

Women travelling alone: Prospects on **gender** and **tourism experiences**

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The consumption of tourism products and services of interest for women has been receiving a significant prominence in the global economy. Thus, there is a growing movement of women who travel independently, for several reasons. This study aims to contribute to a more in-depth discussion on gender issues in the tourism activity, with particular emphasis on independent travel is experienced by women. While agreeing with Sharpley (2011), who states that tourism is the consumption of experiences, the range of forms of interaction that can occur between the tourism destinations and those who visit them is broadened. A deeper knowledge of these different forms of interaction is fundamental to the study of consumer behaviour in tourism, which, in addition to the potential economic benefits, presents itself as an opportunity to optimize the relations with the visited destinations, to emphasize respect for diversity, and to promote the appreciation of the culture and the idiosyncrasies of the 'Other'.

Therefore, it is important to study the tourism market in the perspective of gender issues and to identify which factors differently influence the motivations, the behaviours and the experiences of individuals (both men and women) whilst travelling abroad. Indeed, there are evidences of an increasing number of women from Western countries travelling alone, mostly as a result of a greater financial independence and democratisation of access to education (Pritchard, Morgan, Ateljevic & Harris, 2007; Wilson, 2004). This has enabled the emergence of new ways of looking at the intersection between gender issues and tourism, which directly and globally influences the economy, culture, politics and the society. According to Berdychevsky, Poria and Uriely (2013), gender relations affect the way men and women build their touristic experiences. This justifies the importance of understanding how the condition of 'being' a woman in the 21st century affects individual choices and preferences for leisure and thereby contributes to the deconstruction of firmly rooted stereotypes. Independent travel offer women an alternative 'lens' to examine their lives, away from spouses, family members or domestic responsibilities; a moment in which they are able to find time and space for their own reflections and self-development (Wilson & Harris, 2006). The benefits of travel are transferred to other contexts of these women's everyday life (home, work, leisure, relationships, etc.), and an analysis of the moment after the visitation experience can reveal much about this segment of consumers.

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This work aims to analyse and understand the context in which the independent travel occur and its characteristics, as well as to contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon, its dynamics and future prospects.

This study presents itself as a conceptual approach, based on a review of articles and other scientific publications that directly or indirectly focus on the emerging demand of these women in the tourist market. It aims to deepen the discussions on gender and tourism, through an exploratory research in major global scientific production repositories, such as *Scopus*. Other works which were considered relevant for the understanding of this subject were also accounted. In the search, the keywords 'gender' (female), 'tourism' and 'travel' (independent) were used. This literature review intends to: exhibit the advances in gender studies that are developed in conjunction with research in the tourism field; to address the experience of women as independent travellers; to analyse the challenges and limitations of this experience; and to anticipate some future scenarios for this increasing demand.

In general, the studies of quantitative nature that are carried out within the tourism framework are predominately targeted to the offer, to the detriment of a deeper look into the specifics of demand through the analysis of qualitative data. In methodological terms, and in order to answer the questions that quantitative research fails to clarify as well as to ensure a better understanding of the complexity of tourism in the 21st century, the need to undertake more qualitative research is emphasized.

It was also noted that the discussions on gender issues, from the perspective of tourism, have a common point and aggregator on which researchers recognize and highlight the need to deepen studies that integrate both topics pursuant the social, cultural, political and economic transformations of modern society. The suppression of these gaps may also contribute not only to behaviour analysis and identification of emerging trends, but also to come up with solutions that may add value to human development. According to Pritchard et al. (2007), these gaps should be filled with studies that combine theoretical and socio-cultural analysis. The near absence of studies (namely of qualitative nature) focused on women's independent travel behaviour shows that the scientific production in the tourism field from a gender perspective is still scarce; yet, little research has been conducted with regards to the needs, experiences, learnings and challenges of the contemporary woman who travels independently. Thus, several opportunities for future research can be perceived within this field of knowledge.

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