

TOURISM AND TECHNOLOGY: REVISITING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN TRAVELLING ALONE

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Summary

This paper revisits some of the key concepts I used in my original research into solo female tourists in the 1990s to explore how technology impacts upon, and influences, the experiences of women travelling alone. The paper reviews the market for solo female travel since the 1990s and the ways in which technology is helping to shape its growth. It also considers the influence of technology on the experiences of travel with particular regard to its impact on the performance of tourists, and surveillance and security in tourism.

1 Introduction

When I first became interested in researching the experiences of women travelling alone, over twenty years ago, the view of those relatively few authors who had at that time examined the gendered nature of tourism was that much previous research had been gender-blind (Bagguley, 1990; Enloe, 1989) and that this had adversely affected the ability of the tourism industry to fully understand and meet the needs of the increasing number of female tourists in the UK and elsewhere. My contribution to the field of Tourism was my PhD study of 40 solo female travellers from the UK (for detail see Jordan, 2008; Jordan and Aitchison, 2008; Jordan and Gibson, 2005).

This study used qualitative in-depth interviews to investigate the varied travel experiences of women travelling alone. What has of course changed almost beyond recognition over the 20 years that I have been doing this research is the technological revolution in modern society. It is difficult to believe that when I carried out the interviews with solo female travellers in the late 1990s the internet was still fairly early in its development and in the UK it was still more common to use a travel agent to book a package holiday than to go online and do it yourself. Review sites such as Tripadvisor were in their infancy and the political, economic and security landscapes that shape our travel were quite different.

In my current role I sadly have very little time to follow up on that research and indeed to undertake more. What I do have now however is significantly more experience of what it is like to be a solo female traveller in the 21st century. I am fortunate that my job takes me all over the world and affords me amazing opportunities such as this to expand my travel horizons. For that I am most grateful. I wanted therefore in this paper to revisit some of the key concepts I used in my original research to explore how technology might impact upon, and influence, the experiences of women travelling alone.

The paper reviews the market for solo female travel since the 1990s and the ways in which technology is helping to shape its growth. It also considers the influence of technology on the experiences of travel with particular regard to its impact on the performance of tourism, and surveillance and security in tourism.

2. The growth in solo female travel and the role of technology

As we know, globally, the tourism sector is one of the largest, if not the largest industry (this depends how much we include the various supporting and related industries such as transport and retail). In this type of service business it is essential to understand your clients to ensure that you best meet their needs. When I began my research in the 1990s little research had been carried out about women as tourists and business travellers and whether their expectations and experiences differed from that of men.

During the 1990s and into the 21st century the significant influence of gender across all aspects of holiday choice and experience has been acknowledged in a burgeoning field of academic inquiry (see for instance Fullagar, 2002; Pritchard and Morgan, 2000a, 2000b; Pritchard, Morgan, Ateljevic and Harris, 2007). Such research has revealed that men and women experience tourism differently (Gibson, 2001; Mattila, Apostolopoulos, Sonmez, Yu and Sasidharan, 2001) and that solo leisure and business travel for women constitutes both an exceptionally empowering and a uniquely challenging experience (Berdychevsky and Gibson, 2015; Brownell, 2011; Karatepe and Babakus, 2015; Khoo-Lattimore, and Prayag, 2015; Pizam, 2014; Yavas, Karatepe and Babakus, 2015; Wilson and Little, 2005). The preferences of the rapidly increasing female traveller market are of significant importance to the tourism and hospitality industries in many countries (Marzuki, Razak and Chin, 2012).

In 2015 a TripAdvisor (<https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/TripAdvisorInsights>) survey of 9,181 women in Australia, the US, UK, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Russia and Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand), 41% of respondents said they had travelled alone before. The average for South East Asia was higher with 48% of women polled saying that they had travelled alone, compared to just 36% in 2014. More than three quarters (79%) of the respondents in South East Asia said they are planning a solo trip in future – higher than the global average of 74% and just behind women in Australia and UK (81 per cent), and Germany and France (91 per cent).

The majority (60%) of the women from Southeast Asia who were surveyed said that they travel alone because it gives them the freedom to do whatever they want, while 45% like the challenge. And of those who have travelled alone, 62% said it made them more independent and self-reliant, while 39% said it boosted their confidence. These sentiments echo those of the Western solo female tourists I interviewed so long ago. Like women in other countries, and those who participated in my study many years ago, Southeast Asian women do take precautions when travelling solo. 71% said they avoid going out late at night while 55% avoid quiet streets.

In terms of destinations, Bangkok topped the Asian list for global female solo travellers, ahead of [Singapore](#), [Siem Reap](#), [Bali](#) and [Hong Kong](#). Globally, [London](#) was the most popular destination, with [Paris](#), [New York](#), [Rome](#) and [Barcelona](#) completing the top five. Sixty-five% of respondents said they prefer to stay in independent or boutique hotels.

It is clear that technology is playing a critical role in supporting the growing numbers of women travelling alone and in servicing the needs of solo female travellers in the 21st century. According to the popular trekking website, Trekk Soft, a simple Google search on "solo

female travel" yields 38,300,000 results showing just how prevalent this search term is and how many online resources now exist. The products and services facilitated by technology vary from the emergence of specialist online tour operators to the creation of virtual communities of support. A recent example is the launch of *101 Singles Holidays* a spin off product from the established site *101 Holidays* designed specifically to meet the increasing demand for solo travel.

Technology can also help hospitality and tourism businesses to understand more about the solo female tourist and what she wants to better meet the demand. Li, Law, Vu, Rong, and Zhao, (2015) propose the use of the Emerging Pattern Mining technique to identify hotel features of interest to international travellers. Using data from 118,000 online reviews they show how the use of this technique can enable organisations to gain a better understanding of the rapid changes in tourist preferences. This type of data mining can be invaluable in determining how best to reach out to the female travel audience and can inform communication through online community sites such as Glam Media and iVillage.com. According to comScore (<http://www.comscore.com>) women's use of such sites has risen 35% over the past couple of years.

Greater understanding of the female market has led to the development of new ways to support them. American Airlines, for instance is the first airline to introduce a website for female travellers - www.AA.com/women. This website designed to meet the needs of the 48% of American Airlines passengers that are female, serves as a reservation portal; offering useful information on travel safety and wellness, tips and experience from customers and recommendations on travel packages (Hao and Har, 2014). A note of caution, however, has been sounded by some researchers that the use of technology by tourism and hospitality businesses has the potential to damage as well as enhance reputations. Bilgihan, Okumus, Nusair, and Joon-Wuk (2011:140) for instance comment on the

use of social networking by hospitality organisations: 'while social networking can assist a hospitality firm in strengthening guest loyalty and satisfaction, it may also expose itself to unfair criticism and unfounded speculation'. The power of technology in this respect should not be overlooked.

In addition to the growth of online tour operators and travel agents, the burgeoning of online travel review sites has a significant impact on women's solo travel planning. Research suggests that of American women travelling alone, over 80% purchased travel products or services offline but researched their purchases online beforehand (<http://gutsytraveler.com/women-travel-statistics-women-travel-trends/>). Such examples illustrate the power of technology to understand the growth of the solo female travel market and to support solo female travellers in planning their trips. In the following section I will explore how technology is impacting on the experiences of women travelling alone.

3. Technology and the experiences of tourism

Fundamentally, new technologies lead us to question the whole notion of 'getting away from it all' that used to underpin the perceived binary opposition of home and away and escape from the norm that underpinned many early analyses of tourism. Can we really get away from it all when in fact we take much of 'it' with us? By 'it' I mean our mobile connectivity. How many people here take their smart phones and tablets with them on holiday? How many admit to checking emails whilst on a break from work? I know I do.. As Molz says:

'We are witnessing a fundamental shift in the spatial and temporal parameters of social life as mobile phones, iPods and the Internet to be both here and elsewhere, absent and present. Individuals can enjoy virtual proximity online with friends who are far away, but they can also create a kind

of 'virtual distance' by plugging into mobile phones or laptop computers to detach themselves from the people or places around them' (2012: 65)

The continual evolution of mobile, and increasingly wearable, technology expands social networks beyond the physical, overcoming time and space to create the illusion (or in some cases the reality) of 'perpetual contact' affecting all aspects of tourist experience.

The concept of the flashpacker, for instance, predated my study of solo female travellers. For those of you who don't know this phrase, the flashpacker is someone who rather than simply taking a backpack with them on their travels, also now takes a variety of mobile technology and gadgetry. These days, I suspect if I were to re-interview my participants few would be travelling without mobile communication devices and I wonder to what extent that would have shaped their travels had these been available at the time. Two aspects of experience that were central to my research were the gaze and performance of tourists and surveillance and security of tourists. I will briefly re-examine these areas and their relationship with technology.

3.1 The Influence of technology on the performance of tourism

In theorising the experiences of solo female tourists I drew upon the concepts of tourism as performance and the influence of surveillance and the power of the gaze in tourism. In his metaphor of tourism as 'performance' Edensor (2000) conceptualises tourism as a dynamic and interactive process that varies according to where, when and how it is experienced. Thus, touristic performances are temporally, spatially and socially specific and are influenced by the personal characteristics of the actors (sex, ethnicity, age and so on) (Edensor, 2000).

Central to these analyses are Foucault's conceptualisations of power as exercised through the collective social and cultural gaze (1977; 1984a and b). According to Foucault, people's behaviour in particular social contexts is reliant on a complex process of surveillance through which norms of behaviour are determined and reinforced. He argues that, aware of the gaze of people around us we engage in a process of self-surveillance that affects our feelings and actions. The extent to which we do this varies according to where we are and who is sharing that space. Thus the way places are consumed by tourists is fluid at different moments in time and for different people depending on the way the gaze is exercised and experienced.

In my view, one of the most significant impacts of technology on the experience and performance of tourism is how the tourist gaze and performance is now mediated through its capture and sharing to the wider virtual audience. The gaze is no longer confined to those physically in the scene but is also now subject to the gaze of many not present through its sharing on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and interactive travel blogs. Rather than simply being invited to gaze on the tourism scenes being created **before us**, we are invited to participate through commenting on the performance being played out. The nature of the performance is thus influenced by the wider virtual audience. This phenomenon is explained by Crouch, Jackson and Thompson (2008:5): 'the very accessibility and immediacy of digital media production allows the tourist to become central to the theatrical drama of their own lives'.

This was clearly evident in a recent holiday I took to Borneo. Whilst I am used to the predominance of personal mobile technology in my daily life I was quite shocked by its dominance in the tourist experience I witnessed. Throughout the resort where we stayed rather than

enjoying the relaxation of a holiday, people appeared to be overtly performing as 'the tourists' starring in their own films and those of others. The sea, the beach, the coral, the wildlife appeared simply to be a scenic backdrop for the real purpose of the experience - to find the perfect photo, the perfect selfie to share with others. This was encapsulated in a scene I watched from the beach where two tourists hired a kayak. They were launched from the beach in a two person craft but only one person at a time would paddle as the other filmed and photographed from the front or back of the kayak. This resulted in the kayak simply going round in circles rather than travelling forward. After 10 minutes the tourists returned their kayak to the beach, apparently satisfied with their experience. It was clear that they had performed 'tourists who kayak' sufficiently, had enough material to share with their virtual audience and now moved on to the next scene of their holiday.

Technology also enables us to bring our holiday memories back with us and the use of holiday photos as screen savers on phones and laptops allow us to access the memories daily. It could be questioned though, by the cynics amongst us, as to whether these displays are designed simply to remind us of the good times or whether they are also in fact a further means of performing our roles as tourists back in the everyday to remind others around us that we were recently tourists?

3.2 Technology, surveillance and tourism

I mentioned above that Foucault's conceptualisations of power and surveillance were central to my analyses of women's solo travel and this is another area I believe is now fundamentally shaped by technology. Greater economic empowerment and labour force participation has resulted in a world where mobile women travelling have many more engagements with both the technologies and embodiments of surveillance than their predecessors. In addition therefore to the physical and cultural tourist

gaze that Urry (1990) and Rojek and Urry (1997) originally wrote about in the 1990s, women travelling are also now subject to what Lyon (2002: 1) describes as 'digitized surveillance'.

There is in the 21st century, an apparent paradox when it comes to the use of technology to increase visibility and security through surveillance. In the West growing concerns with terrorism and political violence have led to increased surveillance of particular ethnic groups and often of men from ethnic minorities, employing technologies such as CCTV, GPS and monitoring of phone contact. However the surveillance of women has also increased due to social, cultural, economic and familial changes. In an era of increasing concern with risk, safety and security, particularly in relation to international air travel, the role of surveillance has never been more visible within western society (Bauman, 2006; Lyon, 2001). There is therefore the need to understand how technology may act to make women more secure, or at the very least feel more secure, in their travels.

According to a Travel Guard poll, when travelling alone, nearly half of agents surveyed (47%) noted a solo traveller's greatest concern was encountering a dangerous situation without a travel companion to help. Additional concerns include medical emergencies (23%), potential flight delays or cancellations (24%), lost or stolen travel documents (4%) and lost luggage (3%) (https://www.travelguard.com/newsroom/tgupdate_Mar2013_SoloTravelTrends/). Recent research on the experience of female business travellers suggests that women travelling alone are more likely to experience stress than their male counterparts especially with regard to transport and security (Churchill, 2015). Again, this echoes the findings of my work back in the early 21st century when women reported that safety and security were their primary concerns.

When travelling through an airport in somewhere such as London today, it is almost impossible to ignore the heightened state of national fear manifested in the increasing use of technology to provide additional security. Whilst on the one hand this is designed to be a physical reminder that every measure is being taken to protect the traveller, it is also a constant reminder of the risks that you are taking simply in travelling. Given that female travellers, especially those alone, report more concerns about their security than their male counterparts this is a significant issue and challenge for the tourism industry. How can we allay the fears of female tourists whilst also doing everything in our power to keep them safe? This is definitely an area where more research is needed.

Many of the women I spoke to during my research highlighted the importance of guidebooks in helping them to feel secure about travelling through researching a destination before travel. These days the plethora of review sites such as Tripadvisor assist in this by providing much more detailed information than that available in most guides and also, critically, content produced by other travellers commenting on all aspects of a destination from accommodation to safety. There are many such sites which exist specifically to advise women travellers. Many have active female bloggers sharing every detail of their trip. These sites play an important part in arming women with the information they need to be confident about their travels. However, they can also reinforce concerns about solo travel as often their emphasis is on what needs to be done to keep oneself safe.

Other sites are dedicated to supporting female tourists through providing a virtual and physical network of travellers around the world. Networking site Ladiesaway.com, for example, is a new networking website designed for businesswomen (www.ladiesaway.com). The site helps female travellers to stay connected and enables them to find out about other

female travellers who are staying in the same hotel or neighborhood. Members can post their experience and give recommendations to others members. Going forward, technology has an important role to play in developing resources which provide appropriate information without adding to fear.

4. Conclusion

It has been interesting to revisit my earlier research and to ponder how the experiences of the women I spoke to then might now be changed by technology. When I think about my experiences as a solo female traveller now I am conscious that almost all aspects of my travel are shaped to a greater or lesser extent by the integration of technologies into tourism. From the aeroplanes that I fly on to the mobile gadgets on which I rely to keep up with my work whilst away, technology is central to my experience.

I can see too that it is essential in supporting a growing number of women in the West, and particularly here in South East Asia, to realise their travel aspirations. Technology affords the tourism industry the means to research in greater detail than ever before the expectations and preferences of solo female tourists and to meet their needs. It enables us to feel secure in the knowledge that we are never really totally detached from home and there is security in that knowledge. It has the means to provide us with incredibly detailed information on which to base our planning and also is the mechanism by which we can share our experience with those who care about us and those who might want to follow in our footsteps as tourists.

The only slight concern I am left with is the impact that technology may have on people's ability to enjoy being in the moment. An old-fashioned part of me does wonder if performing as a tourist, and recording this for a wider audience, is in danger of undermining our ability to

simply enjoy being a tourist. That remains to be seen, but is clear to me that certainly now and in the future tourism and technology will be inextricably linked. It is clear that the intersection of technology and tourist does create some very interesting areas for further research. The technologically mediated performance of tourists and the influence of technology on all aspects of travel for women alone are two aspects that I hope I will find the time to investigate in the future.

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