

## **‘Optics of Intersectionality’: Unpacking Women’s Travel Experiences through Instagram**

**Molly Geoghegan**

*M.A. Gender, Globalisation, and Rights*

*National University of Ireland, Galway*

**Abstract** This research applies the feminist framework of intersectionality to female travel and the role that Instagram plays in those experiences. Using a qualitative approach and engaging in interviews with four travel Instagrammers, I will explore these individual experiences with an intersectional lens. Intersectionality helps to unpack the ambiguities of Instagram’s role in travel—both its power to bolster community, as well as perpetuate systems of power.

To disrupt patriarchal, neo-colonial constructions in travel, it is vital to recognize the spaces that research has left untouched and to make aware the complex reality of female travel experiences. Intersectionality helps to illuminate the ambiguities of Instagram’s role in travel, erode systemic barriers, and better understand how women navigate the world.

**Keywords** Intersectionality · Instagram · Travel · Tourism · Colonialism · Feminism

### **Introduction**

The popularization of portable cameras, phones and technology has amplified travel to widely accessible, public domains. Personal photographs can be published to a ‘feed’ in a matter of moments—travel experiences are now ‘share-able’. While there is an abundance of writings about the uses and implications of social media, Instagram has a unique relationship with travel that has been less scrutinized.

Intersectionality, a feminist theory coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, presents a framework to pinpoint axes of oppression (1993). In examining female travel experiences, there are varying dynamics at play. Because of the entwined nature of Instagram and travel, it is vital to examine how they disrupt and frame each other within these experiences.

Women are accustomed to everyday risk in their mobility, but it can be intensified in travel where culture and customs are unfamiliar. These are patriarchal limitations on an individual experience that are both exacerbated and made easier to navigate through Instagram.

Travel also brings with it issues of colonialism. The ability to travel has historically rested with the group with the most power and money; 'the camera was used as an instrument of symbolic control' (2015: 102). John Urry names this perspective the 'tourist gaze,' which is 'largely pre-formed by and within existing mediascapes' (2011: 179); meaning that the context of a photograph is just as important as what is being photographed.

Being a free service available to anyone, Instagram has democratized travel photography and provided opportunities to expand the one-sided narrative of the 'tourist gaze'. To disrupt patriarchal, neo-colonial constructions in travel, it is vital to recognize the spaces that research has left untouched and to make aware the complex reality of female travel experiences. It is in addressing this gap that I arrive at my research question: How can intersectionality help to unpack the experiences of female<sup>1</sup> travel Instagrammers<sup>2</sup>?

As a feminist researcher in this emergent field, it is necessary to consider intersectionality to illuminate interweaving power dynamics such as race, gender and class—and how they are experienced through travel. For the purpose of this article, I will focus primarily on my participants' relationship with Instagram—both how it can be used as a tool and experienced as a hindrance. There are complex gendered dynamics, colonial implications, and lack of representation. These 'multiply-burdened' (Crenshaw, 1993: 140) realities will help to unpack female travel experiences and the baggage that comes with it. In doing so, this research strives to make the world of travel, and in a sense the world itself, more equal.

### ***Defining 'Travel'***

There are many different motivations and reasons for travel—forced migration, immigration and displacement—a few among an endless string of possibilities. The type of travel I engage with is individually motivated leisure travel. This does not necessarily denote a 'holiday' or 'vacation' as many research participants engage in 'long-form' travel, meaning travelling from place to place and making a living 'on the road'. Others have uprooted from the countries they were born in or split their time between different countries on a regular basis. Thus, 'travel', as I utilize it in this research, encapsulates those that willingly and positively participate in travel.

### **Literature Review**

The following section will outline the main theories and themes used within the article through a consolidated literature review.

### ***Theory of Intersectionality***

Engaging in social research, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality resonates. Intersectionality illustrates 'that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot

---

<sup>1</sup> I use 'female' here to embody any woman-identified persons, inclusive of trans, genderqueer or non-binary women. Though I use both 'women' and 'female', I consider an inclusive definition.

<sup>2</sup> Users of the social media, Instagram.

be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately,' (1993: 1244) something Crenshaw would later use and expand upon in cases of violence against women. She explains:

Because women of colour experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of colour and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms. (Crenshaw, 1993: 1251)

Though intersectionality's inaugural use was to highlight a gap in policy, intersections of race, gender, or any societal 'label' can be extrapolated far beyond the realm of law. Because systems of power almost always overlap, intersectionality presents a useful outline to explain deeply complex issues. Of course, Crenshaw herself acknowledges that 'intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity' (1993: 1244). There is a myriad of factors that may contribute to individual experiences. Intersectionality is just one approach to begin the process of unraveling tangled power dynamics at play in travel, tourism media, photography, and understanding lived experiences.

### ***Geography of Fear***

When it comes to mobility and travel, one of the most starkly gendered implications is women's capacity to remain safe. Women do not move or have access to public space in the same way men do. This 'spatial expression of patriarchy' is termed by Gill Valentine as the 'Geography of Women's Fear' (1989: 389). Valentine writes:

When a woman is in an area beyond her local environment, she makes judgements about her safety in public space based on preconceived images she holds about that area and its occupants, as well as from cues she receives about social behaviour from the actual physical surroundings. (Valentine, 1989: 388)

Careful selection and unconscious exclusion from spaces create 'mental maps' (Valentine, 1989: 386) that each woman carries during any form of travel, from the everyday errand to a trip abroad. Unfamiliarity with the area, local culture and even language barriers can add to this sense of fear. The theory does not assume that every woman is fearful when traveling, but that every individual accrues preconceived notions of places from a variety of sources.

Researchers Erica Wilson and Donna Little draw on Valentine's theory with a study of solo female travellers that reemphasizes the idea of constraint in female travel choices and experiences. Their interviewees' expressions of fear ranged from concern about actual violence, to feelings of self-doubt, all instilled through socially constructed messages and stories of what had happened to other women travellers. Moving through gendered tourism settings and spaces, these solo women travellers found it difficult to blend in and take the stance of 'objective sightseer' (Wilson & Little, 2008: 180). Rather, many women described a sense of constraint regarding the safety and appropriateness of their movement. In turn, they developed cognitive maps—whether culturally accurate or not—of which countries would be safe.

### ***Applying Intersectionality: Lack of Representation in Travel***

An intersectional analysis of travel asks us to interrogate not only what parts of travel experiences have been obscured but who has been barred from access to participating.

One such example of under-representation can be found in the 'study abroad' experience, a pillar of academia that many colleges and universities offer students as part of course credit. Of those studying abroad from the United States in 2015-2016, 71.6 percent were white students—an overwhelming majority (Open Doors Report, 2017). 'Because of this fact, organizations have tailored their programs to this demographic', writes Vanessa Doyle in her piece on African American experiences in studying abroad (Doyle, 2018: 1). She iterates that 'without conscious attempts to critically engage with race, study abroad programs have the strong potential to feed into American students' stereotypes about the foreign other' (2018: 9). One student interviewee is quoted: 'They thought I was from anywhere but the US which troubled me a little bit because there's this idea that Americans are just white people' (Doyle, 2018: 19). It is worth interrogating the absence of people of colour in these programmes because it is indicative of barriers for minorities to travel, and further perpetuates stereotypes.

Another omission is uncovered by Elaine Chiao Lin Yang (ECL) *et al.* who studied Asian female travellers to challenge existing tourism research. They track the perceived risks for female Asian backpackers to create the only study of 'solo female travelers from a risk and power perspective, and from an Asian viewpoint' (2018: 43). Barriers that arise are specific to Asian women, such as the belief that travelling alone is not a culturally acceptable lifestyle for women (2018: 45). This kind of representation matters because we cannot know others' challenges if they are not explored, as shown by this kind of research. From their qualitative study, Wilson and Little acknowledge the limited scope of their interviewees:

No Asian, Aboriginal or Islander women were represented in either sample despite searches for women of these ethnic backgrounds. As such, the study is limited to the experiences of predominantly white women, which reflects the somewhat privileged circumstance of Western women being able to access international solo travel. (Wilson & Little, 2008: 173)

Kristi Siegel asks the necessary question:

Most importantly, *what* women are being warned and *what* kind of travel is being addressed? In privileging only certain women and certain travel experiences, the rhetoric of peril leveled at women journeying alone proves myopic in scope and riddled with issues of race and class. (Siegel, 2004: 69)

This brings us back to the importance of intersectionality and theorizing travel through this feminist lens. Certainly, every destination holds varying implications for different sets of people. So, what are the obstacles that women of colour face in travel? Non-cisgender<sup>3</sup> women?

### ***Neo-colonial Implications***

Holding an intersectional lens to *who* has access to travel also helps to unpack issues of neo-colonialism, modern manifestations of colonialism. Though formal colonialism is not as visibly present in the twenty-first century, neo-colonial issues arise in the form of systematic oppressions—much like exclusion from studying abroad. Especially in travel, Shannon Sullivan's theory of 'white ontological expansiveness' articulates this:

---

<sup>3</sup> Non-cisgender is to identify with a different gender identity than the one assigned at birth.

As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces—whether geographical, physical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise—are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish. (Sullivan, 2006: 11)

White ontological expansiveness is one way of assuming entitlement or privilege. Another, surface-level way to recognize it is by looking at the bulk of popular travel writing from Rick Steeves, Lonely Planet, or Fodor's—mainstream travel guides written by predominantly white writers from the West. By claiming authority over other countries, this kind of writing can become an unconscious form of 'us versus them' narrative, further emphasizing white privilege. Just as the West colonized the East, the same homogenous voices now speak for their culture and, in effect, continue to exert *power over*.

### *Relationship of Travel, Photography and Instagram Behaviour*

Instagram's photo-centric nature and emphasis on visually pleasing aesthetics makes it the ideal social media platform for people who document their travels, like travel bloggers who share inspiring snapshots of faraway places. Alice Marwick writes:

A selfie at Machu Picchu is more effective than a clunky paragraph of text in conveying that one likes to travel. This situation is especially true on Instagram. Since the site consists primarily of photographs, it intensifies the importance of visual self-presentation. (Marwick, 2015: 143)

Being able to take or post a photo online holds just as much meaning as getting to the destination itself. Paris and Pietschnig write, 'Understanding this increasingly pervasive form of digital tourist photography is necessary to understand how tourism is experienced by and mediated through mobile technology' (2015: 5). Indeed, travel and the documentation of it are not mutually exclusive.

### *Feedback and decision-making online*

An important aspect of how online communities interact is through the engagement, comments, and feedback on social posts. A recent examination on the behaviour of Online Travel Communities (OTC) details an investigation around the post engagement and feedback behaviour of OTCs— 'deemed as the key social dynamic of an OTC' (Fang *et al.*, 2018: 1). Social capital theory, as they define it, exemplifies the need for second, third and hundreds of opinions when it comes to making decisions about travel; 'a helpful post can satisfy an OC member's innate functional and/or hedonic needs and facilitate decision-making' (2018: 3). Again, this illustrates the power and presence of social media content that can influence users and potential travellers who are often the same audience.

In combating women's 'Geography of Fear' as previously discussed, this aspect of an OTC can be quite useful when making decisions around travel. Fang *et al.* also considers Instagram's role in the perceived risk of selecting destinations:

Due to differences in cultures and the environments, compared to non-exotic destinations, prospective travellers perceive greater uncertainty (for example, economic risk and safety risk) as well as curiosity before they visit exotic destinations. (Fang *et al.*, 2018: 6)

In seeking validation of safety, users catalogue the places that are associated with specific issues of safety.

### ***Significance of Research***

While travel and its documentation have long been analysed, intersectionality unpacks female travel and the role that Instagram plays in those particular experiences. What is the significance for women taking up these spaces? Koskela writes, 'If women have the courage to go out, they make space more easily available for other women by their presence' (1999: 112). Indeed, there are significant trends in the rise of solo female travel. In a report released by 'Solo Traveler World', 72 percent of women from the United States will take a solo journey within the year (Solo Traveler World, 2018). Travel agency G Adventures has seen a 148 percent increase in solo travelers since 2008 and 65 percent of those are women (Sendeki, 2014). After being asked about why and how they go about their solo ventures, one respondent in Wilson and Little's study stated, 'We're not stupid...but we'll not stay home neither' (2005: 201); meaning, they know the risk and still see great value in traveling, regardless. This is an important statement because it overrides the power system in place, a phenomenon worth exploring.

Intersectionality reveals that women's voices and experiences have been less scrutinized in travel, and that Instagram is both a tool to protect systems of power, and publicly take up space against it. This research makes a single step in unpacking what intersectionality can reveal about travel, gender, colonialism, and how all these ideas collide.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research Design: Feminist Social Research Methods and Qualitative Interviews***

This project draws on feminist social research methods, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data about female travel experiences. Feminist researcher Schulmit Reinharz expresses the significance of this:

By listening to women speak, understanding women's membership in particular social systems, and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist interview researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience. (Reinharz, 1991: 44)

In employing a qualitative, semi-structured interview strategy, this approach 'offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researchers' (Reinharz, 1991: 19). An 'interviewee-guided investigation of a lived experience that asks almost no prepared questions' was important in addressing my research question because no one can speak for other women's experiences. Engaging in this kind of research means revealing power structures and including women's perspectives.

#### ***Selection of Participants and Ethical Considerations***

The subsequent selection of participants was given intensive consideration. In addition to being a woman-identifying person, it was also important to gather a sample that engaged with their own travel community through posts and comments, showing an interest and active role in their online presence.

Participants were first identified through Instagram and contacted via email. Originally, this approach was selected as the most appropriate to inform participants of the research. However, after the first interview, it was clear that participants' own Instagram networks had a wider audience than my own social media circles. After one participant put out a call for female travellers from Asia, South America, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean on their Instagram, I received at least a dozen direct messages on Instagram with interest in partaking in the research. I had asked for travellers from these parts of the world specifically as it was important that I include perspectives not exclusively from the 'Global North'<sup>4</sup> or West, a limit I was conscious of within my own social network.

The resulting participants make up perspectives from different continents, carrying multiple passports. For the scope of this research, four total participants were selected—one identifies as a white woman and three as women of colour. Criteria for selection included a need to represent various ethnicities and backgrounds, having lived and travelled in a variety of diverse regions around the world, and an Instagram following of at least 5,000—an indication of influence and reach.

By grounding my research in a feminist approach, I apply the theoretical framework of intersectionality to qualitative interviews and allow participants to speak for themselves. Participants selected their own pseudonyms to represent themselves in the research and maintain anonymity. The remainder of this article will bring forth select findings from these interviews relevant to the research question examining women's travel and Instagram's role in those experiences.

## **Findings & Discussion**

### ***Ambiguities of Instagram***

The following discussion will integrate intersectionality as an analytical lens, further illuminating the multifarious nature of female travel experiences, paying specific attention to the role of Instagram.

#### *Finding community*

In dealing with this norm of fear, Instagram creates a host of tools for minorities and niche groups to find community and navigate the world more safely. As discussed earlier, Instagram's Online Travel Communities (OTCs) can assist in locating like-minded travellers. These groups can be especially important for women in locating safe, welcoming spaces and well-reviewed recommendations. This is iterated here, by participant Anna:

I really like felt for a long time like I was lacking in actual community and getting to know people and not just surface level scrolling through a pretty photo. And so once I did find that, and started to connect more with female travelers all over the world through the platform that I felt really matched my travel style and my interests and um, you know, my ethical values and all of that. Then it [Instagram] became a really important tool for travel, for meeting people, for choosing destinations, and just for having a community of other women to talk to about travel. (Anna)

Finding these communities is important because, as Anna continues, many hostels condone a 'party culture' which can often be a very male-dominated space. Locating a welcoming, safe space on Instagram can

---

<sup>4</sup> A term often used in Development referring to developed countries in Europe and North America

therefore be linked to debunking one's own mental map of fear. However, these communities, which can produce thousands of comments within seconds, have a lot of power. When community members respond negatively, effects are equally felt. Another participant, Kai, articulates the damaging capacity of an OTC:

After experiencing my sexual assault in Morocco and being hammered by a community of women who blamed me for my own sexual assault, I realized the need for women's support groups and someone to be like, *I understand you, I've been there, I don't blame you, I'm here for you. I'm a woman and I support you.* Because I didn't get that—or I did get it but it was so minuscule compared to the hate and death threats that I got that I was like, *okay, I need to combat this by being a role model, I need to be an example.* Because the supportive voices that I did get meant the world to me.  
(Kai)

While positive reinforcement did occur—and assisted in the aftermath of a traumatic event—a feminist analysis pinpoints internalized misogyny manifested in the form of victim-blaming within this OTC. The balance of backlash versus support was disproportionate. Though a single destructive comment is not necessarily representative of an entire community, the weight of hundreds of similar voices can become a real hazard to the person on the receiving end. Thus, proving that while the real world is full of potential danger, so too is the online world.

### *Navigating mental maps*

When introduced to the theory 'Women's Geography of Fear' (Valentine, 1989), each participant made clear their own established behaviours and practices to combat this socialized norm. When asked 'What role does safety and being secure play in your travel choices?', one of the participants revealed its prominence, Pam stated: 'It's a huge part as a single female traveling, most times that's the first thing I have to keep in mind.' This altered behaviour indicates that fear is the norm for most female travellers, 'not regarded as a serious constraint but rather a normal and accepted condition' (Koskela, 1999: 121). Here, navigating a 'mental map of fear' becomes a typical part of even day-to-day travel experiences. Anna battles this internalized consequence of patriarchy, she describes:

I try as much as possible not to let it impact my travels and my travel decisions. You know, I always obviously want to make wise choices and stay safe, but I'm really big on not allowing the fact that we still live in a patriarchy and women are unsafe in pretty much the whole world—not allowing that to restrict me from getting the most that I can out of traveling. (Anna)

Participants also said that friends and strangers had described them as 'brave' or 'courageous' for traveling for so long, so far, or so remotely. It is clear that the world views women as more vulnerable, a more susceptible group in need of defending. Pam reasons: 'A lot of times I think people are afraid of change, it's different. But I think that's for me, a motivation to keep doing it because you know, why not?' This attitude to keep going, despite mental maps of fear, illustrates each participants' public presence travelling as a form of resistance against systems of oppression. Their unanimous motivation to keep journeying, irrespective of cautionary warnings, emphasizes the benefit of travel and perhaps the sense of solidarity in a growing travel 'Instagrammer' movement.



*The High Cost of Social Capital for Influencers*

Instagram's role in travel reveals that while it can aid in decision-making and finding community, its presence can also be a hindrance to Instagrammers' enjoyment of travel.

Especially for those with high-profile Instagram accounts with large followings, constant engagement with the platform can amount to a certain pressure. Each participant had between five thousand and fifty thousand followers – a number that indicates 'influence' – a significant factor in the world of social media, as discussed in my literature review. This heightened 'social capital' (Fang *et al.*, 2018: 3) is met with hesitation from participant Nambi, who has a wide audience watching her journey around the world,

I'm not enjoying travel the way that I used to because, you know, I'm constantly like, *oh my God, I need to get this on video. Oh my God, oh damn—I ate a bite of my food before taking a picture.* That caused a level of pressure that I was like, I can't—I completely collapsed. (Nambi)

From this, we see that while travel Instagrammers are given a responsibility to showcase the world, they may also make sacrifices to their own experiences. Nambi succinctly concludes: 'I think it's good in a way that I'm able to show people the world, but I think it's bad in that I find myself always looking at the world through [the] back-end of my phone.' The digital landscape of travel documentation is a double-edged sword.

*Unpacking Colonial Baggage**Disrupting mainstream travel media*

Despite these tensions with the platform, Instagrammers' presence alone counteracts mainstream travel media. In discussing Shannon Sullivan's 'White Ontological Expansiveness,'<sup>5</sup> Kai responds to the idea of mainstream travel and tourism being built for white people: 'White people have always had a dominating presence on what gets published.' As explored in the literature review regarding the bulk of travel literature from the Western world, the influence and representations of leisure travel have focused solely on white experiences.

Nambi has actually responded to what Kai refers to as 'overwhelming whiteness', with a company of her own, a boutique travel consultancy with the aim to showcase destinations in the African diaspora. This is a distinct effort to expand mainstream attention from traditional destinations defined by white Western travellers (and supporting white Western travellers) to places that can both benefit from tourism as well as create new perspectives.

Why are these destinations not included on most travel 'bucket lists' in the first place? Kai points to the media: 'Travel itself is a pretty neutral being, but media and travel is definitely based around the white population.' These findings suggest that media frames its content for particular audiences, thus granting media power to control travel narratives. In popularizing certain regions through tourism, white power exerts itself over parts of the world in the same way Said's 'Orientalism' exerts *power over*—a media-fueled neo-colonization.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Sullivan, also discussed in the literature review.

### *Intersectionality of Fear*

We know that women experience fear and there is risk both in travel and online. The extent to which fear alters behaviour depends on the individual, their identity, or where they are travelling. Thus, an ‘intersectionality of fear’ becomes a useful way in which to examine individual experiences. One such example is clear when Kai expresses feelings of vulnerability in traveling with groups of Asian women:

As an Asian woman, I've felt like when I travel with other Asian women, I feel endangered more than when I traveled with any other race and um, it has a lot to do with being sexually fetishized on a worldwide scale and I actually try to avoid traveling with other Asians for safety reasons. (Kai)

This sexual fetishizing is both a product of male dominance and colonial power. They are overlapping elements that doubly impact her travel choices, a modern manifestation of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ (Said, 1978). In the exploration on solo Asian female backpackers, ECL Yang *et al.* write:

While this liminal space emancipates women from the social expectations and responsibilities of their home society, this space is not entirely free from social constraints because women are still bound by the gender norms and power relations in the host society. (ECL Yang *et al.*, 2018: 33)

Their research supports Kai’s entrenched perception of power, citing instances when ‘Asian female backpackers had been mistaken as local sex workers when travelling in some Asian countries where sex tourism prevails’ (ECL Yang *et al.*, 2018: 34). Varying levels of risk are contingent on sex, race, gender identity, class and so on. This highlights a need to assess further, not only the female geography of fear, but also people of colour, the LGBTQ+<sup>6</sup> community, persons with disabilities, and those without traditional forms of citizenship. Pam states:

Negotiating risk in decision-making is a daily activity, something that comes down to this question: ‘Is it worth it? It’s not worth the pictures or it’s not worth the lights or it’s not worth any of that if I can’t see it first—I have to live to tell the story.’ (Pam)

A woman’s decision-making process during travel can quite realistically be a matter of life and death. Regardless of borders crossed and glass ceilings broken, deep-seated dynamics are upheld by industries and systems of power. Variant degrees of ‘different’ denote the amount of fear one is subject to when traveling, echoing intersectionality’s examination of ‘multiply-disadvantaged groups.’ (Crenshaw, 1989: 145)

### *‘I’m here, I deserve to be here.’: Creating Space and De-colonizing Instagram*

From this research, the idea of traveling and being able to exist in tourist spaces historically reserved for white people becomes a statement in of itself for women of colour. Pam wears traditional Liberian prints and head wraps and finds them to be an integral part of her travels. She states:

I think for me it’s very, very important that I carry my identity with me especially as an African woman...I think walking around in those prints are a way to educate people...it gives me an opportunity to talk about culture, to talk about places to make connections in that way.

---

<sup>6</sup> Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex Asexual. ‘+’ indicates inclusivity of all identities.

In 'carrying [her] identity', Pam starts a conversation—the first step in breaking down barriers and, as she iterates, making connections. Similar to the study abroad experiences of students of colour from the United States, she breaks down preconceived notions of people entitled to travel to faraway places, thus making travel more accessible through representation. In this way, Instagram is a tool that reaches across borders to showcase any part of the world, from any point of view.

Pam's strong visual link with Liberia is also a method to combat colonial issues with travel photography. Liz Wells asserts that:

The history of photography is integrally linked to colonial and economic exploitation. A sense of submission, exoticism and the 'primitive' were key feelings, which these photographers documented and catalogued (2015: 172).

Instagram is yet another platform where, in travel, people of colour may be used as a backdrop or prop, as the 'other.' Nambi explains that this type of touristic behaviour is appropriation and never a celebration of culture: 'You cannot negate the optics of your whiteness. Period.' In contrast, Pam harnesses the power of her own profile and unreservedly presents herself as a West-African woman. Nambi echoes this sentiment when she claims she will never 'tone things down': 'I will make sure to create space for myself and for other people who look like me and I will not cower in front of people, like, I'm here, I deserve to be here. I belong here' (Nambi).

Amid neo-colonial and patriarchal power dynamics, all participants have created space for themselves both in real life travel interactions and online. They carve a path that works within the system and allow others to follow it—whether in their actual footsteps or as followers on Instagram. This online community that has been created is a resource that, when used positively, has the capacity to influence people beyond face-to-face interactions.

### ***Moving Forward***

#### *The Conscious 'Post-Tourist'*

While an ignorant tourist further solidifies the divide between tourist and guest, the 'post-tourist', as named by Maxine Feifer, 'knows they are a tourist and tourism is a series of games with multiple tests and no single, authentic tourist experience...that the supposedly quaint and traditional fishing village could not survive without the income from tourism' (1985, cited in Urry, 2011: 114). The post-tourist knows they are a tourist, understands their place in a tourist exchange, and—as participants iterate—educates themselves on cultural and political country contexts.

This growing awareness is shown through Kai's Instagram posts, packed with localized information on specific current events, including Palestine, Gaza and indigenous rights in the United States. When asked why it is important to include current events or a country's political news in her social posts, Kai states:

Politics and travel are impossible to separate because they literally—it dictates how a government is, how welcoming they are to travellers, how the economy works and who is allowed to travel, who's not allowed to travel. Like, how our cultures interact with each other. (Kai)

In the same way state-issued warnings can influence citizens' perceptions, governments can selectively utilize travel and tourism to control or stifle certain economies. This political consciousness is something that mainstream tourism ignores: 'Hospitality presupposed various kinds of economies, politics and ethics as the tourist gaze extends around the world and draws into its warm embrace countless social relations between hosts and guests' (Urry, 2011: 96). Indeed, hospitality as an 'industry' is profit-driven; indifferent to contextual implications of political or economic turmoil. Anna underscores this: 'Countries that rely on tourism for the economy to function—their culture is heavily shaped by how their country is marketed.' In contrast, socially, politically and culturally conscious 'post-tourist' is aware; they are simultaneously moving through the world and thinking critically about their surroundings, how they spend their 'tourist dollars', as Kai states, and what communities they are supporting. Can this kind of consciousness assist in eroding neo-colonial issues in tourism?

### *Privilege*

While Instagram can certainly aid in the marketable exploits of tourism, these Instagrammers acknowledge and make others aware of the subtleties of privilege and power within travel—something that intersectionality helps demonstrate. Participants recognized their own privilege in being able to travel and live in the places they have. When discussing privilege, Nambi says:

It takes an immense amount of privilege to be able to do what I'm doing now...So, I feel like in some ways I have some of that entitlement, and my friends will say that too. They're like, I act like a white woman when I move through the world...I think I just have to be very careful about how I talk about other people's privilege without acknowledging my own. (Nambi)

Nambi understands that her behaviour may not be deemed normal by other persons of colour, illustrating the uniquely layered experience of a woman of colour traveling through the world. Of course, travel can be a valuable tool for learning about oneself and becoming aware of other cultures. Understanding one's position as 'visitor' and the power and privilege associated with that is vital. Trends towards a more socially, politically and culturally conscious 'post-tourist' traveller will help to build travel spaces that are more inclusive, authentic, and welcoming—not just for white people, but for everyone.

### ***Intersectionality: Illuminating Gaps and Overlaps***

Intersectionality is not a perfect model for this subject. Much like Uma Narayan's 'dark side of the double vision' (1989: 370), the onus of representation indeed becomes a burden, relying too heavily on individual experience. Nambi emphasizes this by insisting that Instagram does not necessarily allow for variation of experience: 'I'm just telling you these are my experiences. And I think as travel influencers, we have a responsibility to let people know that this is what I experienced. Not everyone else has experienced that or whatever.' However, Instagram has also provided a platform to break down stereotypes and start conversations, something Pam uses through her representations of Liberian culture.

An intersectional analysis of the role of Instagram in travel highlights that perceptions of fear vary and become more complicated dependent on sex, race, background, gender identity, and physical abilities. It also illuminates issues of neo-colonialism, such as 'othering' and taking up space in formerly colonized locations.

If fear has worked its way into becoming such a norm for female travel experiences, is access to travel equally and equitably available to everyone? Beyond that, has freedom of movement been fully realized? An intersectional analysis points to a clear and resounding 'no.' There is much research that could be expanded upon for varying demographics, each bringing forward a unique set of dynamics.

There is a distinctly interrelated nature, illustrated within this research. We cannot discuss travel without including Instagram and its ambiguities both supporting and stifling travel. We cannot study Instagram without speaking to the forms of neo-colonialism it can carry and 'othering'. And we cannot examine these colonial stereotypes without acknowledging the impact they have on women's perceived safety—all women's safety, not only white, cis women. These overlaps are both magnified and complicated by the theory of intersectionality.

The research presented here only scratches the surface of work to be done in understanding the particular needs to represent, keep safe, and support woman-identifying persons, women of colour, and minority groups in travel.

### **Conclusion**

Championing individual voices, intersectionality reveals the tangled relations between photography and tourism, media, women's perceived risk, and neo-colonialism. In addressing my research question, we arrive at a complex point. Travel and Instagram have a tightly wound relationship, both aiding and burdening female experiences and the interlinking nature of each finding emphasizes how multifarious travel is.

For female travel experiences, intersectionality helps dissect issues of representation and media, patriarchal norms and neo-colonial constraints. What can it do for different groups? In 2015, 48 percent of Southeast Asian women had already taken a solo holiday, an increase from 36 percent from the previous year (PATA, 2016). Targeted travel companies such as Travel Noire and Jet Black encourage tourism to the African diaspora. Studies on 'rainbow tourism' track destinations that have made themselves outwardly safe and accepting for LGBTQIA+ communities (Harju-Myllyaho, 2018). Participants' presence and popularity on Instagram is telling in the prevalence and demand for these narratives. All this is symptomatic of a broader movement that is being shaped; highlighting opportunities for more intersectional, inclusive research.

As a tool to find safe communities and create space for themselves, regardless of power dynamics at work, women and women of colour utilize Instagram to their advantage. Perceived fear manifests differently depending on sexuality, race, class and so on, creating an 'intersectionality of fear'. However, the burden of representation—both of destinations travelled to and of travellers themselves—falls heavily on their shoulders, particularly for high-profile Instagrammers. Finally, while neo-colonialism manifests in mainstream travel media, it is combated by women of colour's ability to create space for themselves—a crucial tool in disrupting barriers in travel.

Travel is central to human understanding, offering opportunities for cultural exchanges across borders and languages. In a world that continually seems more divided, examining the deep complexity of travel experiences can help illustrate the ways in which we understand culture, gain new experiences, and represent ourselves—all while breaking down systems of power and privilege.

## References

- Alacovska, A. (2015) ‘Genre anxiety: women travel writers’ experience of work’, *The Sociological Review* 63 (1), pp. 128–143.
- Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (1999) *Her own way: advice for the woman traveller*, Canada: Global Affairs Canada. Available at: <https://travel.gc.ca/travelling/publications/her-own-way>. (Accessed: 27 July 2018).
- Cho, S. (2013) ‘Post-Intersectionality: the curious reception of intersectionality in legal scholarship’, *DePaul University College of Law DuBois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10 (2), pp.385-404.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989) ‘Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics’, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140 (1), pp.139-167.
- Crenshaw, K. (1993) ‘Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of colour’, *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (6), pp.1241-1299.
- Doyle, V. (2018) ‘The African-American experience on study abroad: a closer look at the student perspective’, *Capstone Collection*, 3092, pp.1-49.
- Fang, J. *et al.* (2018) ‘Not all posts are treated equal: An empirical investigation of post-replying behavior in an online travel community’, *Information and Management*<sup>7</sup>, pp.1-11.
- Feifer, M. (1985) *Going Places: the ways of the tourist from imperial Rome to present day*. London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Hammersley, M. (1995) *The politics of social research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Harju-Myllyaho, A. (2018) *Towards Accessible Hospitality: Intersectional Approach to Rainbow Tourism*, Unpublished MA thesis. University of Lapland, Finland.
- Institute of International Education (IIE). (2017) *Open Door Report: Profile of US Study Abroad Students*. Available at: <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/US-StudyAbroad/Student-Profile> (Accessed 29 July 2018).
- Jordan, F. & Gibson, H. (2005) ‘We’re not stupid...but we’ll not stay home either’: Experiences of solo women travelers’, *Tourism Review International*, 9 (2), pp.195-212.

---

<sup>7</sup> No volume or issue number available.

Koskela, H. (1999) 'Gendered Exclusions: women's fear of violence and changing relations to space', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 81 (2), pp.111-124.

Marwick, A. (2015) 'Instafame: luxury selfies in the attention economy', *Public Culture* 27 (1), pp.137-160.

Mooney, S. (2018) 'Illuminating intersectionality for tourism researchers', *Annals of Tourism Research* 10, pp.1-24.

National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA). (2010) *Independent Research Measuring the Impact of Studying Abroad*. Available at: [https://www.nafsa.org/Policy\\_and\\_Advocacy/Policy\\_Resources/Policy\\_Trends\\_and\\_Data/Independent\\_Research\\_Measuring\\_the\\_Impact\\_of\\_Study\\_Abroad](https://www.nafsa.org/Policy_and_Advocacy/Policy_Resources/Policy_Trends_and_Data/Independent_Research_Measuring_the_Impact_of_Study_Abroad) (Accessed: 1 July 2018).

Narayan, U. (1989) 'The Project of feminist epistemology: perspectives from a nonwestern feminist', in McCann, C. & Kim, S-K. (eds.) *Feminist Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp.370-378.

Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA). (2016), 'TripAdvisor: Asian women are in the driver's seat with travel decision-making', 9 March. Available at: <https://www.pata.org/asian-women-are-in-the-drivers-seat-with-travel-decision-making/>. (Accessed: 29 July 2018).

Paris, C. & Pietschnig, J. (2015) *But first, let me take a selfie: Personality traits as predictors of travel selfie taking and sharing behaviors*. Amherst: Tourism Travel and Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally.<sup>8</sup> Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c467/32c063e34530639df8eaa3041fb95f23f423.pdf>.

Reinharz, S. (1991) *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Said, E. (1983) *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Siegel, K. (2004) *Gender, Genre, and Identity in Women's Travel Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sullivan, S. (2006) *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

TripAdvisor. (2016) 'TripBarometer 2016: Traveler Trends and Motivations Global Findings'. Available at: <https://www.tripadvisor.com/TripAdvisorInsights/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/TripBarometer-2016-Traveler-Trends-Motivations-Global-Findings.pdf> (Accessed: 29 July 2018).

---

<sup>8</sup> Recommended citation.

Urry, J. (2011) *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Valentine, G. (1989) 'The Geography of Women's Fear', *The Royal Geographical Society*, 21 (4), pp.385-390.

Wells, L. (2015) *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Wilson, E. & Little, D. (2008) 'The Solo Female Travel Experience: Exploring the Geography of Women's Fear', *Current Issues in Tourism*, 11 (2), pp.167-186.

Yang, Elaine Chiao Ling (ECL) *et al.* (2018) 'Power and empowerment: How Asian solo female travellers perceive and negotiate risks', *Tourism Management*, Volume 68, pp.32-45.



About the author:

Molly works in community development for the National Traveller Women's Forum in Dublin, and contributes to initiatives addressing the Traveller accommodation crisis. Hailing from Denver, Colorado, she graduated NUI Galway in 2018 with a MA in Gender, Globalisation and Rights. Molly strives to center intersectionality in every endeavor, and plans to continue lending her voice to create space for women and minorities in travel, nature, and elected office.