UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

INTERPRETING DESTINATION IMAGE THROUGH THEORY BUILDING APPROACH

NOR AMININ BINTI KHALID

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study is an exploratory attempt at understanding destination image through the writings of the travel writers who have undergone the FAMiliarisation or FAM programs organised by Tourism Malaysia. The idea behind the program is for the writers to experience first hand specific destinations in Malaysia and then share their experiences through their travel writings. The main focus was the content of the articles or themes of particular magazines and their writings represented endorsed information. The data in the form of the travel articles (FAM articles) were collected with the assistance of Tourism Malaysia based on the suggested criteria established. FAM articles were collected for analyses representing writers from several countries including Australia, Canada, Brunei Darussalam, USA, United Kingdom and India to name a few. Using the qualitative method of content analysis and adapting the coding procedures of open, axial and selective codings from the grounded theory approach, this study analysed and interpreted selected travel articles written by the FAM writers. The findings are then integrated with the analysis of face-to-face interviews with international tourists and then further strengthened with literature. This study addresses the gaps between destination image theories and the depiction of such destination image by travel writers. It is postulated that writers will mould the perception of the destination and therefore enhance the understanding of destination image. Although the present depiction of destination image is very much relevant within most tourism contexts, what is perhaps not considered precisely is whether such interpretation still holds when the image is derived merely from textual data as they are interpreted by FAM writers. These writers provide the linkage between the destinations and the potential tourists. How they write, what they write, and their expressions of the destinations will influence potential tourists' attractions to visit. What has yet to be addressed precisely also is the conceptualisation of the framework that describes the elements that form the destination image as it relates to a contextual perspective of Malaysia. The findings reveal that destination images of Malaysia can be divided into three main conceptualisations; a functional depiction of destination image through the portrayal of nature, festivals, people and history; the experiential values relating to excitement and emotional attachment, and the auxillary influence as shown by the spillover effect and FAMiliarity with specific places. The findings further reveal that such destination images lead to the possibility for undertaking psychographic segmentation of targeted travellers and ultimately emphasized the need for positioning strategies to be in place. This essentially led to the evolvement of possible destination branding and in the creation of destination loyalty. This study established that it was possible to derive destination image by interpreting the depth of the articles and through the expressions of the travel writers who very often narrated their experiences coherently through vivid depictions and emotions. It is suggested that future studies further test the evolving themes through empirical analyses that are more conclusive and statistically proven.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with an introduction of the tourism industry and its contribution to economic development as well as the implications brought about by the growth of this industry. The tourism scenario is described, and this is followed by the problem statement that is driving the conduct of this study. Destination image as the focus of study is argued as one of the critical elements which many tourism related bodies and tourists operators should give their full attention on as such image is likely to be the pull that will attract tourists to specific sites and attractions. In addition, this chapter also lays down the objectives of the study, the research questions and the scope and limitation of the study. The definitions of key concepts are also discussed and finally the order of the thesis is described.

1.1   Background of the Study

Tourism development has now been given greater emphasis by many policy makers in numerous countries in the world, as this is now seen as a major contributor to a nation's economy. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) estimates that tourism contributed 9.2 per cent of global GDP and it will continue to grow at over 4 per cent per annum during the next ten years to account for some 9.4 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2010). Athanasopolou (2013) reports that in 2012, international tourist arrivals reached 1,035 million worldwide, 40 million more than 2011 (Figure 1.1). The EU-27 remained the number one tourist destination in the world with 400 million international tourist arrivals while ASEAN was the 5th most visited region in the world recording 85 million international arrivals. The value chain of the tourism industry sees the economic growth being stimulated by income generating efforts, employment opportunities, investment initiatives and possible spin-off benefits through cultural heritage preservation, improved infrastructures and enhancement of facilities in local communities (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2013). It is the value chain in the tourism industry that sees the participation and involvement of many stakeholders, the creation of many