

## Local and Foreign Tourists' Image of Highland Tourism Destinations in Peninsular Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the purpose of identifying and comparing the images of highland destinations in Malaysia, held by both local and foreign tourists. Data from 897 respondents, comprising of both local and foreign tourists who had visited the three highlands (Cameron Highlands, Fraser's Hill and Genting Highlands), were collected using a stratified random sampling technique through a questionnaire survey. Forty-one destination attributes were included in the factors, which were analysed and compared between the local and foreign tourists, using the Independent-sample T-test. Based on the results, six image factors were identified for the highland destinations, and these were labelled as "accessibility and services", "local attractions and facilities", "general mood and vacation atmosphere", "leisure and recreational activities", "natural surroundings", as well as "nature and family-oriented." The present study also found significant difference in the images held by the local and foreign tourists for the factors on "accessibility and services", "local attractions and facilities", "leisure and recreational activities", as well as "natural surroundings." The findings suggested that the local tourists had a higher perceived image than the foreigners towards the highland destinations in Peninsular Malaysia. The findings of the study also provided theoretical and practical implications for the tourism authorities of Malaysia, particularly in enhancing the development of the tourism industry for the highland destinations.

**Keywords:** Destination image, foreign tourists, highland, tourism

### INTRODUCTION

Besides making a major contribution to economy, the tourism industry also causes social impacts on the countries around the world including Malaysia. Many tourism destinations are competing against each other to attract as many visitors as possible to come to their places. It has become a great competitive industry due to the existence of a large number and a variety of travel destination choices, information and communication technologies (e.g. internet) as well as advanced transportation systems (Pikkemaat, 2004; Weiermair, 2001).

Therefore, the destination image held by the tourists or visitors plays a crucial role in understanding travellers' behaviour and designing better marketing strategies (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). The image of a destination is generally defined as the sum of beliefs, impressions, ideas or perceptions which people hold of a particular place (Crompton, 1979). Investigating the differences in the image held by both local and foreign tourists is crucial since they may affect the promotional activities designed by the tourism marketers. One of the efforts by the Ministry of

Tourism Malaysia to promote the uniqueness of Malaysia and increase the number of tourists visiting the destinations in the country was Visit Malaysia Year 2007.

Highland tourism destinations in Malaysia, such as Cameron Highland, Fraser's Hill and Genting Highland, are competing among themselves in attracting as many visitors as they could from both local and international places. These tourist destinations are not only competing among themselves, but also with other tourism places like the wilderness, beach, historical sites and cities. A study by Rosmalina (2005) revealed that most of the respondents chose beaches (35.2%), followed by the wilderness areas (25.4%) and highlands (15.7%), as their main choices for holiday destinations. This implied that highlands are still behind other tourism destinations in terms of tourists' choice of holiday destinations. Although studies on the image of destinations have been undertaken for the past 30 years, there is still a lack in the research which critically focuses on the highlands. The most popular destinations of interests were countries, states and cities (Pike, 2002). In addition, there are very few studies which focus on comparing of the respondents from the different origins (Gallarza, Gil and Calderon, 2002).

Hence, this study was conducted at selected highland destinations in Malaysia to get answers to the following questions; "What images do tourists hold of the highland destinations?" and "Are these images perceived differently by the local and foreign tourists?" Following this introduction, the paper presents a literature review which includes the conceptual framework that underlies the research. This is followed by an elaboration on the methodology of the study, with a particular emphasis on image comparison. Finally, the results of the study are discussed, along with the conclusions and implications related to the theoretical and practical contributions. Finally, limitations of the study as well as some suggestions for future research are presented.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Image of Tourism Destinations*

People travel to various places; they consume numerous products during their holiday, and they evaluate, recall and tell others about their experiences (Prebensen, 2007). Individuals' views or images of a particular place or a specific

product are unique, as they are constructed from their own memories, associations and imagination of the places or products (Jenkins and McArthur, 1996). In analyzing the tourists' images or perceptions of certain places, some researchers have focussed on the components of the images and how people structure their knowledge of destinations (e.g. Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Mayo, 1975; Prebensen, 2005). In more specific, the majority of these studies have focussed on the functional characteristics which are directly observable, such as prices and climate.

Other researchers (e.g. Echtner and Ritchie, 1991) focussed more on and discussed the psychological characteristics, such as the atmosphere or the romantic aspect of the setting. Another approach used in discussing the tourists' perceptions of destinations was analyzing the customers' images in terms of the dimensions, i.e. "common or unique" (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). In addition, Murphy (1997) employed the dichotomy of attribute versus the holistic imagery on another dimension, and the common versus unique dimension on another dimension, when the tourism characteristics of the place image was analysed.

Gartner (1993) showed that most studies on images in relation to tourism had employed a list of attributes to measure the cognitive components of the destination image, which was rather not surprising since most buying behaviour processes are normally started with searching for information and getting knowledge about a particular product or a place. For instance, Keller (1998) performed a similar way of categorizing image formation. Keller distinguished the attributes, benefits and attitudes in dealing with the descriptive features which characterize a product or service, while benefits are about the personal values and meaning attached to the attribute, and attitudes deal with the overall evaluation which consequently serves as a basis for actions and behaviours.

### *Previous Studies on the Image of Destinations*

Images tourists hold of certain tourism destinations have been of interest of numerous researchers. It should be noted, however, that despite the extensive research on the destination image in the travel and tourism industry (e.g. Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; Chen and Tsai, 2006; Pike and Ryan, 2004), studies focusing on comparing

between the images held by local and foreign tourists are still very limited. For instance, Bonn, Joseph and Dai (2005) examined the differences in the image perceptions between international and U.S. domestic travellers visiting Florida, based on the country of origin. In their study, the image of Florida was measured using 10 destination environmental attributes, consisting of functional and psychological characteristics, as well as a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to compare these images, as perceived by both international and domestic tourists. These environmental attributes were further categorized into two different dimensions – destination atmospherics and destination service. The authors reported significant differences in the perception of Florida, as a tourist destination, between domestic and international travellers. It was concluded that the visitors' perception and expectation about a destination varied, depending on their country of origin.

In another study, Grosspietsch (2006) investigated the differences between the perceived and projected images of Rwanda in the perspectives of the visitors and international tour operators. The study measured the images using 15 attributes such as safety, spectacular landscape, mountain gorilla tour, cultural attractiveness, etc. It was found that both the visitors and international tour operators held different images of Rwanda, as the findings revealed significant differences on several attributes indicated above. For instance, tour operators provided a much more negative and gloomy picture as compared to the visitors who perceived it as a destination with a more positive image. Grosspietsch pointed out further that the result was rather surprising because when the international tour operators did not hold a positive perception of a destination themselves, they would not be good sale representatives for the place.

An earlier study conducted by Richardson and Crompton (1988) explored the differences in the images held by French and English Canadians towards USA and Canada. A structured survey, consisting of 10 attributes on a 4-point Comparative scale and a MANOVA, was conducted to compare the images of these destinations. The results of the study indicated that the French and English Canadians held different images toward the USA and Canada. This result is consistent with other studies which revealed that the images were varying across different tourists' origins.

#### *The Measurement of Tourist Destination Image*

Since the past 30 years, the methodologies used for measuring the image of destinations have been diversely developed. Most of them consist of either structured (quantitative) approach or less frequently, an unstructured (qualitative) approach (Grosspietsch, 2006; Pike, 2002). In the structured methodology, various common image attributes are specified and incorporated into a standardised instrument, usually a set of semantic differential or Likert type scales. A product (or destination) is rated by the respondents on each of the attributes included in the measurement and based on which, an 'image profile' is derived from these ratings (Ferber, 1974). However, the drawback of this structured method is that the scale items could not be used to measure the unique aspects of the destination.

The rarely used alternatives to structured approaches are rather unstructured or the qualitative methods of measurement (such as focus groups or open-ended questions), with content analysis and various sorting techniques which employ free form descriptions, to capture the more holistic component image and unique aspects (Ryan and Cave, 2005). In the present study, the structured methodology (scale items) was used since it had commonly been employed in various studies on destination image. Furthermore, it is easy to be administered, coded and analysed, using the sophisticated statistical techniques (Marks, 1976).

#### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

There is a wide agreement among various authors on the research on the image of a tourism destination conducted by Hunt in 1971 (cited in Driscoll, Lawson and Niven, 1994; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991; Gallarza, Gil and Calderon, 2002; Reilly, 1990). By this time onwards, the concept of a destination image has commanded tourism researchers' attention for over 30 years. Among others, Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993, and 2003) contributed greatly to the conceptualization of tourism destination image, by acknowledging the existence of three axes which supported the image of any destination (the functional/psychological, the common/unique, and the holistic/attribute axes). The framework for the destination image, using the attribute-functional and holistic-psychological continuums (as noted by Echtner and Ritchie), is presented in *Fig. 1*.

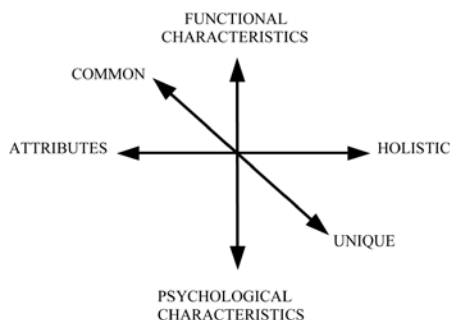


Fig. 1: The conceptual framework of destination image (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003)

This framework suggests that the measurement of image involves methodologies to capture the perceptions of individual functional attributes (e.g. low prices, cool climate) and psychological attributes (e.g. safe place, friendly local people). The functional holistic images are based on psychical or measurable characteristics, such as a mental picture of the psychical characteristics (mountainous, villages). The psychological holistic images concern about feelings towards the overall impressions of the atmosphere or mood of a particular destination. Based on this conceptual framework, destination image is defined as not only the perception of individual destination attributes, but also the holistic impression made by the destination. As stated by Martineau (1958), an image consists of functional characteristics (tangible aspects/ directly observable) and psychological characteristics (intangible aspects/ indirectly observable), and both these components play a critical role in the determining the image. Moreover, as illustrated in Fig. 1, images of destinations can range from those based on the 'common' functional and psychological traits to those, which are based on more 'unique' features, events, feelings or auras (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). This conceptualization of image, developed by Echtner and Ritchie, was adapted in the present study to measure the tourists' images of the highland destinations. However, the present study did not take into account the 'unique' characteristics of the destination image since the structured method (Likert scale) used had excluded these characteristics. Moreover, the list of destination attributes was based on the 'common' functional and psychological characteristics in terms of their importance or

belief, which were held by the tourists who came to visit these destinations. Other studies which had also adapted this concept were conducted by Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001) and Grosspietsch (2006).

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The study was carried out at the three highland destinations in Malaysia – Cameron Highlands, Fraser's Hill and Genting Highlands. These areas were chosen in this study because they are among the most popular tourist destinations in Peninsular Malaysia, which are also among the earliest hill resorts developed in the country.

### Research Instrument

A set of questionnaire was prepared and this was done in two versions, English language and Malay, so as to cater for both local and foreign respondents. The respondents were asked to rate the importance of 41 destination attributes using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (extremely not important) to 5 (extremely important), in order to measure the image of these highland destinations. The attributes for the image measurement were adapted from the previous studies by Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001), Beerli and Martin (2004), Ibrahim and Gill (2005), Pike and Ryan (2004), Sonmez and Sirakaya (2002), with specific destination characteristics. Demographic variables (which include gender, marital status, age, education level, occupation and monthly income) were used to provide additional information of the respondents.

### Pilot Test

Prior to the survey, pre-testing of the questionnaire was conducted to determine whether the variables are reliable (i.e. the length of time required by respondents in completing the questionnaires is sufficient, and the language used is suitable and acceptable to the respondents, etc.). In the pre-test, 20 randomly selected residents in Selangor, comprising both Malaysians and non-Malaysians who had been to one of these highlands and were therefore quite familiar with the highland areas, were requested to complete the questionnaire. Based on the pre-test, the questionnaire was then revised and finalized accordingly. The Cronbach's reliability coefficients were also calculated to

examine the stability of a set of items used to measure a variable (Ary, Jacobs and Razavich, 1996). The results of the Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha=.949$ ) suggested that these items were reliable because of their coefficient value, which was larger than .7 (George and Mallery, 2001). Thus, the content validity of the questionnaire was deemed to be adequate.

#### *Data Collection*

The survey was conducted over a period of two months, i.e. from 1<sup>st</sup> November to 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2007. The questionnaire was personally administered to the respondents and one survey point was chosen to cover the main focal point of tourists at each highland destination. The study used a stratified random sampling technique. The stratification variable was based on day, i.e. working days (Monday to Thursday) and public holidays (Friday to Sunday). Working days and public holidays were further stratified into two separate time sessions, namely morning session (9.00 a.m. – 12.00 noon) and afternoon session (12.00 p.m. – 7.00 p.m.). The initial sample consisted of 1200 tourists of whom 303 did not complete all the questionnaires. For each study site, 400 forms were distributed to the tourists and out of a total of 1200, only 897 completed questionnaires (with 74.8% response rate) were analysed for the study. Overall, there were 350 questionnaires gathered in Cameron Highlands, 235 in Fraser's Hill and 312 in Genting Highlands, respectively.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis was conducted in two stages: Factor Analysis followed by Independent-Samples *t*-test. First, an exploratory Factor Analysis using the principal component method, with the varimax rotation was conducted on destination image, to examine their dimensionalities. On the basis of the Factor Analysis results, the comparison of the images held by both local and foreign tourists was carried out using an Independent-sample *t*-test. These statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *The Socio-Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

Female respondents formed the majority (57.2%) of the study sample and over half (55.2%) of the total respondents were single. The average age of

the respondents who came to visit the highlands was 30 years old. Most of the respondents were degree holders, which contributed about 58.8% of the total number. The respondents were found to earn an average monthly income of RM1765.77. In more specific, the local tourists represented 94% of all the respondents, and the foreign tourists represented only 6%. These foreign tourists came from various countries, particularly Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Brunei, Korea, China, India, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, U.K, U.S, Canada and Australia. A more detailed description of the respondents is given in Table 1.

### *The Identification of Images for the Highland Destinations*

An Exploratory Factor Analysis was undertaken to identify the underlying factors for the image of these highland destinations. Based on the results, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was found to be .95, exceeding the recommended value of .6 (Kaiser, 1970; 1974) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was indicated as .000. A significance of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test, measuring the adequacy of sampling, provided ample evidence that the sample used for the study was adequate. The reliability of each factor was obtained using the calculation of the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .746 to .900, which was found to be relatively high. All the six factors were above the cut-off criterion of 0.7 recommended by Nunnally (1978).

According to Kaiser's rule of selection (eigenvalues larger to 1), a total of six factors were extracted, which accounted to 54.73% of the total variance. This finding provided evidence to construct the validity of the scale (Churchill, 1979) even though the value was quite low. The result was also almost consistent with the other findings gathered in the previous studies, whereby the average total variance accounted was 59% (e.g. Beerli and Martin, 2004; Chen and Tsai, 2006; Ibrahim and Gill, 2005; Leisen, 2001; Pike and Ryan, 2004; Sonmez and Sirakaya, 2002). The factors were labelled as follows: 1) accessibility and services; 2) local attractions and facilities; 3) general mood and vacation atmosphere; 4) leisure and recreational activities; 5) natural surroundings; and 6) nature and family-oriented. The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 1  
Respondents' socio-demographic profile

Demographic	Local Tourists (N=844)	Foreign Tourists (N=53)	Total (N=897)
Gender (%)			
Male	43.0	39.6	42.8
Female	57.0	60.4	57.2
Marital status (%)			
Single	54.5	66.0	55.7
Married	45.5	34.0	44.8
Age (years)	29.6	27.7	29
Education (%)			
Without formal education	4.0	0.0	0.3
Primary school	1.5	3.8	1.7
Secondary school	37.6	34.0	37.3
Degree holders	58.9	56.6	58.8
Other	0.2	5.7	0.6
Occupation (%)			
Professional	20.5	30.2	21.1
Executive	7.9	1.9	7.6
Middle management	5.7	0.0	5.4
Sales/marketing	3.4	0.0	3.2
Clerical/service	10.7	3.8	10.3
Skilled/technical	8.8	1.9	8.4
Self-employed	3.4	5.7	3.6
Student	31.8	47.2	32.7
Retired	0.6	0.0	0.6
Housewife	2.6	5.7	2.8
Others	2.7	3.8	2.8
Income (RM)	1696.29	1908.51	1765.77

Note: Some percentages are not equal to 100% due to some missing values

TABLE 2  
Factor analysis of the image for the highland destinations

Factor	Factor loading	Mean <sup>a</sup>	Eigenvalue	% Variance explained	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Factor 1: Accessibility and Services</i>					
Good highway and roads	.718	4.38	13.881	33.857	.900
Easy to access	.657	4.28			
Hygienic restaurant	.648	4.47			
Public transportation	.642	4.17			
Safe place	.611	4.53			
Health service	.572	4.16			
Inexpensive service/good	.524	4.14			
Suitable accommodation	.517	4.42			
Clean nature environment	.514	4.56			
Vary accommodation	.512	4.27			

TABLE 2 *Cont.*

Low travel cost	.504	4.12			
Signage and indicator	.468	4.34			
Friendly local people	.422	4.01			
Protected nature reserve	.419	4.39			
Grand mean		4.30			
<i>Factor 2: Local Attractions and Facilities</i>					
Agriculture-based product	.760	3.52	2.628	6.409	.854
Local art and handicraft	.716	3.60			
Plantation	.713	3.79			
Local cultural activity	.696	3.56			
Tourist information	.502	3.94			
Near to home	.465	3.28			
Variety of local cuisine	.453	3.95			
Parking area and space	.452	4.12			
Grand mean		3.72			
<i>Factor 3: General Mood and Vacation Atmosphere</i>					
Pleasant	.810	4.46	1.805	4.401	.828
Relaxing	.774	4.47			
Exciting	.765	4.46			
Pollution free	.560	4.39			
Not overcrowded	.523	4.01			
Place of good reputation	.405	4.25			
Grand mean		4.34			
<i>Factor 4: Leisure and Recreational Activities</i>					
A lot of recreational activities	.718	3.95	1.565	3.817	.785
Adventurous activities	.681	3.66			
A lot of shopping centres	.642	3.67			
Sport and gaming facilities	.552	3.56			
Many tourist attractions	.411	4.23			
Grand mean		3.81			
<i>Factor 5: Natural Surroundings</i>					
Beautiful scenery	.739	4.53	1.454	3.546	.759
Fascinating atmosphere	.680	4.47			
Variety of flora and fauna	.540	4.23			
Beautiful building	.507	3.94			
Cool climate	.449	4.16			
Grand mean		4.27			
<i>Factor 6: Nature and Family-oriented</i>					
Beautiful mountain	.585	4.14	1.107	2.701	.746
Family-oriented	.482	4.20			
Good nature trails	.481	3.96			
Grand mean		4.10			

Note: KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) measure of sampling adequacy = 0.95. \*On a scale ranging from 1=extremely not important to 5=extremely important.

The first factor, i.e. "Accessibility and Services" ( $\alpha = .900$ ), explained most of the variance (33.86%) in the model and it contained 14 items. The second factor, "Local Attractions and Facilities" ( $\alpha = .854$ ), explained an additional 6.41% of the variance and this contained 8 items. Moreover, "General Mood and Vacation Atmosphere" ( $\alpha = .828$ ), which was the third factor, included 6 items explaining on additional 4.40% of the variance. The fourth factor, "Leisure and Recreational Activities" ( $\alpha = .785$ ), explained another 3.82% of the variance and it contained 5 items. The fifth factor, "Natural Surroundings" ( $\alpha = .759$ ), also contained 5 items and explained about 3.55% of the variance. Finally, the sixth factor, i.e. "Nature and Family-oriented" ( $\alpha = .746$ ), contained only three items and explained 2.70% of the variance. Even the factor loading for the last factor was relatively low and contained very heterogeneous items; a careful evaluation of the mean values for each item (grand mean = 4.10) and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient (.746) was relatively high. Thus, it was decided that this factor was relevant and should not be discarded (Sonmez and Sirakaya, 2002). Similarly, as shown in Table 2 above, only loadings above .3 (as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996) were displayed and all 41 variables were found to be loaded above .3; therefore, none of the variables was eliminated from the analysis.

*The Comparison between the Perceptions of the Images Held by the Local and Foreign Tourists*

An Independent-samples *t*-test was employed to investigate the differences in the perceptions

of the images held by the local and foreign tourists. For an easy comparison, the results of the Independent-sample *t*-test are illustrated in Table 3. There was a statistically significant difference detected for four out of the six image factors, which included "accessibility and services" ( $t=1.996$ ,  $p=.046$ ), "local attractions and facilities" ( $t=2.028$ ,  $p=.043$ ), "leisure and recreational activities" ( $t=2.578$ ,  $p=.010$ ), and "natural surroundings" ( $t=4.27$ ,  $p=.021$ ). Nevertheless, only two factors, i.e. "general mood and vacation atmosphere" ( $t=.814$ ,  $p=.416$ ) and "nature and family-oriented" ( $t=1.054$ ,  $p=.292$ ) were found to have no difference in terms of the perceptions held between the local and foreign tourists.

Based on the mean value presented in Table 4, "accessibility and services" was rated as of higher importance mostly by the local tourists ( $M=4.31$ ) as compared to the foreign tourists ( $M=4.16$ ). This finding seems to be consistent with the ones by Bonn, Joseph and Dai (2005) who reported that the "service factor" was significantly different between the domestic and international tourists visiting Florida. As noted by Bonn et al. (2005), the "service factor" (including "signage", "value for dollar" and "ground transportation") was perceived lower by the international tourists because the "signage" for instance, in most Florida destinations, was generally written in only one language, i.e. English. As a result, this might be an area of contention by international tourists based on the perceived inadequacy as it is related to the international standards. The present study suggested that the perception of the foreign tourists as lower than the local tourists for the

TABLE 3  
T-test results for the comparison of image between local and foreign tourists' perceptions

Image factor	F	t	df	Sig.	Mean difference
1. Accessibility and Services	.849	1.996	895	.046*	.1569
2. Local Attractions and Facilities	.015	2.028	895	.043*	.2095
3. General Mood and Vacation Atmosphere	.173	0.814	895	.416	.0698
4. Leisure and Recreational Activities	1.625	2.578	895	.010*	.2659
5. Natural Surroundings	.578	2.318	895	.021*	.1931
6. Nature and Family-oriented	1.366	1.054	895	.292	.1102

\*Significant difference at .05



factor on “accessibility and service” supported by Bonn *et al.* (2005). This might be due to the fact that Malaysia is a developing country, which means, it does not have a high standard of services as compare to those developed countries. Thus, the foreign tourists did not perceive highly on the accessibility and services provided at the highland destinations in Malaysia, including the highway/ roads, signage, public transportation, ease of access, accommodation and restaurants.

Further investigation into the factor on “local attractions and facilities” indicated a significant difference in the image held by the local and foreign tourists. Based on the mean value presented in Table 4, a higher mean score for this factor was given by the local tourists (i.e.  $M=3.25$ ) as compared to the foreign tourists ( $M=3.05$ ). This indicated that the local tourists believed that local attractions and facilities as more important for their vacation when travelling

to the highlands, as compared to the foreign tourists. The factor on “local attractions and facilities” was also perceived as more important by the local tourists because the attributes such as ‘agriculture products’, ‘plantation’, ‘local cultural activities’, and ‘local art and handicrafts’ were rated by the local people. Thus, the local tourists would definitely believe and give support on their own local products. These facts could explain the reason why the local tourists held a higher perception on “local attractions and facilities” than the foreign tourists.

Another factor which was found to have a significant difference was “leisure and recreational activities.” As depicted in Table 4, a higher mean score for the factor on “leisure and recreational activities” was again rated by the local tourists ( $M=3.83$ ) as compared to the foreign tourists ( $M=3.56$ ). This finding suggests that the foreign tourists’ perception toward the highland

TABLE 4  
Descriptive statistics for image assessment factors

Image assessment factors	Mean	SD	N
Accessibility and Services			
Local	4.35	.556	844
Foreign	4.20	.537	53
Total	4.30	.547	897
Local Attractions and Facilities			
Local	3.89	.731	844
Foreign	3.65	.707	53
Total	3.72	.719	897
General Mood and Vacation Atmosphere			
Local	4.39	.607	844
Foreign	4.30	.577	53
Total	4.34	.592	897
Leisure and Recreational Activities			
Local	3.93	.724	844
Foreign	3.69	.796	53
Total	3.81	.760	897
Natural Surroundings			
Local	4.38	.587	844
Foreign	4.16	.600	53
Total	4.27	.594	897
Nature and Family-oriented			
Local	4.13	.744	844
Foreign	3.07	.629	53
Total	4.10	.687	897

destinations in Malaysia was lower than the locals when judging this factor. Even a place such as Genting Highlands, with more than 30 outdoor and indoor choices of activities (recreation-based or adventurous), was given a rather low perception by the foreign tourists. Among the reasons stated for the low perception was that the outdoor and indoor activities provided at Genting Highlands, such as 'roller coaster', 'snow house', 'sky diving simulator' and 'cable car riding' were not that much different from those found in their home countries. Moreover, these activities were found much earlier in the countries like Singapore, Brunei, U.S, U.K and China than Malaysia. Thus, the foreign tourists, particularly from these countries, did not have a high perception on "leisure and recreational activities" at the highland destinations in Malaysia.

The final factor, which also has a significant difference in term of image taken into account in this study, was "natural surroundings." With reference to the facts presented in Table 4, the mean score for the factor on "natural surroundings" was rated higher by local tourists ( $M=4.28$ ) than foreign tourists ( $M=4.09$ ). For many decades, Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands have been well-known for their beautiful scenery, fascinating atmosphere, cool climate, beautiful buildings, and varieties of flora and fauna; nevertheless, the perception of the foreign tourists towards these places was still lower than the local tourists. Based on the researcher's own observation, Malaysia has been criticised and labelled as a non-environmental friendly country by other developed nations because of its extensive forest destruction and illegal logging activities (Leong, 2005), and this seemed to affect the foreign tourists' perception on the factor "natural surroundings" at the highland destinations in Malaysia.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study offers findings which can explain the differences in the image held for the highland destinations in Malaysia, as perceived by the local and foreign tourists. The findings of the current research suggest that there is statistically significant difference in the images held between local and foreign tourists. These differences were found in the factors on "accessibility and services", "local attractions and facilities", "leisure and recreational activities", and "natural

surroundings." Only two factors, namely, "general mood and vacation atmosphere" and "nature and family-oriented" showed no difference. Past research also suggested that visual imagery and experiences had been interpreted differently by the tourists, depending on their country of origin (Bonn *et al.*, 2005; Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Thurot and Thurot, 1983). Despite the effective and efficient information technologies such as the internet, which serve to decrease worldwide cultural distances, tourists still have different perceptions on these destinations, and this is very much affected by their geographic regions (Bonn *et al.*, 2005). This finding strongly suggests that understanding the foreign tourists' perceptions towards the country is important since they will contribute to the economic benefits through currency exchange.

From the theoretical point of view, this study has several implications which can be added to the growing body of literature on image research. Although many researchers have investigated on the destination images for the past 30 years, limited studies have been carried out on studying the image of highland destinations. Therefore, this study is considered as making a new contribution in terms of a better understanding of the destination image, with a specific reference to the highland tourism industry in the country. The analysis of this study yielded some very important insights into the perception on the images between the local and foreign tourists, since very few studies have compared these types of respondents. Moreover, the conceptual framework applied in this study was proven as an appropriate framework for research on image; this has also been confirmed by other studies which had chosen the concept underlying the image.

In addition, the findings of this study have a number of important implications, particularly for the practitioners in tourism industry, government and non-governmental organizations, as well as other market players in the industry. The practitioners of the highland destinations in Malaysia, particularly Malaysia's highland tourism offices such as Fraser's Hill Development Corporation (FHDC), should take necessary actions to improve the image of the highland. Based on the results generated in this study, the foreign tourists found to have a low perception toward the image of the highland destinations in Malaysia as compared to the local

tourists. In more specific, the local tourists placed more importance on the factor "accessibility and services" than the foreign tourists. Therefore, managers of these highland destinations should do the necessary actions to improve the current services and accessibilities provided at the highlands in the effort to change and increase the perception of the foreign tourists, and thus further heighten their interest in visiting these places in the future. The management responsible for these highland destinations need to allocate a suitable budget to be used to improve the road conditions, accommodations, restaurants and signage, especially during the peak seasons, since the services at many destinations are usually decline because of the bigger number of tourists visiting these places at that time.

Furthermore, managers also need to emphasize on the factor "local attractions and facilities" because it has been perceived very low by the foreign tourists compared to the locals. In addition, those people involved in the development of the highland tourist destinations have to contribute more in term of their creativity to produce a variety of unique products which could attract the foreign tourists. The foreign tourists who travel to other countries for the purpose of tourism normally wish to see something unique which can not found in their home countries such as the local culture and cuisine of the visited country. Thus, the local people, together with the highland managers, must not take this important factor for granted as this will affect the foreign tourists' perception towards Malaysia.

The "leisure and recreational activities" is another factor which was found to have a significant difference between the local and foreign tourists. It is important to highlight that the perception from the foreign tourists was much lower than the local tourists. Although the leisure and recreational activities have been promoted in the mass media (e.g. television, newspaper, and internet) as well as by word-of-mouth, the foreign tourists still do not hold the same perception as the local tourists. Thus, the managers and marketers alike should design and implement a new plan to introduce new recreational activities such as the traditional games of the different races in Malaysia. For example, the highlands could introduce games like 'congkak', 'wayang kulit' or 'gasing' besides other common modern games which were introduced by other countries. This approach may

probably attract more foreign tourists to visit the highland destinations in the country.

Another factor which was indicated to have a significantly difference between the local and foreign tourists is the "natural surrounding." The impact of the extensive infrastructure development at the highlands has affected and declined the attraction of the surrounding places, and decreased the foreign tourists' perception as well. Thus, any future infrastructure development should be properly planned and implemented to avoid its negative impacts to the highlands, such as the one which currently occurred in Cameron Highlands. Illegal logging activities must be seriously investigated and taken necessary actions against to ensure a well preservation of the natural surroundings.

Apart from above suggestions, such a new approach is not sufficient if these ideas are not implemented effectively. Therefore, marketers of these destinations should stress on carrying out promotional campaigns of highlands in Malaysia to foreigners. For example, they can hold an extensive promotion such as "Malaysia's Week" in other countries (e.g. U.K, U.S, German, Japan, Saudi Arabia, etc.) to promote Malaysia in the eyes of the world. Apart from this, marketers could also use many attractions available at the highland destinations such as the beautiful mountains, the diversity of flora and fauna, relaxing atmosphere, safe places to visit as well as other aspects in promoting them. Hence, these suggestions are hoped to assist both managers and marketers of the highland destinations in Malaysia to gain a better understanding of the different perceptions hold by the local and foreign tourists, and thus implement more strategic marketing decisions.

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered in this study. First, the survey carried out in this study was conducted over a period of two months, which permitted only tourists who had travelled during the months of November and December, 2007 (i.e. peak season) to be included. Based on which, the respondents' views were taken only from those of a particular groups of tourists, which could not be used to represent a year round's tourism. Hence, it is recommended that future research incorporate a survey which will also include the midyear period because seasonality may influence tourists' responses. Second, a better instrument specifically to measure the image of the highland

destinations needs to be developed in order to explain more variance in the construct, and the unique aspects of these highlands (specifically in Malaysia) should be taken into consideration in any future research.

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