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THE SOCIAL REALITY OF BLOGGING AND EMPOWERMENT AMONG MALAYSIAN BLOGGERS.

Abstract

The study focuses on the issue of empowerment among Malaysian bloggers. In Malaysia, there are issues that are considered taboo and are not discussed openly in the mainstream media. The rise of blogs in the earlier part of the 21st century has led to the discovery of a new avenue or platform of interaction. Malaysia is unique in the sense that it has its own interpretation of press freedom, a multicultural society and Islam as the official religion. Though there is a general awareness on “what is illegal offline, should be illegal online”, there are those who have found new freedom in this new realm. The new world of blogosphere is considered as a haven for self experimentation, discourses and sharing of opinions where it allows individuals to express themselves openly with or without considering the legal, religious or even cultural restrictions. Some people have used the the new avenue positively and found empowerment which they would never have found if the blog had never existed. While some individuals may take advantage of this new platform for malicious activities. Forty Malaysian bloggers were interviewed during the course of this study where they share their personal blogging experiences and how blogging has brought about changes to their lives.

Keywords: Blog, Malaysia, Empowerment

Introduction

This paper focuses on the relationship between empowerment and bloggers in Malaysia. It explores the concept of e-empowerment on how individuals find empowerment through the internet. With a Malaysian framework of press freedom, a strong emphasis on the multicultural Asian values and Islam being the majority religion, there are various factors to be considered before one blogs. All these elements needs to be considered before stories are published, interactions occur or how one wants to portray their identity online. The study aimed to show whether bloggers find empowerment through their blogging experience and how it has brought change or changes to their respective lives.

Blog

Nardi et al defined blog as “frequently updated webpages with a series of archived posts, typically in reverse-chronological order” (p.1). O Baoill (2004) defined weblogs as “a separately recognized category of web page mainly when specialized tools that help users create such sites were developed” (p. 2) and Van Doorn et al. (2007) further added the following characteristics of a blog which included, “web page with small chunks of hypertext (known as posts), date-stamped entries, ordered reverse-chronologically and (sometimes) hyperlinks and readers’ commentary” (p. 5).

The blog culture has been gaining popularity in Malaysia. Many bloggers have become iconic figures such as Jeff Ooi, Rocky Bru, Red Mummy and Hanis Zalikha while many iconic figures have also turned to blogging such as Kadir Jasin (newspaper editor), the late Yasmin Ahmad (film director), and the ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Muhammad and his daughter, Marina Mahathir. The range of bloggers today is from politicians to housewives.

These days within a blogosphere, there are a lot of discussions on issues that hardly get to be read or seen in the mainstream media. Some may take advantage of this to create lies and defamatory remarks while some may choose to blog about alternative viewpoints or share information with others. However, there are various factors to be considered before one starts blogging as it involves interactions and portrayals of one's identity. Some of the important factors to think about are the Malaysian framework of press freedom, the multicultural Asian values and Islam being the predominant religion of the country.

The Malaysian framework on press freedom allows Malaysians to have a freedom of speech; however the freedom can be limited as stated in the Federal Constitution. Article 10 (a) of the Federal Constitution states that every citizen has the right to freedom of speech however it is subjected to clauses 2, 3 and 4 of the article. This indicates that the freedom of speech is not absolute in print media as well as in alternative media or online.

Empowerment and E-empowerment

Sadan (2004) defines empowerment as *a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one's life, destiny, and the environment* (p.144). This focuses on the issue where one goes through the process of improvement not only the perceived but the actual ability to control others or the situation. It is a development from being rather passive to a more active role. It is a process of realizing one true human potential. A situation of powerlessness is when one is unable to perform an act, lacks self-confidence and does not believe in being able to make a difference. They can also feel alienated or even of no importance to themselves and to society. Thus empowerment is a process to overturn that negative belief surrounding oneself. Rappaport (1997) related the key elements of empowerments which include the individual and the environment. It

focuses on the strength and the ability of the individuals and also the behaviour and reaction of these individuals to the changes that surround them.

Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna and Tal (2008) have proposed a concept of empowerment which specifically explored the issue of empowerment within the Internet. This research will explore the concept of empowerment among bloggers using this model of study. It discusses the various levels that empowerment can take place within the virtual sphere. They have divided it into personal e-empowerment, interpersonal empowerment, group empowerment and citizenship.

Though Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2008) felt that empowerment takes place from the personal level; it will only be taken into full effect once it reaches the interpersonal level as individuals seek for not only changes and development in life but validation is also a key area towards empowerment. Individuals can achieve personal empowerment through reframing their identities and improving their skills and self-esteem. For example, Bruckman (1992:1778) described the Internet as 'identity workshops' where it provides the opportunity for individuals to explore their identity. The internet allows the bloggers, for example, to re-create themselves to a form that is very difficult to be done in the real world. In the real world, it is difficult for identity reconstruction to take place within a fixed setting of family, friends and social surroundings unless one moves to a new place and come up with a whole different identity.

In improving their skills and self-esteem, individuals are now given the opportunity to test their true potential or even participate in activities that are beyond their capabilities or assumed capabilities. The Internet has provided a non-threatening ground where the

facelessness of the Internet allows individuals to participate in activities that most individuals never had the confidence in doing, especially when they feel that they are being looked at by other people. Those with high level of social anxiety when interacting in the real world, finds the virtual space a comfortable place of interaction where they may even be perceived as likeable and even popular (McKenna and Seidman, 2006). This occurs because the individuals feel free and able to maximize their confidence and self-esteem and try out new things without having their failure noticeable to others.

The next level explored how e-empowerment exists in a group level. Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2008) identified factors that contributed towards online empowerment. They listed finding similar others, group reinforcement, choices of decision-making tools and e-visions as contributing elements.

The Internet allows individuals to find the similar others. Some individuals may feel marginalized in the real world and thus may have to disclose their true feelings. Individuals, generally feels the need to be part of a group and also to be valued as a person. The Internet allows individuals to find others who may share the same traits or problems with them that could have been an obstacle or barrier for a real world interaction (McKenna and Bargh, 1988). This allow individuals to discover that they are not alone in this world and thus able to boost their self-confidence.

Apart from personal, interpersonal and group level, Ambichai-Hamburger (2008) also highlighted how the Internet empowers individuals at the citizenship level. This can be achieved through active political participation, being able to feel accessible and also influencing government decisions. Bloggers are writers and they may be able to use the

Internet as a form of political participation. Socio-political bloggers can be critical about issues relating to politics and with strong influence, can even get the attention of the authorities.

Methodology

The study was conducted using the in-depth interview method. An initial ten primary bloggers were selected for the first round of interviews. These ten bloggers later suggested another ten bloggers to be interviewed. Then the second level of bloggers interviewed further suggested another ten bloggers to be interviewed and they too introduced another ten bloggers. Thus in the end, a total of 40 bloggers were interviewed throughout the process.

General Findings

From the general findings obtained through the interviews conducted with the 40 Malaysian bloggers, 73% of the bloggers admitted to feeling empowered when writing in their blogs. They felt that blog writing has a positive impact on them in terms of their self-development. Another 24% felt that blogging does not empower them. Here, blogging is described as a hobby or just a personal interest and it does not have any personal effect on them. Another 3% were neutral and balanced in their perspective that although blogging empowered them, it may not necessarily be the main contributor to the changes in them as there are other factors that can influence the changes as well.

Freedom as a form of empowerment

Servian (1996) linked the concept of empowerment to power and how it can be contributed towards the achievement of spiritual enlightenment and self-actualization. B1 adapted the

concept and instead of perceiving it as power, it is viewed as the ability to vocally express and share her experience.

B1 did not like the word empowered. She claimed the word sounds a bit authoritative. She preferred to use the word *blessed* in the sense that she has been blessed to be given the opportunity to share her experience with her readers. She felt that it is a gift from God. B1 shared,

“I receive also positive e-mails from people who were affected by cancer, maybe one of the parents had passed away or things like that. They come back to me and say I accidentally went to your blog and then they connected to me because their father had had cancer also. I also have readers who are students and they use my blog as a source of information. Because they want to know how cancer affect people in terms of regiment treatment and post regiment treatment and they come back with more personal question because at times they can't find it in the blog. I also have people coming to me with the thought that if cancer happened to their mom, what is to expect if they go for radiotherapy...”

She felt blessed because people are asking her questions. She felt happy that she can share her stories and experiences to her audience. She filled in the gap that exists within the society. She was able to give a patient's view point which may not necessarily be easily available. For example, in the case of the students who used her blog as a source of information, these are important information which they may not find in their text books. These are stories from the heart which are from a personal account of a person battling with cancer. This form of documents is almost impossible to be obtained by others unless if it is

written and published as a memoir in the form of a book. Now with a click of the mouse, people are able to obtain information on her and the processes she goes through in battling with cancer. Blogging has provided her an opportunity that she never thought could have been realized.

A3 related the ability to voice out his thoughts as a form of empowerment. His voice would have not been heard anywhere because of his reserved nature. He felt that the blog provides him that voice that he cannot obtain in the real world. He said,

“It’s basically the fact that you can write something in the blog, published it out and forget about whether or not people will judge you personally based on that because they don’t know you so they can’t really judge you as a person just from your writing. They can judge your writing, they can judge your idea but they cannot judge you as a person.”

C2 described that his whole experience as a blogger has been freedom in terms of his writing. Being an academician, his works are limited towards journals and academic materials which may just end up being in libraries and might not be read by as many people as on his blog. Through blogging, he has obtained many readers. The topics of discussion are just simple stories however there is a demand for his stories. With regards to his confidence level, C2 described how at times blogging can diminish his confidence level. Turkle (1995) stated that identities in the virtual world would involve simulations, experimentations and taking things at interface value which could strengthen a person’s identity. In this case, C2 has shown how he uses the blog to enhance his real life identity which is by exploring his other potentials.

Bloggers are able to be themselves and project their personal and enacted identity as stated by Jung and Hacht (2004). It is related to the characteristics of the individual and how the individual shares his identity with the surroundings. B1 had this earlier persona on how a blogger is supposed to be but then she realized that ‘You don’t need to be Rocky Bru’ to be a blogger.’ (*Rocky Bru is a famous Malaysian socio-political blogger*). B1 felt blessed that she was introduced to blogging because she felt that she can be herself in her blog. She does not have to be anybody else. There is no proper structure or guideline on how to blog. You can write however you want to write. It is your individual experience, not someone else’s and that is what makes blogging unique. By being yourself, you are able to empower yourself better.

Self Confidence and Self-Esteem

Some bloggers admitted that through blogging, they have had an increase in their confidence level. They were able to make new friends which they find difficult to do in the real world. They have discovered that they become more extroverts through blogging. The reasons could be contributed to the screen that separates the individual and the readers. Without face to face interaction, bloggers may feel that they are being judged solely on their work and not on physical factors or their verbal skills. The absence of these social cues and gestures lead to individuals being more confident to speak out and engage with the social world.

Brennan and Petit (2004) discussed issues on esteem and how people seek positive reputation. One of the cases below is an example where pseudonym is used to strengthen one’s position within society. The example below also shows how esteem and reputation are enhanced with the establishment of a strong brand name. At the same time, this supports Schau and Gilly’s

(2003) idea on creating a digital likeness presence to that identity and Rappaport's (1986) discussion on empowerment and gaining control over the decisions in people's lives.

G1 described the changes he had gone through by blogging. From this guy who is academically majored in Information Technology, he has spread his wings to find an exceptional fame online. His blog address is now regarded as a brand name. Due to his writings, he has landed a job with the country's leading satellite channel in Malaysia. He has also become a broadcast journalist which requires him to report in front of the camera. He never thought that this can happen to him as looking back to the day he started blogging, he was still not confident of meeting his readers. It was definitely a life changing experience for him which involves information transferred from the online world to the real world.

As discussed in the identity section, his blog pseudonym has become a brand name in the entertainment field. People want to know his opinion. He is the alternative entertainment news provider. It all started by doing a recap and weekly reviews of local reality television sensation, Akademi Fantasia. Since then he has established the brand name as people are excited to check his blog to know what his take is on the television show. When he became a broadcast journalist, he has the dilemma of whether to use his real name or his blog pseudonym because he knows that the name itself has led to so many new opportunities. This makes him feel empowered. The establishment of such a strong powerful brand name and also the fact that people want to hear his perspectives, has led him to become an entertainment blogging powerhouse in Malaysia. In his own words "*Ahmad Dhani (not real name) is just a normal guy but King Dhani (not real pseudonym) is something different.*"

One of the other effects of blogging is on self-improvement. G3 talked about how he is more conscious of himself and how he works towards self-development in being the best. G3 has always had the passion for writing. He claimed that having a blog and having a readership has motivated him to better himself. He now takes writing seriously and even purchases dictionaries to expand his vocabulary to further enhance his writing. He said that,

“I want to sound more mature and more confident in my writing because by doing this you gain respect from your readers. I avoid using non-standard or informal language. I try using proper grammar and avoid using vulgar words. I want to show that I can produce quality work and blogging has motivated me to do so.”

“I’ve made a huge amount of friends online. People who have the same interest, the way we think are alike. It’s easier to find them online because they search you up unlike making friends in the real world where you meet somebody and you talk to find out whether they are interested in the things you are interested in. Here on blogs, you are united by your interest.” – F4

These bloggers made new friends through blogging and it is contributed by a few factors. The blogging environment allowed them to change from being an introvert to someone who is more welcoming. This is mainly contributed to the non-existence of a face to face communication where people might feel that they are being judged for their physical appearance. This gives them an added boost of confidence in creating conversations.

Career Progression

Among the changes that bloggers admitted to having is career progression. It is not only in the form of promotion, it also allows individuals to being offered jobs that they are passionately interested in. What started as a hobby ended up being their dream job. A decision they may not be willing to take (in the real world) but the Internet allows them to take further risks in life.

The strong social network has allowed bloggers to find new career path and even play a new role in sharing information. This argument supports Cerulo (1997) when he stated that interactivity or networking now takes place in a different platform and this allows individuals to create a new form of identity. F1, for example, got a job through blogging. This was based on the contacts and the networking she made over the years. She discovered that blogging exposes her to more people from various industries and she learned so many new things from these people. It is an opportunity to extend one's contact list which would be beneficial in the future.

E2 was just a student when he started blogging but he saw the future and prospect of the blog community. What just started as an unintended hobby, updating his life to his friends has embarked into becoming one of the most prominent web based company in Malaysia and Singapore and just recently, they launched their service to Australia. Just through blogging he discovered that there is so much potential in bloggers gaining more from their writings, in the form of monetary gain. And similar to that, many bloggers are now being compensated for their work using blog advertising form of network.

“Yes. If I didn't blog, I wouldn't have started AAA (not the real name of company), a blog advertising network. It started off in

Malaysia.....Honestly, at that point of time, I never thought too much of being a blogger. I thought a blogger is like you and me. Later then, it was different. When I accidentally started blogging, I met the community; I met the people that we have there. The Malaysian blogging community is very vibrant. Even in Singapore. You meet people from all different sorts of background, ethnic background, professional, they are blogging. You meet people from IT at events. It's then when I began to participate in the community and I thought that with AAA, the blogging community could be so much better off and with AAA they could potentially be a lot better."

F3 shared how he is able to turn his hobby into a form of side income. Being an IT consultant in which he does 'system implementation and system integration', he was stuck within a daily 9-5 job. He has never dreamt of venturing into the entertainment industry. As a hobby he enjoys doing mixes on music where he will mash up different songs, like a personal disc jockey. With the existence of his blog, he decided to include some of his famous mixes online. What surprised him was that, his blog begins to gain notice by people of the music industry and he was offered a job to do mixes for the "So You Think You Can Dance" Malaysian edition series on 8TV in Malaysia. He has the opportunity to edit the videos and music

Having a blog changed his life to one that he has never dreamed of. The blog is not just an avenue to express his thoughts and ideas but it gives him the opportunity to explore what was once seemed to be the impossible. It is a way of realizing dreams.

The Next Level

A blogger does not just end up being a blogger. Apart from moving to their respective dream jobs, a blogger can do a lot of other exciting things. For example, at least three of the bloggers have compiled their articles and turn it into a published book while the other one is still in the process of writing. One blogger started to get invites at the international level to attend conferences and talks to present issues that he wrote in his blogs. A disabled blogger have successfully anchored his blog to be a strong tool of advocacy for the disabled community in Malaysia. This states that online empowerment can materialize real world dreams. It also allows bloggers to proceed further into the next level. There were also articles in newspapers that stated bloggers today are even millionaires from the proceeds of the advertisements on their blogs.

Based on the constant persuasion from her brother, B1 planned to produce a book based on her blog postings on battling cancer. She is really looking into that and she will like to write it in Malay and currently it is 30% completed. The reason that she wants to write it in Malay is that she is targeting it to the rural crowd and those without higher level of education. She will use just simple language so this group would be able to understand how cancer has affected people. She felt that this will create awareness to a larger group of audience in understanding more about the deadly disease.

She is also following the footsteps of many other bloggers such as Marina Mahathir who wrote *50 Days Ranting by MM* and the ex-Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohammad who published books from his blog postings titled *Blogging to Unblock*. Recently, top entertainment blogger, Sultan Muzaffar has just published his book which is also from his blog writings entitled, *Sultan Pun Blog (Even the Sultan Blogs)*.

B1 and many other bloggers have shown that by publishing blog postings into books, they may generate a different segment of the market as well. In the case of B1, she aimed for the book to create awareness and hoping that the book will be accessed by people of a different socio-economic background. Some rural Malaysians may still have problems accessing the Internet due to infrastructure and cost problems. With this in mind, she hoped that a lot more people would have access to the published book.

J1 stated how he was quoted by international press and has been invited to speak overseas on the blogs in Malaysia and also on other issues. This recognition and acceptance empower him. Though he agreed that forums and seminars are definitely a good platform to view and give out opinions, these platforms cannot reach the audience as the blogs can. He also realized that he has made an impact when his stories are further developed and turned into headline news in the mainstream newspapers. Empowerment in his sense is to be able to go *'beyond the local geographical boundary.'* The power of the new media allows people to obtain information across borders.

Discussion

Looking at the demographics, there was a similarity between the content based bloggers and those who generally write about personal stuff. There was a consensus between political bloggers that blogging has allowed them a space to express themselves and share their thoughts to a wider audience. Previously, there was no avenue for them to speak as media was heavily regulated and remain rather exclusive due to the high cost of entry.

A few of the socio-political bloggers have even written books and also been invited to speak at international level conferences. Blogging is regarded as the stepping stone to actually bring them to the next level. Having published their articles in the form of books allows them to reach audiences without internet access. It also creates a strong following for them. What was transpired in the online world, has allowed them to transform it into the real world. These bloggers were not popular before, except for one of the female socio-political blogger who is the daughter of a very famous political leader. The other bloggers who wrote a book admitted that they would never have been given an opportunity to write and shine in the real world if they had not owned the blog.

Blog empowers them when their experiments worked and they gained acceptance and a strong following from the readers. The support from their readers and also other bloggers has created a sense of belonging to a wider group. This has put them in a position to provide better materials and content for the public. Some bloggers admitted to having low self-confidence but the relationships built with the readers slowly develop their self-confidence to a higher level.

Blogging allowed individuals to take risk and follow their passion. At least four out of the 40 bloggers interviewed were able to have a change in career by following their passion. Three of them are in the entertainment industry. It can be perceived that the entertainment industry is a glamorous industry and people do get attracted to join this industry. However, there may be doubts over the security of this industry. Those bloggers who shifted to the entertainment industry were from information technology before. It began as a form of escapism until it brought to the level where they were confident enough to make it their new found career.

Empowerment can also be in the form of meeting and interacting with other people and building a community or a strong support system. McKenna and Bargh (1988) discussed about the importance of virtual groups especially to those who felt marginalized within society. This was discussed by the disabled blogger who uses blog as a form of advocacy and also by the blogger who was a cancer patient. Meeting supportive and similar people empowers them to be stronger. They were also regarded as a role model by other readers and also other bloggers. They look up to these individuals and this new found respect motivates them to be a better person and contribute more to the community. A personal blogger had also mentioned how she has to be more careful with what she says as she now has loyal readers who look up to her. As stated by Archer (1987), it is also a form of acceptance and being part of a group where you may have the respect and power unobtained in the real world.

The content based blogger such as the socio-political bloggers and entertainment blogger felt empowered because their thoughts on certain issues gain feedback or are read by others. Bloggers who write about personal things feels empowered because there are people reading their blogs and give positive feedback as to how they (the bloggers) have influenced them with their lives. This could be contributed to how the bloggers portray themselves online. Bloggers could write and not get noticed. Gaining readership is a success and the interaction with the general public empowers these individuals.

Some of the bloggers had to reframe their identity and the opportunity to reframe their identity can only take place when an individual enters a different social setting. Bruckman (1992) and Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna and Tal (2008) associated the Internet platforms such as blogs and forums as identity workshops where people are able to experiment with themselves and learn and re-learn their social capabilities. Some may come up with an

identity different from who they are in the real world while some find the blog as a place to express their closeted self. This was admitted by the homosexual bloggers who really found the blog as a comforting place to actually be themselves.

In summary, many bloggers admitted that the blog has allowed them to empower themselves either through freedom of expression, increasing self-confidence, leading to a career progression and moving beyond the blog and reaching a wider audience through various other opportunities. The ability to document lives also lead to the blogs being a reminder to individuals to improve themselves and at the same time become a role model to others.

Summary

Generally, bloggers do agree that blogging empowers them. They stated that blogging have been positive towards their self-development. Online empowerment was explored in various ways and many have agreed on how blogging has provided freedom as a form of empowerment and boosted their self-confidence. The blog has also realigned some bloggers identities from a nobody in the real world to one of a role model in the online world. Aside from that blogging has also brought career progression to Malaysian bloggers where they are able to explore new job opportunities that they may have the interest in, but never actually have the gut to do so before. And to a few successful bloggers, blogging have brought them to the next level, as an icon, a celebrity and other possibilities. It is important to note that blogging alone does not create this form of empowerment of identity. It requires the active parts of the players within the blogosphere to create that level of empowerment. One needs to be actively participating in online activities to actually experience the effect.

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