

Performing Gender and Rural Tourism: An Analysis of Homestay's Operators in Penang Island

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Abstract

In the field of tourism, the issues of authenticity and post-modern experience has been advanced to the point where such experiences can be seen as authentic and meaningful to tourists even within the context of a largely commoditised and 'staged' experiential setting. The study of generic 'performed events' has been much debated within tourism from a variety of perspectives including: semiotics of tourism; marketing; sociology and anthropology. However, the study on the issue of performing gender stereotypical roles at a commoditized locations such as in the homestay programme is still limited. This study will look at how male and female operators in the homestay programme performed and negotiated their roles within the framed events of receiving tourists at their home. Using a qualitative approach, this study examines how homestay operators performing dual performances between the performance of "staged experiences" and performance of "everyday lives". Theorizing about negotiation of performance is vital in the study of gender and tourism as it offers a perspective on value and meaning on the roles' performed by these male and female operators. It is argued here that 'tourist experience' is a production of "staged" performance in order to create an 'authentic' experience.

Keywords: *Gender Role, Tourism Industry, Performance and Performativity*

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is a rapid growing industry, especially with the growth of tourist arrivals and the concerted efforts through strategic public-private partnership to position and re-branding Malaysian tourism sector to be among the top destination for business and leisure. These large number of foreign tourists may significantly impacted the direction of tourism industry in Malaysia. In parallel with growth of tourist arrivals to Malaysia, The Malaysian Government through the Ministry of Culture, Art and Tourism had provided a specific fund to assist in the growth and expansion of the Homestay programme (Xiao and Pusiran, 2013). The Malaysian Government's increased focus on the development of Homestay is significant because it is regarded as a potentially good product in promoting the country as well as getting the community involved in the tourism industry through rural tourism. Homestay program in

Malaysia offers an opportunity for tourist who would like to experience new environment, living in village ambience, or learn about Malaysian's culture and heritage sites.

When tourists and locals come together, both have the opportunity to glimpse how others live, as well as be able to reflect on their own lives through the eyes of the others. Some of the broadest theoretical issues in anthropology is related to the study of these cross-cultural interactions, of "live performances" (Stronza, 2001). Thus, the issues of authenticity and post-modern experience in the field of tourism has made it up to the point where such experiences can be seen as authentic and meaningful to tourists even within the context of a largely commoditised and 'staged' experiential setting. Malaysia has a great potential in the rural tourism and ecotourism, mainly because the nation is filled with lands that are rich with historical values.

As one of the non-conventional type of accommodation, homestay allows tourists to stay with home owner to learn culture and lifestyles, from first-hand observations and sharing of information from the home owner. Thus, while the type of work force is closely examined, gender stereotyping is evident in the maintenance of the homestay premises. Usually, the homestay premises are co-owned by husbands and wives. The homeowner is the one who prepared lodging and foods for the tourists with reasonable pay. In regards with premises' preparation for tourist arrivals, the tasks of preparing the cultural activities were mostly done by women of the house. Therefore, this study will look at how male and female operators in the homestay programme performed and negotiated their roles within the framed events of preparing for tourists arrival, receiving tourists at their home, and lastly when the tourist is ready to leave the village.

2. Literature Review

Tourism has some aspects of showbiz, some of international trade in commodities; and all of the aspect of tourism has shown some part of innocent fun, as well as part of a devastating modernizing force (Turner, 1974). Being all these elements simultaneously, it tends to induce partial analysis in the discussion on tourism in modern world. On the other hand, Stronza (2001) argued that by exploring only parts of the two-way encounters between tourists and locals, or between "hosts and guests", it has left us with only half-explanations. This encounters linked back to the theories about the historical origins of tourism (Adler 1989; Towner & Wall 1991), in which scholars questioned why people travel as tourists in the modern era

(MacCannell, 1976), or why some tourists seek particular kinds of destinations and experiences over others (Cohen, 1988). These particular issues showed that we lack an understanding of why people and host communities engage in tourism in particular ways.

2.1 Performing Gender in Tourism

In considering tourism as a form of performance, Edensor (2001) that draw on a series of associations, examples and theoretical perspectives to explore the possibilities of performing gender. He investigates the metaphor of performances to examine how tourism can be considered as a set of activism, imbricated with the everyday, whereby traditions are fortified and broken simultaneously (Edensor, 2001). Following the arguments in the paper, it can be said that tourism is a process which involves the ongoing (re)construction of praxis and space in shared contexts. But this (re)production is never assured, for despite the prevalence of codes and norms, tourist conventions can be destabilized by rebellious performances, or by multiple, simultaneous enactions on the same stage. In a study done by Amanatullah and Morris (2010), they proposed that women are aware of gender-role injunctions and tend to adjust their bargaining behaviour to avoid role-violation backlash. Thus, in the field of tourism that involved home-based business, women often lead the household chores, while men were taking care of the business outside their home-compound. According to Global Report on Women in Tourism (2010), the proportion of women “own-account workers” is much higher in tourism than in other sectors across all regions.

In addition, the report found out that women are contributing a substantial amount of unpaid labour to home-based tourism businesses as “contributing family workers” (Global Report on Women in Tourism, 2010). Furthermore, women were known to frequently take a more collaborative approach to problem-solving than men take, for example they will try to find solutions that benefit both parties or trying to align their own requests with shared goals (Babcock & Laschever, 2009). In many situations, women's methods can be superior to those typically employed by men. Unfortunately, however, in our largely male-defined work culture, women's strategies can often be misinterpreted and can leave them operating from a position of weakness. This is evident in the case of home-based business, as homestay premises allowed women to work double-roles as housewives and care-taker of the homestay, while the men is out to work.

2.2 *Gender performativity in tourism*

Turner & Turner (1978) theorized that leisure travel is indeed like a pilgrimage, one that can lift people out of the ordinary structures of their everyday lives. Tourism can offer freedom from work and other obligatory time, an escape from traditional social roles, and the liberty to spend one's time however one prefers. Assessing gender differences in how hosts participate in tourism is a step toward improving our understanding of the origins of tourism from the hosts' perspective (Swain, 1995). Other scholars perceive tourism as affecting local identity through the conveyance of expectations. According to this view, tourists shape the outcome of touristic encounters by giving preference to locals who look and behave in ways that are authentically indigenous or ethnic. A problem here is that authenticity is a subjective concept, and tourists often define for themselves what is authentic, relying on popular stereotypes as points of reference rather than on historical or ethnographic facts (Adams, 1984; Crick, 1989).

Anthropologists have argued that host-guest interactions tend to be asymmetrical in terms of power, and that guests have the upper hand in determining how any given encounter will unfold (Stronza, 2001). Further, ethnographic accounts have shown that the gaze of tourists can be especially influential in determining how hosts look, behave, and feel. Generally, hosts are portrayed in these interactions as passive, unable to influence events, as if they themselves were somehow physically locked in the gaze (McCannell, 1976). Missing in these analyses is the possibility that locals can, and often do, play a role in determining what happens in their encounters with tourists. Relationships within and between groups of hosts and guests can be analysed by focusing on a number of characteristics including gender, class, age, ethnicity and race, and nationality (Swain, 1995). These distinctions intersect and affect each other, and form the complex populations studied by tourism researchers (Ireland, 1993). For social scientists engaged in tourism research, gender is thus a fundamental category useful in human resource studies, economic development projects, marketing strategies, site and infrastructure planning, and policy development.

3. Research Methodology

Authenticity previously described as something that exists in the eyes of the beholder, and it is a concept that has received particular attention by tourism scholars. Initiated by Goffman's (1959) work on 'front' and 'back' stages, this approach is mainly taken from a

constructivist point of view; where reality is a process, created in people's own minds and constructed by interacting with other people and social structures (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). To study a social phenomenon such as the construction of authenticity and hospitality performances, qualitative methods are recommended, and hence used in this study. Data is collected based on a total of eight in-depth interviews with the homestay operators and tourists who visited the homestay village in Penang Island. Participant observation were also carried out in order to observe situations that informants have described in interviews as well as events that informants may be unable or unwilling to share. This is important to make the researcher aware of distortions or inaccuracies in description provided by those informants (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

3.1 Homestay in Penang Island

For the purpose of this study, a homestay village was chosen to carry out the study of the homestay operators and the tourists who visited the island. There are about nine homestay that are registered with the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia in Penang Island. However, according to the statistic of Penang Island Homestay from the year 2009 to 2014, this selected homestay has the highest total income among the other (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 2015). It has several attractions that are unique to the tourists who visited the village. According to statistic given by the Chief Villagers, the whole population of the village consists of 254 people; 117 men and 134 women. It has around 56 households in total. Even though the population is considerably small, the village do have a strong community-based organisation.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section will discuss on how the homestay operators performing dual performances when there are tourists around their village compounds. The homestay operators at this village are usually the housewives who's their husbands are working as fisherman or businessman in or outside the villages. These women had unconsciously performed a "staged performance" when there are tourists around. Their daily activities is considerably different from what they "show" to their guests. The notion of negotiation of performance is vital in the study of gender and tourism as it offers a perspective on value and meaning on the roles' performed by these male and female operators. This paper argues that "tourist experience" is a production of "staged" performance in order to create an "authentic" experience.

4.1 Power in negotiations

Men and women are equally effective at leveraging their negotiation power, even though that men and women typically differ in their status and power (Kray et al, 2004). According to a study, negotiations traits associated with men are related to being a competent negotiator, and this traits is known not being associated with women (Ridgeway, 2001). In addition, Kray (2007) referred to the traits typically associated with each gender as “gender stereotypes”, it is being regard as the linchpin connecting gender to negotiating effectiveness. Therefore, gender stereotypes reflect the gender roles that men are rational, assertive, and highly protective of their own interests (Williams & Best, 1982). In contrast, women are passive, emotional, and accommodating of others’ needs. It takes little to activate gender stereotypes.

From the observation at the village, these men and women were living different activities during the weekdays and weekend. During the weekdays, men were hardly seen at the village compound, in which many of them are fisherman and they had went to the sea for the fishing trip. However, during the weekend, it can be observed that many of men were enjoying themselves outside their home compound with fellow men, discussing about life, religion, or politic issues leisurely. On the contrary, during the weekdays visit, it is obvious that more women villagers were getting together at the *pangkin* which is a designated rest area at their house compound. They were exchanging stories with fellow housewives, and sometime they can spend hours just sitting at the *pangkin*. However, these women were less visible during the weekend. Women were hardly seen to be outside of their home as they can only be seen working at the restaurant or convenience store near the jetty.

One of the operators mentioned that women are usually busier during the weekends because they have to take care of homestay premises if there are bookings made by visitors, as well as preparing meals for their husbands who’s at home during the weekend. These are the instances of gender negotiation that takes place between men and women of the village, as both genders have different roles to be played. These roles becomes more visible when the researcher is comparing their weekdays and weekends activities. Not only that, some other visible gender roles includes the division of labour among men and women when there are visitors around. The women were mostly responsible in the hospitality services, such as prepping the house/room, preparing lunch or dinner, and at the same time providing care

services to the guests. Men were seen to be taking charge of the labour works that involved physical strength such as fishing in the sea or repairing damaged boats.

4.2 Tourism and performance

The study of generic ‘performed events’ has been much debated within tourism from a variety of perspectives including: semiotics of tourism; marketing; sociology and anthropology. However, the study on the issue of performing gender stereotypical roles at a commoditized locations such as in the homestay programme is still limited. Carnegie and McCane (2008) discussed on generic performed events, in which re-enactment events have been subjected to their contribution to understandings of cultural heritages, especially in post-modern consumer societies. This study wants to examine the search for authentic experiences by the tourists who visited this village. The search for authentic experiences is a reflection of modern tourists’ desire to reconnect with “the pristine, the primitive, and the natural, that which is as yet untouched by modernity” (Cohen, 1988: 374).

Based from the interviews with the tourists who visited the village, they all have different expectations when they first visited the village. The homestay village is widely known for its food tourism, namely the Prawn Noodles and fresh seafood that are abundance at the island. One of the tourist interviewed said that she did not expect anything else besides the noodles that she and her friends were aiming for when they visited the village. However, once they arrived at the island by boat, they immediately notice that this village is much more than their speciality on food attraction. Due to the lack tourism exposure of the other attractions present at the village, the tourists who visited the island were mostly surprised with what the village had to offer. The search for authentic prawn noodles had expand into experiencing Malay culture as well.

It is remarkable that these tourists mentioned that the village is mostly similar to their own village, or even what is portrayed in the media of what Malay village looks like. The way houses were situated near to each other symbolizes the strong bond that villagers have among each other. In addition, there are also a trail or pathway that the tourists can follow that lead them to all of the attractions available on the village. By following the right pathway, the tourist were brought to experience magnificent views of sea breeze, floating chalet that is available for rent, small animals farm, some fishing spots, and also the historical well left from hundred years back. Interestingly, the pathway also lead the tourist using different route when they

wanted to go back to the jetty where the floating restaurant is located. These “arrangements” suits the discussion on tourism and performance, in which even if the tourists opted to strolling around the village by themselves without the presence of the villagers as tour guide, they are able to do so because of the pathway presence. These tourists, hence are able to re-enact villagers’ life routine in a short walk by following exactly the pathway in the village.

5. Conclusion

Based from the observation on this village, following with the in depth interviews with both homestay operators and the tourists, it is argued here that ‘tourist experience’ is a production of “staged” performance in order to create an ‘authentic’ experience. For anthropologists, tourism can be a lens through which to explore issues of political economy, social change and development, natural resource management, and cultural identity and expression. This paper argued that gender stereotypes and the negotiation performances of both locals and tourists are the important elements that of tourism products available in this village. With the negotiation that happens between men and women in terms of work division, and also the way they managed to present the village as “authentic” Malay village to the tourists, it is therefore evident that Tourism Industry impacted the villager’s way of life.

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