Writings on the Wall: Empowering Travel Blog Hers in Malaysia

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Abstract: Blogs or writings on the virtual wall are observed as a technology that uses a cost-free writing space to convey ones words and experiences with no specified skills. Experiences are built by matching the effect of traveler's culture and language, values and beliefs. Travel blog writings are narratives that provide a rich source of knowledge about the traveler's significance find through travelling, revealing the impression of travel in their life. This paper explores the growing female travel bloggers in Malaysia with strong self -sense of confidence and assertive voice while they develop a deep sense of positively impacting their reader's knowledge and decision-making. Apart from just being a regular traveler, these women take it a step further by sharing, informing and helping others to make travel decisions through their blogs. The travel blogs become a representation of female liberation and empowerment in the world of travel and technology which is mainly structured by men. The blog descriptions, narratives, comments and posted images owned by ten Malaysian female travelers substantiates that travel blogs extend a strong sense of empowerment among the bloggers by building their sense of control and efficacy while understanding and relating to their social community. Women, in this case Malaysian females are becoming more liberated as technologies such as blogs become their outlet for voices and choices to be heard. The empowered blog authors go beyond just being a female who travels and choose to inspire others through their writings on the virtual world.

Key words: Blogging · Travel · Women · Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Of late the act of sharing travel experiences online during or after a trip has become a trend. One of which is sharing detailed travel chronologies supported by images on virtual walls known as blogs. Blogs are regularly updated writings on the virtual wall [1, 2] that have emerged as an outlet for women's voices and choices to be heard. It is a form of liberation for women where the space embodies liberation to depict one's personal feeling shared with other community or individuals with similar interests. What used to be personal writings in pages of a typical hardcover diary have now become writings on virtual walls shared among fellow readers forging a new form of cyber social contract [3]. Blogs are deemed to empower and create an opportunity for women to feel good about themselves while inspiring others.

Despite the emerging anthropological literature on interest in new media and internet phenomena [4, 5], there have been relatively few works on travel, technologies and gender within anthropology, particularly in the context of Malaysia. Discourses on empowerment and travel behaviour, segregated along gender lines in developing countries like Malaysia is largely amiss. This paper argues that female bloggers gain empowerment through touristic networking by breaking barriers and escaping the usual constraints. Knowing that the blogging space is mainly monopolized by male, the female travel bloggers use their know-how to de-gender travel blogs in Malaysia.

Malaysia is a developing multicultural country shaped by its strong foundationof cultural norms. There are 20.1 million active internet users in 2015, contrary to 1995 when only one in every one thousand Malaysians had access to the internet as reported by the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia [6]. Malaysian government has been an enthusiastic supporter of the internet technology when it first came to Malaysia back in 1987. By 1995 internet became more widely available nation wide. The country's broadband penetration rate in

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2015 of 72.2% shows Malaysians are heading towards a digital lifestyle. Respectively the Star newspaper in February 2007 reported that there are over 10, 000 blogs in Malaysia [3].

Access to interpersonal and social networks have significant positive effects on sustainability of internet usage among the Malaysian women [7]. Studies have also shown an increasing number of women from Western and Asian countries travelling alone, mostly as a result of a greater financial independence and democratisation of access to education [8, 9].Data from TripAdvisor in 2016 substantiates that Asian women are liberating themselves through exploring the world. Revenue from inbound and outbound travel in Malaysia also recorded RM80.1 billion and RM32.0 billion respectively in 2014 [10].

As the travel industry transforms with the emergence of participative social media, the experience of travel changes as well. According to [11] women have been actively engaged in constructing hybrid identities through their consumption of new media such as blogs. Blogging has become an addition in the travel trend for travellers to express or evaluate their personal travel experiences on the virtual space. It is a given that in travel world, blogs are juxtaposition between reference and revenue. The virtual walls made for writing and sharing come to be the new source of community and agency that helps women connect and communicate. Through blogs they are able to connect with fellow readers as they build network. Each blog posts represent authentic, raw and honest versions of truths from the bloggers' private encounters and the wall becomes an interactive channel that reflects the writer's personal voice expressing her thoughts to the world in her own style. The power of authentic expression is rare and effective as a form of dialogues between the readers and other bloggers forming greater connection between the bloggers and their readers in an intimate and private way [7]. Now, as many Malaysian women begin to embrace and actively engage in traveling and blogging, this paper seeks to explore how women pursuit writing travel blogs in Malaysia as a tool of empowerment and also seek to answer how through blogging, they empower themselves and others.

Literature Review
Women: Bloggingand Traveling: The development of blogs in the late 1990's progressed along the seamless online publishing tools that eased users to post content. Blog sites have become spaces where women challenge gendered traditions through post-structuralist online scripts that separate them from the male-centred discourse

[12]. The bloggers share their travel experiences where they develop a sense of positively impacting their reader. According to a study by [16], women are more likely to create lasting blogs than men. In fact, women seem to be relatively more expressive than men. Online narratives of women are more detailed with ample references. Blogging goes beyond writing blog posts. It displays the bloggers enthusiasm and passion for what they share.Survey by Microsoft MSN shows that blogging has moved into the mainstream in Malaysia, with women making up 64% of bloggers aged below 25 [7].

At the same time, the role of women has elevated to represent a solid and growing percentage of travellers [13] as women are becoming more independent and are more likely to undertake outdoor recreational activities such as travel [14]. In 2015, TripAdvisor surveyed 9, 181 female respondents globally and 431 female respondents in South-East Asia and reported that solo travel is on the rise with 48% of women in South-East Asia have travelled alone before, compared to 36% in 2014.The travel industry in Malaysia is also booming with many women actively choosing domestic or international gateways.The Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents wants the Malaysian government to studythis growing need of solo women travellers.

Rapid growth of travel and technology attracted academic disciplines such as anthropology to examineand understand the social practices and the emerging constructions of individual and collective identity. New media influences the access to be heardfor women while they negotiate the boundaries imposed on them by cultural and societal rules. Blogging is observed as an autodidactic skill that balances technology for those who want to speak and be heard using a cost-free writing space. Majority of the research focused on the travel behaviour of women without giving due attention to the causes and consequences of their travel behaviour. Women are recognized as an influential market segment [9][15] within the tourism industry and they are increasingly active in the participation and consumption of travel technologies such as travel blogs.

Travel Blogging as a Tool of Empowerment: If women believe they deserve leisure, then it is useful to describe how women can empower themselves through leisure [19]. Past studies [17, 20, 21, 22] gives evidence that blogging has great influence in empowering women all over the world. The communicative significance of blogging explored the conception of self-expression, personal window to empowerment and escape social restrictions.

Limited studies focused on travel blogs and its impact on women although travel blogging has reinforced the presence of women in public domains. Critical analysis is crucial to include cultural differences of women in constructing self-representation besides the role of travel blogs in creating opportunities for the voices to reach mass audiences as a result, becoming a growing source of travel information.

Previous studies in Malaysia posit that blog has become a new platform of interaction and empowerment that enabled the constructions of identity and representations of the self [23, 24]. However, only limited studies argued and focused on women empowerment specifically via travel blogging. A study by [7] revealed the multiple identities of women – as a wife, mother and social netizen through their engagement and participation in cyberspace. Another study by [25] demonstrated the ways in which a modern Malay women uses blog as a tool of empowerment to negotiate their many roles within the boundaries of socio-cultural norms and religious parameters.In order for empowering processes to unfold, it requires barriers to be broken and opportunities enhanced for enrichment within the social spheres. It is in these arenas, in particular the blog is an immensely powerful tool [26] which open doors. [27] believes that the core of empowerment is "the increase of self-confidence and self-esteem and the feeling to have the right to be respected".

Voices and influences are central to empowerment and blogging enables women not only to build their 'power within' and express their views but also to influence public decisions[28].Establishing and managing blogs provides women authorial autonomy that allowsscrutiny over meaning and writings that exemplify their personal power. The virtual wall becomes a medium that offer women a higher degree of agency over their self –representations given the authorial control they have over the narrative.When women blogs, their narratives are able to achieve greaterunderstanding of the position of women and examine to what extent dominant, patriarchal ideologies are created, reproduced or resistedthrough the process of recounting the experiences [29]. Blogs are also a form of motivation for women as it creates a link of social support that provides and contributes to the well-being of other travellers [30].Studiesby [31, 32] conforms that tourist contributions online areoften exercises of joint-affirmation and community empowerment;where reviewers share advice on practical matters. In her study, [19] explained that the empowerment of women through travel is possible when a 'women sensitive environment' of travel is created.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework of this study draws from the perspective of [33] that exploresthree interrelated dimensions of women's empowerment namely resources (pre-conditions), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes) presented through blogging. Resources are the enablersfor women to develop voice and capacity to express. Agency grants the capacity to women to make decisions to fulfill their own aspirationswhich the bloggers bring to through blogging. The outcome;are achievements of the decision where they achieve the valued ways of '*being and doing*' by living the lives they want[34]. Using this framework, this paper will capture the experiences of empowerment among women travel bloggersthrough their travel blogs' narratives. Given the changes in gendered digital divides and nature of the present blogosphere that favors women, the framework focuses upon the contexts of empowerment achieved from actions and interpretations of female bloggers in Malaysia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Narratives of travel blogs are deemed as practical and valid artifacts that reveal firsthand information from a personal perspective. However, it remains under-utilized as data sources. In his paper, [35] argues that blogging is a new research tool for ethnographer as it is a real-time space that shows the influence of bloggers that is more likely to be about quality rather than quantity. Furthermore, blogging urges to see motives in a more regular sense and displays the overlapping measures between the personal and public topics. Blogs are authentic representation of a person's thoughts, experience and sentiments. Previous studies on blogs employed a content analysis approach [36, 37] that covers a wide range of quantitative and/or qualitative techniques. As travelers become bloggers and storytellers, they organize their experiences in narratives supported by images and related references. In doing so, they develop powers of expression and interaction. This methodology is appropriate and important specifically in tourism research as the volume and traffic of online postings relating to tourism experiences around the world continue to grow [38, 39]. This allows researcher to obtain novel narratives of boundless bloggers. As qualitative research is based on an epistemological subjective stance, the researcher perceived this process as useful to further validate the findings [40]. Through blogs, researcher can observe how written discourse functions to construct meaning and how textual dialogue can form the bases of cultural understanding [41].

Table 1: List of Selected Women Travel Blogs for the study

Blog Names	Blog Link	Blogging Since
Journal of DT	http://dianateo-dt.blogspot.my/	2008
Travelholic	http://lilyrianitravelholic.blogspot.my	2009
Lalalaland	http://muncity.blogspot.my/	2005
Travel Chameleon	http://travelchameleon.net/	2012
The Tiny Wanderer	http://www.tinywanderer.com/blog/	2012
JariManis	http://jarimanistravel.blogspot.my/	2012
It's All About My Life	http://mystoriesmories.blogspot.my/	2006
A Traveller's Note	http://life-of-a-traveller.blogspot.my/	2008
In a Nutshell	http://nadzirahata.blogspot.my/	2013
Aida Sue	http://theaidasue.com/category/travel	2014

First we constructed a sample of blogs that matched the aims and objectives of the paper. Using purposive sampling, ten blogs owned and authored by Malaysian female travelers wereselectedfrom the screening of many blogs via Google search engine. The selection criteria were based on the age of bloggers; agedover 20 years old and have been actively writing for more than five years. These blogs generated high page views and the authors regularly updated their pages. All the selected blogs have prominent readership. Five blogs selected were written in Malay language while another fiveblogs using English. Analysis of each blogs focused on its written textual and images. Nvivo was used for data analysis. Thematic coding was used to identify the themes of empowerment framework employed for this study. According to [42], blog narratives are 'personal but not private' accounts and anonymity is difficult with internet data as the blogs are on public domain that can be easily found using a search engine. In terms of research consent, published materials such as blog narratives do not require informed consent and in fact it would be important to recognise the bloggers by providing a link to their blog when writing up the research.

RESULTS

Tourism is a complex phenomenon and therefore it is important to explore the value of gender and the impact of technology in tourism industry. Each individual differ in their relations to technologies where some use it as a medium to attain feelings of pleasure and entertainment; others use it to gain efficiency and efficacy such as optimizing their travel plans or experiences. Women's empowerment requires systemic transformation in not just any institutions, but fundamentally in those supporting patriarchal structures [43].

Our analysis corroboratesand explains the three elements of empowerment displayed through travel blogging as conceptualized by Kabeer (1999).

Resources: [33, 43] defines resources in a broader sense that includes human and social resources which serves as an enabler to exercise choice. In this study, resources are embodied in the bloggers and encompass their travel knowledge, skills, creativity and experiences. Personal development is a resource that 'care of the self' evolving in the eyes of unspecified audiences [44, 45] thatpersonifies their personal ability [33].One of the most important indicators of empowerment is a woman's aptitude and consciousness to voice her choice.The finding shows that the respondentsdisplayed a great range of travel skills and qualitiesthat enable them to confidently 'voice'.One of the bloggers, Fie describedher travel experience on her blog http://travelchameleon.net as a personal development.

"...Being a Malaysian and having exposure to a multi-racial, multi-ethnic & multi-lingual background since we were young, it gives me a good foundation in seeking new experiences and adventures. I would really love to tell you that I've quit working to travel the world but unfortunately I have yet to reach that stage. While every day is a learning stage for me, I try my best to balance both and make the best of each day. Having a career allows me to grow professionally while traveling helps me to grow as a person. This love allows me to utilize my creative instincts in writing, photography, social media and networking. I wish to absorb and learn as much as I can and expand my creative to as many outlets, just to share with the world about the world we live in."

In his forewordon http://lilyrianitravelholic.blogspot.my Lily's brother describes her as a travel enthusiast by her brother.

"…Despite having set foot to all but 3 continents in this beautiful blue planet, Lily shows no signs of slowing down. An archeologist lost in a corporate manager's body, Lily has been travelling in search of her greatest

archeological discovery since she was 17, armed with wonder and curiosity, she started her journey at the great European landmarks in Rome and Paris before crossing the Atlantic to chase further clues in the United States. This methodical, organized and particular traveler would probably keep a list of countries that she dreams of visiting and chances are this list grows by the day. A very-very well prepared traveler, Lily favors the budget travelling approach as she feels that is the best way to experience life the way it is lived"

In her blog www.tinywanderer.com/blog, Picola describes how confidence and determination are her two 'secret weapon' to fulfill her dream by travelling solo.

"…I'm 32 years old and have lived out of a suitcase for the past 6 years. For many Malaysians, this is a dream come true. Whenever I upload photos of my travel, friends would comment wistfully that they wish they could do what I did. My secret weapons were my sheer determination to see my dream through, a lot of effort and a bit of luck. My confidence grew, my leaps got bolder and at some point, I literally threw off the bowlines and sailed away from the safe harbor to explore as Mark Twain has wisely preached. I quit my job and travel. I don't know how Marco Polo or Ibn Battuta did it, but I couldn't have done much without the Internet. After going online, bombarding Thorn Tree Forums and backpackers from all over the world with my questions, I found a way."

Based on her narrative, Picolacitednotabletravel figures such as Marco Polo and Ibn Batutawhose travels are nothing short of incredibleas herimpetus to travel. Just as Marco Polo's enthusiasm for new lands, cultures and geographies is apparent through his writings, Picola's narratives display her travel aptitudes. Besides her skills and experiences, she highlighted technology and the usage of internet to get information and exercise her choices.

The blog narratives illustrate their skills; travel experiences coupled with technology as a valued resource. It displays their personal convictions and growth as a result of traveling. Beingautodidacts the travel bloggers showcase self-efficacy and competence. Self-efficacy is personal beliefs that make an individual feel empowered. In the process of researching, recollecting and writing blog entries, the bloggers are exposed to different perspectives that open up

greater self-empowerment making them a well-rounded individual. The outcome of increased personal growth and self-esteem is greater subjective sense of empowerment for the blogger to respond to her environment in such a way as to become more empowered [46]. The blog authors did not only go beyond just being a female who travels but chose to inspire others through their writings. Apart from that, the detailed entries they shared, along with supporting images, references and hyperlinks demonstrated their competence, control and efficacy in communicating their travel experiences [47] to others.

Agency: The second dimension of empowerment highlighted by [33] incorporatesthe capacity to pursue collective, as well as individual action that stimulates women's absolute liberation of choice. In this case, the bloggers challenge their ability in a public domain. This in return leads to collective actions that created camaraderie between the bloggers and readers. Power is defined as being produced and reproduced through constant social interaction, from many different directions[44]. Malaysia has a multifaceted social system different from the Western and travel was usually a male-dominated sphere of influence. The socially constructed gender profiles distinguish males and females based on a set of identity traits. Travelling for women seemed as a non-salient subject in lieu of safety issues. In contrast to the situation in the early 1980s, today women portray their capability to tour in various continents and regions.One of the blogs, JariManis at http://jarimanistravel.blogspot.my displays the solidarity among male and female fellow travelers plus readers.

sukaxploTuesday, 11 July, 2017 (translated)

Assalammualaikum

It was nice right!?
I just returned on July 3ʳᵈ after a 4 day trip in HCM :)

aRzMoHaWednesday, 14 June, 2017(translated)

"…good sharingsister JM about the currency … it will be helpful to thousands of travellers planning to visitHanoi and Danang."

Blogger Azra through her blog http://life-of-a-traveller.blogspot.my, shares experience with her reader:

SiqahHusin, August 14, 2017 (translated)

"... I miss Perhentian Island. It's so beautiful there right?" I stayed at Senja Bay Resort at Coral Bay because Long Beach was crowded. I prefer less crowded areas "

Azra, September 5, 2017 (translated)

"..Yes, I noticed that Coral Bay area is less crowded"

Another narrative shows how the blog has become the point of reference for readers who wanted to get more information or guidance from the bloggers.

"... cathdy March 16, 2014

Diana im travelling to kotakinabalu this april 17 to 20 , 2014 .. what r your suggested itinerary ...checking your blog can't find specific regarding kota ...ill be checking in courtyard hotel in one borneo"

"...Diana Diane TeoMarch 18, 2014

Hi Cathdy! Sorry for the lack update of Kota Kinabalu posts. I try to compile the place to go in Kota Kinabalu but I was occupied with plenty of works and also due to frequent travelling. Can you email me at dianateodt@gmail.com so I can give some better advise to you? Thanks ;)

Source: http://dianateo-dt.blogspot.my/

The bloggers use their know-how as female travelers to de-gender travel blogs in Malaysia which is mainly dominated by male bloggers. The informal ties serve as conduits for the spread of social empowerment. Consistent with [33], agency is more than about visible actions but it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring into their activities, their sense of agency or power within. 'Power within' is related to Freire's concept of empowerment through conscientization (critical consciousness) 'that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions' [27]. 'Power within' alsoindicates an increaseof awareness in terms of rights and self and awareness on how to combat internalized oppression and other forms of domination.Voice and influence are central to empowerment. Blogging enables women to use it to build their 'power within' so that they express their views and influence public decisions [28].Empowerment embodies interactions between an individual and community that are culturally and contextually defined. Social support forms collective action and shift in power relation. Based on the narratives, it shows that an individual who perceive a sense of connection with others would feel empowered and motivated.

Achievements: The dimensions of resources and agency collectively constitute what [34] refers to achieving the valued ways of '*being and doing*' by living the lives they want. He explains that empowerment is ''what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important". The blogs are usually publicly published however the interdependent connections create strong social linkage between bloggers and readers. Blogger, Tiny Wanderer was awarded best Malaysian travel blogger in 2016 while blogger Nadzirah's travel article at http://nadzirahata.blogspot.my/was published in a magazine

"…mystory of Kinabalu mission is in BackPackerzVol 3 Magazine April 2016 edition"

As displayed in the blogs, empowerment is about looking at self, knowing their own strengths and becoming more aware of oneself. The achievement interrelates with access to information, making decisions and exercising their choices through actions. Essentially, it is less about actually achieving what the bloggers want but more about willing to make an attempt to change and gain a sense of agency. Blogger Aida Sue at http://theaidasue.com listed her stellar accomplishments as she described herself as a person who:

"…organized more than 30 charity events with 1000 volunteers, nominated and won Digi WWWOW Award, World Blogger and Social Media Award MSMW 2012, gave speech and public speaking for charity awareness among teenagers on television, radio and event and was selected as an ambassador for various brands."

One blogger via her blog http://mystoriesmories.blogspot.my even organized trips to invite other travellers especially women to join her

For friends interested to join my trip throughout 2016.

Indonesia
Mac
Sumut Adventure Trip: Tapanuli Tengah - Tapanuli Utara - Simalungun (11 - 16 Mac 2016) - DONE!
May
Open Trip :Gunung Guntur, Garut, Indonesia (27 - 31 May 2016) - DONE!
Julai
Open Trip : GunungArgopuro via Bremi - Baderan, JawaTimur
Ogos
Sumut Adventure Trip : PulauMursala (27 - 31 Ogos 2016)
Okt/Nov
Open Trip : South Korea Autumn Trip 2016

Another blogger Rara on her blog http://muncity.blogspot.my defined her travel achievements as:

"*..I am a certified PADI Advanced Open Water scuba diver. Anyone needs a dive buddy?I had run and completed 11 Full Marathons (that's 42.195 km, in case you don't know) to date.I had conquered Mount Kinabalu (one of the highest in SEA), Mount Merapi (an active volcano!), Mount Ledang, Mount Datuk, Mount Belum and Bukit Tabur behind my house…*"

The narration on achievementemphasized her expertise in her area that gave her a sense of authority to invite readers to enter into dialogues with her and other bloggers, creating reciprocal relationship between resources and the sense of agency that result in achievements. The personal travel achievements present an interactional empowerment of the bloggers toconnect with readers on an intellectual or emotional level where the blogger can be viewed as a catalyst for change to inspire others. As stated by [49] in any empowermentprocesses women should play the role as agents of change rather than merely as its recipients, It corresponds with [48] claim that power and knowledge cannot exist without the other where one gains power by creating knowledge. Being a woman in a socially construed society and not acclaimed as travel experts, the narratives of their travel blogs allowed the female bloggers to confront and challenge their traditional norms It is not only a space to express personal travel experiences but also a pivotal space in creating awareness about female travel among women of all ages in or outside Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study substantiatesthe study by [24] who found blogging as an outlet that provides more freedom for Malaysian women to write and express their ideas freely on issues she feels strongly about. Malaysian women, mostly modern Malay women have started travelling and blogging while negotiating their many roles within the boundaries of the social expectations informed by traditional and religious parameters. In the process, the bloggers experienced a process of changing roles and created a sense of camaraderie with other women. This study shows that the Malaysian female travel bloggersare empowered and managed to break the male-dominated blog sphere by offering alternative information from the female perspective. Woman's ability to become empowered at the individual level depends on the environment in which she lives. Their choices have a significant impacton other's lives.These female travel bloggers became a source of reference as they have great understanding on travel choices and decisions that they have made.

Tourism is both a component and influence for many peoples around the globe today [40]. This study found that the blogs provide a platform for bloggers to express their opinion and to connect with others. In this case, blogging creates meaning, motivation and purpose and it became an outlet not merely to display control and to promote self-efficacy, but also as a space to inspire reader's community. The culture of blogging among young Malaysian women coincides with the notion that a growing number of independent women are engaging in travel with majority of the travel decisions are made by them. In addition, emerging as an important source of information that shapes travel decisions, the blogs are also seen as a tool to create this sense of empowerment among the bloggers as well as other women that are interested in travelling. As a consequence, the sense of empowerment resulted from blogging can be an immediate one, giving the bloggers a chance to develop their sense of community and agency [40, 42]. For future research, empirical studies to test the theoretical correlations among the three components using quantitative method to validate the findings and measure its impact can be further explored.

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