

### Perception of Welcoming Culture: A Study of Technology Use and Service Training to Enhance Solo Female Travelers Experience #157

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Well-being is one of the important managerial topics in today's world. Many organizations support employees to achieve a better mental state by providing wellness workshops, exercise classes, coaching programs, etc. Employees learn to schedule "me-time" and leave hectic and everyday stress. Me-time is not limited to seeing a movie, going hiking, or going to museums locally. Solo travel to other countries offers an individual more space to be at peace with the world and oneself. According to Skyscanner's Travel Trends 2023 report, one of the key trends highlighted was that solo traveling is no longer a niche. 54% of U.S. travelers were looking to embark on solo adventures within the following year while 69% of travelers from the UAE were considering going on holiday on their own in 2023 (Connecting Travel, 2024).

Previous literature suggests that females account for half of the travel market taking adventure travel, eco tours, educational travel, and backpacking trips (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia, 2017). In recent years, more and more female travelers perceive solo travel as trendy, adventurous, and self-rewarding. They utilize solo female travel apps to discuss travel plans, and most importantly, get insider tips from locals and fellow travelers to find reliable accommodations or tourism products/services. Given that these travelers travel alone with gendered constraints (Douglas & Barrett, 2020), they have a greater concern about the perception of safety and welcoming hospitality culture. Previous literature examined solo female travelers who experienced harassment from male strangers exerted considerable influence on women's perception of safety (Su & Wu, 2020). Another research on solo diners found that they were being considered as not profit-generating customers (Im & Seo, 2024).

Because of the changes in the socioeconomic status of females, it is expected that solo female travelers will be on the rise (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). Their consumption spans different sectors such as hotels and accommodation, restaurants, transportation (e.g. airlines, trains, buses, taxis), retail shops, cruise liners, theme parks, national parks, etc. Given the potential demand and supply in this rising market segment, much previous research focuses on their travel motives. Their perception of welcoming culture (including products/services) offered by various hospitality and tourism sectors is under research. Therefore, this research is a pilot study aiming to explore the underlying concept of solo travelers' perception of welcoming culture and to understand the effectiveness of using solo female travel apps in enhancing their wellness travel experiences.

According to the article *Experienscape: expanding the Concept of Servicescape with a multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary Approach*, Pizam and Tasci (2019) define "experienscape as the sensory, functional, social, natural, and cultural stimuli in a product or service environment, surmounted with a culture of hospitality, all of which accrue to an experience for consumers, employees, and other stakeholders and result in positive or negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions toward products, services, brands, and firms" (Pizam & Tasci, 2019, p. 76). This concept was adopted as a theoretical approach to investigate solo travelers' experiences and hospitality needs. Through purposive and snowball sampling strategies, 10 female travelers who had experience in solo travel were invited to participate in this study. Semi-structured interview questions were developed according to some of the relevant components in the experienscape model. Data was coded and content was analyzed into major themes. Useful features in the solo travel apps to make travelers feel safe and welcome were identified. Solo travel-friendly products and services were suggested. The results provide implications on how products/service providers can partner with solo travel apps or leverage their digital platform to enhance their service competitiveness. Furthermore, Human Resources and training managers are suggested to redefine hospitality welcoming culture, and subsequently develop service training to allure this new market segment.

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