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Literature Review: In What Ways do Vulnerable Travelers Use Social Media to Plan Safe Travel?

1. Black Travelers

A person's identity has the potential to subject them to harm when they travel. This has been historically true for Black American travelers, who "confronted considerable humiliation and harassment when traveling" throughout the Jim Crow era (Alderman 13). In response, Victor Hugo Green published *The Negro Motorists' Green Book* in 1936 to provide Black travelers with a safe travel guide in the United States. It included crucial travel resources such as safe hotels, rest stops, restaurants, and insights in different cities, and later expanded to include international travel resources. Since then, it has ceased publication but remained a part of modern popular culture in film, television, documentaries, and podcasts (Bosley 13). Black travelers continue to express that they have negative travel experiences due to their race, which are embedded in the vulnerability, anxiety, and worry felt about traveling while Black, as documented by Dillette et al. (1363). This legacy of experiencing prejudice while traveling has not deterred Black travelers from traveling, but "Black people have shown resistance and resilience to the racism and discrimination by continuing to travel and create a space and community for themselves. They have shown their resilience by creating their own travel agencies, organizations, and publications" (Dillette et al. 1358). Though the mediated nature of safe travel planning is historically clear, there is little research that explores the ways digital and social media is used in travel planning.

2. Women Travelers

Douglas and Barrett recognize solo travel as a gendered phenomenon (765). They quote a 2014 report on Criminal Victimization by Truman and Lynn to state that the prevalence of

violent victimization does not differ for men and women (qtd. in Douglass and Barrett 767) to suggest that constraints to women's independent travel are a cultural construction of women as more vulnerable to bodily harm than men. This, however, contrasts with the studies by Heimtun and Seow and Brown, who examine women's and men's solo travel experiences, revealing women's heightened concerns regarding safety, as well as their more frequent reports of negative experiences like harassment (qtd. in Douglas and Barrett 765). Whether there is a perceived or real threat to women's safety, women's concern for safety while traveling is real, and their concern informs their travel planning methods. This requires a critical look at how women use media to navigate the perceived dangers of solo travel.

3. LGBTQ+ Travelers

The Damron Men's Travel Guide, a travel guide aimed primarily at gay men, and *The Damron Women's Traveler*, which targets lesbian women, are guidebooks that have been described as way-finding tools that have helped their readers safely navigate their communities with practical information and resources. Though these guides were not the first of their kind, their longstanding commercial success and persistence to present are important to note, as it implies that it was necessary when it was published in 1964 and still necessary today.

Though Knopp and Brown explored *The Damron Guides* as created spatial imaginaries, they do not explain why these alternate spacial imaginaries were necessary to create in the first place, which would point to further research on the travel constraints of LGBTQ+ travelers throughout history and the ways that they used media such as *The Damron Guides* to aid in their safe travel planning. That being said, the dangers that deem LGBTQ+ travelers vulnerable are explored in part by Currah and Mulqueen, who examine the securitizing of transgender travelers' bodies as they go through airport security. Currah and Mulqueen establish the vulnerability of the transgender identity in the context of travel by explaining that "when an individual's cultural legibility is not affirmed by their identity papers, even everyday quotidian transactions become moments of vulnerability" in reference to the conflicts that arise when a transgender person's identity papers do not denote the gender that their appearance may be perceived as by security agents (561). Further, they explain the threat of experiencing transphobia at the airport (Currah and Mulqueen 564-565). This threat, which is specific to the transgender experience, is underexplored and presents further questions about what other unique travel experiences exist for transgender travelers.

Bosley notes that the U.S. Department of State and National Center for Transgender Equality offer travel guides and warnings to LGBTQI+ travelers about certain destinations that are not “queer-friendly” (Bosley 22). Though this differs from media like *The Green Book* and *The Damron Guides*, which were created by and for individuals in their respective communities, it would also be conducive to analyzing the use of mediated travel guidance made with specific identities from government actors.

Knopp and Brown also note that “the obvious danger (with *The Damron Guides*) is the perpetuation of the guides’ own racist, sexist, classist, ableist and ‘Western’ homonormative imagination” (Knopp and Brown 1385) which highlights how identifying with one marginalized identity does not exempt one from perpetuating the systems that deem others vulnerable as well and furthers the need for the study of intersectional experiences. For example, after analyzing the codes used to describe different venues or locations, Knopp and Brown noticed that references for race or ethnicity were not included until 1970 and neither guide included codes for gender non-conforming people until 1997 (1389). This observation is vital to understanding the gap in the literature of how nonbinary people may have used travel media that was aimed at others in the LGBTQ+ community (whether intended for their use or not) as they made travel decisions about safety.

4. Intersectionality

There is little data on the mediated travel planning or experience of vulnerable travelers, and it is important to note that even less information is available about the experiences that exist at the intersection of race and gender. While Dillette et al. mention that the #TravelingWhileBlack hashtag was used by people who expressed frustration with the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, being able-bodied, etc. while traveling (1365), they did not discuss further how the intersections of these identities create a unique need for travel resources that are mindful of their unique experiences.

Willis’ study of African-American female college students’ experience with macro-aggressions while studying abroad found that these Black women experienced negative racially motivated interactions, which were evidence of gendered racism (218-219). This study is one of the few that emphasize the importance of intersectionality of social constructs such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and race in travel; and, how they are inextricably linked (Willis 209). Willis’ research at the intersection of so many vulnerable identities in the context of

international travel can be furthered by examining how these experiences are mediated and how they inform future travel decisions.

Though the vulnerability that exists in the intersection of race and gender is questioned here, there are a plethora of vulnerable identities that exist in addition to race and gender, including (dis)ability, class, religion, ethnicity, body type, and more. The travelers at the intersection of these identities experience vulnerability to harm, which makes safety a crucial aspect of their travel planning process.

5. Mediation of Travel Planning: WOM to eWOM

Word of Mouth (WOM) is defined by Katz and Lazarsfeld as “the exchanging of marketing information between consumers in such a way that it plays a fundamental role in shaping their behavior and in changing attitudes toward products and services” (qtd. in Huete-Alcocer 1). Both *The Negro Motorists’ Green Book* and *The Damron Guides* are examples of physical print media manifestations of Word of Mouth that was used for travel planning by vulnerable travelers, and Knopp and Brown raise the unexplored question of how these guides may have functioned similarly for their respective audiences (1392). Just as the digital age ushered in new ways of communicating, it evolved how people in marginalized communities shared travel information, and evolved the use of print media for travel planning into digital media. The transition of WOM communication to the online sphere has become known as electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) (Yang 93), and has become influential in the tourism industry as presented by Sotiriadis and Van Zyl (qtd. in Huete-Alcocer 2). While Huete-Alcocer mentions the high-risk nature of tourism decisions, they do not mention the even higher-risk nature of tourism decisions for vulnerable travelers.

Coupled with the phenomena that Carter observed that “Black travelers are more likely (than White travelers) to visit destinations solely based on the recommendations from family and friends” (qtd. in Dilletta 1358), and Poopale and Hafizah’s interviews with Muslim women travelers, who “share their experiences about their travel, prayer facilities, halal eatery or attractions to help other Muslim women or any traveller in general to make a more informed decision on their travels” (314), they can inform research that explores the ways that travel influencers in marginalized communities on social media such as TikTok and Instagram (Bosley 15-16) have influenced other vulnerable travelers’ travel decisions. Bosley, who identifies as a Black queer person, describes frequently looking to “Black queer travelers to provide

recommendations for cities or countries that offer safe LGBTQ+ spaces for myself' (Bosley 18). Douglas and Barrett also suggest further research on the greater prevalence of articles guiding solo women than men travelers (782), suggesting that women may seek out Word of Mouth travel advice more often and poses the question of where they seek this information online.

Dillette et al. provide a foundation for researching the sharing of both positive and negative Black travel experiences on social media applications, such as Twitter, using the hashtag #TravelingWhileBlack. Their research revealed that Black travelers also used this hashtag to share knowledge gained from traveling with other Black travelers (1363) and argue for the creation of a current edition of the *Green Book* (1365). This sets the stage for further research of how Black travelers are seeking out advice and insight from fellow Black travelers using social media. Because their data was limited to Twitter users who decided to use the #TravelingWhiteBlack hashtag, and there was no demographic data available for these users, future research could include more specific case studies where qualitative data can be collected directly from travelers who can answer specific questions about their use of social media in the travel planning process. Additionally, while limited, the analysis of Twitter hashtags is still valuable in observing mediated travel planning and experiences, and the same approach can be applied to other hashtags, such as #viajosola (I travel alone in Spanish), which was used for sharing solo travel narratives (Douglas and Barrett 782).

The conversation of "remediating" *The Negro Motorists' Green Book*, describing the process of how one medium of our culture can reform or improve another (Bosley 20), has been expressed in various works such as in Dillette et al. (1365) and Bosley, who has proposed an LGBTQ+ friendly mobile phone application version of *The Green Book* (20). The demand for a remediated, LGBTQ+ friendly *Green Book* also raises further questions about the most effective method of creating a mediated safe travel guide for vulnerable travelers that centers intersectionality.

An important aspect of the research by Dillette et al. is the application of the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), whose foundation "begins with the idea that that race and racism are endemic and permanent rather than a marginal factor in defining and explaining the lived experiences of individuals, therefore, racism looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture" (qtd. in Dillette et al. 1360) as stated by Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings. Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings also explained that CRT suggested that the experiences of people of color

be shared in their own voices (qtd. in Dillette et al. 1360), which makes CRT critical to researching how vulnerable travelers describe their use of social media to plan safe travel experiences.

The prejudiced experiences of vulnerable travelers remain prevalent today when navigating a tourism industry that “nationally and internationally, has traditionally adopted a White male gaze that shrouds experiences of marginalized groups and perpetuates racial stereotypes” (Alderman 2013). Though the occurrences of prejudice during vulnerable travel experiences at the intersection of race and gender is documented in modern digital media including social media networks like Twitter, there is a lack of research about how vulnerable travelers use various social media to plan their travel with safety in mind, which leads to the following research question: In what ways do vulnerable travelers use social media to plan safe travel?

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