Solo Tourism: A Great Excuse to Practice Social Distancing

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Abstract

This paper considers the growth of solo tourism amidst and post COVID-19. Solo tourism is the activity of people travelling alone, and it is not without challenges. Safety concerns with travelling alone, cultural constraints and social taboos associated with solo travelling women, dining alone and the lack of solo packages are among the challenges experienced by solo tourists. There are several potential growth opportunities amidst COVID-19, because despite the growth in tourophobia, social distancing has made solo tourism more appealing. Solo tourism may be perceived as a safer and healthier travel alternative, forming part of the tourism industry's recovery plans. The continued growth of solo tourism will have practical implications for the tourism industry by repackaging offerings and creating new attractions and destinations that appeal to the solo traveller, such as urban destinations and not only rural destinations for solitude. New marketing strategies may also remove stigmas associated with travelling alone. Solo dining could be re-modelled as more socially acceptable through restaurant modifications and maintaining social distance. Technology may also accommodate the solo traveller through virtual connections, further encouraging physical distancing.

Keywords: Solo tourism, solo traveller, tourophobia, social distance, COVID-19

Introduction

Tourism is a social phenomenon (Rastegaeva & Kazakov, 2016) that exists within a service industry and requires human interaction (Blomstervik et al., 2021). There is constant physical contact between employees and tourists, locals and tourists, and tourists with each other. Zeng et al. (2020) refer to the tourism industry as a high-touch industry with continuous physical contact between tourists and different role-players in the industry. The industry's social interaction and physical contact were interrupted with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which became much more than merely a medical issue (Yeh, 2021), and obligated physical distance between people (World Health Organisation, 2020a). The novel coronavirus, named COVID-19, was first reported in late 2019 from Wuhan, China (Yeh, 2021), and on 11 March 2020 it was declared a pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2020a). Globally, economies and societies have been struggling due to the pandemic with its related strict management measures, which includes lockdowns with restrictions on movements, and social distancing to curb the spread of the virus (Zeng et al., 2020). Research indicates that all aspects of life, worldwide have been affected and severely impacted by the pandemic (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2021; Yeh, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020) and the tourism and hospitality industry has been hardest hit by the imposition of social distancing and efforts to prevent physical human interaction (Gudkov, 2021; Yeh, 2021). Gudkov (2021) argues that social distancing requirements are problematic for the service-oriented nature of tourism, which requires continued close interaction. Furthermore, Zeng et al. (2020) indicate that social distancing requires the closure of touristic spaces such as public parks, plazas, and markets, which further exacerbates the negative impact on travel behaviour. However, one form of niche tourism that fits within the rigid social distancing requirements of COVID-19 prevention is solo tourism, which refers to

those travellers who participate in touristic activities on their own (Leith, 2020). The idea of engaging in a highly socialised phenomenon, such as tourism, wanting to be alone and in solitude, seems contradictory and counter intuitive (Hewitt, 2020; Rodriquez, 2019).

This theoretical paper considers solo tourism and how COVID-19 regulations have impacted this niche. Solo tourism will first be discussed, and the associated challenges will also be considered. Thereafter, the potential growth opportunities of solo tourism amidst and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the practical implications for the tourism industry are also reviewed.

Solo tourism

Solo tourism is the activity of people travelling to various locations, on their own, for various reasons (Chung et al., 2017; Hutchinson, 2015; Leith, 2020; Yang, 2020). Plummer (2021) notes that solo travellers can arrange their itinerary with absolute freedom to spend as much or as little time at a site or attraction of their choice. The solo tourist is not a homogeneous group and Leith (2020) argues that both current and future solo tourists will be defined by their personal needs, desires, motivations, and related travel behaviour.

There are, for example, people who choose to travel alone with specific social intentions of wanting to meet new people from different countries and different walks of life (Abbasian, 2018; Hutchinson, 2015; Yang, 2020). Leith (2020) however indicates that some solo travellers desire solitude and have no social intentions, rather only solo intentions. For the latter solo tourist, solitude and the desire to be alone is critical, whereas the former is more likely to engage in social activities. It is argued by Abbasian (2018) and Su and Wu (2021) that travelling solo should not automatically be associated with being single and not having a travelling partner. Many solo travellers have life partners or spouses but choose to travel alone for various reasons. For example, a homemaker with children may travel solo to escape her everyday routine, while a married corporate executive may travel alone to get a break and recharge from a highly stressful job.

Yang (2020) refers to two categories of solo tourism: solo travel due to circumstances and solo travel by choice. Those who engage in solo tourism by choice seek freedom and flexibility in their activities (Abbasian, 2018; Hutchinson, 2015; Seow & Brown, 2018; Yang, 2020), solitude (Leith, 2020) and meeting new people (Leith, 2020; Seow & Brown, 2018; Su & Wu, 2021), among other reasons. On the other hand, solo travel by circumstance may include travelling post a significant life event such as a divorce or the death of a loved one, which could be travel for self-discovery through a pilgrimage or to help with the grieving process (Yang, 2020). Seow and Brown (2021) note that some solo travellers' motivations are linked to experiencing an identity crisis, and a desire to find new meaning in life. It is also noted by Gudkov (2021) that recently, many people have travelled alone to spas and health resorts to help their recovery post contracting COVID-19. As part of continued efforts to develop recovery plans for the tourism industry post-pandemic, focusing on the various types of solo tourists and their related needs may unearth entrepreneurial opportunities. However, the concept of solo travel is not without challenges and concerns.

Challenges of solo tourism

One of the main concerns of travelling alone is the fear and concern of not being safe, particularly for female travellers who are seen to be at greater risk (Seow & Brown, 2018; Yang, 2020). A study conducted by Heimtun and Abelsen (2013) found that female respondents viewed solo tourism as a frightening prospect. Furthermore, Hutchinson (2015) found that concerns about safety and security are of the main disadvantages of solo tourism that hinder solo travel. Safety and security as destination pull factors have also been among the

main reasons for the dissatisfaction of solo travellers (Bianchi, 2016). Many women may thus have a desire to travel alone but may be hampered by the concern that they would not be able to keep themselves safe or have any form of protection or any guarantee of safety.

In addition to being concerned about safety, female travellers often face cultural constraints regarding solo female tourists, both societal and family related. Yang and Tung (2018) argue that the influence of family on solo travel decisions is more important than initially thought of, particularly in Eastern cultures. In some instances, the woman's family forbids solo travel, or it is frowned upon within social circles, and the women abandon their solo travel plans. Solo travel among female Muslim and Asian travellers have been well researched as these two groups of travellers very often receive the brunt of social taboos to travelling alone and related family influence on their decisions (Karagöz et al., 2021; Muslim Travel Girl, 2021; Seow & Brown, 2018; Yang et al., 2017).

Dining alone has also been one of the most significant challenges and deterrents against solo tourism. There is a level of embarrassment associated with dining alone (Seow & Brown, 2018). Song et al. (2021) argue that an essential element of the dining experience is the interaction between the employees and the customers dining together and this is hampered by solo travel. According to Leith (2020), eating alone invites the perceived judgement of what others think of you and the concept of the public gaze that very often leads to the embarrassment of dining alone. Fears of safety may also be exacerbated as solo dining could indicate to predators that someone is alone, and Lahad and May (2017) note that solo dining often makes women feel more vulnerable.

A further challenge includes the lack of tourism packages and offerings that cater for singles as most travel packages are compiled with partners or travel companions in mind (Hutchinson, 2015). Furthermore, due to the two-person travelling perspective of tour packages, solo travellers tend to pay more for their trips in single supplements (Hutchinson, 2015; Yang, 2020), and there is thus a need to create more affordable packages. A study conducted by Yang (2020) found that more budget-friendly prices for solo travellers were essential requests among participants. Many people who might have had solo travel intentions may choose a companion as sharing the trip makes more financial sense. These challenges highlight several growth opportunities and the overall potential for the broader solo tourism industry amidst and post COVID-19.

Growth potential of the solo tourism industry amidst and post covid-19

During the early days of the pandemic, the World Health Organisation advised that one of the measures to slow down and avoid the spread of the virus was through social distancing (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2021). Furthermore, according to Gudkov (2021), COVID-19 has brought about a need for isolation and not only a desire but a need to avoid crowds, whether it be for an event or gathering at a specific attraction. Social distancing requirements have had devastating effects on the tourism industry, with flights being grounded worldwide and an overall negative impact on travel behaviour (Gudkov, 2021). Amidst the growing fears of crowds (Fakuade, 2021; University of Portsmouth, 2021) and fears of travelling (Gajić et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2021), the prospects of solo travel have become more appealing.

According to Wen et al. (2021), because of COVID-19 and its related restrictions, a few independent and accessible forms of niche tourism will gain momentum, and solo tourism may be considered one such niche area that will grow because of the pandemic. When one travels alone, there is a much smaller chance of gathering and mingling in a crowd with strangers, thus avoiding and reducing the risk of contracting and spreading the virus. Tourophobia has risen tremendously (Çakar, 2021) as travellers are concerned about sharing the same space with thousands of other tourists at popular tourist sites, spending time with

other passengers in aeroplanes, particularly on long-haul flights (Reed, 2020). Consequently, there is great potential for the growth of solo tourism as a perceived safer alternative, as many people have developed a fear of crowds due to the fear of contracting COVID-19.

This niche form of tourism could form part of the industry's recovery plans by focussing some attention on the growth and development of solo tourism opportunities. Solo tourism might be considered safer travel amidst COVID-19, from a public health perspective, as people would be encouraged to travel but still adhere to the social distancing guidelines to curb the spread of the virus.

Dining alone may previously have been frowned upon and seen as an unpleasant experience, but the pandemic has forced restaurants to re-consider how they accommodate their guests with physical distancing. Sidman (2020) found that when restaurants re-opened after strict lockdown measures, the social distancing setup made it feel as if one is eating alone, and it has become more acceptable for people to eat alone. Chong (2021) argues that it is time to move past the social stigma of dining alone, mainly because solo dining has become the lifeline for many restaurants struggling due to the pandemic. One restaurant in Sweden, for example, has been named "Table for One" as they were only serving solo diners (News18, 2020), making solo dining more acceptable and even appealing to some.

Another growth opportunity is the inclusion of urban destinations and new and unlikely rural destinations for solo travellers. Rural destinations have predominantly been preferred for solo tourism as these destinations naturally lend themselves to remoteness (Jiménez et al., 2014) and solitude (Rainero & Modarelli, 2020). However, concerns over access to health care during a pandemic at these destinations might be disconcerting for some travellers (Siedner et al., 2020; World Health Organisation, 2020b). If someone became gravely ill, rural areas around the world are less likely to have the health care facilities needed (Dorjdagva et al., 2017; Morris-Paxton et al., 2020). Solo tourism in urban destinations where health care facilities are expected to be more readily available could be another growth area for the industry to consider.

Practical implications for the tourism industry

Wen et al. (2021) argue that the myriad of changes brought about due to the pandemic will require businesses to repackage their offerings to suit different types of travellers, such as solo tourists. Heimtun and Abelsen (2013) argue that the solo tourism market is set to continue growing and the industry should develop creative campaigns to promote socially inclusive holidays for solo travellers. There is a need to create new and alternative solo-themed destinations, attractions, and travel programmes that would meet the specific needs of solo tourists, which includes curiosity and self-actualisation that would benefit solo travellers (Yang & Tung, 2018). Yang and Tung (2018) argue that the unique needs of female travellers, with family and cultural traditions influence, can be addressed through refined marketing efforts that accommodate the social and family pressures. The findings of Hutchinson's (2015) study note that destination marketers must be mindful of the specialised needs of solo travellers and specific packages need to be developed for them.

Moreover, additional changes may need to be brought to restaurants to prevent the solo tourist from feeling the embarrassment of dining alone, with specific areas for single dining for example (Song et al., 2021). These changes in restaurants would not only satisfy the social distancing regulations in place but also make it more acceptable for solo tourists to dine alone. Restaurants may these specified sections available for solo dining, which could be included in tour packages without the single supplement that solo travellers must pay.

Rural destinations have predominantly been considered perfect for meeting the needs of solo tourists due to their natural setting. With the African continent having vast rural areas and a very high rural population density (Mellor, 2014), solo travel to African rural destinations

is possible. Despite the perceived fears of travelling the continent alone, great solo destinations exist in places like Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, and Ethiopia (Ubuntu Travel, 2022). These destinations offer great opportunities for solitude, and seclusion. In addition, a further growth opportunity for solo tourism includes urban destinations, as the primary motivation may not necessarily be solitude, which would be catered for in rural destinations. Abbasian (2018) found that solo tourists who choose city destinations do so due to not having a companion to travel with or out of their own choice. For solo tourists who have social intentions on their trips (Leith, 2020), urban destinations may be a more appealing choice as there would be more social opportunities through nightlife and different attractions in the cities. The growth of solo tourism could potentially help address and reduce or remove social stigmas and the fears around travelling alone, particularly for females (Heimtun & Abelsen, 2013; Thomas & Mura, 2019; Yang, 2020). With continued education and information availability, the stigma of travelling alone could be reduced, and more feared destinations such as Africa could become more popular as myths are debunked and fears allayed (Expert Africa, 2022; Where goes Rose, 2022).

A final practical implication for the tourism industry is how the use of technology can potentially be used to encourage solo tourism and to enhance the experiences of the solo traveller. As a result of COVID-19 and social distancing regulations, many people have had to work from home (Business Tech, 2021; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021), and there has been a growth in the use of social media and various online platforms to communicate with loved ones virtually (Pandya & Lodha, 2021; Statista, 2021). Technology may be a great way to connect those physically distanced and alone to keep them connected (Gudkov, 2021; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). According to Su and Wu (2021), technology may make the solo traveller seem to be never alone as they constantly update family and friends, sharing their experiences virtually, which has been used for the past few years. Another way in which technology can used in solo tourism could be to enhance safety and security through making sure that someone tracks your whereabouts and personal security chains for example (Dunn, 2019).

Conclusions

COVID-19 has brought about many changes worldwide in various areas of life and economic sectors, more so in the tourism and hospitality industry. Travel bans and the grounding of flights, lockdowns with stay-at-home orders, and social distancing requirements have severely strained travellers, while tourism declined globally. Solo tourism as a niche area has been gaining momentum, and the physical distance requirement of the pandemic complements the needs and desires of solo travellers. Despite several of challenges with solo tourism, there are many opportunities that have come about because of the pandemic.

This paper considered the potential growth opportunities of solo tourism and the practical implications for the tourism industry, which include using solo tourism as part of recovery plans amidst and post the pandemic. Furthermore, making dining alone more appealing and socially acceptable while adhering to social distancing requirements were also highlighted. Considering new rural destinations in Africa and including urban destinations in tour packages are further growth opportunities for the industry. Safety and security concerns, particularly among solo female travellers could be addressed through technology.

There are several future research opportunities associated with solo tourism, both linked to the current pandemic and the niche area in general. With current restrictions and guidelines linked to COVID-19, the extent to which solo tourists have been influenced to travel alone due to the pandemic, could be investigated. Future research could examine the profile of solo tourists to create segmentations that could be useful in creating new marketing programmes,

which would in turn help address their specified needs. Research can also be conducted to determine whether the safety and security concerns associated with solo tourism are real or perceived and to what extent the industry can address these issues. Furthermore, considering the African continent for solo tourism, in both rural and urban destinations could be investigated.

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