The Presentation of Gender Identity on Female Travel Blogs

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Abstract

Blogs as a growing online platform came to be seen as a 'newly ideal' space for social interaction, identity construction and negotiation. Bloggers became a social actor who showcase and perform their roles and identities online. This paper wouldattempt to analyse the presentation of gender identities on travel blogs managed and written by female travellers. The research questions raised were "how online technology (travel blogs) become a space for women to perform gender identity online? In performing their identity, how these women may challenge the conception of male domination in "travel world" as presented through their narratives in a travel blog?". The study found that travel blogs have become a space for female travellers to express and extend their identities online. Female identity presented in travel blogs substantially informs the traditionally exclusion of women in travel world. As has also been elaborated, travelling itself can be understood as a gendered phenomenon. Since traveling is gendered, perception of being on the road and the roles playedby male and female traveller is different.

Abstrak

Blog sebagai platform online yang berkembang mulai dilihat sebagai ruang 'baru ideal' untuk interaksi sosial, konstruksi identitas, dan negosiasi. Blogger menjadi aktor sosial yang memamerkan dan melakukan peran dan identitas mereka secara online. Tulisan ini akan mencoba untuk menganalisis penyajian identitas gender pada blog perjalanan yang dikelola dan ditulis oleh pelancong wanita. Pertanyaan penelitian yang diajukan adalah "bagaimana teknologi online (blog perjalanan) menjadi ruang bagi perempuan untuk melakukan identitas gender secara online? Dalam menjalankan identitas mereka, bagaimana para wanita ini dapat menantang konsep dominasi laki-laki dalam "dunia perjalanan" seperti yang disajikan melalui narasi mereka di blog perjalanan?". Studi ini menemukan bahwa blog perjalanan telah menjadi ruang bagi wisatawan wanita untuk mengekspresikan dan memperluas identitas mereka secara online. Identitas perempuan yang disajikan dalam blog perjalanan secara substansial menginformasikan secara tradisional pengecualian wanita di dunia perjalanan. Seperti juga telah diuraikan, perjalanan itu sendiri dapat dipahami sebagai fenomena gender. Karena bepergian adalah gender, persepsi berada di jalan dan peran yang dimainkan oleh wisatawan pria dan wanita berbeda.

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Introduction

Goffman's theory of social interaction as a stage performance has underpinned studies examining how individuals perform and exhibit self-identityin online spaces (Miller, 1995; Hogan, 2010).Extending Goffman's view, the internetwith its variety of platforms such as blogs and social networking sitescan be seen asa "stage" where individualsinteract, communicate with others, perform and present their self-identity online (Azariah, 2016). It is within this context that female's travel blogs can be seen as collection of narratives presentingthe gender roles and identities ofthe blogger as well as traveller. For travel bloggers, online spaces are undeniably of importance to share theirstories and experiencesfor theaudiences. Travel narratives they createmayconsist ofpersonal information, travel tips and motivations, and experiences that may reflect their views oftravel.

Travel bloggersmay frequently see themselves as traveller.Thetraveller identity may explain some features that arguably different from those of tourist. Cohen (1972) in his typology of tourist proposed different types of tourist based on the degree of novelty and familiarity in which travel experience is understood. Travellers may avoid of joining a packaged tour in order to gain a higher degree of novelty and to be more independence in performing their travels. Travel independently as has earlier been practiced by explorers and drifters (or more recently backpackers)provides more chance to express freedom, autonomy, and individuality. This form of travel is often composed with the 'real' presence of risk and adventure travellers seek on the road (Cohen, 2003, p.100). Thus, through the practice of travel blogging, female travellersmay reflect their ideas of what it means to be independent, autonomous, resilient and free.

The act of blogging can be seen as a mean of presenting gender identities and performing'femininities' and 'masculinities'online (Doorn, N. v., 2007, p.156). In relation between gender and technology, Wajcman (2007) argues thatsince 1990s cyberfeminist scholars have endorsed optimism that the digital technologies provide a variety of opportunities for women to liberate themselves from subordinate position. This view presents in complete contrast with second wave feminism arguing that the role of technology may reinforce marginalization of women. Amid the pessimism versus optimism debate, the discourse on gender identityonline has been advanced to construct hybrid, fluid, and multipleidentities of the users. Blogs as a growing online platform came to be seen as a 'newly ideal'space for social interaction, identity construction and negotiation. Bloggers became an actor who perform their roles and identities online.

This paper wouldattempt to analyse the presentation of gender identities on travel blogs managed and written by female travellers. The research question raised in this essay is "How online technology (travel blogs) become a space for women to perform gender identity? In

performing their identity, how these women may challenge male domination in "travel world" as presented through their narratives in travel blog?" AdoptingWest and Zimmerman's (1987, p.129) concept of doing gender, gender identities would be viewed as something individuals achieve or accomplish through ongoing social interactions.To structure this essay, I would first like tostart by briefly discussing the concept of doing gender and gender identities in online research. Then, discussing the rise of female travellers and travel bloggersin the context of 'post' second-wave feminism. Toward the end,I would providean overview of two popular female travel blogs. Literature review andoverview of selected travel blogs would be combined in attempt to answer the research question. The results would be presented inconclusion section.

Doing gender and performing gender online

Almost every day while interacting with others, we consciously or unconsciously carry out a process of categorization based on embodied identities (Woodward, 2015, p.107). This categorization informs which roles we play in society. For example, we have sexual identity that has been commonly ascribed to us either as a man or woman. This kind of identities determine into which category we may enter.When our sexual identity categorizes us as a man, for example, the perception and expectation that are associated with us are typically 'masculine'. Meanwhile, when we are categorized as women, we are expected to act'feminine'. If gender is defined as the culturally established correlates of sex, then conventionalized portrayal of gender display correlates with gender roles (Goffman, 1979, p.1).

In relation to this, West & Zimmerman (1987, p.129) develop the concept of 'doing gender' to argue about the connection and disconnection between sex category and gender role we perform. Doing gender is about social doings of some sort, sexually perform either femininities or masculinities, either as a male or femalein particular social situations.. Although sex category influence which and how we perform gender roles, it is therefore not always true to perceive that men are always 'men' and women are 'women'. By 'doing gender', people can always possibly perform against normative gender roles and identities. For instance, male might perform femininities and femalemight perform masculinities. So, doing gender can include going beyond normative gender behaviours and potential for challenging them.

Gender roles are influenced by process of socialization. When little girls are taught to be soft, calm, and value their appearances, they are socialized to be more 'feminine', they are expected to internalized the characters and values of 'femininity'. When little boys are thought to be brave, strong, and not to drop tears, they are socialized to be more 'masculine', they are expected to internalize the characters of 'masculinity'. Little girls and boys are raised and

socialized different meanings about "appropriate" gender behaviour. Through this process, girls and boys learn how to "competently" be girls and boys. As they grow up, they began to look each other and assess the different gender behaviour between men and women whether they are "appropriate" and "competent" enough in playing their achieved gender roles. However, as West & Zimmerman (1987, p.145) have emphasized, the process is arguably interactional. Doing gender, they suggest,should be understood in the context of social interaction. It is an ongoing process, taking place all the time, and routinely accomplished in every day interaction.Since we do gender in social interaction, and we do interaction every day, doing gender seems to become unavoidable. Doing gender is not simply about who we are, rather it is about what we act and do in the process of interaction with others. Situating the concept of gender in this context, it becomes known that gender is a product of social interaction, it is a social construction.

Femininities and masculinities comprise cultural narratives, discourses and images connecting ways of being, behaving, acting, performing, and presenting of the self with gender categories (McGregor, 2013, p.216). Presentation of femininities and masculinities have interesting implications for how gender is presented and experienced. Along with the rise of internet, online spaces have become an emerging social arena for discussion and investigation on how gender conceived of and experienced online. Looking at the growing research on the relationship between gender identity and online technology, three general types of research can be identified. The first type of studies focuses on the representation of the 'real life' self in online spheres. Here, online identity is largely informed or influenced by the 'real life' experiences and identity. The relation between the 'real' person and the online persona such as avatar is 'synchronous'. Borrowing Goffman's terms, the 'real' self can be seen as a 'performer' who play out gender identity in online spaces through an online 'character'. Emphasis on similarities between online and offline gender identities performed indicates that the persona presented in online spaces is unified, gender identity is embodied with that in the physical world (Doorn, N. v. et al, 2007, p.144). In this type of study, doing gender practiced by the performer in the 'real life' is extended through narratives, discourses and images presented in online spaces.

Other studies focus on the possibilities for creating online identities different with the 'real life' identities. Here, the emphasis is on the potentials for creating new identities without being constrained by the 'real' self-identity. By looking at the possibilities and the potentials of 'creating the new', technology is seen bringing liberatory aspect for the construction of alternative gender identities. Discrepancies and dissimilarities between online and offline identities performed are seen as a positive potential for liberating the performer from biologically determined sex category, rather than negative potential for delusion. Thus, gender identity is undeniably disembodied from the body in the physical world. Cyberfeminist

scholarssince 1990have seen this kind of potentials inherently exist in the digital technology. The internet is thus celebrated as a new technology that provide opportunities for liberating individuals from the constrained identity. The wind of optimism for liberation may be best summed up by Haraway in 1985 as she famously uses the term 'cyborg' to promote the self for being a hybrid organism and machine parts. The implications of this digital technology are the creation of fluid, flexible, and multiple identities that arestarted by the rise of the internet (Wajcman, 2007, p.292), reinforcing what Turkle (1995, p.178) has stated earlier that as an element of contemporary human culture, internet has contributed to thinking about identity as fluid, flexible, and multiple.

Another type of research adopts relational approach in examining the relation between gender and technology. Wajcman (2007) addresses the 'mutual shaping' process of gender and technology. In line with Turkle's (1995, pp.295-296) view on multiplicity of identity, she argued that this mutual shaping process inform the relation between gender and technology that is fluid and flexible. Technology can beboth a source as well as consequence of gender power relations. The premise offered by this approach is that people and technology is co-evolve and co-construct. Here, the material aspect of technology allows or constrain the doing of particular gender power relations. The digital technology as an artefact or object is shaped by social circumstances within which it produces and consumes. Relational account of gender and technology implies that technology is neither technical nor social, rather composed bythe interrelation of both.Gender relations influence the production and consumption of technology. They structure and reflect the use of technology. Conversely, technologies influence gender relations. By claiming that gender and technology are mutually constitutive, technologies as cultural products, reflect, structure, and produce gender relations. Digital technology can afford doing gender in online spaces, but its affordance is constrained by the materiality of technology.

Traditionally masculine connotation of technology has resulted both pessimism and optimism of technological development and innovation with respect to gender relation. The internet has become widespread, but at the same time the debate on whether the internet liberate or subordinate women has not been settled. Optimism accounts of digital technology emphasize its potential for creation of new identities and presentation of expected identities regardless the identities that has been ascribed by individuals in physical world. The presentation of self-identity can be seen through looking at narratives published in online spaces such as blog. Since the late 1990s, the growth of blogs has been rapid and prominent to spread personal stories to public online. Blogging activity has become a global phenomenon (Doorn, N. v. et al, 2007, p.146). Blogs evolve from diary-writing tradition which is historically perceived as feminine activity (Sorapure, 2003 in Azizah, 2016, p.936). Perhaps, this is why blogs are more relevant to be seen as prominent innovation that potentially empower and

liberate women. Blog has increasingly been used to share personal stories and experiences. It has been also utilized by individuals as a means ofsharing experiences. As blogs support these activities, they can be seen as narratives that enable individuals to indicate different role and identities managed and performedonline.

The rise of female traveller and travel blogger

Similar growth in blogging has also emerged intravel and tourism. Travel blogs have become one of the most popular trends in web technologyin which people canshare their travel experiences and receive wider audiences. It is assumed that the growth of travel blogs is directly linked to the increasing number of people who travel and identify themselves as traveller(Bosangit, 2009, p.61). As technology becomes more advanced especially in the area of transportation, information and communication, people's opportunity towards mobility is becoming greater. Recently, traveling has become a widespread phenomenon and practiced by both men and women from across the globe. Looking from historical perspectives, it can be seen that corporeal travel activity was traditionally dominated by men. The purpose of travelling is often describedwith deeply 'masculine' connotationssuch as seeking forfreedom, adventure, exploration, facing risk, danger, etc. Today, social and technological advancement have contributed to liberation for women, leading to greater opportunities for women to express their freedom and independence through travelling. A growing number of women are making the most of their independence to set up a trip and travel around the world (Myers &Hannam, 2008, p.174). This leads to the emergence of a group of women who like to identify themselves as a female traveller.

Female travellers are considered to have difference travel motivations and experiences with males (Richards & Wilson, 2004, p.264). Few triggering factors that motivates females to travel such as the need to escape from domestic or routine job, to overcome a loss of emotional ties, to experience the risk of danger, to demonstrate women's abilities and undertake scientific discovery. It is also indicated that women more than men wanted to travel to gain a sense of freedom and established independence from their families and doing things comfortably alone. Women are more likely than men to travel in order to develop friendship with others. Women's experiences in travel are also considered to be different compared with their male counterpart(Myers &Hannam, 2008, pp.176-177).This difference is often linked to the issue of risk and safety. Travelling is often perceived more dangerous for women rather than for men.Such a perception has been criticized by feminist since it seems to marginalize the position of women when it comes to travel.

However,it is often argued, motivations, experiences, and risk perception of travelling between male and female traveller are clearly different (Richards & Wilson, 2004, pp.264-265).

Since travel experiences havetraditionally been described with more masculine connotations, women are often placed in a marginal position in travel discourse. While the number of female traveller is considered growing,travel is still essentially considered a gendered phenomenon. Although they were no official number showing this trend, the rise ofemaletraveller can be identified by the proliferation of female'stravel blogs narrating their own travel stories. Travel blogs managed and written by females have become common. Sociologically, they utilize blogs not only to share stories and experiences, but also to express and extend their identities online.Travel blogs, as a specific genre of blogs, contain travel-related narratives. They are defined as blogs of travel experiences. These are generally written as online personal journals that describe travellers' journey though narratives, images, videos, and others. As identity is constituted narratively, by sharing stories through travel blogging, people can convey and negotiate their identities with others. Travel blogs as narratives provides textual artefacts of traveller identities (Bosangit et al., 2009, pp.62-63).

Female travel bloggers are engaged in presenting their identity through narratives they create as they write about their own travel stories. The traditionally 'feminine' connotation of diary writing, leads to perceived view of blogging as 'fit for women'. Hence discussing gender identity in travel blogs is examining an intersection between 'masculine' connotations of travelling and 'feminine' act of blogging. Female travel blogs demonstrate the way in which female travellers present and express their identities online. 'Masculine' acts of travelling are presented through storiesthey share in a form of online narratives. In presenting their online self, they disclose their personal information including gender identity as female who adopt 'masculine' act of travelling as their main activity. The representation of embodied self-identity may consider the 'real' identity to be located in the physical world (Doorn, N. v. et al, 2007, p.148). Femaletraveller may view themselves in the way of achieving comprehensively set of self-image that enable them to find their 'true identity' as a traveller.Liberatory sense of blogging is apparent. This present in contrast with second-wave feminist's view of technology, claiming that technological development only reinforces women's exclusion in society (Wajcman, 2007, p.287).

Overview of female travel blogs

An overview of popular female travel blogs is presented here in order to show how gender identities arepresented in online space. In October 2015, a widely known travel site and review www.tripadvisor.comidentified the top 20 female travel bloggers and asked them to share advises for woman to travel alone. These female travellers set up blogs to share many things related to their travel experiences. Besides travel tips and advises, profiles, travel routes, destinations, risks, motivations are dominant narratives that can be found by surfing in their

pages. To pick only two examples out of 20 as the most popular ones among female travel blogs, we find www.grrrltraveller.com and www.bemytravelmuse.com. Popularity of these site has been checked using www.alexa.com, a traffic monitoring website that has been widely accepted for research (Bosangit, 2009, p.64). Those two travel blogs are managed by bloggers who declare themselves as female solo travellers. As narrated in their blogs, they prefer to travel solo and use blogs to share stories, tips, and advices to encourage others especially women to travel.

For example, a popular travel blogwww.bemytravelmuse.com managed by a female traveller, presents her identities along with narratives about her choice of quitting from work and fulfil her dream to travel around the world. She writes that she received many questions from women around the world about how to traveling solo. Many women want to travel solo but feel discourage as they remember being scared of the unknown. Fear of perceived risks that are familiar for travellers has prevented them from traveling. She simply encourages others to believe that such a fear did not really exist. Perception of risk and consideration of safety have frequently become one of the most themes discussed in female travel bogs. Similar encouragement to traveling solo is narrated in another popular travel blogwww.grrrltraveller. com. The author has also identified herself as female solo traveller. There in her blog she shares her tips of traveling solo for women. She begins with a question whether traveling solo for women is easy or not. As posted in her blog, she claims that one of the biggest thing that restrict women for traveling alone is a feeling of fear. What she means by fear is the fear of the unknown. She encourages women not to fear by saying that she feels more motivated by fear of regret if they she does not take the risk.

Presentation of personal information about the blog's author is also an important part of travel blogs because it tells the audiences who is the actual person behind the character. Female travel bloggers portray themselves not merely as blogger who stay behind the screen to share stories, rather, they also engage in embodied activity of traveling. 'The chronology' of how they become a solo traveller is often presented along with their profile. For instance, the author of www.bemytravelmuse.comportrayed herself as a normal girl raised in South California, she once worked as an investment banker for four years before questioning her passion and quitting her job. She started to travel alone since 2012, after sold her belongings, armed with nothing but bag and no company. She then pushed herself to make a change and so become a female solo traveller. The blog www.grrrltraveller.com present the profile of the author as a female solo travel blogger who left her life in New York as an actress and reality TV camera operator and producer to live and work abroad in South Korea for more than 7 months. She then returned to the US and said that she re-designed her lifestyle towards travel.In 2008 when she was on a backpack tour in India and Nepal with a group of friends, she signed up for a scam tour and decided to get out of it. She was "drop-kicked into flight"

and so her first solo travel began.

Another important aspect observed in travel blogs is narratives about motivations of traveling solo.Motivations of travelling solo as narrated in travel blogs mostly include psychological aspects related to inner will and passion to have new experiences, conquer obstacles, or survive from danger. In her site www.grrrltraveller.com, she emphasizes the exercise of utilizing travel survival as a source of valuable experiences motivates her choice to travelling solo. The unpredictable situations that may appear when traveling can lead to the worst condition experienced by the self. In such a situation, courage, she writes, can be an impulse to raise confidence in order to conquer the existing fear and risk. A strong emotion can be exercised by utilizing travel survival when traveling alone. Another factor that motivates female to travel alone is something related to her independence and freedom. Possibility of traveling alone has much to do with a sense of independence such as being single and unattached to work. Stories about quitting from 'professional' jobs imply the need of freedom in order to be able to travelling alone.

Conclusion

Although the contents of female travel blogs may cover various travel-related narratives, personal information, motivations, and advices targeted women to travel are common entries presented in the blogs. The word 'female' as explicitly displayed in the profile page or other entries of the blog implies that gender identity is something that should be visibleto the audiences. It might be difficult to find a travel blog's profile with anexplicit 'male' identity such as 'male traveller' or 'male travel blogger'. Such a display not only tells the audiences about gender identity, but also referring to whatGoffman (1979) has said, evidence of the actor's alignment in the social situations. Female identity presented in travel blogs substantially informs the traditionally exclusion of women in travel world.The stories about how and why they become femaletravellers are also presented in online profile, not only to show 'the stories' behind their choice, but also their 'philosophy' of freedom.For example, presenting narratives about quitting from job, or doing a job that enables them to travel a lot means they try to tellthe audiences what freedom means for them. The act of travel blogging may facilitate them to represent their own ideas and identities online.Female solo travellers express their meaning of freedom, their self-identities, their life choice through narratives presented in their travel blogs.

Travel blogs have become a space for female travellers to express and extend their identities online. As elaborated earlier, travelling alone can be understood as a gendered phenomenon. Since traveling is gendered, perception of being on the road and the roles plays for male and female traveller is different. For example, when women intended to

travel on her own, they are, more than men,expected to consider the risk that may appear in the place they visit. Travel safety becomes an important issue to discussed in blogs with respect to gender relation in travelling. Although safety issues are considerably important for both men and women, in fact, a lot of tips and advices presented in travel blogs are directly or indirectly targeted to women. Blog entries with label such as "safety tips for female travellers" or "the safest place for women to travel alone", etc,show that travel safety has become an exclusively gendered issue. The choice of destination places for women are often determined by information about how friendly a country or cities for women. If the area is perceived of dangerous for female travellers such as Latin America for example, such places tend to be avoided. When women travel to perceived dangerous places, she will be attributed with 'masculine' characters such as brave, though, and strong. The desire to enjoy, survive,experience, challenge, conquer risk and danger in the places they visit push them to perform 'masculinities'as narrated in their blogs. This, of course, reflects that travel itself as essentially gendered phenomenon.

An observation on blog posts presents that narratives regarding motivationsof travelingfor women are often described as having deeply 'masculine' connotations.Thinking about 'maleness' characters that strongly associated with travel phenomenon, women are potentially seen in marginal position.From the perspective of doing gender as elaborated by West and Zimmerman (1987), Individuals are better seen as a social agent that constantly 'do' gender through their actions and interactions. By 'do' gender, it means that individuals actively perform their gender identities through interaction with others within particular social situations. Gender identities presented in their blogs as 'female', can be seen as an indication in which the gender norms in travel are potentially challenged. As they grasp their freedom and independence as opportunities to travel for pleasure or satisfaction, they potentially breakaway from their normative hybrid identities such as the 'wife', 'girlfriend', 'mother' or the 'housewife' (Myers &Hanam, 2008, p.174). The act of travel blogging can be seen as a way they liberate themselves from the traditional gender norms. The assumption that traveling are in some ways liberating for women from 'domesticity' to 'freedom of mobility' can be seen in their narratives in travel blogs. The performative act of blogging reflects the possibility of expressing and extending their 'masculinities' and 'femininities' online.

The examination of female travellers' use of blogs mainly fit into the studies that focus on representational aspect of the relation between online and offline gender identity. The representation of gender identities in travel blogs is closely related to the 'real life' experiences that the travel bloggers gained in their corporeal travelling. Female travel bloggers perform their identities in multiple ways, performing different forms of 'femininities' and 'masculinities' in their travel experiences. The traditionally 'masculine' act of solo travelling, presented in females travel blogs, is adopted by women, challenging the traditional and

normative understanding of the relation between gender and travel. The act of blogging can open up opportunities for the expansion of 'masculine' discourse in traveling done by women in the 'blogosphere'. In this sense, blogs have facilitated female travel bloggers to 'do' gender, present gender identities, and perform 'femininities' and 'masculinities' that may challenge traditional gender norms in travel in the area of online spaces. Thus, the act of blogging for these women can be seen as a way of performing 'doing gender' inonline space.

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