



# Motivations, Needs, and Perceived Risks of Middle-Aged and Senior Solo Travelling Women: A Study of Brazilian Female Travellers

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## Abstract

The trend of senior women travelling alone is increasing as they feel empowered and independent. With more resources available at this stage of life, they choose to travel without the company of acquaintances, but rather with strangers in similar circumstances. Although senior women travelling solo is an important market segment in tourism, few studies have been conducted to better understand this group. This study aims to address the gap in knowledge by exploring the motivations, needs, and perceived risks of senior women who travel alone or with other women. We conducted a qualitative empirical investigation using semi-structured interviews with a group of Brazilian senior women who travel solo. The results demonstrate that travellers' motivations and needs have a significant impact on their choice of accommodation and activities. Meanwhile, their choice of destination is influenced by perceived risks, with safety and health being prioritised. Additionally, this demographic is more demanding in terms of services offered and prioritises comfort, amenities, and accessibility. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that female solo travellers of advanced age are more affected by gender-related concerns than by their age during their journeys

**Keywords** Women solo Traveller · Senior Traveller · Motivation · Needs · Risks

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## Introduction

The market for female tourists has been growing in recent years, particularly for those travelling alone or with other women (Cockburn et al., 2006; Henderson, 2000; Smith, 2022). This trend characterises the female solo traveller segment. They currently represent 50% of the travel market, consuming various tourism products such as adventure, educational, backpacking, and eco-tourism trips (Wilson & Harris, 2006; Wilson & Little, 2005; Yang et al., 2017). This growth can be attributed to socio-economic and cultural changes driven by factors related to gender equality (Khan, 2011; Wilson & Little, 2005; World Economic Forum, 2018). Women now have greater access to employment and education, as well as more opportunities for leisure, which has led to an increased sense of empowerment and a desire to explore the world through tourism, whether alone or with companions. Studies on gender and tourism have identified safety and specialized services (Su & Wu, 2020; Wilson & Little, 2008; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000) as critical factors in this market. It is important to identify and characterise the motivations, needs, and perceived risks of women travelling alone. The trends and issues of the female solo traveller segment are also present in the mature female sub-group, which includes middle-aged and senior women. Senior tourism is a growing niche dominated by women (Pettersson & Schmöcker, 2010; Losada et al., 2016). It has been observed that women tend to start travelling later in life, typically after the age of 55, while senior men tend to start travelling after the age of 45 (Sakai et al., 2000).

Several studies have examined the motivations of older women travellers (Chen & Wu, 2009; Fleischer & Pizam, 2002; Nyaupane et al., 2008). The most commonly cited reasons are a desire for a more stable social and economic life, as well as the wish to enjoy moments of leisure and rest at this stage in life. However, the segment of older women travelling alone has not been studied as extensively as that of younger women. Therefore, further research is required to characterise the segment and describe its profile. This could aid in the development of more suitable tourism products and services.

The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the motivations, needs, and perceived risks of older women when travelling alone or with other women. Qualitative research was conducted using semi-structured interviews with Brazilian women who meet this condition. In recent years, Brazilian women have been travelling more frequently and independently due to a combination of social, economic, and cultural factors. These factors include increased personal and economic independence, higher levels of education, changing social norms towards a more open-minded society, increased access to information, and the desire for cultural exchange (Moraes, 2020).

## Theoretical Background

### Gender Equality in Tourism (from the Perspective of the Solo Female Traveller)

Researchers have studied the experiences of women tourists, including the benefits, motivations, and challenges of travelling alone or with companions (Brown & Osman,

2017; Yozukmaz, 2024). Gender is a significant factor that affects women's travel, shaping opportunities and influencing behaviour. Gender equality is a key objective of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The goal is to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls (United Nations, 2022). The tourism industry is a significant contributor to the global economy, with important economic, social, and environmental impacts (Boluk et al., 2019). Promoting gender equality is an essential function of the tourism sector (Cole, 2018; Font et al., 2016).

Wilson and Little (2008) argue that women's fear of travel is influenced by geography, perpetuating the belief that solo travel is unsafe in certain destinations. One of the main concerns for women travelling alone is the risk of exploring an unfamiliar place and feeling insecure. Chang (2009) notes that risk and tourism are inherently linked, as travel involves uncertainty and exploration of unknown places. Gustafson (1998) suggests that there may be differences in risk perception between genders, as some risks that women perceive are imposed by men, such as sexual violence. Women's fear is often based on perception (Brown & Osman, 2017), personal experiences, stories heard, and media reporting of attacks on women (Wilson & Little, 2008). Insecurity related to gender issues is often a decisive factor for women who travel alone, as evidenced by Seow and Brown's research (2018).

When analysing gender issues in tourism, authors often consider how women handle travel expectations and economic concerns, and how these are influenced by their daily lives and those of their families. Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2001) note that women tourists have different expectations and attitudes towards travel. Many women who travel alone seek self-discovery, education, and respite from domestic work (Cockburn-Wooten et al., 2006).

Finally, when discussing gender equality in tourism, the aim is to address more than just equality in the process and course of a trip. Alarcón and Cole (2019) state that gender equality is a crucial component of sustainable tourism. Women seek empowerment, socialisation, the opportunity to discover new places and cultures, and to disconnect from their daily lives. These factors have significant implications for their daily lives.

### **Solo Travelling Women**

Economic progress in both developed and developing countries, coupled with improvements in gender equality, has led to increased opportunities for women. Consequently, more women are embracing autonomy and travelling independently in search of freedom and empowerment (Elliot, 2015; Jordan & Gibson, 2005). Solo travel can be empowering for those who engage in it (Gibson & Jordan, 1998a, b; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Harris, 2006; Myers, 2010). Women who travel alone have distinct motivations, needs, and perceived risks compared to other groups. According to Milyavskaya and Koestner (2011), motivations are the driving forces behind behaviours, which can be influenced by various levels of needs, including individual and group-based needs. These needs are not necessarily hierarchical in their importance for motivation. Tourists are motivated by a desire to escape routine and seek personal fulfilment. According to Gnoth (1997) and Snepenger et al. (2006),

individuals may also have emotional needs, such as achieving personal goals and experiencing social or cultural connections.

Laesser et al. (2009) classify the solo travel market into two groups: the ‘single-solo’ and the ‘single-group’. The former represents individuals who travel and stay alone, whereas the latter is characterized by individuals who travel in a group but are unaccompanied by previously known people. Furthermore, Osman et al. (2019, p. 10) coined the expression ‘solo, but not alone’ to describe this type of traveller.

Gender is a significant focus in studies on solo travellers, particularly in identifying their demographic and social characteristics and classifying them based on family size, motivations, spending patterns, and travel preferences (Laesser et al., 2009). According to a survey conducted by VISA (Dempsey, 2015), solo travel has become a trend, with approximately 20% of respondents choosing it as a leisure travel option, with women comprising the majority of the participants. Based on a 2015 survey by TripAdvisor, solo travel has gained popularity, with 48% of Asian women already opting for this type of travel.

Motivation in tourism refers to the choices made to achieve a goal when travelling to a destination or undertaking leisure activities (Paris & Teye, 2010; Pearce & Lee, 2005; Tangeland et al., 2013). Solo travellers are motivated by various factors when travelling alone, including ease, flexibility, freedom, exploration, spontaneity, and solitude (Mehmetoglu et al., 2001). TripAdvisor conducted research on women’s motivations for travelling alone. The study’s main findings indicate that 60% of women travel alone for the freedom to do what they want, 45% for independence and challenge, and 32% due to a lack of companionship caused by issues related to availability of time or resources (TripAdvisor, 2015). Chiang and Jogaratnam (2006) investigated the motivation of women who travel solo. Their findings revealed that the most common reasons for solo travel among women were experience, escape, relaxation, social factors, and self-esteem. In these studies, women who travel alone are primarily motivated by the challenge, sense of autonomy and self-determination, possibility of meeting new people, and/or escape from their comfort zone (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Chiang and Jogaratnam, 2006; Wilson & Little, 2005, 2008; McNamara & Prideaux, 2010).

Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) state that perceived risk includes various dimensions, such as financial, physical, psychological, social, satisfaction, and time-related risks. Evaluating the risk of a destination is challenging for solo travellers as they can only rely on the available information, and the actual evaluation can only be made after arriving at the destination (Karagöz et al., 2021). Perceived risk is an uncertainty that arises in the face of circumstances (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). Travellers may avoid a particular destination due to safety and security concerns (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998b). Women are more concerned than men about physical safety and security while travelling (Brown & Osman, 2017). This is because of various factors such as food, hygiene, environmental disasters, disease, culture, and language barriers (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2020; Maser & Weiermair, 1998; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Moreover, women encounter several risks while travelling, including unwanted attention, sexual harassment, and social disapproval for travelling alone (Karagöz et al., 2021). Personal safety is a major concern for solo female travellers, encompassing risks such as violence, harassment, and assault (Wilson & Little, 2005, 2008; Jordan

& Aitchison, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a; Khoo-Lattimore & Gibson, 2018). Sexual harassment is the most common risk faced by solo female travellers (Seow & Brown, 2018; Toh et al., 2017; Valaja, 2018; Su & Wu, 2020).

### Senior Solo Travelling Women: Motivation, Needs and Perceived Risks

A survey conducted by Solo Traveler (2022) in the USA revealed how, why, and where solo travellers spend their money. The survey found that individuals over the age of 55 were more likely to travel alone, with a preference for this mode of travel. In other words, middle-aged and senior tourists prefer to travel alone but with a group of like-minded individuals. The market's behaviour has changed over the years, influenced by preferences and increased access to information. Senior citizens are increasingly opting for educational and cultural trips over beach vacations, as noted by Levine (2008). This segment of the market is also benefiting from higher travel frequency and longer stays, as supported by Alén et al. (2014), Littrell et al. (2004), and Oliveira et al. (2018). Lehto et al. (2008) noted that individuals in this age group typically have greater financial resources. For example, travel expenses increase in proportion to generational cohorts, indicating that travel spending grows as the generation ages (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2023).

According to Otoo et al. (2020), understanding the motivations of senior travellers is a significant contribution to the practice and knowledge of the senior tourism market. Senior travellers have a range of motivations, such as culture, nature, experience, adventure, relaxation, well-being, escape, socialisation, and self-esteem enhancement (Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016). This segment discusses the motivations of individuals who have fewer work, family, and other obligations (Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016). Life events such as retirement, divorce, widowhood, health, emotional state, and social relationships can either facilitate or constrain this group (Huber et al., 2018). Women travellers are particularly affected by some of these factors, which ultimately influence their travel decision-making. Motivation in tourism can be analysed through the Pull and Push categories (Carneiro et al., 2013; Patuelli & Nijkamp, 2016). Seniors' decisions are influenced by various internal factors of Pull origin, such as spirituality, health, work, money, and availability of company for travel (Widiyastuti & Ermawati, 2019). Additionally, older tourists are motivated by external factors, including their appreciation for the services and facilities provided by the accommodation. Small (2003) notes a contrast between younger and older tourists. While there have been numerous studies on women in tourism, there remains a significant gap in knowledge regarding older tourists.

Senior tourists may face more challenges than younger ones, including health concerns, financial limitations, family obligations, and safety concerns (McIntosh et al., 1995). However, some obstacles, such as the availability of barrier-free public transportation, accommodation, tourist sites, and services, as well as tourism programs, are not age or gender-specific (Lee, 2016). Hsu, Cai, and Li (2010) argue that constraints influence destination selection. Therefore, the tourism industry must consider the needs of senior tourists to meet their demands (Small, 2003).

It is crucial to address the risks perceived by senior travellers, including challenges faced by women tourists, such as sexual harassment, lack of safety, and judgement

when travelling alone. These constraints are not limited to young women and are faced by any woman at different stages of life (Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a, b). Gender is a central element in the perceived risk for women, but it is not the only determinant of this identity (Kong & Zhu, 2021). Other factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, and age, also shape women's means of local consumption (Gao & Kerstetter, 2016; Yang et al., 2019).

Table 1 presents the correlation between keywords related to the motivations, needs, and perceived risks of women travelling alone and their corresponding bibliographic sources. This forms the basis of the theoretical framework.

## Method

The methodology of this work is divided into two phases. The first phase is exploratory and involves a literature review. Secondary data were obtained from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The reviewed literature resulted in a theoretical framework, which is presented in Table 1. This framework contributed directly to the design of the second phase of the study, which used qualitative methodology and the inductive method for data collection. Specifically, it provided guidelines for the semi-structured interview. The aim of this empirical study was to identify the main motivations, needs, and risks of respondents when travelling solo. To achieve this, three blocks of questions were developed, covering socio-demographic profiles, motivations and needs, and general and perceived risks. A total of twenty-one questions were included.

The interviews were conducted with the target audience described by Manzini (1990/1991, p. 154): Respondents were selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling, indicating that the sample was not chosen randomly. Brazilian women over the age of fifty who had previously travelled alone or with other women. The participants in the study were selected based on specific criteria. The 'snowball' sampling method was used to select a portion of the sample, whereby potential participants were identified and suggested by members of the target audience themselves. According to Berg (2006), snowball sampling can be used by researchers when they lack access to a population of potential subjects. This technique involves asking one study subject to find and potentially recruit more subjects. The researcher identified the sample's target audience from former clients of their travel agency and referrals from other women. All communication with the interviewees, including the interview itself, was conducted remotely through digital channels. WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger were used for organization, and Zoom Meetings were used for the video call interview.

Thirteen Brazilian women aged between 52 and 78 participated in this study. The sample size was reduced due to the challenge of finding respondents who met the selection criteria, and the interviews were conducted remotely between April and May 2022. The interviews lasted an average of 30 min, with the longest interview taking 35 min and the shortest lasting only 11 min. After conducting the interviews, we transcribed and analysed the audio recordings using content analysis techniques to create codes.

**Table 1** Motivations, needs and perceived risks of senior women traveling alone

Motivations/ Needs	Sources
Experience, escape, relaxation, social factors, and self-esteem	Chiang and Jogaratnam (2006)
Ease, flexibility, freedom, exploration, no traveling companion, spontaneity, and solitude	Mehmetogluet al. (2001)
Transformation, independent self-construction, new relationships	Alonso-Vazquez et al. (2023)
Challenge, find a sense of autonomy and self-determination, meet new people and/or extend yourself outside your comfort zone	Jordan and Gibson (2005); Chiang & Jongaratnam (2006); Wilson and Little (2005, 2008); McNamara and Prideaux (2010)
Search for freedom and empowerment	Elliot (2015); Jordan and Gibson (2005)
“Alone, but not alone”	Osman, Brown e Phung (2019, pg. 10)
Culture, nature, experience, adventure, relaxation, well-being, escape, socialization, self-esteem, and ego enhancement	Patuelli and Nijkamp (2016)
Pull and push travel motivations	Carneiro et al. (2013); Patuelli and Nijkamp (2016)
Spiritual, health, work, money, availability of company	Widiyastuti & Ermawati (2019)
Good services and facilities	Small (2003)
Barrier-free public transportation, accommodation, tourist sites and services, and tourist programs	Lee (2016)
<b>Perceived Risks</b>	<b>Sources</b>
Financial, physical, psychological, social, satisfaction and time related	Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992)
Personal safety, violence, harassment, and assault	Wilson & Little, 20052008; Jordan and Aitchison, (2008); Yang et al. (2018ab <sup>a</sup> ); Khoo-Lattimore and Gibson (2018)
Sexual Harassment	Seow and Brown (2018); Toh et al. (2017); Valaja (2018); Su and Wu (2020)
Unwanted attention, sexual harassment, and social disapproval	Karagöz et al. (2021)
Physical security	Brown and Osman (2017)
Food safety, hygiene, environmental disasters, diseases, culture, and language barriers	Rasoolimanesh et al. (2020); Maser and Weiermair (1998); Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992)
Gender, sociopsychological and destination-specific risks	Karagöz et al. (2021)
Restrictions, costs, family limitations, health, worries, and lack of security	McIntosh, Goeldner e Ritchie (1995)
Sexual harassment, unwanted glances, lack of safety, and judgments for traveling alone	Wilson and Little (2008); Yang et al. (2018a, b)

Source: prepared by the authors

As Coutinho (2011) notes, qualitative data production is often extensive and requires organization and reduction (data reduction) to facilitate interpretation of the studied phenomenon. Therefore, coding is necessary for the emergence of categories from the data (Wiersma, 1995). Following these guidelines, we conducted a thorough analysis of the interviews. We systematically and objectively examined and categorized each question to identify important messages for the research. This enabled us to determine the frequency with which each code was mentioned by the respondents.

## Characterization of the Interviewees

This study examines middle-aged and senior Brazilian women who travel or have travelled alone, residing in major Brazilian cities and appearing to travel more frequently than the average person. These findings confirm those of Czepkiewicz et al. (2018), who argue that residents of large cities, particularly those from centrally located and densely built areas, tend to travel more, especially internationally. Solo travel for women in Brazil is becoming increasingly popular, as evidenced by the emergence of specialized service agencies and platforms. However, Brazilian destinations may not be adequately equipped to accommodate women travelling alone, and high rates of violence against women and public insecurity can influence their decision to travel alone within the country (Mario et al., 2021).

Table 2 presents the sociodemographic data of the interviewed women. The research focuses on middle-aged and senior Brazilian women. Of the interviewees, 15% were living outside of Brazil at the time of the interview. Of the interviewees, 15% were living outside of Brazil at the time of the interview. Marital status was varied, with 31% single, 31% widowed, 23% divorced, 7.5% separated (after a non-

**Table 2** Sociodemographic data of the interviewees

Age	Civil Status	Children	Country and state of residence	Academic Qualifications	Profession
52	Divorced	2	Portugal, Aveiro	Master	Teacher
57	Single	1	Portugal, Aveiro	Master	Marketing Area Division Chief
52	Single	0	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Bachelor and residency	Doctor
78	Widow	3	Brazil, Paraná	Graduate	Teacher (retired)
76	Separated	4	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Graduate	Teacher (retired)
63	Divorced	1	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Graduate	Retired
57	Single	0	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Post-graduation	Lawyer
67	Married	1	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Post-graduation	Nurse
59	Widow	1	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Graduate	Lawyer
58	Single	1	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Graduate	Physician and retiree
57	Divorced	2	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Graduate	Commercial food area
64	Widow	0	Brazil, Paraná	Post-graduation	Retired
58	Widow	2	Brazil, Rio de Janeiro	Graduate	Retired



official marriage), and 7.5% married. In the study, it was found that 23% of the interviewees did not have any children, 39% had one child, 23% had two children, 7.5% had three children, and 7.5% had four children. All interviewees had higher education, with five of them holding a graduate degree. In terms of their professional life, 54% still work in different fields, 38% are retired, and 8% are retired but still work in medicine. Finally, all participants confirmed having a monthly income exceeding one thousand dollars at the time of the interview.

The collected sociodemographic data confirms the theories referenced by Meiners and Seeberger (2010) and Lehto et al. (2008) regarding the greater financial disposition of the interviewees. The authors Boksberger and Laesser (2009), Karani and Fraccastoro (2010), Patterson and Pegg (2009), Ritchie et al. (2003), and Wong (2007) refer to the higher level of education of this generation, which is also evidenced by our data.

## Results and Discussion

### Motivations for Traveling

Figure 1 shows a word cloud of the motivations for senior women traveling alone, as mentioned by the interviewees.

It is clear that most interviewees chose to travel alone because they lacked company. Out of the 13 interviewees, 8 stated this as their main motivation, which is in line with the findings of Mehmetoglu et al. (2001), who identified the absence of company, loneliness, and freedom as the primary motivational factors for solo travelers. The next most commonly cited motivations were a love for travel (4) and a sense of independence (3).

Figure 2 shows a second word cloud generated from a question about reasons for travelling with other women in the context of senior solo travel.

Out of the 13 women interviewed, 7 stated that their main motivation for travelling with companions was to share the experience. The second most frequently mentioned

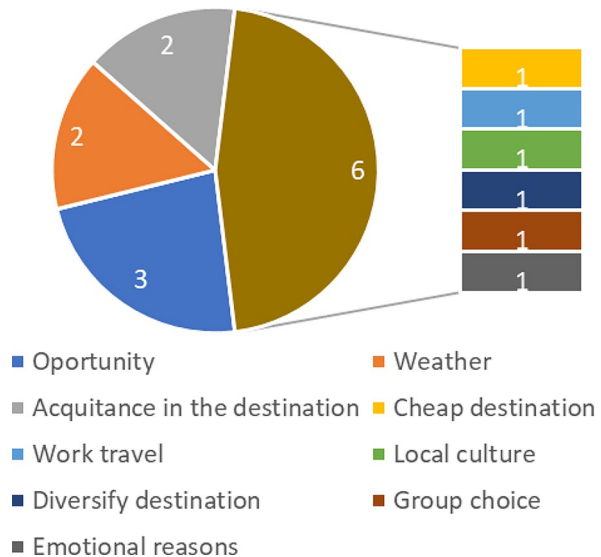


Fig. 1 Word cloud of motivations declared by the interviewees to travel alone



**Fig. 2** Word cloud of motivations declared by the interviewees to travel accompanied by other women

**Fig. 3** Reasons for the interviewees to choose their last travel destinations



motivation was related to health concerns, as some expressed fear of falling ill during their trips, which is a common concern among older people. The least frequently mentioned motivations were related to the cost of the trip and the language barrier. These findings are in line with the literature, as they correspond with the results of McIntosh et al. (1995), who discussed the factors that can act as barriers for senior tourists, particularly women travellers.

When participants were asked about the reasons for choosing their last destination, the results were categorized and presented in Fig. 3.

The primary motivation for travel and destination selection is often opportunity. Respondents frequently choose a destination spontaneously, without prior planning. As Interviewee 1 stated, ‘my travel choices and destinations are not motivated by a

pre-established objective.’ In terms of tourism, my approach is opportunistic. This sentiment was echoed by Interviewee 12 who stated, ‘If there’s an opportunity to go to a certain place, let’s take it. I go where opportunities arise, whether it’s here or there’. This sentiment was echoed by Interviewee 12 who stated, ‘If there’s an opportunity to go to a certain place, let’s take it.’ This supports the findings of Hung and Petrick (2012), indicating that travel intentions are greatly influenced by motivation, opportunity, and ability. In addition to opportunity, Interviewee 6 mentions the personal interests of the travel group. ‘I am part of some travel groups for people who enjoy travelling by ship, so we always research trips that interest us and then plan accordingly. There is no set plan. We look at the opportunities, prices, what is good, and then book it.’ (Int6).

Although safety is sometimes cited as a reason for travelling with a company, only one woman mentioned it as her main motivator for choosing a destination. She stated, ‘I really like Spain due to its proximity to Portugal. At this moment, it makes me feel safer because we are neighbours of a war, a relative neighbour. I was even interested in travelling to more distant places, like Amsterdam, for example.’ Int2 stated that they avoided taking a plane to areas affected by war or targeted by attacks, preferring to stay closer. According to Karagöz et al. (2021), solo travellers perceive the greatest risks associated with their destination.

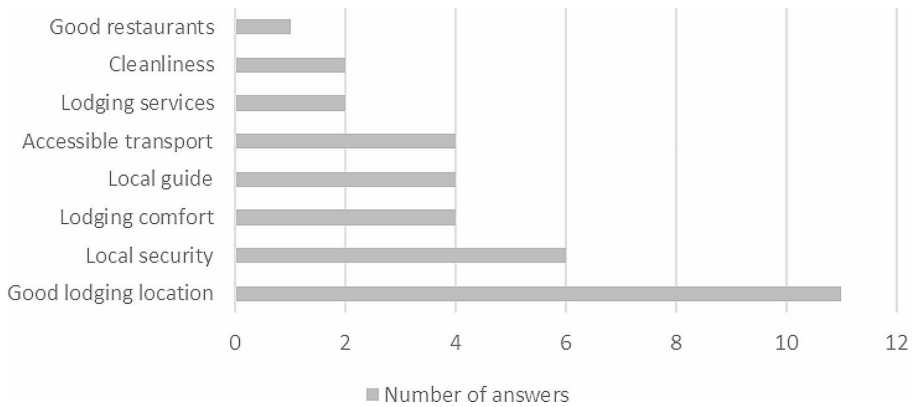
It can be concluded that the primary motivation for women to travel alone is the absence of company. The main reason for travelling with other women is the opportunity to share experiences with someone who has similar preferences and needs, followed by sharing the travel costs. Finally, the motivation for choosing a particular destination is highly related to the opportunities that arise at the moment. This highlights the importance of spontaneity demonstrated by this group when organizing their vacations, often with little planning in advance.

### Identified Needs while Travelling

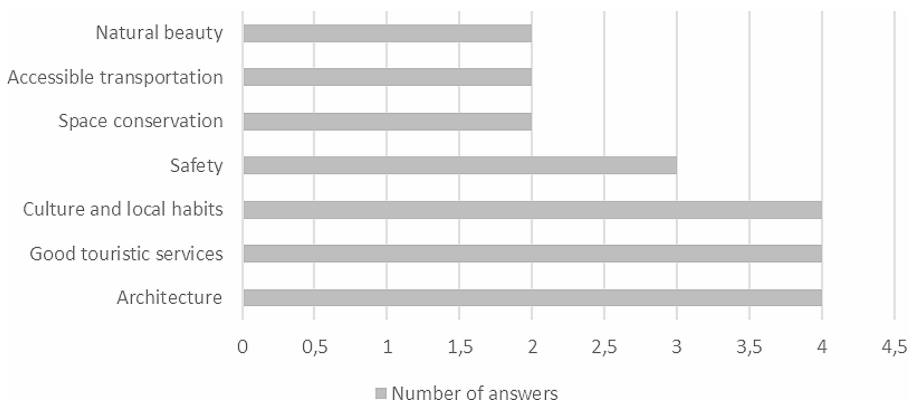
A second dimension of analysis concerns the main needs of older women when travelling alone or with other women. Most respondents gave more than one answer. These were grouped into the dimensions shown in Fig. 4.

Of the thirteen respondents, 11 said that a good location of the accommodation was a primary need, while safety was the second most important need (6 answers). It is also possible to link these two needs, since the choice of location is determined by the security it offers. Respondent 2 states that her main need is related to security: “First, to be accommodated in a very reliable place. So I invest in better places, private rooms. I go to hotels rather than hostels because I am alone. So the location is important, not in places where there might be some risk”. This is confirmed by respondents 6 and 7: “I always look for location and safety”, “I really research the best location, not only the mobility issue, but also the safety issue. I always think of an area that is safer, better known”. This was previously confirmed by Wilson & Little, (2005), (2008); Jordan and Aitchison (2008); Yang et al. (2018a); Khoo-Lattimore and Gibson (2018).

The type and location of accommodation are crucial factors for women when travelling, as they prioritize safety and accessibility to central places. It is the most



**Fig. 4** Main needs declared by the interviewees in the context of women solo travel



**Fig. 5** Most valued destination aspects declared by the interviewees

important thing they consider when planning their trip. Interviewees 3, 4 and 5 stated: “It’s good to be close to everything, to be able to do things, to get to know everything without needing a car. A good location with means of transport, either bus or train, I think that is important”; “I always think about the best location, underground, train, everything that helps me to escape when I need to”.

They also reported additional needs such as comfort (4 responses), hiring a local guide to accompany them in activities during the trip (4), accessibility of public transport (4), hotel services and facilities (2), cleanliness of accommodation (2) and good restaurants (1). Small (2003) suggests that mature women require and appreciate higher quality services, cleanliness, comfort and facilities compared to younger women, which is also supported by our results.

Respondents were also asked what they value most in destinations (Fig. 5). Again, they value good and high-quality services and mention the issue of safety. Indeed, safety is a recurring concern for older women, as it is something that affects their travel behaviour as a result of their needs. Also relevant, but to a lesser extent, respon-

dents value local architecture, culture and customs, conservation of space, natural beauty and, once again, accessible transport as assets of a tourist destination.

Lee (2016) suggests that there are gender-independent barriers to travel, and that the perception of limitations can play a significant role in destination choice (Hsu, Cai & Li, 2010). The interviewees were asked if they had any special needs due to their age when travelling alone. Nine out of thirteen respondents denied having any special needs, while four mentioned mobility as an issue. The latter said that they had problems carrying their luggage alone, whether on trains, stairs or elsewhere: “We took some stations where there was no lift, so we had to carry our suitcase up the stairs, it’s a bit complicated with age”. (Int6), “For example: me with my suitcases to get on the train is a mess. Because my suitcases are very heavy. (Int7), “There was a hotel that my daughter booked for me and they put me on the third floor and there was no lift. It was a staircase; she didn’t think of that when she made the reservation. I can climb stairs easily, but can you imagine a lady like me on the third floor with a suitcase, work material and three steps? (Int11). In addition, one woman reported difficulties in walking on paths because “there was no infrastructure, we went down to the lake without any protection, no handrails, no ladders, nothing”. (Int9). Overall, an important conclusion that can be drawn is that the age-related needs of these women are very much linked to the infrastructure of the destinations and the existing tourism services.

### General and Perceived Risks during Trips

The final category analysed concerned the general and specific risks perceived by the women interviewed on their most recent trips. The results are shown in the word cloud in Fig. 6 and, not surprisingly, can be related to their needs to some extent.

The analysis shows that safety is the most frequently mentioned concern, followed by related issues such as violence, harassment, sexism, and gender. Other risk factors, including health, loneliness, embarrassment, and worry, were also identified. These findings are consistent with those of McIntosh et al. (1995), who identified health and lack of security as the primary risks for older travellers. Sönmez and Graefe’s (1998b) study emphasizes safety and security as factors that affect the selection of a destination by senior travellers.

**Fig. 6** Word cloud of perceived risks during a trip declared by the interviewees



Furthermore, all female interviewees expressed feeling unsafe when travelling alone in Brazil. Although some still do so, they report feeling insecure throughout their trip. As a result, the majority of respondents stated that their most recent travels were to Europe. Some even admitted to avoiding travel to certain countries due to fear. For instance, Interviewee 10 disclosed that she would not travel alone to Turkey due to concerns over the treatment of women in Asian and Muslim countries. However, Interviewee 1 stated that she would like to travel to Morocco but is deterred by concerns over safety and sexism.

When comparing our findings to the research conducted by Huber et al. (2018), it becomes apparent that health is a limiting factor. Specifically, the stress caused by the lack of physical capacity to travel alone is a concern. This issue was highlighted by several of the women interviewed, who, in addition to health issues, also mentioned age and the fact that they were travelling alone. For example, interviewee 4 is “afraid of travelling alone, it worries me because of my age. We already have some health problems, like high blood pressure, this kind of syndromes... I am afraid to travel alone with a heart problem, high blood pressure, these are emergency problems. Several respondents highlight the fear of falling ill or having an accident as the main perceived risks: “The biggest risk is getting sick.” (Int5); “The biggest risk is that something might happen, an accident, you might get sick. Getting sick in a foreign country. Even though I have health insurance, I think it is very complicated, the worst thing would be that”. (Int8); “I fell myself when I was walking on the grass, I stumbled, I fell and it was in a place that I cannot say was safe. I fell and tripped myself. It is a question of balance, which I do not do so well because of my age. (Int9).

With this in mind, one of the interviewees gave important tips for women travelling alone: “Share your location with family or friends; always have a spare battery for your mobile phone; get checked before travelling to avoid unforeseen health problems; have a good internet data plan; always inform your family about any change of plans during the trip”. (Int13).

These quotes demonstrate that interviewees consider previous travel experiences as a factor in their decision-making process for future trips. They also note that experiencing a destination firsthand allows them to compare reality with their subjective perceptions.

In addition, the female participants were asked about any specific risks they perceived during their last trip. Out of the thirteen interviewees, six reported no perceived risks, while one mentioned a friend experiencing a serious health problem during their trip. The remaining interviewees reported various risks they had felt or experienced. The participants reported various concerns related to their travel experiences. These included the insecurity of travelling with their own car, which had broken down on the road (Int1); robberies in Paris (Int5); harassment inside a store in Italy (Int7); insecurity in hiring a boat trip and being at the mercy of the contractor (Int10); insecurity in renting a car when travelling alone at night and the possibility of encountering mechanical problems (Int11); and a general sense of insecurity during a trip to Russia (Int12). The perceived risks of senior women are closely linked to their safety needs, which influence their choice of destination, accommodation location, and type. Health concerns while travelling are also a priority, leading them to travel with companions, particularly women. Constraints in solo travel are more related to

gender than age. Finally, individuals may choose to avoid travelling to certain destinations for various reasons, some of which may be related to gender. Wilson & Little, (2005), (2008); Jordan and Aitchison (2008); Yang et al. (2018a); Khoo-Lattimore and Gibson (2018) have previously confirmed this.

## Conclusion

### Main Results and Contributions

This work presents the results of a qualitative investigation into the behaviour of middle-aged and senior women who travel alone or in a group of women, known as senior women solo travel. The investigation focuses on specific aspects associated with these trips, such as motivation, needs, and risks.

It should be noted that senior women who travel alone may not actually be travelling alone, despite the name. Our interviewees found the company of other women who share their interest in leisure activities to be particularly important during their travels. These travel companions are sought after when their family or regular friends are unavailable or unwilling to join them. The motivation behind these trips is often the pleasure of travelling and a desire for independence, which may be facilitated by a more favourable financial situation in this stage of life. Group travel can provide benefits such as shared experiences, cost-sharing, and assistance with language barriers and health concerns. Rawlins (2012) highlights that unfamiliarity with local culture and language can exacerbate challenges for some tourists. The selection of a destination was primarily motivated by opportunity rather than a deliberate decision based on prior planning. Therefore, it can be concluded that senior female tourists continue to travel in groups even under adverse conditions, even if accompanied by strangers.

During our interviews, senior women who travel alone identified safety as their primary concern. Safety was the most frequently mentioned aspect when discussing their needs and perceived risks during a trip. The choice of accommodation location is influenced by both the proximity to destination attractions and the safety of the region. In addition, it is crucial to consider accessibility, which encompasses both the infrastructure of the destination, such as pedestrian walkways and public transportation, and the facilities and services of the accommodation, including room accessibility and availability of amenities.

According to our interviewees, senior travellers face health limitations due to age-related physical restrictions and pre-existing medical conditions. Additionally, when travelling alone, safety is a primary concern due to issues such as violence, sexism, harassment, and assault, as reported by the interviewees. The data indicates that insecurity is perceived differently in various destinations, which is consistent with previous studies (Wilson & Little, 2005, 2008; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Yang et al., 2018a; Khoo-Lattimore & Gibson, 2018). This study's primary discovery is that senior women who travel alone perceive risks that are more closely linked to their gender than their age. This affects their choice of travel destinations, limiting their options and ability to participate in cultural and leisure activities.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

During the initial exploratory phase, we faced challenges in finding bibliographic material and specific policies that cater to the senior tourism sector. Small (2003) notes in his article that there is a gap in the gender literature for this age group.

As the number of senior women travelling alone increases and women become more empowered, it is crucial to conduct further studies to understand and meet their expectations. Limited research has been conducted in this area for this demographic. Therefore, it is important to amplify their voices and address their needs. Although this work contributes to the task, additional studies are necessary to bridge the gap between sample statistics and representativeness. The sample size was limited in this work due to specific requirements for participation, such as age, nationality, and solo travel experience. Although this research provides valuable insights, it cannot be generalised. However, it can serve as a starting point for future studies on the topic.

A limitation of the study was that some women were unable to participate due to a lack of proficiency in using the Zoom meeting tool, as the interviews were conducted online. To address this limitation in future research, new studies can be designed to analyse this population and achieve additional objectives to further consolidate the results. In this context, future studies could broaden data collection to include women of other nationalities to determine if they share similar needs, motivations, and perceived risks as the Brazilian women studied in this research. To gain a better understanding of the strategies and measures being implemented to cater to this audience, it may be worthwhile to seek more in-depth information directly from tourism stakeholders, specifically those on the supply/destination side. However, the interview should be limited to its original scope and not expanded to draw further conclusions. The impact of solo travel on the cultural, social, and professional development and achievements of older and middle-aged women is beyond the scope of this study. The interviewees' experiences were mainly reported before the Covid-19 pandemic. Conducting a longitudinal study to understand the impact of the pandemic on the motivations, needs and risks of older women traveling solo would be an interesting avenue for future research. Finally, a quantitative study based on a questionnaire survey of a large sample of middle-aged and elderly women who travel alone may provide more consolidated and generalizable results.

This paper addresses a gap in the literature by providing insights into the motivations, needs, and risks experienced by senior women who travel alone or with other women. The enhancement of the health and economic conditions of this demographic warrants further investigation by academics to expand related knowledge. This can inform tourism practitioners by providing strategic and political guidelines. Although exploratory, this study represents a first step in this field.

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## Declarations

**Informed Consent** Informed Consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.



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