Gender Differences in ‘Blogging’ Tourism Activities: A Netnography of Travelers on Penang Island, Malaysia

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Abstract: Travel experience has been enriched especially with the rise of technology among travelers. There are many medium available online to express the travelers’ experiences while they were in their vacation. It has become a necessity for people to capture their holiday by blogging about them and using features such as geo-tag in social media. The Internet is viewed as an open context for social interactions in which practices, meanings and identities are intermingled. This paper is an exploration of travelers’ experiences by using Netnography approach. This approach is used to investigate how images have been carefully chosen by travelers and how ‘tourist gazes’ and their touring experiences are transformed into narratives in blog writing. By employing this observation, such virtual field work has enabled the Internet to be conceptualized as both culture and context for social interaction. The aim of this paper is to explore the narratives and images about Penang Island that travelers have reported on their touristic experiences in their blogs and how gender can influence the way experiences were written. Ten travel blog narratives published by five male and female travelers to Penang were selected for this study. The results revealed two major findings that there are gender differences in terms of what the female and male tourists’ blogged about. While female bloggers tend to focus on features of food and landscape, male bloggers were mostly blog about their reviews of places they visited. Thus, the findings may provide useful information for local tourism industry, especially in transforming the whole experience of holiday with the presence of such advance technology.

Key words: Netnography · Tourist experience · Blogging · Gender analysis · Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

There is an interesting rise of technology usage while travelling. Many people use the internet to tell families and friends, or even to the public about their travelling experiences. Tourists digitalized stories and images that can be read and shared by others. In this case, ‘tourist gaze’ that become the subject of gazing by tourist has become the ‘gaze’ of on-line communities when their touristic experiences are posted online (through blogging). Studies have shown how social media are becoming an essential for tourists while travelling to new destinations [1] particularly blog that are used to capture special moments. In the context of tourism, there are many medium available online that is used to express tourists’ experiences during vacation. Nowadays it has become a necessity for people to capture their holiday by blogging about their tourism experiences by using features such as geo-tag in social media. There are numerous number of websites dedicated specially for different purposes; such as Swarm to check-in at favorite hotspots, Instagram to post vacation pictures, Twitter to lively update any travel activities and of course Facebook as the most famous social media has become the favorite platform for youngsters to share their journey with friends and families. It is argued that men and women want different things from a tourism experience and women are said to be looking for different things in tourism because they are ‘getting away from’ different things in the home environment [2]. In fact, tourist product can be evaluated differently based on gender [3]. There are substantial studies conducted on travel blogging but not much has been focused on gender differences in how touristic experiences are reported in the blogs. Therefore, this
paper attempts to investigate how tourist gaze is transformed into narratives and how similar tourist site or products that are being gazed by male and female travelers can be described differently in the blogs.

**Literature Review**

**Gender, Tourist Gaze and Tourist Experiences:** The term ‘tourist gaze’ was introduced by Urry [4] and according to Urry, tourist gaze is socially constructed and systemized. In this case, tourist will be the spectator of their touring environment and landscapes that are often different from the tourist’s everyday experiences [5]. The tourist gaze is usually constructed and shaped by those involved in tourism industry including local agencies and tourism stakeholders. This according to him will lead to what is called as ‘specialization of place’ [4] that eventually will encourage this process of image-making and tourist site-making by tourist industry [6]. How do tourist gaze and gender related? As Kinnaird and Hall [7] argue, tourism processes are also gendered in their construction, presentation and consumption. In terms of tourist experience, women and men experience holidays differently with women often being more influenced by relations with vacation companions and their responsibility for family members than are men [8]. Study by Aitchison and Reeves [9] argue that tourist spaces are gendered and a woman’s access to leisure through tourism is limited by her inferior position within the larger patriarchal society. While study by Small [10] on holiday memories shows that age also influences the tourist gaze, especially for children.

“Today everything exists to end in a photograph.”

(Sontag, [11]:24)

The quote above has accurately mentioned how the culture of taking pictures has developed to a new level. Tourists are more likely to photograph what they see and like. Urry [4] has noted how in different societies and especially within different social groups, the tourist gaze has changed and developed. While most of the time the tourist gaze is directed to features of landscapes and townscape which separate them off from everyday experience, people in recent years have developed a sense of lingering to everyday activities as well while consuming the gaze. For example, pictures of food were taken before they eat as it is a social norm nowadays to post pictures of beautifully created dish to the social media. The rise of technology has once again alter how do we see everyday experience that seems ordinary, to some occasion that people with smart phones has managed to turn into something extraordinary. Not only travelling, but also the tradition of writing about travel trips has a long tradition [12]. According to Thurm [13], the practice of writing down one’s travel experience as a way to justify their trip by giving information to family members at home. Tourists often are likely to express, compare and to evaluate their different experiences [14].

**Netnography and Tourist Experiences:** Research on netnography and tourist experiences are rather limited particularly in Malaysia. However, in general, substantial research has carried out by using netnography as its main methodology. Study by Mkono [15] in the aspect of food tourism shows how netnography is used to explore tourists’ self-interpretation of the Other as represented in food based on tourist reviews on two cultural restaurants. He argues that netnography offers a novel approach that could reveal tourists’ subjective realities that are provided more candidly in comparison to traditional qualitative methods. Meanwhile study by Chandralal et al. [16] on memorable Tourist Experiences (MTEs) found that bloggers often report positives MTEs in their experiential narratives that relates to various experiential theme including local people, life and culture, personally significant experiences and shared experiences. Others study tourists experience authenticity [17] while Bosangit et al. [18] exploring travel blogs for consumer narrative analysis. In Malaysia, study by Ab Rahman et al. [19] used netnography to study how tourism experiences are constructed and packaged. Their study revealed that experiences is an on-going process, continuously changing and altering during pre, on-site and post visit of tourist experiences. However, not much has been written on how netnography has been used to study gender influence the way tourist gaze is transformed into narratives. Therefore this paper will used gender lens to investigate how the same tourist site or products that are being gazed by male and female travelers can be described differently in the blogs.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In order to investigate the intricate qualitative aspects of the tourism experiences and practices among young travelers in Penang areas, a netnographic interpretive methodology was used. Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet is a new qualitative type of
research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities which have emerged through computer-mediated communications [20]. While Netnography is a form of ethnographic research that has been adapted to include an understanding of the influence of the Internet on contemporary social worlds, it has been extended to the analysis of blogs within the context of tourism. Thus, the Internet has become a fieldwork site in its own right.

The main characteristic of social media is that they enhance collaboration and sharing of information online because they are built around software which makes it possible for individuals to communicate and form communities using their computers [21]. Penang Island was chosen as the location because recently, it has grown into a city where “art lovers” and new trends were rising rapidly. The establishment of many new cafes and drawing of street arts have successfully attracted youngsters to visit Penang and blogged about their experiences.

The Selection of Blogs: We have chosen ten blogs entries, with five men and five women authorship in order to make a comparative study of how these travelers consume their travel experiences through social media. Prior to selecting these blogs, a general analysis was done in order to identify the keywords that were used by travelers to upload their travelling posts only. Using an application from Instagram Web Analysis, we managed to identify the most popular keywords on travels experience. Using the keywords, we head to Google Search to search for the blog and the process of identifying bloggers who had posted on the subject of Penang Island. The keywords or “hashtag” that were used in the search are #penangtravelogue, #penangtrip #penangstreetart and #penangfood. The function of these “hashtag” is to classify or group together the activities or places visited by the travelers and it has become an accessible content for public. Through these observations on the net, content analysis is used to expedite the coding & analysis of data [20].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to start the “thick description”, several thematic categories are identified in order to analyse the narratives. The similar categories will enable the data analysis content to be conducted through a systematic manner as Kozinets [20] has suggested. The netnographer must contextualize the online data as analysis is commencing, in which it often proven to be more challenging in the online context of “netnography” [20]. By taking this into consideration, the study decided to categorize the analysis in several categories; food experiences, local heritage, overall experience to Penang and the sensation of street art along Georgetown area.

Food Experiences: Respondents have all mentioned these categories in their posts and therefore it has become one of the main category identified. Both male and female bloggers agree to the point that their main motivation to visit Penang Island was to experience its food and delicacy. Given the centrality of food and dining culture in Malaysia, Penang is famous for its food culture. The selections of food to be published by these bloggers have affected the popularity of the stall/restaurant mentioned. Geo-tag features have enabled the blogger to share the location of the food stall and thus when readers searched for certain keywords online, their blogs which had “tagged” the location will appear among the search list. The two-way interaction between reader and blogger is how the blog get traffics. Many of the bloggers recommend similar food stall to be visited in Penang Island. Generally, foods that were mentioned are famous food sold at the hawker stall. Apart from that, coffee culture also has become increasingly well-known among youngsters who visited Penang Island, especially in Georgetown area. Based from the observation of the blogs, female bloggers tend to upload and explicitly explain each one of the food and drinks they ordered at every location while male bloggers were most likely to upload a bunch of photos without giving any details explanation of the foods. This shows that female bloggers were more passionate about the food that they were having and publishing that ‘gastronomic experience’ was one way to influence their blog audience. Instead of explaining the taste of the foods, male bloggers tend to publish photos that showed the food they were having. They did not narrate about the dining experience as detail as female bloggers did. However, almost all blog published similar kinds of photos on food such as famous fried noodle, local roti canai and the most popular food in Penang, nasikandar.

Local Heritage: Beside the uniqueness of Penang’s food, tourists also are attracted to visit the Island because of the abundance of local heritage in the city. Digitalized tourist content in blogs and social media analyses how
participative information technology and tourist's reviews of heritage sites contribute to the tourism heritage experience. From these observations, it enables the researcher to examine how social media and user generated content contribute to an understanding of the consumption of heritage sites and discusses new forms of technologically mediated authenticity in tourism. With the inscription of George Town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2008, much attention has been paid to its heritage sites. Based on the data analysis of the ten blogs, visiting local heritage this has become one of the must-do activities when they were in Penang Island. However, most of the respondents were most likely to visit heritage sites that have been altered to their preferences. It is revealed from the analysis that male bloggers were more interested to visit heritage sites while female bloggers narrate more on their visit to religious sites or historical buildings such as Fort Cornwallis, Queen Victoria Clock Tower. Female bloggers were more likely to upload several photos while male bloggers spent some time in narrating the historical backgrounds of places they visited. This shows that male have more interest in the historical elements of Penang Island than female authors. In this case, both male and female respondents have the same access to similar tourist sites but choices of tourists’ site always have gender influence. This is in line with previous research suggesting that travel preferences are different for men and women where men are traditionally looking for action and adventure while women are more likely to be searching for cultural and educational experiences with security being a priority [21].

**Overall experience to Penang:** A female blogger of 3.5k followers, who was travelling with her male friends. She described her travel to Penang as “enjoyable, finally able to release all the work stress” and concluded by saying she was “exhausted but happy”. These expressions show that female tend to use travelling as an escapade from ordinary life, in which they embarked into the “new” daily routine for several days. Another male blogger of 2.8k followers on the other hand, described his experiences to Penang Island as a “24 hour food hunting”, He explained that that was the first experience of doing food hunting in Penang and would be back for more visit in Penang in the near future. In terms of souvenirs and handcraft, female bloggers then to publish more photos on souvenirs and anything that is viewed ‘beautiful’ by them. Another female blogger who has 135k followers was more likely to upload several photos of herself with various small souvenirs such as elephant ceramic or anything colourful such as colourful umbrella. She described all the products shown as ‘cute and colourful’ and encouraged her reader to buy and keep it as a sentimental value. In the tourism literature tourism remembrances appear to have more psychological importance for women than for men and the majority of souvenir purchases are made by women [22]. The netnographic analysis revealed the significant impact of narration published by these respondents to influence other readers especially their followers. These bloggers have indirectly served their role as unofficial tourist guide to their own followers. Through the sharing of stories and information, it has becomes a way of interaction between authors and readers. The potential visitors to Penang were most likely to be attracted to visit the Island after they have read the posts by these bloggers. The travelogue posted can sometimes leave quite a big impact to Tourism Industry in Penang Island as some of these blog authors have hundreds, or even thousands or readers who enjoy surfing through their blogs.

**Sensation of Street Art:** Another new sensation that is rising to be one of the top reasons why tourists choose to visit Penang is the emergence of street art all over the city. Street art is visual art created in public locations, usually consisted of unsanctioned artwork executed outside of the context of traditional art exhibition. In Penang, the collection of street art all over the city mimicked the “life in the city and the wrought-iron caricatures with anecdotal descriptions of the streets that they adorn” (extracted from Street Art’s brochure, Tourism Penang). Tourists, local or foreign enjoyed this newest addition to the city and many have shown an effort to snap pictures with the art and upload them online for friends and families to see. In terms of activities done in Penang Island, all ten blogs had narrated extensively about their experiences of visiting “Street Art” along Georgetown area. Penang Street Art has in the past few years enhanced its appeal as a tourist destination. This began with “Marking Georgetown” in 2009, in which it has brought the telling of street and social history through the use of caricatures. Even though many of the bloggers who came and visited those arts have little or zero knowledge about the history behind the paintings, they seem to enjoy taking pictures and trying to understand what the meaning of those paintings/arts. Male authors seem to upload the photo of “Street Art” without having any human subject in it, or in other words they do not pose together in the photo. However, it is different for
female authors. Their blogs were filled with photos of the “Street Art” including themselves with their friend together in the photo. Therefore, there is quite a disparity in what is chosen to be featured in blogs of these male and female authors.

CONCLUSION

This case study of tourist experiences of traveler to Penang has illustrated the importance gender differences in characterizing a particular form of tourism experiences. Thus, the investigation into the blogs of travelers to Penang Island mirrored the themes of famous cultures and influence of technology that enable tourists to share travelling experiences. The comparative analysis of both male and female authors in their travelogue has shown how both genders differ in some aspects, in which they focused on different things while travelling. Due to the easy access of information available on these blogs, it has significantly directed the tourist gaze to what have been hyped on in these blogs. Readers were most likely to be eager to try on what is suggested by the authors in the blogs themselves, thus these authors act like a virtual tourist guide. It has also transformed the need to consult travel agency before going for a vacation in past years. Now, due to the free information, as well as free reviews provided on the net, tourists are keen to consult blog posts rather than paying high price to know more about the place they about to visit. Social media are now avenues for people to evaluate and express their experiences of authenticity at heritage sites.

REFERENCES


