

Research Paper

Generation Y Malaysian Women's Perception Towards Solo Travel

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Abstract: Global tourism movement has shown an increase over the past years. Historically, global travel is meant to be the prerogative of men but the women and travel phenomenon has slowly started to emerge. This study addresses the cultural values of West and Asia to understand the Asian perspective. Within South East Asia, Malaysia is one of the countries that is expected to have a steady growth in tourism. The specific trait in Generation Y which is technologically savvy makes the experience more enhancing, thus encouraging people to travel. This study investigates gen Y Malaysian women's perceptions towards solo travelling. The qualitative approach was employed in this study and data were collected from Malaysian women aged 19 to 33 years old. In-depth interviews were used in data collection to identify the perceptions of Malaysian women and solo travelling trends. Findings indicate that the differences of West and Asia values are not a constraint for Malaysian women to travel. Instead, gen Y characteristics encourage women to travel with the convenience of technology advancement. Yet, the main concern of Malaysian women is safety. The implications of the findings are for tourism operators and marketers getting an Asian perspective, particularly Malaysian women's, on structuring marketing strategies that cater to the needs of different market segments.

Keywords: Consumer behaviour, decision-making, generation Y, Malaysian women, tourist motivation.

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Introduction

Historically, global travel was meant to be the prerogative of men (Bartos, 1989). During 1970s and 1980s, men experiences were regarded as universal while women experiences were considered to be relatively non-existent. Women experiences were limited to leisure, hence reflecting the dominance of males at that time. The different traits on a biological basis (masculine and feminism) reflect the roles and expectations of society. These ideologies have common attributes in gender norms such as responsibilities and family orientation (Zhang & Hitchlock, 2014). However, typologies have now shifted with regard to the idea of women travelling alone which is perceived as abnormal, and can tarnish the social reputation within Victorian standards (Robinson, 1990). A Booking.com survey (2015) showed that 72% of American women travellers chose to travel alone. On the other hand, TripAdvisor's Women's Travel Survey (2015) showed that 60% of the women in Southeast Asia travel alone. Besides that, in the Japanese and Chinese market segments, the number of women who choose to travel alone abroad is increasing (Hashimoto, 2000). The survey indicates that the phenomenon of women solo travel is growing and correspondingly, there has been more attention on women's leisure activities especially in Asian countries. Increasingly, a number of Malaysian solo women travellers made headlines such as Anita Yusof, the first solo Muslim who rode her bike around the world (The Sun Daily, 2016) and Petrina Thong, who travelled solo by hitchhiking from Kuala Lumpur to Europe ("Meet Petrina," 2016). Marketing is unlikely to be successful if a whole generation is targeted because of the vast differences in a lifetime (Glover, 2010). Previous researchers have proposed various categories of motivation (Mahika, 2011). Hence, the changes that occur in tourist motivation determines consumer demands for tourism products. Thus, this study attempts to identify the perspectives of solo travel amongst generation Y. The aim is linked to gender and societal contexts to acknowledge women's voices in a field where they are not often heard. While the number of gender and tourism studies has increased, most are conducted in the West (Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Perez, Morgan, & Villace-Molinero, 2015). Hence, the study draws its strength from its holistic approach to understanding the tourism phenomenon of Asian women particularly, Malaysian women's experiences in travelling, Asia cultural influences and also women as a dominant gender discourse in the gen Y society. This study employed qualitative method interviews with women who fall under the identified categories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies that revealed the background of women and travelling emerged slowly, especially in the West. Based on the concepts by Schutte and Ciarlante (1998), the

cultural values in the West and in Asia were found to be different. Westerners enjoy a clear boundary between work and leisure and also believe in rewarding themselves for their own benefit. As for Asians, having a balance in life and work evokes a sense of guilt. As such, leisure for women and travel are varied based on Western and Asia concepts. The authors highlighted the modification of marketing strategies to penetrate Asian markets. Also, cross-cultural differences are reflected in perceptions, motivations, expressions, verbal and non-verbal behaviour, values and the meaning system (Tsai, 2010). Malaysia is a pluralist country, so the perceptions of young Malaysians would be different from westerners' perceptions (Mura & Khoo-lattimore, 2012). It demonstrates that Asians are no longer confined to the traditional methods of the role model and as a matter of fact, the Asian and Western perspectives of women travel have converged. Asians in the 21st century acknowledge gender distinction but women can travel freely like men do. Solo women travellers seek fulfilment of adventure, social opportunities, education, self-esteem and confidence. The perception today is that women are not timid; they are bold, confident and gutsy without being dependent on the partner (Wilson, 2004). Therefore, solo travel is a growing trend in the tourism industry and has drawn extensive attention from researchers and marketers, especially concerning women in Asia. Thus, putting entire variables together can give a glimpse into the insights of these women.

The baby boomers (born in 1943-1960) were the primary focus in tourism industry analysis but attention has now shifted towards Gen Y. Gen Y represent an exciting generation as baby boomers have gone through social revolution and grown up without technology advancement. Gen Y is the first generation that have a strong connection with technology (Benckendorf, Moscardo & Pendergast, 2010). They are faced with globalisation and the rapid development of technologies such as mobile phones and internet influences regardless of nationality, social, economic or cultural backgrounds. The specific trait of Gen Y is being tech-savvy, which to an extent reveals gen Y's travelling patterns. The three key trends of Gen Y travelling are (a) they are empowered to decide on their own itineraries through social network platforms such as travel review sites, blogs, photos and other media (b) channel experience because of the convenience of online purchasing and social experiences through interactions with the global community. All these reviews and advices allow them to eventually make decisions (c) Members of Gen Y have strong opinions on their needs and wants and they are open to ideas and suggestions, because their intention is to experience something different or unique (Amadeus, 2013). The availability of technology allows them to create tourism experiences by providing information through the internet platform and boosting traveller confidence in travelling. Gen Y is exposed to the international community so their travelling patterns differ from other generations. The perspectives of Gen Y in the tourism industry can provide guidelines to connect the tourism industry with current and future markets (Benckendorf et al, 2010). The

ideas and characteristics of Gen Y also help to explain human behaviour motivation in tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed interpretive social science paradigms. The rationale is to allow the researcher to understand women's voices in regard to their solo travelling patterns. This strategy is viewed to be the appropriate approach because it allows for a rich collection of descriptive and complex data. Women who agreed to be interviewed were encouraged to speak their thoughts in their own words. The purpose was to explore the deeper meaning of women experiences, thus a qualitative research design was deemed suitable to investigate individual's emotions (Mura & Khoo-lattimore, 2012). A semi-structured interview guide was adopted for this study as the researcher would retain the flexibility of changing direction of probing during interview. The selected women were allowed to speak on their narratives at their own pace and interpret the questions based on their own opinions (Riessman, 2002). The overall aim of the research was to ascertain the perception of Malaysian Gen Y women regarding solo travelling. Thus, a series of open-ended questions were listed in the interview guide to determine their perceptions.

The items used in the interview guide were derived from previous studies (Wilson, 2004; Myers, 2010). The focus of the study was on the interviewees' lives, their cultural and religious backgrounds, travel history and travel experiences. Besides that, a demographics survey was also distributed before the interview to collect basic information. The researcher used snowball sampling and purposive sampling to select the interviewees. The selection was based on the following criteria (a) must be aged between 19-33 years old (b) must be Malaysian, and currently staying in Malaysia and (c) travels. The interviews were conducted in a quiet environment to capture clear voice recordings. Elwood and Martin (2000, p.649) highlighted the importance of location which can affect the interview. Also, the interview was conducted at the participants' convenience, day time or night time and on weekdays or weekends. As the subject matter involved Malaysian women of various races including those in West Malaysia, the interviews were conducted in the three major languages of Malaysia which is Chinese, Malay or English, depending on the interviewee's preference. Initially, three different versions of interview guide were planned to cater to the needs of the interviewees, but since most of them have completed tertiary education and are working, only the English version interview guide was finally prepared. However, the main limitation being multilingual is when Malaysians used "rojak" language. This language does not represent Britain English or U.S English.

The interview was carried out over a period of one to two months. The interviews were continued until data saturation was reached. 16 respondents were interviewed in

this study. The data collected were then classified into general categories and themes. Through open coding, categories and themes set up to identify and establish causes, consequences, conditions, interactions, relationships, linkages were structured and formed into core themes. Finally, these core themes were re-examined and rearranged with the aid of field notes. The data were then reduced into major themes and presented as findings and conclusion. All social researchers are concerned with issues of validity and authenticity of human experiences derived from results (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 1998). It is also important to acknowledge the researcher bias based on the researcher's worldview (Merriam, 1998, p.204-205). Hence, comments from peers and participants should provide valuable insights to the researcher. The purpose is to ensure that the data were not influenced by the inquirer, but were derived from the interviewee's own account whereby the researcher acts as an interpreter. In addition, multiple different sources are used to provide data and these are compared for patterns. Confidentiality and anonymity of respondents is a key ethical concern. These issues need to be dealt in a sensitive and ethical manner. Hence, the data and details of respondents would be treated with privacy. The ethical considerations are integrity, relations and responsibilities towards the respondents. All the women who participated in the study were required to sign a confidentiality form to show their consent of participation in this study. Respondents were identified using alphabets such as Respondent A, Respondent B. In addition, the "knowledgeable stranger" mode was adopted for this study as well. The position of the interviewer is usually between "interviewer as friend" and "interviewer as stranger" (Reinharz, 1992). A good relationship between the researcher and respondent will build trust thus making it easier for the respondent to open up in the interview. Before the interview starts, a brief introduction about the research, its purpose and travelling anecdotes were shared to break the ice and also to make interviewees feel comfortable sharing their stories. Also, the researcher had to display good listening skills and attentiveness as a sign of respect and interest for the interviewees' stories and at the same time, this encouraged them to share more.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 16 respondents from various races took part in this study. One woman is between 19-23 years, four women are between 29-33 years and the rest are between 24-28 years old. The majority of the interviewees have completed their tertiary education and have full-time jobs. This shows that the women interviewees are all equipped with education and considered financially stable. Based on the findings, three themes emerged which are bonding time with friends and family, the inspiration of the women solo traveller and Gen Y information access. The results show that women are able to travel freely with the aid of technology and Gen Y characteristics.

Travelling enables bonding and connecting with friends and family

Most of the women shared that travelling enables connecting with people and bonding with friends and family. The notion of women engaging in solo travel is relatively positive. One respondent Y described her solo travelling trip to China for two months as fruitful because she managed to meet new people and get inspired by solo women travellers around the globe. Her statement is supported by respondent A.

They are awesome, they are brave and then they are really independent types of person for me. Because not everyone can be so independent to travel solo especially women. When we travel as a woman, there are lots of factors to consider. (Respondent A, 28).

However, there are some contradictions regarding the perception of solo travel especially for women who prefer to share the moment with others. For example, respondent S who emphasised that values of family and friends' bonding time is important indicates that the best experience of travelling is strengthening the relationship with loved ones.

Normally I think, what I get is togetherness with friends and family. As I mentioned before, when I was young, my parents were busy working and they worked during night time. When we woke up, they were asleep, and when we finished school or work, they were already at their work. Now we are all working, so travelling together is family bonding time. And for friends, let's say like primary or secondary or colleague friends, the time to be together is less and it is hard to spend time together after graduation. If travelling with different groups of people, there is bonding. So you get to bond in your travel; this is the benefit that most of us experience. (Respondent S, 26).

The results illustrate that most of the women choose to travel with friends and family to enjoy the moment of togetherness and eventually, strengthen the relationship through travelling. Travelling solo enables meeting up with new people but in terms of relationship, it is slightly weaker as the relationship is not long-term.

Women solo traveller inspires other women to travel

This study focused on the perceptions of women solo travellers. The perception of women about other women who travel solo is positive and amusing. Most of the women interpret this as women who are living out their own lives. Respondent M, aged 25, indicates that gender is not a constraint for leisure: *I have been surrounded by many women who travel often.* It is supported by respondent Y, aged 25, whose dream

is to travel and the phenomenon encourages her to travel more: *makes me want to travel more, experience different things in the world* (Respondent Y). In fact, age or generation does not refrain women from solo travelling. For example, respondent I shared a story of her colleague who travelled to Europe solo. This inspired her to want to support her child to do the same: *I would ask her (her child) to go and see the world out there, alone* (Respondent I).

In contrast, respondent N admires the inspirations of solo women traveller but she has no intention of solo travelling because safety is the most important factor to be considered.

I respect women who always travel, whether they travel with their families or alone la. But I think they have to consider safety (Respondent N).

This evidently shows that women are inspired by solo women travellers but they are concerned about their safety as well. Thus, safety is one of the main elements that is often considered when deciding about leisure.

Generation Y's ability to access sources globally

Richards (2007) disclosed that the core traits of gen Y travelling pattern relies on technology advancement such as Internet, social media and blogs. As stated in the literature review, gen Y is the first generation who encountered rapid technology advancements. The findings show that gen Y is more likely to get information from the Internet, travel websites, blogs and social media. Respondent J describes her sources of information.

Basically this one will be from other people's travel blogs or some travel magazines or some go to the online like...there is Tripadvisor right, right now, there are some apps like you compare the hotel prices at Trivago all that. And in the source of information, I think is quite important because you have to make all the arrangements before you travel (Respondent J, 28).

However, the issue of trustworthiness arises as to whether the information is reliable. The respondents also emphasised on the manipulation of information for profit purposes. For example, respondent J, a travel planner who relies on travel websites in her job shared that travel websites tend to be overrated which will give wrong information for the traveller. So even though, online resources are widely used by Gen Y, some respondents remain sceptical about the reliability of information found on the internet.

Through media, sometimes you do check on Agoda, Expedia and anything but this is very commercialised so when it gets too commercialised, too many people book in the same places. Sometimes they misuse Expedia, Agoda, they misuse it, they know there is demand on Expedia, everything they put the price higher. (Respondent J).

This study is focused on Southeast Asia women's perspective of solo travel. While the positive responses of Malaysian women towards solo travellers is inspiring, the study also found that some have doubts about it. The main concern of Malaysian women is fear. Generally, travelling alone is linked to safety and anxiety concerns in an unfamiliar environment with no familiar support. Additionally, societal perceptions regard Asian women vulnerable and dependent when compared to western women. Thus, they prefer not to travel independently (Zhang & Hitchcock, 2014). These results disrupt the perceived ideologies of Asian female travellers as seen through the lens of societies where it is perceived as not appropriate. Instead, it reveals the enthusiasm of Asian women travellers in leisure. Besides that, the findings also refutes West and Asian ideologies (Schutte & Ciantre, 1998) and instead shows similarities in Asian and Western values. Despite the dissimilarities of Asian and Western cultures, the women in this study did not reflect any differing cultural values on their perceptions of travel solo. Instead, the findings reveal features of contemporary women. The results also indicate that Gen Y is a smart consumer group which relies on online resources (Lee, 2013). The information accessed online is their primary source for references even if they doubt it.

CONCLUSION

Today, women travellers are not a new occurrence anymore. The opportunities available today allow women to lead their own lives and act on their own. Amidst various ways of travelling, women in the West and in Asia are increasingly choosing to travel alone. The popularity of solo travel especially among women in Asia has gained attention in the academic field. The key finding of this study would provide a refreshing insight into the tourism phenomenon especially on the Asian women solo traveller and marketing strategies on gen Y. Gen Y are consistently finding new ways of travelling, so will indefinitely change the travel industry. The findings would prove useful to policy makers, tourism, marketers, destination management and any other related tourism business who want to understand women's decision-making process in leisure. The marketing power, wealth and the size of the potential Gen Y market for the tourism industry can develop the capacity for consumption behaviour in groups, and predict the impacts on the demands for tourism products and services. Existing research shows that tourism is a versatile and vibrant concept. However, this study is only limited to gen Y Malaysian women who are aged between 19-33

years old, so it cannot represent the generalised opinion of Malaysian women overall. Further research can be conducted on specific demographic factors of Malaysian women and their viewpoints of solo travel which may provide better robust findings.

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