

RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION AS KEY INPUT TO DESTINATION IMAGE FORMATION FOR RURAL TOURISM

Norazirah Ayob¹ and Sherrymina Kichin²

^{1,2}*Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia*

¹*anorazirah@unimas.my; ²sherrydunst91@rocketmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Many rural communities in Sarawak, Malaysia rely upon and view rural tourism as an opportunity for them to generate income and gain positive benefits from the unprecedented growth in the tourism industry. With increasingly competitive global marketplace, it is very crucial for the rural communities to effectively position their destination or village based on a distinctive and appealing perception or image. Creation and management of brand image or destination image is one of the most important elements in the success of any organization or destination. This conceptual paper develops a model of destination image formation effectively for rural destination or village starting with evaluating cognitive and affective components of village image perceived by its own residents as its initial phase. Analyzing this desired image should be the key input for image formation, putting importance on how the residents wants the village to be perceived by the visitors/tourists. Unstructured methodology using projective techniques is suggested to obtain information from residents on traits common to their village and also to capture unique features or auras which can distinguish the actual image of the destination or village from others.

Keywords: Destination image; Cognitive; Affective; Residents perception; Conceptual

INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that the tourism-service industry is the major economic contributor which accounts for 37% of total Sarawak's economy (Ministry of Tourism Sarawak, 2014). According to Lo, Ramayah and Hui (2014), tourism plays crucial roles in reducing poverty rates especially among local communities in rural tourism destination of Sarawak, Malaysia. Hence, many rural communities view tourism as an opportunity to generate source of income and gain positive benefits from the growing trends of tourism industry. In recognizing the pivotal roles of rural tourism towards the local communities in Sarawak, the brand image of a particular rural tourism destination must be further refined. This is to enable the rural communities to effectively position their destination or village based on a distinctive and appealing perception or image.

According to Lopes (2011), brand image can be defined as individual or collective ideas about a particular brand. Brand image is fundamental nowadays especially in the field of marketing. It has become the main factor that ensures the success of any organization or business. Numerous literatures also suggest that the creation and management of brand image must be done in order to ensure the entire marketing success (Tasci, Gartner & Gavusgil, 2007; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). This is because proper brand image development acts as a

medium to communicate positive messages that encourage customers to choose the organization's products or services. Hence, it is considered a very useful instrument in image research opening up marketing possibilities.

According to Kim and Chen (2015), destination image is one of the most valued concepts that contributes to the total success of a destination in tourism. Alonso-Dos-Santos, Calabuig, Montoro, Valantine and Emeljanovas (2014) define destination image as "an interactive system that is based on an individual or groups' objective knowledge, subjective impressions, prejudices, imaginations and emotional thoughts towards a destination". The definition essentially advocated that both cognitive and affective image components should be included in destination image formation. The rationale for incorporating both image components is because the total destination image requires not only the person's readily-available belief and knowledge but also his emotional attachment or feelings towards the destination.

Ironically, a literature review on studies of destination image from 1975 to 2012 revealed that most destination image researchers disregarded the importance of combining both image components in destination image formation process (Nghiem-Phu, 2014; Tasci et al., 2007). The majority of destination image researchers measure the cognitive images of a particular destination as compared to its affective images. Therefore, it is obvious that the affective component remains understudied in image studies. This study thus attempts to incorporate both image components (cognitive and affective) into the destination image formation process as an effort to construct the most effective rural destination image.

On the other crucial part of destination image formation, this study also argues that residents' perspectives should be considered as the first level of image formation. This is because they are the ones who have the local knowledge of what the destination could offer to visitors (Stylidis, Sit & Biran, 2014). For local residents, their place is more than just a tourism destination where visitors can come and go. In fact, it is a multifunctional home place where they grow up with their family and friends, networking with other community members as well as earning a living (Stylidis et al., 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to firstly discover and then develop the destination image from the perspectives of residents because they are going to serve as a marketing agent that could effectively convey positive aspects of their destination to the visitors.

The objective of this study is to develop an effective destination image formation model for rural tourism in Sarawak, Malaysia. Specifically, this study aims to offer insights on how authentic images of a rural destination or village should be developed by first evaluating village image perceived by its own residents as its initial phase. The proposed model attempts to fill the gaps found in the literature in two ways. Firstly, this model incorporates both cognitive and affective components as significant elements of destination image. Secondly, this model puts importance on the rural residents' perspectives in the initial image or identity formation process instead of the visitors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural Tourism

The Malaysia Rural Tourism Master Plan 2001 defines rural tourism as tourism that promotes socio-economic benefits to the local communities by which it enables visitors to visit rural

destinations or villages while experiencing the culture and heritage of Malaysia (Abdullah & Sanusi, 2015). The Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, Malaysia (MOCAT) (2001) perceives rural tourism to include all activities occurring outside the city area. As such, rural tourism development is highly dependent on the natural, social and cultural environments of the rural areas (Lo et al., 2014).

Due to the rising potential of rural tourism in Malaysia, it has become the major contributor in socio-economic wellbeing of the rural communities (Lo et al., 2014). Many employment and business opportunities could result from the rural tourism development which reduces the poverty rate among the rural communities at once. Not only that, rural tourism can also promote protection of natural and cultural resources through the proper rural programs and planning hence an effective factor for sustainable rural development (Noori & Zand, 2013). Lastly, rural tourism plays pivotal roles in the preservation of culture and heritage as rural tourism activities often enable the visitors to learn about the way of life of rural communities (Radnic, Milojica & Drpic, 2012; Campelo, Aitken, Thyne & Gnoth, 2014).

Residents' Involvement in Rural Tourism Development

Active involvement of the residents in rural tourism development is necessary due to various reasons. Firstly, sustainable rural tourism can only be achieved when there is support from the residents. Specifically from the context of Sarawak rural tourism, Lo et al. (2014) emphasized that the residents must be willing to participate in the process of rural tourism development in order to increase satisfaction on established development and sustain their tourism-related economy. Secondly, the residents play critical functions in ensuring the success of the destination, thus affecting visitors' experiences. The residents themselves should be considered the destination ambassadors who have intimate local knowledge about the destination (Stylidis et al., 2014). The residents would know more about the history, products, facilities and amenities available at their home destination. Consequently, residents' active participation promotes successful tourism marketing for the destination, improves destination competitiveness and increases tourism visits. For this reason, Campelo et al. (2014) strongly suggested the importance of analyzing the destination image from the residents' perspective as the rural communities know how to enhance visitors' experience.

Destination Image and its Formation

The theory of destination image was first introduced by Hunt (1971). Since then, a substantial number of destination image studies have been conducted. Various definitions of destination image were developed over time to match with the rationality and emotionality perceptions from visitors (Lopes, 2011). Among all, the most widely used definition of destination image in tourism image studies was provided by Crompton (1979). Crompton defines destination image as the summation of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person or group has of a destination.

Many destination image researchers recognize that the overall destination image results from an amalgamation of both cognitive and affective destination image elements (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004). The concept of cognitive and affective image components was first developed by Stern and Krakover (1993). In latter studies, the concept was further extended where several authors introduced additional image components to the concept such as those seen in the work done by Tapachai and Waryzak (2000), O'Leary and Deegan (2003), and Pike and Ryan (2004).

Zhang, Fu, Cai and Lu (2014), and Pike and Ryan (2004) state that cognitive image essentially refers to the belief and knowledge that a person has towards a particular destination attributes. Stabler (1988) also agrees that attributes or dimensions specifically relating to the resources, attractions and general tourism offered at a destination would help to form cognitive image. This is also supported by Lopes (2011) who asserts that a person evaluates the attributes of a destination when forming a destination image. In addition to that, Tasci et al. (2007) further add that cognitive image is constructed based on the acts of thinking, paying attention, remembering, understanding, evaluating and deciding about stimuli in the destination environment.

Meanwhile, affective image is defined as a person's feelings towards a particular destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004). According to Marino (2008), affective feelings often become operational when the person evaluates how he or she feels during the visit towards a particular destination. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) adopted Russell and Pratt's (1980) ideas on positive and negative dimensions of the affective component. According to them, Positive dimensions may comprise feelings such as arousing, exciting, pleasant and relaxing. In contrast, negative dimensions include feelings such as sleepy, gloomy, unpleasant and distressing.

In a more recent literature, Nghiem-Phu (2014) revealed that the affective component remains understudied in image studies as compared to the cognitive components. This statement is also supported by other authors who believe that the existing literature focuses more on the cognition when evaluating the image of a destination (Byon & Zhang, 2010; Tasci et al., 2007). According to Chen (2001), the main reason for vast cognitive component being studied in the destination image studies is due to its clear nature of attributes that provide more applicable information than the affective component. Thus, emotional attachment that a person may have to the destination tends to be overlooked resulting in less effective and clear destination image to be formed.

Building on the understanding that the total destination image must include both cognitive and affective components, the effective formation model must be developed to discover the destination image from the perspectives of rural residents. In past studies, numerous destination image formation models have been proposed to place a destination in a unique and attractive brand image's position. The most widely used image formation models include PATH model (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), '*Push and Pull Factors*' model (Chon, 1989) as well as '*Demand and Supply Factors*' model (Stabler, 1988). Unfortunately, these existing models tend to discover the destination image from the perspectives of visitors only since the models are applicable before the actual visitation of a person. Several authors have also adopted these models to analyze how images of destinations are being constructed by potential visitors when the destinations are regarded as a possible option in travel buying process (Kestic, Vlasic & Jakeljic, 2010; Esper & Rateike, 2010; Ji & Wall, 2015). Hence, there is a need for this study to construct an image model that is applicable from the perspectives of residents of a destination.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In reviewing on the contributions made by previous researchers, this research stresses on importance of incorporating both cognitive and affective evaluations from the perspectives of village residents in destination image formation. The literature also reveals that the affective

component is often misrepresented in the destination image studies. Therefore, this study intends to examine both cognitive and affective image components that would result in a complete model of destination image that covers the residents' belief, knowledge and feelings towards a destination. According to Beerli and Martin (2004), the total destination image should comprise cognitive and affective image components. Focusing on either cognitive or affective components would not give the researchers or developers the overall image of a destination that could place its position in a unique or appealing way. This shows that the creation of brand image could only bring success to rural destinations when both image components are analyzed during the image formation process. Still, the main research question on how the knowledge of the cognitive and affective components would be useful in destination image formation remains.

Hence, a conceptual model of an entire destination image formation process for rural destination is proposed in Figure 1.

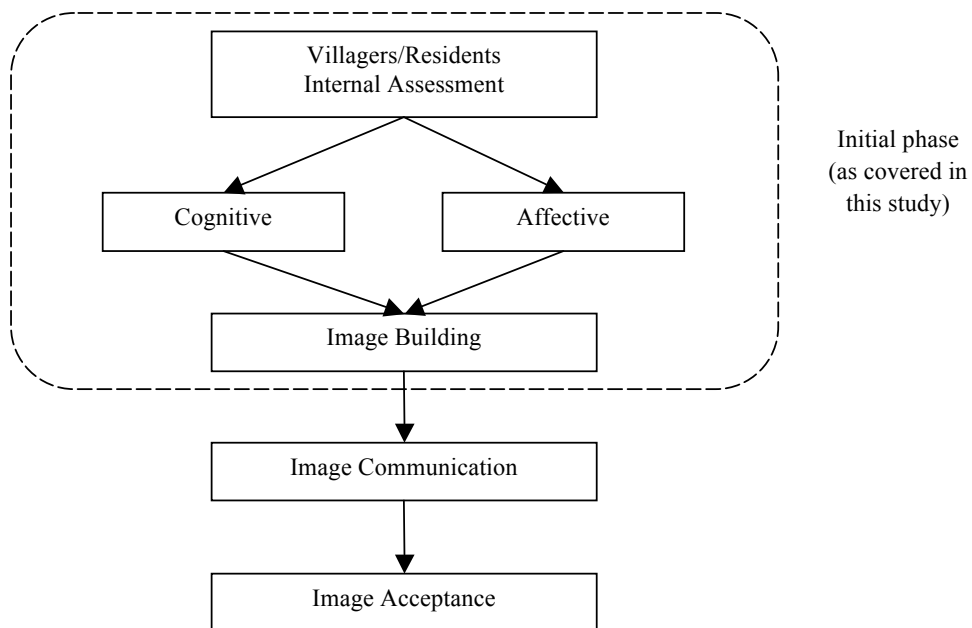


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model – Phases of Image Formation

First, considering the importance of active involvement of residents in rural tourism development, this study focused specifically on the residents' perspectives. Tourism researchers and developers should not overlook or underestimate the residents' opinions as they are the ones who need to determine how their destination or village will be portrayed to visitors. Besides, they are the ones who know better about their own home or village. In short, considering the local residents' view as the first phase might result in a more effective formation of destination image for rural tourism. More importantly, this proposed model incorporates two most important elements of image formation which are cognitive and affective image components. Therefore, the proposed model assures that the overall and effective image of a destination could be formed when this model is applied in future destination image studies.

The initial phase of image formation process in this model must begin by conducting an internal assessment of villagers or residents. According to Li and Vogelsong (2002), internal assessment refers to a process in which the researcher needs to identify individual or groups that will be responsible for a particular process, with what responsibilities and the means by which they are going to perform their work. In reflecting the formation of destination image, internal assessment in this study refers to the discovery of two most crucial indicators of destination image (cognitive and affective) that hold the image perceptions based on the local residents' perception. This first step is crucial in order to obtain accurate image identification that could only come from the residents themselves (Hunter & Suh, 2007). Stylidis et al. (2014) also concurred that the residents would be more knowledgeable about the destination compared to visitors.

Image building, which is a continual process of the internal assessment of villagers or residents, can be defined as an establishment of a specific image of one destination (Li & Vogelsong, 2002). It is also a part of initial phase of destination image formation process as illustrated in a dash-rounded rectangle box in Figure 1. In this phase, the researchers may construct a detailed image of a destination following their assessment on the attributes of a place (cognitive) according to the rural residents and their feelings towards the place (affective).

Cognitive evaluations derive from residents' belief and knowledge (Zhang et al., 2014; Agapito, Valle & Mendes, 2013). Meanwhile, affective evaluations refer to residents' emotion, feelings, moods or attitudes towards their own village (Marino, 2008, Tasci et al., 2007). This phase is crucial because it makes the promotion process or destination image communication possible (Li & Vogelsong, 2002).

Image communication, on the other hand, refers to a process where the tourism researchers or developers select and use the right image vehicles and promotion tools (Li & Vogelsong, 2002). In this phase, the researchers have to suggest the appropriate marketing medium that could assist the residents to communicate positive image messages to target market or visitors. According to Li and Vogelsong (2002), the right image vehicles serve the function that could help the destination image become more recognizable and accessible. Meanwhile, the promotion tools bring all the image information even closer to the visitors. The promotion tools may include television and radio advertisements, printing materials such as brochures, maps, posters and billboard, outdoor media, public relations, or perhaps technology media such as DVDs, slides, CD-ROMs and videotapes.

Following the image communication is image acceptance. Image acceptance is a phase when the researchers need to conform to the built destination image from the perspectives of visitors. According to Ryan and Aicken (2010), a destination that achieves state of congruency or agreement between the residents and visitors is more likely to have positive evaluations among visitors. Hence, in this phase, the researchers need to analyse whether the visitors accept the image information delivered by the local residents or not (Li & Vogelsong, 2002). If the destination image matches the visitors' perceptions, the visitors tend to make a trip to the destination. Conversely, the visitors are likely to discard concerning information if the destination image is considered unfavourable. In either way, the feedback from visitors will help the researchers to improve future image building.

PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES (SENTENCE COMPLETION METHOD)

This study notes that effective destination image formation necessitates emotional and deep investigation instead of being analysed using a standard vocabulary on a structured scale measured by quantitative approach as mentioned by Upadhyaya (2012). Hence, the qualitative approach will be undertaken in this study as it appears to be the most suitable approach for destination image formation. It not only allows the researcher to gain deeper and richer insights (Andriotis, 2004) but also enables the researcher to extract subjective, naturalistic and interpretative information that is not easily captured by quantitative method (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). Thus, the following method will be utilized in this study in an attempt to obtain the most effective data for image formation process.

According to Upadhyaya (2012), projective technique is a qualitative method that projects a respondent's thoughts and feelings using verbal and visual stimuli. Projective techniques have five categories, namely, association tasks, completion tasks, construction techniques, expressive tasks and choice ordering (Upadhyaya, 2012). This study suggests the sentence completion method to be used to discover cognitive and affective image components of a destination or village from the perspectives of its residents. This technique basically requires the local residents to complete the incomplete sentences based on their own interpretation. The method is considered appropriate as it encourages the respondents to reveal their underlying belief and feelings towards their own village in the form of word or phrase.

The qualitative survey in this research comprises two sections. Section A will be devoted to obtaining the residents' demographics background while Section B will require the residents to complete the incomplete sentences. Demographic background includes the residents' information such as gender, age, marital status, race and occupation. Examples of incomplete sentences are "*My village is...*" and "*I like my village because...*". The first incomplete sentence may discover the cognitive images of a village while the second one may explore the positive feelings or affective evaluations of rural residents towards their village.

An exploratory research of a rural destination in the case of Sarawak, Malaysia might include sample size of only 100 local residents especially since villagers in Malaysia are normally small in size of its population. Moreover, this target sample size is considered appropriate for qualitative research as this type of study is generally time consuming and labour-intensive. This is supported by Mason (2010) who asserts that one occurrence of data is still regarded as useful in qualitative analysis. Therefore, frequencies are not the main focus in this type of study. Judgemental sampling method will be utilized in this study. During the sampling procedure, the researchers will select those that meet the purpose of the study so that more realistic images could be constructed.

To analyze data collected, content analysis will be primarily applied as a data analysis method. This method will explain messages or meaning of the data contained in the text answers provided by the respondents. The analysis will begin with themes identification followed by categorizing the themes into similar '*families*', reviewing and refining the themes, and lastly determining its '*incidence density*' or frequencies of theme mentioned by each respondent. All of these steps are exceptionally valuable to the researchers as they can depict a clear indication of comprehensive destination image or can also be referred as village identity for the village according to the rural residents.

CONCLUSION

The tourism industry plays pivotal roles in improving the socio-economic development of the residents in Sarawak's rural destinations. Given the increasing rural tourism destination competitiveness, brand image of a particular destination must be further developed in order to effectively position the destination on a unique and attractive perception or image. The model proposed in this study highlights the importance of two things: (1) the crucial roles of the residents in the earlier phase of image formation process and (2) the significance of cognitive and affective image components in constructing the total destination image of a rural area. Building on these two important points, the model stresses that the image building should be instigated from the internal assessment of villagers or residents before image communication and image acceptance processes could be performed.

The proposed model of destination image formation and projective technique (sentence completion method) might be constructive in helping tourism developers and researchers to carefully form authentic image for rural tourism. Additionally, this study might be crucial to assist rural communities in ensuring strategic image management and marketing of their own villages. This is because it is very important to start a tourism development at rural areas with its own communities. This is because the rural destinations are necessarily more than just a tourism destination to the residents. Moreover, it is important to involve residents in the destination image formation since the residents themselves are going to serve as a marketing agent that could effectively convey positive aspects of their destination to the visitors. Hence, it is best for tourism developers and researchers to discover both cognitive and affective components of destination image that hold the desired image or identity based on the local residents. It is only after this initial phase that future studies (attention to developers and researchers) may proceed to explore subsequent phases of the destination image formation which are image communication and image acceptance in order to complete the entire process of forming destination image for rural tourism as proposed in this study.

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