DESTINATION MARKETING AND REBRANDING TOURISM IMAGES OF IPOH CITY, MALAYSIA

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Abstract— The study of destination image is a relatively recent addition to the field of tourism research. Several studies have illustrated that destination images do, indeed, influence tourist behaviour. In essence, the research suggests that those destinations with strong, positive images are more likely to be considered and chosen in the travel decision process. As a result, destination image has an important role in the various models of travel decision making developed to date. As more and more areas are developed for tourism, the destination choices available to consumers continue to expand. One of the most significant marketing challenges arising from this situation is the need for an effective destination positioning strategy. The research attempts to demonstrate that successful rebranding of destination images of Ipoh city in Malaysia will be valuable in understanding the destination selection process of the tourist's markets and the relationship between destination image and preference or visitation intentions. In this manner, the various strengths, weaknesses, accuracies and inaccuracies of the existing destination images could be more effectively addressed in the design of the promotional strategies, locally and abroad. This research employs a survey among tourists and visitors to Ipoh about their perceptions of Ipoh's destination images, destination attributes and revisit intentions. The research recommendations include understanding the market characteristics and selecting the tools correctly when designing the promotional mix; building brand loyalty through relationship marketing as visitors/tourists had an overall very good assessment of their trips to Ipoh; positioning and differentiating Ipoh from its competitors by bundling competitive advantages and offering more benefits for similar products; and creating an international icon that will be the must-see attraction and instantly recognizable, nationally and globally.

Keywords— Destination Marketing, Tourism Images.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the most important drivers of economic growth (Tang & Tan, 2015; Tugcu, 2014). The uniqueness of the tourist attractions in a destination is the major component of tourism, and it is the drivers to stimulate the intention of people to pay for a visit to a destination. The uniqueness can be either from the perspective of the service quality, site attractivenessand sociological aspect, which could be the brand image used in tourism promotion to the potential visitors around the world. Therefore, creating a positive destination image has become the top priority in tourism management and destination marketing at present, so that to increase global competition of the destination and to fulfill the changing tourist motivations and needs (Molina, Gomez & Martin-Consuegra, 2010).
The importance of brand image has induced a number of studies, especially in the area of tourism research. With increasing competition in tourism markets, creating a positive image of a destination is an added value to the industry. However, the image of the destination is a subjective interpretation of reality by the tourists. Assessing the image of the destination is a challenging work. The importance of creating tourism destination image and the difficulty of the image assessment has highlighted the worthiness of research on this subject matter. Destination image is frequently described as simply "impressions of a place" or "perceptions of an area". The importance of the tourist destination's image is universally acknowledged, since it affects the individual or tourist's subjective perception and consequent behavior and destination choice. Tourism destination image (TDI) has been a worthy area of researchers' investigation for nearly four decades in the intradisciplinary study of marketing, which has been commonly based on either effective destination positioning or on the destination selection process. Being the capital city of Perak state in Malaysia, Ipoh has much to offer to tourists in terms of tourist attractions, although it is recovering from the important role it used to play in the past.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Destination image represents a simplification of a large set of information connecting with a place (Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993). A destination image is formed through the interaction of a system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations and intentions toward a destination (Tasci& Gartner, 2007). The destination images can be viewed from different identities of people, such as destination organizations, local residents, anonymous agents, and tourists. In other words, people with different role played in the society may view the destination from different perspectives. This implies that defining destination image from only one perspective is not accurate to explain for the destination images. A comprehensive assessment of the destination should comprise of the three perspectives:

- The perceived image – how the target segment perceives the brand image.
- The actual image, including the strengths and weaknesses, as perceived by the marketers.
- The desired image, which is how the image of the destination wishes to be perceived by the target segment.

The definition of Echtner and Ritchie (1991) gives the notion that the images of a destination are formed from two perspectives, (i) the marketing effort of the organization in promoting the destination, (ii) the tourists' own experience/feeling towards the destination. The two elements of destination image formation have been studied in the previous literature, and individual element has been given a technical terminology in the literature. A destination's attributes created by the destination organizations/marketers are named cognitive dimension of destination images, while the emotional thoughts towards a destination of an individual are named affective dimension of the destination image. The construct of the cognitive-affective dimension of destination image has been widely applied in the recent studies like Baloglu and Brinberg (1997); Baloglu and McCleary (1999), del Bosque and Martin (2008), Gartner (1993), Kim and Yoon (2003) and Lin, Morais, Kerstetter and Hou (2007).

Successful tourism management and destination marketing could create a positive destination image to the tourists, thereby to be able to compete with the others in the highly competitive tourism markets (Molina, Gomez & Martin-Consuegra, 2010). Communicating a positive destination image becomes the top priority of successful destination marketing (Koencnik, 2002; Molina, Gomez & Martin, 2010). Empirical studies like Chen and Tsai (2007) and Ryan and Gu (2007) demonstrate that destination image induces tourists' emotions, and there is a positive relationship between destination image and tourists' decision making to visit a place. Knowing the visual attributes tourist perceived from the destination as outstanding with the others is critical to promote the destination (Grosspietsch, 2006).

According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), destination marketing "covers all the activities and processes to bring buyers and sellers together, focuses on responding to consumer demands and competitive positioning, is a continuous and coordinated set of activities associated with efficient distribution of products to high potential markets, involves making decisions about the product, branding, the price, market organization, promotion and distribution". Through the effort of destination marketing via tourism, the image of the area could be improved. It brings subsequent benefits to the local community such as attracting industrialists, increasing the range of facilities and amenities available to the local community, providing a rationale and funding for improvements to the local environment and giving local residents more pride in their local area (Horner and Swarbrooke, 1996).

Baker and Cameron (2008) then identify four stages of destination marketing: (i) understanding the strategic orientation in marketing the destination (e.g. tourism demand, competition, sociological aspects), ii) planning to develop destination identity and image, (iii) enhancing the involvement of stakeholder as part of the marketing strategies, and lastly (iv) implementing, monitoring and reviewing the progress of marketing.

In the highly competitive tourism environment, destination marketers attempt to differentiate the images of the destination with the competing ones in order to grab the competitive advantages in the market (Usakli&Baloglu, 2011). The images of a tourism destination could become a brand component, while the image profile is the basis for branding strategies (Cai, 2002). Destination images and destination marketing stand in a close interrelationship with each other. This has no doubt that rebranding the images of the destinations has become the popular marketing strategy at present, in order to grab the attention of tourists with the unique images of the destination (Roodurmun&Juwaheer, 2010).

A positive tourism destination image could become the word-of-mouth for free-of-charge advertisement tool in promoting the destination to the international tourists. The word-of-mouth is able to uncover potential visitors, and stimulate their intentions to visit to the destination. Even, with the help of online social media such as Facebook, Twitter and etc., the effect of the word-of-mouth could be magnified significantly (Reza Jalilvand et al, 2012; Sigala, 2011). The comments upon the satisfaction of a tourism destination could be viewed by all of the people in the world via online social media. This implies that positive tourism destination images perceived by tourists would magnify the effect of word-of-mouth and become a strong promotional tool to the potential tourists. In opposite, a negative tourism destination image would spread rapidly throughout the world via the social media, and this could lead to a great loss in the competitive tourism industry. Hence, creating a positive tourism destination image is always the most important step in developing tourism.

In summary, a positive destination image could facilitate the effectiveness of destination marketing. Even, with the development of Informational Communication Technology (ICT), the influence of a destination image could be magnified through different online media approaches such as social media, books or e-books via literary tourism. It gives the notion that an effective destination marketing strategy should be equipped with a positive tourism destination image in order to drive the tourism

destination to outperform in the worldwide competition between destinations.

Although the research on tourism destination image is plenty, literature search of this study reveals lack of research in assessing Malaysian tourism destination images. As Malaysia has a lot of tourism attributes such as tropical greenery scenes, heritage sites, cultural villages, urban life, beach tourism spots and etc., it is important to impose a unique tourism destination image to the international tourists. Assessing the images perceived by the tourists is significant to provide a useful policy implication, especially in setting strategies for marketing planning.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY AREA

This study conducted a surveybetween November 2014 until February 2015 among tourists and visitors to Ipoh about their perceptions of Ipoh's destination images and destination attributes.A total of 293 usable responses were analyzed. The case study area, Ipoh, is the capital city of Perak state, Malaysia. It is located in the middle between Kuala Lumpur and Penang, by which it is approximately 200 km (125 miles) north of Kuala Lumpur and 130 km (81 miles) south of Penang on the North-South Expressway. Ipoh has developed into one of Malaysia's main cities around the turn of the 19th century due to the booming of the tin mining industry (Wikipedia, 2014).The heritage, natural scenery, entertainment/recreational parks have added to the uniqueness of tourism in Ipoh. It enhances the potential of Ipoh to be developed as a primary tourist destination, which is currently being promoted by Tourism Malaysia Perak to international markets.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

More than two third of the respondents visited Ipoh within the past twelve months, while others who visited the city in the past few years were also considered in the data analysis. Due to easy access from major cities in the country, more than three quarters of the respondents came to Ipoh by private cars and trains. Visitors by flights and buses constituted the next highest percentages. Leisure and recreation comprised the biggest percentage in terms of the purpose of travel, followed by VFR (visiting friends and relatives) and business purposes. Visitors to Ipoh can be generally classified as short-stayers as over three quarters of the respondents stayed three nights and less in the city. However, those who stayed more than a week made up 13.7 percent of total respondents, possibly due to VFR factor. Internet and social media, when combined, were considered the most powerful tool in travel planning. Word of mouth's marketing is also the most reliable source of information sought by respondents, followed by past experiences of repeat visitors.

Respondents were asked to determine their agreement about Ipoh's destination attributes based on five-point Likert scale, from 5 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree. The mean values of Ipoh's destination images are shown in Tables 1-3. It can be seen from the tables that the mean values of the city's destination attributes are generally very good, ranging from 3.21 until 3.93, except shopping attribute that is below 3.0. The reliability of the attributes is considered acceptable as the Cronbach's Alpha values in Tables 1-3 range above 0.65. The sociological attributes of the city, as shown in Table 1, are considered very good as Ipoh is perceived by the respondents as safe, affordable, convenient and has the basic facilities and infrastructure to meet tourist demand.

Table 1: Images of Ipoh's Sociological Attributes
Cronbach's Alpha: 0.692, Number of constructs=5

Sociological Attributes	Mean	Std Dev
Ipoh is convenient to travel	3.73	0.84
I feel safe traveling in Ipoh	3.69	0.77
Traveling in Ipoh is easy without having the assistance of tour guide	3.66	0.90
The prices of tourism products and services in Ipoh are affordable	3.63	0.73
Ipoh has the basic facilities/infrastructure to fulfill the needs of tourists	3.57	0.80
Total	**3.66**	**0.81**

Table 2: Images of Ipoh's Tourism Attributes
Cronbach's Alpha: 0.776, Number of constructs=10

Destination Attributes	Mean	Std Dev
Food hunt is a must when traveling in Ipoh	3.78	0.87
Heritage destinations are one of the main attractions of Ipoh	3.70	0.81
The natural scenery is one of the main attractions of Ipoh	3.64	0.80
Ipoh has a lot of appealing tourism attractions	3.61	0.77
Recreational places are one of the main attractions of Ipoh	3.49	0.80
The places of worship are one of the main attractions of Ipoh	3.40	0.80
Tourism destinations in Ipoh are well-preserved	3.37	0.76
Ipoh is one of the main tourism destinations in West Peninsular Malaysia	3.27	0.89
Tourism destinations in Ipoh are well-promoted	3.21	0.85
Ipoh is a heaven for shopping	2.85	0.99
Total	**3.43**	**0.83**

Ipoh's tourism attributes, except for shopping, are also perceived as very good with food, heritage and natural attractions top the list. However, the preservation and promotion of tourist attractions and the positioning of the city as a primary tourist destination in the country, are placed in the lower range with mean values within 3.21-3.37 range.

Table 3: Views on Ipoh's Future Tourism Development

Cronbach's Alpha: 0.657, Number of constructs=3

Destination Attributes	Mean	Std Dev
I will revisit Ipoh in the future	3.93	0.79
I will highly recommend Ipoh to my friends and family	3.69	0.79
In my opinion, Ipoh has the potential to be developed as an international tourism destination	3.85	0.84
Total	3.82	0.81

Table 3 shows respondents' views on Ipoh's future development, and it can be contested that Ipoh has a high degree of revisiting intention and destination loyalty, strong word of mouth recommendation, and the potential to be developed as an international tourism destination in the future.

In terms of images of individual attractions, local food is perceived as the most prominent imagefor Ipoh, followed by Ipoh Railway Station and Lost World of Tambun theme park. Other prominent images are heritage/historical buildings, natural attractions, and those in the outskirts. Surprisingly, some images that were synonymous with Ipoh in the past score lower mean values. The survey findings further disclose that the frequency level of 'Don't Know' (unaware) is very high for most of the images, which reflects that promotional materials do not effectively reach the targeted market segment.

CONCLUSION

From the tourist market, the survey findings disclose that Ipoh has a high degree of revisiting intention and destination loyalty due to easy access and its central location in West Peninsular. The city is suitable for short-stayers across different market segments and travel purposes, especially VFR market. Ipoh's tourism attributes, except for shopping, are also perceived as very good with food, heritage and natural attractions top the list. The city as a destination is perceived by most survey respondents as safe, affordable, convenient and has the basic facilities and infrastructure to meet tourist demand.

The research recommendations include understanding the market characteristics and selecting the tools correctly when designing the promotional mix; building brand loyalty through relationship marketing as visitors/tourists had an overall very good assessment of their trips to Ipoh; positioning and differentiating Ipoh from its competitors by bundling competitive advantages and offering more benefits for similar products; and creating an international icon that will be the must-see attraction and instantly recognizable, nationally and globally. The particular choices made over the research process have resulted in several limitations of the study. The research findings and analysis were mainly based on data obtained from November 2014 until February 2015. Hence, the research provides only a snapshot view of tourists' perceptions of Ipoh's destination images. Secondly, the findings are unique and can only be claimed true to Ipoh as a single entity case study area. Thirdly, the sample size and type of respondents might suffer from a certain degree of skewing and is only suitable to represent Ipoh.

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