



The female tourist experience in Egypt as an Islamic destination



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ABSTRACT

In Islamic destinations female tourists face the added challenge of negotiating their way through male constructed local norms. This paper fills the gap in gender and tourism research with a focus on female tourists' experiences in Egypt as an Islamic destination, outlining the diverse ways in which gender shapes and influences their experiences. A qualitative approach was taken to explore women's coping strategies with the male sexualised gaze that they encountered during their holiday in Egypt, and sheds light on measures taken towards safeguarding themselves. Their experiences were highly influenced and often involuntarily altered by unwanted male attention and sexual harassment, as the women felt the need to fit into local female norms of behaviour in order to safeguard themselves.

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Introduction

In sociology, gender is viewed as an important explanatory variable that shapes opportunity and behaviour. In 1995, Swain called for a feminist approach to tourism research, grounded in an understanding of gender as a significant variable in any study of human relations. Women and men are involved differently in the consumption and construction of tourism (Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Perez, Morgan, & Villace-Moliero, 2015). Indeed, researchers have increasingly focused on the female tourist experience, specifically on the motivations for and the benefits and challenges involved in travelling either in company or alone. The current study builds on this body of work by offering a focus on the female tourist experience of holidaying in an Islamic destination, in this case Egypt.

It is widely acknowledged that the cultural norms of the host destination will affect the reception offered to tourists by the host community: travel is uniquely linked to the social context, as well as to religion (Battur, Ismail, & Barrur, 2010). It is also recognised that Islam occupies a central role in Islamic societies in informing accepted values and behaviour (Gadami, 2012), and that the role of and attitudes towards women are shaped by both religion and culture (Al-Hibri, 2000; Ali, 2015). Islamic societies are generally governed by Shari'a law (Stephenson, 2014), which organises relationships between individuals, and is driven from the Qu'ran and the Sunnah (Zaman, Afridi, & Saleem, 2013). While the Qur'an offers a detailed source of information on the principles of Islam, the Sunnah offers an account of the life of the prophet Mohammed and his disciples, as chronicled in the Hadiths (Ali, 2015). Together the Qu'ran and the Sunna provide a social and moral structure for day to day life in Islamic societies (Sanad, Kasseem, & Scott, 2010). This is reflected in the following: "and He is with you wherever you are" (the Qu'ran, 57:4).

Stephenson (2014) observes that Islam is embedded within the commercial provision of hospitality including food and accommodation. While the relationship between Islam and tourism has stirred significant academic interest

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(see Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004; Aziz, 2001; Battur et al., 2010; Din, 1989; Sanad et al., 2010; Stephenson, 2014; Timothy & Iverson, 2006; Zamani-Farahani & Henderson, 2010), the experiences of Western non-Muslim female tourists in Islamic destinations have received scant attention. As Wilson and Little (2008) state in their qualitative study of solo female travel, negotiating unfamiliar spaces and places can be daunting for tourists, particularly those travelling independently. This is exacerbated for women travelling in patriarchal societies, where attitudes towards women may inform the treatment they receive (Jordan & Gibson, 2005), whether they are in company or not. It is this issue that we wanted to investigate in this exploratory study of female tourist experiences in Egypt as a Muslim destination, which will help to illuminate how gender shapes women's interactions and how they negotiate movement in patriarchal cultures. Cultural norms in Egypt enable men to act on the basis of gendered privilege (Al-Hibri, 2000; Gadami, 2012). This results in an atmosphere of gender inequality that is felt in everyday life. Women are less socially valued in Egypt than men (Goldschmidt, 2004), thus female tourists in Egypt may be challenged by the attitudes associated with Egypt's patriarchal society.

Despite the tumultuous events of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Middle East attracted 54.9 million international tourist arrivals in 2012 (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2012), a decrease however of 5.6% from 2010. Egypt is the second most popular tourist destination in the Middle East after Saudi Arabia which, as the home of the Islamic pilgrimage, is heavily visited by Muslim pilgrims all year round. Egypt's tourism market more than doubled from 5.5 million in 2000 to 14 million in 2010 (Mintel, 2011; World Bank Group, 2015). However, following the 2011 Egyptian revolution calling for freedom and social justice, then the ousting of Mubarak's government, tourist arrivals declined to 9.7 million in 2011, and to 9.1 million in 2013 (World Bank Group, 2015). During the Muslim Brotherhood leadership in 2012/2013, Egyptian society became highly conservative as its aim was to rid Egypt of Western influence through the adoption of an Islamic path. This further reduced its attractiveness to tourists. Declining arrivals led to hotel closures (Egypt Independent., 2013). Furthermore, the terrorist attack on the Russian airplane in Sharm El Sheik in 2015 led the British and Russian authorities to suspend flights into Sinai (The Guardian, 2015). This undermines the progress that Egypt has made to revive its tourism market since the 2011 uprising (Kneil, 2015). Historically, Egypt has endured major acts of terrorism directed at tourists, such as the Luxor incidents in 1992 and 1997 and the attacks on Taba hotels in 2004 (Wilson, 2011). The country, however, has continued to aggressively promote tourism and to work towards eradicating acts of terrorism (Mintel, 2011).

Egypt is known for its Nile cruises which accounted for 10,000 trips per year prior to 2011 (Ward & Machan, 2014). The Egyptian cities of Sharm El Sheik, Dahab, Hurghada, Cairo and Luxor are among the top 10 destinations in the Middle East, attracting tourists from a mix of nationalities, particularly Russia, the UK and Germany (Mintel, 2011). In 2006, over 1 million British tourists visited Egypt, making the UK the biggest source market (Research, 2013). Emerging tourist markets include Eastern and Central Europe. Egypt's ancient history and archaeological sites and its rich marine life make it a unique travel destination for cultural and heritage tourism and nature-based tourism (Shaalan, 2005). Ayad, H., and Y. (2012) found that visiting the pyramids and the historical sites, taking a Nile cruise and seeking business opportunities were Chinese travellers' key motives for visiting Egypt. However, it must be noted that little research has focused on the motivations of tourists to Egypt.

Much of the literature on Egyptian tourism focuses on attitudes to risk and decision-making. Ahmed and Kadir (2013) for example investigated the impact of information sources on travel behaviour post the 2011 uprising. They highlighted the role of the mass media in shaping people's intentions to visit Egypt. Sustainable tourism is also a theme of research on Egypt, with Ghanem and Saad (2015) and Shaalan (2005) highlighting the role of the government in protecting natural heritage. Finally, some research has been conducted on women's employment in Egypt, finding that women's participation in tourism work is limited and that sociocultural norms confine women to the home (Abou Zeid, 2006; Zaytoun, Heiba & Abdelhakim, 2010). Given the importance of tourism to the Egyptian economy, an understanding of the female tourist experience in Egypt should be of value to the tourist authorities. There is also clearly sociological value to the study in terms of both increasing our understanding of what it means to be a woman travelling through an Islamic destination and shedding light on life for women in Egypt.

Literature review

Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2001) argue that female tourists have different expectations of and attitudes to travel. In their study of women travelling independently, Cockburn-Wootten, Friend, & McIntosh, 2006, for example, cite a desire for self-discovery, enlightenment, education and respite from the confines of their domestic environment. In Poria's (2006a) study of an Israeli lesbian woman's travel experience, anonymity and existential authenticity are noted as motivating factors. Meanwhile in their research into all-female holiday-makers, Junek, Binney, and Winn (2006) highlight pampering and social interaction. In their quantitative study of graduate female tourists, Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter (2001) cited nature, education, shopping and excitement as benefits of the trip. This is supported by Lin and Lehto (2006) who add self-development opportunities, and by McNamara and Prideaux (2010) who also note rest and relaxation, visiting friends and family, and spending quality time with their family.

Escape from familial responsibilities is a recurrent theme. In research on the holiday experiences of women with a child under the age of 15, Small (2005) reports a desire for freedom from domestic roles especially from childcare. Though family holidays offered the benefits of bonding and education for children, the women yearned for a space of their own. Berdychevsky, Gibson, and Poria (2013a) also comment on the promise offered by tourism of freedom from a restrictive

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