between solitude and solo travel, highlighting the diverse preferences and experiences for solitude among SFTs.

Many women expressed positive sentiment towards solitude during solo journeys, emphasising the positive aspects of their travel experiences: "I've travelled to Cuba and Cancun Solo and enjoyed my solitude" (Canada12), "Love my solitude" (USA7), and "I LIKE being solo, I don't wish I was traveling with anyone, I don't feel bad about being alone" (USA12). Many women sought recommendations for destinations where they could experience solitude in their solo travels: "I'd want some sun, access to awesome pools/spas, interesting places/unique vibes, with low key walking trails and good LOCAL food. I won't be in the mood to interact with people" (USA25). In offering recommendations, "I think you can find solitude in lots of places ... " (USA12). Women have recognised the importance of solitude, indicating that they value the opportunity to be alone while travelling. They prioritised destinations that can be enjoyed independently without the need for social interaction.

Solitude in solo travel offered opportunities for self-exploration: "You'll find new appreciation for life, you'll be able to do whatever you want whenever you want and it will allow you to reflect and reconnect with yourself" (Canada2). Another traveller expressed: "Of course that is a voyage of discovery that you are just beginning" (UK5). Some women sought solace and reflection in being alone during their solo travel: "And I like to buy a bottle of wine and enjoy it on the patio of my hotel room while enjoying the view. In solitude while reflecting on my day's travels" (USA26). For many women, solitude is not simply about being alone, it's more about "Looking for a place to relax and process and renew ... the chance to enjoy the healing power of solitude" (USA19). Some women perceived travelling alone and experiencing solitude served as a restorative break from their routine lives: "I was really feeling like life was super boring: work/run/bed/work etc ... I realise that exploring is very important for my mental health! I was so happy the whole time. It was effortless! I recommend it to anyone who is feeling depressed/ stuck/tired of being home for a year!" (USA15). Solitude provides a space for self-care, introspection, and personal growth, highlighting the diverse ways in which women experience solitude during their solo travel journeys.

The need for autonomy

The need for autonomy involves individuals' need for freedom of choice in determining the activities they engage in based on their own interests and preferences: "... it's way easier to travel on my own and do exactly what I want to do rather than compromise with a travel companion" (USA14) and "The best part is that you get to do what you want to do and don't have to worry about missing anything because your travel companion is not interested" (Georgia2). The women expressed a preference for solo travel because it allowed them to exercise control over their itineraries and activities. For many women travelling solo, their sense of control could be challenged when they find themselves in unfamiliar destinations: "I traveled alone before in South East Asia but never in India. I am a bit apprehensive" (X11) and "I do have some anxiety" (USA28). The possibility of encountering risks at the destination could undermine their sense of control, influencing their decision-making and travel behaviour: "I (26-year-old female) completed my second solo trip to Indonesia and wanted to post about safety as a woman in Sumatra. I personally would never go back and felt extremely unsafe for my entire time on the island. I had multiple instances where men tried to corner and intimidate me ..." (USA29).

Women may seek to maintain a sense of control over their solo travel experiences while navigating unfamiliar destinations by actively seeking advice and guidance from others. Some women took a proactive approach to gather information that helped them navigate unfamiliar destinations more effectively: "... any helpful input, referrals and advice would be much appreciated" (USA12). By seeking advice, women thereby empower themselves with knowledge that can enhance their sense of control. One traveller advised: "... take the same precautions you would when visiting anywhere you are unfamiliar ..." (New Zealand8). This advice served as a reminder for SFTs to prioritise their safety by exercising caution. The unfamiliarity and unpredictability of the people and environment at destinations are likely to reduce SFTs' sense of control, potentially increasing their perception of risks associated with travelling solo: "Be aware of what/who is around you" (Canada3).

Online interactions can contribute to SFTs' sense of safety by providing them with valuable information and advice on staying safe while travelling alone. Through discussions on the travel forum, SFTs can learn safety tips, cautionary tales, and recommended precautions from other travellers, helping them make informed decisions and mitigate potential risks during their solo journeys: "There are always people around and I felt very safe there, using the usual precautions" (USA13). Sharing information on the travel platform provided opportunities for women to increase their knowledge of the destinations: "... to educate solo female travelers of what they may encounter. I hope this post serves as a resource" (Switzerland2). Other travellers expressed: "I think a more comprehensive step-by-step trip report could help others who seek similar information" (USA11) and "My trip report is going to be a little different. I am sharing this because I see other posts where women are intimidated to travel solo" (USA30). Another highlighted the supportive role of online travel communities: "There's also a TA Solo Travel forum that might reassure you" (USA16). As such, sharing tourism information can enhance their sense of control.

The need for competence

The need for competence refers to individuals' need to feel capable of controlling their environment and their activities. Women emphasised their perceived or actual abilities to manage various aspects of solo travel, aligning with the need for competence: "I am quite capable of organising own transport, going off the beaten track, feel confident travelling as a solo woman ..." (Australia10). Thus, reflecting her sense of competence in managing the practicalities of solo travel, from transportation arrangements to exploring less-frequented destinations. Competence is closely linked to confidence and the self-perception of bravery: "... considered myself a confident and brave solo traveler" (X3) and "The more you travel, the braver you get" (UK5). Recognising one's courage and bravery can enhance confidence, empowering women to embrace new challenges and explore unfamiliar destinations. This sense of bravery often emerges from past successes in navigating solo journeys,

reinforcing her abilities and building her self-assurance. Such experiences contribute to overall competence as a solo traveller. In solo travel, confidence and competence evolve together, each reinforcing and strengthening the other.

Alternatively, the absence of confidence can serve as a barrier to engaging in solo travels. Some women admitted to lacking confidence when considering solo travel: "Thank you for your advice, some good suggestions there ... has looked at solo holidays, but lacks confidence" (UK8). In this instance, she acknowledged her interest in solo travel but admitted to lacking the confidence to pursue it. This lack of confidence may prevent her from taking the necessary steps to develop the competence needed for solo travel. Furthermore, it emphasises the interlinking nature of competence and confidence: "Should I go with confidence or cancel my trip?" (USA27). One traveller suggested: "However, if you lack confidence or aren't comfortable with your own company then book a tour" (UK2). This reflects the dilemma faced by women grappling with confidence issues in solo travel. Their uncertainty about whether to proceed with the trip highlights the impact of confidence on decision-making in solo travel. The lack of confidence may potentially affect the individual's ability to fully engage in the solo travel experience and develop competence through practice and learning.

Competence plays an important role in how women approach solo travel, reflecting their desire to challenge themselves to gain new experiences: "I've really had to push myself at times even when I've not felt confident, exploring new areas rather than sticking to what I know and what is safe" (Australia9). This willingness to challenge oneself, despite lacking confidence, suggests an underlying sense of competence in navigating unfamiliar environments. Some SFTs acknowledged the need for confidence in unfamiliar destinations: "... I have been to some fair dodgy places as a solo female traveler and because my confidence is what it is I have never felt unsafe" (X10). Others recognised the ongoing development of confidence through experience: "As a solo female traveler I take complete responsibility for my safety ... It maybe after a few times I will feel as confident as I pretend to be" (X10). As confidence grows, so too does the willingness to engage in solo travels, leading to the acquisition of new skills and competencies along the way.

Women seek to feel capable and effective in managing their solo travel experiences, making informed decisions, and navigating unfamiliar environments. Engaging in the travel forums helps SFTs build confidence and self-reliance by connecting them with a supportive community of fellow solo travellers: "thank you for your trip report. I will be travelling solo myself in November and it's a been both a help on what to expect and a bit of a confidence booster, that even when I get it wrong everything will be ok" (Australia10). Solo travel presents opportunities to challenge oneself, navigate new environments, and overcome obstacles, all of which can contribute to a sense of accomplishment: "And don't forget to congratulate yourself on getting out there. Many would be too afraid" (New Zealand3). More importantly, by sharing their own experiences and offering advice to others, women can affirm their own competence, further empowering them to embrace solo travel with confidence.

The need for relatedness

The need for relatedness refers to individuals' expectations of connecting with others. SFTs usually travel solo to destinations without their family and friends: "... solo travel is a challenge ... stepping out of your comfort zone, making decisions without the back up of friends & family, relying on your own inner resources and problem-solving in situations where you don't know the local language/culture/food etc." (UK7). Many women expressed a fear of being alone while travelling solo: "I'm afraid I'll feel alone and would like to connect with some people that are in Phuket too. Do anyone know any sites/apps to meet people or have any suggestions on how to meet people?" (X13). Some women sought advice on finding travelling companions: "Is it easy to meet fellow solo travellers and how?" (Ireland1). By actively seeking out opportunities to connect with other travellers, they can alleviate feelings of aloneness during their solo journeys. This reflects the need for

social interaction and recognising the value of companionship: “If you would appreciate some company just send me a message” (USA8).

Many SFTs use the travel forum to gain social support from other travellers, providing insights into the role of relatedness in facing challenges and uncertainties during their solo journeys, such as navigating unfamiliar destinations: “I am considering traveling to Istanbul for a few days, and I am wondering how safe it is for an older female solo traveler” (USA12). Some were also coping with personal circumstances: “... the finalization of my divorce ...” (USA13). Adjusting to this new reality involved the need to adapt to new life circumstances and establish a new travel pattern: “... it means I’ll be traveling on my own which I haven’t done since before my marriage” (USA13). In another instance: “My husband passed away suddenly ... What is the best holiday websites for widowed people/solo travellers that is safe” (X1). Engaging with fellow travellers online can provide reassurance to someone experiencing uncertainties or a difficult life transition: “I’d suggest you celebrate your 50s. You’ve now got better stories to tell, are more aware of what you do and don’t like, have more money, and (hopefully) more confidence too ... You have a unique opportunity to “reinvent” yourself. I think you are still dwelling on what you had and that’s understandable. But eventually you will have to look forward” (USA32). By offering words of encouragement, one promotes a sense of connection by acknowledging and validating the experiences and potential concerns of other fellow travellers.

Sharing one’s life circumstances can foster a sense of connection and understanding among women: “... sorry to hear about your divorce, what a difficult time” (USA31) and “You have managed to navigate the world sensibly and safely so far and will continue to do so through this new chapter. Give yourself time and baby steps” (UK5). By acknowledging the challenges faced by other travellers, women connect and empathise with them, demonstrating a willingness to engage in meaningful interactions with fellow solo travellers on their journeys. This act of empathy not only fosters a sense of connection but also creates a supportive environment where solo travellers feel valued and understood. The women often expressed gratitude for the kindness received from other participants: “Thanks everyone for the kind words!” (USA15). Engaging in online travel forums fulfils the need for relatedness, allowing solo travellers to connect with each other, provide and receive practical and emotional support, navigate travel challenges together, and reinforce a sense of community.

Discussion

The experiences of time spent alone during solo travel provide a valuable context for understanding the psychological needs of SFTs. This study applies self-determination theory to examine the experiences of solitude and interaction in solo travel, connecting them to the constructs of psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Weinstein et al., 2023). Engaging in online travel discussion forums, SFTs can find opportunities to fulfil their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Solitude aligns with the notion of “whether or not an individual values and enjoys time alone” (Weinstein et al., 2023, p. 405). In solitude, “people can free themselves from immediate pressure and judgement, making meaningful choices, and pursue activities that interest them” (Weinstein et al., 2023, p. 416). Solo travel can provide a sense of independence, allowing women to prioritise self-care and facilitate healing during challenging times, serving as a response to life-changing events (Bianchi, 2016; Huber et al., 2017). For many women, solitude is not simply about being alone; it’s also about finding opportunities for personal growth, introspection, and a sense of empowerment that can be gained through solo travel (Osman et al., 2020; Weinstein et al., 2021; Yang, 2021).

Despite being designed primarily for social interaction, travel forums uniquely facilitate solitude for SFTs, creating a supportive virtual environment that complements the solo experience. These platforms offer SFTs a sense of companionship and emotional support, allowing them to feel connected to a broader travel community even when they are travelling alone. Women often seek

advice on travel forums, indicating a need for reassurance in navigating potential challenges with their solo travel and the experience of solitude. By sharing experiences and seeking guidance in these forums, SFTs gain valuable support from an online community that understands their specific needs. This interaction adds a communal dimension to the solitude of solo travel, where the exchange of advice and stories becomes a collective practice. Thus, the role of online communities highlights that even in the pursuit of solitude, connections to others remain valuable, balancing independence with the support that comes from being part of a larger solo travel community.

Autonomy refers to the freedom of choice and the ability to actively engage in the process of decision-making, attaining a sense of agency in one's environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Freedom and independence serve as motivations for solo travel (Bianchi, 2016; Seow & Brown, 2018). When women travel alone in unfamiliar destinations, they may encounter various risks (Yang et al., 2018b; Su & Wu, 2021), which can affect their perception of the level of control they have while travelling solo. The unpredictability of the destinations, including both the environment and people, likely reduces SFTs' sense of control, thereby increasing their perceived risks associated with solo travel (Brugulat & Coromina, 2021). Many women report a lack of knowledge about destinations, which can heighten their perception of risk and further impair their sense of control while travelling solo (Yang et al., 2018b; Su & Wu, 2021). Simultaneously, women can gain control by interacting with travellers who are knowledgeable about destinations, which can increase the predictability of the environment and improve their ability to negotiate risks (Thomas & Mura, 2019; Wantono & McKercher, 2020), thereby enhancing their ability to navigate uncertainties at their destination.

Participating in the travel forums can enhance the sense of autonomy for SFTs by providing a platform to share experiences and seek advice from others while still maintaining control over their travel plans and decisions. These online interactions allow SFTs to gather valuable information that informs their travel choices (Casaló et al., 2010; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013). By accessing travel-related information and recommendations, women can gain a sense of control over their travel experiences, thereby fostering a greater sense of autonomy. Furthermore, by sharing their experiences online, women exercise autonomy and control in deciding what, when, and how to share their experiences, thus maintaining control over their communication and engagement with others. They have the freedom to select discussion topics, engage with specific forum members, and decide when to participate in online discussions, contributing to their sense of empowerment in managing their solo travels. This autonomy empowers them to express themselves, share their perspectives, and contribute to the collective knowledge base of the solo travel community. By sharing information, seeking support, and promoting safety, they enhance autonomy and control in solo travel.

Competence refers to the ability to effectively navigate and manage one's environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Solo travel often involves travelling to new destinations and navigating unfamiliar environments. For SFTs, competence involves having the necessary information and skills to manage unexpected challenges. Specifically, competence plays a critical role in managing risk and ensuring safety during solo travel. Competence empowers women to assess risks, make informed decisions, and take appropriate actions to ensure their well-being. By possessing the necessary skills and information, women can confidently rely on their own abilities, knowledge, and resourcefulness to overcome challenges and gain a sense of empowerment and agency in their solo travel experiences (Hosseini et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2018a). As women overcome challenges, they gain valuable insights into their strengths, capabilities, and limitations, enabling them to step out of their comfort zones and experience personal growth (Osman et al., 2020; Yang, 2021).

Engaging in travel forums allows SFTs to access information, advice, and support from fellow travellers (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), thereby enhancing their sense of competence. Additionally, participating in online interactions enables them to share information and experiences, making their posts valuable resources of information for other travellers and allowing others to learn from their experiences (Raban & Rafaeli, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Through these

contributions, SFTs showcase their knowledge, expertise, and skills in various aspects of solo travel, including trip planning and safety precautions. Furthermore, receiving positive responses to their posts can reinforce their sense of competence, validate their contribution, and foster a sense of accomplishment. Confidence in one's abilities to navigate and manage the challenges of solo travel is essential for undertaking such journeys. It shows how competence and confidence interact to shape the perceptions and experiences of solo travel.

Relatedness refers to the desire to experience a sense of connection with others, emphasising the importance of interpersonal relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For many women, solo travel may present challenges for fulfilling their need for relatedness. Social interaction, in particular, has been identified as a motivating factor associated with SFTs (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020; Wilson & Harris, 2006). Some women may actively seek social interactions with other travellers, locals, or online communities forming social interactions, and fostering a sense of relatedness during their solo travels (Karagöz et al., 2021; Su & Wu, 2021). For these women, other travellers become their companions in their solo journeys, alleviating feelings of fear and loneliness in unfamiliar destinations (Terziyska, 2021; Yang, 2021).

The travel forums facilitate social interactions and connections among SFTs, meeting their need for relatedness. Through participating in online interactions, SFTs can share their experiences, exchange stories, and receive personalised recommendations tailored to their preferences and travel needs. This information sharing can be considered a form of social support (Chu, 2009), serving as a means to establish social connections among solo travellers (Ma & Chan, 2014; Ma & Yuen, 2011). Beyond practical advice, participating in travel forums often allows women to both provide and receive emotional support. Women share their concerns, fears, and excitement about travelling alone, and these platforms foster an atmosphere where empathy, understanding, and encouragement serve as a basis for connections (Wang et al., 2002). Through online interactions, women can find reassurance, guidance, and encouragement, thereby fostering a sense of relatedness within the solo travel community (Chen et al., 2013). This participation in online social support networks contributes to a more supportive and empowering solo travel experience (Karagöz et al., 2021; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013).

Implications of the study

This study examines online T2T interactions within the context of solo female travel by applying the self-determination theory as the theoretical framework. The self-determination theory proposes that individuals are motivated by intrinsic factors – autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Participating in online travel forums allows SFTs to engage in activities that align with these motivations. From a theoretical perspective, in applying the self-determination theory, researchers can gain insights into the motivations influencing why women choose to travel alone, how they perceive their experiences, and what outcomes they seek to achieve. This study reveals the complex relationships between solo travel and the constructs of self-determination theory. Furthermore, it identifies other needs that can generally be understood conceptually as either subsets of these three needs or combinations thereof (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

First, for many women, the motivation to travel alone is derived from a desire for independence (Bianchi, 2016; Hosseini et al., 2022). In this context, independence may conceptually overlap with the need for autonomy and control. Autonomy allows women to pursue independent travel experiences according to their interests and priorities, while control refers to the perceived ability to manage one's solo travel, including decision-making, itinerary planning, and risk management. Women who feel in control during solo travel perceive themselves as capable and empowered to manage the challenges of their journeys alone. Online T2T interactions can be seen as supportive of the needs for autonomy, control, and independence, helping to alleviate the challenges posed by the unfamiliarity and unpredictability of the destinations.

Second, studies emphasised the importance of building confidence in solo travel (Hosseini et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2018a). The relationship between competence and confidence in solo travel is

reciprocal. Competence enhances confidence by providing the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate solo journeys successfully, while confidence reinforces feelings of competence and self-assurance in one's ability to manage challenges and uncertainties while travelling alone. Competence serves as a basis for confidence, empowering women to navigate challenges with self-assurance. Conversely, the absence of confidence can hinder the development of competence, creating barriers to engaging in solo travel experiences and decision-making processes. Perhaps it is not the actual level of competence per se that is important, but rather the perception of competence that is critical because it influences how women approach and engage with solo travel. Women are less likely to take up solo travel if their need for confidence and/or competence is not fulfilled. Thus, highlighting the importance of developing and reinforcing competence to foster confidence and facilitate meaningful engagement in solo journeys. Online T2T interactions support the need for competence and confidence by facilitating information sharing, encouraging skill development, providing reassurance, and creating a supportive community. As such, they contribute to fostering a positive and empowering solo travel experience.

Third, social interaction has been identified as a motivation associated with SFTs (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020). While solo travel inherently involves journeying alone and intentionally seeking solitude, it also intersects with the need for social interactions and relatedness. The relationship between solitude and interactions can vary widely depending on the travel destinations, selected activities, personal preferences, and emotional needs. Both solitude and interactions can contribute to solo travel in different ways. Solitude can foster personal growth, independence, and self-care, while interactions provide a means for social connectedness, allowing women to share their experiences, exchange tips, and offer encouragement to one another. The travel forums provide supportive environments for the need for relatedness by alleviating feelings of aloneness in solo travel.

Of particular importance, in this context, autonomy does not necessarily imply independence. SFTs can choose to be autonomously independent, yet also be autonomously dependent on others. The feelings of relatedness can facilitate the need for autonomy by enabling SFTs to make independent decisions, whether with or without input from others. This sense of relatedness is also associated with feelings of competence in solo travel. Through sharing information, providing advice, and exchanging personal experiences, women can enhance their competence to make informed decisions, navigate challenges and ensure their safety. These interactions illustrate how the components of the self-determination theory are intertwined and supported in solo female travel.

This study also has practical implications for tourism service providers. First, tourism service providers can empower SFTs by offering them a range of digital resources to plan their trips independently. This could include user-friendly websites or mobile apps that provide comprehensive information about destinations, activities, and safety tips. By giving SFTs control over their planning process, they can exercise autonomy in making decisions that align with their preferences and needs. Second, tourism service providers can help SFTs build competence and confidence in their travel abilities by offering educational resources and support. This may involve providing online tutorials or guides on topics such as navigating around the destination, and helping women familiarise themselves with the environment. By offering virtual orientation sessions, tourism providers can help SFTs feel more prepared and competent in navigating their destinations. Third, despite the nature of online interactions, tourism service providers can foster feelings of relatedness among SFTs by creating virtual communities and facilitating social interactions. This can be achieved through online forums, social media groups, or virtual events designed for SFTs. By facilitating interactions and collaboration among SFTs, service providers help cultivate a sense of connectedness, particularly during periods of solitude. Furthermore, offering opportunities for SFTs to connect with local experts, fellow travellers, or destination ambassadors can enhance their sense of connection to the destination and its community.

Limitations and further research directions

There are some limitations that should be noted. Participants TripAdvisor travel forums may present self-selection bias, indicating that the data collected reflect travellers who are motivated to share their travel experiences. It may exclude the experiences of those who opt not to engage on this platform. Recognising this limitation suggests a research avenue to explore the experiences of those who actively participate in the travel forums. Participation in these forums allows SFTs to access social support networks, even while travelling alone. Future research involving qualitative interviews with solo female travellers could offer further insights into their experiences with online social support networks. By exploring their motivations for engaging in these forums, the types of support they seek or provide, and the perceived benefits or drawbacks of online interactions, researchers can gain a nuanced understanding of how social support networks influence solo travel experiences. Specifically, researchers could examine how perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are influenced by the quality and quantity of social support received through online interactions. Another avenue for further research could focus on an integrated perspective that explores how both onsite and online T2T interactions influence solo travel experiences. From this perspective, researchers can observe how interpersonal interactions transition from onsite to online spaces and examine their interplay within the onsite-online continuum.

Conclusions

This study applies the self-determination theory to examine the online T2T interactions in female solo travel, to gain insights into individual motivations (why women want to travel alone), dynamics within tourist groups (reasons for seeking group support when travelling alone), and the outcomes (benefits derived from group support in solo travel). Understanding online T2T in solo travel becomes most impactful when viewed within a social environment, (travel forums), that fulfils basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We can gain valuable insights into how these constructs influence perceptions and experiences of solo travel, closely associated with solitude, personal growth, and empowerment to solo travel itself.

Disclosure statement

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