Destination Image Evolvement through Experiential Marketing

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Abstract — **This qualitative study is an exploratory attempt at understanding destination image through the writings of the travel writers who have undergone the familiarisation or fam programs organised by Tourism Malaysia. The idea behind the program is for the writers to experience first-hand specific destinations in Malaysia and then expressed their experiences through their travel writings. The data in the form of the travel articles were collected with the assistance of Tourism Malaysia based on the suggested criteria established. This study established that it was possible to derive destination image by interpreting the depth of the articles and through the expressions of the travel writers who very often narrated their experiences coherently through vivid depictions and emotions. It is suggested that future studies further test the evolving themes through empirical analyses that are more conclusive and statistically proven.**

Keywords - *Destination image, experiential marketing, familiarisation program, qualitative method, travel writers*

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I. Introduction

Destination image has become an integral part in the marketing of tourism destinations. A destination image is the 'expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place' (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977 cited by Milman & Pizam,1995). Such expressions may be captured in the way travel writers write about destinations. These write ups are likely to stimulate the readers interest and ultimately influence their travel decisions. Morgan and Pritchard (1998) have already established that image is an important determinant in tourists' destination selection process. There is a clear relationship between positive image of a destination and positive purchase decisions. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges facing destination marketers is that of creating and projecting a memorable and positive image of the destination. It is through words that they read from travel writers that are likely to influence their decision process. According to Gartner (1993), destination image is formed by three different, yet interrelated, components: cognitive, affective and conative. Gartner describes the cognitive component as 'the sum of beliefs and attitudes'   leading to some internally accepted picture of its attributes (Gartner, 1993, p. 193). In other words, the cognitive component is formed based on the tourists' beliefs of a destination. As such what they read are likely to influence their behaviour. The image of destinations is important to tourists as they gather information of potential tourist sites. This study hopes to understand destination image as described by travel writers who are involved in the familiarisation (fam) programs organized by Tourism Malaysia. It is through their experiences that will be tapped to understand how destination image of Malaysia is perceived.

II. Familiarisation Programs and the Travel Writers

In Malaysia, often groups of travel writers are invited to the familiarisation (fam) trips organized by Tourism Malaysia. These groups of travel writers come from various countries and are brought to numerous interesting places, participate in the cultural activities, go shopping and join sightseeing trips organized by Tourism Malaysia. The main purpose of the fam trip is to inculcate the image of Malaysia in their minds and to provide first-hand information to travel writers. There is however, scarce literature on how the language used by travel writers and destination images are interrelated in stimulating tourists' interests. This study aims to address the gaps between destination image theories and the depiction of such destination image by travel writers. It is postulated that the language of the travel writers will mould the perception of the destination and therefore enhance the understanding of destination image.

Travel writers are the linkage between the destinations and the potential tourists. How they write, what they write and their expressions of the destinations will influence potential tourists' attractions to visit. What has yet to be addressed precisely also is the conceptualisation of the framework that describes the elements that form the destination image as it relates to a contextual perspective of Malaysia. In addition, Hui and Wan (2003) in their study of the destination image of Singapore declare that a more qualitative method may need to be employed in addressing destination image in different contexts to capture the unique and holistic elements of the destination. This study therefore, undertakes a qualitative method of capturing the essence of destination image of Malaysia as perceived by the fam writers who have been exposed to the tourists' attractions through their brief encounter with the sites and their interpretation of the destination. It is envisaged that with qualitative enquiry, an extension of the existing theories (the three-dimensional continuum approach and three-component approach) as explained by Echtner and Ritchie (1991) and Gartner (1994) may further be extended as contextual differences. This may well yield a richer interpretation especially when the analyses are focused on the fam writers who are trying to market these destinations. The perspectives of tourism marketers are now deployed in this study which further expresses the gaps that existing studies have yet to fully explain. The objectives of this study therefore are:

1. To determine the focus of attention of destination attractions as described by the fam writers,

2. To interpret the conceptualization of destination image as described by fam writers through experiential marketing understanding.

III. Experiential Marketing

Experiential marketing (EM) talks about engaging customers through two-way communication. Organisations are using experiential marketing to create a strong customer-brand connection and therefore increase loyalty, word-of-mouth and brand awareness. However, despite the growing adoption of EM, there is still not much research on the topic, especially regarding their effects on customer's perception. Understanding the change of customer's emotions and thoughts towards a brand, after going through a brand experience, is especially relevant for organisations that intend to use EM events as part of their communication platform. The authors that have investigated experiences related to marketing activities such as Close et al. (2006) and Masterman and Wood (2008) highlight the lack of concepts and literature in the area, drawing attention to the need for research in short and long terms.

The use of travel writings to depict the experiences of the travel writers as a form of marketing tourism destinations is seen as novel means of attracting potential visitors. Given that the travel writers are more likely to convince as they have experienced the destination have increased the likelihood of attracting the visitors. Prior studies of destination image by Govers, Go and Kumar (2007) identify the many variables from which destination image is measured including visitation intention and destination preferences, influence of previous visitation and destination familiarity, trip purpose, geographical locations of tourists and social and demographical characteristic of tourists. However, very little attention has been given to the image evolvement especially those that are seen from the lens of travel writers who may not necessarily be proper tourists visiting specific sites. For Tourism Malaysia, diversifying the promotional tactics in line with the market segmentation is recognized as effective means of reaching them. In line with this, Tourism Malaysia's usage of the fam programs, where the articles written by the fam writers depicting Malaysia's varying destinations is one of the

efforts to manage the destination pull. Lin and Huang (2006) agree that promotional techniques used must be specific to the interest of the tourists where tourism marketing is concern and this therefore outlines the need to understand how tourists view specific destinations. This study therefore establishes the importance of destination image and move a step further in addressing whether the fam writers are contributing towards the conceptualization of positive images of Malaysia.

IV. Understanding Destination Image

Milman and Pizam (1995) remark that "destination image is the visual or mental impression of a place, a product or an experience held by the general public". Such impression draws a lasting effect on the individuals as they perceived the visualization of the place or the product in question. Opperman (1996) agrees that the topic of destination image has received substantial interest in tourism research and Frias, Rodriguez, and Castañeda, (2008) have extended the understanding of destination image as a place of interest that have full character and that evolves into one unique entity. From a promotional perspective, destination image is a feeling projected of the place. Different people may experience different feelings for one particular destination. More specifically, Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2011) claim, a 'place' only becomes a 'destination' through the images and narratives communicated by tourism promotional materials. This is indeed the basis of understanding that many studies on destination images are based upon.

A diversity of approaches from across various disciplines has been applied in the review of destination image. Gallarza, Saura, and García (2002) points out that among the fields that have looked at destination image include those in geography, sociology, semiotics and marketing particularly in the area of tourist behaviour. The range of disciplines and approaches in studying destination image has extensive definitions of destination image in varying contexts. According to Stepchenkova and Morrison (2008), the concept of destination image has been organised differently by different researchers due to its complicatedness and subjectivity and this concurs with an earlier study by Chon (1990). Several authors have attempted to define the term destination image but none has agreed on a common premise.

Specifically, Crompton (1972 cited by McKay and Fasenmaier, 1997) defines image as the sums of belief, knowledge and feeling that tourists have towards a destination. This definition is the most commonly cited in tourist destination image literature. Lawson and Baud-Bovy (1977 cited by Milman & Pizam,1995) define the term as an expression of knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imagination and emotional thoughts that an individual has of a specific place. The word knowledge is being used and the word feeling is seen to be the same with emotions. Similarly, the keyword impression was then borrowed by Chon (1990), Kotler, Haider and Rein (1993), Milman and Pizam (1995), MacKay and Fesenmaier (1997), Pritchard (1998), Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Kim and Richardson (2003) as exemplified in Table 3.1 which displays the varying definitions of destination image.

V. Methodology

In this research, the qualitative study attempts to identify images evolved from the travel articles. Articles are examined using content anaysis that is integrated with the analytical procedures of open, axial and selective codings as expressed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This analysis leads to the evolvement of images that emerged from the write up of travel writers. Using the qualitative approach allows for a more flexible means of discovering the writers' flair in expressing the destinations and how they want to present these to the target audience. If the quantitative approach is adopted, this may not be possible as quantitative methods merely confirm established assumptions rather than develop such assumptions. Although qualitative research methods are diverse ranging from action research, case study, grounded theory, historical method and ethnography, the underlying principle of interpretation is common in that they hope to evolve the emerging themes relating to the focus of the study. Some examples of data collection methods in qualitative approach are interviews, field observations, diaries and letters. However, this study utilised the fam articles as the focus of the analysis. In social sciences, content analyis or textual analysis is a method for analysing the content of communication. It is a method to identify the characteristics of messages to construct inferences.

VI. Research Findings

What is seen leads to experience. Popular and most recurring writing displays are seen in the way the writers are pushing the readers to experience the sites. The writing expresses the experiences that are to be absorbed if the destination is visited. The uniqueness of experiences established through the functional portrayal are extended further into experiencing the site. This is clearly reflected in the following,

"In an attempt to push ourselves off the rocks, I decided to stand up and push against the rocks with my other foot. This dangerous manoeuvre caused the raft to tilt to one side, resulting in Ivan getting thrown off the raft. With hardly any weight on the back of the raft while I weighed down the front, the waves very quickly gathered beneath the back of the raft and before I knew it, the raft had deposited me onto the very rocks in front, then literally flew right over me. It would have landed on top of me too, had I not kicked it over myself with one outstretched foot, pulling off what is probably the clumsiest cycle kick of sort."

Travel Writer G, Sabah's Amazing Race

The details of the experience are shared with the readers. It is almost a description of events that are meant to invite the readers to imagine the worthiness of the destination. This experiential presentation of image is a projection of image that says that the destination is worth visiting and nowhere else in the world can this be experienced. The story telling tickles the imagination of the readers and is aimed at pushing the readers to literally get up and experience the site. This is further indicated in the following excerpt:

"As well as I rather liked the idea of being videotaped underwater by the Sea Trek Centre cameraman, and showing off how intrepid I was to friends and family when I got home to Canada. However, now that moment of truth is upon me, my knees feel like rubber, and I cling white knuckled to the ladder railings. I grope with my foot for the next rug, wondering whether my legs are long enough and a hand grabs my ankle and gently guides me down…Moving slowly gripping the rope, my feet scrabbling over the rock-strewn ocean floor, I am suddenly

buoyant-exultantly light and fearless, surrounded by spiky orange and speckled blue coral and undulating seaweed."

Travel Writer E, The Delta Optimist

"Our lunch on a pebble beach was a highlight in terms of wonderful food and a sense of living in the moment. Our hosts shared 'tuak', a home-made rice wine that tasted much better than anticipated, perhaps in part due to the sense of place. Here we were, in a remote jungle in Borneo enjoying a common interest in food and nature with people who live simply and very close to the land. Vancouver was far, far away."

Travel Writer G, GSA

Within the tourism context, tourist experiences cannot be bought but can only take shape in the minds of the tourists when they have visited the sites. According to Mcintosh and Siggs (2005), tourism experience is unique, emotionally charged, and of high personal value. Yuan and Wu (2008) cited that the critical point of business in hospitality industry is obtaining experiences which cannot be forgotten. Thus, it is this memorable experience that tourists seek when selecting the destinations to visit. Again, the uniqueness of the experiences is highlighted by the travel writers in the hope that this will elicit further cognitive responses from the readers. This is exemplified in the following,

"That evening I made my way to the opening night of the 11th rainforest world music festival. With the green hills of Santubong as the backdrop and the Sarawak culture village as its neighbor, the festival saw people attending in thousands. For three days every year, this festival brings together music lovers from all around the world and music from the furthest corners of the globe. While the afternoons were crammed with workshop sessions and mini concerts were scheduled for the evening."

Travel Writer C, Explore

Attaining the required action from the readers however, require deep persuasive tactics than just descriptive tales of the sites. It is not easy to convince readers and often they are persuaded by substantiation of experiences

and this will move the travel writers to include their feelings and emotions in the writing as explained in the following,

> *"I'm standing at the edge of a pontoon, gazing down at the greedy waters of the South China Sea off the shores of Sabah, Borneo, and I'm scared witless. In fact, 'witless' is what I must have been to sign on to this escapade in the first place, seeing as I am terrified of water and can't swim a stroke."*
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> Travel Writer E, The Delta Optimist

Experience is also conveyed by the internalization of the surroundings. The writers' descriptions of the surroundings are often vivid and woven with tales of excitement. These are essentially expressed to grasp the attention of the readers and subsequently to attract their interest. The writers commonly relate their experiences for the purpose of inciting the feeling of 'being there' – that the readers can easily experience the same thing if they visit the destination. As described by this writer,

> *"It was the small things that struck us such as the women sitting cross-legged on the floor, nimbly weaving bamboo mats for hours on end, chatting quietly amongst themselves. At the blow pipe demonstration, we watched young boys expertly execute their shots. For me, the most vivid memory will be the hike through the jungle, harvesting plants for lunch. While the jungle initially looked like a wild mass of plants, we soon realized that it is a verdant farm for the 'Iban', very much under cultivation."*
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> Travel Writer G, GSA

VII. Discussion

It is strongly established that image is a valuable concept in identifying and comprehending tourists' destination selection process (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Stepchenkova & Morrison 2008). There is indeed a clear connection between destination image and visit intention. Destination image is undoubtedly the shaping factor of tourist buying actions (Tasci & Gartner 2007). The initial phase of forming an image before the actual visitation of the destination is considered as the most important stage in the selection process (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Since tourism products are mainly intangible and the potential traveller has no or only limited knowledge about them, image is believed to represent the destination and subsequently has the power to influence destination choice (Tasci & Gartner, 2007, p. 419).

To be successful and create an emotional attachment, a destination brand must feature certain characteristics. Ideally, it should be credible, deliverable, differentiating, conveying powerful ideas, something that is enthusiastically anticipated by those involved in the marketing, and it should be resonating with the consumers of the destination product. If the brand can comply with these conditions, consumers should perceive certain additional values and benefits from choosing that one brand over another, or over a non-branded product, service or experience. These benefits are reflected in brand equity, whereby the value of the brand is derived from different factors, namely brand awareness, perceived quality, associations and loyalty concerning that brand. However, brand equity is very difficult to measure accurately (Baker & Cameron, 2008). This is the challenge that destination branding face. On one hand, building equity is seen as essential to strengthen the attraction towards the products or services, it is however not as easy as it is depicted as destinations are not viewed similarly by people. Each individual has his or her own perception of the image of the destinations and often these contradict with common product or service marketing offerings. As such, a deep understanding of the common destination image conceptualisation becomes necessary if tourism marketers want to successfully market such destinations. This however, may prove to be a challenging feat without the right direction towards such conceptualization.

VIII. Conclusion

This study has only explored the tip of destination image as they are perceived by the travel writers through their experiences as fam participants. The destination image of Malaysia has established three main themes expressed as functional depictions, experiential values and auxiliary influences which travel writers subliminally project through their words. There may indeed be more concepts relating to Malaysia's destination image if different mediums are used as the basis for soliciting the interpretation. This study has only touched the surface when it comes to interpreting destination image. More may be realized if different sources of information are used and different research designs are utilized.

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