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Solo tourists' preferences and behaviours

Abstract. The article aims to present the phenomenon of solo tourism, to discuss the inspiration, motivation, preferences and behaviours of people practising this type of tourism, as well as to indicate the problems they encountered during such trips. 114 people participated in the survey. What encouraged respondents to participate in solo tourism was (apart from exploring the world) the opportunity to plan the trip themselves and adapt it to their needs and preferences. The main destination for the respondents were European countries (including Poland). Most people stayed in hotels and Airbnb and used planes and cars. The main problems when travelling solo were the high prices of meals, accommodation and transport, as well as difficulties in accessing selected places. Opponents of this form of travel had concerns about safety and preferred the offers of travel agencies.

Keywords: solo tourism, travelling, tourist activity, preferences, motivations

Introduction

Tourism, as an interdisciplinary, multi-aspect and multi-threaded phenomenon, is characterized by constant changes. The forms of spending free time are also diversifying, which is reflected in changes in tourist preferences, expectations and behaviour. This contributes to the evolution of existing and the emergence of new tourism trends. One of them is solo tourism, which is becoming more and more popular, and involves making tourist trips alone.

Solitary, and often self-organized, expeditions create many challenges to tourists, the need to make difficult decisions and deal with encountered problems alone, which may sometimes increase the feeling of loneliness or fear for one's safety. However, they give a lot of freedom and the ability to control the entire journey, without having to compromise with companions, and also help develop the ability to cope with new situations. Solo tourism also provides access to the world in a way that is unavailable to other forms of travel.

Even though solo tourism is becoming an increasingly popular travel trend, it remains a little-explored area of scientific research. Many studies focus mainly on the differences in expeditions undertaken by women and men. However, few only describes the motivations of solo tourists, the characteristics of these people, and the problems

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they encounter during such trips. The aim of the study was therefore to present the phenomenon of solo tourism, to discuss the inspirations, motivations, preferences and behaviours of people practising this type of tourism, as well as to indicate the problems they encounter when travelling alone.

The concept, essence and specificity of solo tourism

Solo tourism is a relatively new trend in travelling, which has become increasingly popular in recent years (Laesser et al., 2009), what results in a significant increase in the number of solo trips (Lisella, 2019). Solo travel can no longer be perceived as a niche phenomenon, as it has a significant share in the overall tourism market and has shown steady growth in recent years (Hamid et al., 2021). This may be due to, among others: the fact that today's society increasingly values individualism and consumerism (Santos et al., 2017; Bianchi, 2022). Changing social trends and attitudes are also important here (ageing population, increasing number of childless couples and later marriages, and especially the growing number of single people), reflected in the increased tendency to pursue many activities alone (Klinenberg, 2012). These tendencies, and with them the interest in solo travel, have deepened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and need of minimizing the risk of virus infection (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2021).

In the opinion of the creator of one of the most popular blogs devoted to solo tourism, <https://www.solotravel365.com/>, it can generally be perceived as a form of tourism practised and carried out alone, where the traveller is emotionally and physically away from his everyday surroundings. This mainly concerns people close to him and the culture he is familiar with (What Does Solo..., solotravel365.com). Due to the multitude and diversity of forms of organization and implementation of this type of trip, this phenomenon and concept should be examined more carefully.

Solo tourism is perceived as travel undertaken individually, without family or friends. This does not mean, however, that the traveller will be lonely in every case and all the time. It often refers to the form of the arrival of a person to a given destination, and sometimes also to joining a group or event, and not only to the status already in the destination (Yang, Tung, 2018). Solo tourism participants can, of course, travel completely independently, alone, or do it as part of a group trip, together with other, usually completely unknown people, who also travel without family or friends. The organization of solo travel may also take various forms. Some tourists plan it completely on their own and this is how they deal with various complications and problems they encounter. Wilson and Little (2008) note that (especially in the case of longer trips) such people often do not plan their entire trip at once (mainly in the context of accommodation and visited attractions), but only its initial stage, thanks to which they have the opportunity to freely modify and shape the remaining part of the expedition. Chai (1996), indicates that fully independent travellers stay in a given place longer than other tourists. Some buy a ready-made offer and, together with others like them, join an organized group trip, cruise, etc. The third option is to carry out an event planned and organized by an intermediary alone, individually, as

the only participant. This option is definitely easier, more accessible and safer, but it deprives the tourist of the satisfaction of preparing the trip on his own, limits his ability to modify the event program and partially obliges him to use the indicated and previously booked tourist infrastructure facilities.

Solo tourism is one of the fastest-growing forms of tourism. Between 2015 and 2018, travel bookings by solo tourists increased by as much as 42% (Karantzavelou, 2018), and the upward trend continues to this day. This is indicated, among others, by results of research conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of American Express Travel and published in the "2022 Global Travel Trends Report". It was shown that 58% of Generation Y representatives were willing to travel alone to visit their dream destination (2022 Global Travel...). Similar conclusions are provided by the "Travel Predictions 2024" study, conducted by Booking.com with the participation of 27,000 travellers from 33 countries. It was shown that 59% of respondents wanted to travel alone in 2024. Interestingly, this phenomenon does not only apply to singles, as 58% of respondents with children expressed their willingness to travel alone, putting their development first (Travel Predictions 2024, www.booking.com). These declarations, of course, do not fully turn into the actions taken, however, as indicated in the Gitnux Marketdata 2024 report "Solo Travel Statistics: Market Report & Data" (www.gitnux.org/solo-travel-statistics), solo travellers constituted in 2022 approximately 11% of all people travelling for tourist purposes. Importantly, they undertake this type of activity relatively often, 3 or more times a year. In 2023, the share of solo tourists increased to 16% (ABTA research..., 2024), which is an increase of over 45% compared to 2022. The expected average annual increase in the value of the solo tourism market until 2033 will be 13.5%. (from \$482.5 billion in 2024 to \$1,508.2 billion in 2033) (Global Solo Travel..., <https://www.custommarketinsights.com>).

Method, sample selection and organization of the research

Empirical research was conducted in June and July 2023. The research method was a diagnostic survey using the survey technique. The questionnaire, which included 12 single- and multiple-choice questions and 5 questions regarding socio-demographic characteristics, was developed using the webankieta.pl website and disseminated via social media and instant messengers. The use of these tools was conditioned by the fact that they enable reaching a large number of people to collect the necessary information. Due to the purpose of the research, a link to the questionnaire was posted on several thematic groups on Facebook that brought together solo tourism enthusiasts. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed via the social networking site Instagram and Messenger. Respondents obtained on social media were additionally asked to forward the invitation to the study to other people interested in solo tourism. It should therefore be noted that the snowball method was also used to recruit respondents (Sadler et al., 2010; Voicu, 2011; Naderifar, Goli, Ghaljaie, 2017), which increased the scope of the research. Correctly completed questionnaires were obtained from 114 respondents.

Characteristics of respondents

The group of the respondents consisted of 114 people. Women dominated among them, constituting 63.2% of the respondents. The respondents were of various ages, but the largest group were people between 18 and 34 years of age (64.9%), which may have been a result of the chosen research method and the way the link to the questionnaire was disseminated. 13.6% of the respondents were 55 or older. Professional status was related to the age of the respondents. The majority (44.7%) were students (mostly engaging in some form of gainful activity). Working people accounted for 42.1%, and those with pensions accounted for 7.0%. The respondents assessed their financial situation quite well. Most of them considered it very good or good (19.3% and 54.4%, respectively), and 23.7% considered it satisfactory. The respondents lived mainly in cities (87.7%), mostly (60.5%) in large agglomerations with more than 0.5 million inhabitants.

Findings

Even though the questionnaire was distributed among thematic groups that brought together solo tourism enthusiasts, not all the respondents had the opportunity to make this type of trip. These people constituted 27.2% of all the respondents. The main reasons indicated were fear for one’s safety, which was also confirmed by research of other authors (including Yang, 2021; Jonas, 2022). Moreover, the concern about the overwhelming sense of loneliness and helplessness was of great importance here (Figure 1).

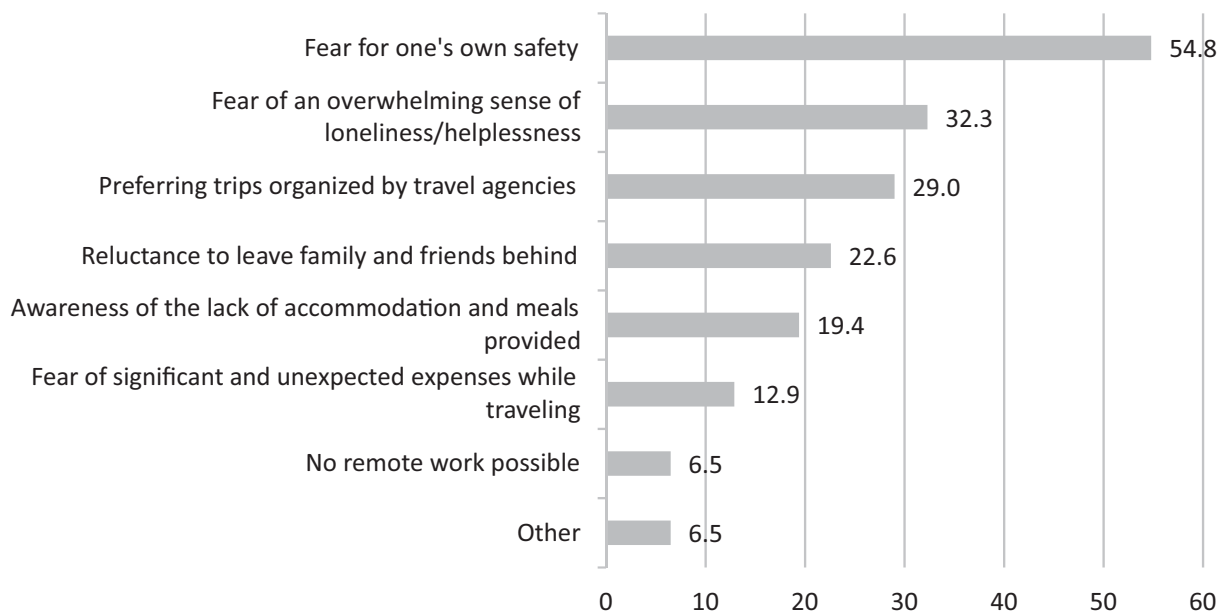


Figure 1. The respondents’ reasons for not traveling solo (N = 31, %)

The respondents had the opportunity to indicate more than one answer.

Source: own research.

Other quite frequently mentioned reasons that discouraged the respondents from travelling alone were being accustomed to trips organized by travel agencies, reluctance to leave family and loved ones during the trip, and awareness of the lack of comfort related to providing accommodation and meals during the trip.

The vast majority (72.8%) of the respondents had experience with solo travel at the time of conducting the research. What motivated them to undertake the first trip of this type was, most often, the desire to travel around the world and see new places, as well as the opportunity to plan the trip on their own, according to their preferences. For many of them, the escapist motive was also important, i.e. the opportunity to break away from everyday life (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The respondents' motives and reasons for deciding to travel solo (N = 83, %)

The respondents had the opportunity to indicate more than one answer.

Source: own research.

Quite important in this case was also the desire to learn about the real life of the inhabitants of the visited destinations and the intention to meet other people who prefer this way of exploring the world. The respondents were also convinced that such trip would be less expensive than the offer of a travel agency. The desire to isolate oneself from others, which is a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the possibility of a remote work (recently gaining more and more supporters, as indicated by the research results discussed on the website forsal.pl (2023)) carried out from any place, were of marginal importance in this case.

The source of inspiration for the respondents to travel solo was primarily the Internet, specifically social media and travel blogs. This does not seem to be any surprise, because

on the Internet one can find countless travellers who share their experiences and recommendations “first-hand” both on social networking sites and on all kinds of travel blogs that allow longer expression and providing more detailed information. Almost 1/3 of the respondents also found such inspirations in literature and tourist guides. Nature films, documentaries and other types of television programs were also mentioned quite often (Figure 3).

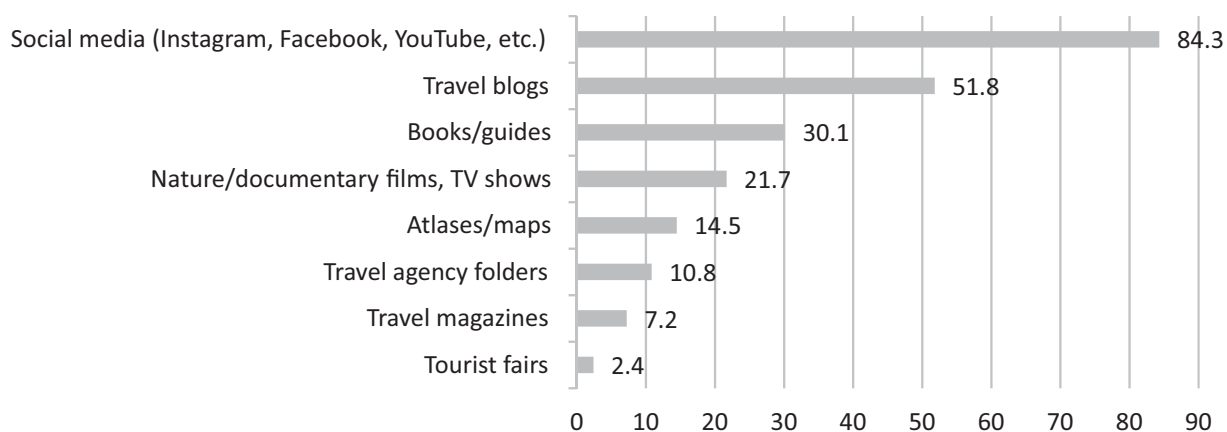


Figure 3. Sources of travel inspiration used by the respondents (N = 83, %)

The respondents had the opportunity to indicate more than one answer.

Source: own research.

As a source of inspiration, atlases, maps (though certainly eagerly used while travelling), travel agency brochures, travel magazines and travel fairs were of much less importance. Perhaps, in the minds of the respondents, the fairs mainly promote offers of organized group trips, which are often outside the area of interest of solo tourists. Other reason might be in necessity of incurring certain costs related to visiting such event.

Solo travellers, due to the way their trips were carried out, had the opportunity to choose different types of accommodation facilities. However, they most often chose hotels and accommodation in Airbnb-type facilities. Guesthouses were less, but still significantly, popular (Figure 4).

The least popular was accommodation in dormitories (probably due to collective rooms and lack of privacy), as well as accommodation booked on Couchsurfing. Even though the last form (which involves offering accommodation in someone’s apartment or house via the portal) is often free of charge, this service has significantly lost popularity as a result of the introduction of a subscription fee in 2020. Others indicated by the respondents included: sleeping outdoors, in a camper or staying overnight with friends. It should be noted, however, that some of the respondents (sometimes by choice, sometimes out of necessity) stayed overnight in various types of facilities. The reason for this is that their travel time was often quite long. Although the last solo trip for 56.6% of respondents lasted no more than 7 days, 37.3% of respondents went for 1-4 weeks. 6.0% of respondents decided to go on trips lasting at least a month.

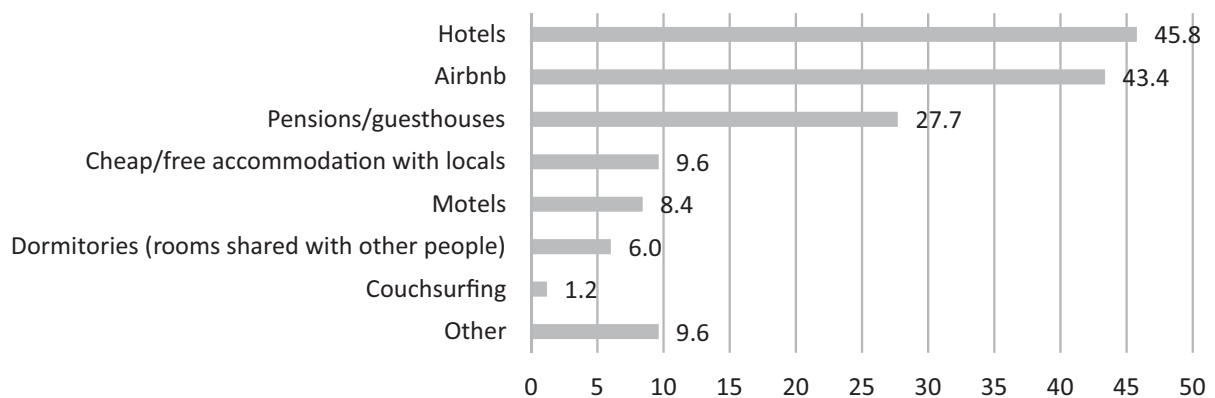


Figure 4. Forms of accommodation most often used by the respondents during solo travel (N = 83, %)

The respondents had the opportunity to indicate more than one answer.

Source: own research.

In addition to accommodation facilities, the means of transport used by the respondents were also diverse. They most often travelled by bus and car (50.6% each). The plane was chosen slightly less frequently (44.6%). Quite large group of the respondents (28.9%) travelled on foot during their trips. Some people also travelled by train (12.0%), hitchhiking (9.6%), and bicycle (6.0%).

The area where the respondents carried out their first solo expeditions was mainly Poland (39.8%) and other European countries (55.4%). This was most likely due to the possibility of a quick return home if this form of tourism turned out to be an unattractive or uncomfortable way of spending time for beginner solo tourists. Other (but only sporadically) chosen destinations were Central Asia, Southeast Asia and North and South America.

The respondents were asked to rate the importance of several elements that may seem important during the trip. The respondents highly appreciated the cleanliness of the accommodation facility, including the room and toilet. It was also important to stay overnight in a room without other people. This explains, to some extent, the marginal use of Couchsurfing by the respondents. The accommodation offered there (just like in dormitories) is often in the company of strangers. Convenient transport, Internet access and mobile phone coverage also turned out to be important (Figure 5).

The least important thing for the respondents was the possibility of working remotely while travelling, as well as support from loved ones and frequent contact with them.

While travelling solo, one may encounter many different adversities and uncomfortable situations. The respondents most often pointed the high prices of meals, accommodation and transport. Many respondents complained about limitations in access to the Internet and telephone coverage, as well as difficulties in transport to the place of their choice (Figure 6).

For a significant group of the respondents, a serious problem was the lack of access to accommodation services in the place visited or the unsatisfactory conditions in such

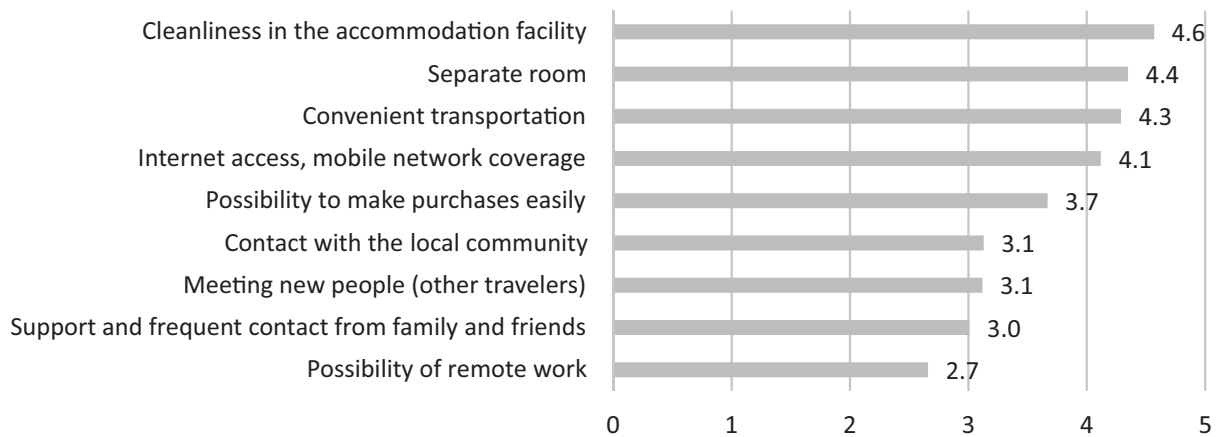


Figure 5. The importance of selected elements during travel in the opinion of the respondents (N = 83)

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant not important and 5 meant very important.

Source: own research.

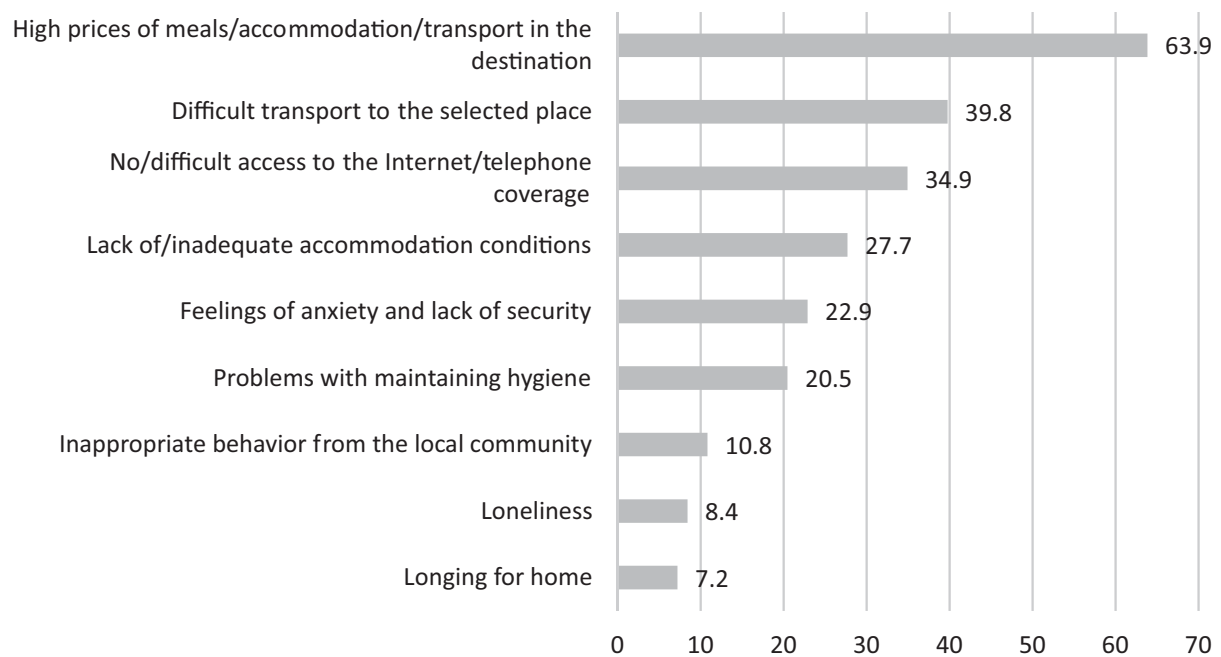


Figure 6. Adversities and inconveniences encountered by the respondents when traveling solo (N = 83, %)

The respondents had the opportunity to indicate more than one answer.

Source: own research.

facilities. Every fourth respondent also indicated a sense of anxiety and lack of security (especially among women, as also pointed out by Karagöz et al. (2021)), and every fifth respondent indicated problems with maintaining hygiene. It should be noted that the sense of loneliness and homesickness (one of the most frequently indicated reasons

for not travelling alone) rarely affected the respondents. It can therefore be assumed that most of the fears and uncertainties that prevent people from undertaking a solo expedition are dispelled and no longer pose a problem during the trip.

Conclusion

Solo tourism, due to the specific nature of the organization and implementation of the trip and the numerous challenges faced by the traveller, sometimes differs significantly from most currently widespread forms of tourism, mainly mass tourism. However, research allows us to believe that despite significant differences between these types of tourism, their main goal remains universal and (in a broader perspective) unchanged - getting to know the world and temporarily breaking away from the well-known surroundings. In addition, the respondents were encouraged to participate in solo trips by the opportunity to plan the trip according to their preferences. However, what was for some of the respondents an advantage of solo tourism, i.e., among other things, a great deal of individuality in planning and organizing the trip and carrying it out independently, discouraged others from undertaking trips of this type. This individuality and independence was a source of concern about one's safety, a sense of loneliness, and caused (in the respondents' opinion) several challenges related to the organization of the trip. However, it is worth emphasizing that travelling alone should not be perceived mainly through the prism of discomfort, sacrifices and difficulties resulting from not purchasing a ready-made offer from a travel agency. Most respondents preferred accommodation in hotels, Airbnb-type facilities or guesthouses, i.e. places that have little in common with spartan conditions or low-cost forms of tourism. This is also indicated by the expectations expressed by the respondents, which include, above all, a clean room just for themselves, convenient transport and access to the Internet and shopping outlets.

Considering the results of this research in the context of the conditions for the development of solo tourism, it is necessary to emphasize the great importance of the Internet (especially social media and tourist blogs) as a source of inspiration for undertaking this type of activity. The growing number of travel influencers and travel blogs can have a significant impact on the rapid development of solo tourism. This is also indicated by the research results and forecasts discussed in the earlier part of the article. It therefore seems that the issue of solo tourism should be an area of in-depth scientific research, the results of which will enable a better understanding of essence and specificity of such trips. This will enable, among others: maximizing the benefits for solo tourists, as well as minimizing the negative effects of the development of this form of tourism on the socio-cultural and natural environment in the areas where it is implemented.

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