Alone, Not Lonely: Motivations, Perceived Risks, and Hospitality Services in Solo Leisure Travel — A Reflective Conceptual Synthesis

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Literature review and conceptual synthesis informed by the author's travel experience. No primary survey data were collected for this version.

Abstract

Solo leisure travel has moved from a niche curiosity to a visible segment of contemporary tourism, yet hospitality systems still often treat the solo guest as a pricing exception rather than a designed-for guest. This paper asks: How do motivations, perceived risks, and destination hospitality services shape the solo leisure travel experience, and what implications does this hold for hospitality managers? Drawing on peer-reviewed tourism and hospitality scholarship and framed with short autoethnographic vignettes from the author's independent and solo journeys across places featured in his public travel portfolio—including Paris, London, Istanbul, Milan, Hong Kong, Sikkim, Tripura, and Busan—this work synthesizes definitions of solo versus independent versus backpacker travel; push–pull motivations; gendered and racialized risk; technology and social media as negotiation tools; and service-design implications for hotels, restaurants, and destinations. The paper proposes a simple three-layer conceptual frame linking motivation → risk negotiation → hospitality service encounter. It does not invent survey results. Limitations, ethics, and a future-research agenda—especially for South Asian and Bangladeshi outbound travellers—are stated plainly. Implications for managers centre on pricing fairness, psychological safety, solo-friendly social design, and culturally literate service.

Keywords: solo travel; independent travel; tourism motivation; perceived risk; gender and tourism; hospitality service design; Asian outbound travellers

1. Introduction

I still remember standing alone in front of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul with my camera bag and a quiet sense that the day belonged entirely to me—the pace, the route, the pause for tea, the decision to stay longer when the light changed. I have felt a similar freedom walking toward the Eiffel Tower in Paris, under Tower Bridge in London, beside the Duomo in Milan, watching Hong Kong's skyline from a plane wing, in the hills of Sikkim, near palace grounds in Tripura, and along Busan's waterfront where I now study and live. Those moments are not "data." They are the reason I care about this topic as a Global Hospitality Management student at Kyungsung University. When you travel alone often enough, you start noticing how destinations, hotels, and restaurants either welcome the solo guest—or quietly assume you should have arrived as a pair.

Academic research has caught up with that lived reality, though unevenly. Solo travel is repeatedly described as a growing and still under-researched area in tourism and hospitality (Laesser et al., 2009; Bianchi, 2016; Otegui-Carles et al., 2022). Bibliometric work after COVID-19 underlines both renewed interest and persistent gaps: weak definitional consensus, over-concentration on female travellers from limited regions, and limited comparison with accompanied tourists (Otegui-Carles et al., 2022). At the same time, a rich qualitative and conceptual stream—especially on Asian solo female travellers—has shown that freedom, self-development, and empowerment sit beside gendered and racialised risk (Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2018a, 2018b; Seow & Brown, 2018).

This paper is a literature review and conceptual synthesis, written in a reflective academic voice. Where I speak in the first person, I am offering autoethnographic vignettes that motivate the research question—not findings that can be generalized. I have not conducted interviews or surveys for this preprint. Every claim that moves beyond my own experience is tied to published sources I have checked.

Research question. How do motivations, perceived risks, and destination hospitality services shape the solo leisure travel experience, and what implications does this hold for hospitality managers?

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews definitions and themed literature. Section 3 offers a conceptual synthesis. Section 4 translates the synthesis into managerial implications. Section 5 states limitations, ethics, and future research. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Solo, Independent, and Backpacker Travel

One of the first problems in this literature is definitional. There is still no single consensus on who counts as a "solo traveller" (Yang, 2021; Otegui-Carles et al., 2022).

Some scholars emphasize arriving alone at a destination; others debate whether joining a tour or meeting companions later still qualifies as solo travel. Laesser et al. (2009), studying a mature Swiss market, offered an early and useful typology that distinguishes living arrangements (alone vs. not) from travel mode (truly alone vs. joining a group of previously unknown people). Yang (2021) later described solo travel as an evolving, fluid concept that varies with experience and circumstance, and distinguished travellers who are "solo by choice" from those who are "solo by circumstances."

It also helps to separate overlapping labels:

- Solo leisure travel typically means holiday travel undertaken without family, friends, or a romantic partner as travel companions—though the traveller may socialize intensively at the destination (Bianchi, 2016; Yang, 2021).

- Independent travel emphasizes self-organized itineraries and flexibility rather than the presence or absence of a companion; a couple can travel independently without being solo.
- Backpacking is a related but distinct tradition in tourism studies, often associated with budget accommodation, flexible planning, longer stays, and intensive social interaction with other travellers (see classic backpacker discussions in the wider tourism literature; Otegui-Carles et al., 2022, note how solo and backpacker themes sometimes blur in practice).

In my own experience across Europe and Asia, I have sometimes been fully alone for days, and sometimes joined walking tours or met people in hostels and cafés. That fluidity matches what Laesser et al. (2009) and Yang (2021) describe: solo travel is less a fixed demographic label than a mode of arriving and deciding.

For hospitality managers, the practical takeaway is simple: design for the guest who books as one, whether or not they later dine with strangers or join a day tour.

2.2 Push–Pull Motivations and the Desire to Travel Alone

Tourism motivation research has long used push–pull thinking: internal forces push people to travel, while destination attributes pull them toward particular places (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). Crompton's classic work identified socio-psychological push motives—such as escape, self-exploration, relaxation, prestige, and social interaction—alongside cultural pull motives such as novelty and education (Crompton, 1979).

Solo travel studies consistently show that those classic motives take a distinctive shape when there is no companion to negotiate with. Bianchi (2016) found that satisfaction for solo holiday travellers was driven more by personal feelings of freedom, relaxation, and discovery, and by human interaction with others met along the way, than by destination attributes alone. Dissatisfaction clustered around safety concerns and unfriendly service. Yang (2021), comparing solo and non-solo travellers, similarly highlighted

transformative experience, freedom, and flexibility as key motivators for those who travel alone, while anticipated self-discovery and freedom inspired potential solo travellers. Constraints—especially safety, cost, and social disapproval—shaped both participation and experience.

I recognize that pattern. When I choose a day alone in Paris or Busan, the "push" is often control over time and attention—the chance to think, photograph, and move without constant compromise. The "pull" might be a skyline, a neighbourhood, a museum, or simply a city that feels walkable and legible. Literature and experience converge here: solo travel is frequently chosen, not merely endured (Bianchi, 2016; Yang, 2021).

Importantly, motivations are not universal. Reviews note that women's solo travel narratives often emphasize independence, empowerment, escape from gendered roles, and personal growth, while men's preferences—where studied—may tilt more toward adventure, nature, and exploration, though comparative gender work remains limited (Otegui-Carles et al., 2022). Asian women's solo travel has been linked to self-transformation and micro-level social change when risk is negotiated successfully (Yang et al., 2018a; Yang, Yang, & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019).

2.3 Perceived Risk, Gender, and the Geography of Fear

If freedom is the bright side of solo travel, perceived risk is its shadow—and hospitality sits right in that shadow. Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) mapped pleasure-travel risk across dimensions including financial, physical, psychological, social, satisfaction, and time risk. Destination safety research has long shown that security concerns can deter visitation (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). For solo travellers, those risks are amplified by the absence of an immediate companion who can share vigilance, language help, or emotional support (Otegui-Carles et al., 2022).

Feminist tourism scholarship has been especially clear about gendered fear in public and tourist space. Wilson and Little (2008) applied Valentine's idea of a "geography of women's fear" to solo international travel, showing how women perceived restricted access, conspicuousness, vulnerability, and others' judgments. Later work on Asian solo female travellers demonstrated that tourism space remains gendered and often Western-dominated; negotiating risk becomes a way of negotiating gender identity itself (Yang et al., 2018b). Yang et al. (2018a) further showed that Asian women confront both gendered risks (harassment, sexual threat) and racialised risks (stereotypes, social disapproval), and that navigating those risks can produce empowerment—while also revealing unequal power relations. Seow and Brown (2018) likewise documented sexualized attention and sociocultural expectations as constraints that do not necessarily stop Asian women from travelling alone.

Thomas and Mura (2019), analysing foreign solo female travellers' blogs about India, argued that women may internalize a "normality of unsafety," raising hard questions

about whether solo travel always challenges gendered power or sometimes reproduces the expectation that women must manage danger alone. Karagöz et al. (2021) connected solo female travel risks and anxiety to travel intentions, examining how online psychological-social support can moderate that relationship—an important bridge to technology (Section 2.4).

From a Bangladeshi angle—personally meaningful to me as a Bangladeshi student and entrepreneur—Bernard, Rahman, and McGehee (2022) examined cultural values and constraints among Bangladeshi female solo travellers. They found a mix of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints (including personal barriers, perceived risk, family support, and time), with power-distance and masculinity linked to constraint patterns, and with implications for mobility rights and gender equality. That study matters because South Asian outbound solo travel is still thinly represented in mainstream tourism journals relative to Western and East/Southeast Asian samples (Bernard et al., 2022; Otegui-Carles et al., 2022).

I write this section carefully. As a male traveller, my risk map is not the same as that of many women travellers described in this literature. What I can say from observation and from reading is that hospitality environments—hotel corridors, elevators, late dining rooms, taxi ranks, poorly lit streets between attractions—feature repeatedly as sites where vulnerability is felt (Wilson & Little, 2008; Wang & Wu, 2020; Otegui-Carles et al., 2022). Designing for solo guests therefore cannot stop at “single rooms.” It has to include psychological safety.

2.4 Technology, Social Media, and Soft Infrastructure

Solo travellers rarely travel in a vacuum of information. Digital tools—maps, translation apps, review platforms, travel groups, and social media—function as soft infrastructure for risk negotiation and companionship-at-a-distance. Karagöz et al. (2021) explicitly tested online psychological-social support as a moderator between risk/anxiety and intention. Bernard et al. (2022) recruited Bangladeshi women through women-only English-speaking Facebook travel groups, underscoring how online communities can both enable research access and serve as peer support for travellers navigating conservative social norms. Reviews also note rising attention to digital advice and online narratives in recent solo-travel scholarship (Otegui-Carles et al., 2022).

There is a useful distinction here between leisure solo travel and digital-nomad mobility. Digital nomads often combine remote work with place-hopping and may seek co-working, long-stay housing, and productivity infrastructure. Leisure solo travellers may want flexibility and occasional social contact without the work stack. Conflating the two leads to poor product design. The literature reviewed here is primarily about leisure and holiday solo travel (Bianchi, 2016; Yang, 2021), not remote-work lifestyles.

In my own practice, technology is how I plan routes, check neighbourhood feel, and stay connected to family while still claiming the independence of the day. That does not erase risk; it redistributes it—sometimes helpfully, sometimes into information overload or performative pressure on social media. Managers should treat digital trust signals (clear safety information, responsive messaging, transparent solo pricing) as part of the service product.

2.5 Destination Choice and Post-COVID Context

Destination choice for solo travellers is inseparable from perceived safety, ease of movement, and the chance of positive social encounters (Bianchi, 2016; Yang, 2021). Otegui-Carles et al. (2022) note that COVID-19 temporarily reshaped interest in solo travel—social distancing made travelling alone more appealing for some—while also disrupting tourism systems overall. Sung et al. (2021), analysing Korean travellers' behaviour in the post-COVID period, illustrate how pandemic conditions reordered risk sensitivities and travel patterns more broadly; their work is not solely about solo travel, but it situates solo movement within a risk-conscious recovery era.

I do not claim a unique COVID finding from my own trips. What the published work supports is more modest: recovery planning that ignores solo guests misses a segment that may be especially sensitive to crowding, cleanliness communication, flexible cancellation, and the emotional tone of service after years of uncertainty (Otegui-Carles et al., 2022; Sung et al., 2021).

2.6 Hospitality Service Design for Solo Guests

Hospitality research is beginning to treat the solo guest as a design problem, not only a marketing slogan. Bianchi (2016) already flagged unfriendly service and single-supplement costs as pain points. Brown, Buhalis, and Beer (2020) studied solo restaurant goers and found that dining alone—especially at dinner—can create discomfort tied to perceived judgment. They proposed dual pathways: "Go Solo" (make solo dining feel legitimate and comfortable) and "Go Plural" (offer communal options for those who want connection without arriving with a companion). Wang and Wu (2020) examined hotel security experience design for women travelling alone, pointing to environmental cues in hotels that heighten or reduce fear.

Industry commentary and consumer investigations have also criticized single supplements that price solo travellers as incomplete doubles—an economic logic of room occupancy that guests often experience as a penalty. Peer-reviewed hospitality work and critical tourism writing converge on the same managerial message: privacy and isolation are not the same thing. Solo guests may want control and optional connection (Bianchi, 2016; Brown et al., 2020).

Constraint-negotiation research adds another layer. Chung, Baik, and Lee (2017) extended leisure constraint models with perceived behavioural control in the solo-travel context, suggesting that motivation and a sense of control help travellers negotiate barriers. For hotels and destinations, that means services which increase guests' sense of control—clear information, reliable transport advice, respectful staff scripts for solo diners, women-conscious security design—are not soft extras; they are part of enabling participation.

3. Conceptual Framework / Synthesis

Synthesizing the literature, I propose a simple three-layer frame for hospitality-oriented reading of solo leisure travel:

Figure 1 (described). Motivation → Risk Negotiation → Hospitality Service Encounter

1. Motivation layer (push–pull). Internal drivers (freedom, self-development, escape, curiosity) and destination pulls (novelty, culture, city form, perceived welcome) initiate solo travel intention (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979; Bianchi, 2016; Yang, 2021).

2. Risk-negotiation layer. Perceived multi-dimensional risks—especially gendered and, for some travellers, racialised or culturally specific constraints—are appraised and negotiated through personal strategies, social ties, and digital support (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a, 2018b; Karagöz et al., 2021; Bernard et al., 2022).

3. Hospitality service-encounter layer. Hotels, restaurants, transport, and destination touchpoints either reduce friction (fair solo pricing, psychological safety, optional social design, culturally literate service) or amplify dissatisfaction (hostile norms around dining alone, opaque supplements, unsafe spatial design) (Bianchi, 2016; Brown et al., 2020; Wang & Wu, 2020).

Table 1. Conceptual synthesis for managers

| Layer | Core idea from literature | What solo guests often need | Managerial lever | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Motivation | Freedom, discovery, flexibility, optional social contact | Autonomy without loneliness | Flexible itineraries; optional group add-ons | | Risk | Multi-dimensional; gendered fear; cultural constraints | Credible safety and dignity | Lighting, staff protocols, clear info, women-aware design | | Service | Solo treated as incomplete double | Fairness + belonging cues | Solo rates; "Go Solo / Go Plural" dining; respectful scripts |

This frame is a synthesis heuristic, not a tested structural model. It is meant to help students and managers read solo travel as a chain of decisions in which hospitality is not

peripheral—it is where motivation either survives contact with risk or collapses into regret.

My vignettes sit only at the edges of this frame: they explain why I care, and they illustrate how a day alone in Istanbul or Hong Kong feels when the city is readable and the service environment does not punish solitude. They do not replace the cited studies.

4. Implications for Hospitality Management and Tourism Practitioners

4.1 Stop designing only for the imaginary couple

Double-occupancy defaults teach staff and systems that one guest is an anomaly. Training should normalize solo arrivals: greet without awkward pity, offer table options that do not maroon diners in high-visibility "lonely" seats, and avoid scripts that ask "Just one?" as if absence were failure (Brown et al., 2020; Bianchi, 2016).

4.2 Price with fairness and transparency

Where single supplements remain economically necessary, communicate them honestly and explore smaller solo rooms, shoulder-season solo rates, or packages that add value (breakfast, lounge access, walking-tour credits) rather than pure penalties (Bianchi, 2016). Perceived unfairness is itself a constraint (Yang, 2021).

4.3 Design for psychological safety

Hotel corridors, elevators, late check-ins, and poorly staffed dining rooms feature in women's fear narratives (Wilson & Little, 2008; Wang & Wu, 2020). Practical steps include well-lit circulation, discreet room-number policies, reliable transport partnerships, and staff trained to respond to harassment reports without dismissal. Safety theatre (for example, women-only floors alone) is insufficient if the public destination remains hostile (Yang et al., 2018a).

4.4 Offer connection without forcing it

Brown et al.'s (2020) "Go Solo" and "Go Plural" logic travels well beyond restaurants: hostels and lifestyle hotels already experiment with communal tables; upscale hotels can offer opt-in social hours, local walking groups, or concierge-matched day tours. The point is choice.

4.5 Treat digital trust as part of the product

Clear pre-arrival messaging, fast chat responses, and honest neighbourhood guidance reduce anxiety—especially for first-time solo travellers and for travellers negotiating family concern from collectivist contexts (Karagöz et al., 2021; Bernard et al., 2022; Chung et al., 2017).

4.6 Build cultural literacy for Asian and South Asian outbound guests

Research on Asian and Bangladeshi women travellers shows that family negotiation, social stigma, language confidence, and religious or cultural needs can shape the trip before the plane leaves (Yang et al., 2018a; Seow & Brown, 2018; Bernard et al., 2022). Destinations that want these markets should invest in respectful marketing representation, halal-friendly options where relevant, and staff awareness—without stereotyping.

As a Bangladeshi student living in Busan, I see a parallel: mobility decisions are never only individual. They are family conversations, visa conversations, and confidence conversations. Hospitality brands that understand that ecology will earn trust.

5. Limitations, Ethics, and Future Research

5.1 Limitations

This paper is a conceptual synthesis and reflective essay, not an empirical study. I did not collect survey responses, interview transcripts, or observational datasets for this version. Personal vignettes are illustrative and autoethnographic; they are not generalizable findings. The literature base, while centred on peer-reviewed tourism and hospitality sources, is English-language dominant and cannot claim exhaustive coverage of all regional scholarship. Some industry discussions of single supplements are used only to connect managerial debates to academic themes; they are not treated as peer-reviewed evidence for effect sizes.

5.2 Ethics

Because no human-subjects primary data were collected, formal IRB review was not required for this preprint. I have avoided inventing quotations, trip statistics, or “results.” When discussing gendered risk, I have relied on published research and have been explicit about the limits of my standpoint as a male author. Future empirical work with travellers should follow informed consent, culturally careful recruitment, and harm-minimisation practices—especially when studying harassment and family constraint.

5.3 Future research

Priorities suggested by the literature—and by gaps I feel as a Bangladeshi hospitality student in Korea—include:

1. Comparative studies of solo versus accompanied travellers across genders, not only female samples (Otegui-Carles et al., 2022). 2. Deeper work on South Asian and Bangladeshi outbound solo leisure travel, including male and non-binary travellers, building on Bernard et al. (2022). 3. Hotel and restaurant experiments testing solo-friendly service scripts and pricing frames (Brown et al., 2020). 4. Post-pandemic longitudinal work on how risk perceptions and solo intention co-evolve (Sung et al.,

2021; Otegui-Carles et al., 2022). 5. Clearer conceptual separation—and empirical comparison—of leisure solo travellers versus digital nomads.

6. Conclusion

Solo leisure travel is not a story about people who could not find a companion. Much of the best research shows a deliberate search for freedom, self-knowledge, and flexible encounter with place—tempered by real risks that fall unevenly across gender, culture, and race (Bianchi, 2016; Yang, 2021; Yang et al., 2018a; Wilson & Little, 2008). Hospitality managers sit at a decisive point in that story. A reception desk, a dinner table, a corridor light, a surcharge line on an invoice: each can either honour the solo guest's autonomy or quietly punish it.

From Istanbul's squares to Busan's shoreline, my own independent journeys keep teaching me the same hospitality lesson the literature names in more formal language: people who travel alone are not incomplete pairs. They are guests with a full set of needs —autonomy, safety, fairness, and the option of company on their own terms. If this preprint helps one hotel rethink a script, one restaurant rethink a table, or one student from South Asia feel that their mobility questions belong in academic conversation, it will have done enough for a first working paper.

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