

A Study on Women Travel Experiences Enhanced by Technology in Georgetown, Penang

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Abstract

All work and no play make not only Jack a dull boy, Jill too! Women are becoming an important entity of the travel industry as producers or consumers of the sector. Travel symbolises a form of liberation from their typical identities. The rise of new technologies has created greater opportunities for women to travel. This study will explore the motivation and travel experiences of women travellers enhanced by technology using ethnography. The findings will then underline how technologies transform the nature of tourism experiences and empower women to travel.

Keywords: women; travel; technology; experience; Georgetown Penang

Problem Definition

Women's participatory role in tourism is divided into two major parts – as producers or consumers of the sector. Early travel discourses have been dominated by men while women were generally considered as '*armchair travellers*' (Mahn, 2016, p.1). Not only were the women subjected to social restrictions (Mowl & Towner 1995; Deem 1996; Khan, 2011) but control of decision making remained largely in the hands of the men. Despite their significant contributions to travel and exploration, women have generally been overlooked. In fact, the pioneers of travel have been construed as the sole preserve of men (Hamalian, 1981; Clarke, 1988; Craik, 1997). Data from Intrepid Travel 2013 shows that 64 per cent of the global travel market was made up of women.

Changes in economy, social values and technology resulted in changes of travel patterns. Information, communication and technology (ICT) has become an integral part that transformed the tourism industry worldwide as well as the traditional roles, structures and processes of tourist experience (Buhalis, 2008; Mkono, 2012; Neuhofer, 2014). As technology becomes the backbone of travel industry, "women's identities, needs and priorities configured together with digital technologies" (Wajcman, 2009, p.150) is crucial. Technology and its usage become a social affirmation for masculinity or men just as 'blue' becomes a colour associated with boys. However female travellers are becoming accustomed to seamless technology and breaking away from the stereotypical norms (Thanuskodi, 2013; Petrovic et al., 2016; Yong et al., 2016).

A study by Kim et al. (2007) shows that females were more involved in online information search, visited more travel websites and even visited these websites more frequently compared to men. Okazaki and Hirose (2009) substantiated the finding by stating that female travellers, compared to males, tend to use a more diverse range of information sources including the mobile Internet. According to Mazman et al. (2009), females are more convinced to adopt technological innovation through social influence while Narasimhamurthy (2014), disclosed that women use social media as a productive tool in contrast to men. The transition of this new age women travellers is characterised by those who are financially stable and tech savvy traveling in their own right; for their own pleasure and breaking away from their typical identities.

According to Myers (2010), female tourism experiences are constrained by male-dominated cultural values besides social restrictions by their home society. Berdychevsky et al. (2015) argue that gender relations do affect the way men and women build their touristic experiences. A study by Figueroa et al. (2015) of 466 tourism gender research journals from 1985 to 2012 shows that only six papers or 1.3% are on gender and tourist experiences. Wang et al. (2016) also found that research has largely focused on travellers' attitudes and technology adoption rather than their experiences with travel technologies. The existing literature appears to have insufficiently addressed women travel experiences or the role of technologies in transforming the nature of tourism experiences and empowering women to travel. Technological empowerment via tourism is a significantly new under-theorized research that requires in-depth investigation.

Literature Review

In the mid-19th century, the first wave of feminist anthropology has begun to include more women's voices in the study of culture as anthropology and travel are intrinsically connected. As Burns (1999, cover; 2004, pg.11) describes it, "anthropology is the window through which tourism dynamics may be properly analysed and understood". Gender is established as an independent variable shaping the tourism studies and production or consumption of tourist sites, goods and experiences (Kinnaird et al., 1994; Gibson, 2001).

Before World War II, travel and leisure industry was gender restricted with women being confined to their domestic roles as the primary caregiver in a social construct where male domination suppressed their freedom including in tourism (Mowl & Towner, 1995; Khan, 2011). Women played an important role in tourism but control of decision making remained largely in the hands of the men. As more women enter tourism, gender ideologies and the balancing of roles and relations are extended and renegotiated within these new areas of economy (Long & Kinson, 1997). As Myers (2010) points out, through social and political change, public spaces that were traditionally male dominated are increasingly becoming available to women, and from a tourism point of view women are now searching for their own tourism spaces.

New technologies encourage whole new genres of experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Past studies on ICT and gender such as Selwyn (2007) found that mobile phones were perceived as a somewhat feminine technology, while Fuad et al. (2011) discovered that women entrepreneurs used technology to be more competitive in the current environment of the business marketplace. Bulik (2011) reported that women's approach to technology is much more practical, and that they are using technology to do more to extend their roles. Unlike their male travellers, women are setting and influencing new trends and "in Web 3.0, women are poised (to be key) in the humanizing of technology" (Bulik, 2011, p.5). Other scholars (Tavakoli, 2015; Wilson, 2016; Genoe et.al., 2016) substantiated that women have been actively engaged in constructing hybrid, transgendered identities through their consumption of new media such as blogs, social media interactions, and online contributions.

Conceptual Development

The conceptual framework for this study is centred on three main terms namely women travellers' motivation to use technology when travelling, how technology enhances their experiences and how technology empowers women through travel. According to Neuhofer et al. (2012), it is important to understand the role ICT plays at all phases of the tourist experience to gauge the concept of technologically enhanced tourist experience. Deem (1996) claims that if women believe they deserve leisure, then it is useful to describe how women can empower themselves through leisure. ICT is an immensely powerful tool (Amichai et.al, 2008) which open doors and offers the potential to empower individuals by giving people power to shape their own lives.

One, the study will redress the ambiguity in tourism research of the women's 'voice' to signify their touristic experiences and link them to the notion of identity construction through tourism. Two, it will be relevant to fill the gap and add to the body of knowledge for tourism and technology from a gender perspective as it is necessary for academic scholars to build upon and expand on the findings of related theories. Third, the findings will also contribute in establishing the role of women as an important tourism market segment in shaping the future of e-tourism by capturing their voices and choices.

Proposed Methodology

Qualitative, inductive framework was viewed to be appropriate, given the exploratory nature of this study. Using ethnography method, this study will employ two main data collection techniques, namely semi-structured in-depth interview and continual participant observation to construct a holistic and contextual view that explores the experiences of travelling women using technology.

Penang Island is the third most common tourist destination in Malaysia located on the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Maghsoodi et al., 2016, p.9). Georgetown, the capital city is widely known for its UNESCO World Heritage-listed streetscape,

ranked No. 4 in Lonely Planet's Top 10 Cities list for Best in Travel 2016 (Straitimes, 2015) besides named as the world's best destination for food by Lonely Planet and top 10 must-visit destinations by Guardian, United Kingdom in 2014. Penang Island boasts advanced infrastructure and facilities besides becoming a hub for digital nomads (Lielacher, 2016). Towards bridging the digital gap, a pioneering project 'Internet Access For All' initiative was launched by the State Government in 2009 with the aim of providing free wireless Internet around public areas (Khoo et al., 2015, p. 27).

The primary respondents in this study will be female travellers using technology to travel and visit Georgetown, Penang from September 2016 to June 2017. The selection of the respondents needs to fulfil the requirement of technology savvy-ness i.e. a person who owns smart-apps, demonstrates active usage of social media, and has experience in using technology for travel activities. The USM-PGT Penang Tourists Survey 2014 showed 54.4% of women traveller in Penang. The study will be conducted in various urban tourist spots around Georgetown, Penang namely public tourism hangout areas, lodging quarters and transportation hubs with a potentially high concentration of technology-savvy women travellers.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study will provide an insight to the importance of understanding how gender and the condition of 'being' a woman in the 21st century affects individual choices, decisions, and experiences in leisure and thereby contributes to the deconstruction of firmly rooted stereotypes with three primary objectives:

- To identify the underlying motivations for technology usage by female travellers;
- To explore the changing nature of the female traveller's travel experiences with technology;
- Seek to understand how technology empower female through travelling.

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