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Malaysian tourism destination image in the mirror of Malaysian cuisine: An analysis of travellers’ photographs

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Abstract
Communication of information from various environmental stimuli affects the consumers’ perception of tourism destinations. Such an interaction results in the creation of images of destination held by the potential consumers. Word of mouth and social media have been previously found to be among the prevailing non-marketer dominated sources of influence on consumer behaviour. However despite the recognition of the significant impact of visual stimuli on the consumer behaviour - specifically on the temptation-relevant stimuli - the majority of previous research on the impact of eWoM on consumer behaviour has been exclusively concerned with the verbal and textual communication. This paper presents a research framework to investigate the impact of exposure of consumers to the food-related user generated visual stimuli on their perception of Malaysia as a tourism destination within their pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption phases. A mixed method approach is proposed to enable the researchers to achieve the above purpose.

Keywords: Destination Image, Food, Malaysia, Photo, Social Media, User Generated Content

Introduction
Tourism industry is an important force for the economic diversification and development of Malaysia (PEMANDU, 2010). Therefore the successful positioning of Malaysia as a desirable tourism destination is an important part of Malaysian economic development strategies. As previous research reported on the importance of local food in the development of a destination image (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000; Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007; Richards, 2002) it is important to investigate how Malaysian food contribute to the development of the current perceived image of Malaysia as a tourism destination. In addition, previous research found travellers’ photographs as a representative portrayal of their perceived image of the destination. Thus this study aims to identify the role of food in the development of Malaysian destination image and to investigate how international travellers portray their gastronomic experience in Malaysia by sharing photos and videos. Within this framework, researchers aim to understand how these user generated photos and videos will contribute to the creation of the perceived image of Malaysia, as a tourism destination.

The significance of this project stems from the following five different dimensions: (i) the important role of destination image in the travellers’ decision making, (ii) the importance of destination image for the successful branding and positioning of Malaysia as a tourism destination, (iii) the importance of tourism industry in the Malaysian economic transformation and diversification, (iv) the important role of food and cuisine as a cultural aspect of destination image and (v) as an important destination image differentiation tool.

Literature Review
Tourist destination choice is often described as a complex and multi-faceted process (Dellaert, Ettema, & Lindh, 1998) which is influenced by a large number of internal and external variables (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). This complexity is largely due to the intangibility of tourism experience and the emotional factors involved in such a process.

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In such a complex psychological process travellers often use their perceived destination image as short-cut to reduce the complexity of the choice (Çakmak & Isaac, 2012). In addition, the growing competition between international destinations (C.-F. Chen & Phou, 2013) has led the marketing organisations to take extensive effort towards constructing a positive destination image (Cai, 2002) which can turn the destination in to a brand positioned uniquely in the tourists’ minds (García, Gómez, & Molina, 2012). In this context, food and cuisine as a cultural tourism product are effective tools to create such a differentiation for tourism destinations (Horng & Tsai, 2010).

Theoretical background

The value of understanding destination image is recognized by several authors (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001; C. F. Chen & Tsai, 2007; Yang, He, & Gu, 2012). Consumers after being exposed to the information communicated from various environmental sources (Blackwell, Minard, & Engel, 2006; Solomon, 2015) consciously or unconsciously process the received information (Dempsey & Mitchell, 2010; Yang et al., 2012). Such a process of information influences the creation of the explicit or implicit destination images in their mind (Yang et al., 2012) which will have an essential role in selecting the travel destination. This cognitive process may eventually result in the act of purchase either through stimulating the recognition of a certain need or informing the consumer about the availability of product to satisfy their need (Blackwell et al., 2006; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). This information may originate from a wide range of sources which can be categorised into two categories of marketer and non-marketer dominated (Blackwell et al., 2006). Word of mouth and social media are examples of the latter group. Destination photos, either produced by official organisations or by travellers are among the sources of information shaping the travellers destination perceptions (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013).

Visual stimuli are among the most influential sources of impact on the consumer decision (Çakmak & Isaac, 2012), particularly in the early stages of decision making when the consumers’ involvement with the product is still minimal (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000). Travellers often register photographic images which portray the destination attributes (Albers & James, 1988) to capture their relationships with the people, places and cultures (Edensor, 2000). These images can be shared via social media and reached by prospective consumers and thus potentially affect the perceptions of other travellers (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). These photographs often describe the way consumers perceive the destination and depict the reflections of their inner feelings about a destination (Albers & James, 1988; Pan, Lee, & Tsai, 2014).

Several studies have found that the images of food can be used effectively for the purpose of destination marketing (Okumus et al., 2007), thus they recommend the consideration of this factor for marketing of destinations. Other studies found food as a growing topic in social media interactions (Gross, Toombs, Wain, & Walorski, 2011). Therefore visual user generated content (V-UGC), depicting the food and cuisine can be regarded as an important information source in the creation of the perceived image of tourism destinations. Food in tourism can be considered as an essential part of tourism experience regardless of its nature (Okumus et al., 2007). It is a generic product in tourism and hospitality industry (Hjalager & Corigliano, 2000) and is recognized as a valuable cultural product to increase the competitiveness of destinations (Richards, 2002). From a cultural viewpoint, it is seen as an important intangible element in the destination portfolio (Okumus et al., 2007), a motivation factor for travellers (Quan & Wang, 2004) and a value-adding factor for the tourism destination (Boniface, 2003; Okumus et al., 2007). Therefore it is not surprising that food is among the most important attributes of a destination in shaping the travellers’ experience.
Research framework

The goal of this study is to investigate the role of Malaysian food in the development of Malaysian destination image and to understand and how food-related user generated photos and videos contribute to the creation of the perceived image of Malaysia, as a tourism destination. In order to achieve this above goal this study aims to answer four research questions which their relationship is illustrated in the following graph.

Figure 1: The schematic representation of the research framework

Within this framework the destination purchase is divided into three phases of pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption phases and researchers aim to answer the following questions related to the above stages: (1) what are the food-related expectations of Malaysia as a part of the tourism destination image held by foreign travellers?; (2) how do international travellers’ perceive their food-related satisfaction in Malaysia comparing to their pre-held expectations (level of satisfaction)?; (3) how do the existing food-related V-UGC corresponds to the portrayal of such expectations?; and (4) how this existing food-related V-UGC may contribute to the creation of the expectations of the perspective travellers?. In order to answer the multidimensional questions of this research, a mixed method approached is proposed to utilise in depth qualitative methods to answer the first, third and fourth questions and quantitative methods to answer the second question. Therefore a three phase qualitative-quantitative-qualitative mixed methodology is proposed where the in-depth findings of the first phase (expectations) is used as a basis for the quantitative survey in the second phase and then verified trends of the second phase (satisfactions) will be used to analyse the V-UGC by using visual analysis methods.
Figure 2: The proposed three-phase structure of the research

References


