Digitalising backpacker to travel vlogger

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Abstract: Tourism is one of the common ways to achieve economic development in most destinations. The expenditure of tourists stimulates the socio-economic development of local communities. Most countries target business travellers and tourists who do not mind spending while travelling. Backpackers were previously underestimated because they travel on an extremely tight budget. This research is based on secondary reviews in the tourism industry. Owing to digitalisation through social media, many backpackers have become travel vloggers who indirectly became influencers in the tourism industry. The popularity of travel vloggers has led to their appointment as tourism ambassadors who promote travel destinations. A leap in momentum in the Malaysian tourism industry is expected within the next few years with the assistance of travel vloggers.

Keywords: backpacker; digital; travel; tourism; tourist; vlogger.

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1 Introduction

The tourism industry has been supporting the economic development in Malaysia. The income generated through tourism continuously increased from RM69.1 billion in 2015 to RM86.1 billion in 2019. Nevertheless, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the income drastically dropped to RM12.7 billion in 2020. Only 4.33 million tourists visited Malaysia in 2020, which is far below the 26.10 million tourists in 2019 (Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board, 2021). The decline in the number of tourists is due to Malaysian movement control order that was issued on 18th March 2020 (Bunyan, 2020) and implemented for nearly 2 years. The movement restriction did not only affect the local communities but also the tourists who intended to visit Malaysia. Given the steady decline of COVID-19 cases, Malaysia opened its boarder for tourism on 1st April 2022 (Aman, 2022). With decreased movement restriction, people are expected to live in the new normal. The economic activities are expected to pick up and support the daily needs of people. Given the drastic impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry, the industry must be rejuvenated through a new industrial revolution wave.

Although not all the income that could be gained through the tourism industry will benefit local communities, the tourism industry generally contributes to the overall socio-economic development of developing countries, especially in Malaysia (Jeyacheya and Hampton, 2020). The tourism industry may also enhance the income distribution and

reduce the income inequality (Shahbaz et al., 2020). Nevertheless, this could be achieved with the strong support from local communities. The willingness of local communities to participate in tourism depends on self-determination and the perceived competence (Jaafar et al., 2020). Further research also revealed that the attachment, commitment and involvement of local communities are important in ensuring that residents are satisfied and support the tourism initiative (Moghavvemi et al., 2021b). As a kick-start to boost the tourism industry, digitalisation prospects must be sought to attract potential tourists. In line with digitalisation, discovering the new generation's needs in tourism is expected to prolong the applicability of the research findings. In fact, the behaviour of youngsters is worth studying because they will shape the future demand in the tourism industry (Caber et al., 2020).

2   Travelling as backpackers

The economic impact that could be generated through the tourism industry not only depends on the number of tourists in a particular destination but also on how much they spend to support the local economic development. On this basis, most developing countries commonly target business travellers who are willing to spend rather than budget travellers who just come to enjoy the ambiance. Nevertheless, the wave of digitalisation has drastically changed the momentum that could be created by these two categories of tourists. Previously, backpacker travellers were underestimated in terms of economic value to local communities because most of them are extreme budget travellers. Some of the backpackers are even getting a share of the benefits that are supposed to be received by local communities. Nevertheless, with the wave of digitalisation through social media, backpackers can now share their travelling journey worldwide. The common travel activities to immerse in the local community's lifestyle can be shared to the world, and indirectly assisting in publicising the particular destination.

Backpackers who travel continuously for more than 6 months can be considered long-term travellers (Smith and Field, 2020). A long-term stay in a particular destination is considered residential tourism (Hao and Xiao, 2021). Most backpackers prefer to stay in hostels due to budget constraint. Capsule hotels are an attraction that cater the needs of backpackers (Chen et al., 2020). Capsule hotels are modern hostels that are normally operated in urban and suburban areas by small and medium enterprises. This modern accommodation is rarely seen in rural areas because the tourism accommodation concept in rural areas places emphasis on homestay, encouraging travellers to stay together with the homeowner and immerse in the local lifestyle as a travel experience. Thus, backpackers also contribute to the income of local communities through homestay (Koiwanit and Filimonau, 2021).

3   Digitalisation in travelling

Travelling to a new destination is always exciting for tourists who like new experiences. In line with the need to stimulate economic development, most developing countries are trying to attract as many tourists as possible by offering tourism destinations. This strategy has been implemented and is common in most countries. The tourism industry requires a reliable transportation system. However, instead of just depending on available

facilities, the tourists themselves should also be transformed (Seeler et al., 2021) as the current surrounding revolution. For example, working holiday experience is one of the transformations in the tourism industry that presents employees with overseas experience while providing travelling opportunity (Xu et al., 2021b). This opportunity allows employees to travel and explore new places while working. In addition, many organisations prefer to recruit freelancers instead of permanent employees who will work in the office, indirectly giving freelancers a chance to work from anywhere with the required provisions, such as laptop or computer, electricity and internet connection. Thus, instead of living in developed countries with high costs of living, travelling to Malaysia as a digital nomad will definitely reduce the living expenses. The availability of co-working spaces in travelling destinations encourage digital nomads to come and stay for a while (Chevtaeva and Denizci-Guillet, 2021). Tourism can also be stimulated by international students who tend spend their holidays by travelling in groups (Hashemi et al., 2017).

For frequent travellers, their previous travelling experience may shape their insight and future travelling objective and decision (Karl et al., 2020). However, not everyone has a similar travel experience. Some tourists seldom travel and do not have expectations. Nevertheless, basic knowledge is still required. Referring to social media reviews by frequent travellers, especially by travel vloggers, may give some hints on what should be expected from a certain destination. Normally, well-experienced backpackers who have been travelling continuously and share their journey as travel vloggers gain the most attention from viewers. Although travel vloggers travel with an extremely tight budget as backpackers, they are currently perceived as professional travellers. Their travelling skills have made them well-known social media influencers.

YouTube is a good platform for building the relationship between travel vloggers and viewers to stimulate intention and addiction (Hsu, 2020). This platform is very influential in terms of attracting youngsters (Djafarova and Matson, 2021). The multiplier effect that could be easily spread through organic electronic word of mouth may strengthen the existing influence (Duffett, 2022). Travel vloggers who share their travel journey through YouTube are also known as YouTubers. The videos created by amateur production can be considered as creative entrepreneurial works (Törhönen et al., 2021). The income that can be generated from social media encourage travel vloggers to share as much experience as possible. This practice indirectly implies that travel vloggers are observing the destination and observed by others (Canavan, 2020), spreading the experience worldwide. The visual materials shared by travel vloggers may effectively engage and provide insight into the destinations (Winter and Adu-Ampong, 2021). The availability of social media has made travel vloggers celebrities (Canavan, 2020).

The social media viewers are often the local communities in the destinations who are interested in knowing how travel vloggers portray their place and people who are interested in visiting the particular destination. Given the increasing number of travel vloggers, a sense of competition exists among the vloggers in attracting viewers. Storytelling is a good way of attracting viewer attention (Moin et al., 2020). The ability of travel vloggers to create a humorous content may attract followers for new contents (Xu et al., 2021a). This may also be supported with suitable audio that match with visuals. Instead of just portraying the destination, the vlogger may also influence people's choice in purchasing food from a particular destination (Xu et al., 2021c). This can be further supported with the availability of global positioning system (Kanmani and Uma, 2019). The main viewers of social media are definitely the youngsters and those who are

digital savvy. These people follow the travelling journeys of vloggers for knowledge sharing, cool and recent fad, relaxing entertainment, companionship, boredom or routine pass time and knowledge discovery (Croes and Bartels, 2021).

4   Tourism in Malaysia

Malaysia is unique due to the multicultural communities who live together. This diverse culture is portrayed through the culinary variety. Tourists may choose from street foods to high-end restaurants. Culinary attractions may enhance the tourism industry (Luoh et al., 2020) because they may positively influence the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists (Safian et al., 2021). The experience shared by travel vloggers who publicise Malaysian cuisine has influenced tourists from other countries to visit. Owing to strong business competition, majority of the local food sellers have also digitally promoted their restaurants through websites, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. The available of online delivery has assisted local food and beverage businesses in expanding their potential market.

Tourism in Malaysia tends to focus on urban areas. This strategy works because the facilities in urban areas, especially the transportation system, are continuously improved. In addition, the recreation centres in urban areas are well-maintained. The availability of recreation centres provides an opportunity for tourists to relax (Shariff et al., 2020b) while enjoying the urban environment. Various souvenirs and services are also available in urban areas. However, not all tourists travel for shopping. Some are interested in observing sceneries, architecture, nature and wildlife. The interest of tourists can be satisfied by advertising the tourism destinations throughout Malaysia. With this initiative, the income that could be generated may also spread to sub-urban and rural areas.

One of the hidden gems that has been somehow overlooked in Malaysia is ecotourism. Ecotourism is beneficial for the economic growth of rural areas through the creation of job opportunities and the preservation of the natural environment (Sharif et al., 2020a). Empowering local communities to participate in ecotourism will not only enhance the socio-economic level (Mansor et al., 2019) but also the overall quality of life in the rural areas (Das, 2018). Given that the location of ecotourism destinations is usually far from the highly populated urban and suburban areas, this tourism activity is a good social distancing option. Thus, the transportation systems that connect ecotourism destinations might be a key factor in attracting tourists. The factors that influence a positive ecotourism experience include guide, adventure, accommodation, recommendation, food and service (Sudhagar, 2019). Exposure to ecotourism may also indirectly alert the new generation on the importance of preserving the natural environmental resources (Abdullah et al., 2019). Many ecotourism destinations in Malaysia have high potential for commercialisation, such as Taman Negara, Matang, Penang National Park, Kuching's Bako National Park, Danum Valley, Maliau Basin, Royal Belum State Park, Kinabalu Mountain, Langkawi Island, Sipadan Island, Sapi Island, Tioman Island, Tiga Island and Cameron Highlands.

The Asian culture is characterised by the very strong family bond among local communities. Malaysians commonly travel in groups of family members. This practice is also common among other Asian tourists. Thus, a potential market exists for family travel tourism (Wu et al., 2021). This type of travel may gain more economic value than solo or couple travels. Nevertheless, the findings on family travel in Malaysia are limited.

Although most travel vloggers usually travel with partners, some travel vloggers, especially from western countries, travel with family members. The family travels that travel vloggers share through social media are expected to give the impression that Malaysia is also a good destination for tourists who would like to bring their entire family.

The Islamic culture in Malaysia is strong because more than half of the total population is Muslim. In line with this, Islam is also known to be the fastest growing religion in the world because the Muslim population seems to be continuously increasing (Ethiopian Gazzete, 2021). The growth in Muslim population has indirectly widened the halal tourism market. Tourism is one of the ways to disclose the beauty of Islamic values (Noor et al., 2020). Commonly, Muslims and non-Muslims visit mosques to observe the unique architecture, design, heritage and culture (Moghavvemi et al., 2021a). In fact, the market potential for halal tourism from The UK, Canada and Spain is huge (Ainin et al., 2020). With halal tourism, tourists may experience the beauty of the Islamic culture while travelling (Ulfy et al., 2021). The exposure of this culture through travel vloggers may assist in tapping into the halal tourism market (Trombin and Veglianti, 2020).

The spread of COVID-19 has negatively impacted the daily economic routine (Soliku et al., 2021) in Malaysia, especially for hotels and airlines (Foo et al., 2020). COVID-19 has changed how people live, work, think and travel (Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021). For health concerns, the Malaysian government encourages everyone to get vaccinated (Bernama, 2021). To cope with the economic downturn, the national boarder has been opened to welcome international tourists (Schulz, 2021) towards economic stimulation. The health concern for tourists and tourism workers has become a top priority in the tourism industry (Nasir et al., 2020). Currently, only fully vaccinated tourists will be able to pass through the national gateway. The cost of vaccination might be a concern for some of travel vloggers (Adongo et al., 2021). In line with the concern on healthcare, private healthcare companies may take this opportunity to promote their services to tourists as a path to stimulate the medical tourism industry (Apornak et al., 2019; Thoo et al., 2020).

As travel vloggers, socialising is a key part of outdoor activities (Kristensen et al., 2021). Unfortunately, due to health consciousness, the travelling experience may not be exactly the same as before due to limited social interaction (Zhang et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this might be a good opportunity for travel vloggers to create special contents to guide other tourists on how to travel during the endemic time. Moving forward, tourists are expected to transform from being general to elaborate, from being outgoing to conscious and from being radical to conservative (Li et al., 2020). Although the next move might be challenging, the economic activities should be continuously running to generate income for the nation. Thus, the tourism industry is expected to adapt to the 'new normal' by placing emphasis on disinfection, sanitation, redesigning infrastructure and promotion (Awan et al., 2020).

5 Conclusions

The Malaysian tourism industry should be rejuvenated from the deep slumber caused by the spread of COVID-19 since 2019. As an initiative to attract tourists, giving travel vloggers an opportunity to publicise local destinations seems highly cost effective. This partnership can even be enhanced by giving additional support to travel vloggers, such as

accommodation, meals and tours. Given that most travel vloggers depend on the number of viewers to generate income through social media, most professional travel vloggers normally share only positive reviews instead of negative reviews to secure the number of followers. The popularity of the travel vloggers is expected to create positive momentum narratives to attract more tourists. Tourism agencies must also keep in mind that travel vloggers are digitally savvy and have significant influence, making them a potent part of destinations' promotional mix.

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