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ABSTRACT

The growing phenomenon of solo women travelers has demonstrated equal travel opportunities between men and women. It has also contributed to promoting the cultural image and economic development within the tourism sectors of many countries. Having a tremendous tourism potential, Morocco is a favorite destination for International solo women travelers. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the experiences of international solo female travelers to Morocco before, during, and after traveling. The theoretical approach used is focused on feminist, postcolonial, and tourism studies. A qualitative method is adopted through a semi-structured and in-depth interview technique with a convenience sampling of 20 international solo female travelers. Results show that the respondents' motivations include cultural understanding, experiential learning, and empowerment. They reported that their interactions with local people were positive. However, their experiences reflect ambivalence towards public services such as transportation and tour guiding. The issue of safety emerged as a recurring theme as the majority faced sexual and physical violence in the public space. This study, therefore, contributes to the understanding of women's contemporary travel experience and informs the different stakeholders about the challenges international solo female travelers confront in Morocco. Implementing effective solutions is expected to advance Morocco's tourism objectives and accelerate the practical realization of Sustainable Development Goals.

KEYWORDS

Solo women travelers

Tourism

International women

Morocco

Female experiences

Safety

Introduction

Women's access to travel opportunities has been limited for centuries. Traditionally, due to gender roles, women were not permitted to travel alone, particularly to foreign countries. Travel was not considered an entertaining journey but a necessity, often undertaken by families seeking better living conditions. During the colonial era, women typically traveled with their families which sometimes allowed them to accompany husbands or fathers who were ambassadors or merchants. At that time, leisure travel was predominantly a male domain with painters, writers, and explorers leading the way. Their adventures have been a subject of research and critical literature for centuries. In contemporary times, travel conditions have improved significantly due to tourism policies and strategies in many countries, including the Kingdom of Morocco.

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With its UNESCO recognized historic landmarks, diverse destinations, and a mosaic of rich cultural heritage – encompassing architecture, gastronomy, fashion, crafts, traditions, music, and hospitality – Morocco has attracted a growing number of international solo women travelers. Despite this emerging phenomenon, there are few studies on female travelers to Morocco. Karla A. Henderson asserts that although leisure began to emerge over a decade earlier, research, specifically focused on women's leisure, did not appear until the early 1980s (13).

This period coincides with feminist movements and women's rights advocacy which permitted a considerable change in gender roles in many societies around the globe. This transformation has had an impact on the leisure and tourism industries through the democratization of equal travel opportunities for men and women, and more specifically, the rise of women traveling around the world without a male companion or supervisor, who are usually family members.

Women's roles, which are family-oriented and limited to the private space, have been dissolving in many societies, thus opening possibilities for women to think and act beyond them. In fact, the right to access the public space, its facilities, and services has enabled women in many parts of the world to participate actively in many facets of socio-economic and political life. The right to education and employment have further allowed many women to improve their socio-economic conditions. Moreover, access and use of technology and internet-based travel content such as blogs, videos, apps, and websites have enabled more and more women to gather information about different cultures, countries, and travel conditions. Another factor which has encouraged women to travel to many destinations is the presence of modernized tourist facilities such as accommodation, transportation, tours, leisure and cultural activities, etc. The convenience of these services forms favorable conditions for women to consider traveling alone.

Travel has been viewed to have positive benefits ranging from pleasure to health benefits to experiential learning (Ng and Ho 61). Mathew Stone and James F. Petrick highlighted how travel improved knowledge and skills, self-confidence, and adaptability (151). Thus, travel is an empowering life experience as it shapes learning, personality, and behavior. However, travel can be a dangerous endeavor and a source of anxiety. Early 21st-century studies have shown that travelers' decisions to travel abroad are influenced by their travel anxiety levels and perceived safety (Reisinger and Mavondo 32). On the contrary, more recent studies showed that "physical risk, financial risk, and socio-psychological risk did not affect visit intention" (Khan et al. 359).

Solo tourism, particularly among women, has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments in the tourism industry (Shukor and Kattiyapornpong 388; Umur 256), driven by motivations such as independence, self-discovery, and empowerment (Umur 266; Silva et al.). Despite a progressive growth, empirical research on solo women travelers remained limited in the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, with few studies exploring their unique experiences combining social interaction, adventure, education, and self-understanding (Bond 3). Other research has focused on the constraints they face including some elements related to their home environments, personal limitations such as self-doubt and vulnerability, and practical challenges related to finances, absence of knowledge about the destination's local culture, and fatigue (Wilson 114).

In recent years, there has been more and more scientific interest towards solo female travelers. Asian academia has been extensively researching this problematic. Ilinka Terziyska explored the different reasons which drive Asian and Australian women to travel alone (114). A study focused on the normalization of unsafety for solo female travelers in countries like India (Thomas and Mura 35) while another revealed that solo female travelers in South-East Asian countries were concerned not only about gender-based violence but also with racialized risks which they were able to negotiate during travel (Yang et al. 40).

Despite the growing scientific research about this problematic, there is a noticeable gap in research related to the Moroccan context. There is a lack of knowledge about the motivations, experiences and challenges which face solo international women travelers in Morocco. Therefore, this article explores how international women experience solo travel to the Kingdom of Morocco through investigating the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons behind women's solo travel to the country?
2. What are their expectations prior to travel?
3. What kind of experiences do they undergo during the trip?
4. What are their post-journey impressions?

This study contributes to gaining knowledge on different solo international women's experiences with travel to Morocco and informs the different stakeholders on the challenges and possible solutions to offer a favorable travel experience to them.

Literature Review

This review explores key theories related to gender and travel, examining postcolonial perspectives on travel writing, the difference between a tourist and a traveler, and gender and feminist readings of travel literature. It further explores studies on global women's solo travel experiences before situating the discussion within the Moroccan context, including tourism strategies and security conditions for women.

According to Michael C. Hall and Hazel Tucker, the experience of tourism "reinforces and is embedded in postcolonial relationships" and therefore revolves around issues of identity, contestation and representation (2). In fact, these three problematics arise from the postcolonial landscape and from the very nature of travel, which is an in-between space where the individual's vision of the world can be constantly challenged.

First, it is essential to discuss how postcolonial theory dissected the travel literature produced by Orientalists. It is indeed a colonial and post-colonial heritage that has influenced the representation of the Orient and non-Western countries. One of the prominent critics of Orientalism is Edward Said, who traced how every author writing about the Orient assumes "some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies" (Said 36). For him, such written texts (literary and visual) become discourses forming "strength and authority" by producing and re-producing a dehumanizing representation of an Orient which "has remained fixed in time and place for the west" (111). This otherness is what makes a destination worthy of consumption (Hall and Tucker 8). Travelers and tourists are attracted to the exotic culture and landscape which they have "always already" internalized, to borrow Althusser's term (145), because of the Western canon that has been constantly reproducing the same stereotypes about the Orient/ East.

Western media representation of Arabs and Muslims is a good example of this. Jack Shaheen explains how these two groups, who have different cultures and traditions, are considered to be a homogenous entity by Hollywood cinema (173). Shaheen traced decades of recycling preferred images of Arabs as terrorists, oil billionaires, buffoons, sexual predators who live in exotic places where flying carpets, lamp genies, desert locations, and camels are commonplace (177). The Western traveler/tourist has been exposed to and has internalized many stereotypical representations, which create ambivalent feelings towards this mysterious East. This legacy of representation of the Orient is one component that may affect the travel motivation of solo women travelers to non-Western countries.

Another concept to discuss is the problematic nature of naming a Western individual traveling to the Orient as "tourist" or "traveler." Beverly A. Simmons explains how the male

Western-centric discourse projects the idea that the two identities, tourist and traveler, merge into one entity (46). However, these are completely different as the meaning of a traveler is the one who engages all their senses, participates in authentic relationships with locals, and seeks self-discovery and experimentation. A tourist, on the other hand, is the construction of a contemporary travel discourse.

For Simmons, contemporary travel discourse is composed of four elements: privilege, desire, sightseeing, and fanciful play. Privilege is based on the superiority of Western tourists in non-Western lands, in which "they are a travelling social elite and that places are already familiar and readily available to them" (Simmons 45). Desire is the longing to escape modernism and feel nostalgic about the past. This would project the idea that non-Western destinations are non-modern, unaffected by globalization and socio-economic and political transformations. Sightseeing refers to the fact that tourists are spectators of the visited place so that "place and local inhabitants are shaped in picturesque and exotic narratives that are designed to seduce tourists" (46). The last element is fanciful play, which is described as the result of the three previous elements. The tourist, therefore, imagines that he enjoys a certain degree of freedom in foreign lands, unlike in their homeland. Simmons points out that "By pretending that tourists are not tourists but travelers, this discourse encourages tourists to ignore the reality of power relations within modern tourism such as their dependence on the travel industry, or their relationships of power with locals as they might actually exist" (48). Thus, a traveler is the one who is free from being dependent on tourist facilities and who constructs authentic encounters with the culture visited. This viewpoint of the distinction between a tourist and traveler is particularly interesting as it forms a critical analysis of male travel narratives. However, there is a lack of extensive research on how this difference is valid for female travel narratives and experiences.

Women's travel experiences were invisible to and trivialized in the colonial narratives. Their roles were minor and limited to domesticity and romantic objects of desire. Alternatively, their experiences were bound by seeking the same objectives as the privileged white man (adventure, freedom, exploration), thereby erasing their identity and uniqueness (Simmons 48-50). Moreover, despite the fact that many Western female travel narratives existed during the 19th century, postcolonial male criticism (such as Said's and others) excluded them from discourse analysis.

It is thanks to feminist criticism that these narratives gained visibility. Several feminist critics considered these texts to be a counterpoint to male-authored texts, to portray strong female role models, to present factual events, and to depict the female authors as individuals free from the constraints of Victorian society and the history of colonialism (Mills 29). Yet, this feminist reading is reductive as it omits the colonial framework. In fact, Sara Mills explains that these texts should not be considered biographical, but rather as experiences and representations. Further, acknowledging the colonial framework from which women's travel narratives emanate, Mills affirms that these narratives "cannot be said to speak from outside colonial discourse, but their relation to the dominant discourse is problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of 'femininity', which were operating on them in equal, and sometimes stronger, measure" (61-63).

However, some feminist critics and female travel writers disidentify with colonial ideologies. Simone Fullagar explains that her travel to Nepal was a quest for identity and describes how travel embodies vulnerability through an "abandonment of self to wandering, and the mastery of surmounting the unknown" (62). Fullagar admits belonging to a Western background of colonial history and ideology but does not identify with that heritage as she perceives the world from different other perspectives that prove an instability of identity and unfixed cultural encounters. She asserts that her "desire for otherness does not exist outside a western imagining

of eastern cultures but it does reveal an ambivalent disidentification with colonial origins and a complex interplay between gender, class and culture" (Fullagar 61). Consequently, Western female travelers' experiences form a mosaic of components: the colonial background, the seeking for self-discovery, the constraints of gender politics and its intersectionality with class, race, and other socio-cultural constructs.

In the 21st century, quantitative and qualitative studies on solo women travelers showed that various reasons motivate them to travel alone. Some of these are education, adventure, socializing with people from other cultures, self-discovery and a desire for autonomy (Chiang and Jogaratnam 68; Pereira and Silva). Other reasons are related to women's well-being, including overcoming depression and bringing positive energy and happiness back to their lives (Hamid et al. 1-13; Pereira and Silva; Seow and Brown 1190). These findings show that women travel alone not only to discover new places but also to interact closely with the cultures visited and learn from them. This seems to break tradition with previous male and female travelers' narratives.

Concerning the challenges faced, it has been found that one of the main issues these women face is a feeling of insecurity and lack of safety. This latter is manifested in risks of violent crimes, verbal and sexual harassment, and theft (Bianchi 200; Yang 2460; Su and Wu 380). The fear of this danger increases women's vigilance and has restrictive consequences for their freedom of movement in public spaces.

In their study of solo British and American women travelers, Fiona Jordan and Heather Gibson adopt a post-structuralist approach, analyzing women's travel experiences in relation to the gender relations of surveillance, resistance, and empowerment (206). They point out that these solo women travelers experienced themselves as being the object of the male gaze, which even made some of them confine themselves to their hotel rooms to avoid it. Jordan and Gibson explain:

> Many of the women were conscious that they were the subject of sexual speculation because of their solo presence in the sexualized and potentially liminoid spaces of tourism. They worried that their singleness signaled availability and constructed them as the subjects of unwanted sexual attention of men in the places they visited. (206)

However, some travelers showed resistant techniques. They refused to adopt a passive attitude and were present in the space, while others wore wedding rings despite being single to discourage harassers. Others grabbed a book or a magazine which "provided a legitimate activity for being in such public tourism spaces" (20). The reading activity made them less self-conscious and drove away the male gaze, as being alone in a public space was conceived as eliciting sexual attention. In fact, recent ethnographic research found that the feeling of security is enhanced based on not only the destination's reputation for safety and the presence of other solo female travelers, but more importantly, on safety strategies adopted (Ghadban et al.). Examples of these strategies include informing their families back home of their location and avoiding sharing personal information with strangers while traveling (Ghadban et al.). These types of studies have been conducted in various cultural contexts from Europe to Asia. However, there is limited knowledge about Morocco as a destination for solo female travelers.

One case study was explored by Sian Stephens who, during her travel to Morocco, describes an unsafe experience in which she respected cultural rules and adapted her behavior by dressing in a conservative way, ignoring unwanted attention, and being courteous and polite to reduce the male gaze and the risk of sexual harassment. However, despite these strategies, she still felt unsafe and affirms that she has "reached the difficult conclusions that [she] should not seek out

cultures where an 'unaccompanied' woman in public is upsetting to those she encounters" (Stephens 138).

Unsafety in public spaces is the result of violence which is a pressing problem in Morocco. According to the High Commission for Planning, gender-based violence represents 56.5%, of which 49% is psychological, 14% is sexual, and 13% is physical (28). Different forms, such as sexual harassment, groping, attempted rape, and rape, happen in the public space with a rate of 12.6% (High Commission for Planning 128). In light of these figures, the issue of gender-based violence underscores the intersection between safety in the public space for women and Morocco's broader ambitions in the tourism sector. Morocco has implemented a national tourism strategy aimed at positioning the country among the world's top 15 travel destinations (Ministry of Tourism). With a target of 26 million tourists by 2030, the kingdom has already welcomed 17.4 million visitors in 2024, a 20% increase from the previous year, highlighting its growing appeal (Ministry of Tourism). The strategy emphasizes sustainable economic development through collaboration between the public and private sectors, local communities, and international partners. Moreover, the Ministry of Tourism has made considerable efforts to regulate the profession of tour guiding through Law 05.12, which stipulates specific requirements for entering and practicing the profession. The ministry affirms that "the tour guide plays a key role in showcasing and promoting Morocco's natural and cultural heritage. They act as a cultural ambassador of the destination to tourists" (Ministry of Tourism, 2023). In order to combat unauthorized tour guides, who can affect Morocco's image, the ministry has published the list of licensed tour guides, approved by the ministry, on its official website. Moreover, the ministry has provided a continuous training capacity program for authorized tourist guides. Another important strategy concerns the means of transportation, a key component used by international solo female travelers in Morocco. The Ministry of Transport and Logistics' strategy for the period 2023-2026 focuses on developing public infrastructure, including roads, railways, airports, and maritime transport. In addition to improving governance and administrative management, the ministry adopts an "inclusive and sustainable mobility" (Ministry of Transport and Logistics, 2023). However, achieving this vision requires addressing the safety concerns that deter solo female tourists, a demographic that contributes significantly to the industry's growth.

Although existing research has explored the experiences of solo women travelers in various cultural contexts, Morocco's unique position as both a rapidly growing tourist destination (Ministry of Tourism) and a setting where gender-based violence remains prevalent (High Commission for Planning, 128) signals a critically overlooked dimension in the literature. While studies have identified that young, single urban women are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence (128), little empirical research has investigated how safety concerns intersect with the experiences of international female solo travelers in Morocco. These strategies are particularly essential given the country's ambitious tourism development goals and the increasing global trend of solo female travel.

Research Methodology

To address the objective of investigating the experiences of solo international women travelers before, during, and after visiting Morocco, this study adopts a qualitative research design. It is used when research needs to explore the experiences, testimonials, feelings, and beliefs of a certain population. Moreover, in order to collect data from a diverse population, in this case international women, a qualitative design enables us to delve deeply into "how people interpret their experiences … and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Tisdell et al. 8).

One qualitative data collection technique that allows the researcher to interpret the meaning of the respondent's perspective is interviewing (Kvale 326). The choice made for this study is semi-structured interviews, which consist of setting clear questions related to the objective of the research. However, this data collection technique allows more flexibility to the researcher to ask further questions to the interviewee to elaborate on certain ideas and feelings (Dörnyei; Taylor et al.; Alamri). Convenience sampling was adopted in this study due to the researchers' existing network with potential interviewees, making it a time and cost-effective approach. This method is also well-suited for exploratory research, providing a foundation for more in-depth future studies.

Since the interviewees are international and were residing in different countries at the time of the data collection, the most convenient way to conduct the interviews was using internet-based platforms, which allow distance interviewing. Media platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom video calls enabled the recording of the interaction, which later facilitated the transcription and analysis of the data collected. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 international solo women travelers from 2 American and 4 European countries.

The interview guide incorporated nineteen main questions; each was supplemented by follow-up questions. The purpose of the probing was to give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that was desired, to deepen the responses to a question, and to increase the richness of the data being obtained.

The profile of the respondents was diversified. The majority of the respondents' age (75%) are between 20 and 30 years old, 15% are between 30 and 40 years old, and 10% are more than 40 years old. Most of the participants are from the United States of America (15 participants). Other countries like Belgium, France, Germany, Peru, and Russia are represented by one participant each.

Most of the respondents speak English either as their native or second/third language while others' native languages range from French, German, Spanish, to Russian. Eight of the participants have a good knowledge of three foreign languages: Arabic, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), and French; which form the official languages of Morocco. However, another official language which Morocco adopts, Amazigh, is not spoken by any participant.

Concerning the periods of time during which the respondents visited Morocco, 40% visited the country only once, 25% live permanently in the country after having visited it previously, 15% visited twice, 10% four times, 5% five times and another 5% between fifteen to twenty times. This shows that 60% of the participants have returned to Morocco after their first visit.

While respondents could visit Morocco in any month, the peak period for solo female travelers particularly those on study abroad programs or summer vacations occurred between May and August. Their trips spanned from 1989 to 2021, though most arrived after 2000, with a notable surge post-2010. This imbalance toward more recent years likely reflects the younger demographic of participants at the time of the study. It is also worth mentioning that most of the participants visited Morocco before 2019, and only a few did so from 2019 to 2021. This can be explained by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic which affected the number of tourists and travelers, not only in Morocco but also around the world.

Many of these women are students and have had the opportunity to participate in study abroad programs with their universities. While one of them had obtained a job opportunity after her previous visits and chose to live permanently in Morocco, others work and reside in their countries.

The respondents have visited different cities in Morocco. Some cities are more popular than others. Here is a summary of the visited cities by the interviewees:

Table 1
Percentage of the Visited Cities by the Interviewees

City Visited	Percentage
High Popularity (60-90%)	
Meknes	90%
Rabat	80%
Fes	75%
Marrakesh and Casablanca	60%
Moderate Popularity (55-30%)	
Tangier	55%
Essaouira	50%
Chefchaouen	40%
Asilah	35%
Ifrane	30%
Lower Popularity (25-15%)	
Agadir	25%
Tetouan	20%
Merzouga	15%
Minimal Popularity (10-5%)	
Ouarzazate, Azrou, El Jadida, Taghazout	10%
Moulay Idriss, Larache, M'diq, Tiflet, Khemisset, Volubilis, Oualidia, Mohammedia, Imsouane, Taliouine, Taroudant, Akchour, Todra, Bin El Ouidane, Ouzoud, Midelt, Beni-Mellal, Ben Slimane, El Hajeb, Ait Bougemez, Martil	5%

Data shows that the most visited cities are the imperial cities (Meknes, Fez, Rabat, Marrakesh) and summer destinations (Tangiers, Essaouira, Chefchaouen, Asilah). The convenient sampling of female students participating in study abroad programs may have affected these results. It is also observed that southern cities and small towns are less likely to be visited by international solo female travelers.

Results and Discussion

Following the objective of this study, which is to investigate international solo women's experiences before, during, and after traveling to Morocco, the results and discussion are going to be presented following this timeline.

Before Travel

Most of the participants had preconceived ideas about Morocco. Some of them mirror orientalist representations in colonial-male travel narratives (Said) and in the depiction of the Arab world in general and Morocco in particular by the American and European media (Shaheen). One participant said that "it was a popular tourist destination. Movies/TV portrayed it as an 'exotic' location (deserts, camels, etc.)" and two others said: "I thought it would be all desert;" "I assumed cities would be crowded with a lot of people living in close proximity." Placing herself in a superior tourist position, the solo international woman traveler expects to visit an exotic Morocco where deserts and camels are mundane. An ideology of otherness which is conceived through a spectacle of splendid landscapes, of swarming populations, and of dangerous encounters waiting to be explored by the "fanciful play" tourist profile (Simmons 2004).

The colonial perception (Mills, Hall, and Tucker) of these participants made them form an unchanging idea about Islam (being the official religion in Morocco) and about gender dynamics. They explained that they had thought Morocco would still be fixed in strict conservative Muslim culture and in a male-dominated society. Words like "conservative, communal, male-dominant, Islamic" were said by an interviewee, while another said "I assumed there would be no alcohol, some places had it and people drank more than I expected" and another "I expected it to be very similar to other Middle Eastern countries and to have very strict Muslim rules." This indicates that the image of Morocco abroad, particularly in Western countries, remains shaped by colonial encounters. This image is fixed, unchanging, and archaic. However, a small percentage of 25% went to Morocco with a neutral perception, waiting to understand the self and others: "I didn't really know much at all before I visited for the first time;" "I do not think I had preconceived ideas."

Other participants anticipated that Morocco was unsafe. Despite affirming that they expected a positive encounter with the culture, they had been worried about their security before traveling. Here are some comments by 30% of the interviewees: "Amazing geography and culture. Maybe not very safe;" "Not for a solo female;" "I thought it would be full of different cultural experiences and that I may have to worry about my safety a bit more than in the US." Others' perceptions were formed by their families, friends, and acquaintances, warning them against the physical and sexual danger they might face in Morocco. For example, "I was warned about street harassment;" "I didn't come in with too many pre-conceived notions as I wanted to keep an open mind and see what my experience offered. However, based on the reactions of friends and family, I can say that some American people may unfortunately view Morocco as an unsafe and underdeveloped country." This shows that even if a solo female traveler may have a positive expectation about the country, she still worries about her safety.

The participants (70%) contended that in order to enjoy the traveling experience to Morocco, they needed to plan their trip beforehand and take careful precautions to minimize risks and cultural misunderstandings. This proves that despite the perception of unsafety and the presence of several risks, women still decide to travel (Khan, Chelliah, and Ahmed). Some affirmed that they prepared plans on how to take means of transport, to visit possible cities and architectural sites, to enhance their safety at night, and to have travel insurance. Others preferred to collect as much information as possible from different sources about the country before traveling. These sources varied between books, travel guides, previous travelers, Moroccan friends, and online content as these comments show: "I read books about Morocco, by Moroccan authors, and by foreigners who had lived there;" "conversations with previous travelers, online blogs, reading books by Moroccan authors;" "I talked to other people who had traveled to the areas I was going or lived there. I asked the Moroccan friends I knew what it was like to live there.

Talked to a lot of other biracial/bi-religious couples about challenges they faced;" "I researched and read about the country online, aiming to learn more about its history and culture. I chatted with some people who had previously visited to ask questions about their experiences;" "classes, making Maghrebi friends, reading about the culture, and other American experiences."

Before the democratization of online travel content, information sources, whether textual, visual, or oral and whether paper-based, digital, or testimonial, have been widely based on a history of colonial and post-colonial trajectories (Said, Shaheen, Hall, and Tucker). A traveler is not allowed to exist outside of it; she is "always already" (Althusser) conditioned by this heritage. However, the presence of online travel blogs and videos about women's travel, online communication among international users, and cross-cultural educational programs has contributed to correcting a previous understanding and creating a different one. In fact, some travelers affirmed that, before traveling to Morocco, they had chosen to learn basic Arabic and/or Moroccan dialect, in addition to speaking or learning French. They explained that this decision was motivated by the desire to make their trip easier, to be able to connect better with locals, and to fully immerse themselves in the culture. This confirms Stone and Petrick's idea that travel improves knowledge, skills, and adaptability. It also confirms the fact that some solo women travelers perceive their travels as an equal cultural encounter where they seek to interact and socialize with the local culture (Simmons, Mills, Fullagar).

When asked about the motivations to visit Morocco, some (15%) expressed an interest in the culture, others (10%) mentioned visiting family and friends they had met online (Ng and Ho, Hamid et.al., Pereira and Silva, Seow and Brown), and another category (20%) moved to Morocco for a work/volunteering experience. However, the majority of the interviewees' motivations (45%) were educational, such as study abroad programs, and academic and research purposes (Bond, Chiang, Jogaratnam, Pereira, and Silva). Consequently, international solo women's travel to Morocco is characterized by diverse reasons that are likely to enrich their personal, academic, and professional experiences.

During Travel

During their short or long-term stay in Morocco, the participants have experienced ambivalent situations and conflicting emotions about different components related to transportation, tour guides, and local people. The advantages and disadvantages of these experiences have all left a lasting impression on international solo female travelers.

The means of transportation was an important subject for the interviewees as they had many comments about it. All the travelers agreed that comfort and safety are of great importance to them while taking transportation. According to them, these could be ensured by choosing specific types of transport: trains and coach buses for inter-city shifts and small taxis[1] for short trips inside a city. These three choices are supported by the vacancy, suitable indoor temperature, especially during summer days, affordability, and easy access to information on the internet for intercity transport. Positive comments such as "in terms of the train, I felt they were easy to navigate and I personally felt comfortable. As for taxis, they were easy to use and talking to taxi drivers was always a fun experience;" "I traveled with a personal taxi back to Casa. It was also a lovely experience as the driver was extremely friendly and I learnt more about Morocco;" "fantastic. Made friends with a lot of cool taxi drivers," highlighted not only the ease in navigation but also the pleasant conversations with taxi drivers. Thus, the means of transport are an essential component to international solo women's travelers as they seek comfort, a pleasant encounter with locals during the trip, and ease of navigation.

However, other women experienced some ambivalent transport situations. Despite their positive impression, they had uncomfortable feelings such as stress, fear, frustration, and confusion. Stress and fear were expressed by two participants: "Mainly positive experience,

though intercity buses have sometimes been stressful with the crowds and occasional theft;" "I preferred the petit taxi over the grand taxis. Grand taxis were a little more stressful in the areas I would go. The bus was easy to navigate but really stressful to be on, alone as a woman, especially at night. I always had earphones in without music playing and would get a spot by the window so I didn't have to make eye contact with anyone." These testimonies reflect that some means of transport, like buses and grand taxis, are not safe public spaces for women travelers, which questions the strategy of inclusion and sustainability by the Ministry of Transport and Logistics. Feelings of frustration were expressed by a participant saying that it was "sometimes challenging, people were sometimes helpful, sometimes people asked too many questions." One interviewee was stunned at her experience with grand taxis: "I never had a problem getting from point A to point B. It was surprising to have four people in back seat of a taxi and two in passenger seat. Things always ran a bit late, but we always got there" and another one related her challenge with communication by saying "the language barrier is something a bit difficult." As previously mentioned, the difficulty of communicating with public transport drivers and service providers interrogates the Ministry of Transport and Logistics' efforts to develop the quality of the service. In addition, the uncomfortable feelings, which the international solo women travelers described, convey a status of vulnerability and prove an unfixed cultural adaptation since the solo female traveler negotiates her presence in this public space, which confirms the findings by Fullagar.

The tourist guides were quite troublesome for most participants who had chosen to resort to their services. Most experiences showed unprofessional, unsafe, and profit-driven guides. One participant said "I don't really use them, have used one in Fes and he had to leave the tour suddenly so I just walked around alone… but if I used a tour guide I would want a woman!"[2] The interviewed women pinpointed to the fact that some guides did not highlight positive aspects of the Moroccan culture and were reproducing colonial discourses such as this woman who said that "they give a very 'white washed/tourist' view of things. I've never read or seen any tourist guide that really grasped the true experience of Morocco." Few others added that the material benefit is what drives these kinds of guides: "As I live here, I haven't had too many interactions with tourist guides, but my experiences with them have been mixed. Some seem genuinely eager to show and teach visitors about Morocco, whereas others can be pushy and seem to just want money;" "competent mostly, some trying to lure us into tourist traps;" "they often have deals with various vendors which makes sense and I respect it as a business model - many people come here to buy and I understand they would be useful for those unable to easily communicate with shop owners."

Other experiences were positive due to the minute selection of the tour guides by the academic host institutions in the case of study abroad programs: "All the tour guides I interacted with were through the study abroad program so they were all very nice and tolerable;" "they were extremely helpful, accessible, ready to answer questions and proud about their country." These ambivalent testimonies show that the profession of tour guiding in Morocco reflects unprofessionalism and a lack of rigor, which explains the measures recently taken by the Ministry of Tourism to regulate this field by discouraging unauthorized tour guides and training the authorized ones.

On another level, a few participants preferred not to follow a constructed common touristy experience and rather explored their surroundings on their own, such as this participant saying, "I don't personally like tour guides - the experience feels too constructed for my taste." The motivation behind this attitude is to enrich the solo female traveler's cultural experience and to make herself feel empowered and self-confident through an independent exploration of her surroundings which reinforces experiential learning and confirms many research studies on the

subject (Ng and Ho, Stone and Petrick, Umur, Silva et.al., Simmons, Chiang and Jogaratnam, Pereira and Silva). It is, however, questionable whether these self-reliant tours enable the traveler to deeply explore the history of each visited space.

Another aspect discussed during the interviews is the attitude of local people towards the international solo woman traveler. The majority described friendly, welcoming, and helpful attitudes from locals like these participants saying: "People came to me easily and chatted, and some offered to show me some places;" "I received more attention, as someone who is visibly foreign. Most people have been polite and friendly'" "they were so welcoming and warm. Always willing to help and accommodate." Some enjoyed benefits from their looks like this participant: "They always thought I was Moroccan. So, I got treated like a Moroccan woman all the time, which definitely had its benefits" while another received positive feedback when she spoke the Moroccan dialect, as she said, "they were usually excited that I was learning Arabic." However, the notion of personal space and intimacy was problematic for one solo international female traveler. She was unable to assimilate to the invasion of her personal space, as she explains, "some locals were sometimes a bit pushy and getting too close."

When asked if they had experienced any threatening situations, 75% responded that they had. These dangerous situations, as described by the travelers, were all related to physical and sexual violence in the public space. Here are some testimonials:

- "There was some harassment from younger and older gentlemen that was frustrating."
- "A few weeks after I first arrived in Morocco, I was mugged at knifepoint in broad daylight by a park with two other friends. Not long after, I was wrapped in a car by a Moroccan guy who I had known for a good amount of time and thought was just my friend. Almost daily cat calling that got more physical and aggressive during the winter months."
- "One man tried to pull my roommate and I into his car, offering to give us dirhams. Another time, a man grabbed me in the street. Men often followed me for long periods of time, and I would have to find creative ways to escape the situation."

Most of the encounters were incidents of sexual harassment, assault, and theft. Ranging from catcalling, following the victim in the street, to sexual and physical assaults, the offenders are young or old men and complete strangers to the victims. It is clear that the presence of solo international female travelers is seen as an exotic/erotic individual, hence an intrusion into the Moroccan conservative public space. These travelers suffered from similar treatment which Moroccan women undergo in the public space (High Commission for Planning), as both international and national women are already conditioned by their gender discriminated profile of being a woman present in the public space and unaccompanied by a male chaperone.

In order to elude these violent encounters, a traveler changed her behavior by covering up her body like this participant: "In my solo trip to Rabat, while waiting to meet up with a friend, I had two men follow me on two separate occasions. One of them had tried to grab my arm for attention. It was the only time I felt fearful that something might happen to me. I was wearing a past knee length dress and I walked inside a clothing store and bought some pants and a blouse to change." On other occasions, all that was possible as a solution was to escape the threatening situation either by taking a public transport or by fleeing the scene as these women confirm:

- "I was walking home late with my roommate and a man started harassing us and would not leave us alone. We had to take a taxi home instead."
- "A man tried to follow me home and drug me. He followed me down the street in his car and parked, then got out in front of me when I was walking home alone. He had a rag in his hand with some kind of liquid on it. Thankfully, I was almost home so I ran into my building where my concierge was."

• "I was robbed once and another time, men were trying to follow me home. Another time I was swarmed by a group of young boys. In all these situations, I was able to go to the nearest shop owner and wait until I felt safe."

One participant mentioned that during the sexual harassment she was facing, a local bystander intervened to protect her: "Late night in Meknes, I was walking home and a man grabbed me and pushed me up against a wall. The older man who cleaned the street witnessed it and started hitting the man with his broom, which rescued me from the situation."

All these experiences with lack of safety, undergone by the international solo female travelers, confirm previous studies achieved in European and Asian countries (Bianchi, Su and Wu, Yang). Surveillance was applied on these women through the male gaze and violence, which led, in almost all occasions, to the inability to use the resistance techniques explained by Jordan, Gibson, and Stephens. In fact, the victims had to deal with the feelings of fear and finding an escape, and had little chance to think otherwise. However, these hazardous encounters did not stop the respondents from re-appropriating their presence as travelers in the Moroccan public space. This shows a defiant attitude towards such violence, unlike Stephens, who chose not to visit Morocco again. In fact, when asked if they think that Morocco is still a safe country for international solo female travelers, 90% said yes.

This resistant position by international solo women travelers shows that they have strengthened their self-confidence and adaptability skills (Stone and Petrick 151). When asked about other types of challenges faced, the participants explained that the nature of solo travel teaches patience, planning, and responsibility. One participant described the difficulty in finding her way in the old town, "labyrinths of downtown medinas, but it was a nice challenge to go through it!" And another one explained that "you're in this constant state of being over alert. You have to overanalyze even simple situations and scenarios. Even just deciding to walk to a hanout [small convenience store] becomes a task."

International solo women travelers' experiences during their stay in Morocco were characterized by positive, negative, and ambivalent encounters. These experiences confirm the difference between a traveler as opposed to a tourist, as explained by Simmons. In fact, all these women engaged their senses, were involved in authentic relations with the locals, and went through self-discovery and experimentation (Stone and Petrick 151). This also invalidates Mills' analysis of female travel literature produced in the 19th and 20th centuries, which placed the female traveler as superior to the culture visited.

After Travel

When the participants were asked about their post-travel impressions, they expressed their genuine admiration for the different components which make up contemporary Morocco. Here are some testimonials:

• "I am absolutely in love with Morocco. The culture has so much to offer, every place is so diverse and different. The food, the music, the language everything is so stimulating."

• "I have loved living here and getting to know the people, culture, and languages of the country. Overall, people have been incredibly welcoming and have made me feel at home. I appreciate the generosity and kindness I've received and the collectivist nature of the society as a whole."

• "Architecture, orange trees bloom and the smell of it, hard-working woodcrafters and mosaics makers, wonderful artists decorating the porcelain, great vegetables and flavorful fruits, cheap and tasty fresh orange juice, everything!"

• "The people are phenomenal, the food is fantastic, and the landscape is beautiful. I was amazed from the start."

However, they mentioned that the only matter which needs careful attention and serious measures was related to their safety from physical and sexual violence. One participant pointed out that solo travel becomes an arduous experience because she needs to be alert at all times and wary of harassment. She considered that it would be safer to travel as part of a group or be accompanied by a male relative or friend. Another comment was a call for a reaction by the witnesses of gender-based violence in the public space. Another one reinforced that solo women travelers must be "smart, plan ahead, and acknowledge the risks" when visiting Morocco. Consequently, Morocco has tremendous potential to attract international solo women travelers thanks to its diverse culture, welcoming local people, a developing transport infrastructure, and improving tourist services. However, one component tarnishes this idealistic experience, which is the lack of safety these women experience when they visit the country.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Before traveling to Morocco, international solo women travelers had adopted the white male colonialist/orientalist ideologies. They were interpellated by Western discourses of the East, which are male-dominated. Despite the interconnected world facilitated by the internet, the majority of travelers did not have a "realistic" idea of Morocco. Thus, promotional campaigns are needed to present a contemporary image of the country's diversity, including the natural landscape and updated cultural trends in order to avoid exoticizing the image of Morocco.

The tourist profile soon disappears once international solo women travelers set foot in Morocco. These travelers were humbled by the experience, were open to learn about the culture and its people, and questioned their pre-travel beliefs about the country. Empowerment during solo travel should, therefore, not only be understood in terms of female autonomy and conquering one's fears and challenges during travel, but also in destabilizing and overthrowing Western male-dominated and orientalist visions of the Other.

In fact, solo international women travelers are primarily interested in educational and cultural experiences. During her journey, the traveler seeks to gain genuine insight into the host culture, develop an understanding of cultural differences, overcome prior stereotypes, and reflect on her learning experience. This ongoing effort is challenging not only due to cultural differences but also because of the varying quality of tourist services.

Despite a general positive feedback regarding the means of transport, participants reported two main challenges: difficulty in communication and concerns about safety. In light of its 2023-2026 strategy, it is highly recommended that the Ministry of Transport and Logistics train drivers and all service providers in foreign languages, particularly English, to facilitate better communication with international travelers. More importantly, the ministry should prioritize ensuring safety on all forms of public transport, including the installation of surveillance cameras on board, strict and precise policy measures, awareness campaigns among passengers, staff training, and security presence.

Tour guiding is another tourism related service which was criticized by international solo women travelers. Some representatives of the profession are accused of being unprofessional, spreading false information about Morocco, involving travelers in tourist scams, and engaging in sexual harassment. It is advisable that illegal tour guides be identified by the ministry in charge of the sector and penalized in accordance with the law. Moreover, authorized tour guides should undergo regular training and capacity-building programs to update their communication approach in line with modern-day Morocco and improve their competence to engage with diverse groups, especially international solo female travelers. Finally, the profession needs to

raise awareness about behaviors which constitute harassment and violence against women. It should also aim to include more female tour guides which could, on the one hand, increase women's visibility in public spaces, and on the other hand, offer more options and help female travelers feel safer.

An additional recommendation for both the tourism and transport sectors is to enable access to the identification details of authorized and licensed drivers, tour guides, and service providers through mobile applications. Simultaneously, mobile apps should also include features for reporting incidents, ensuring that international solo women travelers can easily access both forms of information. This could be further supported by the establishment of information desks or the placement of signage in public spaces, particularly in high-traffic tourist areas, to ensure travelers are well-informed.

The women interviewed in this study shared their experiences with local people, which were largely positive. However, the issue of safety surfaced repeatedly in their narratives, with many reporting incidents of sexual harassment and physical assault by strangers in public spaces. It is recommended that the Ministry of Interior collaborate with the Ministry of Tourism to establish a tourist police force in popular tourist areas to address incidents of theft and violence against international solo women travelers. Additionally, establishing an emergency hotline could provide immediate assistance to these women facing threatening situations.

Consequently, the Ministry of Transport and Logistics, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of Interior must integrate safety measures for international solo women travelers into their strategic frameworks. Addressing gender-based violence in public services and spaces not only contributes to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities, but also enhances Morocco's appeal as a destination for international solo female travelers, making their journeys easier and safer. In this regard, the ministries' approaches should go beyond purely economic objectives and adopt a deep social perspective, recognizing that safety and women's inclusivity are essential to sustainable tourism and long-term economic development.

Notes

1. In Morocco, there are two types of taxis: Petit (small) taxi and grand (big) taxi. The petit taxi takes up to 3 people only, uses a taximeter, and is usually more expensive than the grand taxi, which takes up to 6 passengers with a fixed price and a fixed arrival destination point. Small taxis used to be more comfortable than the big ones, as these latter were old car models. During the last decade, however, the Moroccan ministry has enabled many grand taxi owners to change their cars into more comfortable and new engines.

2. Female tour guides represent a minority in Morocco. There is a striking lack of statistical studies on this segment of the workforce. The Ministry of Tourism's (2023) list of authorized tour guides does not specify the gender of the individuals listed. In the absence of credible surveys, AI-based tools (Perplexity, Copilot, and ChatGPT) were employed to estimate the percentage of women tour guides using this list. Results indicate that out of 4670 tour guides, only 2% are women. While the AI engines may have limitations in identifying gender from ambiguous names, this result provides insight into the sector's low feminization rate.

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