

## The Evolvement of brand identity of Langkawi Island, Malaysia

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this paper is to investigate the brand identity development efforts of Langkawi Island as one of the most prominent and well-guarded tourism destinations in Malaysia. It will be viewed from the historical perspectives for the last 35 years since 1980s until the present time as to how this involvement influences the formation of its brand identity and later, existing destination image. Based on in depth interviews with 11 different levels of managers of separate divisions for destination management organizations (DMOs) in Langkawi Island, Malaysia, theoretically, the findings provide an opportunity to expand the knowledge of destination brand identity development and the involvement of DMOs in influencing image making over time. Practically, the findings indicate three key important antecedents of brand identity development efforts related to (1) the effects from multiple positioning themes and slogans, (2) lack of brand coordination, and (3) brand leadership issue. These empirical findings provide new insights into enhancing the theoretical aspect of managing a destination brand, including its close relationship with issues faced by destination marketing organizations in dealing with various stakeholders involved. Thus, using the case study of Langkawi Island, the context of multiple identities or image fragmentation is important to be understood due to the different perceived ideas on how the image should be projected according to stakeholders and market segmentation.*

### **KEYWORDS**

*Brand identity development, Langkawi, Malaysia, stakeholders, branding slogans, DMOs.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Destination brand identity is one of the important core concepts that have been discussed in destination branding literature (e.g. Mak 2011; Saraniemi 2011; Wheeler et al. 2011; Bregoli 2012). Mak (2011) has explored the destination brand identity from the DMO's industry partners, while Saraniemi (2011) investigates the destination brand building activities by the National Tourism Organization (NTO) drawing from the identity based branding literature. Wheeler et al. (2011) have indicated that a destination brand developed could be incongruence with the destination product offerings and its identity. They also point out that internal stakeholders such as tourism operators and local communities may perceive a destination brand that does not conform to the values and its identity if the brand is enforced by the authority. In short, brand identity development is important as it represents the brand from a supply side perspective.

Most of the destination branding studies discussed and examined the brand from the demand perspective or visitors to the destination (Konecnik & Go 2008; García et al. 2012). From the branding literature, examining the brand from demand side is defined as a brand image and from the supply side is as a brand identity. Both perspectives should be taken into account to get a holistic view of the success of destination branding strategy (Bregoli 2012; Saraniemi 2010). From a general marketing point of view, brand identity and brand image are related, but they are two different concepts (Lin et al. 2010). In short, the key difference between these two concepts is that identity comes from the company whereas the image is an individual's 'perception of a particular brand' (Nandan 2005).

Although destination branding has been one of the topics that has gained attention in destination management research, the development process of destination identity or brand identity has yet to be adequately addressed particularly in a tourism destination of a developing country. More studies are observed in the context of destination identity and its sense of place in relation to destination brand identity development (e.g. (Konecnik & Go 2008; Konecnik Ruzzier & de Chernatony 2013; Wheeler et al. 2011; Campelo et al. 2013). However, fewer studies are reported in terms of tracking the evolution of destination brand identity over a period of time due to the development of the tourism industry of a particular area. This paper examines the brand identity development efforts from a historical perspective of the way a destination is positioned using multiple branding slogans or positioning themes to promote as a competitive tourism destination. Using Langkawi Island, one of the most prominent and well-guarded tourism destination in Malaysia as a study context, multiple documents such as official reports and archival materials were analysed to examine how brand identity is changed to attract multiple market segmentations for a period of over three decades. This study also performed in depth interviews with various key officers of a destination development authority, a National Tourism Organization and with a destination local municipal council to get their perspective on the brand identity development efforts that seems to have changed due to more tourism products are introduced to cater to multiple market segmentations.

The significant involvements of various policymakers such as destination management organizations, (DMOs), local city councils and national tourism organizations (NTOs) in destination's tourism success, particularly in branding strategy are vastly discussed in the destination branding literature (e.g. Pike 2007; Bornhorst et al. 2010; Volgger & Pechlaner 2014). To remain competitive in tourism marketplace, many destinations have established a DMO to provide leadership in managing tourist destination (Bornhorst et al. 2010; Pike & Page 2014). One of the important roles performed by DMOs is to brand a destination as unique and attractive to attract more visitors to the area. Therefore, DMOs have increased the amount of investment for branding activities and the efforts are observed since the 1990s (Pike 2007). DMOs are recognized as the principal of branding strategists for a destination. In branding a destination, DMOs are in charge of crafting the overall brand strategy. In the literature, the term DMO is referring either to destination marketing organization or destination management organization and is used interchangeably to highlight the multiple responsibilities of such organization. Normally, lead DMOs can be nations, states, local governments or specific tourism entities such as a Convention and Visitors Bureau (Zavattaro et al. 2015).

However, in Malaysia, the term DMO is mainly referring to either National Tourism Organization (NTO) or a development authority where specifically in the case of Langkawi Island, it is destination development authority and National Tourism Organization (Tourism Malaysia). Both organizations are funded by the federal government. Local government authorities also have its role in supporting the tourism industry, but they do not directly involve in destination branding strategy. In the case of Langkawi, in order to develop the island as a prime international tourism destination, the government has established Langkawi Development Authority in the year 1990. The primary roles of the agency is to plan, stimulate and coordinate of the overall development of the island where the locals may reap the maximum benefits from all the tourism activities and development (Samat 2010). The agency is also responsible in positioning the island as one of the top tourism destinations globally through its various tourism product offerings and identifying market segmentations.

Brands as described in the literature is supposed to be a clear and distinct image which differentiates them from the competitors (Baker & Cameron 2008). Similarly, in destination image literature, branding efforts should be framed within a clear image strategy (Camprubí et al. 2008). Pike (2010) also mentioned that a destination should have a clear identity to remain competitive. However, as argued by Ren & Blichfeldt (2011), literature do not provide much explanation towards the meaning of 'clear identity or a clear image strategy. Therefore, lack of clear identity or having multiple identities or images as perceived by both from internal stakeholders perspective or the visitors are not necessarily mean something negative. These different views are to be expected and acknowledged. As long as the destination can deliver what it promises, it is alright to have multiple projected images.

### *Slogans and positioning themes as part of identity development*

Having a slogan is part of the branding efforts to promote a destination. Most destinations are using a branding slogan as part of their brand positioning strategy (Pike 2005). In order to associate between the brand identity desired by DMOs and the actual brand image held in the market, destinations provide various slogans as one to differentiate from others. A slogan is defined as a short phrase that is easy to remember and is used to convey the values of a destination to the visitors to experience (Rehan 2014). Slogans are supposed to be attractive, commercialized and catchy to be associated with a brand. A destination is identified through a slogan and very often a powerful image is projected by developing a slogan that visitors can remember such as I love NY, Malaysia Truly Asia and Amazing Thailand. The main purpose of a slogan is to communicate key descriptive features of a place such as a tourism destination or a country (Supphellen 2002). From the general branding perspective, slogans are part of the identity elements and used to differentiate a brand (Keller 2013). Slogans are powerful branding tools because, like brand names, they are an extremely efficient, shorthand means to build brand equity (Keller 2013, pg 158). Similarly, in branding a destination, a slogan is used to create brand awareness and to reinforce the brand positioning. However, developing an effective slogan or tagline for a destination is very much more complicated than consumer and corporate brands (Supphellen 2002). As claimed by Pike (2012), DMOs experience several challenges in developing meaningful positioning themes that represent the needs of diverse markets and the range and diversity of local attractions and product offerings.

### *Brand coordination*

Branding a destination is mostly coordinated by destination management organizations which are normally administered and funded by a government authority. It is recognized in the literature that coordination among different stakeholders is one of the important factors determining the success of destination brand (Bregoli 2012). However, internal coordination between departments, divisions or units within DMO is also critical in building and implementing a successful branding strategy (Hankinson 2007). Hankinson argued that developing brand identity begins with the DMO from the top management of the organization to the entire staff members. Subsequently, the brand identity is extended and coordinated with other partner organizations.

### *Brand leadership issues*

Brand leadership is one of the important guiding principles for destination brands. Based on the corporate branding theories, Hankinson (2007) argues that a strong, visionary leadership is critical to brand a destination efficiently. Managing and developing brand identity is a process performed by the DMO whereby the organization as a whole decides a vision and strategy for the brand creation (Kavaratzis 2009). As suggested by Kavaratzis (2009), the DMO has to inculcate the brand culture of the organization focusing on the internal brand identity development among its entire staff members first. The next step is to promote the brand with other organizations in order to build alliances and partnerships as part of the external brand identity development. The last step is to communicate the brand promise and to deliver the brand experience with the multiple stakeholders that involves in the branding process.

## **2.0 Methodology**

In order to investigate the brand identity development efforts of Langkawi Island and its image projected over a period 35 years (1980-2015) it was decided to conduct field interviews with a sample of senior key persons from different organizations operating on the island. The data were gathered by interviewing eight different division managers of the destination planning and development authority including the CEO, three different level managers of the National Tourism Organization and the president of the local municipal council. All participants were selected based on their experience,

knowledge and their roles in influencing the brand identity developments of Langkawi Island from DMO's perspective. A total of twelve participants were contacted to participate in the study. Official letters were sent through emails to senior managers' in charge of tourism asking the person and other related officers to participate in the study. A separate letter was sent to the CEO of the development authority through his personal assistant also by email for the same purpose. A follow up phone call was made a week after the email was sent to reconfirm the interviews which would take place in Langkawi. Details of the participants representing respective organizations with different level of managerial positions and roles are set up in table 1.

As mentioned by Saraniemi (2010), the data collected from interviews with the selected respondents may not represent the actual realities of the events or phenomenon as in every historical research. Therefore, this study made efforts to cross-check and verify several times against secondary data of multiple archive reports published by the relevant authorities such as Visitor destination plan and other development plans and reports during the years(Saraniemi 2010).

**Table 1 Details of individuals interviewed representing different level managerial and divisions**

<b>Organization/Individuals with different level managerial positions and divisions</b>
<p><b>Destination Development Authority</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. CEO</li> <li>2. Manager (Tourism Division)</li> <li>3. Senior Assistant Manager (Tourism Division)</li> <li>4. Assistant Manager (Event and Promotion)</li> <li>5. Senior Assistant Manager (Geopark and Conservation Division)</li> <li>6. Assistant Manager (Development and Planning Division)</li> <li>7. Head Assistant Manager (Delivery Management Office)</li> </ol>
<p><b>National Tourism Organization</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Assistant Director Promotional Support Division</li> <li>9. Manager of Tourist Destination Information Center</li> <li>10. Assistant Manager of Tourism Information Center</li> </ol>
<p><b>Destination Local Council</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. President of Municipal Council</li> </ol>

To explain how the destination identity developments were evolved over the period of 35 years (1980-2015), a series of questions were addressed regarding the multiples taglines or themes used to project the image of the destination during that period of time, including how managers: 1) perceive the changes of different slogans, 2) identify the core values or actual identity of the destination, 3) engage with other internal stakeholders such as tourism operators and local community, and 4) react to change of leadership. The examples of the questions used were as follows: "Can you tell me about Langkawi's identity and its core values?"; "How would you engage with other important stakeholders in creating the brand identity?"; "Why there were different slogans or taglines used to represent Langkawi over the period of 35 years?" These questions were asked of most of the respondents to get the views on the evolvement of the destination identity.

The researcher used semi structured questionnaire to guide the interviews. Ten interviews were tape recorded and the other two were based on writing notes throughout the conversation. The interviews were conducted separately over the period of 7 months starting from October 2014 until April 2015 due to different schedules of the managers and their time constraints. It was challenging to interview with some of the managers and the CEO as they always on official trips and attending multiple events and functions. The interviews took times varying from about 15 to 60 minutes and they were transcribed immediately after each interview to have a clear understanding of the studied case(Okumus et al. 2007). The researcher read all the transcribed documents several times and examined the patterns that emerged. All the transcriptions were coded accordingly. The researcher focused on the patterns identified that relate to evolvement of destination identity development efforts from different periods based on the views from managers of the destination development authority, the national tourism organization and the president of the municipal council. To provide a comprehensive

picture of destination brand development efforts of Langkawi over the last 35 years, beside in depth interviews data, the researcher also referred to other sources of information including websites and destination official portal, promotional materials, official reports and other related documents.

**3.0 Results and discussions**

It was discovered that between 1980 and 2015, Langkawi Island had many positioning themes or taglines introduced to market the island as a tourism destination. All participants agreed that over a period of 35 years from 1980-2015, Langkawi Island has reinforced multiple images through different themes or slogans including the Isle of Legend, Langkawi Duty Free Island, 99 Magical Islands, Langkawi Tourism City, Langkawi the Jewel of Kedah, Langkawi Global Geopark and Naturally Langkawi. All the labels used seem to work in attracting different markets to the island. The tourist arrivals have grown substantially over that period of time as shown by the figures in figure1. In 2013, Langkawi recorded total tourist receipt of approximately MYR\$4.6 billion from the arrival of 3.4 million tourists representing domestic and international visitors. In the same year, Malaysia’s tourist receipt was recorded at MYR\$65.44 billion and Langkawi’s tourist receipt alone represented 7% of the total tourist receipts of the whole country. Therefore, the tourism industry now is the biggest industry on the island and the local people appear to enjoy the economic benefits gain from the industry. Majority of the local people are engaged in the tourism industry working in the hotels, operating resorts and chalets and managing tour guiding.

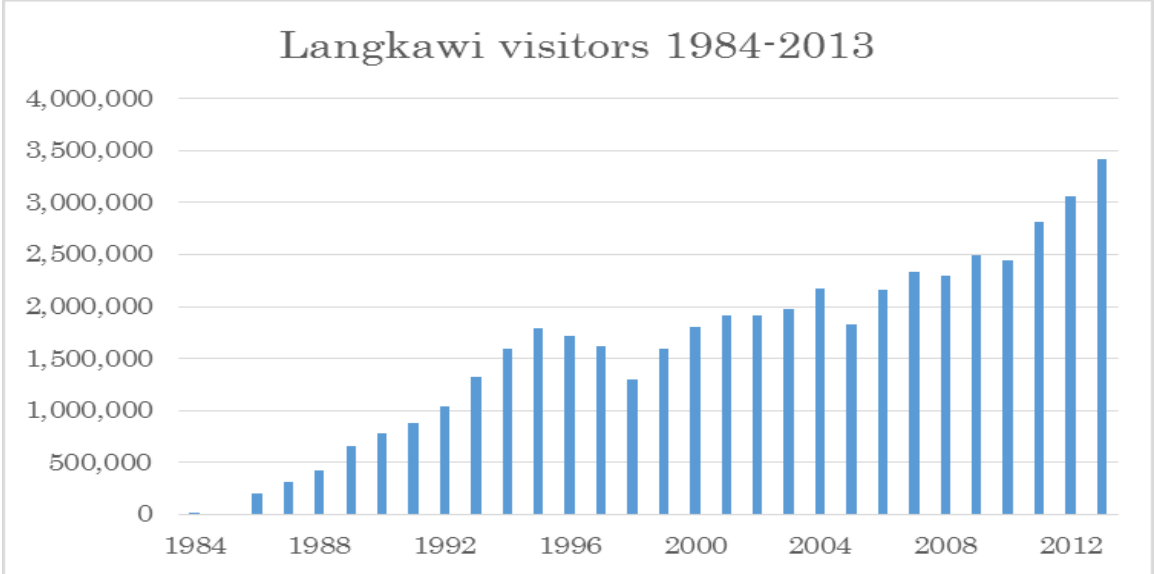


Figure 1: Foreign and domestic tourist arrivals for Langkawi Island 1984-2013

In analyzing the Langkawi destination identity, it is found that Langkawi’s hold different identities to different market segmentations. According to one of the senior managers of tourism division for Langkawi development authority, Langkawi is perceived with different identities and images by different markets:

*Event organizers want to have events here. The local people want to come here for shopping, the foreign tourists come here to enjoy the natural beauty, natural landscapes, beaches and soft adventures activities such as walking in the jungle trail, birding and so on.*

This comment narrates to the destination brand identity development efforts where image projected by the agency are varies based on different target markets. For the last 35 years from 1980-2015, Langkawi Island has been positioned with different themes and slogans to reflect with the changing markets over time. Some of the taglines did not came directly from the agency office but from the previous elected state government which was consented by the Royal Sultan of Kedah (Langkawi the Jewel of Kedah), and the Ministry of Local Government (Langkawi Tourism City). When asking

about how and why did Langkawi use different branding slogans over that period of time, one of the managers mentioned:

*Langkawi tourism city is a status awarded by Ministry of Local Government to elevate the status of Langkawi as a modern tourism city especially for the domestic market. Once you get city status, there will more fund directed from the government to further develop Langkawi....Langkawi the Jewel of Kedah was proposed by the previous elected Kedah opposition party and it was consented by the Sultan of Kedah to show that Langkawi is still part of Kedah and long before that is 99 Magical Island.*

The empirical evidences of this study indicate that destination identity development is influenced by different stakeholder's involvements which are politically related. Granting Langkawi as a tourism city and being recognised by the Ministry of Local government as a tourism city had provided access for the destination to get more funding to develop the island's tourism. As a result, more funds are channeled to the developing authority in improving local infrastructures such as road condition and enhancing other tourism infrastructures and therefore modernizing the island to cater for the international tourists. The slogan 'Langkawi the Jewel of Kedah' was mooted by the previous elected statement government to indicate that Langkawi is still part of Kedah and not completely owned by the federal government. Therefore, the purpose of branding is not only to attract more visitors to the island but also to get more funding from the government and potential investors to further develop the island. At the same time, the branding slogan such as Langkawi, The Jewel of Kedah is supposed to create the sense of belonging and sense of ownership among the local residents towards the Langkawi brand.

Brand coordination is one of the critical issues that are raised by the development authority managers and those officers from Tourism Information center. In the case of Langkawi, there is empirical evidence observed in terms of brand coordination within different divisions among a particular development authority as well as coordination with the other tourism organizations. Some of managers from different divisions of the DMO have little understanding what the brand is and why brand is important. As a result, this little coordination contributes to lack of understanding and confusion among managers towards the brand promise.

Leadership skills among the appointed CEO or General Manager of the development authority play important roles in influencing the destination brand identity efforts over the last 35 years of tourism development on the island. Since the agency was established in year 1990, there were six changes to its general managerial position, with a new CEO, a retired senior government officer appointed in year 2012 until the present time. All the General Managers or CEO of the agency was appointed by the government among government senior officers who previously were attached to different government agencies and ministry such as from administrative and diplomatic offices, finance, district, mineral and land offices. Each CEO has different leadership styles and their enthusiasm towards developing Langkawi as a destination brands are varies. Every time the new GM is appointed, there will be changes in the way the agency is managed. Some CEOs were enthusiastic in developing Langkawi and come up with different ideas to advance the tourism industry. Some were too focus on bureaucratic procedures to the extent that it limits the island' overall tourism development.

#### **4.0 Recommendations and conclusions**

In the case of Langkawi Island, the role of DMO in the form of development authority is of utmost important. The government's traditional top down approach through its various agencies such as its Development Authority, National Tourism Organization influenced much of the brand identity development efforts of Langkawi for the last 35 years from 1980 until 2015. Since most of the tourism development could only be done by the government, Langkawi through its Development Authority has been positioned with different themes and slogans to attract different market segmentations but with little consultation from its wider stakeholders (e.g tourism operators, local

community etc). However, given the increasing number of tourists arrival over that period of time, the strategy of multiples projected images seems to be working well with Langkawi.

For the last 35 years, the development authority is in charge of implementing various tourism projects and constructing tourism facilities and attractions that cater to both local and foreign tourists the island. This traditional approach practicing by DMO in emphasizing brand identity development efforts on projected multiple images towards visitors alone could be less efficient in enhancing the destination brand values(García et al. 2012). It could be successful in attracting more tourists but eventually, the DMO may ends up losing support from the other important stakeholders such as business operators and local community. In the case of Langkawi, it is time for the DMO to rethink its branding strategy by engaging more dialogues with the stakeholders. Given the important roles of widest stakeholders in supporting any brand promoted by the DMO, striking an acceptable balance between the demand and supply approach in branding strategy is very critical.

Therefore, more concerted branding efforts are needed to position a destination to be competitive. It is suggested that DMO to intensify their efforts in engaging with the wider stakeholders to make a brand a success. Supports from different stakeholders are important to deliver the brand promise. Having slogans or interesting labels are important for branding but what most important is whether a destination can deliver the promises or values or not. A bottom up approach that promotes engagement with a range of different stakeholders may provide strengths to the brand identity development which include public and private partnership(Woodland & Acott 2007).

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