

Solo, But Not Alone
Rethinking Autonomy and Connection in Memorable Solo Travel
Experiences of Gen Z Women

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"J'accepte la grande aventure d'être moi."
"I accept the great adventure of being me."

- Simone de Beauvoir, *Cahiers de jeunesse*, 2008

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the impact of social interactions on memorable solo travel experiences for female Gen Z members. It focuses on Gen Z as an emergent market segment and investigates how technology enables and mediates connections. While typically framed as a solitary endeavor, this research questions how solo travel is inherently shaped by social dynamics. The main research question examines how social interactions shape the memorability of solo travel experiences for female Gen Z travelers. Therefore, the objective is to investigate how interpersonal encounters and digital tools shape not only the travel experience but also the memory attributed to it.

The research employed a qualitative analysis of thirteen semi-structured interviews with female Gen Z member who are currently living in Europe. Thematic analysis revealed that Gen Z women navigate a space between independence and connection. While all participants were seeking autonomy and independence, there was an evident social significance with other travelers. While the depth of these interactions varied from fleeting to long-term friendships, all enhanced emotional engagement and memory-making. With the help of digital tools participants stayed connected even after traveling, but more importantly, also connect with family and friends from home during the traveling. Digital tools not only served as guidance and reassurance for female travelers, but created safety nets over distances without which participants would not travel solo. Sharing memorable moments was another integral part of the experiences, as it enhanced meaning-making and reflection processes. Overall, three typologies emerged from the findings: The Social Solo Traveler, the Semi-Social Traveler, the Life Crisis Traveler, as well as a conceptual framework for Memorable Solo Travel Experiences (MSTE).

This thesis contributes to the literature on Gen Z solo travel by reframing solo travel as an inherently social and digitally mediated experience. Implications include the need for tourism providers to design products that support emotional safety and community-building for solo travelers. Additionally, this thesis questions whether pre-conceived understandings of “authentic” solo travel impose exclusionary ideals, particularly for women, by undervaluing the collective dimensions that often define these experiences.

KEYWORDS: Solo Travel, Female, Social Interactions, Memorability, Technology

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Abbreviations

MTE	Memorable tourism experiences
MSTE	Memorable solo travel experiences

1 Introduction

Solo travel, once considered a trip for solitude and introspection, is undergoing a cultural transformation. Due to shifting societal norms, including the rise of single-person households, increasing individualism, and a growing emphasis on personal development, this form of travel is gaining popularity (Yang, 2021, p. 2469). The rise in interest, especially around female solo travel, following the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects broader shifts in how autonomy and self-exploration are perceived today. As Generation Z becomes of age and increases its independence, it is increasingly acknowledged as an emerging and influential market segment within the tourism industry (*The European Market Potential for Gen Z Tourism / CBI*, 2024). Among female Generation Z members, solo travel is not simply a logistical decision but a reflection of freedom, personal growth, and immersive cultural engagement (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019, p. 134).

Various researchers have suggested that solo travel is not a purely solitary act (Murphy, 2001; Reichenberger, 2016; Zhang et al., 2024). It is deeply intertwined with social experiences. While travelers might set out alone, their journeys often involve rich, emotional interactions with locals, fellow travelers, as well as digital communities. These interactions are able to offer safety and connection, as well as shape how experiences are remembered and given meaning (Vada et al., 2022, p. 719). Oftentimes, individuals associate connections with others as part of the traveling process as they search for immersive and meaningful experiences (Campos et al., 2016, p. 1328; Torres, 2016, p. 2146).

This thesis explores this dynamic between independence and connection in the solo travel experiences of female Gen Z travelers. Specifically, it investigates how social interactions contribute to the creation of memorable tourism experiences. While existing literature has explored the motivations, typologies, and emotional dimensions of solo travel, it has not yet thoroughly examined the relational and social mechanisms through which solo experiences become memorable. In the context of female solo travelers, who also have to navigate gender-specific challenges, it is underexplored to what extent emotional connections can influence the memorability and meaning of their journeys. This gap is filled by integrating theories of the experience economy, forms of social interaction, and digital mediation to demonstrate that solo travel is not only about personal autonomy but also about connection.

Therefore, it asks the following research question: “How do social interactions shape the memorability of solo travel experiences for female Gen Z travelers?” To address this question, the following sub-questions are posed: What forms of social interactions do female

Gen Z solo travelers encounter during their journey? How do these interactions contribute to the memorability of solo travel experiences? What role do digital tools play in supporting or shaping these interactions? How do female Gen Z solo travelers reflect on social connections after their trips?

This thesis focuses on female solo travelers born between 1997 – 2006, representing the digitally native Generation Z. It examines travelers who identify as either “single-solo” or “collective-solo”, therefore those who set out without companions even if they are living in a multi-person household. The study is geographically scoped to those currently living within Europe, where participants share relatively comparable digital access and sociocultural backgrounds.

Key concepts include solo travel, defined as traveling alone without known companions; memorable tourism experiences, understood as emotionally impactful events marked by meaning; social interactions, including both in-person and online encounters; and digital tools used throughout the travel journey. These tools support everything from itinerary planning to emotional support, influencing how travelers connect with others and reflect on their experiences.

Understanding how solo travelers create meaning through social connections is gaining growing relevance for the tourism industry. This research offers insights into how Gen Z solo travelers interact with others, emotionally process their experiences, and navigate autonomy in a connected world. Its findings can help tourism providers design flexible, emotionally safe, and socially connective products and services. Ultimately, this research contributes to tourism studies by exploring how in-the-moment and post-travel social connections influence what becomes memorable in travel for female Gen Z. Through this, it reconceptualizes solo travel not as isolated experiences but as an interplay of independence and belonging.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Touristic Experiences

Post-modern tourists seek richer, more immersive cultural experiences (Rihova, 2015, p. 357). These tourists are seen as a contrast to traditional tourists who are interested in visiting famous sights. Instead, they are no longer satisfied with passive sightseeing as they seek meaningful engagements that align with their quest for real experiences (Campos et al., 2016, p. 1310). Therefore, post-modern tourists value experiences over material goods. Touristic experiences are known to engage tourists with high levels of positive emotions and serve as a contrast to their everyday lives (de Geus et al., 2015, p. 275). They are understood as “the subjective mental state felt by participants during a service encounter” (Kim et al., 2010, p. 13) and have become relevant ever since it was understood that consumers value experiences over products. An experience can be understood as gained knowledge or lived experiences (Cutler & Carmicheal, 2010, p. 3). In this thesis, lived experiences are regarded because they provide insights into how individuals navigate new environments alone.

The experience economy has emerged as one of the main theories of the creation and consumption of experiences (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013, p. 1). It sees the experience as a new economic value that aims to engage the visitor in every aspect of the activity (Pine & Gilmore, 2019, p. 3). The goal is to make the consumed product as personal and individual as possible. The concept has gained attention over the last few years and can be seen both as a new business model and a scientific paradigm. Nowadays, the experience economy has moved towards more emotional aspects of consumption (Rihova, 2015, p. 357). In this context, experiences are regarded as mental phenomena that are influenced by external stimuli and are then perceived by the individual (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013, p. 2). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that they are always processed on an individual basis (Cutler & Carmicheal, 2010, p. 4). These experiences should be something extraordinary that goes beyond daily life and breaks out of daily routines (Cohen, 1979, p. 182). Andersson (2007, p. 57) puts the consumer in an active role in the middle of the experience. Consumers should not be seen as passive recipients but as active co-creators. They actively choose which experiences they want to participate in and how much they want to get involved. Cohen (1979, p. 4) discusses how it is also vital to understand that different individuals require different experiences. Therefore, different tourists are not able to have the exact same experience (Pine & Gilmore, 2019, p. 17).

Still, experiences can reach consumers better than materialistic products, as they often come with the attached value of being memorable (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009, p. 2). Additionally, the value of the experience lies in the individual's memory instead of in the experience itself (Pine & Gilmore, 2019, p. 18). In tourism, experiences have the potential to evoke emotional responses that remain in a person's memory, sometimes for a lifetime (Cutler & Carmicheal, 2010, p. 9). Since experiences are always evaluated subjectively, not all experiences are necessarily memorable (Kim et al., 2010, p. 13; Seyfi et al., 2020, p. 341). The challenge for tourism providers is thus to curate experiences that are unique and have the potential to be transformative, engaging tourists in ways that align with their values and interests (de Geus et al., 2015, p. 275). While transformative experiences are often understood as resulting in personal growth or emotional impact (Yang, 2021, p. 2460), not all tourists necessarily desire such changes.

For post-modern tourists, it is important to recognize each tourist's agency. This agency relates to the shift from a top-down approach to a more participatory model which gives more power to all agents within the tourism process (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009, p. 4; Prebensen & Vittersø, 2013, p. 241). Therefore, tourists are looking for active participation that allows them to be fully engaged and immersed in the experience. Traditionally, firms used to sell products to consumers with little to no interactions giving them essentially no agency in the value creation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 6). Individuals had little control over the product or service beyond the purchase decision. Nowadays, however, consumers are involved in a joint creation in order to allow them to create personal experiences. This way, individuals can live through individual experiences, even though they result from the same origin (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 8). These immersive experiences engage visitors in a way so that they bring meaning to an individual's life and turn the experience into a memorable tourism experience (MTE) (Campos et al., 2016, p. 1310). The influencing factor in the creation of memorable experiences is the power of memory as experiences are tied to the recollection and emotional processes in the mind (Seyfi et al., 2020, p. 344). Looking back on their travels, tourists tend to remember extraordinary or unusual events more than mundane ones. As tourists are on a constant quest for novelty, experiences need to be different and stand out (Rihova, 2015, p. 357). When something is novel, it demands more attention and is likely to create lasting impressions. Therefore, the power of memory influences what tourists remember and how they perceive an experience.

2.2 Memorable Experiences

There are various dimensions and values that influence tourists' perceptions of experiences and turn them into individual processes. Brochado et al. (2021, p. 1481) identify emotional values as elements that have the strongest impact on the memorability of travel experiences, while social and psychological values also play significant roles. Zatori and Beardsley (2017, p. 33ff.) further argue that travel experiences often involve a combination of intellectual, emotional, and social enrichment, which contributes to hedonic happiness and subjective well-being. The concept of “flow” (Zatori & Beardsley, 2017, p. 35) highlights how the value of the experience lies in the lived process of engaging with new environments and individuals. Therefore, fully engaged consumers focus not only on the experience itself, but its surroundings and everything that comes with it.

Kim et al (2010, p. 19) have developed seven factors that influence the memorability of tourism experiences: Hedonism, refreshments, local culture, meaningful, knowledge, and novelty.

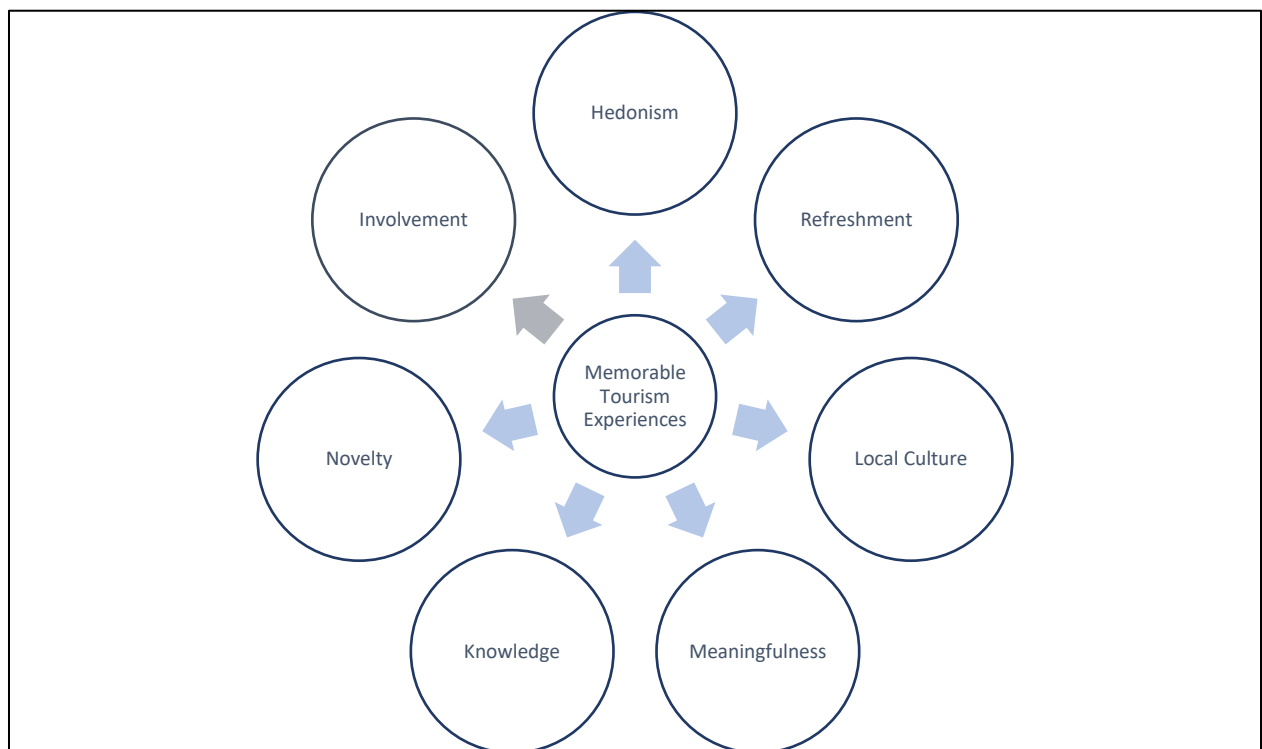


Figure 1 Memorable Tourism Experiences (Kim et al., 2010)

Hedonism refers to the enjoyment derived from experiences, highlighting the need for positive emotions. Refreshment includes the relaxing qualities needed to escape from daily routines and stressful environments. Local culture involves immersion in the cultural characteristics of the destinations, such as interactions with locals, traditional practices, and learning about heritage. The attribute of meaningfulness reflects the personal significance of

the experience that can create lasting personal impacts. Knowledge refers to learning new information or skills, while involvement refers to the active participation of tourists in the experience. This can lead to a higher sense of belonging. Lastly, novelty captures the search for uniqueness and something new. It relates to the need to be exposed to familiarity that deviates from routine life and sparks excitement. Castellani et al. (2020) acknowledge these factors and add the concepts of surprise, servicescape, value proposition, value constellation, and social and economic profit equation (p. 1127f.). These concepts relate to physical attributions of the destination such as the design, but also to the importance of activities that the tourist might not have expected before diving into the experience.

2.3 Solo Travel as Memorable Experience

As previously highlighted, memorable experiences are characterized by factors such as novelty and immersion into local culture. Solo travel is a travel form that incorporates these factors as well. Therefore, it might turn into a memorable travel experience for individuals. Solo travel is shaped by distinct motivations, experiences, and challenges (Manthiou et al., 2023; Yang, 2021). It is an expanding tourism segment that has seen significant growth over the last few years (Manthiou et al., 2023, p. 454). The concept of solo travel has evolved significantly over time, influenced by societal changes, individual motivations, and external factors. The origins of solo travel can be traced back to various contexts, where individuals left on their own for exploration, pilgrimage, or trade purposes (Sharpley, 2018, p. 35). In ancient times, travelers often embarked on solitary journeys for spiritual reasons, such as seeking enlightenment. Later, explorers set out to discover new lands, driven by curiosity and seeking knowledge (Sharpley, 2018, p. 35). Nowadays, travel has become more accessible and affordable, and solo travel has evolved into a choice for broader audiences. While people have long traveled alone for purposes such as exploration, work or pilgrimage, solo travel is nowadays increasingly associated with autonomy, self-discovery, and transformative experiences (Yang, 2021, p. 2460; Zhang et al., 2024, p. 1). This shift can be attributed to broader societal changes such as evolving family structures, increasing single populations, and a growing emphasis on individualism (Yang, 2021, p. 2459). Rather than being a necessity or circumstantial decision, traveling alone is now often a deliberate lifestyle choice for many.

2.3.1 Motivations and Challenges

There are multifaceted motivations for engaging in solo traveling. Common drivers include freedom and flexibility through the ability to design itineraries without compromise,

identity, self-discovery through self-actualization and empowerment, adventure and novelty through exploring new cultures, unique experiences, and stepping out of comfort zones (Murphy, 2001, p. 60; Yang, 2021, p. 2460; Zhang et al., 2024, p. 1). Manthiou et al. (2023, p. 464) attribute different dimensions to solo traveling, such as escapism, self-discovery, hedonism, social interaction, freedom, learning, self-expression, and monetary parameters. Additionally, solo travelers seek a break from daily routines and seek to indulge in social interactions with both locals and other tourists alike. That is why they often travel to destinations that were previously unknown to them in order to explore new cultures and customs (Laesser et al., 2009, p. 226).

Despite its allure, solo travel can come with challenges. Conventional tourism spaces are often designed for families or couples, leading to logistical and social constraints as providers often target group travelers instead of solitary travelers (Manthiou et al., 2023, p. 453). Safety concerns, loneliness, and lack of companionship can further deter travelers from traveling alone (Yang, 2021, p. 2461). However, seasoned travelers report that fellow solo tourists frequently form spontaneous travel groups, trying to overcome these concerns.

2.3.2 Typologies of Solo Travelers

Previous literature provides different typologies for solo travelers. Manthiou et al. (2023, p. 454) distinguish solo travelers by their departure status. They highlight how solo travelers either travel solo by default or by choice, adapting Laesser et al. (2009, p. 219) who distinguish between different types of solo travelers. Firstly, single-solo are those people who live alone and also travel alone. Secondly, single-group travelers are those who live in single households but travel with a group of others. Additionally, collective-solo are those who travel alone even though they do not live by themselves. Lastly, collective-group are those who live with others, but travel without those to travel as a part of a group. When talking about solo travelers, this thesis will regard single-solo and collective-solo travelers, as the focus lies on the process of traveling alone.

Zhang et al. (2024, p. 5ff) distinguish between the sought value of solo traveling for the individual:

- **Pleasure-Seeking Solo Travelers:** These travelers are under 30 years old and are looking for ways to escape their daily life in order to gain pleasure. Additionally, they are active and looking to let go of themselves.

- **Social Solo Travelers:** These travelers prioritize esteem during their traveling and like to share their experiences with others both in the moment and later through pictures. They believe that traveling enhances the image others hold of them.
- **Exploratory Solo Travelers:** These travelers are looking to engage and explore their surroundings in order to gain new knowledge and broaden their horizons. Thus, they are looking for immersive experiences.
- **Escape-type solo travelers:** These travelers are looking for transformation and empowerment. They see solo traveling as a way to escape from daily life and recharge before going back to routine.

While this typology provides a first understanding of solo travelers, the potential for overlap between the categories should be acknowledged. Many solo travelers may exhibit multiple motivations at the same time. For example, escape-type travelers might also seek pleasure during their travels. The uniqueness of solo traveling should be considered in order to understand individual's motivations and value making. Additionally, travelers under 30 make up over 60% in Zhang et al. (2024, p. 6)'s sample. Therefore, it is questionable whether the findings are applicable across different demographics.

Another way of distinguishing between solo travelers is by regarding their age groups. Different generations have different motivations, perceptions, and priorities (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024 p. 384; Popşa, 2024, p. 190). Baby boomers (1946-1964) are interested in gastronomical experiences and value good service quality while looking for a one-of-a-kind cultural experience (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024, p. 390; Popşa, 2024, p. 190). Generation X (1965-1979) is more focused on family-oriented traveling and exploring heritage sites (Popşa, 2024, p. 190). Millennials (1981-1996) value experiences and show interest in exploring different cultures while also learning more about their own (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024, p. 390; Popşa, 2024, p. 190). Lastly, generation Z (1997 – 2012) is looking for cultural and social experiences and relaxation (Popşa, 2024, p. 196).

Gen Z will be the focus of this thesis, as they value immersive and authentic experiences. This generation is interested in finding fun experiences, adventures, and off-the-beaten-paths (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019, p. 134). During their journey, they want to learn about the local culture by interacting with locals and then becoming part of the community (Popşa, 2024, p. 196). Additionally, while traveling solo, they still search for the company of others and are also interested in joining travel groups. They are the first generation that has grown up with technology and uses it to research the destination or already connect with others (Pinho & Gomes, 2022, p. 487).

2.3.3 Female Solo Travelers

Solo female travel has emerged as a growing segment within the broader solo travel trend. Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, Google searches for the term “female solo travel” have doubled in the amount, highlighting the interest around the world (*Google Trends*, n.d.). Female travelers are shaped by unique motivations, behavioral patterns, and contextual challenges. As gender continues to influence the perception of travel experiences, it is essential to examine how being female can shape the solo travel experience.

Previous research has shown that women often see the possibility of traveling by themselves as proof of their liberation and freedom to do whatever they want (Karagöz et al., 2020, p. 1569). Many describe solo travel as a pathway to autonomy, self-exploration and resisting societal expectation. However, while solo travel allows them to escape stereotypical roles, solo travel for women still holds the risk to not be socially respected (Karagöz et al., 2020, p. 1607). Already before embarking on their journey many women have to listen to doubts about their abilities oftentimes in their close surroundings (Wilson & Little, 2008, p. 174).

Additionally, they face several risks in the destination itself, out of which a possible negative experience in the destination is perceived as the most critical (Karagöz et al., 2020, p. 1607). Female solo travelers have to fear catcalling, harassment, and violence on top of challenges such as loneliness and safety concerns as solo travelers. Wilson and Little’s (2008) research proves that this fear oftentimes changes the behavioral patterns of the travelers. Women feel like it is their responsibility to avoid “dangerous” places and times of the day (Wilson & Little, 2008, p. 176). Therefore, they try to find safe spaces for themselves in the destination and often end up in more touristy areas where they feel like the acceptance rate of female solo travelers is higher (Wilson & Little, 2008, p. 178). However, because of this they often feel like they are restricted in the things they are able to do, already starting at the choice of their destination.

Technology plays a significant role in mitigating these concerns. Digital tools such as navigation apps, online support groups of female travelers, and other blog posts can help to provide women with information, support networks, and a sense of control over their journeys (Karagöz et al., 2020, p. 1608). Support in the form of online communities can minimize the feeling of being limited because of one’s vulnerability (Wilson & Little, 2008, p. 180).

2.3.4 Digital Natives and the Solo Travel Experience

There are also other ways in which advancements in technology have influenced the travel industry. Firstly, the availability and accessibility of information allows for easier and faster decision-making (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 9). Some examples of this are platforms such as Booking.com and Trip Advisor, which act as online travel agencies and meta-search engines for consumers. Instead of having to search through multiple platforms, various results show up all in one place which allows consumers to directly compare them to each other (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 4).

As discussed earlier, Generation Z has emerged as a pivotal demographic that is just beginning to explore the solo travel segment. As digital natives, they have grown up with constant access to technology and the internet, which significantly shapes how they approach travel. Their preferences, values, and behaviors are closely tied to digital culture and the values of the experience economy, leading to the use of social media and travel influencers in order to research and plan travel experiences (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 5). The availability and accessibility of information have made decision-making more efficient and personalized (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 9). Online platforms such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor simplify comparisons across accommodation and travel options, enabling users to make informed choices quickly. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok are crucial tools for discovering new destinations and experiences, as users can find real-time feedback and experiences shared by fellow travelers. This use of technology also takes place at the destination during their traveling. Apps on their smartphones help them navigate the new environments (Fisu et al., 2024, p. 6) which they then share with others as they take on the role of travel influencers. Gen Z actively searches for “instagrammable” spots that they can share on their own social media channels both during and after the experiences take place (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 11).

This generation places a strong emphasis on immersive and meaningful experiences, often favoring cultural exchange, personal growth, and social connectivity over material consumption (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019, p. 134). Instead of following traditional tourist routes, they seek unique and transformative interactions with others. These motivations are informed not only by personal aspirations but also by broader societal influences. Having grown up amid climate change, geopolitical uncertainty, and economic precarity, Gen Z is aware of the world’s complexities and often seeks experiences that allow for reflection, identity formation, and a temporary escape from routine (Pinho & Gomes, 2022, p. 488; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019, p. 128). A key component of their travel experience is forming connections. This includes meeting other travelers in hostels, joining group activities, and

connecting through social media. These interactions contribute to a sense of belonging, enhance the emotional depth of the journey, and support the co-creation of memorable experiences (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019, p. 134).

Robinson and Schänzel (2019, p. 136) propose a theoretical framework that shifts the focus from the travel destination to the traveler, recognizing that Gen Z's travel experiences result from interactions between three primary categories of influence. The first category consists of immediate influences, which stem from the traveler's personal background, including family, friends, and their home environment. Childhood memories, such as family traditions or early travel experiences, play a role in shaping expectations. The second category includes global influences, such as climate change, economic fluctuations, and geopolitical events, which impact how Gen Z perceives travel. For example, facing travel restrictions in the COVID-19 pandemic might grow the desire to travel even stronger. Finally, destination-specific influences, such as cultural encounters, local interactions, and the physical environment, contribute significantly to the travel experience. Engaging with locals, sharing meals, and experiencing unique landscapes all play a crucial role in shaping Gen Z's perception of a place.

This model aligns with the understanding that memorable experiences are flexible and are not experienced in the same way as the traveler's expectations, preparations, and reflections shape the experience. It highlights the importance of understanding the individual in the context of their life experiences. Therefore, Gen Z's solo travel is deeply mediated by digital tools and values. Their desire for meaningful, socially connected, and transformative experiences is amplified by their online presence. The blend of independence, constant connectivity, and digital expression shapes how they experience solitude, overcome challenges, and form emotional connections. In this way, Gen Z solo travel experiences highlight the concept of "being solo, but not alone" that Yang (2021, p. 2641) proposes as characterization of solo travelers. As such, solo travel should not be viewed in isolation but as part of a broader experiential framework where individual agency meets collective context. The following section extends this understanding by examining the role of social interactions, both online and offline, in enhancing or shaping these experiences.

2.4 The Importance of Social Interactions

While solo travel emphasizes solitary and self-discovery, social interactions can enrich the overall travel experience (Zhang et al., 2024, p. 11). They shape tourism experiences, as travelers frequently encounter and engage with others in shared spaces (Reichenberger, 2016,

p. 629). Previous research has investigated social interactions in the context of multiple disciplines such as economics as well as sociology (Becker, 1974, p. 1065). Social interactions are an essential part of human life as humans interact with others solely for social reasons in order to form deep and significant connections with others (Litt et al., 2020, p. 1f). These interactions contribute to emotional well-being, providing individuals with a sense of belonging and support. Research suggests that strong social connections are linked to improved mental health, greater life satisfaction, and general health benefits (Bernstein et al., 2018, p. 374).

For Gen Z travelers in particular, social interactions can play a dual role. They fulfill desires for connection while reinforcing identity construction. Through social interactions, individuals are able to exchange memories and traits that contribute to their sense of identity. These interactions occur at different levels. On one level, individuals can interact directly with each other either face-to-face or through technology (Litt et al., 2020, p. 3). On another level, individuals interact as members of a group, where the behaviors and characteristics of others could shape their own actions depending on power relations and dynamics within the group (Blume et al., 2011, p. 861). Oftentimes, the quality of the interaction is based on the quality of the relationship between individuals (Litt et al., 2020, p. 11). Generally, interactions are more meaningful if the interacting individuals know each other and share common interests.

Interactions can occur both digital and face-to-face. Both of these forms are relevant for solo travelers as others transform individual experiences into emotionally rich, memorable experiences. The following subsections examine how technology enables these interactions and how they unfold in the destination.

2.4.1 Interactions through technology

Litt et al. (2020) mention that meaningful interactions can also take place through technological media (p. 12). Technology has a significant influence on social interactions nowadays, as it allows individuals to interact with each other from all over the world (Antonucci et al., 2017, p. 3). The rise of digital communication, such as video calls, social media, and instant messaging, has transformed the way people interact and makes communication more immediate and accessible. Individuals are able to create online communities and social networks that enable real-time conversations across the globe.

However, disadvantages also have to be acknowledged. Digital communication often lacks the richness of in-person encounters, as social cues such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions may be misinterpreted or completely unavailable (Litt et al.,

2020, p. 12). Additionally, social interactions might run at risk to turn into depersonalized interactions that reduce the quality of social interactions (Litt et al., 2020, p. 12). Excessive reliance on digital communication might also contribute to negative feelings such as social isolation, as these interactions may not always provide the same depth and emotional fulfillment as face-to-face encounters.

Despite these challenges Litt et al. (2020) highlight the potential of virtual interactions as especially younger individuals highlight the meaningfulness of social interactions online (p. 12). The possibility of communicating at the same time might be more significant than the medium through which this interaction takes place. Social media and social interactions are, therefore, closely linked to each other. Social media can be used as a central platform to interact with others, exchange information, and take care of established relationships (Fisu et al., 2024, p. 8). It enables Gen Z to stay in touch with people worldwide and, therefore, also with friends and family while they are away from home. By sharing information with each other, a sense of community is created that can help to establish confidence in the pre-travel planning phase and also while being on the trip. These patterns of online interaction reflect broader digital behaviors typical of Gen Z travelers, whose travel experiences are shaped by continuous connectivity (see Section 2.3.4).

2.4.2 Social Interactions during Solo Travel

While digital interactions can provide support across geographic boundaries, it is often the in-person encounters that are deemed as valuable. The unique dynamics of travel environments can make interactions even more personal and intense than similar interactions at home (Murphy, 2001, p. 60). Traveling allows people to become both physically and emotionally engaged with their surroundings and each other. When people are away from their familiar surroundings, they often find themselves more open to new experiences and connections. The transient nature of travel can encourage people to be more genuine in their interactions. Additionally, people from various backgrounds can relate to each other as they explore new environments, leading to opportunities to engage with others on a more personal level.

Murphy (2001, p. 51) highlights varying levels of interaction that can occur while backpacking which is often a form of solo traveling. Firstly, the interaction is based on co-presence, which emerges through shared spaces but does not necessarily involve engaging directly with each other. Secondly, she refers to focused interaction, which involves active engagement, such as conversations or participation in shared activities. In the context of

experiences, it is likely that solo travelers will be engaging in focused interactions. Social interactions serve both intrinsic and extrinsic purposes for solo travelers. Conversations usually involve travel-related topics, such as recommendations and sharing aspects of their origins (Reichenberger, 2016, p. 633). Murphy (2001) adds that these exchanges usually serve practical goals related to travel, such as acquiring information or navigating unfamiliar environments. Still, even practical interactions can spark comfort or inspiration, emotions which align closely with Kim et al.'s (2010) factors of memorable experiences.

These focused interactions allow individuals to create a temporary community or “communitas”: a shared sense of togetherness in a restricted environment (Reichenberger, 2016, p. 634). Factors such as mutual likeability, perceived commonalities, and shared skills influence the success of these interactions. At a more nuanced level, Reichenberger (2016, p. 634) identifies different types of tourist interactions (Table 1). As mentioned before, he defines communitas as offering long, meaningful interactions in a temporary community setting that relies on personal resources, commonalities, and mutual respect. The next type is the social bubble level. Within this level, interactions happen between members of the same travel group. Oftentimes, interactions are more short-lived and less intense. The last type is the one of the detached tourists. This tourist type wants to focus on their travel companion but is willing to provide basic assistance to others. They often prefer private accommodation and are therefore not in spaces that would immediately promote interactions with others.

Type of Tourist Interaction	Description	Key Characteristics
Communitas	A temporary but meaningful community formed through shared experiences and mutual respect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long, meaningful interactions • Based on mutual support • Possibility of strong emotional bonds • Enhances cultural and personal learning
Social Bubble	Interactions mainly occur within a pre-existing travel group, often shorter and less intense.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfort and security • Limited external engagement

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only brief encounters outside of group
Detached Tourist	Prioritizes small-group experiences, only engaging minimally with others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on travel partners • Likely no deeper social interactions

Table 1 Interaction Types (adapted from Reichenberger, 2016, p. 634)

Out of Reichenberger's (2016, p. 634) types, *communitas* are the focus of this thesis as they represent the most meaningful type of interaction among the identified categories and, therefore, offer temporary yet impactful connections for solo travelers. Additionally, they can bridge the gap between solitary and collective experiences, laying the foundation for the creation of meaningful and memorable touristic experiences.

In the case of solo travelers, specifically backpackers, hostels often act as mediators between travelers as they offer both solitude and meaningful interaction opportunities (Murphy, 2001, p. 51). Still, solo travelers are not a homogenous group. Some might actively seek out hostels for their communal atmosphere, while others might prefer private accommodations that align more closely with their desire for independence, comfort, or privacy.

Thus, tourism inherently involves constant encounters with other individuals, such as locals and fellow tourists, allowing them to significantly influence visitor experiences (Reichenberger, 2016, p. 629). Gen Z is known to look for socialization while traveling to find new friendships and other ways to empower themselves (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019, p. 2019). These social interactions contribute to knowledge construction, meaning-making, and shaping a traveler's perception of their experience. Interactions are defined by environmental factors such as boundaries and physical aspects of the environment, which determine the emotional tone of encounters (Murphy, 2001, p. 62).

2.5 Memorable Solo Travel Experiences

As explored in the literature, memorable solo travel experiences for Generation Z travelers are shaped by a dynamic blend of emotional, psychological, and social factors. Rather than being passive or isolated events, these experiences often emerge through meaningful engagement with people, places, and digital environments. Understanding what makes solo travel memorable therefore involves examining the aspects that evoke emotional resonance, foster reflection, and create lasting personal impact.

Drawing from Kim et al.'s (2010) model, the following dimensions help define memorable solo travel experiences. Novelty plays a crucial role in breaking routine and exposing travelers to new environments. Cultural immersion allows for deeper engagement with local traditions and ways of life and can create a sense of belonging. Solo travel offers autonomy by allowing individuals to design their own itineraries and make independent decisions. By overcoming challenges, individuals learn to navigate unfamiliar environments and acquire new skills. These dimensions form the foundation for a theoretical framework of a conceptual model of memorable solo travel experiences (MSTE) (Figure 2), which brings together internal motivations, social dynamics, and digital mediation in the context of Gen Z solo travel.

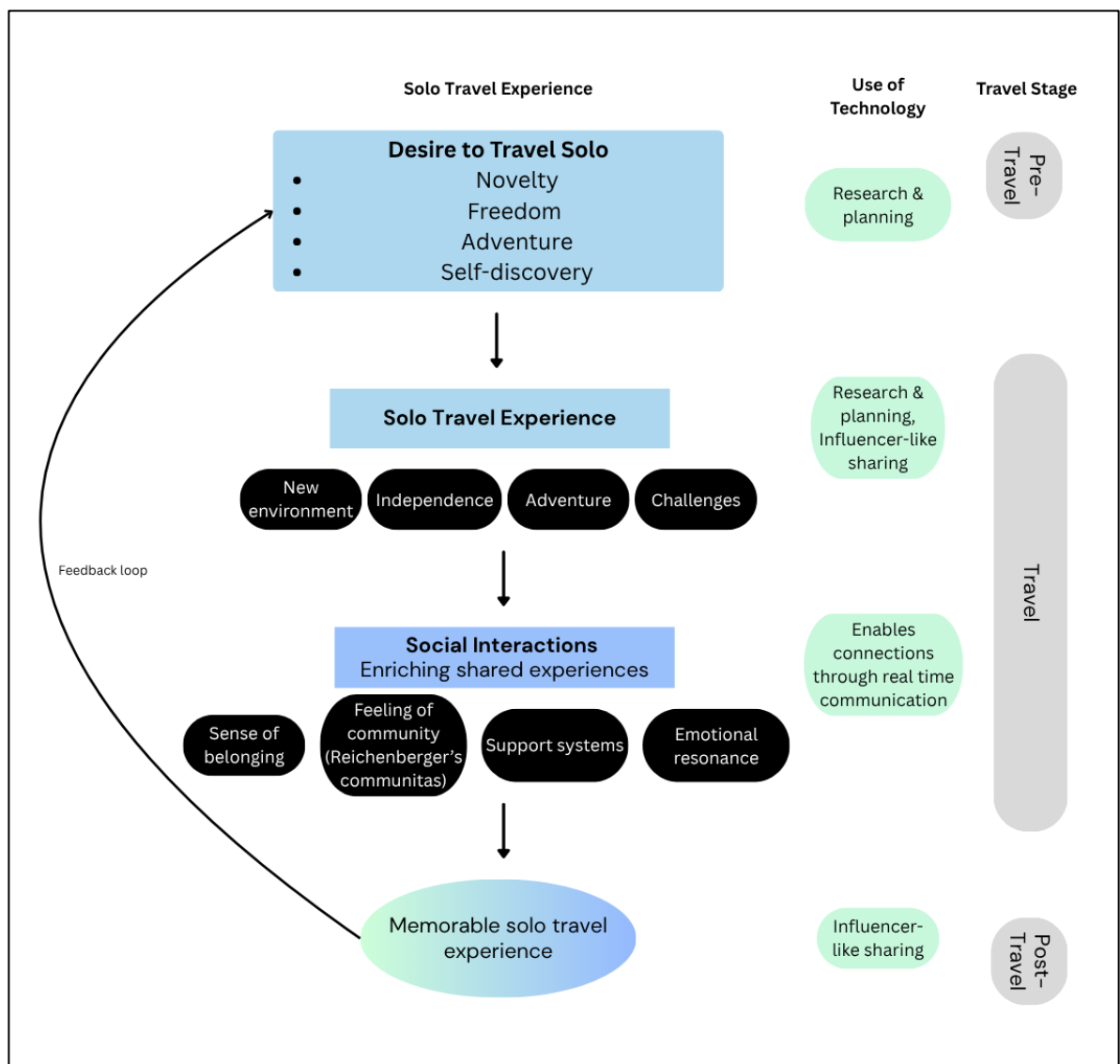


Figure 2 Memorable Solo Travel Experience

As defined by Manthiou et al. (2023, p. 464) there are various motivations to go solo travel. Once an individual has gone on the trip, they are faced with a multi-faceted experience based on elements such as novelty and hedonism that have both positive and negative characteristics. These experiences evoke a range of emotions, ranging from excitement to moments of uncertainty and solitude. To process these feelings, individuals engage with others either physically or through technology across distances. This aligns with Zatori and Beardsley's (2017, p. 35) concept of flow, which emphasizes that the surrounding environment significantly influences the memorability of an experience.

While traditional understandings of solo travel suggest independence, Gen Z travelers remain socially engaged through digital and physical interactions. Technology plays an essential role in planning, experiencing, and remembering solo travel journeys. It is used in pre-travel research, itinerary planning, and accommodation booking, as well as for navigation and making informed decisions. Social media platforms and various apps allow travelers to find ways of connecting with others. After returning home, digital storytelling through blogs and social media helps to preserve travel memories and can turn Gen Z into travel influencers by influencing peer travel behaviors (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 12). The digital aspect of solo travel not only allows for real-time sharing of experiences but also contributes to a sense of community among solo travelers, enabling them to exchange insights and emotional support despite physical distance.

Acknowledging the importance of the social for solo traveler, social interaction emerges as a critical factor in shaping memorable tourism experiences. Vada et al. (2022, p. 720) emphasize the importance of travel companions in the creation of memorable experiences. Their findings show differences between those who travel alone and those who travel with friends or family (Vada et al., 2022, p. 719). Solo travelers, for instance, often show a deeper connection between well-being and travel, relying more heavily on cultural immersion, self-reflection, and personal development. This might explain why they frequently seek out social interactions that shape the quality and meaning of their experiences (Yang, 2021, p. 2463). Other studies have also recognized that interactions can lead to positive connection, pleasure, and emotional moments (Campos et al., 2016, p. 1313; Murphy, 2001, p. 51; Reichenberger, 2016, p. 629). Tourists often seek the company of others to share touristic experiences (Torres, 2016, p. 2141) as these play a key role in engaging experiences. According to Reichenberger (2016, p. 634) solo travelers are able to come together in a community that allows them to feel a sense of belonging and togetherness. While they are still experiencing

factors of solo traveling such as exposure to new environments and escapism, they are able to mitigate challenges by facing them together.

Together, these social connections not only enhance emotional well-being but can also serve as key elements of memorable travel experiences, particularly when interactions lead to personal growth, shared meaning-making, or reflection. Therefore, their MSTE is “solo, but not alone” (Yang, 2021, p. 2461). Within MSTEs, the presence of a broader social network offers reassurance and emotional enrichment. Others provide comfort and support, often creating a *communitas* that deepens the emotional impact of travel and reduces the potential loneliness of solo journeys. The presence of others is especially essential for female travelers who, while viewing their journeys as acts of autonomy and liberation, also have to face distinct challenges related to safety, social judgement, and vulnerability (Karagöz et al., 2020, p. 1607; Wilson & Little, 2008, p. 182). These concerns shape behavioral patterns, such as choosing safer destinations or relying on female-oriented travel communities. Meaningful social interactions can intersect with the search for safety, belonging, and validation. In addition, digital tools such as online forums can serve as planning aids as well as sources of empowerment and reassurance.

Once back home, solo travelers begin processing the experiences they had along the way and identifying the moments that proved the most memorable. The model assumes that these reflections shape future travel decisions and expectations. Post-travel reflection therefore becomes part of a feedback loop that illustrates the dynamic and evolving nature of solo travel for Gen Z, where each trip contributes to longer-term perspectives on exploration, cultural engagement, and personal growth. The model highlights how solo travel is a multidimensional experience, guided by internal motivations, external interactions, and technological mediation. As tourism continues to evolve, the interplay between independence and connectivity and between personal discovery and shared interaction will further shape the solo travel experiences of the future.

Therefore, in the case of MSTEs, the presence of a broader social network offers reassurance and enriches the experience. These other individuals are able to bring the solo traveler a form of comfort through their company that leads them to form a *communita*. This phenomenon helps mitigate the potential loneliness of solo travel and enhances its emotional depth, making experiences more meaningful and impactful. Once the solo traveler has arrived back home, they start processing their experiences during the journey and are able to reflect on which of the experiences were memorable.

It is important to note that this model assumes that past travel experiences shape future travel behaviors and expectations. Therefore, post-travel reflections have an influence on how travelers plan and perceive the following trips. This feedback loop highlights the dynamic and ever-changing nature of solo travel for Gen Z, where experiences come together to shape long-term attitudes toward exploration, cultural engagement, and personal growth. It acknowledges the influence of others on how individuals remember their travel experiences. Solo travel is understood as a multidimensional experience, influenced by internal motivations, external interactions, and digital mediation. As tourism continues to evolve, the interplay between independence and connectivity and personal discovery and social interactions will further define solo travel experiences.

3 Methodology

The previous chapters have shown that solo travel among Gen Z women is shaped by a dynamic interplay of independence, connection, and digital mediation. To explore how these travelers make sense of their most memorable moments, following research question is asked: “How do social interactions shape the memorability of solo travel experiences for female Gen Z travelers?”. Sub-questions contribute to the research by breaking the research question down into smaller parts and focusing on different aspects. In specific, the following sub-questions are regarded: What forms of social interactions do female Gen Z solo travelers encounter during their journey? How do these interactions contribute to the memorability of solo travel experiences? What role do digital tools play in supporting or shaping these interactions? How do female Gen Z solo travelers reflect on social connections after their trips?

A qualitative approach is appropriate for this in order to uncover rich, in-depth insights into behavior, meanings, and lived experiences (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). With the help of qualitative interviews an in-depth understanding of the travel experiences of solo travelers can be achieved. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees to express their experiences and perceptions in their own words, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the issue (Bryman, 2012, p. 470). Interviews offer the possibility for participants to share personal thoughts, feelings, and memories in their own terms. Within the data key themes and patterns were identified in the form of a thematic analysis which entails a nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

No research can be conducted in a value-free way; therefore, it is important for the researcher to position themselves (Holmes, 2020, p. 2). Personal values and beliefs are shaped by for instance religion, gender, sexuality, and political standpoints. However, it is also important to note that values change over time, and therefore the position as researcher as well. Within my research I am an outsider to the experiences shared by solo travelers as I have not solo travelled myself before and am therefore not part of the. Still, I cannot be seen as a complete outsider as I am part of generation Z and have therefore some shared experiences and knowledge. Additionally, due to me being female there is the possibility of me having some pre-bias towards certain experiences specific to females. This has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, no personal experience influences the research, as I can investigate the topic from a neutral angle and a fresh perspective. On the

other hand, lack of intimate knowledge might lead me to missing information that is only available to insiders.

3.1 Sample

The units of analysis consist of Gen Z solo travelers who are single-solo or collective-solo travelers, as defined by Laesser et al. (2009, p. 219). Generation Z, characterized by their preference for immersive experiences and search for social connectedness, offers a unique lens through which these dynamics can be explored (Popşa, 2024, p. 196). A purposive sampling strategy involving multi criterion sampling was employed to effectively explore the experiences of solo travelers, particularly those belonging to Generation Z, and to gain in-depth insights into the relationship between social interaction and memorability. This approach ensured that participants were selected based on specific characteristics that align with the focus of this research (Bryman, 2012, p. 416).

One criterion for the sample was that all of the participants must have returned home already, allowing them to reflect on the memorability of their experiences and the role of social interactions within them. The research will focus on female Gen Z, who originated from Europe or lived in Europe during the period in which the research was conducted, ensuring contextual consistency and providing a culturally and geographically relevant sample. A focus on Europe allowed some geographical variety, while also ensuring that the participants have similar access to digital platforms and gender norms that may differ from other regions. Since Gen Z spans a wide age range as defined by Popşa (2024, p. 196), this thesis focuses specifically on individuals born between 1997 and 2006. This ensures that participants have graduated from high school at the point of data collection and have traveled independently. Furthermore, this range was chosen for ethical reasons, to avoid involving minors in the research process and to ensure the following of ethical research guidelines. Another demographic criterion is the gender of the participants. The decision to focus on female Gen Z solo travelers is grounded in both empirical relevance and theoretical significance. Research has consistently shown that female solo travelers often navigate travel experiences differently, particularly in relation to issues such as safety and empowerment (Wilson & Little, 2008, p. 176). For many women, solo travel is not just a logistical choice, but a transformative journey tied to identity, autonomy, and emotional growth (Khoo-Lattimore & Wilson, 2017, p. 2ff). Therefore, women often engage in solo travel as a means of self-discovery, while simultaneously navigating societal norms and expectations. Such factors influence the depth and nature of social interactions, especially in unfamiliar or male-

dominated settings (Karagöz et al., 2020, p. 1607). Considering these factors the focus on female Gen Z solo travelers allows for a more coherent and meaningful exploration of the research topic.

Since this thesis also examines the role of technology during solo travel experiences, participants were recruited through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which are commonly used by Gen Z travelers for inspiration, advice, and community engagement (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 11). On Instagram, the researcher used their own network to reach out to people who had traveled solo before. Additionally, snowball sampling was used as participants referred to other solo travelers who met the research criteria. Because of this, the researcher was able to connect with a broader network of Gen Z solo travelers. In addition to that, on both Instagram and TikTok the keywords "solo traveling", "female solo travel", "solo travel friends" and "solo traveling women" were inputted. Once it was ensured that the accounts showing up matched the criteria, the researcher reached out to the individuals via private messaging to invite them to participate. The following table shows the selected participants:

Interviewee	Origin	Currently living	Age	Amount of Times Solo Traveled	Destinations of Solo Traveling
I1	France	France	23	1	Canada
I2	Greece	Greece	23	2	Austria, United Kingdom
I3	Hungary	Hungary	22	2	Thailand, France
I4	Austria	Germany	24	1	New Zealand
I5	Sweden	Sweden	23	2	Portugal, Austria
I6	Germany	Germany	24	2	United States of America
I7	Germany	Netherlands	24	1	Marocco, Mid-America
I8	Bulgaria	Netherlands	19	1	Italy, Switzerland, France
I9	India	Netherlands	22	3	India
I10	Japan	Netherlands	25	7	Australia, Japan
I11	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	25	6	Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium
I12	Austria	Austria	25	2	New Zealand, Sri Lanka

I13	Germany	Germany	24	3	Portugal, Sri Lanka, Bali, Lombok, Singapore, France
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Table 2 Sample

3.2 Operationalization

This research explores how social interactions shape the memorability of solo travel experiences, and how technology influences these dynamics throughout the travel process. To investigate these themes in a structured and meaningful way, the core concepts “memorable moments”, “social interactions”, “solo travel experiences”, and “use of technology” were operationalized into interview questions (see Appendix B). The concept of memorable moments refers to emotionally significant events that left a lasting impression on travelers (Campos et al., 2016, p. 1328). Participants were asked to describe moments that stood out to them during their trip to reveal the emotional nature and personal meaning behind certain experiences. Social interactions were explored as connections that shaped the travel experience through emotional support, shared meaning or a sense of belonging (Reichenberger, 2016, p. 635). Participants were asked to first describe their social life while travelling solo and to then reflect on the nature and impact of these interactions from their perspective. The solo travel experience was examined as the entire travel process, beginning from the planning stage to the experiences they had within the destination. Questions explored both motivations, as well as challenges, to understand the multi-faceted nature of solo traveling. Lastly, technology was approached as a set of digital tools used in all stages of the travel process for planning, navigating, documenting and communicating during travel (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 5ff.). This approach helped uncover both practical and emotional dimensions of technology use, including how it enabled or inhibited social connection and memory-making.

Concept	Definition	Example
Memorable Moments	Specific experiences or events that stood out emotionally and left a lasting impression on the traveler (Campos et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2010).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe a moment or two that really stood out during your trip? • Why do you think those experiences stood out like that?

Social Life	In this context, the social life entails those connections that influence the travel experience (Yang, 2021). These can take place both offline and online and lead to emotional support, shared meaning, and a sense of belonging (Reichenberger, 2016; Torres, 2016).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was your social life while traveling solo? • How would you describe your relationships with others during your trip? • How did those interactions affect your experience?
Solo Travel Experiences	The individual's journey of traveling alone, including motivations, emotions, and challenges faced. These experiences often foster autonomy and self-discovery (Manthiou et al., 2023; Vada et al., 2022).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did it feel like to travel on your own? • Can you describe why you decided to go solo traveling? • Did you face any challenges while traveling solo?
Use of Technology	Use of digital tools for travel, such as apps for planning, navigation, storytelling, and online interaction (Vancia et al., 2023).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you use any digital tools before, during, or after the trip? • In what ways did these tools influence your experience?

Table 3 Operationalization

By structuring the interviews around these operationalized concepts, rich, layered data could be collected that resonated directly to the research question. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

3.3 Data Collection & Ethical Considerations

13 semi-structured interviews were conducted from the beginning of April to mid-May of 2025. Some of the interviews could be done in person; however, due to geographical distances between the interviewees and the researcher, some were conducted online. In-person

interviews allowed for stronger rapport-building through face-to-face interaction and the ability to observe non-verbal cues such as body language. However, coordinating in-person meetings was limited to participants located nearby, thereby restricting geographic diversity. Contrarily, online interviews enabled access to a broader and more geographically dispersed sample. Still, they can come with challenges such as potential technical issues, reduced ability to observe body language fully, and occasional distractions. Each interview allowed for in-depth discussions and exploration of the participants' perspectives. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing the participants to share their experiences and allowing for open conversation between the researcher and the participants. The process of data collection stopped once theoretical saturation was reached. This indicates that new interviews did not bring any new insights as no new or relevant data was emerging regarding the research question (Bryman, 2012, p. 420).

All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Thus, informed consent (Appendix C) was obtained before participation, and all data was anonymized to ensure ethical research. Informed consent also enabled the recording of the interviews for later in-depth analysis. Additionally, the researcher took notes of important key elements of the interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and anonymized with the help of the software Turboscribe. After transcription, participants were offered to review their responses for accuracy and clarity. This ensured that the participants felt accurately represented in the analysis. The interviews were conducted in English or German. Therefore, each participant needed to understand one of the languages sufficiently to ensure proper communication between the researcher and the participants.

3.4 Data Analysis

Based on the theoretical framework, a coding scheme based on the literature was developed, which was then continuously reviewed and refined as the research progressed. Through the help of coding, sections could be identified that relate to the research's topic. The software ATLAS.ti 25 allows one to easily identify and compare recurring themes and patterns (Zakaria & Zakaria, 2016, p. 12). With the help of the software, themes, sub-themes, and categories were established.

The coding for this research was done in multiple steps, the first being open coding. This step focuses on the content of the data to identify unexpected patterns and contexts without imposing pre-existing categories. Often this entailed *in vivo* coding was used, as

direct quotes were used as codes. For instance, the code “independence” was used if a participant mentioned independence. Following open coding, focused coding allowed the researcher to prioritize and refine frequently occurring codes. During this phase, codes such as “independence”, “personal development”, and “leaving comfort zone” were grouped under the broader conceptual category of “motivation solo travel”. The last phase, axial coding, involved identifying relationships between categories, such as links and conditions. Thus, it developed a thematic structure reflecting individual experiences and the broader social context. It is important to note that the coding was revised continuously. Five central themes were derived from the data:

- The Solo: Individual motivations, the experiences of solo travelers, emotional self-regulation, and exploration of personal growth.
- The Social: Covers the dynamics of meeting new people and types of interpersonal connections.
- Technology as Mediator: Highlights the use of digital tools in planning, navigating, and enhancing both safety and connection during travel.
- Sharing: Focuses on the ways in which participants shared moments both in real-time and retrospectively.
- Memorability: Investigates what makes certain moments emotionally lasting, including reflection processes and meaning-making.

A codebook (Appendix D) was used to ensure transparency and replicability of the research design (Bryman, 2012, p. 248). This codebook helps document each code’s definition and includes examples from the data. It was regularly revised and updated as new data emerged.

3.5 Limitations

There are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Due to the researcher’s own language restrictions the interviews could only be conducted in English or German. This can be a challenge as participants might be able to explain something not as profoundly due to English not being their mother tongue. If this was the case, the researcher tried to ensure that the interview was done in a comfortable and comforting setting so that participants would not feel any external pressure. They were always allowed to take a moment to sort out their thoughts and were not rushed in any way. The German interviews were translated for the

purpose of this thesis. While every effort was made to preserve meaning and nuance, some contextual subtleties may have been lost in translation.

While the targeted approach of this research allows for in-depth explorations of specific experiences, this focus also limits the broader applicability of the findings. Perspectives from male or non-binary travelers, as well as individuals from other backgrounds, might lead to different insights. Additionally, the sampling method might lead to a sampling bias. Some of the participants were recruited through social media which might favor individuals who are more socially active and have an online presence as they are willing to publicly share their travel experiences. To mitigate this, efforts were made to include a variety of accounts. Furthermore, due to the time constraint and scope of the research, the sampling strategy also included snowball sampling through the researcher's own network. In order to ensure that the participants were not led in any kind of way, it was ensured that the researcher does not have any close contact with any of the participants. Therefore, all of the participants had the same amount of information before going into the interviews.

Another limitation is the timing of the interviews. While previous research shows that travelers are able to reflect post-travel, the data is based on retrospective self-reporting. Especially if the travel experiences were some time ago, the accuracy of memory might be affected. To address this, participants were asked to focus on standout moments, which are more likely to be remembered over time.

4 Results

The data reveals that solo travel is not merely about the act of traveling, but a dynamic experience shaped by both internal reflections and external encounters, which can be divided into five themes. The first, “The Solo”, examines participants’ motivations and the flow of their experiences before, during, and after the trip. The second section, “The Social”, examines the social aspects of solo travel, focusing on how participants interact with others during their travels. The third section examines the role of technology, specifically how it facilitates communication over distances. Afterward, this chapter examines how solo travelers shared a moment and what made it significant. Lastly, all of these themes are brought together to discover memorable moments of solo travel experiences.

4.1 The Solo

The interviews reveal diverse internal drives, many of which are connected to broader themes of self-development, emotional resilience, and autonomy and, therefore, a diverse range of motivations for embarking on a solo journey. While some individuals deliberately chose to travel alone, others found themselves in this position inadvertently. For instance, several participants noted that they traveled alone because no one else was available or willing to join them on the trip (I11, I12, I13). Two participants even originally planned to go on the trip with another person who did not end up joining them (I1, I7). Rather than abandoning the trip, they went on the trip alone instead. I1 described feeling nervous but ultimately grateful as the experience gave her confidence she had not anticipated. Nowadays, she does not have any troubles traveling alone. Similarly, I7 expressed initial disappointment, but later appreciated the freedom of the experience in following her own pace.

Many participants wanted this freedom, independence, or time for themselves. The experience was seen as a form of self-care or a means of resisting routines and external pressures. Solo travel served as a break from daily routines and an opportunity for new perspectives and personal growth. For I7, her solo travel trips always took place after she went through very stressful periods of intense work or study phases. I12 also emphasized that she needs solo trips to leave work behind and thoroughly enjoy her summer break, allowing her to recharge before reentering everyday life.

On the other hand, solo travel was linked to personal growth and was not seen as a retreat but rather as a challenge. For some, it offered a chance to overcome anxiety, build confidence, or work through emotional challenges, turning the travel into a therapeutic

experience (I2, I3, I8, I13). I8 especially saw it as a necessary experience to grow further as a person:

Well, I thought at one point I have to do it anyway because, yeah, I can't be this anxious person who just, yeah, always sticks to friends and family, yeah, to travel. So, I thought, yeah, I must get out of my comfort zone.

Therefore, individuals who viewed themselves as introverted or shy saw solo traveling as a way to address this aspect of their personality and discover parts of themselves they had not previously seen (I8). The anticipation of meeting new people was seen either as a challenge or an extension of one's natural sociability and became a valuable part of the solo travel experience, enabling both personal and interpersonal growth.

For many interviewees, the solo travel experience had already begun before departure. This stage was characterized by the planning of the journey and very individual. While some interviewees preferred to plan everything, from accommodation to transportation and activities (I6, I3), others preferred to plan only the most necessary elements, such as arrival, departure, and accommodation (I1, I4, I11). To book accommodations in advance, participants used various digital platforms, including Airbnb, Booking.com, and Hostelworld. They relied heavily on reviews, and I7 used filter options to find specific functions such as the type of hostel or the average age of the guests.

All participants were open to taking activities day by day, looking for inspiration in posters, the staff members in the accommodations, locals, or other travelers. Interestingly, various participants expressed a desire to be spontaneous in their destination, seeking to break out of their structured daily routines. I1 usually likes to have her daily routines very structured and always plans her week ahead of time. However, she wanted to embrace spontaneity during her solo traveling. For I7, it was important to plan things such as accommodation and transportation for safety reasons. For her, being alone means that you need to be prepared for anything that could happen, as you do not have the same safety net to fall back on as when you are in a group setting.

A common theme among all participants was the experience of feelings of loneliness during the trip. However, how they experienced these sentiments differed from individual to individual. Some experienced loneliness as part of the emotional flow of solo travel, while others saw it as a profound space for self-reflection and emotional processing. For certain participants, solitude enabled introspection and emotional healing, aligning with solo travel as a therapeutic experience (I2, I9). Others found loneliness more difficult, highlighting the

emotional toll of being disconnected from familiar environments for extended periods (I3, I4). Ultimately, solo travel serves as a space where individuals confront themselves, negotiate vulnerability, and discover new aspects of themselves.

4.1.1. Emotional Experiences

The individuality of the experiences also remained consistent during the trips, as participants sought different activities and experiences while traveling. Some were actively seeking out busy places (I2, I6), while others tried to escape the noise and ventured off the beaten path (I10, I13). The length of the trips also varied, ranging from a longer weekend getaway to six months. Still, all of the participants viewed themselves as solo travelers and were able to achieve the feelings of freedom and independence that they were looking for. Many of the participants journaled in order to bring their experiences to paper and keep the moments as a keepsake to look back on later (I2, I6, I12). I2 described the new environment as a judgment-free zone where no one knew her. Therefore, she could try new things without feeling like others were watching or scrutinizing her.

Interestingly, this feeling of freedom to choose whatever they want to do was a common theme across the interviews. Participants described different behaviors than they have at home, as they could try whatever they wanted and were simultaneously more open to new things than they are in their usual homes. Commonly, they all thought that traveling with another person meant having to make compromises as other people might want to see other things. At the same time, traveling solo also encouraged participants to try out things they would not do at home or in a group. I3 wanted to explore the nightlife in Paris because she had heard so much of it even though she usually prefers to stay in, while I9 went on an adventure to explore a cave. She mentioned that she only realized later on how dangerous that climb had been and that she would not want to do this with another person who she would have to worry about. Therefore, solo traveling allowed her to be more carefree in some senses.

I1 and I7 both described the beginning of the journey as “always the hardest” because one has to get used to so many things in new settings. Especially the first solo travel carries a different perception of danger: “I was really worried and I was like, boah, shit, nobody knows, so if someone kidnaps me, nobody will find out.” (I6) However, as time passes, one becomes more comfortable, and things become easier. I13 describes her experience as a “roller-coaster of emotions” because of the many highs and lows she experienced. Even if being alone got easier, all participants faced various challenges while solo traveling. A shared challenge was

realizing they suddenly had to take care of themselves and experience new forms of responsibility. As I6 puts it, things that would usually be taken care of in familiar situations had to be established: “Where do I stay? How do I feed myself? What do I do when something goes wrong?” Due to the unfamiliarity of a new environment, these questions played a bigger role than they would in everyday life.

Pre-travel concerns about safety turned into real travel experiences for some of the participants. I7 was robbed the first week when she arrived in South America and also had a motorbike accident that forced her to stay in the same city for a while. I13 also had an accident while surfing that had to be treated in the hospital. Due to different standards and cultural differences, it became a moment of realization for her: “You have to realize that you have different hygiene standards.” (I13). While it was a traumatizing experience, as the hospital was not able to fully treat her wound, it also made her appreciate the things she had at home more. Both of them were now able to laugh about their experiences, but they also emphasized how they had questioned their decision to travel solo when they were sick. Accommodation could also provide challenges. I1 and I5 found themselves in situations that made them feel uncomfortable. Both of them were staying on farms as part of their work and travel journeys and ended up leaving the places earlier than intended. In I1’s case, it was because the host was making her feel unsafe, and in I5’s case, because the animals were being poorly treated. Through digital tools, they were able to leave a negative review in the hopes of helping others. While it felt bad or even like a failure to leave earlier than intended, now they are proud of themselves for listening to their gut feeling that something was wrong and removing themselves from the situation.

There’s a lot that goes with the decision to go back home earlier than originally planned. (...) So, I think looking back, it’s also just like knowing like to or like listening to your gut feeling is something that I think is very important also like especially when you’re traveling by yourself, like just listening to what your body is telling you essentially. (I1)

While not all of the participants went through extreme experiences of feeling unsafe, safety remained a central concern for all of the women. Their primary concern involved the presence of men that would make them feel unsafe. However, the approach they took differed. I13, for instance, willingly went with a man she did not know because he claimed to be her driver. Although nothing harmful occurred, she acknowledged in hindsight that it was a risk

she would avoid in the future. I9 went on a hiking trip by herself and was at one point harassed by men, who were “(...) banging on [her] window. Not letting the car pass.” For her, female solo travelers are more aware of their surroundings than they would be if they were in a group because “if you see a girl alone, they’re gonna bother you because you’re just vulnerable” (I9). I12 and I13 experienced catcalling and also mentioned that they sometimes felt unsafe in foreign countries due to cultural differences. All women took steps in order to navigate these circumstances.

I2 looked for destinations that would feel safe as a woman. I6 mentioned rules that she followed in order to stay safe, such as not being alone once it gets dark, taking an Uber if she does have to be out at night, and paying attention to not get into “weird corners”. I11 also mentioned that there are corners you try to avoid as a woman because you hear from locals that they are unsafe. I3 and I8 deliberately chose to stay around other female travelers by sleeping in female-only hostel rooms. On a different trip, I3 also stayed in an all-gender room, and she specifically remembered how, even then, she and other women would end up in the same corner of the room and kind of group up. I1 mentioned that she naturally gravitated towards other women, as it was easier to relate to them.

Emotional challenges were also a significant part of the experience. I8 struggled with loneliness and anxiety, particularly after seeing her family over the holidays, which made her feel even more homesick. I1 was also struggling with homesickness, particularly around the time of Christmas and New Year’s. I3 also described how she could sometimes feel lonely because she had no one to share the moment with. However, she quickly overcame those feelings as there was so much to see and explore. I7 described feeling lost and stranded in some ways if she did not have anything planned for the day or was especially missing someone else when she was sick. In contrast, other participants said that they were not struggling with homesickness at all and that it was their family who were struggling more with the thoughts of their daughter traveling alone and far from home.

4.1.2 Transformative Experiences

Despite these challenges, all participants viewed at least parts of their trips in a positive light. I2 describes her trip “as a self-care trip” that taught her “how to be alone in a city and enjoy myself”. Even scary moments, such as going to a restaurant alone and only seeing couples or groups, can be freeing and lead to feelings of pride and fulfillment because participants realize what they are capable of doing. Interestingly, positive moments seemed to have stayed more in the participants’ minds than negative ones. Initially, only I13 described

negative moments when she was asked to describe significant ones, but even then, they turned out to be positive ones in the end. The interviews, therefore, tend to highlight the emotional impact of solo travel shaped by personal growth and reflection rather than by immediate discomfort. Challenges that once felt overwhelming were often reframed as valuable learning experiences, contributing to a sense of confidence and awareness. Participants seemed to carry with them a deep sense of accomplishment: Having navigated unfamiliar environments, overcome personal fears, and adapted to unforeseen circumstances. As such, their reflections were often accompanied by pride, reinforcing the idea that even difficult moments can become transformative in retrospect.

Another common theme was that participants learned to manage their thoughts independently. They acknowledged how they learned to spend time alone and what it meant to be on their own. Going on a solo trip was a possibility of loving to spend time with oneself. For I7, learning how to spend time with yourself was also a process that could be challenging during the first trip. She recalled that she would be “going crazy” because she was bored and did not know what to do. However, nowadays, she even chooses to remove herself from group settings, such as dorm hostel rooms, in order to be on her own and recharge her social battery¹. Other participants shared this sentiment of enjoying their companionship. I10, especially, highlighted the importance of learning to be by oneself.

And it was still lovely like it was beautiful, and I enjoyed it to the fullest. So, yeah, I would say I'm never alone in my travels. I have me. So, me is my best companion, (...) but it really takes time for you to learn what you actually want and like. (I10)

While the solo journey was often marked by introspection, personal growth, and self-reliance, it did not mean that participants stayed isolated throughout their travels. Many emphasized that one of the most enriching aspects of their experiences was the social connections formed along the way. Whether fleeting encounters or lasting friendships, these interactions played a crucial role in shaping their journeys. They were able to offer support when faced with challenges, inspiration, and a sense of belonging in unfamiliar places.

¹ A term used to describe one's level of energy for social interaction. It is usually restored through solitude (Stacy, 2024).

4.2 The Social

While often framed as an individual pursuit, the interviews framed solo travel as inherently social.

4.2.1 Meeting People

For many participants, meeting people was an organic part of the journey, facilitated by physical proximity and shared openness. Hostels and public transportation such as trains and buses, cafés, campsites, and restaurants serve as common meeting spots where spontaneous interactions can naturally occur. These connections were characterized by a *laissez-faire* mentality and openness to whatever may come. “So, we would just wake up every day and be like, oh, do you want to hang out for coffee or something like that?” (I2) Participants also voiced that they were more open to talking to other people when they were alone in comparison to when they were traveling with a group they already knew which I2, for instance, had not felt before to such an extent. Additionally, they emphasized that it is essential for both sides to be open in order to establish a connection. As I4 puts it: “A connection between humans is always a double-sided thing. That means that you have to work with it, even if someone else approaches you.”

Some participants also mentioned using digital platforms like Tinder and Bumble BFF² to meet locals who could show them around their city. However, according to I7, these were often only short-lived connections limited to the initial meeting, as locals often did not understand the situation solo travelers were in. In her experience, many people struggle to empathize with the decision to travel alone, partly because it is a privileged position to be in. Still, for I6, apps offered a possibility to connect with people if no one else was around: “It’s not like you are forever alone. You always have the possibility, even when you are alone, to meet other people.”

Travelers such as I1 and I2 highlighted the variable nature of social engagement, noting that it depended on the situation whether people were easy to meet or not. In smaller or more intimate hostels, meeting people came naturally. In comparison, it can be more challenging to approach people and make connections in larger hostels with pre-established groups upon arrival. Participants also highlighted that social connections could become emotionally demanding and distracting. Nearly all participants expressed a desire to occasionally escape

² Tinder and Bumble are online dating apps through which individuals can connect. Bumble also offers the option of Bumble BFF, which focuses on friendships instead of romantic relationships.

social settings to find quiet spaces where they could recharge their social batteries and enjoy some privacy.

Still, meeting people helped all participants find footing in the destination and create a sense of belonging and comfort in unfamiliar surroundings. For instance, initial contact can ease the transition into new places and offer a feeling of safety and belonging. I1's initial connections in Toronto that she met when first arriving in her hostel helped her feel comfortable and find her place in Toronto: "I think otherwise. Had I not had like a group like that, I would have been a lot more anxious about what was to come. I would have. I think kept more to myself." Thus, other travel can significantly enhance the journey, for instance, by offering insider tips or acting as informal guides, particularly if they have already spent time at the destination (I2).

With people it is similar, I think those interactions stay in mind where I was struggling myself or did not have such a good day. And then, you look for two people, and they are able to completely turn the experience around. (I7)

As I9 noted, traveling alone can serve as a strong motivator to reach out and meet others simply because it entails stepping out of one's comfort zone, which many solo travelers want to achieve. Shared interests, backgrounds, and travel plans, such as a love of travel, common languages, or a shared interest in reading the same books, often lay a seemingly natural foundation for connection between travelers. I11 pointed out that many activities are designed for pairs or groups, which can encourage solo travelers to team up with others. However, not all interactions lead to the same connection with people.

4.2.2 Type of Interaction

Social interactions during solo travel take many forms, ranging from fleeting exchanges to lifelong bonds. I7 described three sorts of interactions that she encounters while solo traveling. The first one is interactions with other travelers with whom she clicks and becomes long-term friends. The second type is interactions with friendly people who are "totally funny at the moment, but with whom you could do nothing at home." (I7) They happen to be there at the moment, and one can do some activities together or even travel to some parts of the journey together, but afterward, one simply parts ways. Lastly, she viewed relations with locals separately as the interactions are based on a completely different level. They are usually not that deep, but hostel staff, camp staff, or store owners sometimes take on a helpful and caring role that can help solo travelers find their way to the destination.

For some, it was clear that the connections they made were only based on the moment, as it is impossible to form long-lasting friendships:

And (...) they're not your friend per se, but it's just someone you met along the way. And you also left the person there. It's kind of like that. (...) You know what, it's really what it is. I don't believe (...) if someone comes up to me and says that they made friends for life, I'm like, dude, you are bullshitting me right now. (I9)

Other travelers echoed similar distinctions. For some, connections were meaningful at the moment but naturally transient. The pre-determined length of the friendships was not seen as a bad thing but instead viewed as a way to reach feelings of a community and a sense of belonging in foreign communities: "Because you feel like a sense of belonging. Like even if you don't know them, like you are part of a group, which is really nice. Yeah, it just makes you feel included like you're a part of something." (I3) All of the participants agreed that you can get close to people fairly quickly, as it often felt as if you had known each other for your entire lives.

Various participants also associated the freedom of solo travel with the possibility of leaving people behind if you did not get along with them too well. For I1, it was nice to have different people there to help her through some challenging moments, but she was also relieved once she could leave the group: "I was happy to leave them after. They weren't really (...) my type of company." This possibility of leaving them behind also felt like less pressure to feel liked by the people. In the end, every traveler was always able to pick and choose which people they wanted to get to know.

Others spoke of forming deeper connections, as I13 called them "Herzensfreundschaften" – soul-level friendships that transcended the circumstances of travel. These bonds were often perceived as different from those formed at home, shaped by the intensity and openness that travel tends to foster. However, I7 also mentioned that she looks for different things in people she meets while traveling. Characteristics that are important at home, such as punctuality and dependability, take on a less important role in traveling. Even lasting friendships seem to have fewer requirements than at home. All of the interviewees who formed close friendships emphasize that it is not about the frequency of seeing each other but more about staying in touch and the experiences you lived through with each other. I13

speaks of gratefulness from both sides that you get to meet each other and form these connections.

However, social interactions are not always positive. For I1, negative experiences with a host made it difficult to trust strangers again, pushing her back into being cautious of her own space and even complicating future social encounters. I6 was harassed by another guest at the hostel. She recalled feeling very unsafe at that moment and also questioning whether she could stay overnight. Luckily, the hostel staff was able to reassure her and took direct and strict measures against the other guest. While these experiences had a greater impact on the journey, other participants noted that they were fortunate not to have experienced anything to that extreme. Some of them voiced that they could sometimes be annoyed because other travelers “were trying too hard to get social connections” (I6, I13) or because others stepped over their boundaries (I13). Due to the closeness of sharing a dorm room, many participants also voiced challenges of privacy and social battery when they were around others for too long (I3, I7, I13).

Despite these difficulties, many described a profound sense of belonging that emerged through the process of community building. Travelers often looked out for one another, creating temporary yet meaningful safety nets. I12 shared that she could tell immediately whether a connection would click or not, a sentiment that others echoed. Sometimes, the bond felt so natural, as though they had known each other their entire lives – even if they had only met the same day.

Interestingly, interactions were not only limited to humans either. For I9, even meeting dogs was an important part of the social experience, offering comfort and companionship along the way. Various other travelers also shared stories about animals; I3 and a friend saw a “huge cockroach”, which brought them closer together, and I5’s solo travel trips were all about taking care of horses and other farm animals.

These encounters, whether deep or surface level, often had a tangible impact on the journey itself. People influenced each other in significant ways, sometimes even altering travel plans completely, as shared by I13. The social fabric of solo travel is, therefore, not only about who one meets but also how those interactions shape the experience, offering insight, companionship, and, at times, true friendships.

Post-traveling, the connections formed during solo travel often continued in the digital realm. Many travelers stay in touch through social media, allowing for ongoing engagement with people they meet along the way. In most cases, the engagement is passive; they enjoy seeing what their former companions are up to these days but do not desire any direct impact.

For some, however, these connections remain meaningful and active. I7, for example, found some of her best friends while traveling solo and still makes sure to see them at least once a year. I13 and I12 are planning another trip together soon, emphasizing the depth of relationships formed while traveling.

Importantly, the flexibility of these relationships is often seen as a positive aspect. One of the benefits of travel-based connections is that there is no obligation to maintain them. Many highlight that even if there is no daily communication amongst them, they could send people a message that they are in town, and everyone would love to catch up (I6, I7). The freedom to stay in touch or not mirrors the nature of solo travel itself: connections are meaningful, but maintaining independence is essential.

4.3 Home as Safety Net

While solo travelers were immersed in their journeys, contact with people back home remained an important part of their social world. All participants maintained contact with friends and family to varying degrees. For some, communication was regular and emotionally significant, especially during moments of solitude or boredom. In such times, calling or texting home provided comfort and continuity. In a way, this communication with people they knew could feel

a little bit like a safety net that I know if something goes wrong or if I'm having a bad day or I don't know whatever happens (...) I could always call someone at home and immediately be able to speak to someone I think that (...) that definitely helps (I5).

I7 took a particularly creative approach by recording a podcast during travel to share daily updates about her adventures. I6 expressed her travel stories after returning from her trip, bringing back American food and creating a PowerPoint presentation for her family. I2 maintained intense contact with her friends and had a long phone call with someone from home, while I1 was in close touch with her best friend, who even visited her during her travels.

The communication was not only meaningful to the travelers but also to those on the receiving end. Parents, in particular, wanted to stay informed about the safety and whereabouts of their children, while also learning about their experiences. This also created a sort of emotional safety net for solo travelers as the possibility of reaching out comforted all

travelers. I7 even said that she would not go on a solo trip if she had not had that level of communication, with I8 agreeing that she could never imagine going on a trip if it would take her parents months to know about her safety.

That said, the level of contact often depended on how busy or socially engaged the travelers were at the destination. When surrounded by others, communication with home often played a less significant role. I13, for example, reached out primarily when she encountered difficulties. I6 had more phone calls when she had nothing to do, and I7 would even leave her phone in the hostel if she were out with people she could trust. Still, these connections to home, though physically distant, played a stabilizing role for many. They offered not only emotional support but also the possibility to share the intense moments travelers experienced along the way.

4.4 Sharing the Moment

Across all interviews, one theme emerged with notable consistency: the importance of sharing experiences. For many solo travelers, the ability to share a moment gave that moment greater emotional weight or clarity. In some cases, participants felt that they were unable to fully process an experience unless they had the opportunity to share it. This act of sharing manifested in several distinct forms, each serving a different psychological or social function.

The most powerful form of sharing was immediate: experiencing something alongside someone else in real time. For many, this kind of presence offered a sense of emotional grounding and validation as “you are just there together, can enjoy it” (I3). The moments can be positive, such as laughing together during a spontaneous event or reacting to a breathtaking view, or negative, for instance, experiencing traumatic events or discussing difficult experiences. The other person acted as a companion who was able to amplify the feeling and help make sense of it. This real-time sharing often made the experience more memorable as it made moments seem more intense and like they mattered more because someone else was there to witness them, too: “I think that's worth so much more because the other person is actually there you can talk to that person in the moment and the person is experiencing everything like you are.” (I5)

When immediate sharing was not possible, participants often turned to delayed forms of connection. This involved calling or messaging a friend or family member or writing about experiences in a travel journal. I12 still keeps all of her travel diaries and enjoys going back to read them. She says that there is so much going on every single day that she cannot keep track of it all by herself. However, reading her daily entries offers a way to take her right back.

Others shared images or updates on social media for documentation but also to connect with others and feel seen. For I3, this action is really about sharing moments that feel significant to her as “if you have nice pictures, why not share them with people?” These forms of after-the-fact sharing, therefore, allowed travelers to relive and reframe their experiences through narration. For instance, I10 said that she is often unable to fully comprehend and process a moment, as she can become overwhelmed by the many new impressions. Taking pictures and looking back at them later can help her process the moment, as she can take a step back and reflect. The act of sharing what happened, whether through words, visuals, or creative expression, helped them sort through emotions, recall details, and integrate the experience into their broader personal narrative.

4.5 Memorability

When asked to share a moment or two in the interview, many participants struggled to isolate just one experience: “I would say it's difficult for like (...) actual moments.” (I1) This challenge was not due to a lack of meaningful events but rather the richness of their experiences. According to them, solo travel is about its variety and how different moments add up to complete the whole experience.

Interestingly, although negative experiences did occasionally dominate at the moment, especially when they involved stress, discomfort, or unexpected challenges, these events tended to lose significance over time. Upon reflection, participants were more inclined to focus on the positive.

I would say it's easier to evaluate and kind of like separate those things as well because obviously like (...) if you're travelling for such a long time also by yourself, something is gonna go wrong like not everything can be perfect all the time. (I1)

While participants were expecting to experience negative things during their journey, even those became sources of insight or stories to share. Still, participants preferred to talk about the uplifting, unique, or beautiful moments that lingered and that ultimately shaped the narrative of their trips – “I think it's because I haven't had them anywhere else. They are just such unique experiences. And because you can't have them anywhere else.” (I6)

A recurring theme was that interactions with others often became the very core of what was remembered. Other people influenced the memorability of a moment – or, as I4 put it,

“they were the moment”. A deep conversation in a café, a companion for a train ride across the country, or a friend after injury stays in mind. Many participants felt that the social connections they formed actually were the heart of their journey. Even when an experience did not turn out as planned, they often enjoyed simply being with the people. “So, it was just us in the city and I really loved that.” (I2) This highlights how others have the power to elevate an experience sort of and turn it into something nice, or as I2 puts it: “It was enjoyable, nevertheless. Because the people were good. So, if you have good people, you're gonna have a good time. That's what I think.” However, they also emphasized that these moments do not occur on their own; one has to be open to them in order to allow the connection to unfold.

Memorability, then, often stemmed from a mixture of the unexpected and the extraordinary. Unique, emotionally charged, or particularly intense experiences left the strongest impressions. These ranged from impressive natural elements to immersive hostel life and moments of genuine friendships. Still, not all memories were immediately appreciated. I12, for example, expressed that she did not always feel capable of fully valuing experiences as they happened: “Only afterward, one goes wow, I was allowed to experience all of this.” This delayed appreciation was echoed by others, suggesting that travelers unravel moments after the moment itself has passed. Memorability is not just about what happened, but how individuals’ make sense of it and which elements they hold onto.

Ultimately, what stood out was not just where participants had been but how they had felt, and especially, who they had shared it with. Solo travel may be defined by individual agency, but the memories that endure are often those shaped in connection with others.

5 Discussion

The results show that the concept of memorability lies at the heart of the solo travel experience. For female Gen Z travelers, what becomes memorable is not simply defined by the destination or activities but by the interplay of emotional intensity, social interaction, and digital mediation. These moments stood out because of their emotional intensity or the role they are playing in personal transformation. Therefore, for many participants, memorable experiences were not consumed passively but co-constructed through interaction, solitude, and storytelling. The results demonstrate that what makes a solo journey unforgettable often lies in its relational and emotional fabric, shaped not only by what was done but by who was present, how emotions were felt, and how the experiences were later shared, interpreted, and preserved (Seyfi et al., 2020, p. 344).

5.1 The Solo or the Social?

The nature of social experiences among female solo travelers is significantly influenced by individual pursuits. Factors such as emotional stress, the desire to form new connections, or the need to reflect and make significant life decisions all play a role in shaping how solo travelers engage with others (Manthiou et al., 2023; Yang, 2021). In essence, the “solo” aspect of travel can be both a physical and emotional state as travelers may be alone but still seek varied degrees of social interaction. This research reaffirms Zhang et al.’s (2024, p. 11) argument that social interaction is not only part of the experience but central to enhancing it.

However, in this study there is a noticeable tension between seeking connection and needing time alone. Many participants described fluctuating between moments of intense interaction and deliberate solitude in order to manage energy levels. Socializing was fulfilling but can also get exhausting as shared hostel rooms offer no privacy. Solitude offered the solution to this and the possibility to decide when and when not to engage was valued by participants. This fluidity reflects Zatori and Beardsley’s (2017, p. 35) concept of flow, where it is not just the experience but also the emotional and environmental context surrounding it that matters. Safety and trust were integral parts of the experiences. Without a sense of safety, participants were less likely to engage meaningfully. Gut feelings and digital tools can be helpful to assess the trustworthiness in people and places. Women-only dorms, well-reviewed accommodations, and positive word-of-mouth helped establish this sense of security.

Nevertheless, social interactions support Yang’s (2021, p. 2461) conceptualization of solo travel as “solo, but not alone”, a theme that recurred throughout the interviews. Connections with others enhanced meaning, reduced loneliness, and allowed them to share

experiences. The paradox of solo travel being inherently social lies at the heart of the results. Although it involves time alone, solo travel often creates the very conditions for heightened interpersonal interaction. The absence of known faces appears to make solo travelers more attuned to connection and more available for spontaneous interaction. Rather than being an isolated experience, being alone amplified the receptivity to others. Therefore, solo travel enables spontaneous, novel, and emotionally charged connections which make the experience unique to the individual just like characteristics of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2019, p. 17). Participants tended to remember social interactions more vividly than natural landmarks as emotional connections anchored memories in ways that simple sightseeing could not thus highlighting the importance of emotional values (Brochado et al., 2021, p. 1481).

If solo travel becomes a continuous pursuit of emotionally resonant or transformative moments, does it risk transforming experiences into a kind of emotional labor? Solo travelers can feel pressured to make their travels meaningful, raising questions about the need to go through a life-changing experience that needs to be validated by others in digitally mediated contexts. Does this entail entering an era where a “true” solo traveler must face growth, vulnerability, and connection along the way? When participants faced challenges, they often treated them as moments of self-discovery or accomplishment and looked back on them with a sense of pride. In the moment itself, the experiences were intimidating and more significant. So, where does this transformation into retrospectively positive come from? Psychological studies have investigated this phenomenon and have found various reasons for why people tend or even prefer to remember positive memories before negative ones. Firstly, studies show that humans tend to be more often happy than unhappy (Walker, 2003, p. 204). This might be because it is in human’s nature to seek positive experiences instead of negative ones (Walker, 2003, p. 205). Secondly, fading-affect-bias exists. It indicates that the emotional significance of negative experiences shrinks more than positive ones (Walker, 2003, p. 206). Therefore, people are able to cope with experiences in a healthy way and feel higher levels of positive emotions (Walker, 2003, p. 207). Participants in this research were also able to experience this. Negative experiences, while significant in the moment, were turned around and could be seen as valuable learning experiences. Having to go through challenges and tough moments left participants feeling with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Psychological studies also show that people tend to remember positive memories that they experienced with others instead of those that had no social interactions (Speer & Delgado, 2020, p. 792). Most valued experiences are therefore the ones experienced in

companionship of other people. This is also reflected in conversations as people like to tell stories of interactions or reminisce about time spent together (Speer & Delgado, 2020, p. 790). At the core of memorable solo travel experiences for female solo travelers were often social interactions. Others were at the heart of the journeys and moments that stuck were often co-created with others. However, the results also proved that even short-lived interactions can improve emotional engagement. Previous studies showed that especially close connections improve the memory of positive experiences (Speer & Delgado, 2020, p. 792). This research shows the emotional significance of sharing as it enables intrinsic value of experiencing and sharing positive memories. It could also be because of the intense nature of solo traveling that even short-lived interactions are significant.

The degree to which one identifies with the concept of being a solo traveler influences the nature of social bonds formed. Those who fully embraced the identity of a solo traveler were more likely to form lasting friendships, as they seemed to be seeking focused interactions (Murphy, 2001, p. 51). On the other hand, individuals who did not resonate as strongly with the solo travel identity often formed friendships that were less carried forward. However, even these participants had focused interactions with other travelers as they grouped together to travel or search for activities. These encounters show how emotional connectedness can emerge quickly and fade just as fast. The feeling of belonging, even when temporarily, was reinforced by the shared context that solo travel enabled. Within this context solo travelers felt a kind of openness to activities and behavior they would not be having at home. For instance, they would want to be more spontaneous instead of planning everything, or embraced hobbies that they would not do as often at home.

Across the board, interactions with others were meaningful for solo travelers, but participants questioned the depth of these encounters. While meaningful at the moment, many connections were temporary or situational rather than indicative of belonging to a long-term community. Instead, most travelers perceive themselves as part of a short-term community that can foster a sense of belonging but does not extend beyond the trip. They often viewed people as companions for phases of their trip. Therefore, Reichenberger's (2016, p. 634) types cannot be applied directly to the findings of this research; instead, they need to be adapted. Although almost all participants were able to establish a sense of belonging, not all of them were in a community setting, and their sense of belonging was not based on long and meaningful interactions. Even brief interactions with staff members, locals, or fellow travelers could bring comfort and the opportunity to learn new things to the individual. Still, even these

interactions can be intense and significant, varying from those participants would have at home, as Murphy (2001, p. 60) proposed.

5.2 Characteristics of Social Interactions

This intensity of interactions leads to the key question of why some social interactions become memorable. As Rihova (2015, p. 357) explains, experiences that stand out tend to be novel or unusual. The data reveals that intensity, novelty, and emotional vulnerability are major contributing factors. Shared emotional experiences, such as late-night talks or shared interests, created bonds that anchored memories. Even a brief conversation can become memorable if it occurs during a moment of emotional openness. This supports Kim et al.'s (2010, p. 19) dimensions of MTEs, particularly emotional engagement, meaning, and novelty. Emotional engagement was present in the way shared interests and fun times were remembered, while meaning was a strong driver for emotional growth and validation. Novelty acted as the key trigger for memorability as moments often center on first-time experiences or the unpredictability of solo travel. Lastly, moments in which the participants were active agents in shaping the experience stuck the most. The sense of actively controlling their own experience rather than simply following a plan reinforced the emotional salience of these events. For many participants, it was not the duration or frequency of interaction that mattered but the emotional imprint it left. This insight challenges assumptions that depth is only possible through longevity.

Building on Reichenberger's (2016, p. 634) typology of interaction, this research introduces a framework that inspects the intentionality and psychological motivation behind interaction. This new typology, based on participant data, classifies solo travelers into three overlapping profiles: the Social Solo Traveler, the Semi-Social Traveler, and the Life Crisis Traveler.

The **Social Solo Traveler** is highly interested in interpersonal interaction as their main motivation for solo traveling is meeting new people and boosting their social personality. They align closely with what Zhang et al. (2024, p. 5ff) describe as Social Solo Travelers who prioritize esteem and image enhancement through social exchange. These individuals tend to stay in social accommodations such as hostels or camps, environments that naturally encourage contact with others. They are generally open to all types of social interactions and often see these connections develop into lasting friendships. For them, the solo travel experience is not about isolation but about the freedom to form diverse relationships based on their choices and interests. The autonomy of solo travel does not mean isolating oneself but

rather having the freedom to choose with whom to connect. They exemplify the type of tourist Pine and Gilmore (2019, p. 3) describe as fully immersed in the co-creation of experience.

The **Semi-Social Traveler** embodies a balanced approach. While they express a desire to meet people, they also value solitude, as described by Murphy (2001) and Yang (2021). This group demonstrates a deliberate decision-making process when choosing how to engage socially, prioritizing their own well-being over a constant need for interaction. Therefore, they often self-regulate their social contact to maintain mental balance, forming deep connections only when the interaction is meaningful or restorative. Overall, they resemble Zatori and Beardsley's (2017) depiction of flow in the way individuals engage in different waves with others.

The **Life Crisis Traveler** represents the most introspective type out of the three and resonates with Manthiou et al.'s (2023, p. 464) escape-type solo travelers. Often driven by a need to escape routine or address personal challenges, these travelers embark on their journey to seek clarity or make life-changing decisions. Although they remain open to connections, they frequently find social engagement to be a distraction from their inner process. They are more similar to Reichenberg's (2016, p. 364) Detached Tourist type, though even they may experience brief but emotionally potent interactions (Murphy, 2001).

Importantly, these typologies should be viewed as fluid identities that solo travelers may shift between depending on their current needs, travel context, or emotional state. A traveler may begin a trip as a Life Crisis Traveler and, after finding emotional stability, shift toward Semi-Social modes of engagement. This dynamic aligns with Cutler and Carmichael's (2010, p. 4) framing of experiences as shaped by situational stimuli and individual perception.

In addition to the three typologies, the data also revealed that there are different types of interactions. Encounters with other travelers commonly resulted in bonding, belonging, emotional safety, comfort, and fun. Shared experiences, whether adventurous or reflective, were meaningful precisely because they were shared with someone going through a similar journey. Locals, in contrast, were seen mostly as cultural guides, offering insight and practical help that enhanced a sense of place. Interestingly, while Popşa (2024) and Robinson and Schänzel (2019) note Gen Z's interest in local culture, various participants found interactions with other travelers more accessible and impactful. This complicates the dominant narrative of Gen Z as immersive, place-focused tourists and suggests a preference for socially familiar modes of engagement. Instead of looking for challenges, solo travelers were looking for convenience and emotional comfort in their relationships. Lastly, and importantly, digital check-ins with friends and family provided reassurance as they served as a stabilizing force

for female travelers. For many, digital contacts were just as real and valuable as physical presence echoing Litt et al. (2020) and Fisun et al. (2024). Online contact helped regulate emotions, offering support, validation, and encouragement when social energy was low or when participants faced challenges.

5.3 Technology as Mediator

Altogether, technology played an integral part in the travel experiences of female solo travelers. Digital tools not only supported planning but also served as an emotional mediator. They were used to manage loneliness, maintain relationships, and find emotional support. As Litt et al. (2020, p. 12) argue, the medium of interaction is less relevant than the intent and emotional weight it carries. Social media (Instagram, WhatsApp) has become vital in building digital safety nets, both with other travelers and especially in forming support networks back home. This reinforced the idea that solo travel is both globally connected and individually transformative. Additionally, the process of sharing served as a form of emotional reflection. The act of having someone witness what you experience, even digitally, enhanced memorability.

Therefore, digital storytelling was key in framing memories. By taking pictures and then later choosing which ones to share, participants curated their experiences consciously, choosing what to highlight and what to leave out. This act of curation was reflective and emotionally driven as these stories shaped how they remembered their journey. Instagram profiles could serve as emotional bookmarks, that make remembering moments easier and allow them to relive specific feelings. However, this sharing was less about the instagrammability of things (Vancia et al., 2023, p. 11) and instead about sharing moments with others who were not there in the moment. These findings support Brochado et al. (2021, p. 1481), who emphasize emotional value as a core part of memorability. Digital storytelling was instrumental in shaping not just how participants remembered their journey but also how they interpreted its meaning. Even travelers who did not share publicly still engaged in reflective practices through pictures, journals, and messages. Yet this process is not without its tensions. The act of documenting might become performative, encouraging travelers to frame their journey according to emotional or social norms. This raises the question: when does the act of sharing enhance memory, and when does it begin to distort it?

Especially for women, technology plays a significant role in enhancing the perception of safety. It offered ways for them to experience liberation through their autonomy while simultaneously having something to fall back on in case they needed support. Apps for

navigation, recommendations, and ridesharing help them to feel secure and in control (Karagöz et al., 2020; Fisu et al., 2024). In addition, technology also allowed female travelers to navigate loneliness and boredom. When they had no connections to their destinations, all travelers reached out to people they knew to pass the time and share their memorable experiences, moments, and impressions. While technology can extend autonomy, the need to document and validate travel through social media can distort the experience itself. By sharing moments, solo travelers might focus on external affirmation rather than intrinsic meaning. Setting the focus on this would lose the original purpose of solo travel as a transformative journey. If solo travelers travel only to find external approval, are they truly going to be successful on a journey of self-discovery?

Still, technology also enabled the experience of “being solo, but not alone” overall (Yang, 2021, p. 2461). It provided safety, connection, and continuity across borders. Even after the trip, reviewing digital memories helped participants relive and reframe experiences. In this sense, apps and digital spaces were integral to the travel experience and its memorability.

5.4 MSTE – Between Independence and Connection

Lastly, the proposed framework for memorable solo travel experiences (MSTE) requires revision. When asked to describe memorable moments, most participants discussed significant and unique destinations or landmarks but focused more on people and emotions. Therefore, solo travel should not be viewed as an isolated act but rather as an emotional, social, and digital process that unfolds over time. Figure 3, therefore, depicts an adapted version of the original proposed framework (Figure 2).

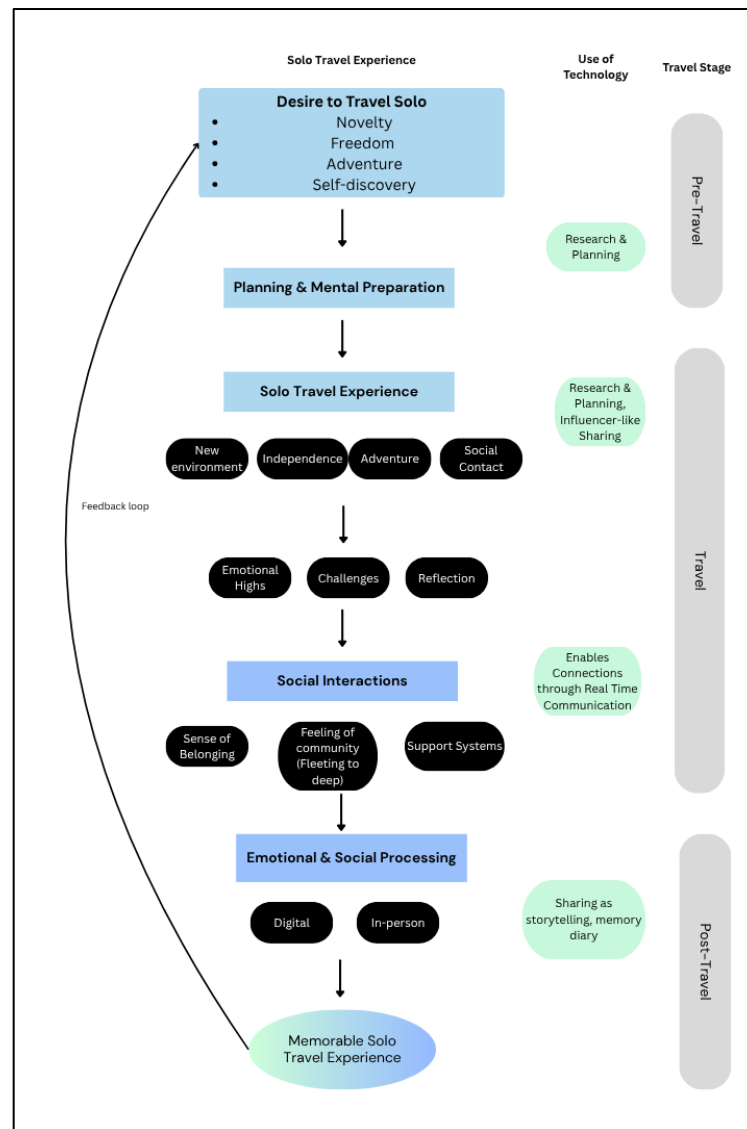


Figure 3 Adapted Memorable Solo Travel Experience

The results show that MSTEs are not only shaped by motivations such as novelty and the desire for exploration but also stem from life transitions and emotional stress. Additionally, the pre-departure phase significantly influences the shape of the travel experience, as planning through digital tools such as Booking.com and social media enables travelers to plan many elements. The anticipation for the trip also plays a significant role. Some travelers planned the trip for a long time, while others went spontaneously; however, the arrival phase and the first days are key elements that participants remember.

A flow of activities and emotions characterizes the travel phase. Encounters with people can be brief or long-lasting and may sometimes lead to lasting bonds. All the travelers recalled highs and lows, often navigating a state between solitude and sociability. This process proved to be a learning opportunity for them to understand their own needs as individuals and to know when to engage or step back. However, travelers did not need to form

deep friendships and relationships with others, as even brief encounters could influence the quality of the experience. This demonstrates that social interaction offers a kind of emotional safety net that is especially valuable for the moment.

Technology plays an essential role not only in planning phases but also in emotional and social terms. Previous research (Pinho & Gomes, 2022; Vancia et al., 2023) suggests that Gen Z should be viewed as digital natives. Female Gen Z travelers utilize digital tools for navigation, planning, connection, documentation, and reflection. Social media, blogs, and messaging apps help maintain ties to home and facilitate new social contacts abroad. Especially the possibility of connecting with people from the same community makes participants feel safer and allows them to enjoy their experiences more. For some, journals or digital storytelling offer outlets for processing experiences and emotions. These outlets allowed participants to review photos, journals, or shared content as a way of reliving the journey and discussing it with people who were not even part of the experience itself. Therefore, while this form of sharing does not compare to the real deal, later moments can still lead to connections as well. By sharing on Instagram or sending pictures on WhatsApp, travelers reinforce for themselves which moments mattered. Therefore, photography can be seen as emotional cues in post-travel reflection. Sharing was even significant for those who did not share anything publicly as social media seemed superficial.

The concept of “solo, but not alone” best captures this balance between independence and connection, demonstrating that even temporary or long-distance relationships can significantly shape the travel experience. Reflection and digital storytelling play a key role in making meaning and consolidating memory. Participants also highlighted how emotional highs and lows were often reflected on in hindsight as part of the personal journey. Even traumatic moments, such as accidents, could be reframed as important growth points. This supports the reflective loop in the MSTE model and echoes Zatori and Beardsley’s (2017) emphasis on flow and emotional resonance.

However, this also raises questions about what is forgotten. If only peak experiences are shared and remembered, what happens to the ordinary, the quiet, or the emotionally neutral? This pressure to create and live through meaningful experiences may reduce space for boredom, slowness, or serendipity, all of which are elements that once defined exploratory travel. In this way memorability becomes not just a byproduct of experience but a demand upon it.

5.5 Future Outlook

Academically, future studies could investigate how factors such as age, race, and socioeconomic status influence emotional safety, social participation, and digital storytelling practices. Additionally, longitudinal research into how travel memories evolve and are influenced by digital storytelling could deepen the understanding of memory consolidation in tourism. For instance, participants could be directly interviewed during, immediately after, and then some time after their trip. In this way, differences in memory can be discovered and compared. Another suggestion is to study the idea of solo travel as a therapeutic process. While this thesis focused on social interactions, participants still voiced notions of growing and finding peace on their journeys. The contexts in which these changes occur could help tourism providers create products that align with the needs of Gen Z solo travellers. Also, a bigger focus on the psychological context of favoring positive moments over negative experiences while solo traveling could further improve the understanding of the field. Lastly, future research could explore in what ways social media portrays solo traveling and how this influences Gen Z women's perceptions of it. How do these platforms create images of empowerment or safety?

Practically, tourism providers should consider ways to foster safe, low-pressure interaction spaces that facilitate connection without forcing it. However, even in these spaces, it is essential to ensure that staff are trained to maintain safety, especially for women traveling alone. Hostels could integrate communal design, create female-focused programming, and leverage technology to support curated experiences that respect the traveler's autonomy while nurturing a sense of community. Apps could integrate features such as mood-based itinerary suggestions or storytelling tools that help travelers process and shape their experiences in a meaningful way. On a policy level, findings call for gender-sensitive tourism development. Certification programs for female-friendly accommodations and dedicated support services could improve the accessibility and appeal of solo travel. When aiming to attract young independent travelers, policymakers should recognize the importance of place atmospheres. Public transport, walkability, and the visibility of communal spaces play a significant role in shaping solo travelers' sense of security and spontaneity.

A sustainable future for solo travel lies in designing experiences that are flexible, inclusive, and emotionally attuned to the individual. Recognizing that while every journey is individual, but does not need to be transformative, tourism stakeholders should support conditions where solo travelers can move between solitude and connection without pressure.

This would reinforce what solo travel is truly about – enabling the traveler to create meaning on their terms.

6 Conclusion

This thesis examined how social interactions influence the memorability of solo travel experiences for female Generation Z travelers. Drawing from qualitative interviews with thirteen women who traveled solo, the findings reinforce that solo travel is in fact a social rather than solitary act. Autonomy, emotional depth, and interpersonal connection all interplay to form memorable experiences. What participants remembered most vividly were often the people they met, the relationships they formed, and the feelings these connections evoked. Some developed lifelong friendships, while others experienced fleeting but intense connections. Regardless of duration, the quality and emotional significance of these encounters played a key role in shaping what was ultimately remembered. This reinforces the notion that meaningful social interaction enhances memorability, and in the context of solo travel, not by replacing autonomy but by enriching it. All participants recalled appreciating relationships because they were fleeting; there was no pressure from either side to maintain them, as it was normal to leave them behind.

Technology emerged as a mediator in this process. Digital tools served as planning assistants, safety nets, and platforms for real-time and retrospective storytelling. The ability to connect with others provided a sense of comfort and control. Online reviews provided reassurance and guidance in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, this reliance on technology should also be viewed critically. While it shapes how Gen Z travels, it also influences how they frame and share their experiences. By documenting and publishing key moments, travelers influence memory by potentially prioritizing shareable or aesthetically pleasing experiences over more private or mundane ones.

Female Gen Z members undergo emotional journeys when they travel solo. Joy, vulnerability, loneliness, pride, and fear were all part of the larger experience. Navigating these issues, listening to gut feelings, and adapting to discomfort reinforced their independence as significant turning points. Interestingly, these points also encompassed negative experiences that were reframed with a sense of pride and accomplishment. Notions of gender were also important while navigating social interactions. Many participants reported modifying their behavior out of necessity. While negative experiences reinforced safety concerns, positive interactions helped them feel safe, seen, and supported. However, for many women, hardships were caused by harassment or fear of harassment. It needs to be questioned whether female travelers need to endure risk or discomfort to achieve the confidence and empowerment often associated with solo travel. It causes solo travel to be more than just a

neutral space for self-discovery; it becomes a gender-based environment that requires female travelers to assess, adapt, and defend their autonomy.

Altogether, the findings support and expand the proposed framework of Memorable Solo Travel Experiences. The model accounts for the fluid and interdependent roles of motivation, social connection, emotional resonance, and digital mediation. It positions solo travel not as a fixed or static activity but as a dynamic process of meaning-making. Memory is socially constructed: what is shared, validated, and reflected upon becomes more memorable over time.

It needs to be acknowledged that this research is not without limitation. The retrospective nature of the interviews means that the narratives are shaped by how things are remembered and made meaningful afterwards. Additionally, the sample focuses on a set geographical location. Still, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on Generation Z travel trends and female solo travel by framing solo travel as simultaneously individual and collective. It challenges the view of solo travel as either isolating or empowering by presenting a perspective that emphasizes connections and emotional interdependence. It also highlights the significance of digital culture in shaping how younger generations experience, process, and recall travel. Future research could broaden its scope to include non-Western perspectives and other genders, exploring how social and digital dynamics differ across various contexts.

For tourism providers, the findings suggest the need to design products that cater to the emotional and social dimensions of solo travel. This includes safe and flexible environments, spaces that facilitate authentic social connection, and digital platforms that support information sharing and emotional engagement. Rather than marketing solo travel for solitude purposes, providers should acknowledge the relational factors that contribute to the memorability of such journeys.

Ultimately, this thesis sets solo travel as a layered and emotionally rich experience for Gen Z women. It is constructed in interaction with others and reflected through a lens of discovery and self-expression. Through digital tools, solo travelers exist in a world of constant connectivity, and while they might be physically alone, they are rarely emotionally or socially isolated. Altogether, solo traveling enables travelers to choose when, how, and with whom to engage. Female solo travelers navigate a balance between autonomy and connection, crafting memories not away from others, but often because of them.

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Appendix A Anonymized Participant Overview

Interviewee	Origin	Currently living	Age	Amount of Times Solo Traveled	Destinations of Solo Traveling
I1	France	France	23	1	Canada
I2	Greece	Greece	23	2	Austria, United Kingdom
I3	Hungary	Hungary	22	2	Thailand, France
I4	Austria	Germany	24	1	New Zealand
I5	Sweden	Sweden	23	2	Portugal, Austria
I6	Germany	Germany	24	2	United States of America
I7	Germany	Netherlands	24	1	Marocco, Mid-America
I8	Bulgaria	Netherlands	19	1	Italy, Switzerland, France
I9	India	Netherlands	22	3	India
I10	Japan	Netherlands	25	7	Australia, Japan
I11	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	25	6	Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium
I12	Austria	Austria	25	2	New Zealand, Sri Lanka
I13	Germany	Germany	24	3	Portugal, Sri Lanka, Bali, Lombok, Singapore, France

Appendix B Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Where did you travel recently? Have you traveled solo before?
3. How many times have you traveled solo? How did you choose your destination?
4. Can you tell me a bit more about your experience?
- 5.

The experience

6. What did it feel like to travel on your own?
7. How did you go about this trip?
 - a. Did you plan a lot of elements in advance, or did you leave your trip to chance?
 - b. Can you describe why you wanted a solo travel experience?
8. Did you face any challenges while traveling solo? How did you deal with them?

Memorability

9. Can you describe a moment or two that really stood out during your trip?
10. Why do you think those experiences stood out like that?
 - a. How significant were they and why?

Social Interaction

11. How was your social life while traveling solo?
12. How did you meet or connect with other people during your trip?
13. Thinking back to the experience that stood out to you, how did those interactions affect your experience?
14. How have those interactions helped with some of the challenges you've described earlier?

Technology

15. Did you use any digital tools before, during, or after the trip?

- a. Which ones?
- b. For what did you use them?

16. In what ways did these tools influence your experience?

Ending

Thank you, is there anything else you would like to share with me, or do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title and version	Solo but not Alone – Memorable Experiences while Solo Traveling
Name of Principal Investigator	Clara Koch
Name of Organisation	Erasmus University Rotterdam – Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication.
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Clara Koch. I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the influence of social interactions on solo travel experiences. It aims to contribute to the research on memorability, social connections, and solo travel challenges.
Procedures	<p>You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. You will be asked questions about your personal solo travel experiences and social interactions you encountered during your traveling. Sample questions include: “Thinking back to the experience that stood out to you, how did those interactions affect your experience?”</p> <p>You must be at least 18 years old.</p>
Potential and anti-cipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
Potential Benefits	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating you may better understand the ways in which social interactions influence how you evaluate your travel experiences. The broader goal of this research is to research the value interactions hold.
Sharing the results	All data will be anonymized and handled confidently. A first version of the thesis will be handed in on the 23 rd of May, while the final version will be handed in on the 13 th of June. All participants have the possibility to read the thesis if they wish to do so. A publication of the thesis is not planned at this moment.

Confidentiality	<p>Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.</p> <p>As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.</p>
Right to Withdraw and Questions	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Clara Koch 705179ck@student.eur.nl</p>
Statement of Consent	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, please contact the coordinator of the course Methods of Qualitative Research Dr. Naomi Oosterman (oosterman@eshcc.eur.nl).</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>
Audio recording (if applicable)	<p>I consent to have my interview audio recorded</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p>

Secondary use (if applicable)	I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no	
Signature and Date	NAME PARTICIPANT	NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
	SIGNATURE	SIGNATURE
	DATE	DATE

Appendix D Code Book

Theme	Code	Definition
Internal Motivation	Autonomous Decision-Making	Traveler values full control over travel behavior, including itinerary, accommodations, and pacing.
	Confidence building	Gaining self-assurance through independence.
	Desire for Spontaneity	Preference for embracing the unknown.
	Exploration	A strong interest in exploring local customs, food, or traditions.
	Transformational Motivation	Solo traveling for emotional recovery, transition, or self-reinvention
Emotionality	Comfort in Solitude	The ability to feel at ease and fulfilled while alone.
	Emotional Adaptability	Ability to regulate and reframe negative experiences into positive insights.
	Emotional Self-Reliance	Managing emotional ups and downs independently.
	Homesickness	Emotional distress due to separation from familiar environments, family, or routines.
	Loneliness	Negative emotional state resulting from lack of meaningful social connections.
Social Behavior and Interaction	Need for Connection	Desire to connect with others for support, joy, or meaning.
	Openness to Social Interaction	Willingness to engage with strangers and other travelers to enrich the experience.
	Selective Social Engagement	Conscious decision-making about when and with whom to interact based on mood and energy levels.
	Sensitivity to Environment	How external factors influence comfort, safety, and behavior.
	Social Dynamics	The dynamics and form of interactions while solo traveling.
Use of Technology	Connections to Home	The role technology played in connecting travelers to family and friends.
	Digital Competence	Confident use of technology for various elements.
	Digital Networking	Use of digital platforms to meet new people while traveling.
	Digital Storytelling	Sharing travel experiences online to create meaning, inspire others, or simply document the journey.

	Inspiration	Using digital tools for inspiration for journey.
	Technology as a Safety Net	Using digital tools for safety, information, and emotional support.
Memory and Meaning-Making	Emotionally Driven Memory	Long-term recollection based on strong emotional resonance.
	Negative Experiences	Unpleasant but memorable experiences.
	Positive Experiences	Enjoyable and fulfilling memories.
	Value of Reflection	Actions for self-reflection such as journaling or storytelling.
Safety and Risk Navigation	Gendered Safety Strategies	Behavioral adaptations made specifically by female travelers to manage risk and discomfort.
	Risk Awareness	Assessing and responding to perceived threats or discomforts.
	Safety-Oriented Planning	Proactive steps taken to ensure physical and emotional safety while traveling.
Travel Experience	Accommodation	Descriptions of the type of accommodation travelers stayed in and the role they played in the overall experience.
	Challenges	Obstacles encountered during solo travel.
	Planning Phase	The significance and characteristics of the pre-travel planning phase.

Appendix E Code Tree

