

# DESTINATION IMAGE AS A HEALING DESTINATION AMONG MEDICAL TOURISTS: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF PENANG, MALAYSIA

Deeparechigi Vashu<sup>1,\*</sup>, Ridzuan Bin Masri<sup>2</sup>, Cham Tat Huei<sup>3</sup>,  
and Kenny S.L Cheah<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

Medical tourism has become adjectival tourism in both developed and developing nations. In recent years, it has gained impetus in Malaysia, which is an ideal hub for medical tourism in Asia due to various competitive factors. Although several key elements have contributed to the growth of medical tourism in the country, few studies have explored the role of destination image in the context of medical tourism. Therefore, this research aims to provide insight into the attributes of destination image in the context of medical tourism in Penang, Malaysia. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 26 patients randomly chosen at selected private hospitals in Penang, and the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council's (MHTC) concierge and lounge at Penang International Airport. The findings revealed that the dominant attributes of the destination image perceived by medical tourists in Penang are: (a) Hospital Internal Amenities; (b) Influenced and Informed Decisions; and (c) Aesthetics. The paper further discusses Penang's apparent image as a healing destination among medical tourists who travel to Malaysia. This study thus carries

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<sup>1,\*</sup>Ms Deepa obtains a Master degree in Bachelor of Business Administration (Economics) from Multimedia University, Malaysia. She is currently working as a lecturer at the School of Marketing and Management of Asia Pacific University, Malaysia. She is a PhD. Candidate in the Department of Business and Law at the University of Malaya-Wales, Malaysia. Email: deeparechigi@staffemail.apu.edu.my

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Ridzuan Bin Masri obtains a Ph.D. in Management from International Islamic University Malaysia. Currently he/she is working as a lecturer in the School of Management and Business, Manipal International University, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor Dr Cham Tat Huei obtains a Ph.D. in Marketing from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia. Currently, he is the Head of Programme (PhD & MPhil) at Faculty of Accountancy and Management, UTAR.

<sup>4</sup>Dr. Kenny S.L Cheah obtains a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from University of Malaya, Malaysia. Currently, he is working as a senior lecturer in the Department of Education Management, Planning, and Policy, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya.

implications for healthcare practitioners to enhance and position their healthcare services based on destination image as their source of competitive advantage.

**Keywords:** Medical Tourism, Destination Image, Image Formation, Healing Destination, Tourism

## **INTRODUCTION**

The tourism industry has emerged as one of the most vital, fast-growing, and developed economic sectors globally (Tang & Tan, 2015). The industry's expansion and development are closely connected to increased competitiveness between destinations (McIntosh et al., 2000; UNWTO Tourism Highlights, 2017). As a relatively new subset of the tourism industry, medical tourism has gained prominence and popularity over the past few years (Cham, Cheng, Low & Cheok., 2020; Heydari et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2020; Perkumiene et al., 2019; Sarwar, 2013; Singh, 2015; Yuhani et al., 2015), surpassing traditional tourism and other forms of tourism (Herrick, 2007). According to Carreira and Bridges (2006), while health tourism encompasses a planned journey beyond an individual's existing environment for the reestablishment, restoration, and maintenance of health and general wellbeing, medical tourism refers to any activity that involves the restoration of health through medical intervention.

In recent years, medical tourism has been deemed a lucrative economic segment in developing countries (Zarei & Maleki, 2019). Specifically,

Asia has remained the top medical tourist destination and the main hub for medical tourism, where this industry has been progressively promoted (Wang, 2017; Wong et al., 2015). Among the Asian destinations, Malaysia has recognised the potential of the medical tourism industry as a new source of economic activity and has appeared as the cost leader in medical treatment, holding the highest ranking in the international arena (Cham et al., 2015; Cham et al., 2016; Cham et al., 2020; Krishnan & Chelliah, 2013). In 2009, the Malaysian government established the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) under the Ministry of Finance, with the objective of attracting medical tourists and promoting Malaysia's healthcare industry globally. Following its initiatives, in 2018 alone, the nation saw up to RM1.5 billion in revenue receipts from 1.2 million healthcare travellers. Malaysia's Year of Healthcare Travel was launched in line with the Year 2020's Visit Malaysia campaign, to sustain and solidify Malaysia's image as a reputable healthcare provider as well as to showcase Malaysia's competency as an esteemed healthcare destination in the region. This transformation reflects the

willingness of the nation to move towards the current demands of tourism.

Within Malaysia, the state of Penang on the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia stands out as the major contributor to medical tourism receipts, drawing more than 60 percent of the country's medical travellers and a revenue of around RM 500 million in 2018 alone (MHTC Report, 2018). Although tourist arrivals to the state are growing substantially, Manaf et al. (2011) and Manaf et al. (2015) claimed that overdependence on the Indonesian market for medical tourism poses a risk, as Malaysia aims to boost its healthcare services for medical tourists from other parts of the world (PEMANDU, 2010). In fact, despite the prominence of Penang as the top receiver of medical tourists in the country, the Penang Economic and Development Report (2016) highlighted that there are still market expansion opportunities to entice a higher spending segment of medical tourists beyond Indonesia. Similarly, a report by the OECD Reviews of Higher Education in Regional and City Development (2011) highlighted that although Penang is making all efforts to further enhance itself as a medical hub in Southeast Asia, there is still room for improvement in terms of development and skill enhancement in the healthcare sector. With the goal to be positioned as a desirable medical tourism destination for tourists globally, the overreliance on Indonesian tourists is a gap that further expresses that the potential of

medical tourism has not been fully explored by the Malaysian medical service providers.

Although there are several strategies to attract medical tourists to a destination, a country's image as a potential hub for medical tourism is a strong determining factor, enticing medical tourists. Tourists often rely on existing ideas, beliefs, or perceptions, to make decisions before visiting a destination or during their visit (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Crompton, 1979). Thus, destination image is deemed to be an important attribute driving tourists' selection and their satisfaction with a destination (Chiu et al., 2016; Deeparechigi et al., 2018; Prayag, 2009; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Zulfakar & Rahim, 2019).

The recent Covid-19 outbreak has severely affected both the global and Malaysian tourism industries. Nevertheless, Malaysia's reputation as a preferred destination for medical tourism is expected to thrive due to its effective management of the pandemic. Its previously (even locally) unacknowledged medical facilities and infrastructure have now been hailed as one of the world's best by foreign observers (New Strait Times, 2020). Therefore, it is apparent that the destination image of Malaysia as a trusted and reliable healthcare provider has not been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, despite an abundance of literature on destination image, the role of destination image in medical tourism, especially in the Malaysian context, has not been sufficiently explored.

In view of the potential of the medical tourism market for Malaysia, this study attempts to understand the attributes that form the destination image of Malaysia as a medical tourism destination, with a specific focus on Penang, which receives the highest number of medical tourists in the country. Understanding these attributes will enable destination managers and service providers to enhance and integrate appropriate resources to better meet the needs of medical tourists, and subsequently generate increased satisfaction, and intentions to recommend the destination to others.

The following section is the literature review, which examines the extant research to establish the attributes that form the image of Malaysia as a desirable medical tourism destination within Asia.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The concept of destination image has been given great significance by both practitioners and academics (Yilmaz et al., 2009). 'Image' is a concept that is extensively practised in marketing and communication disciplines to indicate an individual's perceptions about a product, service, or procedure, based on their opinions, impressions, and feelings (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Cham & Easvaralingam, 2012; Cham, Cheng & Ng, 2020; Cheng et al., 2014; Cheng et al., 2019; Crompton, 1979; Lim et al., 2020). Prior travel and tourism research has revealed that the destination image of tourists is a

unique, inimitable, and valuable concept, for understanding the destination selection process (Prebežac & Mikulić, 2008). Numerous scholars have also described destination image as the perceptions regarding a destination or place which have an impact on tourism decision making (Akroush et al., 2016; Bigne et al., 2001; Um & Crompton, 1990).

## **Gunn's Image Formation Theory**

It has long been established that travellers' perceptions of a destination's image influence the overall success of the destination, prompting researchers (e.g. Baloglu, 1997; Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972; Tasci, 2007; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Tseng et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2016) to study the factors influencing the formation of destination image. In endeavouring to construct a theoretical framework for this concept, Gunn (1988) proposed a seven-phase model which presents the effects of several attributes on tourists' image of a destination. Gunn's (1972, 1988) model asserts that mental images of a destination are shaped through the accumulation of information from non-commercial sources such as school, books, television documentaries, and the experiences of friends and family. According to the model, image also has the tendency to change, before, during, and after a trip, such that tourists who visit a destination will modify their image based on what they experienced during their

vacation. Gunn's work on destination image has inspired many researchers to define and conceptualise destination image in the context of tourism.

### **Components of Destination Image**

Gartner (1994), Dan (1996), and Baloglu (1999) agree that image is formed from two distinct yet interrelated components: cognitive and affective. Subsequently, Gartner (1994) added the conative element as the third attribute of destination image. Accordingly, Dann (1996), Gartner (1994), and King et al. (2015) classified destination image as a socio-linguistic model with three components, namely affective (internal sources of stimuli), cognitive (external sources of stimuli), and conative (act or action). The cognitive component is related to one's conviction and knowledge of a destination, while the affective component reflects how one feels about a destination. Lastly, the conative component is linked to one's behavioral intention concerning a tourism destination (Gartner, 1993; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Images are thus based on tourists' motives and sources of stimuli (Kim & Yoon, 2003), which are often interlinked.

In addition, Echtner and Ritchie (1993) postulated that it is not sufficient to present common traits across destinations when measuring destination image. As such, though common attributes set the basis for the formation of a destination's image, in respect of a medical tourism

destination, the motivations and purposes of the medical tourists (which are mainly driven by their need for health restoration) require further exploration to establish the attributes that are specific and unique to such destinations. Therefore, greater emphasis should be given to the novel and distinctive attributes that differentiate medical tourism destinations.

### **Medical Tourism Destination Image**

It is argued that the conventional definition of destination image differs between leisure tourism and medical tourism. This is attributed to the distinctiveness present within the medical tourism industry. To persuade medical tourists to visit and revisit a particular destination, marketing practitioners should project a good image by delivering value through superior medical facilities, advanced technological supplies, and reputable physician services (Hassan & Hemdi, 2016). The present measurement of destination image via cognitive and affective components, though directly observable and measurable in general tourism, may not appropriately represent the high credence service of healthcare, which includes complex procedures (e.g. surgeries) (Cham et al., 2020; Hyder et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2017). The absence of research on the dimensions and attributes that form destination image in the medical tourism industry thus calls for further study in this area.

Nevertheless, a limited number

of scholars have attempted to examine destination image in the medical tourism context. For example, Khan et al. (2016) highlighted that the attributes which shape destination image in medical tourism consist of medical amenities, general infrastructure, tourism attractions, and the social environment. Meanwhile, Abdullah et al. (2019) examined the factors influencing Indonesian medical tourists to travel to Penang, finding that the main factors which induce their visit are treatment accuracy and the reliable prescription of doctors in Penang. Since it is not easy to change an image once it is formed, destination stakeholders must pay due attention to image formation among current and potential tourists when promoting their destination for a specific purpose (Chi & Qu, 2008). Therefore, this study attempts to establish the attributes which help to form the image of Malaysia as a desirable destination for medical tourism, with a specific focus on Penang.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

To reiterate, this study aimed to identify the attributes which contribute to the formation of Penang's image as a desirable destination for medical tourism in Malaysia. Penang has witnessed unprecedented growth of medical tourism and currently draws around 60 percent of all medical tourists who

visit the country (International Medical Travel Journal, 2019; Lim et al., 2018; Nazem & Mohamed, 2015). Since not much is known about destination image attributes from the perspective of medical tourists in Penang, a qualitative design was deemed appropriate as a method of exploration, allowing participants free expression of their views, opinions, and experiences. In particular, the interview method provides researchers with descriptions and comprehensive qualitative data to assess participants' experiences, how they describe those experiences, and the meaning they receive from those experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Accordingly, to meet the research objective, this study employed a semi-structured face-to-face interview as the data collection method. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to map the interview questions in alignment with the research questions. Table 1 presents the selected interview questions posed to the medical tourists regarding the attributes of Penang's destination image as a medical tourism destination.

Since this research did not intend to generalise the findings to the whole country, participants who understood the phenomenon were purposefully selected to provide in-depth and rich information (Patton, 1990). That is, medical tourists who had experience of undertaking medical procedures and treatment in Penang, who had stayed for at least one night in Penang, and who gave informed consent to participate in the study were

Table 1: Selected Interview Questions

Selected Interview Questions	The rationale for asking these questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell me more about how you were encouraged to seek medical treatment in Malaysia?</li> <li>• Where did you receive information about this hospital and treatment in Penang? Have you seen any promotional material of Malaysia as a travel destination for medical facilities? Can you describe it to me?</li> <li>• What images or characteristics come to your mind when you think of Penang? What is your first impression of Penang?</li> <li>• As a medical tourist in Malaysia, how does this country make you feel (e.g. excited, relaxed, fascinated)?</li> <li>• What part of your experience was most memorable? Relate the event and the feelings you had which made this event the most memorable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To obtain an understanding of how medical tourists decide to travel to Malaysia to seek treatment.</li> <li>• To assess why medical tourists specifically choose Penang as their preferred destination for medical treatment.</li> <li>• To understand the holistic image of Penang as a preferred destination for medical tourism.</li> <li>• To evaluate the cognitive and affective attributes that form the image of Penang as a preferred destination for medical tourism.</li> <li>• To identify any unique image that has been formed during the medical tourism experience in Penang.</li> </ul>

specifically chosen to be part of the study.

Following these criteria, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 26 medical tourists from Indonesia, between November 2018 and January 2019, to acquire rich information and profound perceptions of the key attributes of Penang as a medical tourism destination. The interviews were conducted at the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council’s lounge at the Penang International Airport and other selected premises (i.e. hospitals) where respondents stayed while

receiving treatment or recuperating after treatment. Before each interview, a confidential consent statement describing the study's background and aim in English and Indonesian languages was presented to and signed by each respondent.

The semi-structured method, which was open-ended in nature, provided diverse and valuable insights into the concepts under study. This method allows the researcher to prompt for further information if unique or novel findings begin emerging (Baškarada, 2014). As some

of the medical tourists in this study were current patients who were recuperating from their treatment, they were understandably reluctant to spend more than 30 minutes for the interview. Therefore, each interview lasted between 25 and 30 minutes. The medical tourists were asked about their experiences, views, and perceptions on aspects of the medical tourism experience in Penang, until data saturation was achieved.

With theoretical saturation occupying the desired criterion in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the interviews were analyzed to assess the need for additional samples. Although interviews were conducted with 30 participants, data saturation occurred after the 26<sup>th</sup> interview. No forthcoming ideas emerged from the last four interviews, indicating no necessity for additional samples. Based on the depth of information conveyed by the 26 participants, the richness of the data prevailed. Therefore, the interview process was deemed complete with 26 medical tourists.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Upon receiving the respondents' consent, all interviews were recorded using an audio recorder while notes were taken for verification purposes. The original interview questions in English were translated into Bahasa Indonesia (the official language of Indonesia) by an Indonesian translator with proficiency in both languages. The translation was an important step,

as most of the medical tourists in Penang are Indonesian (Kumar et al., 2016; Musa et al., 2012; Ormond, 2011). In this study, the data collected during the interviews was coded and analyzed using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), an important tool for qualitative data analysis. Past studies have emphasized that ATLAS.ti software is a reliable and consistent tool (Grise & Huertas, 2013) for analyzing data, including text, audio, images, and videos, assisting in the coding of the data, which is eventually converted into themes. After the interview, the raw data or transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were uploaded into ATLAS.ti based on the number of participants. Following that, each transcript was coded using an open coding method to develop initial categories, while an axial coding method was subsequently used to identify the interrelationships among the open codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

In total, 26 medical tourists from Indonesia were interviewed at the Penang International Airport and selected medical premises in Penang. Table 2 presents an overview of the demographic profile of the Indonesian medical tourists by their assigned codes. Overall, it is evident that most Indonesian medical tourists who were visiting Penang were undergoing treatment which required medical intervention.



Table 2: List of Respondents with Codes

	<b>Code</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Gender</b> <b>M-Male</b> <b>F- Female</b>	<b>Purpose of Visit</b>
<i>Respondent 1</i>	<i>R1</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Health Check-Up</i>
<i>Respondent 2</i>	<i>R2</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Harelip Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 3</i>	<i>R3</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 4</i>	<i>R4</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 5</i>	<i>R5</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 6</i>	<i>R6</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Knee Replacement Surgery</i>
<i>Respondent 7</i>	<i>R7</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 8</i>	<i>R8</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sinus treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 9</i>	<i>R9</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Health Check-Up</i>
<i>Respondent 10</i>	<i>R10</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 11</i>	<i>R11</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Kidney Stone Disease</i>
<i>Respondent 12</i>	<i>R12</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Spine Surgery</i>
<i>Respondent 13</i>	<i>R13</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 14</i>	<i>R14</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Heart Surgery</i>
<i>Respondent 15</i>	<i>R15</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Health Check-Up</i>
<i>Respondent 16</i>	<i>R16</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Heart Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 17</i>	<i>R17</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Health Check-Up</i>
<i>Respondent 18</i>	<i>R18</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Gastritis</i>
<i>Respondent 19</i>	<i>R19</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Spine Surgery</i>
<i>Respondent 20</i>	<i>R20</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Appendicitis</i>
<i>Respondent 21</i>	<i>R21</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 22</i>	<i>R22</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Dengue Treatment and Heart Disease</i>
<i>Respondent 23</i>	<i>R23</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Health Check-Up</i>
<i>Respondent 24</i>	<i>R24</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 25</i>	<i>R25</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Cancer Treatment</i>
<i>Respondent 26</i>	<i>R26</i>	<i>Indonesian</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Health Check-Up</i>

Table 3 shows the attributes of destination image mentioned by the respondents. The attributes of the destination image are indicated in the leftmost column, followed by their definitions in the middle column. The sub-attributes or sub-themes are then indicated on the rightmost column.

Based on the findings, the attribute of Influenced and Informed Decisions stands out as the dominant theme that was reflected in the sub-themes of the image of Penang as a

healing destination, as well as tourists' awareness of medical facilities in Penang, which had developed via the Internet and word-of-mouth. Other prominent themes that emerged were Hospital Internal Amenities (higher success rate of treatment and reputable doctors) and Aesthetics (image of Penang as a pleasant and comfortable destination). Further discussion on the themes is presented in the following sub-sections.

**Table 3: Cognitive Attributes of Destination Image (Themes)**

Attributes/ Themes	Definition	Codes (Density of codes)
1. Hospital Internal Amenities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources and facilities required to perform services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reputable hospitals (8)</li> <li>• High success rate of treatment <b>(31)</b></li> <li>• Reputable doctor <b>(18)</b></li> <li>• Pleasant and comfortable hospital ambiance (11)</li> </ul>
2. Aesthetics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The aesthetic environment of Penang while seeking treatment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean environment (3)</li> <li>• Pleasant weather (4)</li> <li>• A safe and secure environment (7)</li> <li>• Image of Penang as a fascinating and exciting destination (5)</li> <li>• Image of Penang as a pleasant and comfortable destination <b>(23)</b></li> </ul>
3. Influenced and Informed Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influenced and informed decision-making process on how and why to seek medical treatment in Penang</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of medical treatments and "Word-of-Mouth" <b>(42)</b></li> <li>• Image of Penang as a healing destination <b>(54)</b></li> </ul>

**Theme 1: Influenced and Informed Decisions**

Based on the interview findings, the influenced and informed decisions of medical tourists visiting Penang emerged as the most significant theme. The respondent 1 indicated that she felt confident about receiving treatment in Penang because of the high number of success stories. Interestingly, some respondents have an image of Penang as a healing destination, as they commonly generalise and assume that most passengers travelling to Penang are

medical tourists. Respondents 13 and 21 had a positive image of the medical facilities in Penang and were confident with the doctors' capability to handle their health issues.

Respondent 13 commented, "*The first time I travelled to Penang was to seek medical treatment. Since then, we have come here so often that we have positioned Penang as a destination for treatment and healing more than a tourist destination. Many medical tourists come here, and we heard many people have come here and been cured too.*" According to Respondent 21, "*I feel very relieved*

*since I came here because I am confident that I will be cured. I would probably need to travel only twice or thrice and I'm quite sure I will be healed by then. I am very confident with the doctors here in Penang, and as far as I know, these doctors at Hospital X are the best."*

This confidence emerged from the trust and satisfaction respondents have towards their doctors. According to the respondents, the doctors accurately diagnosed their illness and offered them a high possibility for being cured every time they visit Penang. This has instilled a strong sense of trust among the respondents. Besides this, the respondents' decisions to travel to Penang for treatment are highly influenced by their family, relatives, and friends.

### **Theme 2: Hospital Internal Amenities**

Another theme is hospitals' internal amenities, which are represented by a higher treatment success rate and reputable (i.e. Western-trained) doctors. Respondents 6, 9, and 13 stressed the importance of having qualified doctors in influencing their decision to seek treatment in Malaysia. As Respondent 6 commented, *"The doctors are well-educated and trained overseas. If they are educated overseas, it means they are intelligent."* Respondent 9, on the other hand, explained that *"The only reason we came here is because of the doctors. From the doctors' clinic, we*

*can see if they are locally or foreign-educated."*

### **Theme 3: Aesthetics**

Most respondents expressed their satisfaction with the aesthetic attributes of Penang, which arose as one of the key themes among the interviews. The aesthetic pleasure received by tourists relates to their preference for Penang city, specifically due to its cleanliness, good weather, safety and security, and its exciting, fascinating, pleasant, and comfortable environment. As Respondent 6 claimed, *"I'm comfortable with the cleanliness of this city. As a medical tourist, I feel happy and fascinated by being here."*

Respondents are happy to visit attractions around the city. Those receiving minor treatments are able to visit tourist attractions in Penang, such as Bukit Bendera and Gurney Drive Shopping Mall. Meanwhile, others perceive Penang as not very different from their own country. Therefore, they feel more relaxed and comfortable in Penang. As mentioned by Respondent 8, *"The atmosphere is calm, and we feel relaxed being here."* Notably, Respondent 8 and a few others claimed that Penang is fascinating, and that they would like to migrate to Penang in the future. As mentioned by Respondent 8, *"Penang Island is comfortable. I may want to migrate to Penang and live here."* These findings show that besides healthcare and treatment, medical tourists choose Penang due to its calm environment, which makes it

conducive to recovery and rejuvenation.

trusted people are seen as a reliable source of information.

## **DISCUSSION**

A further discussion on the key attributes that shape the image of Penang as a medical tourism destination is presented below.

### **Influenced and Informed Decisions**

#### **Healing Destination**

A key prevailing image of Penang among medical tourists is that of a destination with healing attributes. Based on findings from interviews with 26 medical tourists, this destination image is seen as a vital attribute in shaping the image of Penang as a medical tourism destination. Medical tourists have formed an image of Penang as a destination that promises to satisfactorily heal and restore health and wellbeing. It was further revealed that the image of Penang as a healing destination is shaped by tourists' confidence and trust in a rapid diagnosis, quick recovery, and high success rate. Indeed, trust is seen as one of the most powerful tools in building customer relationships as there is no lasting customer loyalty without trust (Berry, 1996; Cohen, 2013; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Moreover, in the healthcare context, the level of awareness or familiarity a patient has with his or her doctor determines trust or confidence. These findings support Veerasoontorn and Zee's (2010) result that positive relationships with

#### **Word-of-Mouth Recommendation**

In this study, word-of-mouth as a source of information was observed to be preferred by medical tourists compared to e-word-of-mouth or search engines. This scenario reflects the way medical tourists often receive favourable recommendations and reviews from their family and friends, consequently developing a positive perception about the hospitals and doctors in Penang. Hence, the image that medical tourists hold about Penang is mainly spurred by overwhelming positive encounters by treated family and friends, coupled with their own past experiences. This perception becomes a reality when they experience, first-hand, an improvement in their own health or the health of family and friends after the first visit. However, despite being an important factor, word-of-mouth remains an under-researched area in the healthcare sector (Martin, 2015).

#### **Hospital Internal Amenities**

#### **Higher Success Rate of Treatment and Reputable Doctors**

A higher treatment success rate is one of the key predictors of destination image, which in Penang is mainly attributed to the availability of reputable doctors. The findings indicate that although Penang is endowed with resources and features for tourists such as infrastructure and leisure activities, these attributes only complement the core offering, which

is competent medical service providers and health facilities. Another finding that emerged in this context is that medical tourists who travel to Penang have a high regard for doctors who are educated overseas and who possess an international degree, as they perceive these doctors to be more intelligent and experienced. Given that a doctor's reputation is seen as one of the primary generators of trust, similar results were reported by McCallum and Jacoby (2007).

### **Aesthetics**

#### **Pleasant and Comfortable Destination**

The findings further show that medical tourists perceive Penang as a clean, green, and serene destination with good weather. They also feel good being in an environment that is safe and secure. Tourists thus portray Penang's environment as conducive for the healing and recuperation process, although they may not actively engage in tourism-related activities. Borg (2017) claimed that the tourism element helps reduce negative stress associated with treatment and thus improves the quality of care.

Further, it is clear that the entire healing experience in Penang is, at its core, reflected by the treatment received from the hospitals and the relaxation and recreational elements outside the hospital premises. In this regard, the findings from this study revealed that in Penang, patients feel

that healing from sickness and ailments is synonymous with being on holiday, as it relieves them from the stress of their condition. The term "tourism" or "holiday" was described as a recovery element in the interviews, as being sick entails psychological stress while being healthy creates a state of wellbeing and happiness that is equated with the stress-free feeling one experiences on holiday.

Figure 1 presents a graphical presentation of the frequency of attributes that contribute to the destination image of Penang as a medical tourism destination, while Figure 2 illustrates a network view of these attributes.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study offer insight into the salient attributes that form the image of a destination in relation to the medical tourism industry in Malaysia. In essence, Penang is recognised as a reputable and favourable destination for medical tourists from Indonesia.

Apart from cognitive and affective images, the image of Penang is exemplified by a deep conviction in the success of healing and recovery. As shown in Figure 3, the actual image formed at the end of the experience is also embodied by the belief that Penang is a destination for healing. Thus, Penang has become synonymous with healing – a description conveyed by most medical tourists in this study.

**Top 5 Attributes Determining The Destination Image Of Penang as a Medical Tourism Destination**

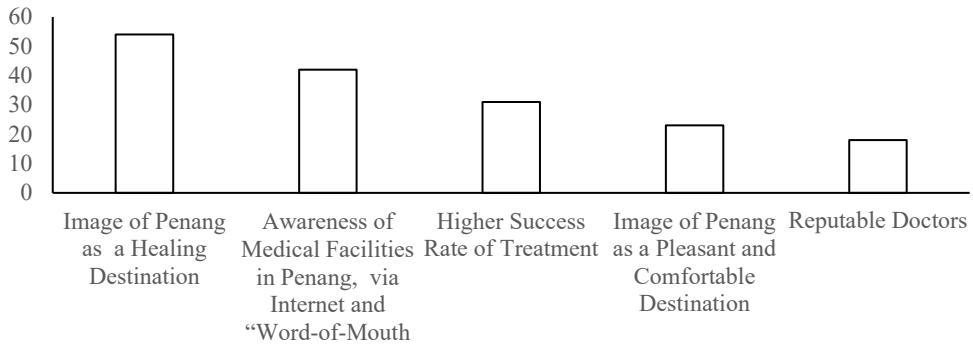


Figure 1: Density (Grounded) of Attributes of the Destination Image of Penang as a Medical Tourism Destination (Source: ATLAS.ti)

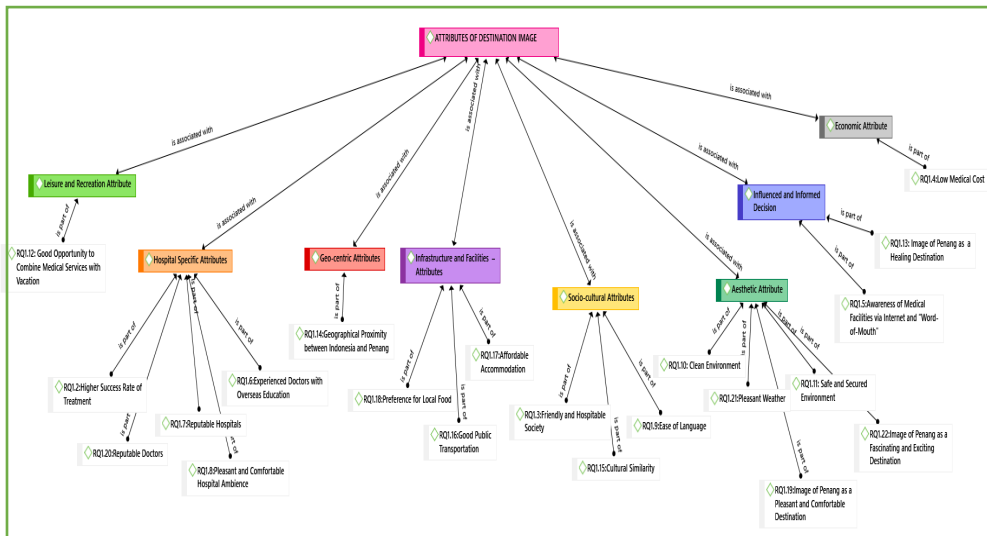


Figure 2: Network View of Attributes of the Destination Image of Penang as a Medical Tourism Destination (Source: ATLAS.ti)

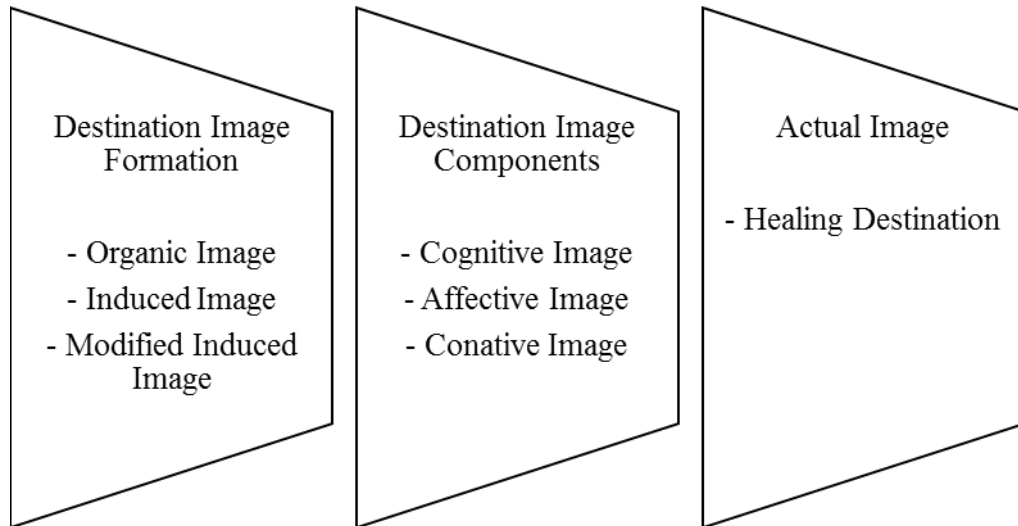


Figure 3: Explorative Framework of Penang's Image as a Medical Tourism Destination

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study present several useful implications that are likely to benefit relevant stakeholders. The subsequent sections explain these implications from both the theoretical and practical perspectives.

### **Theoretical Implication**

The findings of this study have led to an understanding of the conceptualisation of destination image in the context of medical tourism in Malaysia. Finding from the qualitative method have permitted an in-depth exploration of how medical tourists perceive the destination image of Malaysia as a medical tourism destination. Having experienced healthcare services in Penang, the medical tourists who participated in the study were able to present and

describe sincere views, feelings, and opinions about the destination, from which the term 'healing destination' was established. This is a fundamental and unique contribution of the study, which could be established due to the exploratory case study method used to elicit the qualitative expressions of medical tourists' experiences through detailed analysis. Specifically, 11 attributes and three themes emerged with respect to the formation of destination image in the context of medical tourism, supporting Gartner's (1994) and Gunn's (1972, 1988) destination image formation theory which considers cognitive and affective elements.

### **Practical Implication**

Several essential practical implications can also be drawn for use by managers and policymakers, based

on the importance of the attributes found in this study. It can be safely recommended that destination image is the most relevant factor encouraging travelers to seek Penang as a medical tourism destination. Based on the study findings, individual hospitals should emphasize doctor recruitment and widely promote doctors' expertise and qualifications in the most appropriate manner. Language proficiency is an added advantage for Indonesian patients; however, this may not apply to tourists from other countries or nationalities such as China. Therefore, to empower communication skills and attract medical tourists from untapped markets, private hospitals should encourage their doctors and nurses to enhance their multilingual expertise and fluency.

Notably, in line with the Ministry of Finance's allocation of RM25 million to the Malaysian Healthcare Travel Council (MHTC) to strengthen the medical tourism sector and heighten the awareness of Malaysia as a preferred medical travel destination for fertility, cardiology, and oncology, Malaysia must take conscious efforts to focus on service quality, treatment outcomes, patient satisfaction, and destination image.

## **LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

While the present study has highlighted the significance of destination image in the context of medical tourism, there remain limitations. First, this research did not

highlight the potential factors that influence the image of a medical tourism destination. The results obtained thus do not substantially explain possible ways to develop the image of a destination among medical tourists. Second, the sample of this study consisted only of Indonesian medical tourists, preventing the generalisation of the findings to medical tourists from other nations with cultural and geographic differences.

In view of these limitations, future research should extend upon this work by examining the factors which influence destination image. For example, future studies could explore the potential influence of marketing, psychological, country, push-pull, social media, technology, and social factors on destination image. In addition, future study samples should also be extended to encompass various nationalities from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is important as cultural differences may influence the expectations, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards specific tourism offerings. A broader sample would provide a better understanding of medical tourists, which would in turn benefit the host country in the market segmentation process. Moreover, the service strategy, operations, and branding, of healthcare service providers should be further investigated in view of the credence-based nature of the medical tourism setting. These elements are critical in ensuring the success of healthcare service providers in this competitive industry.



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