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Women journeying alone: exploring solitude across the life stages

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of women of all ages are travelling solo. Drawing on discussions from solo travel forums collected from TripAdvisor, this study examines the experiences of women travelling solo across various stages of the lifespan. Thematic analysis of discussions indicates that solitude shapes the motivations and experiences of solo female travellers. The life stage theory is applied to understand women's perceptions, interpretations, and utilisation of solitude across various life stages, reflecting how age, developmental tasks, challenges, and life events intersect with the experience of solitude, impacting the way solo travel is perceived and experienced. This study provides a meaningful theoretical contribution to the broader discourse on the solo female travel experience.

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Introduction

Solo travel has experienced a significant surge in popularity, appealing to a wide range of individuals, including both men and women from their 10s to their 70s (Barrett & Douglas, 2020; Haugen, 2018; Solo Traveler, 2023). This surge can be attributed to changing attitudes, individualised lifestyles, personal development opportunities, and the desire for more independent travel experiences. Solo female travellers (SFTs) represent a gender-specific phenomenon, attracting considerable academic attention on various aspects of women traveling solo (Terziyska, 2021; Thomas & Mura, 2019; Yang et al., 2018). The gender specification facilitates a focused analysis, enabling researchers to examine the underlying motivations, experiences, and challenges of SFTs, which may differ from those of other travellers (Benjamin & Schwab, 2023; Ngwira et al., 2020; Seow & Brown, 2018). This phenomenon signifies its cultural, economic, and social significance within the broader context of travel. More importantly, this trend corresponds with an increasing number of women of different ages and generational cohorts choosing to travel solo (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024; Barrett & Douglas, 2020; Ying et al., 2017).

Despite considerable academic interest in SFTs, two notable areas require further attention: first, solitude, often as a central component of solo travel, significantly influences the nature of solo travel experiences (Leith, 2020; Somasiri et al., 2022; Yang, 2021), yet the experience of solitude within solo travel remains largely unexplored. To gain a better understanding of the scope of solo travel, it is essential to explore the nature and dynamics of solitude. This exploration may reveal how women experience their solo journeys, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of solitude, being alone, and solo travel experiences. Second, several studies have indicated that solo travel experience varies across different age groups and generational cohorts (Alonso-Vazquez et al.,

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2024; Barrett & Douglas, 2020). However, solo travel within the life stage theory has not been extensively researched, particularly in relation to SFTs. Applying life stage theory in the context of solo travel may reveal how each stage brings its own set of societal roles, developmental tasks, and challenges, all of which can shape the solo travel behaviours, preferences, and experiences. Furthermore, exploring solitude within the context of solo travel, especially in relation to life stage theory, is essential for deeper understanding of solo travel dynamics. Solitude may vary greatly depending on an individual's stage of life, reflecting differing needs, motivations, and challenges. By examining how solitude is sought, experienced, and valued differently across life stages, researchers gain nuanced insights into the patterns and meaning of how solitude is perceived and experienced in solo travels. Recognising and understanding the varied motivations, perceptions, and experiences of solitude not only enhances the theoretical implications of the diversity of women's experiences travelling solo but also has practical implications for designing more personalised travel experiences that align with their needs and desires at different stages of the lifespan.

Literature review

Solo female traveller motivation

Researchers have identified motivations for SFTS related to personal development, such as independence, empowerment, and exploration of the self (Hosseini et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2020; Wilson & Harris, 2006). Other critical motivators include the desire to escape the mundane responsibilities, as well as the constraints imposed by societal and gender expectations (Hosseini et al., 2022; Osman et al., 2020; Seow & Brown, 2018; Yang et al., 2019). For some women, the decision to travel solo is influenced by introverted personality traits (Terziyska, 2021). Others seek solo travel for the freedom it offers, which allows them to make choices without the need to accommodate the travel preferences of others or compromise their own. Additionally, the motivations for women travelling solo can be attributed to their specific circumstances. A common reason for women choosing to travel alone is the absence of travel companions. This situation may arise from not having friends or family available to join them for travel or facing difficulties in coordinating travel plans with potential companions (Terziyska, 2021; Yang & Tung, 2018). Likewise, major life transitions, like divorce, also serve as a motivation for solo travel. Women travel solo to enjoy leisure, discover new cultures, focus on themselves, meet new people, have novel experiences, and build self-esteem (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020; Su & Wu, 2021). As such, women's decision to travel solo is associated with various factors, thereby highlighting the multifaceted nature of the motivations of SFTs.

Exploring the benefits of solo travelling is another research area that provides insights into why women choose to travel solo. Among these benefits, solo travel is particularly valued for its role in fostering self-reflection and personal growth (Bianchi, 2016). Furthermore, it offers an opportunity to step away from one's usual surroundings, facilitating a period of self-reflection and enabling the reevaluation of life perspectives (Wilson & Harries, 2006). Wilson and Harris (2006) revealed that the search for self and identity, along with self-empowerment and establishing connections with others, defines 'meaningful travel' for solo travellers. Additionally, they identified that self-empowerment through solo travel involves an interrelated process of managing constraints, navigating challenges, and resisting societal expectations. The sense of empowerment for many women was enhanced by the ability to make their own choices and control their own actions (Bianchi, 2016; Wilson & Harris, 2006). Beyond these internal benefits, travelling solo also provided women with opportunities to form new social connections with others, including other travellers and locals (Terziyska, 2021; Ying et al., 2017).

Conceptualisation of solitude

Previous studies have identified the need for independence and solitude as motivations for solo travellers (Leith, 2020; Yang, 2021), with SFTs identifying these factors as reasons for their

journeys (Somasiri et al., 2022; Terziyska, 2021; Yang et al., 2019). Solitude can be 'a state of being alone – either by oneself or, if in the presence of others, without any social interaction' (Long & Averill, 2003, p. 579). Researchers have examined solitary behaviour across various age groups and in diverse contexts with differing views on how solitude is conceptualised (Coplan et al., 2021; Hipson et al., 2021; Long & Averill, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2018). Many definitions of solitude revolve around the level of social (dis)engagement with others, enabling individuals the choice to be either inwardly or outwardly focused (Burger, 1995; Long & Averill, 2003). As such, solitude can elicit both positive and negative experiences. Solitude can promote emotion regulation, reduce stress, foster inner peace, and increase life satisfaction (Larson, 1997; Nguyen et al., 2018). However, solitude may also result in feelings of boredom, anxiety, depression, loneliness, and isolation (Lay et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

In considering the positive and negative experiences of solitude, a significant distinguishing factor is whether the individual desires to be alone or not (Long & Averill, 2003). Nguyen et al. (2018) reported that having a choice significantly contributes to positive solitary experiences. These positive solitude experiences are associated with the autonomous motivation for solitary behaviour and higher levels of control an individual has over their situation (Chua & Koestner, 2008; Long & Averill, 2003). Several studies have identified a relationship between autonomous motivation for solitary experiences and a preference for being alone. Individuals motivated to spend time alone actively seek solitude, experiencing it positively and thereby differentiating solitude from loneliness and isolation (Burger, 1995; Chua & Koestner, 2008; Larson, 1990; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). The way individuals engage with solitude can significantly impact their psychosocial outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2018; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

Life stage and travel

According to the life stage theory, which includes infancy, early childhood, play age, school age, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood (Erikson & Erikson, 1998), significant life transitions occur across these distinct stages. Each stage is marked by development tasks, challenges, and opportunities that correspond to shifts in personal development, roles, and responsibilities. These transitions often coincide with changes in educational attainment, employment status, living arrangement, marital status, and disposable income. As such, individuals' needs, interests, values, behaviours, lifestyles, and expectations change across their life stages. Researchers have indicated that life stages produce varying travel motivational patterns and experiences (Bicikova, 2014; Gibson et al., 2012). The theoretical framework of life stages provides essential context for understanding how significant life events serve as markers within one's life stage, thus can be used to explain the travel behaviours (Huber et al., 2017; Moody, 2009).

Several studies have reported that the nature of solo travel experience is interlocked with age, leading to variability across different age groups and generational cohorts (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024; Barrett & Douglas, 2020; Osman et al., 2017; Ying et al., 2017). Specifically, when considering age, researchers have identified issues associated with solo travel, such as safety risk, individualism, autonomy, and self-discovery, may develop differently for older and younger women (Heimtun, 2012; Ying et al., 2017). Furthermore, some studies have examined different segments of travellers by considering age within the context of the life stage perspective. Maoz (2006) illustrated how life stage influenced backpackers' travel experiences, impacting their crises. Additionally, Gibson et al. (2012) examined girlfriend getaways and revealed variations in vacations needs across life stages. Other studies have specifically focused on women transitioning through specific life stages and experiencing significant life events, finding themselves pursuing solo travel journeys (Harmon & Kyle, 2022; Kleiber et al., 2002; Sengupta, 2022).

Of particular relevance to solo female travel, researchers have indicated that the experience of solitude varies across the lifespan (Larson, 1990; Ost Mor et al., 2021; Weinstein, 2021). In this regard, older adults typically experience solitude more positively compared to individuals in other age groups, including middle age and younger adults (Larson, 1990; Pauly et al., 2017). However,

motivation for seeking solitude in solo travel across the lifespan remains unexplored. By considering life stages in the context of solo travel, we can explore how women perceive and engage with solitude during their solo travels. The wide range of motivations not only reflects the diversity of reasons why women travel solo but also indicates that personal development and life events can influence the experiences of solitude. Thus, understanding the specific motivations of SFTs at different life stages can inform how solitude is experienced and its contribution to solo travel.

Although age is the focus of many studies on women's solo travel experiences (Seow & Brown, 2018; Yang et al., 2018), limited attention has been given to life stages as a potential influencing factor in their solo travel (Barrett & Douglas, 2020; Osman et al., 2017; Ying et al., 2017). Life stages consider not only chronological age but also factors such as psychological developments, various life events, social roles, and identity formation. These factors may offer insights into why and how women may engage in solo travel at various stages in their lives, leading to a more holistic understanding of the patterns and meanings associated with SFTs. By considering life stage as a complementary theory to the unique influences of age and generational cohort theory, researcher can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how women's solo travel experiences interact with their life trajectories. The aim of this study is to identify the components of solitude in solo travel across the lifespan. The research questions are:

1. How do solo female travellers perceive the experience of solitude in their solo travels?
2. How do different life stages influence the ways in which solo female travellers perceive and engage with solitude during their solo travels?

This study contributes to the tourism literature by providing a wider understanding of how life stages shape the perceptions and engagement of solitude during solo travel, which has important implications for both researchers and destination managers.

Methods

This study is part of a larger study consisting of two phases of data collection. The first phase involved conducting in-depth interviews and the second phase centred on analysing discussions on the TripAdvisor travel forum. The methodological approach of comparing and contrasting findings from the interviews with those from the TripAdvisor forum discussions enhances the validity of the research findings. It confirms that the identified components of solitude are not isolated to a specific individual or group but are reflected across a wider community of SFTs. After analysing the extensive data collected from both the interviews and the forum discussions, this article narrows its focus solely to the findings derived from the discussions on the TripAdvisor travel forum. This strategic narrowing of scope allows for a more thorough and focused exploration of this dataset, eliminating the need to address multiple data sources simultaneously. Analysing discussions on the TripAdvisor travel forum offers a distinctive approach to understanding the SFTs' experiences through the stories they shared on the travel forum.

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; Taecharungroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). This travel forum provides access to a diverse community of solo travellers, offering a unique opportunity to explore a broad spectrum of perspectives on solitude in solo travel. Examining data from this forum allows us to gain insights from a larger, more varied population than the interview data permits, potentially revealing trends and patterns that are reflective of the global solo travel community. Additionally, 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 deem important to share on these forums aiming to identify the essential components of solitude in solo travel across the

lifespan. 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 deductive thematic analysis to gain insights into the connections between solo travel and solitude (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, the data from each discussion forum were deductively coded according to Erikson's developmental life stages, incorporating adolescence (11–20 years), young adult (21–39 years), middle adult (40–65 years), and late adulthood (65 + years). For the posts where the age was not indicated, we examined each post for contextual clues that might hint at the poster's life stage. This examination involved looking for proxy indicators of life events that typically align with specific life stages. For example, a post mentioning their travel during school holidays might hint at adolescence. If the specific life stages were difficult to determine, we focused on the content of the message to see if the content itself provided insights relevant to the concept of solitude or solo travel. Three research members analysed the data and through group discussion, reached 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 (Kozinets, 2010). To maintain anonymity, each direct quote from the post was assigned a random number. For example, 'Norway4' indicated the participant was from Norway, while 'X12' was assigned when the participant's country was not specified. Ethical approval was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Findings and discussion

The findings revealed various factors explaining why women travel solo, indicating the sources of their motivation for solo travel. These motivations provided a context for understanding how solitude contributed to the motivation of solo travel. The aspects of solitude in solo travel have been grouped thematically into three themes. The first theme, centred on the preference for solitude, explored whether a traveller preferred to travel alone or with others. The second theme, related to the choice for solitude, examined whether travelling alone was a voluntary choice or a necessity. The third theme, focussed on the value of solitude, assessed whether a solo traveller valued and enjoyed spending time alone. Linking the motivations for solo travel to the developmental tasks and challenges of each life stage can provide insights into how solo travel and solitude function in meeting the psychological and developmental needs across various life stages.

Preference for solitude

Solitude could be conceptualised as having 'time to oneself' (Choi et al., 2023, p. 219) and a preference for solitude could be viewed as 'whether or not an individual prefers to be alone or with others' (Weinstein et al., 2023, p. 405). Solo travel is facilitated by solitude: 'The addition of another person, no matter how beloved, would have taken away from that sense of glorious solitude' (UK5). Many women expressed a preference for solitude during solo travel: 'I want to live in a monastry for a

few days to practice silence and solitude' (India1) and 'It seems the better option for much needed solitude would be the Hut to Hut trek rather than the Golden Ring' (USA5). Other women seek recommendations for solitude in their solo travels. In offering recommendations, they received highlighted a range of locations where solitude can be experienced: 'there are some quaint villages in Goa that could engage a person seeking solitude' (USA10), 'The Oregon coast is a good choice as well, scenic, reasonably peaceful, easy to find solitude' (Australia6). The preferences for solitude emphasise that solitude is a state that can be experienced in numerous destinations during solo travel. Solitude is not a fixed condition but rather a flexible aspect of their solo travel experiences, capable of adapting to differing motivations, needs, and situations. Such adaptability highlights the varied ways in which solitude is pursued and experienced among SFTs, demonstrating its role as a personally tailored component of their solo journeys.

Women perceived solo travel differently depending on their level of engagement with others in the tourism environment. Women described solo travel as being either completely alone or being with others. For some, 'solo travel means travelling solo, it's not another phrase meaning people who want to go on holiday with a stranger' (UK2). For others, solo travels consist of both solo and non-solo encounters, offering varying levels of aloneness: 'Travelling solo doesn't mean always being alone … can include sharing a meal with someone local or another traveller' (UK5). Notably, social interaction serves as a motivating factor for some SFTs (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020), offering opportunities for meaningful social interactions and friendships: 'What I enjoy about traveling alone are all the opportunities for meeting people and making new friends' (USA6). The destination environment can fulfil women's needs for interactions with other travellers, thereby striking a balance between solitude and social interaction. This balance plays a crucial role in fulfilling women's varied needs in their solo travel experiences. While the notion of solo travel inherently suggests journeying alone, the reality is that it often involves a spectrum of engagement with others, ranging from complete solitude to interaction with local and fellow travellers, thereby enhancing the solo travel experience (Su & Wu, 2021; Ying et al., 2017).

Choice for solitude

Motivation for solitude requires a sense of choice. Choice for solitude applies to 'whether alone time is elective or compulsory' (Weinstein et al., 2023, p. 405). Solo travel may present challenges for some women: 'Some travelers embrace solitude and others can't even stand to eat alone' (Canada4). On the travel forum, some women expressed: ' … I prefer to go with someone, going solo is never my first choice' (Canada7). Yet, others made a liberate choice of being alone, 'I am alone on holiday because I choose to be, I am alone on holiday to experience wonderful places and people' (X10). Solo travel enables women to customise their solo travel experiences and choose when and how they engage with solitude: 'I say solo travel is liberating because you are on your own schedule … You can have as much solitude as you want' (X7). Solo travel can be strategically used to enable women to freely move between solitude and social settings, thereby providing a choice between these two forms of experience.

The negative or positive experiences of solitude during solo travel depend on the level of personal choice, thereby highlighting the difference between solitude and loneliness: 'I was supposed to be travelling with a friend to Hotel Playa Cayo Santa Marie in 5 days but they cancelled on me last minute … I am worried about feeling lonely and considering cancelling the trip which is non refundable' (X2). When unwilling to be alone, women may be particularly fearful of their time in solitude: 'I am a little apprehensive about getting a bit lonely' (Australia8). Some women sought travel companions in other travellers, alleviating feelings of loneliness during their solo travel (Terziyska, 2021; White & White, 2008; Yang, 2021). Loneliness during solo travel is not merely an outcome of being alone; rather, it arises from a lack of personal choice in social interaction and companionship: 'This is what I fear, that it's gonna be lonely and boring. I would obviously like to befriend some people there … ' (Norway4). In the context of personal choice in being alone, loneliness is a negative

form of aloneness, whereas solitude indicates a positive form of aloneness (Burger, 1995; Hipson et al., 2021).

Values and enjoyment for solitude

Solitude relates to 'whether or not an individual values and enjoys time alone' (Weinstein et al., 2023, p. 405). In the travel forums, women emphasised the personal enjoyment for solo travel and solitude: 'I enjoy travelling solo' (Australia3) and 'I like being by myself … and find the solitude also welcoming' (USA6). Solitude is considered central for enjoying solo travel (Lay et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Pauly et al., 2017). Many women value solitude as a means to maintain their autonomy, enabling them to engage in activities based on their own desires and exercise control over their solo travel experiences without having to compromise on their needs. This autonomy plays a positive role in the solitude experience, as women have the freedom to navigate a journey autonomously contributes to time spent in solitude. When alone, women may be free to feel and act without social constraints, enabling them to make personal choices about their activities. Many women expressed a sense of freedom associated with autonomy affordance: 'The best part of a solo trips is you get to set your own agenda, no compromises' (USA6). More specifically, freedom from introjected pressure allows them to experience their solo travels, making choices that reflect their individual preferences and goals:

> 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. I'm able to pack it in and move quickly and get to see more than I can when traveling with someone else. (Georgia2)

They are not constrained by the expectations of others or by a sense of obligation: 'I love traveling solo. It's wonderful to be able to do what I want without having to consider anyone elses wishes' (Sweden3). In solitude 'people can free themselves from immediate pressure and judgement, making meaningful choices, and pursue activities that interest them' (Weinstein, 2023 p. 416).

Women reported valuing solitude in solo travels as it provides them with opportunities to engage in self-care (Weinstein et al., 2021). They shared instances of seeking out their own company, finding places for having quiet moments in solitude without interruptions: 'I sometimes wanted my own company, too, and in my experience I could always find somewhere to sit quietly and not be disturbed' (3, UK). For many women, solitude is about 'Looking for a place to relax and process and renew … the chance to enjoy the healing power of solitude' (USA19). Solitude through solo travels offer women a valuable opportunity for healing and rejuvenation: 'I need solitude in order to rejuvenate' (Canada15). As such, SFTs seek solitude to assert their autonomy during their solo journeys, experiencing a sense of freedom from the expectations of others. Solitude allows them to prioritise self-care and wellbeing. Many women view solitude as essential for healing and rejuvenation, highlighting its significance in promoting wellbeing in solo travels. Thus, the pursuit of solitude aligns with SFTs' motivations for engaging in solo travel, emphasising its role as a means to support autonomy and enhancing their travel experiences.

Solo travel across the life stages

The life stage theory specifies that individuals go through distinct phases of psychological development as they progress through different life stages. Examining the significance of solo travel and solitude in relation to the developmental needs of each life stage provides insights into why women choose solo travel and how solitude influences their travel experiences.

Adolescence

During adolescence, solo travel occurs in the later teenage years, featuring both the decline of family trips and the initiation of independent travel:

> I am 17 years old and female and want to go on a two-three week trip in Europe (Germany, Austria and Italy) mainly by myself that I will finance. My parents, understandably, don't want me to go alone as they think that it is dangerous. I believe that I am mature enough to go … This also won't be the first time I will be going on a trip without them, just the first time I will be doing so alone and not in my home country. (Israel5)

For some adolescents, solo travel serves as a means of pursuing independence and self-sufficiency, allowing them to separate from their families, make decisions for themselves, and navigate unfamiliar territories. Furthermore, during adolescence, there is a tension between the desire for independence and parental concerns, marked by the transition from childhood to adulthood nature of this life stage.

For others, solo travel highlights their determination to pursue such journeys despite safety concerns:

> About a week after my 17th birthday I flew to London on my own … didn't have anybody I knew to pick me up and arrived late in the evening. In hindsight it was really scary, but in the moment I was completely calm and collected. (Austria5)

This aligns with the developmental characteristics of adolescence, where individuals explore the environment on their own, gradually gaining confidence in their abilities, which adds to their sense of autonomy. At this life stage, the notions of 'alone' and 'on my own' are reflected in the pursuit of independence away from the family travels. Adolescents make decisions for themselves, including choices related to solo travel. This reflects the developmental tasks that involve a pursuit of autonomy, independence, and competence in navigating unfamiliar situations, all of which are associated with the process of the formation of self.

Despite their motivation for solo travels and desire for autonomy and independence, adolescents may face unique challenges and social perceptions associated with their developmental stage. Most adolescents, travelling solo involved being with their friends: 'Well the only time i would be alone, would when i get to the airport and to the hotel, otherwise i would only go out only mostly with my friend who is a native there' (X9). Similarly, 'I'm currently 17 years old and my mom is really scared of letting me go to Montevideo alone to visit my friend. She's not afraid of me staying there but of the journey alone' (Croatia6). Safety concerns and parental involvement, including staying with known friends or family, significantly shape adolescents' solo travel experiences. These safety nets, while necessary, reduce opportunities for true solitude, aligning solo travel experiences more closely with social exploration and connectivity. This highlights the ongoing negotiating of safety concerns by adolescents in solo travel as they seek to gain autonomy.

Young adulthood

At young adulthood, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked by identity exploration, independence, and the development of the self. Solo travel allows young women to explore their own interests:

> I've only tried snowboarding once a while ago so I would be a beginner. Just wondering if anyone has done this or has any recommendations for where to go or if its easy to meet others doing a similar thing as being a solo female traveler in my 20s I'd prefer to be in a group. (X12)

This highlights not only the pursuit of experiences but also the desire for community shared experiences even within the context of solo travel. Furthermore, solo travel fosters the development of adaptability skills to navigate various situations during their solo travel, which adds to their sense of independence and self-sufficiency: 'I'm proud of navigating my way through Italy all by myself' (USA8). The outcomes of solo travel may serve in developing a sense of mastery and agency, enabling young women to realise their potentials. This experience contributes to the construction

of a positive identity (Fu et al., 2018; Thomas & Mura, 2019; Yang et al., 2018). Thus, solo travel and the experience of solitude at the young adulthood stage may have formative functions.

In the young adult group, solo travel often involves seeking independence and self-exploration through making independent travel choices. For many young women, this marks a period of partially independent travel within various social contexts: 'I am a 26 yr female and traveled solo through Ecuador June 26-July 8 before meeting friends in Colombia for another leg of my trip' (USA1). While others, 'I'm a 28 yr old female solo traveller looking at going to Jordan in the first 2 weeks of March. Im after suggestions for guided tour companies to go with that caters to young, adventurous travellers' (X14). This variation not only reflects the diversity of solo travel experiences that young adults encounter during this phase but also highlights the exploration of independence and the importance of social relationships at this stage through solo travel.

For some young women, solo travel without their families and friends can be challenging, reflecting their fear of loneliness: 'I am terrified of becoming depressed and lonely during my trip' (USA2). This highlights how loneliness can be a notable aspect of the solo travel experience (Neluhena et al., 2023), which often motivates young women, in particular, to seek interactions with other travellers: 'I will be travelling around for a week, my friends are not sure if they are going to make it, so it would be nice to meet people or join a girl group (if they dont mind)' (USA8). For many young women, solo travel often involves seeking companionship and engaging in social interactions with other travellers as a means to overcome feelings of isolation. Such travel experiences, whether solo, with friends, or part of group tours, are ways in which young adults pursue their developmental goals and navigate the challenges of this life stage.

Middle adulthood

In middle adulthood, work commitments and sociocultural expectations of having a family and children, along with childcare responsibilities, lead to a change in travel patterns previously established during adolescence and young adulthood: 'I'm 45 years old experienced traveller female but haven't done solo in YEARS due to childrearing, family & work obligations' (USA20). According to Harris and Wilson (2007), expectations to manage family can affect travel pattern and experiences. Some women found opportunities for solo travel as their expected commitments towards the family shifted: 'I am looking or a place to go from the US for 5–8 days over Christmas since I do not have my kids this year for the holiday' (USA18). This reflects a moment of generativity by seizing solo travel opportunities to embrace periods of independence amidst the broader context of fulfilling the expectations of roles within the family. Other women, even they are enjoying solitude, may still seek meaningful interactions with friends and family, thus adding another dimension to their solo travel experiences: 'My friends and kids saw me having a great time and joined me for 10 days part way through which was nice … ' (X5). This transition from a solo journey to a shared experience with friends and family highlights the transformative potential of solo travel in middle adulthood. Such experiences evolve into generative acts, not only enriching relationships but also fostering new dimensions of interpersonal connectivity. Just as middle adulthood involves balancing independence with expectations to maintain relationships and manage family responsibilities, solo travellers often navigate their need for solitude with nurturing their relationships.

Solo travel during middle adulthood can promote personal growth: 'as a solo 50 something female, I've really had to push myself at times even when ive not felt confident, exploring new areas rather than sticking to what I know and what is safe' (Australia9). Solo travel provides opportunities to challenge oneself, seek new experiences, navigate new environments, overcome obstacles, and adapt to changing circumstances. Solo travel can also provide the time and space to pursue personal interests, contributing to a sense of accomplishment, fulfilment, and personal growth. In response to a question, 'Looking for ideas for middle aged solo travel' (USA17), women on the discussion forum offered suggestions which connects to their interests or explore new ones: 'People travelling alone tend to go somewhere that interests them, stay locally and explore

enjoying their own company' (UK4). During middle adulthood, solo travel provides opportunities for women to embrace new experiences, find meaning, and foster both personal growth and enriching life experiences.

At this stage, specific life circumstances contribute to women's motivation to travel solo (Harmon & Kyle, 2022; Sengupta, 2022). Solo travel can serve as a means of marking personal milestones: 'Thinking about splurging on a 40th bday gift to myself with a solo trip to Hawaii' (X9). Additionally, it can become an act of self-care, especially during significant life events such as divorce:

> I'm about to file for divorce in a high conflict process that'll likely be long too! So, to help me keep myself together i'd like to daydream and plan for this amazing healing trip to take end of this year or early next year. (USA20)

After the negative experience during the event of a divorce, solo travel is viewed as a way of prioritising self-care, declaring self-celebration, coping with the challenges, and embracing changes in their lives: 'This is my big "hurrah" trip after the finalization of my divorce, and it means I'll be traveling on my own which I haven't done since before my marriage' (USA13). This suggests that solo travel during middle adulthood can represent a fresh start to regain a sense of control over their lives. Solo travel can serve as a therapeutic and empowering experience, leading to transformative experiences, particularly following significant life events (Sengupta, 2022).

Late adulthood

The late adulthood stage is marked by several distinctive considerations, including retirement, health, and wellbeing. Solo travel plays an important role in older women's pursuits of solitude. As one traveller noted, 'I'm over 70 and to me 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). The autonomy afforded by solo travel, enabling older women to prioritise their interests over others' desires, serves as motivation for choosing it over group travel (Osman et al., 2020). The decision to travel solo while acknowledging health limitations suggests a desire to maintain a sense of autonomy and pursue meaningful travel experiences despite health concerns: 'I am 75 with some health issues' (UK5). Financial constraints are also a notable consideration: 'I'm an older, female, solo, budget traveler'. This suggests that some older women may prioritise budget considerations when planning solo travels, possibly due to financial constraints associated with retirement and fixed incomes during late adulthood. Solo travels with these considerations, show how older women seek to maintain a sense of autonomy and fulfilment while addressing the specific constraints at this life stage.

The desire for solo travel in late adulthood can be seen as a way to pursue leisure, relaxation, and the enjoyment of life, all of which are important for maintaining a sense of integrity and wellbeing during this stage: 'I'm a retired senior and live in Oklahoma. I need to get away from this cold horrible weather for a 4–5 d beach getaway this month' (USA15). In response, one traveller stated: ' I find on this forum that when people begin to research and develop connections to places, that's when their true dreams and wishes can be met. You obviously see a connection in the Orlando area and the nature/wildlife area north of there – so why not start planning it out?' (USA11). Solo travel can empower older women to take steps ' … to explore a dream destination on her own terms' (UK1). Solo travel during late adulthood can serve as a means of experiencing novelty and establishing connections to places, enabling retirees to engage meaningfully with destination activities (Bianchi, 2022; Nimrod & Rotem, 2010).

Similar to middle-aged women, older women also experience separation from their partners. However, in their case, it is often due to the death of their spouses: 'My husband passed away suddenly just before New Year. We had been married just over 40 years, We enjoyed our holidays, What is the best holiday websites for widowed people/solo travellers that is safe' (X1). Coping with the loss of a long-term spouse and seeking ways to continue enjoying life through solo travel align with the

late adulthood stage, as older women aim to maintain a sense of integrity and purpose. Further, solo travel can serve as a coping mechanism for women dealing with profound life transitions, marked by the need to adapt to new life circumstances (Kleiber et al., 2002; Sengupta, 2022). Late adulthood, characterised by significant life transitions, necessitates making sense of one's life, adjustment to life changes, and adapting to new circumstances. In this context, solo travel can offer a sense of independence and facilitate healing during challenging times, serving as a response to life-changing events (Huber et al., 2019).

General discussion

Erikson's theory of psychological development posits that the central crisis of adolescence is Identity vs. Role confusion. Adolescents are actively exploring various facets of their identity. This exploration often involves experimenting with different roles, beliefs, and activities, many of which are highly social in nature. The desire for autonomy and independence, therefore, is not necessarily a pursuit of solitude but rather a means to exercise personal choice, explore self-identity, and assert individuality. Adolescents engage in solo travel to develop agency and mastery (Fu et al., 2018). Adolescence is also marked by a significant emphasis on peer relationships. The importance of friendships and peer groups increases dramatically during this stage, serving as a critical source of support, identity validation, and social learning. Solo travel for adolescents is seen as an opportunity for social engagement, namely travelling to meet friends, staying with local peers, or exploring new places with friends, rather than seeking solitude. This emphasis on social connections reflects the developmental need for belonging and the influence of peer dynamics on adolescents' choices and behaviours in solo travel.

Young adults share some similarities with adolescents in their experience of solo travel and solitude. Like adolescents, many young adults may undertake their first independent trips away, signalling a period of exploration and self-discovery. However, the motivations and experiences associated with solitude during solo travel in young adulthood tend to be more varied. For some young adults, solo travel represents complete independence, while others engage in semi-independent travel within different social contexts, seeking companionship and forming social interactions during their solo travels. This variation reflects the developmental needs of young adults to balance independence with the desire for intimacy and connection, aligning with Erikson's stage of Intimacy vs. Isolation. At this stage, the challenge for young adults involves forming meaningful connections without succumbing to isolation, even when engaging in solo travel. Notably, young women have expressed a low level of motivation to be alone and are more likely to feel loneliness in solitude (Larson, 1990). Thus, solo travels may not necessarily translate into a positive experience of solitude. The fear of loneliness expressed by some young women during solo travel indicates the potential negative impact that solitude can have on their travel experiences.

Middle adulthood is characterised by Generativity vs. Stagnation. Amidst the development tasks of adapting to life transitions and pursuing self-discovery, women often experience a renewed sense of identity and purpose during middle adulthood. For middle-aged women, who often juggle the dual responsibilities of career and family expectations, solitude during solo travel can be embraced as a positive element, allowing them to reconnect with themselves away from the demands of family and work. Unlike in adolescence and young adulthood, where the focus of solo travel might be on exploration and social connections, middle-aged women may find solace and personal growth through solitude. For women experiencing specific life circumstances, such as divorce (Harmon & Kyle, 2022; Sengupta, 2022), solo travel becomes a coping mechanism and a way to navigate the challenges of change. It reflects a conscious effort to regain a sense of control over one's life. As such, solitude is viewed as a positive element, meeting the need for introspection, self-care, healing, personal growth, and renewed sense of identity (Weinstein et al., 2021). Therefore, the positive embrace of solitude during middle adulthood reflects a broader developmental journey, signifying a shift in valuing internal exploration and personal growth. This change highlights how

Table 1. Solitude in solo travel across the life stages.

Life stage	Focus of solo travel	Role of solitude	Key characteristics
Adolescence	Facilitates peer integration and identity formation	Exploration & socialisation	– Solo travel for social engagement and exploration. – Desire for autonomy. – Emphasis on peer relationships. – Identity formation.
Young Adulthood	Interplay of autonomy and social engagement	Independence & connections	– Varied motivations for solo travel. – Balancing independence with desire for intimacy and connection. – Duality with both freedom and forming new connections.
Middle Adulthood	Fosters generativity and self-revitalisation	Personal growth & renewal	– Embracing solitude for personal growth. – Navigating life changes through solo travel. – Rejuventing, personal growth, and self-care.
Late Adulthood	Enhances ego integrity	Introspective & reflection	– Increased preference for solitude. – Solo travel as a deliberate choice for introspective. – Internal contentment.

experiences of solitude in solo travel contribute to the generative and introspective aspects of middle adulthood, where the emphasis is on creating meaning, embracing change, and fostering personal renewal.

The stage of late adulthood is characterised by Ego integrity vs. Despair, which involves reflecting on one's life, leading to a sense of fulfilment or conversely to feelings of despair. In this context, older adults often actively seek solitude during solo travel (Lay et al., 2020; Ost Mor et al., 2021) and their preference for solitude, notably stronger than other life stages. They tend to choose to be alone and perceive solitude more positively, in contrast to other life stages such as adolescence, young adulthood, and middle adulthood during solo travel (Larson, 1990; Pauly et al., 2017). This aligns with previous findings that suggest older adults are more capable at spending time alone and less dependent on the presence of others (Larson, 1990; Lay, et al., 2020; Ost Mor et al., 2021). Additionally, they are typically more removed from social interactions, as they may place less emphasis on external stimuli and social engagement (Lay, et al., 2020). Engaging in solo travel, therefore, often represents a deliberate choice for solitude by older adults. This phase sees older women prioritise introspection, reflection, and personal growth, aligning with their reduced emphasis on external stimuli and social engagement. Solo travel offers a context for older adults to engage deeply with these tasks, using solitude as a means for a broader developmental transition towards seeking contentment in internal, self-focused experiences. Table 1 summarises the motivations and experiences of solitude associated with solo travel from adolescence through late adulthood, reflecting the developmental needs across the life stages.

Implications and directions for further research

The theoretical framework of life stages provides a novel context for illustrating how the motivations for solo travel and solitude are intricately connected, each enhancing the understanding of the other, particularly when viewed through the developmental needs of the lifespan. The life stage approach not only allows researchers to consider how women's motivations, perceptions, and experiences of solitude in solo travel align with their life stages, but also offers insights into the developmental significance of these experiences, thereby contributing to the broadening of the theoretical scope of solo travel. It contributes to the existing literature on solo travel in tourism by offering new perspectives in three distinct ways. First, solo travel serves as a facilitator for meeting developmental needs at various life stages. By integrating the psychological and developmental dimensions, solo travel can be seen as a means of addressing the specific challenges and

developmental tasks at each stage, thereby fostering opportunities for growth, reflection, and connection with others across various stages of the lifespan. Notably, solitude acts as a motivation for many women to engage in solo journeys. Solitude is not merely an outcome of solo travel but also a deliberate choice, highlighting its significance. Essentially, solitude is an important component that emphasises its integral role in shaping the solo travel experience.

Second, the application of life stage theory reveals that women's motivations for engaging in solo travel and seeking solitude may vary depending on their current life stage. Examining these experiences across different life stages contributes to a more nuanced understanding of solitude and solo travel. At various life stages, women's perceptions, interpretations, and utilisation of solitude take distinct forms, reflecting how age, personal development and life events influence the experience of solitude, thereby impacting the way solo travel is experienced. Solo travel in adolescence and young adulthood may foster independence, while middle adulthood may provide opportunities to escape from routine responsibilities. In late adulthood, solo travel can offer a sense of renewal and opportunities for continued growth. This contextualisation of needs, challenges, and developmental tasks adds depth to the understanding of how women experience solitude in solo travel and how they interpret the functions of solitude, moving beyond mere age-specific motivations.

Third, by applying the life stage theory, we can understand how life transitions serve as motivations for solo travel, providing unique opportunities for meeting developmental needs and managing changes specific to each life stage. The intersection of life events, solo travel and solitude provides insights into how women navigate significant life transitions. Events such as divorce, death of a partner, or retirement are not merely changes in one's social or professional status; they are transformative experiences that can alter a person's sense of identity and life goals. These transitions can significantly impact women's engagement with solo travel. In experiencing such events, solo travel emerges not just as a means of escape, but a proactive step towards healing and self-discovery. By applying the life stage theory, we can understand how these life transitions not only motivate women to engage in solo travel but also shape the nature and outcomes of these journeys.

This study also has practical implications for tourism service providers. Knowing that motivations and preferences for solo travel can vary with life stages, tourism providers can develop offerings to appeal to the unique interests of the SFTs at different life stages. This could include solo-friendly group tours for young adults seeking social interaction, wellness retreats for middle adulthood focusing on health and rejuvenation, or cultural events with a higher degree of comfort and accessibility for late adulthood. Understanding the challenges and concerns of SFTs at various life stages allows providers to offer enhanced support services. This could range from safety information and support for younger travellers to health and mobility services for older travellers. For many SFTs, particular those likely to experience loneliness or undergoing significant life transitions, opportunities to connect with others can be valuable. Tourism providers can facilitate community-building activities, such as sharing dinning experiences or interest-based group excursions, catering to the desire for both solitude and occasional social interaction. Understanding how different life stages engage with solo travel can inform services and marketing strategies, ensuring that tourism and hospitality experiences meet the needs and preferences of SFTs from various stages of life.

There are some limitations to be noted. TripAdvisor participants on the travel forum may present self-selection bias. Thus, the data collected represent travellers who are motivated to share their travel experiences. It may not capture the experiences of those who choose not to engage on this platform. Recognising this limitation points to a research avenue for exploring the experiences of those who actively participate in the travel forums. Future studies could examine the public discourse surrounding solitude in solo travel, analysing how community and support systems within these experiences contribute to our understanding of the barriers and enablers to solo travel for women. Women in different life stages might seek and offer support in various ways, from online forums and social media to travel groups and networks. Insights into how these communities function can guide the development of supportive platforms and resources for SFTs. Additionally,

employing quantitative methodologies, researchers can systematically assess the prevalence of identified themes, quantify the relationships between variables, and potentially capture a wider spectrum of solo female travel experiences. This approach enables a more precise assessment of the influence of various factors on solo travel experiences.

Conclusions

This study was designed to describe the components of solitude in solo travel and to apply life stage theory to gain insights into how the experience of solitude shapes the motivations and experiences of solo female travellers. Understanding solitude in solo travel becomes most effective when viewed within the context of the entire lifespan, as developmental tasks, challenges, and life events can alter how it is perceived. By viewing solitude in solo travel through the life stage theory, we gain insights into the diversity of motivations for solo travel and its significance for personal development and adaptation to life's changes. In this context, solo travel becomes not just a mode of travel, but a meaningful journey that fosters independence, facilitates self-discovery, enhances empowerment, and supports adaptation to life's changes across various stages of the lifespan.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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