



Safe Travel Experiences by Women Travelling Alone

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This thesis is implemented as development work for the SAFE project, which is co-funded by the Erasmus + Programme of the European Union. The SAFE project aims to develop safe and accessible urban areas and promote the needs of the diverse focus groups. The objective of this work was to research the factors affecting on women's travel safety and develop safety guidelines for solo female travellers. The purpose of the work was to understand how women can improve their travel safety and to create educational content for the client.

Qualitative research methods were used in this thesis. Based on the themes identified during the literature review, semi-structured interview questions were prepared, as qualitative interviewing was selected to the main data collection method. The interview participants were women from the participating SAFE project countries, and they had a diverse experience on solo travel. The anonymized interview transcripts were used for the data analysis. Thematic analysis with Artificial Intelligence (AI) assisted coding was the chosen method for the data analysis.

The results of the data analysis revealed five themes which can be seen improving women's travel safety, six factors which can increase the risk to face safety related problems when travelling alone, and nine guidance verbs which can be utilized to improve the personal strategies on travel safety. As the outcome of the development work, three solo female traveller User personas were created and for each User persona, six personalized safety guidelines were developed. These final products can be used as an educational or promotional material for the SAFE project. Further research could include more traditional data analysis techniques and comparison to the AI assisted data analysis results. However, this research clearly revealed the main themes affecting on women's travel safety.

Keywords: Safety guidelines, Solo travel, Travel safety, Women travelling alone

Jonna Konivuori

Yksin matkustavien naisten turvallisia matkailukokemuksia

Vuosi

2024

Sivumäärä

49

Tämä opinnäytetyö toteutettiin kehitysprojektina SAFE-hankkeelle, joka on osittain Euroopan Unionin Erasmus+ -ohjelman rahoittama. SAFE-hankkeen tavoitteena on kehittää urbaanien alueiden turvallista saavutettavuutta sekä edistää erilaisten kohderyhmien erityistarpeiden huomioimista. Työn tavoitteena oli tutkia naisten matkustusturvallisuuden vaikuttavia tekijöitä ja kehittää yksin matkustaville naisille suunnattuja turvallisuusohjeita. Työn tarkoituksena oli oppia ymmärtämään, miten naiset voivat parantaa matkustusturvallisuuttaan, sekä kehittää asiakkaalle koulutusmateriaaleja.

Tässä opinnäytetyössä käytettiin laadullisia tutkimusmenetelmiä. Kirjallisuuskatsauksessa tunnistettujen teemojen pohjalta laadittiin puolistrukturoidut haastattelukysymykset, sillä pääasiallisesti tiedonkeruumenetelmäksi valittiin laadullinen haastattelu. Haastateltavat naiset olivat kotoisin SAFE-hankkeen osallistujajamaista, ja heillä oli monipuolisia kokemuksia yksin matkustamisesta. Datan analysoinnissa käytettiin anonymisoituja haastatteluiden litterointeja. Data-analyysiin menetelmäksi valittiin temaattinen analyysi, jossa datan koodaus suoritettiin tekoälyavusteisesti.

Data-analyysin tulokset nostivat esiin viisi teemaa, joiden voidaan nähdä parantavan naisten matkustusturvallisuutta, sekä kuusi tekijää, jotka voivat lisätä riskiä kohdata turvallisuusaiheisia ongelmia yksin matkustettaessa. Lisäksi tunnistettiin yhdeksän ohjeverbiä, joiden avulla yksin matkustavat naiset voivat kehittää henkilökohtaisia matkustusturvallisuuteen liittyviä strategioita. Varsinaisena kehitystyön lopputuloksena syntyi kolme yksin matkustavan naisen käyttäjäpersoonaa ja jokaiselle käyttäjäpersoonalle kehitettiin kuusi personoitua turvallisuusohjetta. Näitä projektin lopputuotteita voidaan käyttää esimerkiksi SAFE-hankkeen opetus- tai mainosmateriaalina. Aiheen jatkotutkimus voisi sisältää perinteisempien data-analyysitekniikoiden käyttöä ja saatujen tulosten vertailua tekoälyavusteisesti tuotettuihin data-analyysituloksiin. Tämä tutkimus toi kuitenkin selvästi esiin tärkeimmät naisten matkustusturvallisuuden vaikuttavat teemat.

Asiasanat: matkustusturvallisuus, soolomatkailu, turvallisuusohjeet, yksin matkustavat naiset

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1 Introduction

This thesis is implemented as a development work for the SAFE project, which is co-funded Erasmus + Programme of the European Union. The SAFE acronym means “Safe Accessible Future Environments”. The SAFE project is an interdisciplinary project where participants develop and promote safe and accessible urban areas in the five participating university cities. These cities are Vantaa (Finland), Kranj (Slovenia), Kiel (Germany), Bydgoszcz (Poland), and Granada (Spain). The SAFE project also aims to develop e.g., new training programs, workshops and materials for students and educational institutions. The participating universities represents different disciplines, such as security management, tourism and hospitality, social sciences, and architecture. By combining this interdisciplinary knowledge and experience, the SAFE project is aiming to help cities and service providers improve their accessibility and provide sustainable and safe services and public areas for all users. One of the SAFE project’s main objectives is to increase awareness of diversity when developing accessible urban areas. There are many associated partners working with the SAFE project and promoting the needs of the diverse focus groups, such as people with disabilities, people with different socio-economic or cultural backgrounds and seniors. (SAFE n.d).

The objective of this thesis is to collect and analyse personal experiences of women travelling alone and develop safety guidelines how women can improve their travel safety. By collecting and analysing safe travel experiences, I aim to find factors which help women to stay safe when travelling alone and understand which factors can potentially increase the risk to face problems. One of the SAFE project main themes is safe and accessible cities for tourists and residents, so travel safety guidelines fit under this theme and provide useful information for the SAFE project. As travel safety is quite generic and broad topic, narrowing the scope was necessary. To ensure that thesis scope remains manageable, the target group has been narrowed to women travelling alone. Nowadays many women like to travel also alone, so it is important to understand how women themselves can ensure their safety during their travels, but also service providers should take this aspect into consideration. It is presumable that there are cultural differences affecting what kind of challenges women travelling alone might experience. Due to cultural differences and interests of the SAFE project, scope of the thesis has been further narrowed to the participating countries in the SAFE project. This means all kind of travel experiences has been taken into consideration, but travelling experiences has been collected and analysed only from women who are residents or citizens in one of the participating project countries.

As an author of this thesis, I have also personal interest to this topic. Several years working experience in aviation has taken me to dozens of different countries. Also, outside my work I

have travelled a lot—as a part of the small group but also alone. According to my own observation some people are more likely encountering different safety related problems during their travel, while some other people always stay safe regardless of where they are travelling. This makes women’s travel safety an interesting and important topic to research more.

2 Safety of Solo Female Travellers

Travelling is a popular topic and there are plenty of different publications available, not only academic publications but also autobiographical books, travel blogs, magazines, guides, and online sources including social media channels. However, when searching academic publications specifically focusing on women travelling alone and their safety, publications are mainly focusing on the tourism and hospitality point of view, instead of the safety or risk management research. It is common that published travel guides are targeted for all travellers, even though there might be specific chapters for women or for solo travellers. Travel guides often assume solo female travellers are quite homogeneous group, even though nowadays women are travelling alone from many different reasons, and they have significant variation in their needs. It can be said modern solo female travellers are very diverse group of women (Solo Female Travelers 2024). Especially after Covid pandemic interest towards solo female travel has increased significantly. “Female solo travel” search in Google has increased 62% in the last three years. Last year 81% of solo female travellers were over 45 years old, so it can be seen not only younger women, but especially also more mature women are keen to travel alone. (Condor Ferries 2024.)

Travel habits has been changing by the time. Not so long time ago travellers were relying mainly on travel books, magazines, and assistance of the travel agencies. Nowadays, at least in the modern world, most of the travellers prefer more online sources and services. The role of the social media has also increased significantly (Drifter Planet 2018). However, while travelling has become more affordable and achievable for the different type of travellers, our world generally and risks related to travelling, have changed. For example, political tension, wars and other conflicts, natural disasters, terrorism, and pandemics have strong impact on travel safety (Smartraveller 2023). While modern solo female travellers have more options and tools to prepare for a safe travel, there are more risks to assess, as well. According to Condor Ferries (2024) four main risks which solo female traveller were worried about, were pickpocketing (93%), credit card fraud (86%), identity theft (63%) and taxi scams (62%). Same kind of safety concerns were highlighted also in the survey of Solo Female Travelers (2024). According to this survey personal safety was a main concern for 70% of the respondents. The additional main concerns were higher costs (65%), something bad happening (40%), language barriers (39%), getting lost (34%), feeling lonely (32%) and dining alone (20%). It can be said that safety related concerns have the priority over the other concerns. However, experience seems to bring more

confidence also in the solo travel. Solo Female Travelers (2024) states that from those solo female travellers who have travelled alone at least ten times, their safety worries have been decreasing from 78% down to 59%.

It is not a new phenomenon to see women enjoying of solo travel. Already on the 19th century there were women who travelled alone and wrote travel books about their experiences. A young American woman Lilian Leland was one of these ladies. She travelled around the world alone and had many interesting adventures. She probably did not have to worry so much about terrorism or political conflicts, but according to her diary-based book she also had safety issues which are common in a modern travel, such as earthquakes, storms, cultural differences, and language barriers (Leland 1890, 69-70, 236). Despite of some challenges, Leland (1890, 358) named kindness of the people as her favourite memory of her travels.

For practical reasons, I used online publications as the primary source for the literature review. Google Scholar was used as a main search engine to find suitable academic research papers, which would adduce safety problems related to the solo female travel. There are several research papers about women travelling alone, which also include discussion about safety related issues. Perhaps surprisingly many of these research papers are focusing on travel experiences of non-European women, especially women from Asian countries. I chose a diverse combination of the academic research papers for further studying in order to understand solo female travel phenomenon better and to prepare for the interview process.

2.1 Academic Research

Haruman, Nordin, Ching, Zaid, Woodcock, McDonagh and Faiz (2021) discuss in their paper how women have become more mobile since beginning of the 19th century, but how there are still significant differences between the countries. High crime rate, lack of trust in the police and political or cultural issues are some of the mentioned challenges which are limiting women's free mobility in certain countries, such as India, Palestine, and Mexico. Urbanization has been seen providing more opportunities for females. Haruman et al. sees the most severe challenges against the women's free mobility in the 21st century is gender-based violence, sexual harassment, ethnic segregation, hostile social environment, and inadequate infrastructure. In some of the most problematic countries women has adapted to avoid these problems for example by wearing neutral and more covering clothes and using only private transportation.

Otegui-Charles, Araujo-Vila, and Fraiz-Brea (2022) analyse in their paper different solo travel related statistics but are also addressing the concern over lack of the suitable research publications. Especially after Covid pandemic solo travel has increased even more, but many of the published research do not take into consideration how heterogeneous group solo travellers are nowadays. According to statistics, women travelling alone are in higher risk to face health or safety related problems compared to the men. Otegui-Charles et al. highlights

that genuine gender equality would not be reached if women were not able to travel under the same conditions than men.

Backpacker tourism is one of the popular travelling methods amongst the solo travellers. Falconer (2011) writes about women who has been travelling alone as a backpacker. She has interviewed several women for her research and most of the stories seems to have at least some negative aspects. In her paper she is studying what kind of roles excitement, risk and emotional conflict have within backpacker female travellers' acts. Falconer describes how many backpacker women were taking high risks during their travels. Wild parties, unprotected sex, alcohol, and drugs were part of the menu, even though these ladies would not behave like that in their home countries. But not all stories were about parties, she also collected stories about situations when a woman felt threatened for some reason. She mentioned several examples when a woman has been travelling for example in India or Middle East and faced some uncomfortable situations. In these situations, a woman has drawn too much attention, and she has been worried if she is being too rude, but that has been the only way to get out of the uncomfortable situation. Possibly some of these situations have been misunderstandings due to cultural differences, but generally women were thinking better to be safe than sorry.

While Falconer had quite negative approach to the topic, Mani & Jose (2020) and Sürme (2022) had more positive approach, even though they represent universities from India and Turkey. Both were seeing women's solo travel as a positive thing. Mani & Jose highlighted research issues, according to them earlier research about female solo travel have been concentrating on western countries and western women, while there would be a need to have research data about Asian travellers as well. Mani & Jose used Southern Indian women from Kerala as an example in their research. That region is still very patriarchal, so women must solve their problems and persuade their families to let them travel solo. This experience makes them feel confident and capable to deal with the further issues. Also, Sürme saw positive aspects in women's solo travel, such as self-empowerment and life-changing experience. However, according on his research solo woman travellers in Turkey have still faced some issues, for example physical or verbal harassment and eye harassment.

It does not mean women should necessarily travel somewhere far or to exotic places to feel fear in public places. Stark & Meschik (2019) write in their article about women's constrained travel behaviour by using Austrian research as a case-study. In their article Stark & Meschik explain how women's fear for their personal safety on different type of transportation modes can affect their travel behaviour. This can lead to a situation where women begin change their travel patterns or even avoid travelling alone. This kind of constrained travel behaviour might happen especially in the urban areas and while using the public transportation. Constrained travel behaviour can be also conditional, meaning that women might avoid certain areas or public transportation modes depending on if it is daylight time, night, or a specific day. Some

women might begin to follow so called Arming measures strategy, which means carrying some self-defence tools, such as knives or a pepper spray. Furthermore, women can develop behavioural self-defence methods, such as making a phone call to some trusted one while walking or travelling alone, or even attending to the self-defence classes. In their article Stark & Meschik refers to the survey results of Austrian research. According to that research approximately 30% of the respondents had encountered in frightening situations. These incidents were typically different forms of harassment, stalking or attempted assaults. Majority of the frightening situations had happened outside the vehicles. According to the survey results women generally felt safer if they were travelling inside a vehicle or using a bicycle. Stark & Meschik summarize in their article, that women might feel they are forced to choose less desirable transportation modes if no alternative routes or modes are available. Sense of personal safety has a vital role in the women's travel behaviour. Fear can significantly influence women's mobility choices and in the worst case, it can lead to a social exclusion. It is essential to ensure safe and fear-free environments for everyone, regardless of their gender.

Burdisso (2024) has researched women's travel experiences in her MSc thesis *Mapping the Geography of Women's Fear: Exploring Risks, Safety, and Empowerment in Solo Travel Experiences*. Burdisso's research is part of her Tourism studies. She explores women's experiences through the feminist theories, but her research still has a deep focus on women's safety during travel. Burdisso (2024, 43) talks about risk perception and how it can be affected by different factors, such as cultural background, personal relations, media and individual's own characters and experiences. Often women are more cautious and alerted when travelling alone, compared to men. Women are usually considered more vulnerable, and they have many safety related concerns, such as fear of sexual attack and harassment.

Nowadays women can be exposed to harassment everywhere, also at public places. Burdisso (2024, 69-70) discuss about a concept of the geography of fear, which can explain a correlation between the safety perceptions and destination selection. According to her findings, feedback from the other solo female travellers has a notable impact on other women's travel behaviour. The negative feedback from the other solo travellers alerts collectively those solo female travellers who are possibly planning to visit that specific destination. And vice versa, the positive feedback can have a huge positive and motivating impact on others. Burdisso (2024, 76) urges in her thesis that solo female travellers should always exercise a careful planning before solo travel. She highlights the planning of accommodation or travel itinerary only is not enough. Moreover, a solo female traveller should also learn at least some basic knowledge about the political and social situation, local customs, and possible risks at the destination. Cultural sensitivity is also a useful skill, especially when travelling alone as a woman.

Schwab (2019) discuss in her research paper about spatial constraint negotiation among solo female travellers. Her study aims to understand solo female travellers' reactions on physical

safety and harassment related constraints and what are their actions in those situations. In her research questions were shared into two themes: How these women would deal with unwanted attention and how they would deal with physical harassment. Against the unwanted attention women had developed different means. Many women just simply lie and tell they are waiting someone, they have a boyfriend or even lie they have a STD or other contagious disease, or they are transgender. Some women would use a firm rejection, while some others were trying to avoid attention by acting ugly. This means these women would try to behave in an ugly way or make their physical appearance so unattractive, that men left them alone.

When discussing about the physical harassment, Schwab noted that the other solo female travellers were extremely encouraging and empathic towards those women who told about their experiences being harassed physically. Despite of their negative experience, these women were strongly encouraged to continue solo travelling. How these solo female travellers responded to the physical harassment threat was varying from a person to person. Generally, it can be said that their responses were more passive or proactive, or then more aggressive or reactive. Some women tried to avoid becoming the target by avoiding situations or behaviour which potentially could lead to the physical harassment, such as avoiding certain areas, avoiding going out night-time, avoiding certain type of clothing or avoiding getting drunk. Also understanding of social customs were highlighted. Especially in the more conservative countries this plays a vital role. However, some other women were rather solving physical harassment situations by drawing attention or getting violent. They would scream or yell and try to draw attention from the other people. If necessary, some women would also use the self-defence skills or tools, such as a pepper spray, sticks or sharp keys. (Schwab 2019).

2.2 Other Publications and Guides

When looking for the non-academic information about the travel safety of solo female travellers, there are lot of different type of publications and guides available. However, most of those publications or guides are not specifically targeted to solo female travellers' safety, but rather generic guides about travelling. Usually travel guides also include some chapters about travel safety. Some guides are focusing for solo travel generally, and they might have a chapter dedicated for the solo female travellers.

Most of the countries, at least European and other Western countries, provides governmental travel advisories. The travel advisories offer generic travel information about the other countries, but also updated alerts about the safety situation and possible cultural or legal considerations or restrictions. European Commission (n.d) has published a link collection for all travel advisories in the European Union area. European Commission (n.d) also reminds people that if an EU citizen needs an urgent assistance and there is not own embassy or consulate

available in that specific country, an EU citizen has right to seek consular protection from the other EU embassies and consulates.

2.2.1 Female Business Travellers

There are many women who are travelling alone for their business trips. Safety precautions and risks for solo female trips depends on what kind of business activities or organization she is connected. Larger companies or companies who operate at high-risk areas, are often better prepared for travel risk management. Emerson, VanBeest & Walters (2016) have published an inclusive handbook about travel risk management and risk mitigation. Their book is obviously targeted for people who must do business trips also in the high-risk or conflict areas. Nevertheless, their handbook contains useful safety tips also for more regular business travellers. Safety instructions are not targeted specially for women, but rather equally for both genders. Furthermore, few notes have been dedicated specifically for women. For example, female travellers should not accept hotel room in the vicinity of stairwells or elevator landing, as this might enable a surprise attack when entering to a hotel room (Emerson & al. 2016,156).

Another similar type of publication is a Travel Risk Management guidance book for organizations, written by Brossman (2016). In this guidance book Brossman (2016, 21-25) use relatively bold narrative style when talking about cultural differences, dangers at high-risk areas, terrorism, and honour killings. He also makes a clear statement that adapting to local cultural norm, such as conservative clothing and behaviour, can really be a life-saving factor. Even though it might be hard to believe for the modern western women.

Travel Risk Management companies are not the only actors who are interested in well-being and safety of female business travellers. Service providers in the travel industry have noticed an increasing group of female business travellers. For example, hotels and some airports have launched designated female-friendly areas or rooms, which offers safety, comfort, and privacy for women (Jorden 2023). It is a positive improvement if service providers are trying to take into consideration female business travellers' needs. However, according to a study only 18% of corporate travel policies include safety or security guidelines targeted to female employees (Sheivachman 2018). No doubt there is a room for improvement, but it must be said that it is common female business travellers do not report their possible safety problems to their organizations. If the organization does not know what and where has happened, it is difficult to be pro-active. It would be very helpful for the female business travellers if their organization provided some kind of risk assessment and safety guidelines for each destination where their female employees must travel (Jorden 2023).

2.2.2 Online Platforms and Communities

Nowadays different type of online platforms and travel communities have become very popular. Lonely Planet is one the most traditional online travel platforms. It was originally established in 1973, and initially Lonely Planet was focusing to provide good-quality travel guidebooks (Bleach 2023). They still do that, but guidebooks are now available also through their online platform. People who love to travel can join their online community, but also a huge amount of free information, such as articles and guides are available for everyone. Lonely Planet has published a World travel guide (Lonely Planet 2017), where they give travel tips for every country in the world, but also some generic travel tips about visas, time zones, currencies and other useful information when preparing for the travel. They have also published the Solo Travel Handbook (Lonely Planet 2018), which is attractively designed handbook for all solo travellers, regardless of their gender. This handbook contains lot of interesting and useful information, including a chapter about travel safety and a sub-chapter about women's travel safety, telling some practical safety tips for a solo traveller. However, some of the safety tips sounds questionable. For example, wearing a fake wedding ring might attract thieves and carrying a pepper spray might cause problems with police or customs, depending on a country of course.

Another well-known online travel platform is Tripadvisor, which is famous for restaurant and hotel reviews posted by the other service users. Through Tripadvisor travellers can for example book flights, hotels, cruises, rent cars or use online forum. An interesting new feature is the NO MORE-campaign. Tripadvisor has launched a training program in a collaboration with the NO MORE organization. This campaign is aiming to educate tourism and hospitality business owners and employees through the educational videos. The goal of this campaign is to prevent assaults and sexual harassment between the employees and customers. (Tripadvisor 2024).

Skift is not an online travel platform targeted to travellers, but rather a travel news outlet for the professionals working within travel industry. Skift publish travel industry related articles, news, research results and organize the professional meetings and conferences. Even though the focus group of Skift is travel industry professionals, anyone who is interested in learning more about travel industry trends, research articles or news, can find interesting information by visiting Skift website. Skift has published several articles about travel safety, solo travel, and women's travel safety. (Skift 2024).

Solo Female Travelers is an online community for females only. It is a profitable business established by the group of solo female travellers, whose mission is to empower women through travel. The Solo Female Traveler community has more than 300 000 members and they offer information and services for solo female travellers, such as female only tours, reviews, webinars, educational information, and of course an online forum for networking. (Solo Female Travelers n.d). Solo Female Travelers offers some helpful tools for someone who is planning to

travel solo. Solo Female Travel Index includes interesting information about countries from the solo female traveller's point of view. This index consists of seven travel safety variables, which are UK and US travel advisories, risk of theft, attitudes towards women, risk of scam, risk of harassment and global peace index. The eighth column shows the average score based on the data in the safety variables. (Solo Female Travelers n.d). Another useful tool offered is an article about solo female travel safety tips, which is a very large-scaled guide designed by female travellers. It has been divided into themes, such as preparation, transit, accommodation, food safety, traffic, animals, outdoor activities, self-defence and many more (Pages 2024).

Her Packing List is again another type of online travel platform. It is based on the idea that female travellers should be encouraged to pack as light as possible while travelling. Especially when travelling alone, Her packing list offers packing tips for different type of locations or activities combined with practical information about the local weather and cultural norms. There is also for example information about the safe travel bags and tools available. (Her Packing List n.d). An interesting article about female travel safety advice can be found from their website. This article collects and challenge several travel advices from the different sources. And indeed, there are many travel safety advices which can be seen quite contradictory (Her Packing List 2024).

Women on the Road is a travel blog written by Leyla Alyanak, a senior age former foreign correspondent and diplomat who has over 50 years' experience in solo female travelling. Her blog is not just a regular travel blog, where she shares her own travel experiences with ups and downs. Additionally, she shares newsletters, information about preparedness in travel planning, destination ideas, travel tools and reviews. (Alyanak n.d). In her travel safety article, she introduces strategies to avoid risks and dangers, such as right clothing, correct mindset, and preparedness. Most of all, she encourages all women, also seniors, to travel alone (Alyanak 2021).

2.3 Outcome of the Literature Review

When reviewing published academic research papers, I noticed there are several different types of academic research papers available, but I did not find any research with the same objectives and scope than this thesis. Most of the academic publications can be categorized as a tourism or cultural research. Nevertheless, the academic research papers chosen for the literature review were still pointing out important themes affecting on women's travel safety and improved my knowledge about solo female travellers' safety. More importantly, these themes created a base for the interview themes and questions in this thesis. Planning, different coping mechanisms, personal behaviour, cultural differences, safety perception, constraints, risks, and benefits of solo travel where the main themes that emerged in the literature review. I

utilized these themes in the interview planning and prepared five different interview themes with the question sets, which will be explained further in this thesis.

By reviewing also other than academic travel safety publications and platforms, I deepened my understanding of this topic even further. I concentrated on the most famous online platforms and communities, and some maybe not so well-known materials, but which were providing a valuable information considering my research objectives. This part of the literature review helped me to understand better what kind of travel safety guides has been already published and what are the types and needs of the different solo female traveller profiles.

3 Research Process and Methods

For this thesis I chose qualitative approach to collect and analyse data. As the primary source for the data analysis are personal experiences collected from women travelling alone, qualitative approach offers better tools to record individual stories. Additionally, it takes into consideration possibly unique experiences and gives an opportunity for a researcher to react instantly to specific answers. Also, a researcher can modify questions during the data collection phase, as necessary. Qualitative approach is more likely offering richer data than quantitative approach in this kind of experience-based research (Walle 2015, 10-11).

Interviews with participants are very commonly used in qualitative research as a main data collection method. It allows participants to use their own words and talk about their genuine feelings, opinions, and beliefs, especially when semi-structured or nonstructured questions are used (Saldana 2011, 32). Qualitative interviewing can be called also in-depth interviewing. Compared to structured interviewing, it is a very flexible and dynamic way to interview participants. In-depth interviews enable a researcher to really understand how participants lived their experience and how it affected on them. An in-depth interview is more like a discussion between the equals than a formal interview (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault 2016, 102). Moreover, Auerbach & Silverstein (2003, 35-36) suggest that qualitative research is a good method to investigate a subjective experience. They state that if a researcher wants to learn about someone's subjective experience, first he must ask about it and then carefully listen what is told. Usually, people like to talk about their experiences in a storied form. Therefore, it can be said that qualitative research is based on textual data and stories, rather than numbers, which differs it from quantitative research (Auerbach & Silverstein 2003, 37).

When preparing for a qualitative interviewing, a researcher must consider how many interviews is enough for the research. Saldana (2011, 33-34) proposes that there is not one correct answer, but it rather depends on several different factors. Sometimes couple of interviews is enough, and sometimes 20 interviews are required. More important is to continue until a researcher

have a sufficient interview data. Also, Richards (2015, 25) suggests that one should continue qualitative interviewing until the research questions can be answered with data gained from the interviews. Moreover, it can be said that data collection phase can be considered complete, when the data saturation point has been reached, meaning that no more relevant new information was emerged, even if data collection phase would be continued (Given 2008, 195). In this thesis it means as many interviews should be conducted, as required to reach the data saturation point.

3.1 Interviews

Based on the project objectives, research questions and knowledge gained from the literature review, I prepared the semi-structured interview questions. The initial interview questions were open-ended and divided into five themes: Travel Habits, Preparedness, Sense of Safety, Experiences and Conclusion and Recommendations (Appendix 1). I chose these interview themes and questions to enable a logical flow and order for the interview. A time slot scheduled for each interview included some additional time to allow a researcher to modify or skip some questions during the interview, depending on the topics a participant was willing to discuss. More generic or formal questions were asked first, and possibly more sensitive questions were asked at the end, if a participant was willing to talk about this kind of topics. This kept interview flow more natural and enabled to gain trust between a participant and a researcher (Walle 2015, 70).

I selected the interviewed women from the participating SAFE project countries: Finland, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain. The all participants were adult, working-aged women, who have at least once travelled alone abroad. Additionally, my target was to invite women who have more solo travel experience than travelling just once or twice. Furthermore, it was noted that the group of participants should be enough diverse for a good quality research. The chosen participants were representing different age groups and different professional levels from the students to the senior specialists. The interviewed women were invited to participate through different academic, business and leisure networks. The interviewed women were initially approached via email or face-to-face contact during the different events. Overall, majority of the contacted women gave a positive response for the interview request. Couple of women were willing to participate, but due to scheduling challenges they could not participate. Three social media influencers or travel bloggers from the two different countries were also contacted, but they were the only women who did not reply anything to the interview request.

The initial target was to have 1-3 participants from each country, altogether approximately ten interviews. Based on the number of the project countries, project schedule and interview themes, I estimated approximately ten interviews could be enough to reach the data saturation point. However, I decided to begin with the interviews and then make a final decision after I

understand better what kind of data each participant can produce. I found this target accurate, and it was fulfilled well. The final figures were 11 interviews and 1-4 participants from each project country. It can be said the data saturation point has been reached after 11 interviews, as interviews did not anymore provide new information but were rather following certain fixed patterns.

I used Laurea Sign service to give an access for the informed consent form and request the participants to sign their acknowledgement that they have agreed and understood the content of the informed consent form. Laura Sign service is a good platform to organize all required informed consent forms and signatures. It is a user-friendly service and available for all participants regardless of their domicile. I created the informed consent form before the interviews, and the participants received an invitation link. As a researcher I had information about the names, nationalities and contact details for mandatory communication with the participants. All interviews were recorded as video meetings. No additional personal data was collected during the interviews. Personal data collected during the project was stored and kept strictly confidential. All recorded material has been available only for me as a researcher and it will be destroyed after the finalization of this thesis. All transcript materials based on the interviews were anonymized before the data analysis phase or further use in the thesis project. Privacy and data protection regulations were followed carefully during the project, as instructed by Laurea UAS guidelines and in Arene (2020) data management instructions publication.

I conducted the interviews in the Microsoft Teams application, which is a practical platform to organize international meetings, record them, and create transcripts for further data analysis. The interview language was English, except the Finnish speakers were interviewed in Finnish language. Each interview was scheduled to last approximately 30 min, but some of the interviews lasted 40-50 min, even an hour, because some of the participants were very communicative and they had many interesting stories to discuss. At the beginning of an interview, I reminded a participant of her right not to answer to any of the questions if she does not feel comfortable to do so. Also, I confirmed an approval for the interview recording.

I used ChatGPT to modify the interview transcripts in the more readable format. Each interview produced approximately 40-60 pages automated transcripts. This kind of raw version of an automated transcript includes a significant amount of unnecessary information, such as time log notes, filler words, comments of the researcher and misheard words. Each automated transcript has been first manually modified by removing filler words and creating complete sentences. During that phase also possible personal data, such as names, nationalities, or hometowns, were removed. In this stage, length of the interview transcripts was approximately five to ten pages per transcript. After that, I modified anonymized transcripts by ChatGPT to ensure better spelling and more readable structure, which summarized each transcript

approximately down to two pages. However, it can be said that ChatGPT seems to provide higher quality writing in English than in Finnish language. After the AI check the interview transcripts were ready for the data analysis phase.

3.2 Data Analysis Process

As this thesis is a qualitative research based on the interviews about personal experiences and stories, I selected thematic analysis with inductive approach for the data analysis method. Inductive approach is a suitable method when a researcher analyses interview data, search patterns from the data and based on the findings, try to develop theories (Roulston 2010, 2). Thematic analysis is one of the most common data analysis methods in qualitative research. It is also a flexible method as themes can be generated in different ways, even though coding is usually used as a part of the data analysis process (Roulston 2010, 3-4). Thematic analysis can be summarized as a process of identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of themes (Hecker & Kalpokas n.d). Usually data, for example interview transcripts, must be reduced before moving forward in the data analysing process. This can be called also as data condensation, and summarizing, coding, and developing themes are some of the possible methods for the data condensation (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2014, 31). The next step in the thematic analysis process is generating initial codes for the data analysis by organizing data and taking research questions into consideration. After the initial coding phase, suitable themes are grouped based on the initial codes. The last steps consist of reviewing, defining, and validating themes, and preparing a report according to the analysis results. Original data, such as interview transcripts, shall be revisited during the data analysis process, when necessary (Hecker & Kalpokas n.d).

3.3 User Personas and Safety Guidelines

This thesis is implemented as a development work for the SAFE project, which means the outcome of the research should be utilized in practice. Based on the interview data analysis results, the research questions, and other knowledge gained during this research process, I develop safety guidelines for solo female travellers and deliver them to the client, the SAFE project. One of the goals in this project is to develop something new for the project. In order to avoid publishing another regular travel guidance booklet, I decided to utilize User personas as a part of the development work. A User persona is a hypothetical model of the possible service or product user, an imaginary person. User personas are used to support design thinking and perspectives. Even though User personas are widely used in Service Design and Marketing, it is possible to utilize them also in the other context. User personas can be used also for example in role-playing, scenarios, and storytelling (Hartson & Pyla 2012, 264). For this thesis, I create three different User personas and for each User persona, I develop personalized safety guidelines.

I had a basic understanding of the User personas due to my prior Service design course project. When I was conducting the interviews, already during that stage I started to notice certain patterns and personality types within the participants. I made notes about my observations and when I completed the interview process, I already had a clear vision what kind of User personas would be suitable for this project. I wrote my initial findings and ideas to the empty User persona templates. I tried to create User personas which would cover identified personality types and travelling preferences as extensively as possible. I finished the templates and refined the initial ideas by utilizing my own knowledge and information gained during the interviews. I decided three User personas would be enough for this development work. It is enough to cover the main personality types and travelling preferences without overlapping between the profiles.

4 Results

In this chapter I present the main results and findings of this research. The results are divided into two main chapters. Firstly, I present the original interview results without actual data analysis, presented in the same thematic order than the original interview questions. Secondly, I explain the AI assisted thematic analysis process with coding and what were the main findings of the data analysis.

4.1 Interview Themes

Before the actual data analysis phase, I carefully read the longer manually modified interview transcripts and the shorter AI modified interview transcripts thoroughly. To prepare better for the data analysis phase and have a deeper understanding of the collected data, I used ChatGPT to summarize longer manually modified interview transcripts according to five themes. These five themes follow the same structure than the interview questions: Travel Habits, Preparedness, Sense of Safety, Experiences and Conclusion and Recommendations.

The purpose of this summarizing phase was to present some main findings from the interview transcripts before the actual data analysis. Before uploading the interview transcripts for ChatGPT, metadata was removed by converting .docx files to .txt files. A following prompt was given to ChatGPT: *“You are a researcher. I will provide you a raw version of interview transcript. Your research is a qualitative research based on interviews and your research topic is “Safe travel experiences by women travelling alone”. Can you summarize transcript into themes: Travel habits, Preparedness, Sense of Safety, Experiences and Conclusion/Recommendations?”*¹.

¹ ChatGPT, generated 17 April 2024

4.1.1 Travel Habits

Participants have been travelling actively all over the world. European destinations have been the most popular ones, but some of the participants have travelled also in Africa, Asia, Balkan, North America, Australia, South America, and Central America. Some of the participants travel alone only for business trips or only for leisure trips, while some are doing both. There has been different type of leisure trips, from the regular holiday trips to the adventure or sports holidays, such as hiking, surfing, or diving trips. Length of the solo trips have been varying between the short weekend trips to the several months trip due to Covid lockdown.

None of the participants were a member in any of the solo female travel social media groups or communities. Many of the participants prefer to book an accommodation and tickets by herself and well before the trip, while some others must coordinate bookings through their workplaces. Most of the participants prefer to book early, while some others like to use last minute options and book accommodation later when already on the way or arrived at the destination. Some participants wanted to have flexibility on their travel plan, so they preferred to book an accommodation only for first few nights and then plan and book more after their arrival.

4.1.2 Preparedness

All the participants have at least some kind of preparational habits before their solo trips. Some of them spend lot of time by searching information about the next destination, while some just check few things before they go. However, all participants were highlighting the importance of preparedness when planning to travel alone. Document copies, bookings, ground transportation modes and schedules, travel insurance, suitable packing and nearest consulate locations are some of the most typical items for preparedness. Some participants plan and calculate everything with the Excel sheets, while some others travel with a minimal preparation. Creating a backup plan was mentioned by several participants.

General preparation by using Google Maps or Google to find interesting places to visit, but also to know where the important places are located, such as police stations, hospitals, or the own hotel, was common. Also, information about possibly dangerous areas or typical crimes were searched before the trips. Google and the travel advisories published by Ministry of Foreign Affairs were the main sources for this kind of search. Some participants filled a travel notification at their Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, especially before travelling somewhere outside the EU. Some of the participants prepare by checking practical aspects such as currency, vaccination requirements or local power plug type. Planning the travel schedule according to the arrival time was also mentioned few times. Also, information about local culture and possible restrictions or recommendations were searched.

4.1.3 Sense of Safety

Almost all participants felt they are safe most of the time during their travels. Still, several participants have had situations they did not completely or at all feel safe during their travels. There was a lot of variation depending on a destination. Usually, participants felt safer in Europe than in other countries. Many participants felt less safe or more vulnerable when travelling alone, compared to when travelling in a group or with a partner. Also, their behaviour changed when they were on a solo trip. Time of day, darkness and general atmosphere in the destination city or specific areas, affects on sense of safety, according to the participants. General cleanliness, behaviour or amount of other people at public places, cultural differences, language barrier and being unfamiliar with the local environment were listed as other factors affecting on sense of safety. The ability to blend in the local cultural environment without drawing attention, having reliable local contacts, preparing well before the trip, and always following instincts, were important factors emphasized by the participants when considering how to maintain a good level of sense of safety and situational awareness.

Some of the participants always have high trust in police, while some others trust police only in Europe or their trust depends on the country. Corruption was named as a main reason why it is not always possible to trust police. Most of the participants could name countries or regions where they would not travel alone. Arabic countries, Africa, South America, USA, Russia, Ukraine, and conflict areas generally were commonly mentioned places. A few participants could travel also to high-risk areas if it is a work-related trip with adequate assistance available at the destination, or if they can have an extensive preparation before the trip.

4.1.4 Experiences

Overall, the participants were describing their solo travel experience positively. Empowerment, increased self-confidence and self-awareness, flexibility, freedom, and unique opportunity to interact with new people and learn about local culture were mentioned as the positive aspects of solo travel. Some of the mentioned negative aspects were vulnerability, loneliness, feeling isolated and anxiety when travelling in potentially dangerous or high-risk areas. All participants agreed that ethnicity and age have an influence on women's travel safety. Majority of the participants told some of their family members or friends have been worried about their solo travel plans and habits. All participants emphasized the importance of communication and connectivity, not only with family and friends, but also to be able to use phone in case of emergency or in urgent need to search important information.

The participants have not faced any serious safety related incidents leading to an injury or a psychological trauma, but several of them have had some minor incidents. However, some of these incidents could have potentially led to a more serious consequence. Incidents mentioned

were for example, theft, attempted robbery, stalking, physical assault, verbal assault, harassment, pickpocketing and witnessing shooting and stabbing incidents.

4.1.5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite of challenges and risks the participants have encountered during their solo travels, all of them recommended other women to try solo travelling. Empowerment through travel, personal growth, self-reliance, self-discovery, freedom, and enjoyment of new experiences are benefits of solo travel mentioned by the participants. For beginner solo female travellers, the participants recommended starting with the safe and tourist-friendly destinations in Europe. Accompanied guided trips at the destination and choosing a hotel with the good reputation and central location are encouraged.

General recommendations for all solo female travellers were given, such as highlighting the importance of good planning and preparedness, situational and cultural awareness, maintaining good communication and connectivity and avoiding unnecessary risks. Also, neutral appearance, avoiding going out night-time, avoiding alcohol and drugs, avoiding risky areas, and having a backup plan were mentioned. If possible, specific security awareness courses or carrying some practical tools, such as torch or a door blocker, could be a useful addition for the personal safety.

4.2 Generating Codes and Themes

At the beginning of the data analysis phase, the AI modified interview transcripts were combined as a text file without metadata for a smoother data analysis process. As the amount of data after 11 interviews was remarkable, it had to be reduced before the coding. That's why I chose the AI modified interview transcripts for further data analysis instead of longer manually modified interview transcripts. There are several different coding techniques, but many of them are complicated and time-consuming without prior experience or coding software usage. Keeping in mind the goals and limitations of this development work, it is not appropriate to dig too deep into coding. Consequently, I chose an upgraded ChatGPT 4.0 version to assist with the data analysis process. ChatGPT is a useful tool for data analysis. With precise prompts it can assist with a qualitative data coding process, and present qualitative themes and trends while significantly saving the time, costs and reducing the risk of human errors (Zhang, Wu, Xie, Lyu, Cai & Carroll 2023, 22-24).

I uploaded the AI modified interview transcripts to ChatGPT and requested it to generate initial codes. A following prompt was given to ChatGPT: " *You are a researcher. I upload for you a summary of interview transcripts. Please do with that a qualitative coding, specifically initial coding called as an open coding. I want the code to be detailed and descriptive. I want you to apply codes to sentences or parts of sentences, and later when you develop a list of codes, I*

want you to tell me what sentences or parts of the sentences these codes were applied to”². ChatGPT provided a good set of initial codes divided into initial themes. Each code was attached with a sentence or a part of sentence where that code was applied to. All codes were reviewed and compared to the interview transcript data. One code was deleted, as it was incorrectly analysed from the interview data. Altogether, initial coding produced 20 acceptable codes divided into 16 initial themes (Appendix 2). These initial codes were marked by different colour codes according to their themes. This categorization was just an initial step and the purpose of it was to help a researcher to understand the codes. The initial themes for codes are presented in the word cloud (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Initial coding themes (Created with wordclouds.com)

When analysing the initial codes and themes, it can be seen they follow certain pattern and can be grouped into broader themes. I requested ChatGPT to assist with the next thematic analysis step. A following prompt was given to ChatGPT: “You are a researcher. I upload for you a summary of interview transcripts. Based on those transcripts you already performed detailed and descriptive open coding. These codes are attached at the end of this message. Can you help me to take a next step and create themes based on these codes and interview transcripts according to thematic analysis practices?”³. ChatGPT generated five potential themes for the codes and divided codes into themes. These themes were Safety and Security

² ChatGPT, A supplementary request to provide more codes may have been required, generated 18 April 2024.

³ ChatGPT, generated 18 April 2024

Measures, Cultural and Social Adaptation, Interactions and Social Awareness, Personal Strategies and Mindset, and Preparation and Proactivity. In this theme refining phase, after checking the codes again and revisiting the interview transcripts, I came to conclusion the themes should be modified further as the code grouping and theme categories were not enough logical.

Based on the interview transcripts, and initial codes and themes provided by ChatGPT, I defined the actual themes for the grouped codes. The research questions were also taken into consideration when defining themes. Altogether, five themes were defined: Preparedness (six codes), Cultural and Social Awareness (five codes), Prevention (four codes), Personal Strategies and Capabilities (three codes) and Communication Strategies (two codes) (Appendix 3). The actual themes are presented in the word cloud (Figure 2). The whole data analysis process has been described in the process chart (Figure 3).



Figure 2: Actual themes for the grouped codes (Created with wordclouds.com)

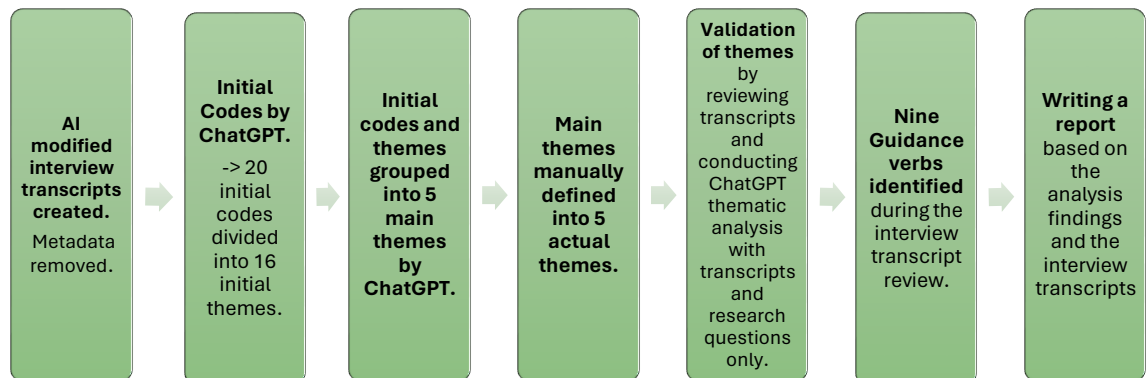


Figure 3: Process chart

5 Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Questions

Qualitative research based on personal experiences collected through interview might have some validity issues. The respondent and researcher bias can affect on the research validity. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to confirm if collected experiences and memories are accurate or not. Some of the collected experiences might have happened already few decades ago. However, it can be said that usually people can remember surprisingly well the most spectacular or traumatic experiences. And even if some minor details would have been missed, most probably it does not have any significant impact on data analysis in this research. As all respondents were very motivated to participate to the interviews, likelihood for an intentional false information is low. If some of the participants would have encountered very traumatic and severe safety incidents, it is more likely they declined from the interview instead of giving a false information.

I tried to keep the researcher bias in minimum. It is possible that a personal experience of the researcher in connection to the research topic could create some preconceptions. Also, cultural difference expectations could have cause preconceptions. However, when a researcher can identify the possible preconceptions, it is possible to minimize the impact on the research validity. I applied the appropriate measures to maintain the reliability of the research as high as possible. I tried to keep the interview and data analysis processes as equal and standardized, as it is appropriate considering the nature of the qualitative interviewing as a research method.

There were few ethical questions which had to be taken into consideration. Privacy protection, data storage and confidentiality must always be processed in a professional and legal manner. All participants must be aware of their rights, and they must give their consent for the interview. Privacy and data protection regulations were followed by utilizing the informed consent form, which was created based on Laurea UAS guidelines and data management instructions published by Arene (2020).

When preparing for the interviews, in the researcher role I had to take into consideration that some very traumatic experiences could be discussed during the interviews, such as sexual abuse or violence. Although, this kind of questions were not intentionally asked, and the participants were reminded they have right to choose which questions and topics they want to discuss. However, not any serious criminal acts or very traumatic experiences emerged. Some minor incidents emerged, but the participants were willing to talk about those incidents, and they maintained a positive mood while discussing the topic. Not any medical information or any other sensitive personal data were collected or asked from the participants. Nevertheless, one of the participants spontaneously referenced to her medical condition, but this information was removed from the interview transcript.

When doing research and trying to understand different factors affecting solo female travellers' safety, it is important to remember that victims should never be blamed. Even though we all have responsibilities when taking care of our personal safety. The safety guidelines created as an outcome of this development work, should be reasonable, encouraging and yet leave room for an adventurous and enjoyable travel experience. The safety guidelines should not be too limiting, or otherwise the enjoyment of solo travel experience might be lost.

6 Discussion

All identified themes are important for the safety of solo female travellers and patterns following these themes can be found from the interview transcripts. Preparedness can perhaps be seen as a most important theme. It had more code matches than other themes, and according to the interview transcripts, preparedness was often mentioned as one of the most important factors to improve travel safety and avoid safety related problems. Even those participants who often plan their travel in the last minute, were highlighting the importance of good preparation. However, some of these last-minute planners were already very experienced travellers, who have own learnt routines while travelling. But usually, a proper preparation begins already well before the trip. It is important to search information about the destination country, especially when travelling to high-risk areas. Travel documents should be kept safe and stored in multiple locations, also in email. Travel insurance is vital as anything can happen, even at the safest countries. Emergency contact details should be kept available even if own phone has been lost. Depending on a destination country profile, some kind of emergency or contingency plan would be useful, if things go wrong.

The second highest amount of code matches belongs to the theme Cultural and Social Awareness. The importance of cultural awareness was mentioned by almost every participant. Admittedly, cultural differences can easily create situations, which potentially cause tension, confusion, awkward moments or even conflicts. Especially in more religious or conservative countries it is important to respect local culture and avoid creating unnecessary problems. This is even more important for solo female travellers. Suitable clothing and appearance, and overall good cultural and social awareness can save a female traveller from the many problems and hazards. There are countries where certain hand gestures, behaviour, conversation etiquette or even wrong words can cause uncomfortable issues. The codes under this theme included comments confirming the importance of cultural awareness. For example, adjustment to cultural norms and local conditions, and appearance adaptation were highlighted. It can be noted that there were two themes which could have been categorized also under the themes Prevention and Communication strategies, but Cultural and Social Awareness theme felt more accurate option. This shows that categorizing the travel safety themes is not strictly black and

white. Themes are connected and codes can be floating between the other themes, depending on the current situation.

Prevention is a theme with the four code matches. Regardless of good planning and preparation, a solo female traveller can still encounter potentially risky situations during her travels. Often, avoidance is key when a solo traveller wants to prevent further escalation or potentially dangerous situations. The interview transcripts and codes include multiple examples how to prevent possible safety issues. Avoiding of known risky or dangerous areas, avoiding going out night-time, avoiding exposing a solo traveller status to the strangers, and avoiding being too drunk, were some of the most frequently mentioned preventing methods. It is good to understand how to recognize potentially risky situations. But also, sometimes it can be only a gut feeling telling something is not right. It is recommended to follow your instincts. If something feels it is not right or safe, it is safer to avoid that situation and leave.

Personal Strategies and Capabilities is a theme with the three code matches. This theme can be seen containing a mixture of different type of codes. For example, there are codes related to the sense of safety, but also personal behaviour and decisions, and capabilities achieved by the traveller. It is still an important theme. Some of the personal capabilities are factors which a person has naturally, but also some of the capabilities are possible to develop by training and gaining the experience. It can be said that personal capabilities, but also positive and negative experiences have an impact on a person's sense of safety. Majority of the participants were telling their behaviour changes depending on whether they are travelling alone or in a group. So personal strategies are not something which is always fixed; it can vary depending on the conditions.

Communication strategies is the theme with the fewest code matches, only two. This can be seen as a slightly surprising result, as most of the participants were emphasizing the importance of good communication and connectivity. Adequate communication and connectivity have been seen as a crucial factor for the safety of solo female travellers. Regular communication with the family and friends is not only important for the safety, but also for mental well-being. In case of an emergency, it is hard to manage the situation without proper communication tools, usually a phone. Data plan is also very useful when looking for information at the destination or trying to navigate in the unfamiliar neighbourhood. Communication is not only about connectivity and phones, but also about communication skills. Language barriers and conversations with the other people at the destination are also part of the communication theme. However, it must be noted that one of the Cultural and Social Awareness codes could have been added also under this theme. Indeed, communication strategies and cultural and social awareness are closely linked together.

When I revisited the interview transcripts several times during the data analysis process, I noticed that certain verbs are regularly recurring, like a fixed pattern. Those verbs were used especially when discussing about safety concerns and strategies related to the research questions. These identified verbs Adapt, Avoid, Communicate, Connect, Increase Awareness, Know the local culture, Prepare, Prevent and Research, can be considered as guidance verbs when creating safety guidelines or advising solo female travellers to improve their safety (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Guidance verbs (Created with wordclouds.com)

6.1 Outcome of the Data Analysis

The Data Analysis process and the interview transcripts emerged multiple good aspects and solutions for the research questions; How solo female travellers can improve their safety and which factors can increase the risk to face safety related problems. By keeping in mind those five identified themes and guidance verbs, a solo female traveller can improve her safety during her travels and make her experience overall not only safer, but also more comfortable and memorable.

As the coding process in this thesis was relatively light and assisted by ChatGPT, I compared generated codes and themes to the interview transcripts. ChatGPT managed to generate good codes, which were further developed to provide more answers to the research questions. However, it can be said that more in-depth coding process could possibly have generated additional codes and some of the notable factors may have been disregarded. To validate the coding process and themes, I reviewed the research questions with the assistance of ChatGPT. For the validation phase, the interview transcripts were reviewed once more without the codes. A following prompt was given to ChatGPT:” *Can you please perform thematic analysis for attached summary of interview transcripts by giving your own themes with the research*

questions "How solo female travellers can improve their safety?" and "Which factors can increase the risk to face safety related problems?" Your research is qualitative research and research topic is "Safe travel experiences by women traveling alone"⁴. When reviewing the first research question: How solo female travellers can improve their safety, ChatGPT generated seven themes according to the given prompt. The suggested themes were Preparation and Planning, Adaptation to Local Contexts, Safety Tools and Technology, Communication Strategies, Self-defence and Awareness Training, and Trust and Intuition. Even though the themes are named differently than the themes generated after the coding process, all these themes could be grouped under the actual themes as well. Thus, it looks like the coding process generated accurate themes. Additionally, when using the coding process, more detailed data is attached to each theme, if compared to the themes generated without the codes.

6.2 Risk Factors

When reviewing the second research question: Which factors can increase the risk to face safety related problems, ChatGPT generated six themes. These themes were Environmental and Cultural Factors, Personal Attributes and Behaviour, Time and Place, Lack of Local Knowledge, Isolation, and Risk-Taking Behaviours (Figure 5). These themes could be grouped under the actual themes, but they are not found from the coding list. The reason for this is, that the coding process is searching for factors which improve safety, while the second research question requires factors which are increasing the risk. But when reviewing and validating the whole process manually, both research questions can be answered. In fact, most of the generated themes for the second research question are almost like contrary compared to the first ones.

Environmental and cultural factors affect when travelling at high-risk areas or in a cultural environment which is hostile for women. Personal attributes and behaviour can affect for example when ethnicity or age of the woman draw unwanted attention on her. Time and place can be a factor especially in the cities where is more dangerous to move outside at the night-time, or when certain areas become more dangerous during the night-time. Lack of local knowledge is a controversial factor compared to Cultural and situational awareness which has been highlighted one of the main factors to improve travel safety. Isolation is also a controversial factor compared to prevention. Usually, it is safer for a woman to stay in the crowded areas rather than in the empty spots, especially during the night-time. Risk-taking behaviour is a self-explanatory factor. The more risks a traveller is ready to accept, the more probable it is that something negative will happen.

⁴ ChatGPT, generated 18 April 2024

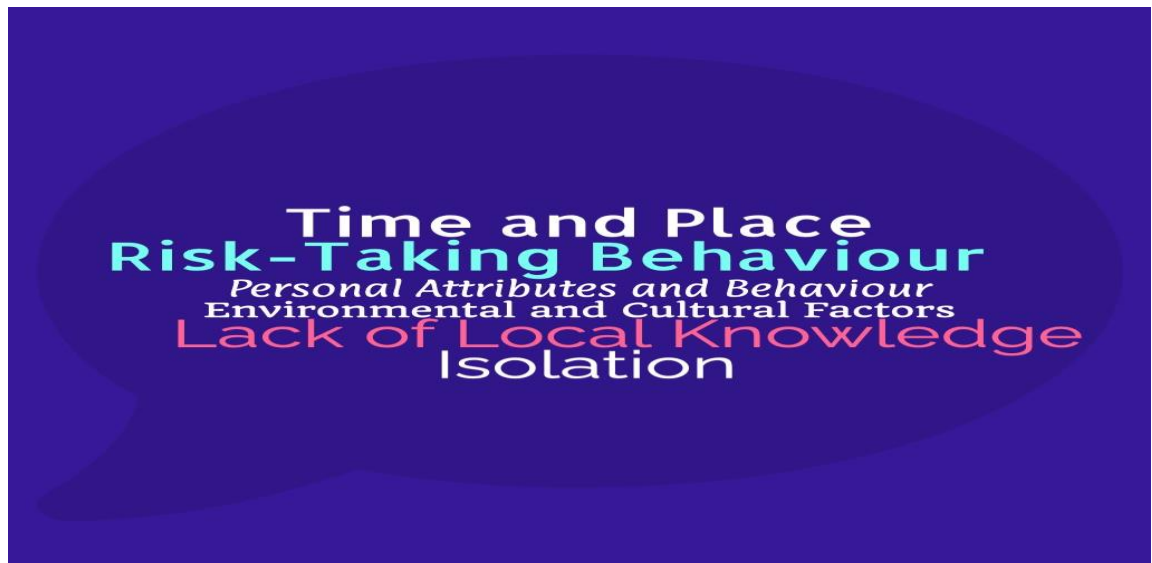


Figure 5: Factors increasing the risk to encounter safety related problems (Created with wordclouds.com)

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

The main objectives of this thesis were to collect and analyse personal travel experiences of women travelling alone and use this processed data to develop personalized safety guidelines for identified solo female traveller profiles. I set two research questions, how solo female travellers can improve their safety and which factors can increase the risk to encounter safety related problems. As a conclusion it can be said that five main themes were identified based on the interview transcripts and the data analysis process. When solo female travellers focus on improving their skills and understanding in preparedness, cultural and social awareness, prevention, personal strategies and capabilities, and communication strategies, they have excellent opportunities to improve their travel safety.

I identified nine guidance verbs as a recurring pattern in the interview transcripts. These verbs were Adapt, Avoid, Communicate, Connect, Increase Awareness, Know the local culture, Prepare, Prevent and Research. These verbs can be used as a tool when a solo female traveller wants to prepare and develop her personal strategies on travel safety.

Also, I identified several factors possibly increasing the risk to face safety related problems. Some of the risk factors are external factors meaning that a traveller cannot really control those factors unless she does not travel at all. But obviously, this is not necessarily an option, especially for the business travellers. This kind of external factors are environmental and cultural factors and time and place. It is still possible to minimize these risk factors by appropriate planning and focusing to avoid the other risk factors which are more controllable

by the individual. These risk factors are risk-taking behaviour, personal attributes and behaviour, lack of local knowledge and isolation.

The targeted outcome of this thesis as a development work was to create the solo female traveller User personas and develop personalized safety guidelines for each User persona. This outcome has been described further in the following sub-chapters. Overall, it can be said this thesis research was a successful project. I conducted an adequate number of the qualitative interviews providing abundantly data for the analysis process. ChatGPT was an important tool to assist in the data analysis and together with the human input, the data analysis process produced interesting findings, which enabled to answer the research questions and develop the safety guidelines for the SAFE project.

The main limitations of this thesis were time pressure and the lack of resources in the qualitative data analysis. Considering the remarkable amount of the data collected during this thesis project, further research could be implemented if more time and more advanced qualitative data analysis techniques and software were available.

7.1 User Personas

Based on the in-depth interviews, couple of main type of solo female traveller profiles were identified. All participants were own kind of individuals, but there were some patterns in their travel behaviour and experience, which helped to combine certain characters and create three different User personas (Appendix 4). As the final objective in this development work was to develop personalized safety guidelines, it was important to create User personas which would be realistic, but also cover different type of solo female traveller profiles as extensively as possible. These User personas are not directly linked to any of the participants, but rather fictive characters reflecting several features identified during the interviews. Microsoft PowerPoint application and PowerPoint stock photos were used to design the User personas.

The first User persona is called “Maria The Newcomer Tourist”. Maria is a 46-year-old IT Consultant from Spain. She has not travelled alone earlier, but she would like to try that. Maria loves travel blogs and reads travel reviews and recommendations. She wants to plan her travel well ahead, and she is currently exploring different options for a safe and solo traveller-friendly destination. Maria is looking for a personal growth and she is excited to learn more about new cultures and people.

The second User persona is “Emma The Business Traveller”. Emma is a 38-year-old Business Consultant from Germany. Emma travels frequently, but mainly business trips, even though she also likes to travel for leisure. She is trying to combine these two travel modes, when possible. Emma is always very busy, but she tries to find time to explore new destinations. She prefers

good quality hotels at the city centres, where everything works efficiently and safely. Local dishes and cultural events are her passion.

The third User persona is “Rosa The Backpacker”. Rosa is a 26-year-old hairdresser from Finland. Rosa is more spontaneous traveller, even though she understands the importance of good planning, especially when travelling alone on remote areas or culturally very different countries. She is a budget-traveller, who prefers cheaper accommodation options and public transportation and walking. She loves to meet new people and explore different cultures, without forgetting her personal safety. Rosa always travels light without heavy luggage, and she loves to share her best travel memories on social media.

7.2 Safety Guidelines

As a final product of this development work for the SAFE project, I developed six personalized safety guidelines for each User persona (Table 1). These safety guidelines are based on the collected data and the User persona profiles. When developing the safety guidelines, I took into consideration which identified safety themes and factors could be the most useful for each User persona. The safety guidelines help solo female travellers identify their personal needs and get personalized guidance how to improve their travel safety when travelling alone.

The safety guidelines are presented in the two different formats in this thesis. The safety guidelines with the description part are the more detailed package presented as a table in the Word file (Appendix 5). Another version of the safety guidelines is more visual, a poster style presentation including the safety guidelines without the description part. The visual version was designed by Canva, which is an online graphic design tool (Appendix 6). The safety guideline types are presented in the visual Canva version as the safety guidelines for a beginner solo female traveller, for a solo female business traveller and for a solo female backpacker, while in the Word version they are named according to the User persona profiles. The Word version of the safety guidelines could be used for example as a part of the educational materials, and the more visual Canva version could be used for example as a poster on the project website or even as a printed version.

Table 1: Safety guidelines examples

Maria The Newcomer Tourist	Emma The Business Traveller	Rosa The Backpacker
Buy Inclusive Travel Insurance	Choose Safe Accommodation	Research and Plan beforehand
Try Guided Tours	Share Your Travel Itinerary	Secure Your Valuables
Research Local Tourist Scams and Crimes	Prepare Emergency Plan	Stay Connected
Choose Safe and Reliable Transportation	Connect with Your Professional Network	Carry own Safety Gear
Stay in Public and Populated Areas	Know the Local Culture	Be Considerate but Cautious when Engaging Locally
Prepare Your Language Skills	Avoid Late Night Travel	Always Trust Your Instincts

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Appendix 1: Interview questions

Travel Habits

When and where have you been travelling alone?

Why did you travel alone?

How often do you travel alone?

Do you connect with other solo female travellers, e.g., in social media?

Do you prefer to use travel agencies, or are you rather more spontaneous or independent traveller?

Do you plan and book your accommodation beforehand and what type of accommodation do you prefer? Why?

Do you plan your ground transportation beforehand and what transportation methods do you prefer? Why?

Preparedness

Do you have specific routines or preparations when travelling alone?

Do you behave differently while travelling alone?

How can you try to avoid safety related issues?

Do you have any emergency plan while travelling?

Do you assess possible safety risks at the destination before travelling?

Do you adjust your clothing or behaviour according to local cultural environment?

How do you prepare for possible communication or connectivity challenges?

Sense of Safety

Did you feel safe when travelling alone?

What did your family/friends think about your travel?

Is there any place where you wouldn't travel alone?

Did you avoid any places particularly (at the destination)?

Do you think if ethnicity or age effects on your travel safety?

Do you trust your instincts or do you more likely follow known facts?

Do you always trust local police or other authorities?

Have you ever needed help from the local police or authorities?

Have you ever needed help from the local people or other tourists?

Experiences

Did you face any safety related problems or challenges?

How did you manage these situations?

What did help you to stay safe?

Did you ever witness a situation where some other female solo traveller had safety related issues?

Have you noticed if your personal safety has been impacted by local culture or regulations?

What do you think, why do some women face safety related problems easier or more often than some others?

Would you do now something differently?

Conclusion and Recommendations

What are the benefits of travelling alone?

What are the disadvantages of travelling alone?

Has your solo travel behaviour changed by the time?

Would you still travel alone?

Would you recommend solo travel to other women?

What safety related advice would you give to other women?

What would you tell your daughter if she wants to travel alone?

Appendix 2: Initial codes

Travel Preparation
"Pre-tip research"
"Securing belongings"
Safety Practices
"Avoidance of risky areas"
"Cultural adjustments"
Emergency Readiness
"Emergency contacts and insurance"
Interactions with Locals
"Trust in locals vs. self-reliance"
Perception of Safety
"General feeling of safety"
Cultural and Social Awareness
"Adapting to cultural norms"
Routine Practices
"Luggage management"
"Document safety"
Safety Strategies
"Night-time vigilance"
"Discreet behaviour"
Cultural Considerations
"Appearance adaptation"
Social Interactions
"Avoiding personal disclosures"
Risk Assessment
"Country-specific risks"
Support Networks
"Family updates"
Travel Experience
"Solo vs. group behaviour"
Self-Protection Measures
"White lies for safety"
Adaptive Behaviour
"Adjusting to local conditions"
Travel Wisdom
"Travel wisdom from family"

Appendix 3: Themes based on the grouped codes

PREPAREDNESS

Code: "Pre-trip research"

"Before traveling to a new destination, I always conduct research to understand safety risks, crime rates, and dangerous areas."

Code: "Securing belongings"

"I always keep the hotel's phone number with me for emergencies and rely on apps like Uber for transportation, ensuring I have everything well arranged."

Code: "Emergency contacts and insurance"

"I've never had a formal emergency plan, but I ensure to carry health insurance and keep emergency contacts updated in my phone."

Code: "Luggage management"

"I carry my luggage always in carry-on bags, never check a bag."

Code: "Document safety"

"Important documents, such as passport and flight tickets, are stored in both my phone and email for security reasons."

Code: "Country-specific risks"

"In certain African and Middle Eastern countries, I conduct thorough background checks and make contingency plans."

COMMUNICATON STRATEGIES

Code: "Trust in locals vs. self-reliance"

"Although I enjoy the company of others, even when traveling solo, I feel uneasy when isolated or unable to engage with others."

Code: "Family updates"

"Relatives may be more worried, but I have gotten used to informing them about my travel plans."

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

Code: "Cultural adjustments"

"Cultural sensitivity is also crucial. In countries like Morocco and Uganda, I dress conservatively to respect local norms and ensure my comfort."

Code: "Adapting to cultural norms"

"Communicating with locals about safety has generally reassured me, and I often rely on hotel staff or new acquaintances to feel more secure in a new place."

Code: "Appearance adaptation"

"Especially my blonde appearance has attracted attention in certain cultures, which can increase security risks."

Code: "Avoiding personal disclosures"

"I avoid giving out too much personal information to strangers."

Code: "Adjusting to local conditions"

"I adapt my behaviour according to the culture of the country and act accordingly."

PREVENTION

Code: "Avoidance of risky areas"

"I try to stay away from sketchy areas and trust my instincts."

Code: "Night-time vigilance"

"I am more aware of my surroundings, especially at night and in unfamiliar places."

Code: "Discreet behaviour"

"If someone asks if I am alone, I often respond that I am waiting for a friend."

Code: "White lies for safety"

"Small white lies help protect me from potential threats."

PERSONAL STRATEGIES AND CAPABILITIES

Code: "General feeling of safety"

"While I generally feel safe while traveling, I attribute this to a combination of careful planning, awareness of my surroundings, and maintaining a positive outlook."

Code: "Solo vs. group behaviour"

"I behave differently when traveling alone than in a group. In a group, I am less conscious of safety."

Code: "Travel wisdom from family"


"My parents taught me the skills of traveling at an early age."

Appendix 4: User personas



Maria The Newcomer Tourist

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46 years old
IT Consultant
Spain

Motto:
“Start with the small steps and slowly gain confidence to discover the unknown”.

Behaviors:
Hasn't travelled solo earlier but is eager to try.

Looking for safe, affordable and solo travel-friendly destinations.

Loves to read travel blogs and review recommendations.

Prefers rather traditional tourist destinations than very adventurous trips.

Goals:
To build confidence and self-reliance on solo travel.


Meet new people from the different cultures.

Feeling empowered and learn from the new cultures.


Frustrations and problems:
Overcoming the initial concerns over solo travel.


How to choose safe and tourist-friendly travel destinations.

Learning to navigate and communicate abroad.



Emma The Business Traveler

Co-funded by the
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38 years old
Business consultant
Germany

Motto:
“Work trips open new doors. Plan well but leave room for adventures”.

Behaviors:
Travels regularly for business but is trying to combine trips for leisure.

Prefers reputable hotels at the vicinity of business locations.

High trust on technology and local recommendations.

Appreciate efficient and safe travel arrangements.

Goals:
Not to waste time between business meetings.

Improve productivity and spend the saved spare time enjoying the new cities.

Loves to try local dishes and cultural events.

Frustrations and problems:
How to stay safe while traveling in the big cities.

Dealing with the constant stress.

Balancing very busy schedule.



Rosa The Backpacker

Co-funded by the
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26 years old
Hairdresser
Finland

Motto:

“Always ready for
new adventures, but
responsibly”

Behaviors:

- Prefers budget-friendly traveling.
- Stays usually in hostels or Airbnb.
- Likes public transportation and walking.
- Connects easily with other people, trying to engage with locals.
- Maintains cautious openness.
- Always travel light.

Goals:

Learn about new cultures and landscapes.

Share best travel memories on social media.

Maintain safety while traveling all over the world.

Frustrations and problems:

How to stay safe in the remote areas.

How to balance travel budget.

Language barrier in non-English speaking countries.

Appendix 5: Safety Guidelines (Word)



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MARIA THE NEWCOMER TOURIST

SAFETY GUIDELINES	DESCRIPTION
<p>Buy Inclusive Travel Insurance</p>	<p>Invest in a good quality travel insurance, which covers all your needs. Remember to check if additional coverage is required to cover possible special activities, such as sports or adventurous activities.</p>
<p>Try Guided Tours</p>	<p>Consider joining to guided tours at your destination. Guided tours can offer you a safe and hassle-free opportunity to explore tourist sites. Compare tour operator prices before booking.</p>
<p>Research Local Tourist Scams and Crimes</p>	<p>Search information about typical tourist scams and crimes at your destination. Preparedness will help you to identify and avoid regrettable incidents.</p>
<p>Choose Safe and Reliable Transportation</p>	<p>Use only licenced and reputable taxi companies or taxi apps like Uber or Bolt. Verify driver's identity and car plate number. Confirm taxi meter is operative or fixed price has been officially agreed.</p>
<p>Stay in Public and Populated Areas</p>	<p>Prefer public and well-populated areas over isolated or empty areas. But be cautious against pickpocketing in the heavily crowded places.</p>
<p>Prepare Your Language Skills</p>	<p>Learn some useful phrases in the local language, e.g., how to ask help for the right direction or in case of emergency. Consider downloading a suitable mobile app or carrying a phrasebook.</p>



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EMMA THE BUSINESS TRAVELLER

SAFETY GUIDELINES	DESCRIPTION
Choose Safe Accommodation	Prefer reputable hotel brands and check customer reviews before booking. Verify your hotel follows safety regulations.
Share Your Travel Itinerary	Prepare as accurate travel itinerary as practical and add important contact details. Share your itinerary with some trusted person in your home country.
Prepare Emergency Plan	Collect a list with relevant emergency contacts e.g., hospitals, police, embassy etc. Carry with you a small emergency kit with some basic medicine and first aid supplies.
Connect with Your Professional Network	Utilize your professional networks. Ask tips for dining, safe transportation options, sightseeing and what should be avoided. Connect with other business travellers or locals, if convenient.
Know the Local Culture	Cultural Awareness is one of the main factors affecting on your travel safety and comfort. Familiarize yourself with the cultural characteristics and possible restrictions at your destination. Consider etiquette regarding the attire and behaviour.
Avoid Late Night Travel	Avoid late night travel in unknown locations. If you can't avoid, stay in populated and well-lit areas. Prefer licenced taxi services or safe taxi apps.



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ROSA THE BACKPACKER

SAFETY GUIDELINES	DESCRIPTION
Research and Plan beforehand	Even if you like spontaneous travel plans, research at least safe and unsafe areas, other possible safety risks and local customs at your destination.
Secure Your Valuables	Avoid wearing anything valuable on you, it can draw unwanted attention. Hide a small amount of money, credit card, or your ID to a hidden pocket under your clothes, use e.g., money belts or bra pouches.
Stay Connected	Buy a travel data package or a local sim card when travelling outside the EU. Download offline maps to your phone. e.g., Google Maps. Make sure you have copies of your itinerary and important documents available online. Store important emergency contacts to your phone. Keep your phone charged.
Carry own Safety Gear	Consider carrying a small Safety Gear or Survival Kit including items like torch, locks, lighter, door blocker and perhaps a personal alarm or spray for self-defence. If you carry a pepper spray, check local regulations beforehand.
Be Considerate but Cautious when Engaging Locally	Getting to know local people can really enrich your travel but avoid oversharing personal information to strangers or on social media. Be cautious if someone is overly friendly or interested in your travel plans.
Always Trust Your Instincts	Listen your gut feeling. If something doesn't feel right, avoid it, or leave the situation. Better to be safe than sorry.

Appendix 6: Safety Guidelines (Canva)



SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR A SOLO FEMALE BUSINESS TRAVELLER

Choose Safe Accommodation

Share Your Travel Itinerary

Prepare Emergency Plan

Connect with Your Professional Network

Know the Local Culture

Avoid Late Night Travel


SAFE
Sustainable Accessible Future Environments

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR A SOLO FEMALE BACKPACKER

Research and Plan beforehand

 **Secure Your Valuables**

Stay Connected

 **Carry own Safety Gear**

Be Considerate but Cautious when Engaging Locally

Always Trust Your Instincts

SAFE
Sustainable Accessible Future Environments