An Examination Of The Challenges Involved In Distributing A Strong And Consistent Destination Image In The Marketing Of Tourism In Malaysia

Grace Phang Ing, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
Janie Liew-Tsonis, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
Sharon Cheuk, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
Izyanti Awang Razli, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The future of marketing will be a battle of brands and destination branding is arguably the tourism industry's biggest challenge (Pike, 2005). Marketing a destination consistently over time is critical to the success of destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and destination marketing companies (DMCs). However, media and market proliferation and clusterisation creates a high risk of contrary and confusing messages. This research paper reports on the findings of a two year study on the promotion of transportation in tourism development in Malaysia which examined the challenges involved in distributing a strong and consistent image of a destination. Key issues identified include the complexity of relationships which co-exist in the marketing of a tourism destination, its place image and conflicting messages. A qualitative approach to in-depth interviews was conducted with key respondents who were policy makers, tour and travel agents, non-government organisations, and residents in Malaysia. The empirical evidence has shown that policy makers in Government, although receptive to the promotion of tourism, are not entirely aware of the roles each is involved in the distribution of a strong and consistent image of place in the marketing of tourism in Malaysia.

Keywords: place image, destination marketing, media channels, transportation, Sabah, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

*T*hough destination branding is a relatively new concept with the available literature only showcased in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Pike, 2005), studies on destination image have long been carried out and reflected in several different perspectives (Kim, 2000). These included the relationship of image to destination choice (Fakeye, 1991; Goodrich, 1978; Mayo and Jarvis, 1981), the image formation process (Baloglu, 1999; Fakeye, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Gunn, 1972), image modification and change (Chon, 1991; Pearce, 1982), and image measurement (Echtner, 1992; Gartner, 1993).

In the case of Malaysia, the marketing of the destination has attracted vast attention in recent years. Multiculturalism has not only made Malaysia a gastronomy paradise, it has also made Malaysia home to hundreds of colourful festivals. The encouraging number of tourist arrivals has signified huge market potential for Malaysia, not only in the promotion of her multi-cultures, festivals, and delicacies; but also its natural attractions and rich traditions. In particular, in the effort to promote Malaysia as a multi-racial country, *"Malaysia, Truly Asia"* has been widely used since its launch in 1996. A large amount of money has been spent on its extensively publicised advertisements in the media, nationally and internationally. The idea is to promote the potpourri of culture, language, religion and food which coexists seamlessly in the country.

Tourist arrivals to Malaysia have dramatically increased over the past decade, with an increase of 300% from 5.5 million in 1998 to 22 million in 2008 (Tourism Malaysia, 2008). A year-on-year increase was noted from 2003 onwards (Tourism Malaysia, 2008), contributed in part by the Visit Malaysia Year campaign in 2007. The tremendous growth of tourist arrivals to Malaysia, over the last 20 years, has portrayed a necessary need to understand the image that Malaysia represents in the eyes of the world. Relevant to this, in most cases, a slogan is used to form the image of a place. Such examples which have worked very well are from tag lines such as *"Amazing Thailand"* for Thailand, and *"Uniquely Singapore"* for Singapore. Regionally, slogans are frequently used as a formula to make a distinction from countries which share a common heritage. These are usually difficult to differentiate due to geographical proximity and ethnic similarity. However, there have been arguments on the effectiveness of slogans as it is difficult for destinations to differentiate itself meaningfully, by slogans alone, over time (Gold, 1994).

Understandably, well planned coordination across different sectors is required to deliver a strong and consistent image to the outside world. Though most of the time, this in itself presents the main challenge in the disruption of efforts in the promotion and marketing of a destination. In many cases, the number of stakeholders involved adds to the complication as different views held by the public and private sectors may have contradictory directions in the promotion effort. In addition to which, the influence across government policies in the effort of image building has added difficulties in communication and coordination of a clear, strong and consistent image.

Hence, this paper explores the issues and challenges which are involved in forming a strong and consistent destination image by answering the following objectives: (1) to examine the various destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and destination marketing companies (DMCs)such as government and its agencies, conventions or visitors' bureaus, travel and tour agencies, and tourism promotional boards; accommodation providers, tour operators and travel agents involved in the planning and development of tourism in Malaysia, (2) the challenges faced by the tourism industry in portraying a strong and consistent image, (3) to suggest solutions in overcoming these issues and challenges. This paper is presented in four sections. The first provides an introduction to the matter at hand and an account of the literature reviewed. The second section describes the methodology used. The third section provides the findings of this research and the paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations, and conclusion on solutions sought.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although travel and transportation can be discussed without taking tourism into consideration, it would be difficult for tourism to succeed without the accessibility associated with travel. The travel and tourism industry and Malaysia's transportation system have significant interdependent impacts on the economy. Whichever way you look at it, transportation is an integral part of the tourism industry (Inskeep, 1987) as it provides accessibility and linkage of various destinations and connects people to attractions and the services provided for them. In fact, public infrastructure is the central factor in terms of both destination development and the development of small tourism enterprises (Goeldner et al., 2000; Lerner, 2000). All destinations which want tourism to succeed needs suitable public infrastructure (e.g. Airports, linked roads, highways, rivers, ports) to enhance the development of tourism. A large part of tourism is about travel and the role of transportation (which transports the great bulk of travellers and goods) in its operation is vital. In any case, it is largely due to the improvement of transportation that tourism has expanded (Ayala, 1996).

The travel and tourism industry and the transportation system which exists within the country have significant interdependent contributions to a strong and consistent destination image in the marketing of tourism in Malaysia. The Government's role in promoting tourism is in fact embedded across different Government Ministries, agencies, and departments, mostly relies heavily on the Ministry of Tourism and its promotional bodies to plan and development tourism destination. In more cases than not, a large part of built infrastructure is solely the government's responsibilities; this is especially the case when DMCs provide limited infrastructure which leads to a private attraction or not at all, due to the high degree of public usage (Biehl, 1991) for major road structures.

In the case of the private sector, DMCs or travel intermediaries such as accommodation providers, tour operators and travel agents, play an important role in the active information search process (Gartner, 1993; Gartner,

1994) that influences destination image and choice (Baloglu, 2001); at times, this has a direct contribution to the formation of the destination image itself (Frias, 2008). They are considered both as a formal, as well as, a social (personal) information centre to the promotional and consultative efforts (Frias, 2008) of tourists who has the intention to visit a destination. This is critical especially when it is a new destination of choice for the tourist seeking places which they have not visited before. DMCs ability to deliver a strong message to potential tourists, at the point of contact, can assist in the formation of the *sought after image* which exist in the tourist's mind. This has significantly improved the importance of private sector involvement, in any efforts or attempts made for the development of a tourism destination.

We have seen significant positive relationships between destination image and the purchase decision (Mayo, 1973; Mayo, 1981), indicating that image is a critical selection factor (Woodside, 1989) when it comes to destination selection and vacation choice. Based on the literature reviewed, tourists have limited knowledge of destinations which they have not visited; hence, image plays an important function in destination selection. Destinations with a strong, positive, and recognisable image have a higher probability of being selected by tourists (Hunt, 1975; Pearce, 1982; Goodrich, 1978; Woodside, 1989). Understanding this, destination image has been widely used as a marketing and promotional tool by many DMOs and DMCs in their attempts in attracting tourists to their country and tour packages.

To determine a destination's image is quite different from the branding of a product or service as the name of a destination does not suggest any explicit association with the position or image sought by DMOs and DMCs. Many have used slogans or tag lines with the aim to 'tangiblize' the very intangible nature of images formed specifically for tourism. However, image is difficult to determine because it is highly subjective. This includes both cognitive (beliefs) and affective (feeling) indicators (Baloglu, 1997; Castro et al., 2007; Mckay, 2000). Image is one of those terms that will not go away, and the term itself has vague and shifting meanings (Pearce, 1988). In tourism, it is the perceptions held by potential tourists about an area (Hunt, 1975), and a collective sum of beliefs, impressions, ideas, and perceptions that people hold of objects, behaviours and events (Crompton, 1979) and most importantly, the 'total impressions an entity makes on the minds of others' (Echtne, 1991). In simple terms, destination image should be a holistic perception formed by tourists after consideration of the different perspectives which are available.

It is understood that the ultimate aim of destination marketing is to create a strong image that can add value to minimize destination preference over time; this is quite common among tourists as vacation choices depends on so many factors, individual or otherwise. This would be the next challenge for all stakeholders within the tourism industry. Marketing orientation emphasised an interesting aspect of tourism development planning by refocusing the importance, from inward-outward looking to outward-inward thinking (Pike, 2004). The planning of tourism development need to be start with a thorough assessment of the external environment, most importantly with focus on the need and wants of the target markets, before the inner strengths are assessed. However, most of time, DMOs and DMCs who are rather inward-outward looking attempt to find target tourism markets that are interested in a destination's existing products and this can contribute to marketing myopia. The needs and wants of the target markets are mostly ignored which leads to the challenge of settings of different perceptions formed between DMOs and DMCs and their targeted markets. As a result, the image of the destination perceived by target markets may or may not differ from the image identity intended by DMOs and DMCs, which has portray huge challenge to the idea of delivering a clear, consistent and strong destination image.

The growing attention towards tourism development has been centrally driven by the potential economic benefits that a destination can enjoy. This traditional view is further complicated by the changing trends of travellers, the intangible nature of the industry and the diverse stakeholders seeking a direct or indirect involvement in the development of tourism. Thorough studies on the promotion and management of destination images has indicated that the collaborative and cooperative relationships between those who formulate and implement public policies pertaining to transportation and its linkage to the formation of a strong, clear and consistent image remains as one of the most challenging responsibility which tourism stakeholders may need to undertake in Malaysia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a multi-stage research format. Preliminary research design decisions included the types of research approach and the list of suitable respondents involving DMOs and DMCs. The second stage included the selection of sample sites within the scope of study. A total of four geographical areas were identified and chosen, namely Kota Kinabalu, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, and Kuching based on multiple considerations included the accessibility to international air transport hubs, existing built and natural attractions, future plans for potential development of tourism activities in the area, total tourist arrivals, and current tourism receipts.

A qualitative approach, in the form of in-depth interviews, was then adopted to address the research objectives. Such an approach was deliberately chosen as it offered the researcher adaptability in data collection, whereby ideas can be followed upon, responses can be further explored, and motives and feelings can be further explained. As the interviews were conducted by a team of researchers with respondents at various locations and at different times, standard semi-structured questionnaires were used to ensure coverage of the research objectives; they acted only as an interviewing guide and were not directly administered by the respondents. Leeway was given to the respondents to expand on their views as when necessary, with minimal interruption from the interviewers. Interviewers provided further clarification or prompt the respondents with suggestions or hints only when respondents were unclear about what was asked. In return, interviewers also sought for further clarification, when responses given were vague or ambiguous.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Literature has highlighted that the image formation process is influenced by information obtained from a variety of tangible and intangible sources, external and internally stimulated, which can be formed from visitor experience of destinations visited or to be visited. Rhetorically, at the level of policy making and planning, the importance of destinations' unique and distinctive attributes for the tourism sector is frequently articulated. In respect to this, 76% of private sector and 55% public sector believe this as the case. The majority of the respondents agreed that Malaysia's image as presented in the media is seen in a positive light due to the increasing tourist arrivals to the country. However, the management of its natural landscapes and built environment for tourism is another issue as working collaboration and connection between stakeholders, 34% private sector and 30% public sector, within their own varied realm of influence are often weakly developed in practice. Inter-disciplinary research at the interface of the complex linkages between these sectors and professional interests has much to contribute to terms of critical, reflective debate on key issues affecting the relationships between national economic direction, transportation and tourism development, especially, at the destination level.

The study shows interesting finding. While most N/SMOT and N/STM perceive that they work well together (93%) with the private sector, their counterpart in the private sector carries totally contradictory result stated that they only have limited involvement in the said issue (80%). This has highlighted the integral challenges in forming a consistent and strong image. For example, the (national) Ministry of Tourism commissions the (national) promotional board, *Tourism Malaysia*, to promote Malaysia as a peaceful place to retire under the *Malaysia My Second Home Program*, whilst the (national) Ministry of International Trade and Industries promotes it as a place where emphasis is on industrial realisation; confusion could easily arise from this single, but contradictory promotion from two governing bodies. If the (state) Ministry of Industrial Development promotes Sabah as an attractive site for important downstream agricultural based industries for oil palm and the (state) tourism promotional board, Sabah Tourism, under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment, promotes it as a destination which is unspoilt with eco treasures from mountain high to ocean deep, the two pictures will, inevitably, collide. The direction of future urban development planning would be in dilemma as many natural attractions may need to give way to heavy industrialisation. From the perspective of targeted tourism markets, these would caused image confusion and further hinder the chances of establishing Malaysia as a tourism destination of choice as tourists will be confused by the authenticity of the message and image delivered.

Research in destination policy, planning and management also explores the competitive opportunities and pressures associated with the emergence of new and diverse international tourist markets. Such research makes a critical contribution in the development of creative and sustainable strategies (Hall, 1998, Godfrey, 2000)) for the

economic development, transportation linkages and tourism sectors as well. The evolution in value systems has led directly to a major shift in the fundamental nature of the types of experiences demanded by the market. The focus of travel experience has shifted away from the family, in which vacation travel tended to emphasise relaxation, with an underlying goal of producing a memorable experience to be shared among all family members.

In today's travelling market, the demand for authentic experiences has become more individual in nature. In addition, there is greater emphasis on stimulation, social interaction, and more recently the need for experiential learning. While relaxation has not been completely set aside, the nature of the relaxation experience has changed. The result of these fundamental changes arising from shifting values is that both DMOs and DMCs are now competing for individuals or groups seeking to share experiences from a vastly different mindset and across different demographic characteristics. In addition to which, the changing demographics of the world's population is considerably redefining what the great majority of the population finds appealing. Since appeal or destination attractiveness is one of the major components of competitiveness, those in tourism, as in all sectors of the economy, must face the reality that a product that is highly successful today may well decline considerably in competitiveness, even though the physical product is still of high quality. It would be utmost important for tourism players to employ outward –inward thinking in planning and developing a tourist destination.

As discussed in the literature, travellers and economic growth are clearly best served by cooperative and collaborative relationships between those who formulate and implement public policies pertaining to transportation accessibility and tourism development. Following this lead, this study further emphasised and examined those relationships as manifested in interactions between national and state government and its agencies with the Ministries of Transport and / or the Ministries of Tourism. Although the transport industry provides the link between tourism generating and destination regions, the transport industry's role as an agent in destination development has largely been overlooked. While both National and State offices believe there need to be more investment in transportation resources to support tourism development, the majority of respondents (76%) believe that tourism industry is not engaged enough in transportation decision-making.

If the ability of tourists to travel to preferred destinations is inhibited by inefficiencies in the transport system, there is likelihood that they will seek alternative destinations. Taking the example of travelling from Kota Kinabalu (Sabah, East Malaysia) to one of the most exciting diving sites in Indonesia, Manado. Tourists would need to take a flight to Kuala Lumpur, (Malaysia) transit in Jakarta, (Indonesia) and land in Manado 24 hours later, due to the infrequent air transport routing. However, the faster option would be from Kota Kinabalu, to the east coast town of Tawau (Sabah, East Malaysia) and from there to Manado (Indonesia), which will take no more than a third of travelling time and cost. This is not an option as there are no available air linkages servicing this route.

Transportation in tourism is most often seen as just part of the tourism system which is in charge of bringing the tourists to the destination, a means of getting around the place and leaving it once the duration of the trip is over.   There is a significant link between transport and destination development in the selection of destinations by tourists (WTO, 1998). Page and Lumsdon (2004) contend that the transportation system of a tourist destination has an impact on the tourism experience which explains how people travel and why they choose different forms of holiday, destination and transport. It is a combined effort of transport and tourism which will demonstrate the extent of this effect on the delivery of a strong and consistent image.

The findings of the study stated that 76% of the private sector believes the promotion of transportation has to do with the strength of the economy and 46% believes it is done to improve mobility within the country. None of the respondents actually felt that the reason for public sector investment on transportation has anything to do with tourism at all. Although literature has clearly shown that the factors affecting destination choices has a direct link to transportation, the case may be for policy makers other than those in tourism, that even if transportation is an integral part of tourism development, it is not consciously considered a fundamental part of tourism, however strong an influence it has over it.

Accessibility and improved infrastructure has its disadvantages as well. The increase in the number of visitors to Malaysia and to its relatively remote areas within the thirteen states has resulted in degradation and damage of the very resources that tourists came to see. As a destination, Malaysia is relatively young in terms of

international tourism. Hence, transport is not seen to be a major factor in the contribution of the flow of tourism and unlikely to be viewed as a harmful contributor to areas which needs access, not only for tourism but for the general public.   The damage to natural resources to what were once remote areas has prompted the need to re-evaluate the role transportation plays in the promotion of tourism in the country.

In addition, it does not make it easy for tourism development and the creation of a single strong image which reflects attractions consistently within the country. Malaysia is served by a national Government and thirteen state Governments. Each has certain autonomy over transportation and tourism development. Today we live in a world of unrelenting, and constant competition. Although transportation and travel can be discussed without taking tourism into consideration, in any case, tourism cannot succeed without travel accessibility. Transportation is an integral part of the tourism industry. It is largely due to the improvement of transportation that tourism has expanded. The impacts on the ecology, degradation of destination sites, tourist experience, and economy has called for a better management of resources. In biodiversity-rich areas, opening of sensitive and fragile areas through improved infrastructure and service may prove detrimental to the ecology of the place. In light of such issues, it is important to re-think the role of transportation in areas such as these. Though careful planning of the components of the destination is done to ensure sustainability, transportation is seldom considered in the process and due to this a number of biodiversity-rich areas have been destroyed due to easy access.

CONCLUSION

Travellers and economic growth are clearly best served by cooperative and collaborative relationships between those who formulate and implement public policies pertaining to transportation and tourism development to, within, and from Malaysia. This research examined the relationships as manifested in interactions between National / State Ministries of Transportation (N/SMOT) and its agencies and National / State Tourism Ministries (N/STM)and its agencies and how the roles of each contribute to deliver a clear and consistent image in the promotion of Malaysia as a tourism destination of choice. The achievement of a viable, strong and effective partnership, however loosely, between surface transportation and tourism and recreation that would benefit both remains elusive in many states with regard to important projects and substantive policies and issues.

There is an overall agreement that when political leadership, whether from the National or State level, directs closer collaboration between the two ministries, it creates an enhanced and receptive environment for interagency coordination and cooperation. In addition, there appears to be a need to institutionalise an environment whereby the private sector travel and tourism industry is encouraged to participate in transportation decisions and one that offers greater communication between N/SMOT and N/STM.

The knowledge and reflection of image on a destination in the mind of tourists, potential or otherwise, is one of the most vital factors that affect destination competitiveness. The role of most DMO and DMC centres on the promotion of the destination. Hence, a substantial amount of activity, effort and time, is dedicated to the task of developing a strong awareness of the destination in targeted markets and influencing an attractive and tempting image of the destination in order to attract tourists. Despite every effort that DMOs (National and State) and DMCs nationally go in order to create awareness and characterise a strong image, this image may lack consistency due to the differing focus of the multiple policies available. Image and awareness covers such a wide variety of sources and forms of information about a place and its people. Unfortunately, the explicit efforts, by both DMOs and DMCs collectively, can only play a minor role – often a very insignificant role in destination selection.

This paper has highlighted some of the challenges involved in the distribution of a strong and consistent destination image in the marketing of tourism in Malaysia. In order for the country to be effective as a competitor, it is essential that it recognises the competitive extent of destination management. The most fundamental of all resources on which tourism ultimately relies on is the sustainability of its physical and human resource base. The management of these two primary resource bases implies a special effort to ensure that its physical, environmental and human integrity are maintained.   A positive image of a destination combined with high levels of awareness in a specific but major market segment can only strengthen the competiveness and success of Malaysia.

While Malaysia's tourism policy maker's promotion and marketing clearly plays an important role in generating awareness and shaping image, its existing approach which involves only DMCs would seem limited in its success, in the long term. For this reason, Malaysia may need to reconsider its approach in adopting an all-inclusive branding approach which integrates not only tourism, but also, economic and social-cultural development and industrial and international trade, or other *"place-marketing goals"* of non-traditional stakeholders. This will lead towards an integrated and cohesive destination branding strategy which will reflect a strong and consistent image for Malaysia.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitations of this paper lie in the research design which is exploratory and qualitative in nature, which implies that findings were not generalisable. For better validation of the findings and research reliability, data collection could be extended to include all the major policy makers in Government offices and cities in Malaysia, specifically to gauge on whether they can contribute to the improvement in the development of the destination.

Comparative work in a similar context in different countries would prove beneficial in this respect. Also, a sequential exploratory strategy (a mixed method approach whereby quantitative analysis follows after qualitative) could be employed, whereby qualitative data collected can be further explored for distribution of a phenomenon observed, or for testing emergent theory arising from the qualitative phase (Creswell, 2003). At the time of writing this paper, the project has decided to explore the results quantitatively with residents only and not parties in government.

In addition, there were also limited studies done on issues and challenges relating to both N/SMOT and N/STM. Documentation in existence revealed that perspectives were from one or the other, but not both.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Sharon Cheuk is an Auditing lecturer at the School of Business & Economics, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). She read her first and masters degrees at De Montfort University, United Kingdom. She joined Ernst & Young in 1995, and serviced a portfolio comprising clients in the manufacturing, engineering, construction, financial services, hospitality, tourism, timber and plantation industries. Sharon was also extensively involved in consultancy, financial monitoring and due diligence assignments, and coordinated the firm's staff training as well as served as a key trainer. Sharon joined UMS in 2004, and currently contributes her expertise to multidisciplinary team research. She has participated in research with the Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and Malaysian Accounting Research and Education Foundation.

Janie Liew-Tsonis is Associate Professor at the School of Business and Economics, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS); Janie is under the Tourism Program and specializes in Ecotourism, Community Development, Biodiversity and Park Management. Her current research interests is in the linkage of policies to sustainable development and how the usage of data in exercising judgment can minimize risks in its implementation on the ground. Janie has a PhD. in Biodiversity Management, MSc. In Business Administration and a BSc. In Economics, and economic linkages with the natural environment is where she feels most comfortable. Her performance results include a good partnership with the private/public sectors especially where socio-economic and environmental emerging trends and conditions are concerned.

Grace Phang Ing is a lecturer at the School of Business & Economics, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), where she currently serves as a lecturer in the Marketing Program. Her areas of specialty are Strategic Marketing, Sales Management and Services Marketing. After receiving her first degree in Marketing from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and master degree from Universiti Putra Malaysia, she moved on to Singapore to pursue a career in the shipping and logistic industry. In 2004, she joined UMS at Kota Kinabalu. Her research interests are services, branding strategy and advertising. She has participated in research with the Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Ministry of Sabah Industrial Development, UMS Orchid Centre, MS Smart Recycling (M) Sdn Bhd and also Worldwide Fund for Nature (Sabah). She has also published in a number of journals such as *Journal of Contemporary Research in Business, International Business & Economics Research Journal, Journal Kemanusiaan, International Journal of Business Society (IJBS), UNITAR E-journal and Anamalai Business Review*.

Izyanti Awang Razli is a lecturer and the Head of the Hotel Management Program at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Izyanti graduated from Universiti Technology Mara with a diploma and first degree before completing her masters degree in International Tourism and Hospitality Management at Griffith University, Australia. Her areas of specialty are Housekeeping Management, Hotel Operation and Accommodation Management. She has participated in research with the Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation and has received a Fundamental Research Grant from the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia.

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