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Research paper



A Review on Malaysian Women's Leisure and Perceptions Towards Solo Travelling.

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Abstract

The female travel market has shown an increase in leisure travel especially in Asia. Global travel is meant for men in the past but the women travel phenomenon has gradually emerged. Malaysia is among the South East Asian countries which is experiencing a sturdy growth in tourism. The aim of this study is to explore Malaysian women viewpoints towards solo travelling. This study addresses the activeness of Malaysian women in leisure and provides an insight of these women from the Asian perspective. A qualitative approach is employed in this study. Malaysia is a pluralist country and thus it would be ideal to understand the country's social and cultural influences on women's perception of solo travel. Data is collected among Malaysian women aged from 19 to 33 years old. An in-depth interview technique is conducted to identify the perceptions of Malaysian women on solo travelling and subsequently the travelling patterns. The findings indicate that the women possessed positive determination in overcoming the constraints of solo travelling. Furthermore, the individuals' social and cultural identities do not restrict them not to take leisure travel. However, Malaysian women prefer to travel in groups instead of solo travel. This paper provides academicians, tourism marketers and policymakers with a glimpse of Asian perspectives, particularly of Malaysian women and solo travelling, and hence can better prepare the industry in tapping the lucrative solo travelling market.

Keywords: *Consumer Behaviour; Decision Making; Malaysian Women; Solo Travellin*

1. Introduction

There are various attributes that motivate people particularly women in leisure. Substantial changes in the social structure for women ideologies have modernized within Asian perspective. Contributing factors such as the active, aging population, no child marriages, and late marriages have created diverse demands in travel and leisure[1]. With the growing demand in niche tourism, mass tourism has evolved from the 1950s[2]. Understanding the perspectives of Asian women is important because it foresees the behaviours of women which are likely to occur. Generational studies has given rise to the controversies and debates on the inconsistencies[3] where the criticisms are limited within selected segments such as minorities, immigrants, women studies and generations in the workplace and the precise birth dates of different generations[4]. Also, most studies of gender and tourism are focused to the West instead of Asia[5]. Thus, this study attempted to identify the perspectives of women in solo travelling. The aim was to address the gender and societal contexts of Malaysian women in leisure and acknowledge the women's voices where they are less heard in tourism studies. Looking into the cases in Malaysia, opportunities for women involved in the workforce and education are on the rise[6] which give impacts of financial independence and access in education in gender and tourism. Besides that, marketing played important roles in boosting tourism where yearly events like the Malaysia International Travel Mart (MITM) and the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA) were organized. The goal of these events was to promote holiday packages for Malaysian thus motivation people to travel which showed an increase in leisure seeking among youngsters[7]. Demographic changes in Malaysia indicated the age group 19-33 years old as the largest cohort in the Malaysia population. This age group has gone through education and the transition experience from childhood to adulthood[8] and were involved in the workforce. Thus, it particular age group was the ideal target.

2. Literature Review

The study presented the profit of solo travelling particularly in women by using the Malaysian population as the inkling. Solo travel refers to the status of arriving in the country alone[9] and the entire journey which can be adjusted from the organized mass tourist to the fully independent traveller. It was driven by the fact that this group of women adopted a self-organized travel pattern where travel itineraries and activities were arranged on their own with or without tourism intermediary. The idea of women's leisure to pursue diverse travelling patterns and consequently, solo travel, has increased in prevalence. Previously, leisure was a rite passage for men but now solo travelling is emerging among women. Gender was related to the powers of privileges or restrictions and identified as masculine and femininie[11]. In the social structure and in comparison to men, women were intricate with familial responsibilities. With the changes of the generational eras, the status ofgender has transformed and elevated the status of women in

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stereotypical gender identities and women empowerment. Women still remained in domestic responsibilities but it cannot be affirmed on women engaged in travel. Gender relations of men and women also built there touristic experiences[11]. Therefore, it was essential to understand the conditions of women in the 21st century on their choices and preferences in leisure.

Previous literature in tourism and census indicated that solo travel was one of the growing segmentations. In the West, the booking.com survey 2015[12] showed that 72% of American women undertook solo travel whereas Tripadvisor's Women's Travel Survey 2015[13] showed that 60% of women in Southeast Asia travelled alone with an increasing number among the Japanese and Chinese[14], where solo travel was their selection instead of the various travelling patterns in the West and Asia. This was the sign that the phenomenon of women solo travel was gaining attention especially in Asian countries and in cognizance, attention had given on Malaysian women solo travellers as reported in the news. Likewise, Anita Yusof, the first solo Muslim who rode her bike around the world[15] and Petrina Thong, who travelled solo by hitchhiking from Malaysia to Europe[16] were seen as indicators of the rising phenomenon in solo travel. Asian identities however, were varied based on the geography. In Asia, values are important in social relations especially families. The cultures disclose the beliefs on gender basis and are linked to a patriarchal system reflecting both past and present values. Additionally, there are three main religions which are practiced widely in Asia, namely, Confucianism, Islam and Hinduism. These religions are also practiced in Malaysia[17]. The ideologies have similar concepts particularly in gender norms where the individual of dominant gender and roles in the family are emphasized[18]. Yet in the 21st century, there concepts are still clearly divided in Asia. The main adjustment was that women were able to access freely these days. Popular debates among Malaysian women interest group in inequality is reinforced in Malaysia[25]. Also, in terms of cross-cultural research, the motivation and the travel experiences of Malaysian women had not been empirically researched, particularly with regard to the solo travelling patterns. There was lack of understanding in women's voices. Hence, the implications are to represent Malaysian women in the present for tourism research and management.

3. Methodology

The process in addressing the research was positioned by interpretative paradigm, using the qualitative method. The theory was substantiated through the data rather than imposing the hypotheses[19]. The rationale was to allow the researcher to identify women's voices with regard to their solo travelling patterns. This research design was viewed to be appropriate tool to interpret emotions[20] and the complexities of data. Therefore, the in-depth interview was the ideal selection for accessing the women's feelings, thoughts and voices[24]. A survey questionnaire consisting of close-ended questions and open-ended questions in the interview guide was designed to collect required data for the study. The women who were interviewed were encouraged to express their viewpoints in their own ways based on their opinions[21]. Thus, a series of open-ended questions were listed in the semi-structured interview guide. Then, the researcher probed spontaneously to lead so as to gain a clearer picture of the information given by the women during the interviews. Also, a demographic survey was distributed in order to collect basic information about them. The items in the interview guide were derived from previous studies[22 23] where the focus of the study was the interviewees' lives, their cultural and religious backgrounds, travel experiences and travel history. The whole process was carried out over a period of one to two months until the data saturations were reached. The interviews were conducted face to face and recorded using voice memos. The data was transcribed for analysis purposes. The study sample comprised of 16 women. The selection was based on three main criteria (a) must be aged between 19-33 years old, (b) must be Malaysian and staying in Malaysia and (c) she des travel whether or not the travels were domestic or international. Where the data were collected via purposive sampling, snowball sampling was also used so as to connect with the others interviewees. As the subjects involved various races in Malaysia, the interviews were conducted in three major languages of Malaysia that is Mandarin, Malay and English. The usage of language was according to the interviewees' preferences. Since Malaysia is a multilingual country, the main limitation of the study was the language. Most of the interviewees used a mix of the languages. This mix of the languages consisted of Chinese dialects or Mandarin, Malay and English. It was not British English or U.S. English; rather it was Manglish. Before the interview started, an introduction, purpose of the research and some travelling anecdotes were shared to present the idea in general and to initiate the ice-breaking session. The "knowledgeable stranger" mode was adopted to construct the relationship and build trust between the researchers and respondents. This mode referred to the "interviewer as friend" and "interviewer as stranger"[24]. The main purpose was to encourage respondents to open up and be flexible in the interviews. It was a sign of respect to show gratitude and thus inspire them to unfold more stories willingly. Hence, the researchers needed to be attentive and portray good listening skills. Interviewees were informed on confidential and ethnic issues for their acknowledgement before the consent form was signed. Respondents were identified using alphabets such as Respondent A and Respondent B. In terms of validity and reliability, comments from peers, colleagues and participants provided valuable insight to the researchers. This was to acknowledge researchers bias based on the researchers' worldview[25]. Besides that, multiple and different resources were utilized to identify and compare the data. The objective was to pinpoint the data from the interviewees' own narrative whereby the researchers acted as interpreters and were not influenced by the inquirer. All data was then transcribed and analysed into general categories and themes. Descriptive labels were created in each segment. This was followed by coding where initial codes were developed to identify and incorporate the themes and subthemes. Finally, themes were revealed as representative theoretical concepts for the sample. The analysis thus yielded was categorized into three main themes

4. Discussion and Findings

The main themes represented the women's voices which were explained in the outcomes of this study. Based on the findings, the three themes that emerged were the activeness of Malaysian women in life, and the women who were able to access travel freely and Malaysian women who still prefer to travel in groups.

4.1. Malaysian Women are Active in Life

This theme represents the rising desire in life besides the expectations from the society suggested women should remain in a protective environment. Therefore, women acknowledged their gender roles and emphasized on gender stereotypes[26]. However, most of the women in this study showed the positive determinations in leisure. Respondent M indicated: *Girls can do what the guys can do.* It was supported by Respondent Y, where women are active individuals to continuously travel: *I think women can do anything what… we should travel more.* Also, the encouragement of Respondent J to be brave: *Face their biggest fear in their lives, whatever fear you have, just try for once in your lifetime*.

In fact, positive resistance was not only a determination approach: it developed an intrinsic empowering faith that allowed them to embrace their ongoing life decisions. For Respondent J whose eagerness to achieve her dream as she did not have many opportunities to travel when she was younger, this factor drove her to undertake the travel path.

Actually, from the dream of a little girl from a small town really, so I really want to achieve that kind of life when you can go freely, travel the world… emm since you didn't have, never had the opportunity to travel when you were young, not even out of your town, not even a small town, you can't travel to that.

This evidently showed that the women in this study challenged the acknowledgement of gender differences [27] and patriarchal ideologies where there were no gender differences for women's leisure. While previous literatures demonstrated the power of men who had access in all spheres of life, the women was secondary in status in many societies. The decisions made were more likely according to the women's own beliefs and desires. It demonstrated the Asian perspectives of women travelling that have converged in the 21st century. It was interesting to note that most women did not view gender as a restriction factor. Women conformed to gender roles and shared the authority similar to men in life. The development and societal progress had elevated the status the status of women and empowered the position of women in societies. Travel statistics which occupied a large segment of women in leisure thus explained the rising of women travel phenomenon.

4.2. Culture and Religion Were Not Constraints to Travel

The second theme showed that women were able to access travel freely. Cross-cultural differences can be reflected in terms of perceptions, motivations, expressions, verbal and non-verbal behaviours, values and the meaning system[28]. The dominance of the Westerner and the Asian reflected the gaps in leisure concepts. However, the existence of Asian women participating in leisure and solo travel revealed the ideologies of the westerners in Asian perspectives. The statement from Respondent N indicated Western and Asian exposures in travelling which is not being focused in Asian perspectives yet.

So you look at the Americans or Europeans, they already start to travel alone. You can see like 16 years or 18 years old women, or teenage girls travelling alone like going to the island, take part in beer festivals whatever they already tried this. I would say this is actually new for Asians only. Asians are actually trying to change from their usual environment; they are trying to adopt the new things, travelling solo. However this concept is already used in Asia long way back but not very focused like yes we can see women travel alone from Malaysia, few from Singapore, few from Thailand, or India few.

Malaysia is a pluralist country where various beliefs are practiced based on individual backgrounds. Likewise, Respondent A and Respondent Z, indicated that Muslims were able to access and travel conveniently as the facilities such as prayer rooms and *Halal* (foods that Muslims consume) restaurants were provided to cater for the religions needs in most countries: *I can still do like a Muslim does like e.g. I still can pray even in a non-Muslim country*. Their statement was also supported by Respondent I, who made further timelines which reflected her aspiration to share positive life experiences with her children, and indicated: *I don't think so my culture and my religion influence me any further where I want to travel*. Instead, decision making on travel depended on the individual's desire as in the excerpt from Respondent Z.

Basically, I will set my mind this time where I want to go. I want to cover Asia, so I will think of a few countries like within Southeast Asia and also Australia or Japan or Korea. So for my coming trip, my next aim is to go to Europe, so that is how I make a decision.

Although most of the women interviewed did not acknowledge the cultural and social constraints as hindrances yet there were some women who expressed the attributions of decision making on destinations that depended on some backgrounds. It could be that they obliged to the rules of religions as stated by Respondent Y*: I won't travel to go disco or emm to go maybe I guess things that are not allowed like alcohol things*. Similarly, Respondent Y claimed that the religion influenced her decision: *If in terms of religion, I think ya I would be more interested on like maybe for places: church buildings and all that rather than temples, Chinese temples.*

The results disputed previous researches of Wilson[18] and Subramaniam[29] in regard of the religious affiliation in leisure. Muslim and Hindi cultures were perceived as the constraints. Yet, the interview pointed out that religion was less likely to be influential in leisure. These women showed that religions were not a restriction and obligation to fulfil and leisure can be done at the same time. This highlighted the features of contemporary women whereby the conveniences and flexibility upon the obligations of culture and religion provided a shifting trend. In fact, Malaysia as a pluralist country with a cross culture of multi languages, religions and cultures offered advantages for Malaysians. Such exposure lessened the hassle for the travellers and encouraged them to participate in leisure due to the resemblances present in other countries.

4.3. Malaysian Women Prefer to Travel in Groups

The trend of solo travelling among women in Southeast Asia had grown. Adding to the sense of desire in travel presented in the previous themes, women's vitality highlighted the current trends. Still, solo travel was functioning as a hindrance to act. Besides that, many literatures and media coverage of female solo travellers and the risk of sexual harassment[30] indicated that women were equally concerned of the uncertainties ahead. When travelling alone, the women travelers had to cope with their own safety and anxiety concerns. Therefore, travelling in group was the appropriate selection to raise awareness of the uncertain circumstances

Women's anxieties in anticipation of safety were exacerbated by explicit critics from family and friends that the act of undertaking solo travel was not a thoughtful option. A similar opinion of Respondent S and Respondent K was their concern of family worries and thus, encouraged women to travel with partner instead: *women can travel where ever they want but still they should have assistance with them, maybe their friends and family.*

Let's say before this my boyfriend is based in India. When I have thought to pay a visit, my family and boyfriend will stop me and told me it is not a safe place for a girl to travel alone. That's why this is also not to say you can travel to any place you want, you have to consider other people's feelings.

In accordance with Respondent Y, her notion reflected on the gender stereotypes

Women is very hard to travel alone in general because leisure is still the kind of place that would not let, would not see women as somebody that is independent depends on some places and people perspectives.

In addition to the tangible fears, common circumstances that triggered women's awareness were the social norms that made women's travel vulnerable. Both Respondent M and Respondent I reflected upon feminine figures in certain places: *If I go somewhere I need to be more covered up, I think lots of people look at you differently la.*

Either way, the statement was not significant to all destinations. Likewise, Respondent Z mentioned the courtesy of the locals brought about a sense of recognition to these women by being different in wearing *hijab*, a traditional veil in non-Muslim countries, resulting in the acceptance their self-identities as Muslims.

Just once when I went to Korea, all the old ladies there they saw me and my other friends wearing hijab, like all the girls, but they

keep saying to us how beautiful, beautiful, so that is a nice feedback.

The results partially professed the literature of Wilson[18] and Alsawafi[31] where the stereotypical image and sexual harassment of women in patriarchal countries led them to comply to social ideologies. Some women in the study revealed the independency of women's actions as constrain in the case of family members and fear of surrounding people especially in hazardous places. Therefore, being accompanies was essential in these circumstances. Otherwise, women were delightful when the locals showed their courtesy in respect of the individual's cultural and religious differences. This indicated that women's leisure was influenced by other individual's remarks in making decisions. Hence, the women in this study were aware of their safety and the behaviour of the locals. Predominance of the masculine gender still existed and was practiced in Asian societies. Thus, travelling in groups was able to counteract the fear and tolerate uncertain circumstances.

5. Conclusion

The trend of solo travel was not a new occurrence. This paper explored the phenomenon of Malaysian women as a whole where solo travelling for women was challenging the traditional conventions. Generally, the main conclusion of the paper was that Malaysian women were actively engaged in leisure and this was relatively positive. As a result, the outcomes in the gendered nature of society structures did not show the constraints of the women participating in leisure. It was noted that women were not the disadvantaged gender in the modernization of societies. Social change gave women near equality division in most aspects of life. Women expected high anxiety concerns in solo travelling which ultimately led to decision of their travelling patterns. The risk of being exposed in public spheres where women's respectability was threatened if they travelled alone and the unwanted attention made the travelling vulnerable. Therefore, most of the women preferred to travel in group. The results demonstrated that solo travel can be seen as a new category of travelling pattern in Malaysia. The subtle changes in the norms of society had identified the changes in perceptions of women in leisure. This phenomenon had the potential to widen in ways that gendered respectability was present in the 21st century. Also, with the cross cultural nature of Asia, the potential of women's participation in leisure had emerged where tourism was no longer pertinent for the dominant gender only. However, this research focused on Malaysian women aged between 19-33 years old, so it did not generalize women as a whole. Rather than approaching Malaysian women as a phenomenon, future research of gender studies in Southeast Asia in this subject may gain great insight as an indicator in the tourism industry.

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