

# The flag-bearers of change in a patriarchal Muslim society: Narratives of Iranian solo female travelers on Instagram

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the travel experiences of Iranian solo female travelers through an analysis of their Instagram posts. While there is a growing body of literature on solo female travelers, few studies involve women from Asian or Middle Eastern countries. In the case of the Iranian women who are the focus of this study, our analysis identified three main themes: meaning-making; power and empowerment; and facilitation of self-awareness and transformation. We argue that traveling solo is a form of active resistance against Iranian gender relations that creates opportunities for the women to overcome personal fears and logistical challenges. The act of writing up their experiences in their Instagram posts involves self-reflection and such critical analysis allows for greater levels of awareness of self that may then lead to self-transformation.

## 1. Introduction

Although individuals have been traveling as lone, independent travelers since antiquity, there is a growing trend among contemporary travel cultures for solo travel. Yang, Yang, and Khoo-Lattimore (2019) note the number of Google searches for 'solo travel' had grown by 500% since 2009, and according to VISA, about 20% of tourists traveled alone in 2015, of which women travelers are growing in number more strongly than male solo traveling.

This increasing trend in solo female traveling has drawn the attention of scholars (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Seow & Brown, 2018; Thomas & Mura, 2019; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2018a, 2018b) who examine different aspects of the solo female traveling experience, including the meanings attached to their experiences; identity construction; empowerment; gendered perceptions; and perceived risks and fears. Most of these studies involve women from the West, although a small but growing body of knowledge is now extant about women tourists from Asia (see for example, Khoo-Lattimore & Mura, 2016a, 2016b, whose edited collection examines critically the intersections of gender and travel for Asian tourists). Female travelers from the Middle East (Western Asia) remain understudied, even when

substantial differences from their Western and other Asian counterparts could be expected that deserve critical attention (Tavakoli & Mura, 2017).

In patriarchal Muslim societies like Iran, the position of women has been weakened by hegemonic masculinity. Men occupy uncontested positions of power that allow them to make decisions for themselves and for their families (Moghadam, Knudson-Martin, & Mahoney, 2009). Influenced by Islamic law, traditional Iranian men hold to the *gheyra* behavior code which allows for a sense of possessiveness and protectiveness toward their female kin (Abedinifard, 2019). Generally, *gheyra* limits women in freely doing what they want and obliges them to obey their father or husband. In the case of traveling, freedom of movement for women is legally constrained by the requirement to gain permission from their father or husband to travel domestically or internationally (Tavakoli & Mura, 2017). Since the Islamic religion is interwoven in various aspects of life in Iran (Moghadam et al., 2009), parts of society see the gender issues and definition of femininity through a lens of Islamic gender relations, which is in contrast with secular feminist movements (Eger, 2020) and defines women as a weaker gender which needs to be supported by men as their guardian (Nikjoo, Zaman, Salehi, & Hernández-Lara, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite the state's role in reinforcing the Islamic laws

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in Iran through the formal channels and widespread suppression of feminist movements, Iranian society has witnessed a significant shift toward gender equity and women empowerment, mainly by the emergence of the Internet and the rise of informal communication channels (Khalajabadi-Farahani, Månsson, & Cleland, 2019). Fadaee (2018) argues that the number of women who reject the control of men over their lives and fight for the acquisition of greater agency and emancipation is rising in Iran. According to Shahvali, Shahvali, and Kerstetter (2016), single Iranian women are more likely to resist the social gender norm by traveling alone when they become more educated and more economically independent because these factors improve their position in negotiation for solo traveling. Consequently, on travel and leisure intentions, younger Iranian women appear to be traveling in increasing numbers both within Iran and internationally. Yet, virtually nothing is known about Iranian women as tourists.

Paralleling the rise in female solo tourists, the use of the social media platform, Instagram, continues to grow rapidly, with more than 1 billion monthly users in 2020, the majority of whom are young women (Clement, 2020). While predominantly a photograph and video sharing platform, Instagram users can also share text and for these reasons it has become intimately entwined with contemporary tourist behavior. According to Nikjoo and Bakhshi (2019), sharing travel photos helps tourists form a memory of their travel, communicate with their friends, update their network about their recent travel activities, and improve their online image. In January 2020, there were around 34 million social media users in Iran that approximates 40% of Iran's population (Kemp, 2020).

Accordingly, the present study analyses the Instagram pages of a sample of Iranian women in order to better understand the way the travel experiences of solo Iranian women travelers are represented through this form of social media. This study is important for several reasons. It appears to be the first study that examines the travel narratives of women from a nation (Iran) that imposes limits and restrictions on women's travel. Second, it contributes to our understanding of women as solo travelers as they negotiate the constraints and barriers that operate both within and outside of Iran. Finally, the findings demonstrate the importance of travel for these sole women travelers in the process of identity construction, agency and empowerment within a Middle Eastern context. In particular, we seek to critically understand how travel, and the writing up of their travel experiences to post on Instagram, provides a vehicle for these women to negotiate and resist the cultural expectations of them as female Iranian citizens. Through its focus on the lived experience of Western Asian (Iranian) women tourists, and its authorship by two Iranian and two Western scholars, the paper seeks to make a novel contribution to Asian qualitative tourism research (Mura & Khoo-Lattimore, 2018).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Travel writing: from traditional travelogues to social media pages

Travel writing, which we understand to comprise a variety of media, including social media (Blaer, Frost, & Laing, 2020), has a long history across many cultural contexts. Travel writing was an important element in the development of an emerging travel culture in Europe, UK and North America and constituted a substantial part of literary culture in the West in the eighteenth century (Towner, 1996). Many of the early published travelogues were authored by male European travelers who wrote about remote destinations and local peoples through lenses of romanticism, orientalism, imperialism, colonialism, and exoticism (Blaer et al., 2020; Smith, 2018). While much travel writing was undertaken by men, particularly in the early modern period (McWha, Frost, & Laing, 2018), female travelers also wrote about their journeys and by doing so, 'defied the strictures of femininity' (McWha et al., 2018) which situated women largely within the domestic space of home (Stanford, 2017).

In contrast to the traditional Western travelogues which tend to frame other cultures within colonialist discourses, cross-cultural understanding intentions are increasingly apparent among contemporary travel writers who write in very different times and who are often more sensitive toward other cultures, their identity, authenticity, as well as environmental issues and sustainability in general (McWha, Frost, & Laing, 2017). Nevertheless, Smith (2018) warns that objectification and othering is still evident among contemporary travel writing, whether intentional or unintentional. For instance, there is still a marked tendency by Western tourists tend to gaze upon poverty and underdevelopment aspects of less developed destinations and ignore their signs of progress and modernity (Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2019), thus rendering these people and their societies locked in the past.

The advent of the Internet has opened the doors for countless bloggers and social media users who began to define and present the world from their perspective. This technological and subsequent social change has invited both experienced and amateur travel writers to present, in narrative and visual form, what they experience for a wide audience (Blaer et al., 2020). Gradually, because of the ubiquity of information about destinations, travel writing has gone further than reportage about cultures and places and become more personalized to reflect the author's world and their personal interpretations of destinations they visit (Bohls & Duncan, 2005), based on their particular cultural frameworks (Santos, 2006). These cultural frameworks include social categories, folk knowledge, common beliefs, and interpretive frames of reference which construct personal meaning (Thompson, 1997). Bosangit, Hibbert, and McCabe (2015) argue that this abundance of personalized interpretations adds value and new meanings to destinations, leading to a broadening of tourism experience.

Social media, such as Instagram, encourages and facilitates a particular style of travel writing that is increasingly personalized and necessitates a high level of interactivity with followers who desire more than mere travel information available elsewhere on the Internet (Bosangit et al., 2015). Furthermore, contemporary travel writers no longer depend on traditional publishers and their imposed limitations; instead, they have freedom to write on any topic that they wish and in any style they desire (Blaer et al., 2020).

Despite all the above-mentioned changes in travel writing from printed travelogues to blogs and social media pages, one thing has remained unchanged during the time: the impact of the practice of travel writing on the authors themselves. Travel writers, in fact, negotiate new identities by making sense of their travel experiences (Noy, 2004). McWha et al., (2018) suggest that self-understanding is an important consequence of travel writing as travelers may lose and reinvent themselves in their travels and, through the therapeutic process of writing, negotiate different versions of their selves. Elsrud (2001) suggests that travel narratives, more than describing visited destinations and cultures, tell us who the writer is or wants to be. As an example, Azariah (2016) refers to some travel bloggers who intensify their "traveler" identity in their travel writings to differentiate themselves from "mass tourists". The reciprocal nature of interactions in social media has forced travel writers to co-construct an online version of their "self" (Belk, 2013; McWha et al., 2018) which may also reinforce their awareness of self (Rettberg, 2014).

### 2.2. Solo female traveling: from transformation of self to transforming others

Many people embark on backpacking, solo traveling, and volunteering every year which expands their worldview and sometimes leads to transformation of self (Bruner, 1991; Chen, Huang, & Hu, 2019; Cohen, 2010; Pearce & Foster, 2007; Pung, Gnoth, & Del Chiappa, 2020; Pung, Yung, Khoo-Lattimore, & Del Chiappa, 2020; Zhang, Morrison, Tucker, & Wu, 2018). Some of these travelers position traveling as lifestyle (Zhang et al., 2018) and this long separation from ordinary life can be thought of as a rite of passage, leading to transformation and

creating a sense of *communitas* with their traveling peers (Matthews, 2014). Due to the apparent transformative effects of such journeys, Pearce and Foster (2007) assert the concept of the “University of Travel” through which such travelers become more knowledgeable, self-confident, and independent.

But how does travel facilitate transformation of self? Pung, Yung, Khoo-Lattimore, and Del Chiappa, (2020) identify three different constructs: transformative learning, existential transformation, and behavioral change to explain tourist transformation. While transformative learning is outward-directed and takes place through developing cross-cultural awareness and gaining new abilities, existential transformation is internal, self-directed, and occurs as a result of alteration of one’s definition of life. According to Wang (1999), tourism destinations can be liminal spaces where social norms become suspended and tourists feel free to express their authentic selves. The peak episodes, liminality, challenges, and cultural differences increase opportunities for greater self-awareness and may lead them to re-evaluate their values and priorities (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017; Pung, Gnoth, & Del Chiappa, 2020). Some of these transformations in travelers’ attitudes may be strong enough to create life-long changes (Pung, Gnoth, & Del Chiappa, 2020).

Although many elements of transformation, such as becoming more confident and mentally stronger, as well as an increased ability to deal with challenges and negative events, are shared between both genders, self-consciousness, relationality and being aware of their physical abilities are often more highlighted in female travelers compared with their male peers (Pung, Yung, et al., 2020). In addition, some studies (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Reichel, Fuchs, & Uriely, 2007; Seow & Brown, 2018; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a) reveal that women experience higher perceptions of fear and risks such as experience of harassment, sexual risk, and a sense of discrimination in their solo traveling than do males.

Despite the higher perception of risks, young women have continued solo traveling and in doing so, overcoming their fears to achieve a stronger sense of agency, emancipation, independence, and power (Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2018b). Johnson (2010) suggests that these elements in the stories of women travelers evoke dimensions of heroism. Weatherby and Vidon (2018) argue that women increasingly travel to remote and wild territories to show their mastery over these places, prove their power to themselves and others, push against social boundaries, combat stereotypes, and redefine femininity. Understood in this way, travel becomes an active form of resistance against the constraints and barriers experienced through patriarchal expectations and obligations.

Weatherby and Vidon (2018) also highlight the role of social media in the presentation of women’s empowerment that has the capacity to transform society on a larger scale (Yang et al., 2018b). Lockwood (2006) argues that in the selection of role models, women are more inspired by females than males. Women are also unlikely to be influenced by ‘superstars’ that reinforce gender stereotypes; rather, they highly admire outstanding women who exhibit a more powerful picture of women (Kelan & Mah, 2014). In this regard, Adamson and Kelan (2019: 981) characterize female heroism by 3Cs: “confidence to jump over gendered barriers; control in managing these barriers; and courage to push through them”.

### 2.3. Theoretical framework

The research is informed by a ‘gender aware’ framework (Kinnaird & Hall, 1996) in which tourism is understood to comprise a set of gendered inter-relationships between tourists, suppliers and marketers of tourism experiences, regulatory bodies and residents of a destination. The gender aware framework is useful to analyze the relationships, differences, and inequalities of tourist processes in terms of gender and is focused on men’s and women’s different lived experiences, consumption, and conceptions of tourism (Kinnaird & Hall, 1996). Gender

intersects with other social structures such as ethnicity, class and sexuality to produce social relations that directly or indirectly constrain or inhibit women traveling, and most certainly which shape the tourist experience for women (Yang & Mura, 2016; Khoo-Lattimore & Wilson, 2017). These gendered experiences may also be ‘lived’ differently in different socio-cultural contexts (Yang & Mura, 2016), thus rendering studies like the one presented in this paper important in terms of their contribution to a critical understanding of tourism as a gendered and ethnically diverse phenomenon.

Adopting a gender aware framework allows us to explore the travel experiences of women who originate from Iran, a nation in which, currently, women’s roles and opportunities are highly constrained by, and for, the interests of men. This regional context constitutes an excellent example of a society that deserves to be explored from a gendered perspective to explain the different tourism development processes and tourism-related activities experienced by women and men. Even if younger generations of Iranian women appear to be traveling more, they still suffer from the consequences of their traditional weaker position in a strongly masculine society and from limitations of freedom and rights in comparison to other contexts. Rather than adopting a Western form of feminist theory, which may not necessarily be appropriate for the analysis, adoption of a gender aware framework provides us greater conceptual space to analyze the lived experiences of these women as they travel, to get a better understanding in this case of gender differences and inequalities on tourism-related processes and activities, to analyze how tourism expresses gender relations and those, in turn, inform and affect tourism, and the power relations related to and derived from tourist activities. These three issues constitute the fundamental basis of the gender aware perspective (Kinnaird & Hall, 1996).

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Sampling, data collection, and analysis

This netnographic study, informed by an interpretivist paradigmatic approach, explores the content of Instagram pages of a sample of Iranian female travelers. We constructed the sample by initially selecting public profiles of Iranian female travelers with more than ten thousand followers having an engagement rate of greater than 5%. To do so, three Iranian female travelers who had been followed by the lead author were identified, and then, using the ‘similar accounts suggestions’ feature of Instagram, we identified over 50 similar pages. We selected accounts where travel contents accounted for more than 75% of their posts. Then, given that the exploration of travel narratives was an objective of this study, we selected accounts with an average minimum of 50 words per post. This process created a sample of 16 women (see Table 1) who met our criteria for inclusion in the study. We acknowledge that the sample comprises a number of Iranian women who are relatively privileged in terms of being able to travel independently and some now have residency in other countries. Most of these women actively advocate for the rights of Iranian women through their travel blogs. The languages of posts were in Farsi, English, or a combination of both. In posts containing both Farsi and English, we considered the Farsi section for analysis because the Farsi section was more detailed.

After finalizing the sample, we systematically read their posts to capture a general picture of what they shared. Subsequently, 100 posts from each Instagram account were selected through a process of systematic proportional sampling; for instance, every fifth post on a page with 500 posts was selected and subsequently transferred to MAXQDA 2020. MAXQDA is a software package for qualitative and mixed methods research. The 2020 version was suitable for the present study because it allows importing and analyzing of photographs and text at the same time. Coding photographs and captions together helped researchers to identify more concepts in each post. The leading and the third authors, who are both young Iranian tourism researchers, began the analytical process by open coding the data. The leading author is a

**Table 1**  
Basic information about each of the female travelers included in the study.

Name	Instagram account	Number of followers	Engagement rate	Number of posts	Biographical details as given on Instagram
Arezoo	arezoosot	45 k	18%	521	Full time dentist, part time traveler - dancer - fitness enthusiast
Forough	forough.is	12 k	8%	921	I'm working on a new me
Hediye	hediye_molaei	25 k	11%	440	I am on a road in a journey known as life
Hoda	hodarostami	452 k	10%	1282	Here we travel together
Kimia	kimiakhosravii	29 k	11%	753	Podcaster - Tour Operator & Tour Guide
Mahsa	moonsa.azizi	10 k	16%	538	I am an adventurous girl, who wants to live her life
Mahzad	mahzad.elyassi	27 k	7%	582	I like to travel and live inside stories
Maryam	maaryaam_rah	27 k	13%	626	Yesterday's traveler and today's life explorer – I tell the stories of people and places here
Melica	melliic	195 k	14%	759	As you start to walk on the way, the way appears (Rumi) +3 years on the road
Negar	_negaralizadeh_	68 k	7%	448	Writer, Traveler, Food lover
Nina	persiangypsy	22 k	6%	657	Adventures of Nina - Sustainability - Dreamer - Human Optimization
Parisa	parisabajelan	20 k	16%	519	I love both photography and nature and this is my page for sharing that with you
Sahar	sahar_toussi	49 k	10%	549	I climb up my life, dance my moments, and offer my view
Sara	sara.louee	32 k	8%	533	Adventurer
Shadi	shadi.ganji	28 k	11%	228	Roamer, archaeologist and teacher
Shahzad	shahzad.ejtehadi	18 k	9%	312	Wondering on the earth Freelancer - Tour Operator

male researcher interested in traveling and social media and has some research experience utilizing feminist studies. As an Iranian woman, the third author's lived experiences provided for a more nuanced understanding of solo women traveling as an option for Iranian women. The open coding process ended with the identification of 152 open codes of which 26 codes overlapped and were eliminated. The same two authors then grouped the open codes to create meaningful concepts. In the next step, through the iterative and reflexive comparisons of the 31 identified meaningful concepts, three main themes have been identified. The second and fourth authors, who are established scholars with expertise in tourism and gender studies, participated in framing the themes to ensure consistency and validity of themes.

Regarding the ethical dimensions of the study, since this study explores only public pages for an academic and non-profitable reason, it is considered as "fair use" by Instagram copyright terms ([Instagram Data Policy, undated](#)). Nevertheless, [Ravn, Barnwell, and Barbosa Neves \(2019\)](#) argue there are different understandings of the notion of what is 'public', and therefore, some people will make their Instagram page public while not being aware of the nature of their audiences that may include researchers. [Ravn et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that researchers contact the account holders to gain their consent and in the case of receiving no response it is fair to use the content of public pages that the account holders intentionally use to promote their pages. Following this protocol, we contacted 18 account holders via the direct message function of Instagram to inform them about this study; 16 responded to us and expressed their consent; two did not respond to our messages and were excluded from the analysis.

### 3.2. Findings

Analysis identified three major themes: (i) Meaning-making at destinations; (ii) Expression of power and empowerment; and (iii) Self-discovery and transformation.

#### 3.3. Meaning-making at destinations: people, cultures and activities

One of the dominant themes emerging from the analysis was that of making meaning of the destinations that they see and experience: the people they meet, the cultures they experience and the activities in which they participate.

Almost all women in this study explained in their pages that meeting people was more important than conventional tourist attractions for them. Hediye noted that "traveling without stories of people doesn't make sense", while Kimia expressed her satisfaction from spending her

time in Paris with a French host and enjoying a long dinner instead of visiting the Eiffel Tower which she saw reproduced photographically, everywhere. The women took delight in what might be considered the ordinary and mundane, posting insightful observations of the lives of those they observed, often using storytelling, funny, or poetic language. Shadi described boys who were showing her their village in a remote part of Iran ([Fig. 1](#) image a) "...as if they were a part of nature; just like tree and river; they knew the language of birds, knew where each caterpillar lived under which leaf..." Hoda shared a photograph of some elderly men in an old train (see image b) by which she traveled and made the photograph more meaningful by providing a simile in the caption "old trains are like old men; tired and grumpy but patient enough."

The women adopted both positive and negative positions when posting about Western cultures. They rarely shared a post about historical buildings or what may be considered to be the main tourism attractions; instead, they tried to make sense of Western culture through making intercultural comparisons between Iranian and Western culture. Many of them posted very positive experiences of their European and Australian hosts and praised their trust, kindness, lifestyle, and high level of general knowledge. For instance, Maryam described one of her hosts in Australia: "The weather was a little cloudy. She...offered me to go out using her car...Although I hosted couchsurfers in Iran and I considered myself as a good host, seeing this amount of trust reminded me how much people can trust each other."

Making sense of the geography and culture was frequently evident in the posts. For instance, Hoda poetically described the political geography of the Slovenian region: "Ljubljana is Europe's pretty woman with red hair. Somewhere in the neighborhood of Italy, Hungary, Austria, and Croatia, she has lived for many years, enjoyed and suffered, watched the war, drank wine, and she aged with the same beauty." The absence of hard borders between countries in Europe and the subsequent freedom of movement was remarked upon by several women, whose own experiences at home were of strict borders and difficult visa processes. This sense of surprise was obvious in a post by Sara: "Bratislava sticks to Vienna, just like Karaj to Tehran! Many people live in Vienna but work here or vice versa. Imagine you eat your breakfast in one country and lunch in another every day! It's that surreal!"

However, the accounts by the women of the West were not always positive, and criticisms were made of aspects of Regulations and culture in the West. Mahzad, for instance, after the rejection of her visa request in the London embassy, extremely criticized their behavior against Iranians by leading a hashtag on the right to travel. Hediye, who had sold almost everything she had for her travel to Europe, represented her



**Fig. 1.** a) The boys described by Shadi as if they were a ‘part of nature’. The photograph portrays the boys as socialising together. The emphasis is on the people not landscape; b) The room in which Kimia’s European host cooked a meal for her. The photograph, showing an interior space of a kitchen, with her host preparing to share. The photograph has an intimacy that is not typical of a tourist photograph.

dualistic view toward Paris in this way: “Paris resembles a pretty lady with rotten teeth! Who doesn’t have the thirst for kissing the alluring lips before seeing inside.” Parisa describes the people of Rome “It’s strange why people of this fantastic city are that cold-eyed”. Sometimes there are instances when the women have an unpleasant encounter with a local person as in the case of Sara who posted negatively about a wealthy Slovak man “He was surprised when he found out I am Iranian, then he began to talk about the Middle East and its governments with hatred...I disliked the way he proudly spoke about his country and the freedom in Europe.”

Travel to Western destinations also provided opportunities for the women to share their lived experiences of being Iranian women with the people who they met. The cultural and personal differences between the women and Westerners were frequently found to be striking by the women. In her journey to Australia, Maryam concluded “Honestly, sometimes I feel we are from different planets because of the extent of differences in concerns and worldview.” A common experience was the curiosity of people they met about Iran: women’s rights, its foods, and government. Kimia wrote of one of her European hosts (See Fig. 1 image b) who said to her: “I prepare everything [for dinner]. You just sit here and like Shahrzad (Scheherazade) tell me stories about Iran.” Such genuine willingness to learn about Iran was often a delightful surprise, given the deep political tensions that exist between Iran and Western nations. For example, the hostility that exists between the Iranian and Israeli governments was missing for Hediye when she was visiting Russia: “Immediately after the anthem of Iran, the anthem of Israel was played. The Iranians smiled at the Israelis and an old woman from Israel took a selfie with an Iranian woman. The world is smiling...”

The narratives of the women travelers when they visited less developed regions such as Africa and some parts of Asia were substantially different from what they posted about the West. Although they mention the poverty and other systemic and structural difficulties that people experienced in Africa, they also describe new insights that they achieved about their understandings of life after experiencing this continent. In particular, they explain how their experiences in Africa led them to reflect on how they lived their own lives. However, some of the women tended to ‘wallpaper’ over the difficult realities of many of the people they met or observed, making assumptions that may not be close to reality. For example, Shahrzad posted that “African people are basically

happy; when you turn the camera on them, even though they know you may have no motive other than recording their poverty, they still bravely stand in front of your camera and smile.” Shadi, who stayed as a volunteer in some African countries, posted a comment that she heard often from African children “I wish we could change our skin and hair”. This led her to reflect upon and criticize the lasting effect of colonialism “...but its [colonialism] trace has remained in the mind of Africans as a chronic wound....so that being white is more beautiful in their view.”

#### 3.4. Expression of power and empowerment

Belonging to a traditional, Islamic, and patriarchal society, the women in our sample behave contrary to the popular beliefs about them. Their Instagram posts suggest strongly that they not only feel a sense of power through overcoming their fears and challenges of traveling alone but, and importantly, in breaking the stereotypes of women in Islamic society.

Many of the women wrote on their Instagram pages about how they had followed their dreams of traveling around the world alone, and how such travel made them feel more powerful. The dream of traveling, which was a common theme among our participants, is well described by Negar: “I followed my dreams and tolerated all financial hardships, unemployment, and blame...today, I think it was the best decision of my life. I believe all of us should get all things that imprison us away and get out of our boundaries.”

In a country in which society and its laws work against women traveling solo, those women who embark on these independent travels were regarded as heroic by their followers who reject the traditional definition of women and their place in Iranian society. Perhaps that is the reason why female solo travelers are fewer in Iran but those that do become ‘Instagram-famous’ very soon for being the flag bearers of change in a strongly patriarchal society. Maryam narrates her dialogue with her mother:

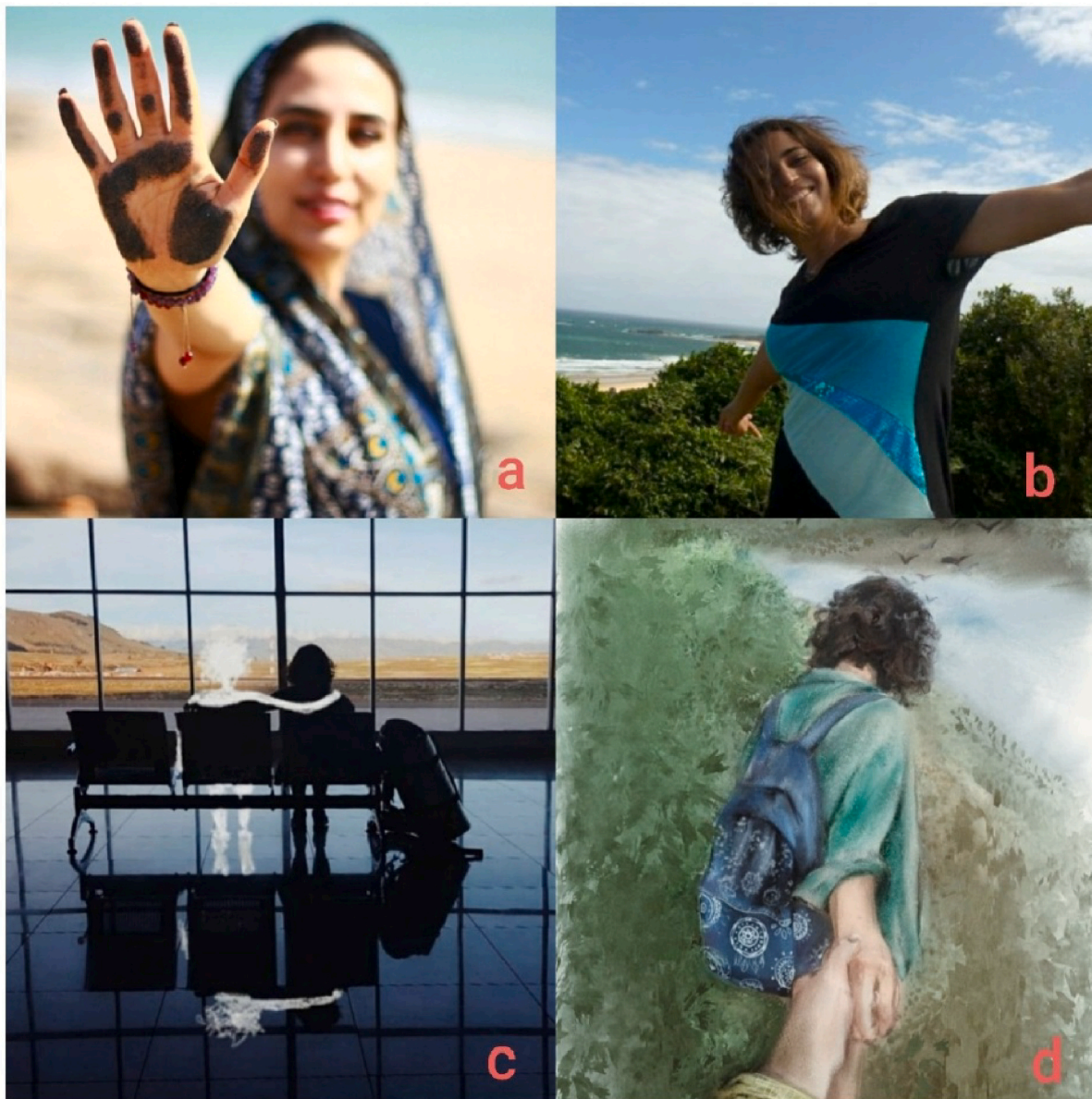
“She said: I don’t know why you remind me of Oriana Fallaci! She was the hero of all my adolescence. You are the life I had never lived! ... I told: I feel responsible for conveying everything I have seen and heard to those who seek change. She responded: Maryam, you are responsible for the people of your land! Continue and open the doors even a bit for the next generation and the women of this land!”

Almost all of the women shared stories of how traveling had helped them overcome their fears and how overcoming them made them stronger. They frequently mention the fear of their first encounters with new experiences while solo traveling such as the first experience of being alone in nature or in a new culture, the first time being lost, first financial problems during the travel and instances of harassment. Hoda, after listing a set of her former fears writes “Fear has been the main travel companion of my life...I was the one with all of those fears...but I am not that person anymore”. Similarly, Melica, after being encouraged by some local youths to jump from a high cliff into a deep lake in Ecuador says “these fears become funny gradually.” She explains how she turns each of her fears to fun by experiencing them one by one. Overcoming fears and the challenges of solo traveling have gradually given these women a greater sense of power over their own life which they post about victoriously on their Instagram pages.

The narratives of the mental stresses of solo traveling and the women’s inner dialogues in times of challenges were another common perspective shared by these women. They use flashbacks to their

previous experiences as examples of challenges and fears and their expectation of events, and then they reflect how such fears and challenges are common in many women and they show how they have overcome them. Hediye writes of a terrifying experience: “My hand became numb. I wish I could open the door and jump out. He (driver) was masturbating. He stopped the car on the shoulder of the road and said: just get out of the car; I don’t want to bother you....when I calmed down I found some solutions that helped me never experience this happening again...” (Fig. 2, image a).

A number of the women reflected on how their travel experiences were liberating, helping them become more resilient and braver. After encountering a large snake while on a nature walk, Maryam concluded: “...I thought that we gradually being imprisoned by our fears and our fears take decisions for us. I thought that I unconsciously left my fears one by one in this journey. I left one above a tree, one in the middle of the ocean, one in course of a road, and hand one to the wind. And as much as I leave my fears, I feel I become freer and stronger.” (see Fig. 2, image b).



**Fig. 2.** a) Hediya’s photograph suggests a strength and assertiveness that resists the situation she was placed in by the driver who had picked her up; b) Maryam’s gesture of her open arms and smile presents a sense of freedom which aligns with her narrative of facing and overcoming her fears; c) Hoda’s photograph suggests the loneliness she sometimes felt during her travels; d) An image shared by Hoda depicting her notion of the opposite personas she felt made up her traveling identity.

In some cases, people who they met on their travels expressed an admiration for the women's bravery and resilience. For instance, a truck driver who was giving a lift to Hediye told her: "You are very strong. Just like the girl in Wild [a movie]." This comment created enormous pride in Hediye who wrote that "It was like he injected life into my veins." The sense of happiness of becoming stronger through traveling is obvious in a number of their posts.

Not surprisingly, many of the women identified a sense of loneliness during some parts of their travels as a disadvantage of solo traveling. As Hoda commented, "There are few people who are not afraid of being alone or lost" (Fig. 2, image c). Arezoo, when using a Persian hashtag meaning "why we travel alone" describes her feeling of being alone in her earlier solo travels: "I entered a busy cafe so that my loneliness becomes absorbed in the crowd. I chose the furthest table and as soon as ordering the food I start reading a book to show that my loneliness was my decision and I basically travel alone to Venice to sit in this cafe and read this book. I was feeling the heavy glances and understood nothing of the book...I wished I could be disappeared and no one see me!" Arezoo posts later that solo traveling helped her to become a more sociable woman.

As alluded to earlier, many of the women employed a linguistic strategy of sharing within their travel writing what we call their 'inner dialogues'; conversations with themselves which, in some cases extended to introducing their different personas and the imagined dialogues between them. By providing a conceptual image (see Fig. 2, image d) Hoda writes of the different personas that are at work in her consciousness: "There are two me in my mind that work conversely but get energy from each other. One pulls and another pushes! One of them is lazier, happier, and careless; another is more energetic, more obsessive, and asked more detailed questions...travelling helps me to understand my two opposite selves and find a harmony between them".

In their Instagram posts, the women not only reflect on their success in following their dreams and overcoming fears and challenges but it was also apparent that they actively use the platform to empower other Iranian women to resist female stereotypes and gender inequality. It appears that attaining the large numbers of followers that they have helps to empower the women and in turn they try and empower other Iranian women. Among all the social issues that the women share on their pages, it was Iranian stereotypes about women that are highlighted most often. The women particularly try to encourage their followers to resist or remove themselves from the position that Iranian society

defines for women and for them to assert their independence. The women explicitly challenge the traditional definitions of Iranian femininity. Sara writes: "I hope our girls do not care about their appearances and beauty that much and consider other qualities in their lives instead." Negar when sharing a post to respond to those who asked her about safety in solo traveling writes "It is clear that the world outside the home is insecure for a woman who covers her body with gold." In this quotation, Negar tries to challenge the common definitions of femininity in Iran that emphasize women's beauty rather than their strength.

There are examples where some of the women are also critical of the way other Iranian women reflect and unintentionally reinforce gender relations in Iranian society. Kimia wrote of a message she received that suggested that women have absorbed dominant beliefs about the relation of women and men. She wrote: "The message said: 'Good for Kimia that although she is married, she travels solo. Her husband must be very open-minded' ... It seems that in this patriarchal society, everything is attributed to a man, and it is the man who is praised!" (see Fig. 3, image a) Another example of one of the women challenging these sexist beliefs about women is when Hediye writes "Buddies! A girl who travels is not a prostitute. Or if she laughs with a boy, she is not unrestrained... a girl and a boy who travel together do not necessarily have a sexual relationship."

Among all gender stereotypes, issues related to women's control over their life, and the ability to do what they want without the permission of a man were frequently highlighted in their posts. These posts were written in ways that sought to empower other women. One writing strategy that was often used was to provide personal stories to demonstrate that they themselves are ordinary women like their followers and that other women are capable of doing what they have done. Parisa brings a personal experience that is common among many women to show to what extent the roots of patriarchy have penetrated in the society "When my work was the best in the electrical workshop, the professor pointed at me and told the boys: Shame on you! It's done by a girl!" Sara wrote "People keep asking, why you are traveling alone? So where is your boyfriend or husband? As if you're paralyzed when you're alone!" These strong emotions that the women imbue their posts with are most prevalent when reflecting on gender relations and are summed up in this comment by Sahar with which she captioned her photo (Fig. 3, image b) on the summit of a mountain in Turkey "I couldn't wait for a man to support me...The women of my country are tired ... they should know they are not dolls!"



Fig. 3. a) The image Kimia shared when she criticized female stereotypes in Iran. She had just come back from a 25 day solo trip and the following day she and her partner decided to get married. It was a mutual decision; b) Sahar's photograph of herself on the summit of a mountain representing a sense of power that disrupts and resists stereotypes about Iranian women.

### 3.5. Self-discovery and transformation

Exposure to new cultures and creating new understandings of life, facilitated moments of self-discovery and transformation in the women. According to their narratives, the difficulties of long-term traveling, encountering the lives of other people, and thirst for continuing their travel lifestyle led many of them to adopt a different approach to their own lives back home. After staying in some African countries as a volunteer, Shadi says “Happiness has become very accessible to me now ... so close that I don’t look for it anymore.” Similarly, after two years of exploring South America, Melica reflected, “I have never been at peace to this extent with myself, my past, who I am, who I have been, the place I was born, and where I currently want to live. I am practicing peace, love, and patience.”

The word “learn” is frequently used in the narratives, and the women share their new insights and what they learn from others during their journeys. Hoda explains: “When you hang out for a few hours with new

friends of different nationalities, cultures, genders, and behaviors, you grow up far more than the times you stay in your comfort zone watching TV at home.” Parisa compares some do’s and don’ts of Iranian culture with what she experiences in Africa (Fig. 4, image a) and concludes “I learned to put my bias away because they have only a geographical origin.”

The thirst for gaining new insights as well as broadening the view of others encouraged some Iranian female travelers to stay longer in destinations or to travel slower. Mahzad explains: “My inner Margaret Mead has been awakened and I need to live among the local people in different areas so that I can name it a journey. To tell the truth, I steal knowledge from the collective lived experiences of people of each place I live.” Rather than being a brief visitor, for whom a superficial understanding is most likely, Mahzad seeks to ‘live’ (even if for a comparatively short time) in order to gain a deeper understanding of the people and cultures she experiences.

Transformation is another shared experience among these travelers.



**Fig. 4.** a) The photograph of Parisa with some young men in Kenya challenges notions of how Iranian women should travel as it situates Parisa as one female traveler with a group of young men. There is a sense of equality here with the hand gestures made by Parisa and one of the men. Shaking hands between men and women unknown to each other is forbidden in Islamic cultures; b) This photograph posted by Shahrzad represents a time when she was more concerned about her appearance (she is plucking her eyebrows with a Swiss Army knife); c) Maryam celebrating the first birthday of her new identity after one year of solo traveling.

All of them provide examples of how traveling has, in some ways, gradually changed them and even transformed into a somewhat different person. Mahsa wrote, "Sometimes when I discover a layer of the city or village, I discover a part of myself... Even visiting the same cities is different because I am changed. Destinations become a mirror [showing my change]." Arezoo reflects on her past personality "How strange was the shy girl who spent all her time on others' (Instagram) pages and regretted her life, travel, and body, to me." Maryam explains how travel has transformed her:

"Somewhere along the way, you realize that you have changed...that, blacks are no longer black, they become gray for example...that, the importance of events is changed...the happenings that one day were a crisis for you, have turned into a simple challenge in travel...somewhere you realize that you've become simpler."

Some of the women in our sample describe how liminal experiences in solo traveling helped them to find their authentic self. Sara, for instance, when explaining how traveling had led to her personal growth, reflects "A big benefit of traveling alone is that it gives you the opportunity to be who you really are, without fear of being judged or influenced by your friends and family." The below quotation of Mahzad narrating her communication with an old Norwegian man in Athena is another example of liminal experience in solo traveling:

I was telling him about my deepest fears, doubts and annoying memories. I could not believe that those sentences were mine because it was so strange to me to express the feelings that had been hidden under the layers of sediment inside me for years. I told him things I had never told anyone before. It was as if a therapist was walking along the streets of Athens listening to me.

A quotation by Shahrzad (see Fig. 4, image b) is an example of "transformation narratives" that emerge in the posts in different ways by other women: "When you start traveling, destinations, attractions, and travel companions are the most important matters. After a while, cultures and local traditions attract you...Gradually, travel companions and destinations lose their importance, and here is the beginning of your real life...Traveling takes you inside; everything you see outside becomes a sign for your inner travel."

The act of writing their Instagram posts, which itself requires reflection and, to some extent, curation of their experiences, appears to assist in the transformative process as Hoda suggests "I am the main audience of my posts; they show me my gradual growth during this way." After one year traveling in Australia, Maryam wrote: "I share this post to appreciate you, the little girl inside me, Maryam Raha! Thanks for proving to me that there is no unachievable dream...Now, I declare with honor that I am a simple girl from Iran who decided to rewrite her destiny." (see Fig. 4, image c) The use of 'Raha' as her 'family name' is significant here, as Raha means 'free'.

Finally, for some of the women, they believed that transformation of the self could lead to transformation of other women back in Iran. This quotation from Arezoo is an exemplar of the perceived responsibility to facilitate social change that many of the women travelers felt: "When we return home, we become another person, and as we change, we change the lives of those around us, we make an impact and inspire others."

#### 4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore the narratives of solo female travelers belonging to a Middle Eastern Muslim society as expressed through a particular form of travel writing: Instagram posts. Through a netnographic analysis, we identified three main themes; (i) Meaning-making at destinations; (ii) expressions of power and empowerment and (iii) self-discovery and transformation.

First, meaning-making of destinations (including the people they encountered, the cultures they experienced and the activities they participated in) was, not surprisingly, a dominant theme across their pages. Drawing on the gender aware framework, we were sensitive to the importance placed by the women on social interactions and

experiences with the people who they met during their travels, rather than on objectified activities (Khoo-Lattimore & Wilson, 2017). Rather than simply 'sight-see', the women tended to write about the experiences in a highly relational way; seeking insights into the lives of individuals or critiquing cultures and places in order to make comparisons with their own lived experience of their lives in Iran. They deepened their travel experiences through participation in local activities and communication with local people.

Through their posts about destinations, the women revealed much about their own lived experiences as Iranian women. The freedom to travel, to move easily across borders in Europe, for example, powerfully brought to the fore differences in both personal and political freedoms between the women and their Western counterparts. In this instance, gender intersects with culture and religion to substantially affect, and often constrain, the agency of these women, the freedom to travel within and outside of their country (Yang & Mura, 2016). Multiple comparisons were made between their experiences of 'home' and the places and cultures that they visited; comparing the systematic order and 'discipline' of large Western cities to their lived experiences of Iranian cities or comparing what they regarded as the more 'simple' lives of people they met in African nations. In so doing, some, at least, perhaps and in an unintended way, perpetuated the stereotype of indigenous peoples living a more simple life, than the lives of those in industrialised countries (Smith, 2018). The romantic trope (Mulligan, 2016) could be discerned in the women's writings, particularly of non-Western destinations.

In their posts of Western destinations, the women tended to write about the West's progress and technologies, high levels of city organization and the kindness of some people. But at the same time, they were not hesitant in criticizing what they saw as 'cold' behavior and a negative view of Iran/Iranians by some Europeans. They also criticized visa rejections by Western embassies as discrimination against the right to travel. Smith (2018) studied another side of the coin and reflected this mobility inequality by revealing how privileged Western travelers can freely pass borders because the international legal regime favors them. Nevertheless, the narratives of Iranian female travelers of destinations in Africa, Central Asia, and South Africa tended often praised and celebrated what they saw as the 'simplicity' and genuine hospitality of the people they met. Although they mention some hardships of traveling to these regions, they frequently recount how meaningful and significant these journeys were for them.

To make their narratives more meaningful and interesting to their readers, the women employed storytelling, poetic writing styles, sense of humor and intercultural comparisons, in their writings. Duffy and Kang (2019) pointed to persuasive literary techniques as a strategy among travel writers to attract followers. Bohls and Duncan (2005) argue that the ubiquity of the Internet has led to the saturation of information about various destinations, and therefore, contemporary travel writers need to differentiate themselves by bringing personal interpretations of destinations. Some of the women also exhibited high levels of self-disclosure, and we argue that one reason for this technique is to make their narratives more meaningful to their followers by revealing some personal information to create stronger connections between the woman and their followers. These kinds of interactions with followers are characteristic of successful social media travel writers (Bosangit et al., 2015). Similar to Gretzel (2006), we argue that travel writers try to perform a reliable and ordinary persona to show their audiences that they are ordinary people similar to them and their content is authentic and real.

The study also highlights the role of tourism in facilitating inter or cross-cultural understanding which has been identified by previous studies (i.e. Farmaki, 2017; Khalilzadeh, 2018). Meaningful interaction with people of what might be considered 'politically-hostile countries' (Like Israel in our case) in a third country is evidence of how tourism and travel writing in social media can help to counter racist stereotypes, promote cross-cultural awareness and understanding, and perhaps even

facilitate a form of reconciliation. Farmaki (2017) suggests that tourism can 'bridge ethnic and social gaps' and certainly there was evidence in our study.

The second major finding related to the expression of power and feelings of empowerment that were conveyed through the women's posts of their travel experiences. Such a finding has been found in other studies that have critically examined women's travel through a gender aware framework. This approach to critiquing tourism illuminates the multitude of ways that gender, as a social construct, influences all stages of women's travel, shaping the contours of women's travel experiences. Fundamental to such travel are the ways in which power is expressed and experienced (Kinnaid & Hall, 1996). The women's sense of agency and emancipation, their success in overcoming fears and challenges, their proficiency in traveling and expertise in different skills, and their reputation as successful travelers are clear from our analysis. Previous research on solo female travelers has also focused on aspects of empowerment such as achieving a sense of independence, emancipation, agency (Pung, Yung, et al., 2020; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Yang et al., 2018b) overcoming fears (Johnson, 2010; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Reichel et al., 2007; Seow & Brown, 2018; Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a), and actively resisting feminine stereotypes (Weatherby & Vidon, 2018).

In the case of the Iranian women, it was clear that solo traveling created opportunities for actively resisting dominant gender roles and relationships. For many of the women, travel itself was an act of resistance to and freedom from the socio-cultural and political limitations that they experienced in their lives in Iran. Overcoming their fears of traveling alone, as well as the personal and logistical challenges they encountered, empowered the women which they conveyed in ways that they hoped would empower their followers. This finding constitutes an example of the differential tourism-related processes and experiences lived by women and men and in the specific case of female solo traveling such travel often involves feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). The resistance to the gendered risks and constraints faced by solo female travelers can create opportunities for empowerment and greater control (Khoo-Lattimore & Wilson, 2017).

We noticed that while the women try to differentiate themselves from others through meaning-making of destinations and representing their mastery in traveling to remote or insecure areas, they present an ordinary persona when attempting to empower their female followers. We argue that through a self-disclosure strategy, they create mutual empathy with their imagined audience. As Lockwood (2006) noted, perceived similarity between writer and audience facilitates inspiration, and therefore, 'superstars' are less likely to be accepted as a role model by other women.

In particular, Iranian female travel writers attempt to redefine the position of women in Iranian society by opposing what they considered to be out-dated stereotypes imposed by tradition, religion, and law. Yang et al. (2018b) suggest that female travelers can transform society on a larger scale by their activities, while Weatherby and Vidon (2018) argue that the emergence of social media has significantly deepened women's ability to transform society. Instagram and other social media have given new opportunities to Iranian women to more easily share their travel narratives with others in a country where the voices of women are subordinate to those of men. The narratives embedded within the posts of the women travelers clearly suggest that they are aware of their influence on other Iranians, particularly Iranian women. Litt and Hargittai (2016) suggest that people's imagery fluctuates between different groups of their imagined audience when they share a post on social media. Evidence for this claim is the frequency of addressing Iranian women in their narratives, showing that Iranian women constituted the predominant imagined audiences when sharing a new post. All in all, the societal transformation advocated by the travelers leverages off the acknowledgement and critical understanding of the gendered dimensions of Iranian (and other) social systems.

Finally, we found that growing self-awareness and transformation

were achieved during the women's travel evidenced through the sharing of new insights, new understandings of life and learning through their posts. In line with previous studies on transformation through travel (Kirillova et al., 2017; Pung, Yung, Khoo-Lattimore, & Del Chiappa, 2020), we found that travel can act as a transformatory practice for solo female travelers through the accessing of spaces for experiencing new cultures, meeting different people, learning new insights, overcoming fears and challenges, experiencing liminality, and other novel experiences.

We suggest that writing about their travel for their followers on Instagram reinforces the process of transformation of self for several reasons: the matter of being followed by thousands of people motivates them to travel to remoter destinations which provides further space for transformation; sharing content worthy to be read by followers requires more attention to details in destinations and increases travel mindfulness; the reciprocal feature of Instagram allows these women to be aware of their followers' feedback on their posts that may lead to further reflection and insight; and travelers actually document their travel moments by sharing them on their social media page, and this documentation of travel moments which followed with details in the text increases the memorability of the travel experiences (including transformative travel experiences). The reciprocal nature of interactions in social media leads to the creation of an online version of their "self" in travel writers (Belk, 2013; McWha et al., 2018), which may reinforce their awareness of self (Rettberg, 2014). Pung, Yung, et al. (2020) explain that if transformative learning and existential transformation last in the mind of travelers they may lead to behavioral change which is the final stage of travel transformation.

We believe that solo female traveling needs further attention especially in regions like the Middle East where women's rights and its related discussions have some complexities. How they cope with their fears of solo traveling, how they persuade their family to take solo traveling permission, and how they deal with stigmas of solo female traveling in the Muslim society could be some questions to be responded to by future studies. The impacts of female travelers on society also need further study; analyzing their comments or interviewing them may show such impacts on society. And in general, we suggest that tourism researchers pay greater attention to the capacity of social media in the analysis of travelers.

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