An exploratory study of links between individuals' perceptions of solo tourism and their desires for social interaction and solitude.

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Craig Leith
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland
c.leith1@rgu.ac.uk

Abstract: There is a continuing growth of solo tourism as a significant sector within the tourism industry. This growth reflects a general growth of solo lifestyle choices in areas such as housing, work, relationships and leisure pursuits. While reasons for the growth of solitary lifestyles are varied, one factor that has risen to prominence is the degree of choice available to individuals; the greater the level of choice, the more positive the perception of solitary experiences. Previous research has suggested studying solitude by placing individuals along two dimensions; one measuring desire for social interaction and the other measuring desire for solitude. This paper asked one hundred and three participants to subjectively self-select their perceived placement on both these dimensions. Despite the growth of solo tourism, there are relatively few papers exploring this perspective of solo tourism, with research more likely to report issues like gender, safety, and risk in the solo tourism industry. This exploratory research therefore aimed to identify links between individuals' perceptions of solo tourism and their desires for social interaction and solitude. Results allowed for an initial typology to be proposed according to the desire for solitude/desire for social interaction dimensions. The research also indicated potential links between individual's placement within this typology and their general perceptions of solo tourism and tourists. Further research will aim to test these exploratory findings through study of individuals who have personal experience of solo tourism. It is hoped outcomes will widen the current relatively narrow range of solo tourism research.

Key words:- solo tourism (perceptions of); solitude; social interaction; typology

1. Background

Limited research currently exists in the areas of solo tourism, with the main focus to date being on gender. (Chiang & Jogaratnam, 2006; Yang et al, 2018; Wilson & Little, 2018). McNamara and Prideax (2010) add context to the idea that female solo travellers have greater concerns over safety by suggesting that this concern is largely dependent on the destination. Jordan & Gibson (2005) comment on the unwanted gaze of others in their study of solo women travellers, from a perception of being judged as "sad or lonely" to receiving overtly unwanted sexual attention. Responses to this gaze varied from feeling judged, altering behaviour, being frustrated or resisting and rejecting the views of others. Although focused on the travel experience of lesbian women specifically, Poria (2006) highlights that tourists can be conscious of others around them and adapt their behaviour accordingly. This self-consciousness is perhaps more common in those who see themselves as an outsider – such as the solo tourist (Heimtun, 2012). Ratner & Hamilton (2015) raised the prospect that an individual may be reluctant to partake in a solitary activity if it was public and they ran the perceived risk of being observed and judged.

It is possible to consider a state of solitude as existing when one is in the presence of others but unobserved (Long & Averill, 2003; Detrixhe et al, 2014). Viewing solitude as a psychological state (More et al, 2003), the nature and impact of it can depend on the internal motivations and feelings of the individual rather than the actual presence, or lack thereof, of others. It is an internal, rather than external, construct. Solitude, when seen as disengagement from others, can remove inhibitions and give freedom to ones choices in behaviour. Those engaging in solo activities can often be stigmatised as lonely (Ratner & Hamilton, 2015), or even as a sign of mental illness (Detrixhe et al, 2014). However, it can be argued that such individuals are in fact displaying a developed sense of self as they are not in search of immediate social reinforcement (Long et al, 2006) and indeed are demonstrating mature emotional development (Winnicott, 1958 cited in Larson, 1990). Buchholz & Helbraun,(1999), when considering infants, argue that periods of solitude are psychologically warranted and as much as part of the developmental process as seeking attachment. Velleman (2013) posits that enjoying solitude involves having awareness of enjoying one's own company. Conscious effort to entertain oneself by keeping busy actually is a distraction from solitude. In this argument, an individual in physical isolation can not be said to being experiencing solitude if they are actively engaged in any activity, beyond being aware of their own company. Storr (1988) is firm in the belief that a capacity for solitude is a signal of emotional maturity rather than a sign of some form of mental deficiency.

There is an evidencable increase in solo lifestyle choices, particularly living alone (Klinenberg, 2012) with "loner living" being identified as a key global consumer trend for the coming decade and beyond (Euromonitor,

2019). Reasons for living alone will vary greatly between individuals and globally, but can include lower marriage rates, higher divorce rates, and greater employment movement. It may also simply be down to individual preference. The level of choice will vary considerably, with some individuals seeing it as a desirable living state, while others may have loner living thrust upon them for particular external, or internal, reasons. With a focus on a single, rather than couple, lifestyle, Budgeon (2008) notes the importance of choice in validating and embracing singleness. Santos et al (2017) concluded that a move towards an individualist society was a global trend, which links with previous expansive USA focused studies by Putnam (2000) which projected significant negative impacts of the decline of civic and community bonds. Although there is significant evidence that loneliness is becoming a greater problem within society (Wang, Zhu and Shiv, 2012; Dijulio et al 2018) this study was not designed to focus on the particular reasons for social interaction or solitude. Rather, the focus was on the level of desire that participants had for each.

A distinction must be made between *loneliness* and *solitude*, (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992) with the former being negative and indicating a lack of choice in being alone, while the latter indicates a positive or negative state, depending on factors including context and level of personal choice. Chua and Koestner (2008) studied solitary behaviour in the context of self-determination theory and concluded that only when there was a lack of autonomy in behaviour were there any negative outcomes associated with solitary behaviour. Averill & Sundararajan (2014) state the importance of choice by defining unwanted isolation as pseudo-solitude while authentic solitude is achieved through personal choice, while Nguyen et al (2018) also found that choice played a significant role in positive solitary experiences. Wang (2006) formalised twenty types of solitude experience, rating them on a scale of desirability; while also addressing potential cultural factors across Chinese and American samples. Solitary experiences which allowed for self-discovery and freedom were among those seen as most desirable, while experiences involving loneliness, boredom and alienation unsurprisingly scored as not desirable. Long et al (2016), describes nine distinct types of solitude. It is a reasonable assumption that solo tourists seek different types of solitude perhaps depending on their individual personality and desires, or linked to a range of external and internal factors at a particular moment in time. For example, a solo tourist may seek solitude as anonymity within a large and busy city. Indeed, as a counterpoint to the concern that being a solo tourist may bring unwanted, judgemental gaze of others, it can be argued that solo tourism offers a significant degree of anonymity which may be sought by those seeking solitude. In her work on city living, Tonkiss (2003) refers to the concept of indifference of a community and the individual solitude of shared urban living. Other types of solitude as identified by Long et al (2003) can be seen to apply to the solo tourist, such as solitude as diversion, as inner peace or as self discovery. This typology of solitude also identified solitude as loneliness which has obvious negative implications for the solo tourist. One significant aspect of this classification of types of solitude is that it moves beyond the idea that solitude is purely a physical state of distance from other people.

2. Methodology

The wider area of solo tourism is worthy of further research as it is currently lacking beyond a narrow focus. Furthermore, this research was aiming to investigate links which have previously not been studied. Therefore, the research is very much exploratory and aims to inform future studies in the area of solo tourism (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). A sample of convenience was used of final year undergraduate students. Although this may narrow the focus of findings, it was felt sufficient for the purpose of this exploratory research (Cresswell, 1998). The research design took the form of a short qualitative survey consisting of two elements. The first element questioned participants views on their own individual desire for both solitude and for social interaction. It also sought their perceptions of both solo tourism and solo tourists. The second element of the survey adopted the category system used by Burger (1995) which divides people along two distinct dimensions. One dimension measures an individual's desire for social interaction and the other dimension measures their desire for solitude. This current research asked one hundred and three participants to subjectively self-select their perceived placement on both these dimensions. Three respondents were classed as invalid as this element was incomplete. It is recognised that the subjective nature of this methodology limits defined accuracy of findings. Although based on the subjective responses of participants, this does allow for a proposed typology (Figure 1) in the context of an individual's wider preferences for both solitude and social interaction. The qualitative comments were cross referenced with the clustering which informed the final typology in order to identify possible links between perceptions of solo tourism and individuals' desires for social interaction and solitude. Initial findings from the exploratory research are presented in the discussion

below. Furthermore, the findings here have laid the groundwork for future research which is addressed in section 6.   It is important to note that this proposed typology has been developed purely to inform future study into solo tourism specifically.
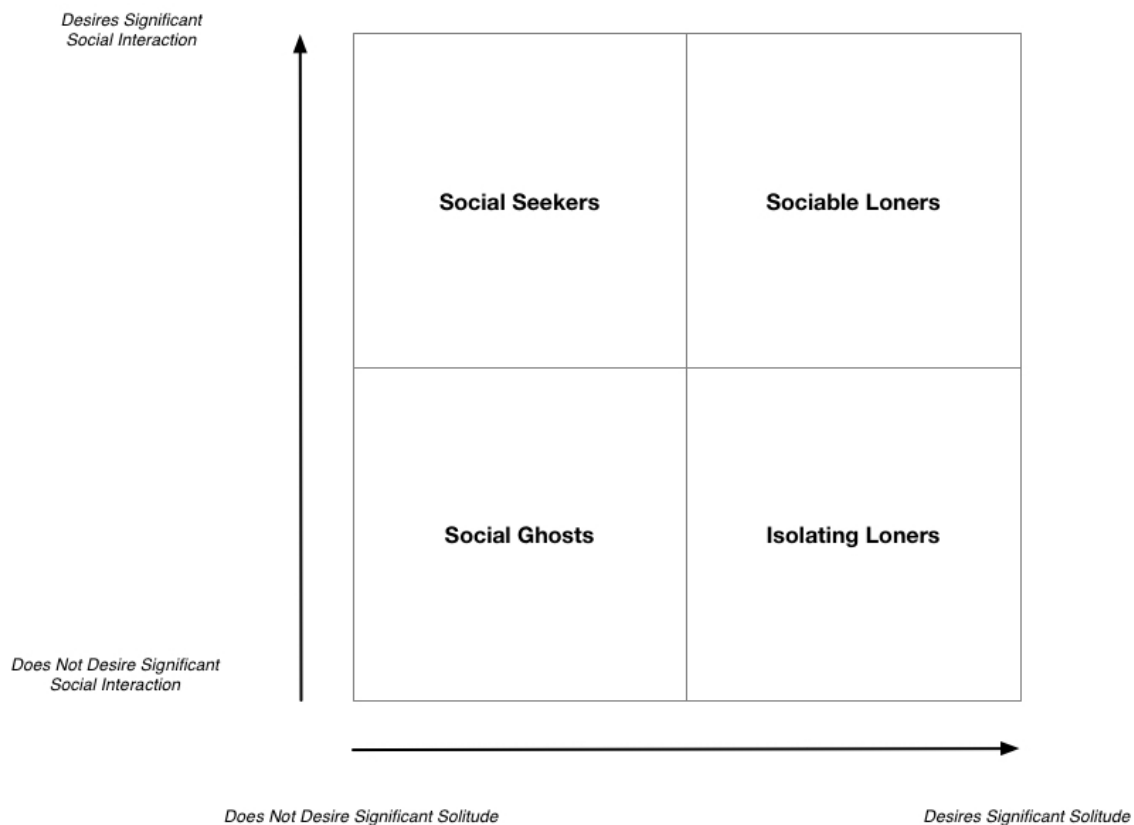

3.   Discussion

This exploratory study strongly suggests that a significant majority of individual's desire some degree of social interaction, no matter the level of solitude they prefer. This reiterates previous work by Leary, Herbst, and McCrary (2003) who concluded that those who enjoy solitary activities demonstrate a strong orientation toward solitude rather than indicating weak desire for social interaction.

This research did not attempt to address the reasons why participants placed themselves at particular points across both dimensions. The reasons for this subjective placement are likely varied, and at the basest level could be for broadly positive or negative reasons. However, the focus is on the levels of an individuals' *desire* for solitude and social interaction. In terms of the solitude dimension, this desire can be said to indicate an individuals' choice in seeking solitude. The study did not aim to study the degree of solitude in an individuals' life; rather the degree of solitude they desired.

Participants' were instructed to subjectively place themselves on the dimensions in a general manner in order to indicate their overall self-perception of desires for both solitude and social interaction. This subjective self-selection of placement along both dimensions suggested clear clustering sufficient for exploratory purposes. With the caveat that the individual reasons for desire for both solitude and social interaction were not investigated, initial terms of classification have been given to each of the four typology segments – "social seekers"; "sociable loners", "isolating loners" and "social ghosts." At this stage of the on-going research, no great deeper meaning should be read into these chosen terms of classification beyond what is outlined here. Social seekers are those who broadly seek social interaction, but do not tend to desire solitude. Sociable loners seek a greater level of solitude, but also seek social interaction. Isolated loners indicate desire for solitude, but not for social interaction. Finally, social ghosts would be those who seek neither solitude nor social interaction.

Figure 1 – Proposed Typology Based on Individuals' Desire for both Solitude and Social Interaction

Desires Significant Social Interaction

Social Seekers	**Sociable Loners**
Social Ghosts	**Isolating Loners**

Does Not Desire Significant Social Interaction

Does Not Desire Significant Solitude   *Desires Significant Solitude*

3.1 Social Seekers

A significant proportion of respondents (34%), indicated that generally they did not desire solitude but did desire social interaction. Although a number of respondents in this segment admitted that they did enjoy some solitude, it always came with a caveat of only for short periods of time, or to recover briefly from busy social or work periods. Although not proven within their work, Lay et al (2019) suggested that one's desire for solitude may ebb and flow in daily life. Within this "social seekers" grouping there was an overwhelming number of negative words and phrases associated with times of solitude. ("Difficult"; "bored"; "don't like"; "makes me feel sad and withdrawn"; "sink into a vortex of gloom and despair"; "get lonely"; "drives me crazy"). "Being bored" was by far the most common comment. Harris (2017) notes the potential benefits of solitude which can lead to the mind wandering and making random connections through thoughts. It is possible that those such as social seekers are led towards negative thoughts if they lack the capacity to enjoy solitude. This would suggest that these individuals would be more susceptible to the negativity of loneliness.

When asked about their views and perceptions of solo tourists, it is notable that this segment of respondents were broadly very positive in their impressions of such tourists. They were seen as "brave", "confident" and worthy of "respect" and "admiration." There were only a few negative comments towards such people, such as considering them as "lonely", "sad" and doing something which is "pointless." This view of the pointlessness of solo tourism was mentioned by several respondents. It can perhaps be linked to the age group of participants (early twenties), with Deresiewicz (2009) previously claiming that young people today cannot see the purpose of having time alone. We need to bear in mind this segment are those who personally do not desire solitude but do desire social interaction. This self awareness perhaps explains the positive views towards those who do go on holiday alone, while also a recognition from the respondents that it is a style of tourism which does not appeal to them personally. On the question of whether they would consider having a solo tourism experience personally, the responses were strongly negative. The main concerns expressed involved potential loneliness, spending some time alone, having nobody to share the experience with, feeling bored, the anxiety of not knowing anyone and the specific concern over how they would actually meet people to talk to. This final worry indicates a need to meet people even when being a solo tourist, but an awareness that this need may prove problematic to fulfil. Hill (1987) notes the distinction between wishing interpersonal contact and the actual ability to achieve this based on an individuals' social skills. Epley and Schroeder (2014) suggest that people struggle to engage with strangers as they believe that others are less keen to connect socially than they themselves are. One respondent raised the interesting point that they would likely miss out on experiences by staying in hotel as having nobody to encourage them to experience what awaited. They would then feel frustrated and angry at themselves for the missed opportunity. However, many of the respondents in this grouping did state that they would potentially enjoy making their own schedule with no need to compromise or take account of what companions wanted to do. (Mehmetoglu, Dann and Larsen, 2001). This positive desire was shared by a significant majority of respondents across all of the three populated segments.

3.2 Sociable Loners

Exactly half of valid participants can be categorised as "sociable loners" according to their self-selected placement across the two dimensions. This grouping, to varying degrees, indicated desire for social interaction while also wishing solitude. Although further research is required it is possible that individuals within this grouping experience solitude positively as proposed by Lay et al (2019) who recognise that two distinct types of solitude exist; one positive and one negative, and that an individual's confidence in their own social skills may lend them to experiencing solitude positively.

 In the comments specifically about solitude, there were similarities with the "social seekers" grouping in terms of "enjoying" periods of solitude, but with the caveat of for limited time periods. An analysis of the comments of this grouping does indicate limitations of the original research design. Although these participants were significantly drawn towards the "desires solitude" extremity of the dimension, a majority of comments indicate clear similarities with the "social seekers" grouping who saw themselves at the opposite "does not desire solitude" extremity of the same dimension. A frequent comment in this study shared between both "social seekers" and "social loners" was the opportunity to meet other people as a solo tourist, which links with previous research (Laesser, Beritelli and Bieger,2008; Bianchi, 2016). Furthermore, there were very similar comments from both groupings regarding their views on solo tourists and solo tourism. Coplan, Ooi and Baldwin (2019) have previously made the case that the lack of a strong desire for social interaction does not

necessarily also indicate a preference for solitude. This current research indicates the same may be true for those who do desire social interaction.

3.3 Isolating Loners
This segment is where a limited number (16%) of participants placed themselves. This grouping displayed a desire for solitude and also a lack of desire for social interaction. This signifies participants who desire solitude do not desire a large degree of social interaction. This might include those who are extremely socially anxious and seek solitude in order to avoid social interaction. However, it might also include those who feel no great need for social interaction as they have a developed sense of self which does not require social reinforcement (Larson, 2016). As with all four of the identified segments, the actual individual reasons for preference across both dimensions are difficult to define without further study. However, from the comments provided there does appear to be a high level of choice for both solitude and limited social interaction by the participants of this study. This is evidenced by views such as "I greatly enjoy solitude;" "I find interactions difficult and exhausting"; "I love being alone and enjoy my own company"; "I often crave quiet times alone." Participants within the segment do share similar comments as those within the sociable loner segment, in terms of seeking out periods of solitude. However, broadly their overall views differ by lacking the regular caveat of only for short periods or recognising the value of spending some time with others. Furthermore, several respondents within this segment stated they would "struggle" with social interaction with people they did not know during a solo tourism experience. Although there can be no definite conclusion drawn from these statements, it does suggest that their desire not to have social interaction is, at least to some degree, linked to their self-recognised difficulties in social situations with people they do not know. So, not entirely a question of choice, but rather one brought about by internal circumstances.

3.4 Social Ghosts
The instruction to focus on generality is a potential reason for the lack of any participants to be found in one segment of the proposed typology. It is not a surprise that no respondent generally does not significantly desire either solitude or social interaction. However, this finding does indicate the likely importance of situational context in the study of desire of social interaction and solitude. Although further study is required, it is possible to visualise a person who enjoys or seeks not to be alone and also desires no social interaction at the same time, in certain circumstances. This does seem to be a paradox. However, consider the individual who is working on an academic paper but prefers to work in a public area such as a coffee shop rather than enclosed in their office. This individual is making an effort to avoid solitude but is also likely to reject any attempt at social interaction from fellow patrons. The possibility of being solitary in a crowd has been raised previously by Cramer and Lake (1998). The motivations for this decision may be varied but the key point is that in a specific situation, the individual is making a conscious decision to avoid both solitude and social interaction. Hwang, Shin and Mattila (2018) suggest that a solo diner for example may find the social connectedness they seek by eating in proximity of other diners who are together as a group. However, in this research it is understandable that no respondents can be found in this "social ghost" typology segment as they were asked to consider their general views of solitude and social interaction – and not a situation specific context.

5.   Conclusions
There was little intention to reach significant conclusions from this exploratory research. However, it has provided a starting point for intended future research in the wider, and under studied, area of solo tourism, with particular focus on an individual's levels of desire for both solitude and social interaction. The key conclusion has been the initial identification of a proposed typology which will provide the starting point for the future research outlined below.

6.   Future Research

The priority for future research is a wider and rigorous testing of the desire for solitude/desire for social interaction typology proposed by this exploratory study. It is fully recognised that a limitation here has been the subjective nature of placement on both dimensions. Follow up research will focus on individuals who have experienced solo tourism in order to test the initial findings of this current study.

This research was focused on respondents generalised views on their own desire or need for both solitude and social interaction. It is suggested that there is a need to focus further research in a situational context based manner. This seems particularly pertinent when studying solo tourists. Previous research has indicated that the level of desire for solitude or social interaction may be linked to external considerations such as the activity being undertaken, the time of day or the level of exposure to others gaze. (Heimtun, 2010; Her and Seo, 2018). Although this study was not situation specific, some participants, across all populated segments, did comment that being alone in public such as eating would make them feel uncomfortable and being negatively judged by others. Furthermore, it is evident that the ubiquitous nature of social media and online communication has impacted on the level of solitude in our daily lives (Harris, 2014). There is a need for further research as to how this links to the solo tourist experience. It could be surmised that such invading communication methods makes solitude more difficult to achieve. However, it is also highly likely that such communication increases the appeal of solo tourism for those who desire social interaction; those classified here as social seekers and sociable loners. Finally, it is apparent from wider research that there is debate as to actually defining solitude, for example in terms of proximity of others, a state of mind and the impact of digital communication on solitude to highlight three elements. This current study looked upon solitude simply as time alone from other people. Future research will aim to explore the concept of solitude further, through the specific prism of solo tourism.

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