The perceived safety of Europe as a travel destination in travel decision-making process: from the perspective of solo female travelers

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Abstract

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European countries are one of the most visited travel destinations, enticing travelers from each corner of the globe. Nevertheless, Europe, much like other continents, is facing its own challenges adapting to the continuously changing global environment. In the recent years, the solo female travel trend has seen a notable growth, and while destination preferences vary, feeling safe remains one of the top motives of female travelers.

The objective of this research-based thesis was to examine the perceived safety of European countries from the perspective of solo female travellers. It aimed to further examine the factors influencing these safety perceptions and their impact in the travel decision-making process. Hence, the main research question of this thesis was "What is the impact of perceived safety of European countries on travel decision from the perspective of solo female travelers?" The research question was approached by answering to the following sub-questions: 1) Which factors affect the perceived safety of solo female travelers, 2) Which sources do female travelers rely on when assessing the safety of a destination, and 3) What is the perception of safety of European countries as travel destinations?

The theoretical framework of this thesis was based on defining safety in the context of travel, while taking a deeper look into the concepts of perceived safety and travel decision-making. In addition, the literature dived into the phenomenon of solo female travel. It also covered Europe as a travel destination considering its many aspects. Moreover, general safety issues impacting travel choices were discussed.

The chosen research method was a quantitative questionnaire directed at female travelers internationally. It aimed to understand female's safety perceptions, and therefore, previous solo travel experience was not a requirement to participate in the study. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions, and the responses were collected in November 2023. The research was conducted via a web-based survey.

The outcome of this thesis attempts to suggest that the impact of perceived safety of European countries on solo females' travel decisions is high. Based on the questionnaire results, there are differences in how different parts of Europe are perceived in terms of safety. Solo women travellers avoid destinations they perceive as unsafe. Moreover, the results indicate that women almost exclusively take safety precautions when travelling solo, despite the destination country.

Finally, it is to be highlighted that female solo travel is an important customer segment in the travel industry, with 74% of the women solely from this research agreeing to having travelled alone. More in-depth analysis of the results is presented in the chapter 8.

Keywords
Solo female travel, Perceived safety, Europe, Decision-making process

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1   Introduction

The safety of a destination is becoming a more salient factor in the travel decision-making process. While the tourism industry is growing, European countries are continuing to be the most visited destinations in the world with travellers from within and outside Europe. (Berentsen, East, Poulsen & Windley 2023) The travel industry, in relation to other industries, is particularly susceptible to changes. It is influenced by weather conditions, the economy, safety crises, and trends among many other factors. (Kaksonen, Ojuva & Ouallen 2012, 93). In 2023 Europe and its neighboring regions have faced a record number of catastrophes and conflicts, meanwhile, the risk for natural catastrophes continues to heighten along with the effects of climate change. (Wilhelmus 2023)

The solo female travel trend has grown explicitly over the years with more and more women deciding to embark on a journey alone, making it an important customer segment for tourism destinations. The personal impacts of travel are significant, and travel is often seen as a form to develop one's self-awareness and global consciousness by creating new perspectives and linkages, both within oneself and the world outside. (Lew 2018, 749) This perspective is rather prevalent among women as solo trips, longer solo trips in particular, are not seen only as leisure holidays, but instead, they are often described as a way to find thyself, grow as a person or even change the world (Ruoho, 2023). Yet it is evident that many women feel unsafe travelling alone. Ruoho (2023) affirms that solo female travellers are continuously analyzing safety matters and modifying their behavior according to the safety environment. According to Global Report on Women in Tourism, women represent 54% of all tourism employees in the world (UNWTO 2019, 9). Hence women have a significant role in shaping the tourism industry, be it in growth aspect or by influencing other women.

As reported by European Travel Commission (ETC), destination safety is the key driver influencing travel choice in Europe among international travelers (ETC 2024). However, the line between the terms safety and perceived safety is faint, causing them easily to overlap. Perceived safety can be simply defined as the "feeling of being safe" rather than actual safety. (Equifax 2023) It is a multifaceted concept, and in this thesis, safety perceptions work as a base to understand existing prejudgments of Europe among women. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived safety of European countries from the perspective of solo female travelers. The objective is to examine the factors influencing females' safety perceptions and their impact on the travel-decision making process. In addition, it aims to examine media's impact on safety as an undeniable part of today's modern society.

The main research question of this thesis is "What is the impact of the perceived safety of European countries on travel decisions from the perspective of solo female travellers?" This will be examined more thoroughly by answering to the following sub-questions:

1. Which factors affect the perceived safety of solo female travellers?

2. Which sources do female travellers rely on when assessing the safety of a destination?

3. What is the perception of safety of European countries as travel destinations?

This research will be beneficial not only to the tourism industry but also to governmental bodies as it will examine some of the common concerns females have regarding solo travel. Consequently, it may offer valuable insights for female travellers as well as inbound marketing for European countries. The seed for the researched topic regarding the sense of security and safety was planted during the author's own travel experiences. The curiosity for the chosen topic was sparked due to the current global situation.

The theoretical framework of this thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses Europe as a travel destination and provides an overview of its current situation. The second chapter describes safety in the context of travel as well as covers some of the key concepts of this thesis. The third chapter discusses solo female travellers as a phenomenon, while the fourth chapter introduces general safety issues in Europe. In chapters 6 and 7, results are presented and analyzed, while the reliability of the study is discussed, and further research suggestions are made.

2 Europe as a travel destination

This chapter discusses Europe as a travel destination by considering both its geographic location and political situation. In addition, the chapter introduces Europe's key travel statistics and trends, alongside common travel motivations. Based on the definitions by United Nations World Tourism Organization, travel is the activity of travellers, whereas tourism refers to a subdivision of travel. A tourism destination can be defined as a physical space, where a visitor can stay overnight. It is "the cluster of products and services and of activities and experiences along the tourism value chain and a basic unit of analysis of tourism". (UNWTO s. a)

Europe, one of the seven continents of the world, is making up approximately one-fifteenth of the total land area with an estimated population of 742,2 in the year 2023. Altogether it encompasses 51 countries. European continent lies in the western part of Eurasia, bordered by the Arctic Ocean to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, Kuma-Manyach Depression and Caspian Sea to the south. To the East the border stretches to the Ural Mountains in Russia and along Emba River in the southwest ending at the northern coast of the Caspian Sea. Furthermore, Europe has large islands and archipelagos, along with an uneven coastline marked by numerous bays, lakes and seas totaling of about 38 000 km in length. Given Europe's vast land area, its climate can be roughly classified into four regional types: Maritime climate in western areas, continental climate in a broad area, central European climate, and Mediterranean climate in the southern coastlands. However, within each region variations exist due to their own specific topography. (Berentsen & al. 2023; McEvoy 2023; Tózsa 2014, 4) According to European Travel Commission (2023, 20) the high season for travel in the region is during the summer months from June to August.

Together with mentioned natural attributes, Europe's cultural heritage, and disparity, are one of the most evident pulls to tourists. There are 21 major cultural groups identified, albeit sharing similarities in language and geographic proximity. (Berentsen & al. 2023) The most spoken languages in Europe are Russian, German, French, English, Spanish, Ukrainian, Italian, and Polish, with English being the most used language for international communication (Tózsa 2014, 7). Europe's appeal is reaching beyond its natural and cultural attributes. History, local cuisine, and tourism infrastructure are among many other competitive advantages of the continent (ETC 2019). In addition, with online platforms, such as "Visit Europe" website, travellers worldwide can find relevant information regarding different European destinations, experiences and events within Europe, making it an optimal travel destination for many.

2.1   Political situation

27 European countries form the European Union (EU), a political international organization, established in 1993 to strengthen the economic and political ties among European nations. A single currency (the euro), unified security policies, as well as shared citizenship rights are among many factors that were followed by the unification. Until today EU continues to have a major political influence in the world. (Gabel 2023) Dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and human rights among many other shared values and aims set to lead EU countries actions (European union s.a.). Travelling within the EU is relatively easy due to the creation of the Schengen Area, free travel area in 1985. It comprises 23 EU countries and 4 non-EU countries and allows EU citizens to move between EU countries without special requirements or border control checks. (European commission s.a)

Political instability and stability are linked with countries' welfare hence having a major influence on the safety of the tourism industry. According to Puhakainen (2023) the recent global crises, conflicts and economic difficulties have changed the environment and brought up critical questions within the EU. Both the COVID-19 and Ukraine crises have had a profound impact on its institutional cycle leading to calls for European strategic autonomy. The balance power in Europe has shifted due to the changes that have come along with the Russia-Ukraine war (García 2022). Furthermore, governments throughout Europe are seen moving towards the right side of the political spectrum, which could result in possible changes in European countries policies regarding issues such as climate, and migration. (Lynch 2023)

Considering the relations between the EU and the United States, both share a global responsibility to advance common values in terms of democracy, peace, freedom, and law, as well as to safeguard human rights globally. The EU and the United States collaborate for strong, sustainable partnerships that address critical global issues. This includes facing challenges such as climate change, and health security. (Administration Team of the EU Delegation to the United States 2023) Whilst NATO and the European Union (EU) share strategic interests, they too, tackle with similar challenges, collaborating on several matters from crisis management to enhancing capabilities and assisting their partners in eastern and southern regions. The EU is an important partner for NATO, today sharing 22 member countries in common. (North Atlantic Treaty Organization s.a)

Since the Maidan movement protests in Ukraine in 2013, the relationship between Russia and EU has deteriorated. The European Union alongside with other Western countries have laid restrictive sanctions on Russia starting from visa bans to wider economic sanctions. Despite tensions persisting since 2014, Russia was the fourth most important trading partner for EU. In March 2022, after Ukraine being attacked, EU implied Russia being a significant threat to European security,

stamping a major shift concerning EU-Russia relations. In addition to individual and economic sanctions followed by the invasion, actions such as the suspension of visa facilitation between the EU and Russia have been addressed. (Herman 2023) In recent years, the relationship between the EU and China has also significantly decreased alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Russia's conflict in Ukraine and China's trade constraints for instance (Liboreiro 2023). In Europe concerns are also raised for instance about the worsening relations between Serbia and Kosovo, stemming from the brutal conflict erupted in the 1990s (Ellyatt 2023).

Understanding Europe's role on a global scale is fundamental for creating an overall image of it as a destination, while the relations between European Union (EU) and other nations are important influencing factors. Yet, despite Europe's geographical location, as well as social, cultural, and economic significance, a book "What is Europe?" discusses how conceptualizing Europe is complicated in how the meaning takes various shapes depending on the historical context, but also the perspective adopted by individuals. Hence Triandafyllidou and Gropas suggest that Europe is "an ongoing story" and when talking about Europe, it could rather be talked about as "Europes" in plural to better understand it. (Triandafyllidou & Gropas 2023, 3)

2.2   Travel statistics and emerging trends

European countries are continuing to be popular travel destinations by leading the international tourism with around 60 % of tourist arrivals worldwide in 2022 (Statista research department 2024). In the same year EU residents alone made over 800 million domestic trips, accounting to 94% of all trips made by EU residents (Eurostat 2023). According to the European Travel Commission (ETC), in 2023, Europe gained roughly 700 million international visitors. The international arrival numbers to European destinations in 2023 were 1,6% lower than the levels of 2019 prior the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that the demand for travel is strong in Europe. (ETC 2024, 5-6)

The most visited region within Europe is the Southern region. In 2022, the most popular countries were along the Mediterranean Sea, with Spain receiving the most international tourists, followed by the United Kingdom and France. For EU residents, respectively, Spain and Italy were the top destinations in the year 2022. Other popular destinations include Greece, Turkey, and Portugal. While in 2024, the Southern region of Europe remains popular for inbound tourism, the Eastern part of the continent is negatively affected by the ongoing conflicts. (ETC 2024, 5-6; Eurostat 2023; Statista research department 2024)

Beyond observing statistics, travel trends offer important insights into understanding European tourism patterns. The word "trend" itself describes a prevailing tendency to a certain direction or

reflection of general movement over time. (Merriam-Webster s. a) Due to the inflation in Europe, a decrease in the travel motives among Europeans is seen as the total costs of trips have become higher (Statista 2024). The impacts of inflation have resulted in rising costs concerning accommodation, food, and other amenities. Data also indicates that the trend of price consciousness is noticeable, and countries affordability corresponds to better tourism performance, favoring countries such as Bulgaria, Portugal, Montenegro and Albania. Despite increased fares, people are willing to pay for travel. (ETC & Eurail B.V 2023; ETC 2023, 22)

European destinations are not immune to the effects of climate change, and the travelers' destination choices are expected to be increasingly led by the direct and indirect impacts of extreme weather incidents. The hottest summer destinations may not be as attractive to the travellers in the future, whereas destinations with cooler weather conditions may lure more visitors. (ETC 2023, 20-22) European destinations' popularity comes with its own challenges too. Over time, the popularity has started significantly affecting the lives of local residents with problems such as littering, traffic, and heightened noise levels. It has started a shift from previous efforts to encourage more tourists to creation of anti-tourism strategies in the most visited locations across Europe. (Rodriguez 2023) The effects are also visible on a governmental level, as cities such as Barcelona, one of the most visited cities in Europe, is increasing its tourist tax to fight overtourism and thus seeking to bring more value to the city by supporting "quality" tourism (Hughes 2023). More importantly, Rodriguez (2020) argues that the impacts of tourism are not free from ambiguity, and they extend beyond the local economy, altering the social structures, culture, and lifestyle of the visited place.

2.3 Travel motivations

In terms of European countries, each has their own capital city, distinctive from one another, posing countless different travel motivations. Travel motivation naturally varies for each person, and given that motivation is a complex subject, several studies on travel motivations effect on tourism behavior have been conducted over the years. Dann's (1977) push-pull framework is a commonly used approach, in which push factors describe psychological drivers, e.g., self-exploration and desire for escape. Pull factors focus on environmental factors that work as attractors to a specific place, e.g., sunshine, and historical monuments. (Chen & Chen 2015) Another study suggests that travel intention is set by peoples own internal forces, while being pulled to the destination by external factors, meaning that they work simultaneously, instead of being two separate factors at a specific time. (Klenosky 2002, 385-386) Simply put, the definition of motive can be defined as "an internal factor that arouses, directs, and integrates a person's behavior" (Chen & Chen 2015).

Some of the top attractions in Europe are The Eiffel Tower in Paris, France; La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Spain; the Colosseum in Rome, Italy; Stonehenge in England; Brandenburg Gate in Berlin; Germany and Acropolis of Athens in Greece. (Bocco 2022) Europe has also the highest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites due to its many cultural and natural attributes, most located in Italy and France (Statista 2023). Europe is not known only for its natural landscapes, as many European destinations with cultural amenities (art, architecture, history) are motivating tourists as well. Among the top styles of travel preferences for Europeans are bigger city holidays mixed with cultural offers. (Travellyze,s.a)

Nationalities and cultural factors have been seen to influence the behavior of the tourists, yet there are some common motivators that are universal, e.g., romance. (Swarbrooke & Horner 2007) Other common travel motivations are the following elements: escape, relaxation, novelty, relationship, and self-development. Yet, motivational factors also differ among individuals with different levels of travel experience. (Pearce & Lee 2005, 235)

3   Safety in travel

In the following part of the thesis, the paper is going to identify safety and perceived safety, explore the role of perceived safety in the travel decision-making process, as well as discuss the media's influence on safety perceptions. As safety as a concept is very broad, the paper focuses on it merely in the travel context. Nonetheless, to establish a clear definition of safety from a travel perspective, it is important to address it as such. It is a term with various definitions yet being a common and freely used word in verbal communication. From an individual's perspective, safety is a state where the level of risks to individuals, their belongings or environment is acceptable. A state that protects individuals from undesirable incidents. (Iivari 2017, 188)

Safety consciousness in travel is a growing megatrend, as the travel industry is a part of an ever-changing environment, making it inclined to numerous unforeseen events and perceptions of insecurity. In fact, safety can be regarded as one the core values of life today, particularly applying to the western world where the basic human needs, to a certain extent, are already satisfied. (Iivari 2017, 189) A common, widely recognized theory used to explain human needs is Maslow's Psychological Hierarchy of Needs. In Maslow's theory, human needs are divided into five levels in a hierarchal order, in which each level represents its own need. To move higher up in the pyramid, the lower levels of needs must be fulfilled. At the bottom level are the psychological "survival" needs, which are the very essence of being alive, such as eating and sleeping. "Safety and security" appear to be on the second level indicating, that they indeed are one of the fundamental human needs. (Mcleod, 2023) Until now, the concept of safety has been often divided into two categories: safety and security, both obtaining a different meaning. The term safety is regarded as "softer" that describes safety in mundane life activities, e.g., occupational safety and environmental safety. Whereas security "harder", more serious matters such as economical security, but typically terrorism, crime, and wars are associated with security issues as well. (Iivari 2017, 189)

However, safety in travel is a relatively new concept, with the notion of safety and security arising alongside the growth of mass tourism in the 1950s. Through this evolution, tourism grew to be one of the biggest industries in the world economy, stressing the importance of safety and security issues. Until the Global tourism transition in the 1990s, the perception of safety and security were more focused on elements such as road safety and technical improvements to becoming a multidimensional notion that covers various components such as integration of cultures and societies, political security and consumer protection. (Kővári & Zimányi 2010, 67-68).

According to ETC (2023) destination's safety (e.g., low crime rates and no civil turmoil) is regarded as one of the most important criteria for choosing a destination overseas. As (Iivari 2012, 14) states, safety in travel contributes to the general safety and well- being of a destination, and

therefore has an important role in sustaining the vital societal functions. In the future, the importance of safety image will be playing even more vital role in the realm of tourism-both regarding geographical areas and companies' success.

3.1   Definition of perceived safety

The terms perceived safety and actual safety hold different meanings. While actual safety can be defined as "the condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury, or loss" (Merriam-Webster s. a.), perceived safety is regarded as the sense of being "safe" and protected against harmful events. Tourists' perceived safety is built on an overall judgement of a destination's steadiness and expected level of safety, concerning both their physical self and personal belongings. (Xie, Zhang, & Morrison 2021) Typically, individuals' perceptions are formed from own expectations, that are based on familiarity, values, motivations as well as prior experiences (Cohen, Prayag, Moital 2014, 885).

While safety perceptions are multifaceted, the way individuals perceive safety risks differ. A study on risk perceptions found that travelers with no prior experience visiting a destination may have higher risk perceptions and safety worries compared to the ones with prior experience. Additionally, the study highlighted the significance of cultural perspective, in how individuals from risk-averse countries tend to have a higher risk perception of travelling internationally or to a certain destination in comparison to individuals from lower risk averse countries. Thus, emphasizing that risk perceptions are context-dependent, and vary by destinations. (Kim, Schroeder & Pennington-Gray 2016, 24-25)

In line with Iivari (2012, 20-27) cultural factors not only influence one's interpretations and experiences of safety, but also how one perceives and communicates these observations. Besides looking at safety from an individual's perspective, feelings of safety can also be related to certain communities, region, or cities. Hereby, the contrast between reality and mental image often lead to matter of opinions rather than backed up data. Safety, to a significant degree is a feeling, an irrational image. Nonetheless, in any case, an individual's gap between perceived safety beliefs and actual safety experiences should not be too notable or else they could turn into adverse incidents. (Iivari 2012, 20-27)

3.2   Perceived safety in travel decision- making process

The travel decision-making process is a journey, which can be examined through the lens of consumer purchasing behavior. It can be divided into levels, depending on the type of decision at hand. "Routine decision-making" describes the ease of purchasing, where individuals' decisions require only minimal effort and time. The risk and money associated with the purchase are low. On

the other spectrum, individuals may go through an "extended decision-making" process, where one makes a fair amount of research on the product or service, while comparing options from various sources. The purchase risk and potential failing is high, in addition to their financial significance. Between the mentioned extremes lies "limited decision-making" requiring limited effort, yet not all feasible options are thoroughly searched. Relative risk is present. (Bergström & Leppänen 2021, 3.2) Likewise in travel decision-making, travelers analyze various factors. Another approach created by Kollat, Blackwell and Engel (1972), identifies a five-stage model for consumer behaviour. It consists of need recognition, information search, pre- purchase evaluation, purchasing and post- purchase evaluation. (Westcott & Anderson 2021, chapter 8.4)

Hence, travel-decision making is a complex process, where tourists must make several decisions e.g., whether to travel or when to travel. However, the choice of destination is the weightiest of those decisions. (Nuraeni, Arru & Novani 2015, 313) Where destination image and reputation play a key role in travel decision-making, safety and security, alongside with destinations hospitality and uniqueness are one of the main factors influencing the image. (Mihai & al. 2023, 10) Altindag (2013, 8) suggests that the tourist destination's attractiveness may compensate the perceived risk factors.

Iivari (2017, 188-189) states, that the safety of a travel destination influences the traveler's destination choice, yet highlights that safety is a relative concept, and a complete absence of risks is not attainable. According to Kim & al. (2016, 25) differences regarding safety worries can be found in sociodemographics. Women tend to express more concern on the safety of the destination than males when making travel decisions. This indicates that safety is a more important element for female travelers than their male counterparts. Another study suggests that perception and response to risks can be explained by different characteristics. For instance, individuals with relatively higher income are more likely to avoid destinations with an elevated political risk. Yet, political risk can also be perceived differently depending on different regions in the world. (Myungsook, Chongho, Yonghwi 2010, 165)

Essentially, safety and crime threats, both real and perceived, have a negative impact on tourism behavior and influences the choice of a destination (Mansfeld & Pizam 2011, 188). Even one adverse incident in a destination can alter travelers' perception of risk and thus reduce inbound tourism (Khan, Chelliah, Khan & Amin 2019, 722) Therefore, as stated by Iivari (2012, 20) constructed perceptions of safety can have substantial weight in the travel decision-making.

3.3   Influence of media on perceived safety

In today's information era, media's influence on individuals' perceptions cannot be undermined either. Consuming media has become a norm in the everyday lives of the majority of people across the world. It is available in many forms, from newspapers and radio to user-generated content. On a study of travel anxiety and intentions, it was raised that media has an enormous effect on the travelers' risk perception. While media tends to exaggerate, it may in turn cause excessive worry and anxiety regarding a destination for a prolonged time. Safety related events work as important news generators, and thus potential tourists, consciously or unconsciously may perceive a higher, more prejudiced image of a destination. (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005, 223; Mansfeld and Pizam 2011, 17; Kapuściński and Richards 2016, 234) In addition, the word "safety" itself can draw attention as it is perceived as an innermost subject. (Iivari, 2012, 27)

Essentially, destinations perceived risks cause individuals to search for information, giving emphasis to accessible and reliable information sources. The information traditional media such as TV and newspapers provide are often seen as generalized information lacking objectivity and details regards to perceived safety concerns. Where intermediary sources such as travel agencies or the government's tourism offices are relevant for general information of a destination, are internal information and own experiences viewed as more trustworthy when individuals need exact information regarding a destination. Nonetheless, it is highlighted that in cases where a destination has been hit by a terrorist attack, for instance, are the tourists less interested in the details of the incident, and more prone to make judgements based on the mere fact that it happened. Adding that, e.g., secondary sources of information play an important role of timely information for those individuals with no personal experiences with certain threats. (Sharifpour, Walters, Ritchie & Winter 2014; Kapuściński and Richards 2016, 241)

One of the primary information sources for travelers in travel decision-making, and throughout each step of the process, is social media (Gulati, 2022). Supporting outcomes are found in further studies of tourists' media usage, indicating that social media sites such as TikTok are regularly used information sources among all demographic groups nowadays. However, traditional media, e.g., TV and radio are continuing to be important information sources for safety for certain groups such as individuals over 50 years old, and those with a wealthier- or lower-educational background. Moreover, certain groups do extensive research gathering information from multitude of different sources. (Sun, Ye, Tang, Yang & Scott 2023)

Along with digitalization, Word of Mouth (WOM) has shown to be an important factor influencing consumers behavior and beliefs. It is an exchange of information that is informal and shared between people one knows. The information received from trusted family and friends are more

often remembered. (Allton, 2023) The social influence on people is recognized online as well. A study regarding travelers' usage of TripAdvisor as an information source shows that consumer generated media is very effectual due to consumers placing high value on other users' recommendations. They can count on the information, if it fits the needs, and is trustworthy, timely, complete, and valuable. (Filieri, Alguezaui & McLeay, 2015)

As the types of media are broad, it is not limited only on above mentioned. It includes official governmental websites as well. For instance, The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland has travel advisories in approximately 160 countries, providing information on each country's situation and conditions. They include detailed information about safety, health, and other relevant info. (The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland s. a) Finally, (Sharifpour & al. 2014) suggest that risk perceptions are formed from travelers' subjective knowledge gained by past travel experiences and objective knowledge, subsequently influencing the usage of different media sources.

4   Solo female travelers

While the previous chapter considered safety perceptions, this chapter will be defining the solo female travelers. In the past decades, solo female travel trend has experienced a notable growth, along with e.g., gender equality progressing. (Yang, 2015) According to Wilson & Harris (2006, 169) females see solo travel as an empowering factor, which allows one to create meaningful social and cultural links, with the positive impacts extending to their everyday lives. Females often describe their travel as "an inner journey of personal growth and self-development".

The term "traveler" itself is a vast term with many definitions. A definition set by UNWTO, a traveler "is someone who moves away between different geographic locations, for any purpose and for any duration" (UNWTO s. a). However, there are a few clearer subcategories for the word, in which limitations are made based on the purpose of travel, length of travel, and duration. Different countries carry their own criteria regards the term, and therefore having one single universal definition is complex. (Edelheim & Ilola, 2017, 23)

The trend of solo travel is seen rising increasingly amongst women of all ages, indicating a shift in the peoples' mindsets. While women over 55-year-olds and generation Z are manifesting a wider interest for solo travel, safety remains a primary concern. (Brophy, 2023) For solo female travelers' safety of a destination is the third highest leading factor for choosing destination. While culture, beauty, local cuisine and access to nature amongst many others are considered important as well. (Statista 2023) Ruoho (2023) states that discussion of solo travel amongst women is encouraging, yet the question of safety is usually present. Women are often proposed to avoid walking alone at night or wearing covering clothes. In essence, women solo travelers are attuned to keeping themselves free from danger by doing what is safe, right, or reasonable. (Wilson & Little 2008, 182; Ruoho 2023) Another study revealed that the impact of frightening situations on women's behavior whilst travelling is high. Women take precautions especially during the dark hours, by avoiding public transportation and specific paths and destinations. Also carrying repellents shows constrained behavior. (Stark & Meschik, 2018, 320)

The results from the Global business travel association's survey conducted in 2018 showed that 83% of women had faced at least one safety-related concern during the previous year. (Jorden 2023) In Europe, females remain more frequent victims of violence than men (Buzmaniuk, 2023). Yet, studies show that young female travelers higher travel motivation seems to correlate with a higher intention to travel, even with elevated physical risks and structural constraints linked to a particular destination. (Khan & al. 2019, 733)

Results from research on the typology of solo independent women travelers indicate, that females don't feel any less safe and, in fact, take part in similar activities as male solo travelers. This implies, that prior research on safety worries of solo female travelers could primarily be of an indication of safety issues in certain travel destinations rather than the women feeling fear whilst travelling. (McNamara & Prideaux 2010, 262) Also Carvalho (2022, 19) suggests that there is no difference in travel risk between men and women, in contradictory to previous studies stating that women are more sensitive to travel risks.

Referring to Yang, (2017), most of the studies on solo female travelers focus on western, centric point of view. In her study of Asian solo female travelers, it was revealed that Asian women have concerns related to gendered and cultural risks, e.g., sexual harassment and unfriendly behavior. The respondents of the study believed that western solo female travelers may not perceive as big of a risk and are ready to take more risk compared to Asian travelers. Therefore, the findings showed that female travelers aren't homogeneous, and researching on female travelers should place more sensitivity on culture, as well as context. Similarities can be found in further studies affirming that women have differences in how they feel about solo travel. Perceptions are intertwined and shaped by numerous factors, such as gender, culture, economics, and individuals' history, rather than being objectively acknowledged views. Therefore, further investigation of solo female travelers and its socio- cultural restraints is needed. (Wilson & Little 2008, 182)

5   General safety issues impacting travel decisions

Next the paper aims to identify general safety issues and risks in Europe. As it is impossible to examine all possible safety issues concerning European destinations, this thesis is going to cover a few of the most common issues that may influence solo females' travel decisions. Thus, the following issues are going to be looked at more in depth: terrorism, crime, language barriers and cultural differences, and lastly, natural disasters.

Despite Europe being the most peaceful region in the world, with four out of five most peaceful countries located in Europe (IEP, 2022, 4), there are several safety issues to consider. European destinations safety and security are continuously measured to help travellers gain insights of their safety environment. Alongside with regularly published statistics, databases such as "Numbeo" focuses on gathering data that is based on individuals' feedback and safety perceptions. While Munich, Ljubljana, Tallin and Reykjavik are voted amidst the safest cities in Europe, many other popular European destinations score high in e.g., crime rankings. Accordingly, the five most dangerous cities in Europe are considered Marseille, Coventry in England, Birmingham, Naples and Montpellier. (Wein 2024)

According to Altindag (2013, 1) any threat to one's own safety has been shown to reduce tourism activity. A study on disaster events in tourism confirms that several disasters, both natural and human-caused, reduces not only the tourist number but also the experience for tourists. Hence, they play a vital role in the normal functioning of the industry. In order to enhance the positive safety perceptions of a destination, proper precautions are important, with pre- disaster management being more efficient to post- disaster management. (Ma, Chiu, Tian, Zhang & Guo 2020, 9-10)

5.1   Terrorism

Terrorism is the act of using violence or threatening to cause fear or attain political or ideological objectives. It can take many shapes such as bombings, kidnappings, and armed assaults. It can be targeted to either civilians, government figures or even public infrastructure. The threat of terrorism is a dominant concern in most countries across the globe. (Bastian & al. 2023)

Fear of terrorism may awaken anxiety concerning certain destinations, and therefore leading to negative travel decisions. Through the evolution of modern technology, terrorism has adapted new ways to carry out its activities. By attacking e.g., tourism infrastructures, terrorists have reached new media coverage globally. (Baker, D. A 2014, 64) Hence, the purpose of terrorism is to cause fear not just among the direct target, but among the wider public. Terrorism has had both right-wing

and left-wing objectives carried out by revolutionaries, nationalistic or religious groups, as well as state institutions, including the police. (Jenkins, 2023) The right- wing lone actors continue being critical while left-wing, anarchist terrorist and violent extremes are also causing a significant threat to the EU's security. Online propaganda is another concern terrorists' profit from by spreading their messages online and attracting new advocates. In Europe, Terrorism is a considerable threat to the internal security of European Union. In the year 2022, EU faced 16 terrorist attacks and 12 failed attacks. (Europol 2023, 4)

However, the influence of terrorist attacks may not directly affect the impacted destination's tourism, but rather it could shape the safety perception of the destination (Ma & al. 2020, 9-10) Typically, countries threat level is evaluated using a scale from 1-5. Changes to them can be made though; in August 2023, Sweden, after a prolonged period of weakening safety situation in the country, raised the national threat level by one degree from level three to a level four. (Korhonen, aholuoto, Sippola, 2023)

5.2 Crime

The spectrum of crimes is vast, including both more- and less-serious crimes. The definition of crime is a purposeful act deemed socially damaging and punishable by the government (Allott & al. 2023). Crimes are often classified into five groups: crimes against a person or property, statutory crimes, inchoate crimes, and financial crimes. Crimes against person include homicide and violent crimes. Examples of violent crimes are crimes against another individual, sexual offenses, and robberies. Homicide refers to intentionally killing another person. (Justia s.a) However, beneath these more serious crimes, exists a vast range of less serious crimes, such as theft. Thefts are especially common at tourism destinations. Nonetheless, the negative impacts from violent crimes seem to be more visible as they gain more media coverage, and hence affecting tourists' behavior. (Mansfeld & Pizam 2011, 113)

According to the European crime index 2023, Belarus, France, Belgium and Sweden are the leading countries of high crime rates in Europe (Numbeo s. a.). Iceland has the lowest crime rate, while also being the most peaceful country in 2022. To contradictory, Turkey was ranked the least peaceful country in 2022 GPI. Yet overall criminality levels in Europe saw an improvement in the year 2022. (IEP 2022, 4-17) However, when analyzing crime statistics, it should be taken into account that statistics between countries can vary due to different legal and criminal justice systems and reporting proportions to the police for instance. Same applies when defining crimes in detail as the EU Member States may have different standard definitions. (Eurostat 2014)

The unfavorable consequences crime has on travel destination can primarily be seen as decreased number of tourists, as it creates a negative destination image. The influences may be very negative, hence maintaining security of tourism destinations is necessary both on financial and organizational level. (Matakovic & Matakovic 2019,14)

5.3 Language barriers and cultural differences

A simplified definition of culture is "the knowledge and behavior that characterizes a particular group of people". Culture consists of several elements such as language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, artworks, and rituals. (Heyes 2020; White 2022) Still, cultural differences in tourism extend far beyond language and food, but are experienced in various human interactions, encompassing non-verbal cues, religious beliefs, perceptions of time and privacy, manners, and body language. Such cultural aspects can lead to misunderstandings, and tensions between the locals and international tourists, and in result, cause feelings of stress and fear. (Reisinger & Turner 2002, 31)

Results from a study examining the role of language proficiency and cultural adaptation in travel shows, that the lower the knowledge of the language, the higher risk the travelers perceive. Higher language skills obtaining individuals may educate themselves and raise awareness of possible risks through different online platforms, compared to the ones with lower language skills. (Nagai, Tkaczynski & Benckendorff 2020)

As previously mentioned, the European region has a lot of diversity in terms of cultures. Bothlanguage barriers and cultural differences may have a negative influence on individuals' safety perceptions. A study on culture's effect on tourism demand suggests that in order to attract more tourists, destination countries should try to lessen the perceived cultural distance between countries (Liu, Fan & Qiu 2021). Similarly, results from a study on tourists visit intentions shows, that highlighting cultural alikeness may be efficient in destination promotion (Ng, Lee & Soutar 2007).

5.4 Natural disasters

Natural disasters are events caused by environmental factors, typically leading to human mortality, detriment of the natural environment, private property, or public infrastructure. They can occur throughout the planet, yet there are limitations on the types of disasters that can occur depending on the specific geographical locations. Natural disasters can be categorized further into three groups, the most common being Hydrometerological disasters, referring to climate, oceans and the movement of wet mass, e.g., droughts. The risk of natural disasters persists amidst the growth of

population, changes in climate and economic instabilities. (Metych, 2024; Prasad & Francescutti, 2017)

During the years 2001 and 2020, the most common natural disaster in Europe was flooding (41%), followed by storms (27%) and extreme temperatures (23%). The higher temperatures and strong winds in the recent years have escalated other weather-related disasters, such as wildfires in the Mediterranean. (Statista, 2021) It is expected that European destinations will encounter more extreme weather incidents, as the impacts from climate change are evident with rising sea levels and altering the geographical distribution of infectious diseases. Both Southern and Northen Europe are going to be facing the consequences. In South, already mentioned wildfires and water scarcity and in the North increased temperatures and floods. (European Commission & ECHO, 8-9)

The effects natural disasters have are far-reaching. They cause public health issues, humanitarian crises, damage for infrastructures and environment, and thereby impacting destinations communities and inviduals. (Grosfield, 2018) The impact natural disasters have on a destination differs on the type of disaster, but it is challenging to determine whether negative effects are caused by possible destruction of infrastructure or negative perception of the affected destination. However, milder event, such as heat wave are not likely to cause a serious drop on tourist arrivals, as it does not pose long- term risks to tourists once the event is done. (Rossello, Becken & Santana-Gallego, 2020, 8)

6 Methodology

The following chapter introduces the methodology chosen for this paper and describes the research process from data collection to data analysis. Firstly, two alternative research methods are introduced, secondly the process of planning the questionnaire is discussed, and thirdly the phases of data collection and analysis are explained more in depth.

To gather relevant information for the research, firstly identifying the suitable research method holds utmost importance. Typically, research methods are divided into qualitative or quantitative methods, but in some cases the research may benefit from gathering data from both methods. (Vilkka 2021)

Qualitative method examines and interprets a phenomenon through individuals experiences. It tries to understand the subjective human experiences in which linguistic expressions are an important source of information. Commonly, qualitative method uses interviews. It answers questions such as "where", "how" and "in what way". In qualitative research it is a necessity to understand the context in which the phenomenon is important to the respondent. It can be used to investigate e.g., experiences that are related to commonalities, recruiting, and studying. (Vilkka 2021)

Quantitative method in contradictory takes a different approach, that is based on collecting and analyzing numerical data. It is often used to get an understanding of the experiences and perceptions individuals have and how they are shared amongst them. Through the statistics it is possible to draw conclusions and find causal connections between these experiences or assumptions. It wishes to answer questions "how much" and "how often" but also looks for an answer to "why". It investigates means of support, finances, but also measures e.g., perceptions of own educational success or matters of equality. Quantitative method has several qualities such as structuring information, measuring, objectivity of the process and results, as well as high number of responses. (Vilkka 2007, 17; Vilkka 2021)

As this thesis aims to find out how the perceived safety impacts solo female travelers' travel decision, the methodology chosen for this research paper is quantitative. For looking to understand overall safety perceptions of Europe, quantitative approach is the most suitable option for gathering already existing perceptions from a large sample.

Typical elements to quantitative research is that it examines large number of people, ranging anywhere from 100-1000 respondents. The larger sample size, the better it represents the standard attitudes and opinions on the topic researched. (Vilkka 2007, 17) In quantitative research process, the importance of theory can be seen in the way the research progresses. After

theoretical framework the research moves onto practical implementations in the form of a questionnaires, interviews, or observations. Then it comes back to theory to analyze and interpret the results. The goal is to find patterns from the data that transcend everyday life. (Vilkka 2007, 25)

6.1 Planning of a questionnaire

For this thesis, the most appropriate research tool is a questionnaire. Questionnaire is a commonly used quantitative method to examine a wide group of individuals, and their opinions, attitudes, behavior, qualities, or even personal subjects, such as own health or consuming habits. It is important to know what is studied and what is the aim of the the questionnaire to know what is being measured. (Vilkka, 2021; Vilkka 2007, 36)

Creating the questionnaire form is pivotal in ensuring the success of the research. The order of the questions should be well-thought, logical and clear by using, e.g., subheadings to differentiate entities. The simplicity, understandability, validity, and neutral tone of the questions are the fundamentals of a good questionnaire. Excess of questions may be time consuming for the respondent, hence having appropriate number of questions in relation to the actual research questions is crucial. (Tähtinen, Laakkonen & Broberg 2020, 30) From a user perspective, answering should feel valuable and easy. (Heikkilä, 2014)

Questionnaires can be conducted in a web-based-, phone-based, or even mail form. For the validity of the questionnaire, the aim is that the questions on the form are presented in the same order, in a similar format for each respondent. (Vilkka 2021) The question types can have variety, with multiple choice-, close-ended- and mixed questions. (Heikkilä, 2014)

The questionnaire is created by using Webropol online tool. It consists of 14 questions, and mixture of question types is used, including Likert- scales, multiple choice- and open- ended questions. All the questions are mandatory; expect two questions. The last question, which asks the respondent to add anything, and a question of nationality, given the sensitivity of the topic. Furthermore, the questionnaire is going to present a map of Europe together with one of the questions regarding safety perceptions of European countries. Agreeing that the division of Europe is very generalized, the main purpose is to examine European countries on a wider scale, instead of parting it into numerous smaller geographical areas.

As the questionnaire's purpose is to research primarily the safety perception of European destinations, not actual safety, the questions are presented hypothetically, assuming one were to travel solo. The purpose is to make the questionnaire as low threshold as possible, hence keeping the number of questions small, yet sufficient. All questions are in English. The questions are presented in appendix 1.

The chosen Likert- scale is especially convenient for this research, as it allows respondents to choose a preferrable answer option to describe their own perceptions or attitudes. Typically, Likert-scale is a 1 to 5 scale, consisting of 4 or 5 response options, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". However, depending on the researched topic, it can be designed to fit the specific needs or purposes. It may vary with higher number of response options, to presenting only the extreme options. (Heikkilä, 2014) This questionnaire is going to provide only extremes, leaving room for interpretation of one's own perceptions. As Vilkka (2021) explains, the chosen measurement scale is going to determine the type of answers the research is going to bring forth.

The form of the questionnaire is as follows: a cover letter briefing the respondent on the purpose of the study, followed by the question part. The cover letter informs the respondents of their anonymity and specifies that all females, regarding of solo travel experience are qualified to answer. (Appendix 1.) The questionnaire is spread into two pages making it more user friendly. The questionnaire begins by asking the respondents' background information regarding age group and nationality. Background information is followed by the question part reflecting on the theoretical framework of this thesis, categorized into four subchapters. Moreover, the questions are presented in line with the research questions. At the end of the questionnaire respondents are offered a free response.

6.2   Data collection and analysis

All web-based questionnaires are conducted online, which makes collecting and analyzing responses relatively easy. It is especially efficient in collecting a large number of respondents. (Huttunen 2020) Web- based questionnaires are not only efficient in its fast and easy-to use attributes but allows respondents to stay anonymous and answer to sensitive subjects.

The questionnaire link will be shared to solo female travel Facebook groups, as well as the author's own social network to gather a variety of responses. It is easily accessible as the link takes the respondents directly to the questionnaire. The questionnaire is aimed at females of all ages from any background, no further limitations are made. Nor is prior solo travel experience needed, as author proposed it would not bring additional value to the results.

The data will be analyzed by collecting the data from Webropol tool. The results are then transformed into Microsoft Excel and created into charts and figures. As the questionnaire has a few open-ended questions, they will be analyzed further through categorizing them into responses that occurred more frequently.

7   Results

While the previous chapter focused on choosing the methodology and building the questionnaire, this chapter, examines the results from the questionnaire. Each question is introduced and explained alongside with the gathered responses.

The responses were collected in 12 days during the time period between 8.11- 20.11.2023. The questionnaire gathered altogether 92 responses. It was posted on different social media platforms, the authors own social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn) as well as reposted to her connection's social media. The link was also shared multiple times on WhatsApp Messenger. The aim for number of respondents was initially between 150-300, hoping to reach visibility via Facebook female traveler groups. The goal was to reach females internationally for a broader, more reliable results to support the scope of this study. Despite many attempts, the post and questionnaire link were not accepted to be published on Facebook groups.

The results from the questionnaire are presented in the same order as in the questionnaire form to correspond it's five subcategories. The following subchapters are background details, solo travel experience, perception of Europe, safety assessment and travel decision-making.

7.1   Background details

Firstly, the background details of the participants were collected. Each age category had gained responses, with the biggest participant group by age being 25-35 years old with 39%. Second biggest age group was less than 25 years old with 23%, followed by 46-55 with 17%, 55+ years old with 12% and 36-45 with 9%.

The respondents were mostly from European countries, with majority from Finland (77%). Other nationalities were Germany (5%), Finnish- American (2%), Finnish- Filipino (1%), Finnish- British (1%).

7.2   Solo travel experience

After the mentioned background information, the respondents were led to the researched topic by asking about their solo travel experience. The definition of travel by UNWTO was explained after the question to ensure that each person understood it in the same manner. Majority of the respondents, 74% stated having travelled alone previously.

Another question in the same category asked the respondents to rate their travel preferences regarding travel companion. The highest percentage as to type of travel was "mostly travelling with

others" (37%). Second highest percentage was "travelling alone and with others equally" (32%) followed by "always travelling with others" (21%), and "mostly travelling alone" (10%).

7.3   Perception of Europe

After questions of personal travel experience, the questionnaire moved towards Europe. The question asked the respondents to rate how safe they view different parts of Europe. The Likert - scale presented options from 1 (very unsafe) to 5 (very safe). Below the question there was a simplified, color-coded map of Europe divided into four parts: North, East, South and West. At the end of each option, it stated its corresponding color on the map. (appendix 1.)

Northern Europe was voted the safest with an average of 4,5 and standard deviation of 0,6. On the contrary, the average level of Central and Eastern Europe was 2,5, with standard deviation of 0,8. Both Southern Europe and Western Europe had an average higher than 3.
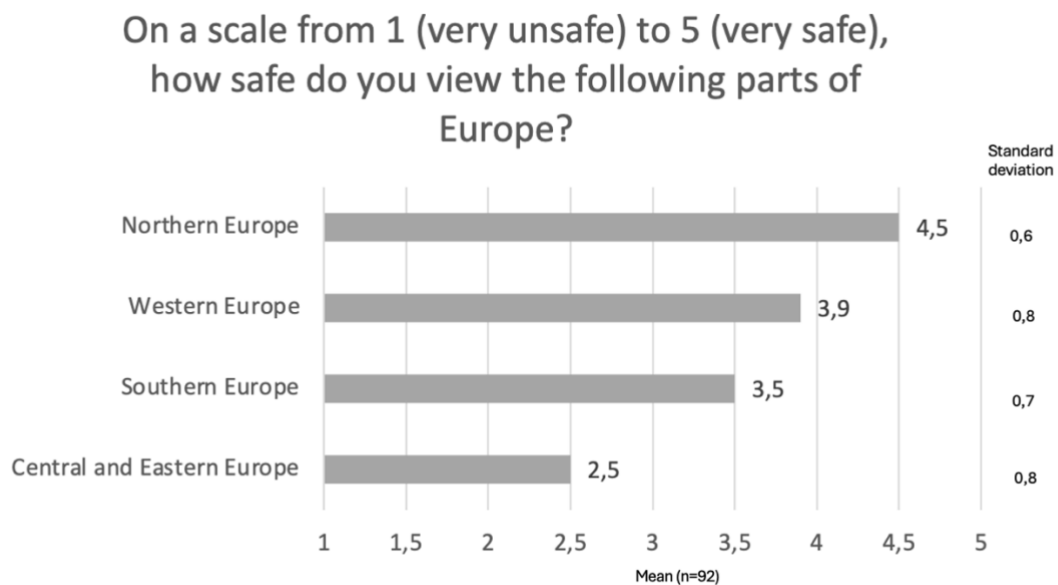

Figure 1. Northern Europe is viewed as the safest part of Europe.

The sixth question was "Are there countries in Europe you wouldn't consider travelling alone? (excluding war zones)". The answer options given were yes/no, provided with a further question "why".

The results showed that 47% (n=43) of the respondents chose the option "yes", while 53% (n= 49) did not have any country in Europe they would not travel alone. After choosing their answer options, they were asked to give clarification, if desired.

Some of the repeated themes that occurred regarding the answer "yes" (would not travel alone) are presented below:

- *"Eastern European countries because of corruption, women's place in society, sexism, violence"*
- *"Language barriers, if English is not used"*
- *"Safety reasons"*
- *"Travelling as a solo woman would not feel safe"*
- *"Getting unusual attention or getting harassed"*
- *"Woman rights problems"*

Below are some of the clarifications obtained from respondents who chose the answer option "no":

- *"Curious to see all countries"*
- *"I would just be more careful"*
- *"Most of European countries are safe"*
- *"If I am travelling alone, I'm not out late"*
- *"I have a lot of travel experience, so I am not worried about Europe"*

7.4 Safety assessment

Next the questionnaire aimed to understand how the perceived safety of a destination affects the female's travel decision. The question asked the respondents to rate their answer on a Likert-scale from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high). The results showed an average value of 7,4 with a minimum picked value of 2 and a maximum of 10.

The figure 2. below is going to demonstrate the responses regarding a question "On a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), rate which aspects of a travel destination negatively affect your feeling of safety the most". The figure presents the mean as well as the standard deviation of the options. Crime options were divided into two, lining in with the theory of this thesis: petty crimes and serious crimes. From both options, an example was given to separate the two from each other.
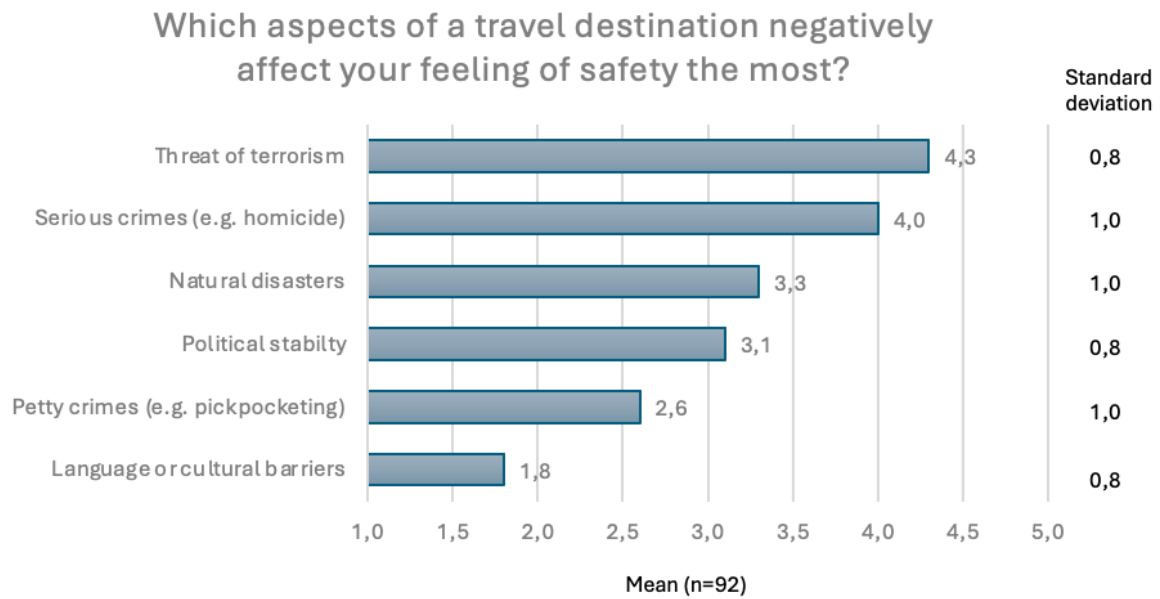
Figure 2. Threat of terrorism in a destination affects female's feeling of safety the most.

"Threat of terrorism" was rated to have the highest impact on the feelings of safety with an average of 4,3 and standard deviation of 0,8. Likewise the aspect of "serious crimes" has a high negative impact with an average of 4,0 and a standard deviation of 1.0. In contrast, the least influential factors were given as "petty crimes" and "language and cultural barriers". Whilst in the middle lies natural disasters and political stability.

Next, the participants were asked if they had ever experienced safety concerns while travelling, and if so, has it influenced their perception of safety regarding future travel in Europe. Both answer options were open- ended.

Based on the results, 56,5% had not experienced any safety concerns. Some noteworthy responses obtained from here were the following:

- *"I have only been to very touristic places."*
- *"I have experiences in my own country. Therefore, I am more conscious of safety abroad."*

Meanwhile, 43,5% stated having experienced safety concerns previously. Recurring themes were:

- *"Usually pretty small ones like pickpocketing, scams etc. If there have been political tensions and threats towards the country I'm visiting, I might be more nervous. Also, diseases/anything health related"*

- *"Pickpocketing, harassment and physical violence"*

- *"Was shouted and followed by men, Before I would've thought that I'd be safe when travelling alone in these countries"*

- *"Threaths and guys being flirtatious even after being said that i'm not interested"*

- *"I was travelling around Europe around the time terrorist attacks were happening in Europe, I was scared it could hit me"*

- *"During interrail, several theft attempts and suspicious behaviour from some airbnb hosts. These have made me much more aware of my surroundings"*

- *"Regarding the current global situation, there is a high uncertainty. I do not enjoy being in alert and unfortunately, many countries' terrorist attack probability has increased a lot in the past months. That make me nowadays think at least twice the destination of my travel"*

Similar concerns were given regarding future travel in Europe. One respondent told to always take the same safety measures when travelling solo, despite of the destination. Another respondent highlighted that pickpocketing in Barcelona impacted only their perception of safety in Barcelona, not other parts of Europe.

With a question number 10 "Rate which precautions you would take if you had to travel alone in Europe" the participants were again asked to rate their answer on a scale from 1 to 5. The scale's low extremity was "never" and highest extremity "always"'. Standard deviation is presented as well.
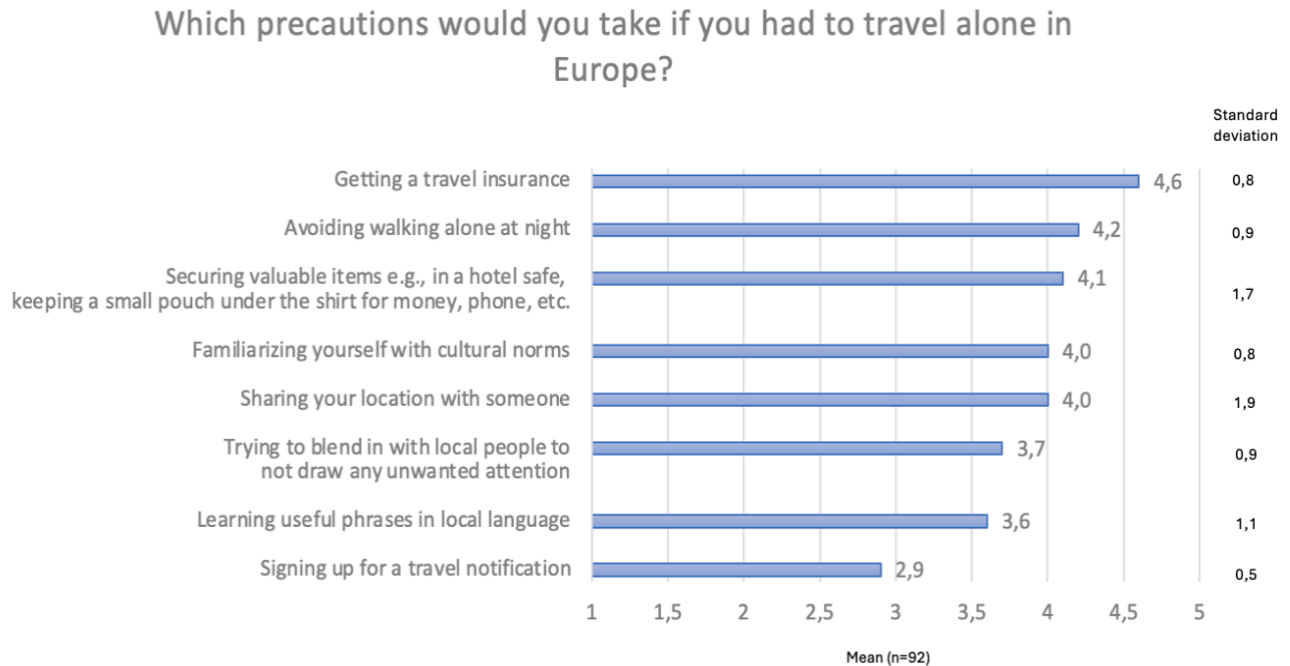
Figure 3. Women would take several precautions while solo traveling in Europe.

The results reveal that getting a travel insurance, avoiding walking alone at night and securing valuable items are the most acquired precautions women take. Familiarizing oneself with cultural norms and sharing one's location both received an average of 4,0. The significance of travel notification is lower with an average of 2,9.

7.5   Travel decision-making

With the 11th question, the purpose was to find out which sources for safety females check before choosing a travel destination. The question was "Before choosing a destination, which of the following sources for safety do you normally check?" The participants could choose one or more options. Additionally, an option "other?" was given.

The results reveal that word of mouth (WoM) is the most checked source for safety with 71%. It is followed by news (63%) and Travel websites (55%). Less than 50% got the options social media (43%), Travel blogs and forums (38%), TV and radio (24%).

Regarding the option "Other?" one respondent stated that if they know they are going to be travelling to a certain destination, they may check news related to it, if news come across, but do not purposely check.

Which of the following sources for safety do you normally check?

(N=92)

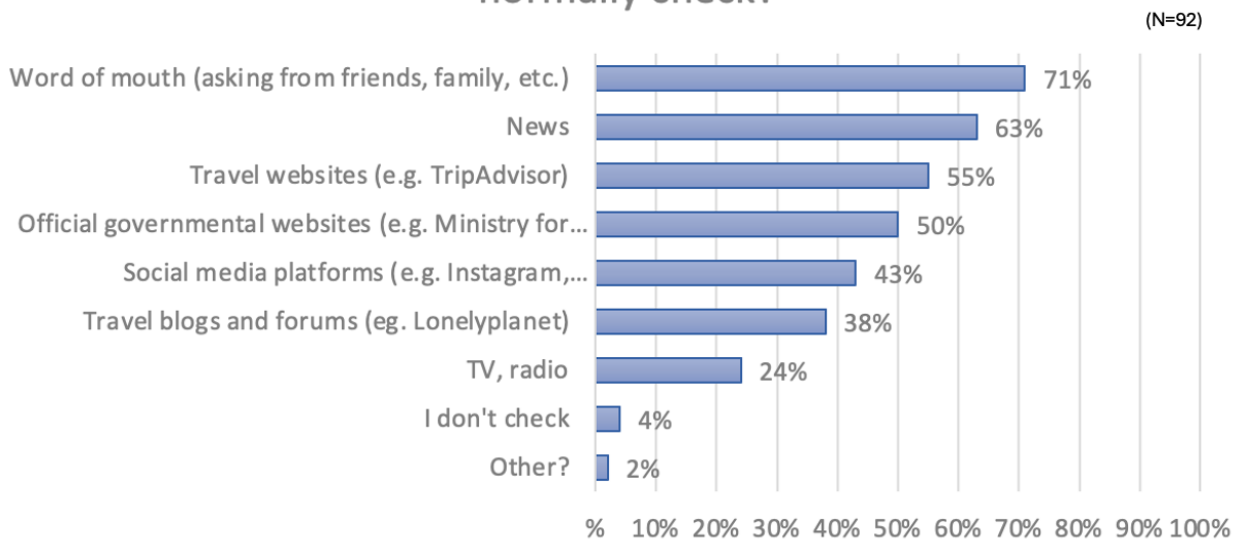| Source	%
Word of mouth (asking from friends, family, etc.)	71%
News	63%
Travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor)	55%
Official governmental websites (e.g. Ministry for…)	50%
Social media platforms (e.g. Instagram,…)	43%
Travel blogs and forums (eg. Lonelyplanet)	38%
TV, radio	24%
I don't check	4%
Other?	2%

% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Figure 4. Sources solo female travelers check for safety.

The next question was: "How much do you place value on the following sources regarding destination's safety, on a scale from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much)?" Participants were asked to choose their preferred option.

How much do you place value on the following sources regarding destination's safety, on a scale from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much)?

Source	Mean	Standard deviation
Recommendations from friends and family	4,2	0,9
News and media	3,8	0,8
Social media	3,3	0,9

1 1,5 2 2,5 3 3,5 4 4,5 5
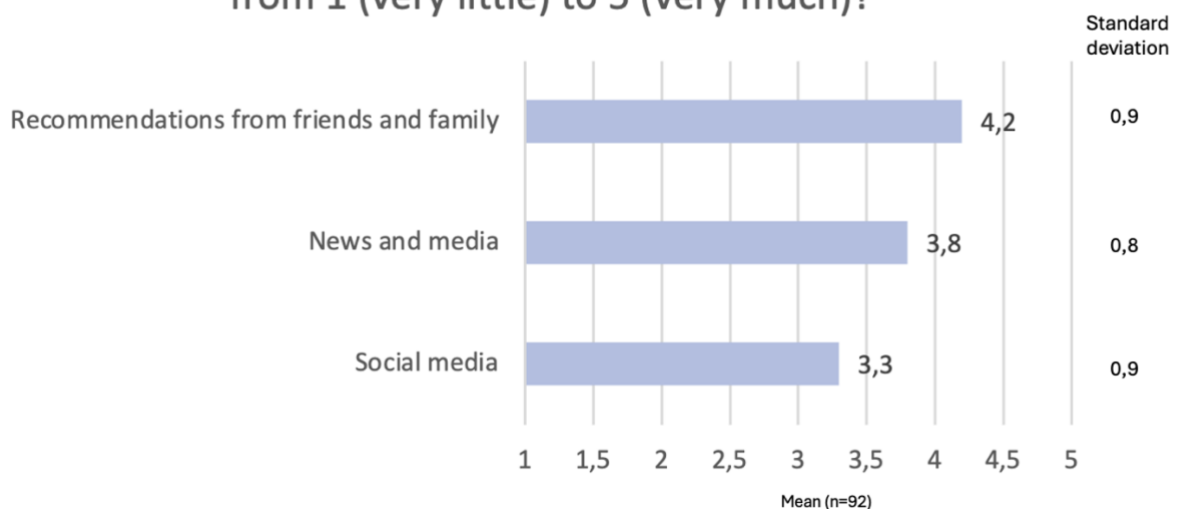
Mean (n=92)

Figure 5. Friends and family are the most valued sources for safety.

The value of "Recommendations from friends and family" received an average of 4,2. It was followed by "News and media" and lastly "Social media".

The question number 13 asked "Have you ever cancelled a trip to Europe due to safety concerns?" aimed to understand if safety concerns can go as far as cancelling a trip. If one chose the option "yes", they were asked to kindly explain. Furthermore, individuals choosing the option "no" were given an option to provide an explanation, if preferred. The results were rather unanimous. 95% stated that they had never cancelled a trip, while 5% had cancelled. All 5% (n=5) gave further explanation.

Three people out of five mentioned having cancelled a trip to Russia, while others mentioned raising war in Egypt and a volcano explosion. Other respondents explained that while they had not cancelled, they can see themselves doing so in the future.

The final question "Anything else you would like to add?" offered the participant a free word to express any thoughts or feelings that surfaced during the questionnaire. Two viewpoints are presented below:

- *"I have felt safe in Europe in general. However, when you have to travel alone in middle of the night, I'm a bit worried. As I was in Copenhagen, I asked the reception if it is safe to walk to the metro station at night alone, she said that it's okay, but of course I was still a bit suspicious, because you can never be sure."*

- *"As an european I feel like Europe feels like a safe haven, despite the war and some uncertainties. However, my family friends in Australia feel more insecure about coming to Europe. As the view from that side of the world is that the war is actively affecting 3/4 of Europe."*

8 Discussion

This final chapter is going to provide an overview of the conclusions and discuss the main findings of the research reflecting on the theoretical framework of this thesis. It is going to present the answers to the research questions, which were the following: 1) Which factors affect the perceived safety of solo female travellers, 2) Which sources do female travellers rely on when assessing the safety of a destination, and 3) What is the perception of the safety of European countries as travel destinations? Additionally, the chapter discusses the reliability and validity of the thesis. Finally, self-assessment and suggestions for further research are made.

The results of the questionnaire suggest that the perceived safety of female travellers is affected by a combination of factors. The results show a link between travel experience and feelings of safety. It is in alignment with the theoretical framework, affirming that feelings of familiarity may influence one's safety perceptions. Respondents with more travel experience and extensive travel background seem to have a higher confidence in travelling in Europe. Likewise, the findings indicate that a singular negative event during travel may have a notable impact on the safety perception of that specific area.

The threat of terrorism, natural disasters, and serious crimes such as homicide have the most negative impact on women's perception of the safety of a destination. Also, language barriers were a concern, however, the influence of it in relation to more serious factors, is very small. Additionally, it can be concluded that past negative incidents related to travel make females more aware of possible safety risks, but not necessarily cause feelings of overall safety.

Based on the results, females' most preferred source for assessing the safety of a destination is through word of mouth (WoM), and similarly most valued information sources are family members or friends. Indicating that females may often make safety perceptions based on the information derived from close relationships. Nonetheless, the results do show that news is still a considerable information source for safety for many individuals.

The questionnaire results reveal that there are differences in how different parts of Europe are seen in terms of safety. Especially prevalent safety concerns are associated with Eastern European destinations. These concerns seem far-reaching, embodying various factors such as political instability and women's place in society in certain countries. Whereas Northern Europe is perceived as the safest among the respondents.

The results also show that pickpocketing and harassment are a reason for concern in Europe. Female travellers would take various safety precautions whilst travelling alone in Europe. The

majority of women would avoid walking alone in the dark hours, and feel the need to share their location, secure their valuables, and familiarize themselves with the cultural norms to protect themselves from possible safety risks. Also, travel insurance is commonly acquired by solo female travelers. However, it was emphasized by a few respondents that the same precautions are always taken when travelling solo, despite the destination country.

Finally, to answer the main research question of this thesis of the impact of the perceived safety of European countries on travel decisions, it is apparent that safety perceptions play an important role in solo female travellers travel decisions. Respondents rated the destination's safety to influence their travel decision with an average of 7,4. Together with other data collected, it can be settled that the impact of the perceived safety of European countries on travel decisions is high.

It can also be noted that within a demographic group, solo female travellers have similarities. They are quite aware of the safety environment in Europe, and women would consciously avoid countries they perceive as a threat to their safety. Still, many European countries are perceived as rather safe in comparison to many other countries, and thus female's travel decision to Europe is not entirely dependent on its perceived safety. As Carvalho (2022, 18) states, safety concerns have an indirect impact on the travel decision.

Based on the results from the questionnaire, many women would go solo travelling to Europe, but the vast majority would prepare themselves for possible risks by taking safety precautions. In line with the literature, it can be summed up that safety perceptions are based on feeling, and they can vary significantly from one another making it impossible to gather excellent results, lacking any variables.

8.1   Reliability and validity of the study

Reliability and validity are crucial factors of any research. Reliability indicates how accurately and repeatedly used metric assesses the desired phenomenon, while validity refers to how effectively the used method evaluates the phenomenon that is being measured (Tilastokeskus s.a). Throughout the research journey, emphasis should be placed on its ethical aspects, from initial data collection to its eventual disposal. From an individual's perspective, it is essential that responding is voluntary and that their information remains confidential. Should the authors always keep in mind their power position conducting research. (Vilkka, 2021)

The results of this thesis were presented honestly in their original form, and preserving the anonymity of the respondents was a priority throughout the research. In the preface of the questionnaire, the participants were informed about its anonymity. No personal data was saved or recorded. The research is possible to repeat at any point in any given time, as both the

methodology used is in line with the literature and questionnaire form is presented in the appendix 1. However, given the multifaceted nature of this topic, additional focus should be directed in the creation of the questionnaire.

The aim of this thesis was accomplished, despite having a few limitations. For the scope of this research, the initial aim was to gain between150—300 responses, but the final number of responses gained was 92. It could be argued that the sample size was rather small. Most of the respondents were from Finland, with the biggest age group being 25—35 years old. Due to the inability to provide a higher level of diversity, the results cannot be generalized to all female solo travelers. Thereby, the results are more accurate to understand the safety perceptions of Finnish female travelers only.

The quantitative method proved to be an effective way to gather needed information regarding the research problem. With the questionnaire, the factors affecting female's safety perceptions were explored, different sources for safety assessment were sought through, while common safety concerns related to European destinations were examined. The questionnaire was tested before publishing, and the questions were made simple and clear for the respondents. Yet, due to the questionnaire being in English, and the majority of respondents were from Finland, possible language barriers may have influenced the quality of responses. Despite English being a commonly used language in Finland, it may have a minor impact on reliability. A higher number of respondents, with varying nationalities, could have increased the reliability and validity of this research significantly.

8.2 Further research

Taking into consideration the overall situation in Europe, the European perspective was an interesting viewpoint to start with, however, it certainly provides a scope for further research. During this research process, there have been many realizations, and further research ideas have risen. It would be interesting to conduct and compare the results from male travelers' perspective to get a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Also research on concerns of gender equality in travel could be an interesting topic, which could surely be researched for a full thesis.

This type of research could benefit more from focusing only on one part of Europe, e.g., Northern Europe, which could give more detailed results. It was also brought up in the questionnaire that each country has unsafe areas, and therefore, it would be worthwhile to research more on certain countries and the distinction between different areas of it. Additionally, instead of a quantitative method, this research could benefit from a qualitative method as well. Finally, due to social media

being increasingly popular source, further research could focus on social media's effect on safety perceptions among newer generations such as generation Z.

8.3   Self- evaluation

Reflecting on this whole thesis process, from the planning phases to analyzing the results, has been a very educational journey for me. In the past months, I have not only gained an understanding of the topic but also learned the various aspects needed to conduct research. Hence, leading me to evaluate my own learnings.

Quite early in the process of planning this thesis, I knew I wanted to write about safety perceptions, as I was interested in their psychological attributes. While considering the current situation in Europe, my interest towards European safety situation arose. Yet, for the length of a typical bachelor's degree thesis, it would have been too much to cover, e.g., all safety concerns existing in Europe. Thus, a simplified perspective of Europe and possible safety issues were chosen to get on an overall image. Other relevant safety concerns, such as health issues were left out due to an attempt to switch the focus away from diseases such as COVID-19, and rather focus on exploring general safety perceptions.

The topic of my thesis was timely and meaningful considering the growing solo female travel trend. However, the topic was rather broad, and the entire process would have been a lot easier by narrowing it down more. The large scope of the study engendered me to get sidetracked quite a few times, making it difficult to draw lines and find relevant information from the extensive spectrum of information. Thereby, at times I struggled to stay on my schedule, and better time management would have been beneficial. Writing the theoretical framework was very time-consuming for me, and only afterward did I come to many realizations. I feel that the questionnaire should have been more thoroughly planned as well, as the phase of analyzing the results was rather inconvenient.

However, I feel that I accomplished the aims of this study, despite the limitations mentioned. I have learned a lot during this process, both about myself and about the researched topic. It taught me profound resilience and information search skills, and last but not least, it gave me the skills to conduct research. Writing has never been my strength, and looking back now, I feel as though I have been through a learning curve during this process. I am positive that these learnings will be beneficial for me in the future. Moreover, the process has sparked my interest to do more research on this topic later in my possible further studies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Questionnaire form

The perceived safety of European destinations from the perspective of solo female travellers

Hi! My name is Elisa and I am in my final year of hospitality and tourism studies at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. This research is a part of my thesis, which is done to complete my bachelor's degree. The purpose of this study is to find out, what is the perceived safety of European countries from the perspective of solo female travellers and what is the impact of it on their travel decision.

The questionnaire is voluntary and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

Note! The following questionnaire is aimed at female travellers from all around the world of all ages. No prior solo travel experience is needed.

Thank you for your input!

Backround details

1. How old are you? *

○ Less than 25 years old

○ 25-35 years old

○ 36-45 years old

○ 46-55 years old

○ Over 55 years old

2. What is your nationality?

Solo travel experience

3. Have you ever travelled alone?

(The definition of travel by UNWTO is described as the activity of travellers, who move between different geographic locations for any purpose and any duration) *
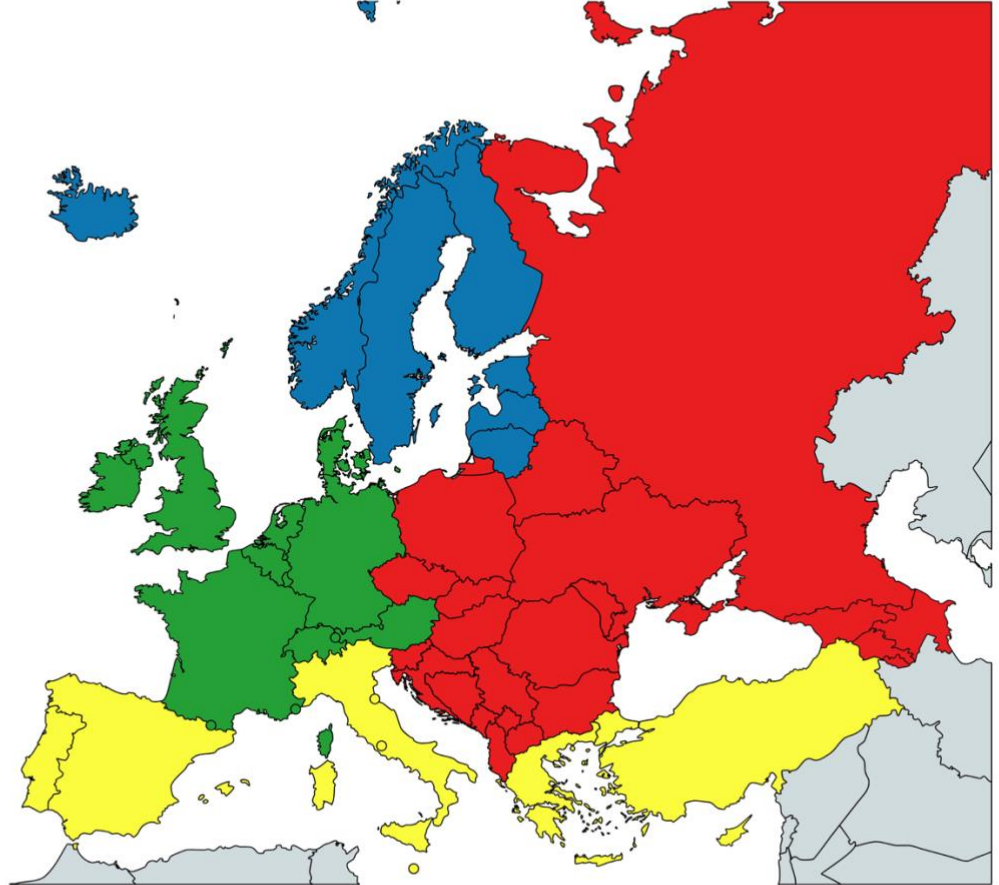
◯ Yes
◯ No

4. Do you generally prefer: *

◯ Always travelling alone
◯ Mostly travelling alone
◯ Travelling alone and with others equally
◯ Mostly travelling with others
◯ Always travelling with others

Perception of Europe

5. On a scale from 1 (very unsafe) to 5 (very safe), how safe do you view the following parts of Europe? *

	1	2	3	4	5
Central and Eastern Europe (in red)	O	O	O	O	O
Northern Europe (in blue)	O	O	O	O	O
Southern Europe (in yellow)	O	O	O	O	O
Western Europe (in green)	O	O	O	O	O

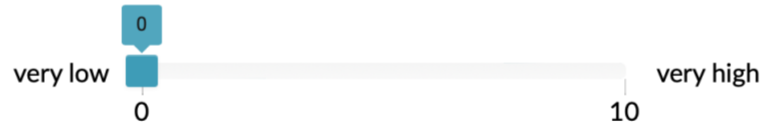## 6. Are there countries in Europe you wouldn't consider travelling alone? (excluding war zones) *

O No, why? [   ]

O Yes, why? [   ]

Safety assesment

7. On a scale from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high), rate how much the perceived safety of a destination affects your travel decision *

very low   0   very high

0   10

8. On a scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), rate which aspects of a travel destination negatively affect your feeling of safety the most *

	1	2	3	4	5
Petty crimes (e.g. pickpocketing)	○	○	○	○	○
Serious crimes (e.g. homicide)	○	○	○	○	○
Threat of terrorism	○	○	○	○	○
Natural disasters	○	○	○	○	○
Language or cultural barriers	○	○	○	○	○
Political stability	○	○	○	○	○

9. Have you ever experienced safety worries while travelling, and if so, has it influenced your perception of safety regarding future travel in Europe? *

○ Yes, how?

○ No, would you like to explain?

10. On a scale from 1 to 5, rate which precautions you would take if you had to travel alone in Europe:

Sharing your location with someone: *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

11. Securing valuable items e.g., in a hotel safe, keeping a small pouch under the shirt for money, phone, etc. *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

12. Avoiding walking alone in the dark *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	O	O	O	O	O	Always

13. Trying to blend in with local people to not draw any unwanted attention *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	O	O	O	O	O	Always

14. Learning useful phrases in local language *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	O	O	O	O	O	Always

15. Familiarizing yourself with cultural norms *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	O	O	O	O	O	Always

16. Getting a travel insurance *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	O	O	O	O	O	Always

17. Signing up for a travel registration/notification (answer only, if available in your country) *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	○	○	○	○	○	Always

Travel decision-making

18. Before choosing a destination, which of the following sources for safety do you normally check? *

☐ Official governmental websites (e.g. Ministry for Foreign Affairs)

☐ Social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc.)

☐ TV, radio

☐ Travel blogs and forums (e.g. Lonelyplanet)

☐ Travel websites (e.g. TripAdvisor)

☐ News

☐ Word of mouth (asking from friends, family, etc.)

☐ Other? [   ]

☐ I don't check

19. How much do you place value on the following sources regarding destination's safety, on a scale from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much)?

	1	2	3	4	5
Recommendations from friends and family	○	○	○	○	○
News and media	○	○	○	○	○
Social media	○	○	○	○	○

20. Have you ever cancelled a trip to Europe due to safety concerns? *

○ Yes, would you like to explain? [   ]

○ No [   ]

21. Anything else you would like to add?

[   ]