

## Forming A Destination Image from Travel Writers' Perspective

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### Abstract

This study was an attempt to analyze destination image through the writings of travel writers who have undergone Familiarization or FAM programs organized by Tourism Malaysia. The idea behind the FAM program is for the writers to experience first-hand specific destinations in Malaysia and express their experiences through article writings. The most important tool that the writers need is an endorsed information. Valid information would be a source to write interesting articles. The data in the form of the travel articles (FAM articles) were collected with the assistance of Tourism Malaysia based on the suggested criteria. The articles that we used in this research was back in 2010. Since then, there is little research being done using this type of articles. This study aims to determine what are the focus of attraction at the destinations described by FAM writers. It also aims to interpret and assign conceptualization image as per their descriptions thereof. The study uses qualitative methods of content analysis and adapts the coding procedures of open, axial and selective coding from the grounded theory approach. This study analyses and interprets selected travel articles written by FAM writers. FAM articles were collected for analysis. This study addresses the gaps between destination image theories and the depiction of such destination image by travel writers. It is postulated that writers envisage the perception of the destination and therefore enhance the understanding of destination image through their writings. 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 to visit.

**Keywords:** Destination Image, Grounded Theory Coding Approach, Content Analysis, Travel Writers, Qualitative Method.

**Introduction**

There is no denying that tourism sector is one of the essential contributors to our national economy. The allocations by Malaysian government through the years, for tourism development, displayed seriousness and a sense of importance tourism industry has for the country. In the 8th Malaysia Plan (RMK8 2001-2005), RM 1009.00 million were invested in the tourism sector. The government pursued basic strategy of luring tourists into the country and enhance the existing tourism development policies to achieve sustainable growth as well as generate income for the country. Sustainable tourism strategy has been used to protect the balance between environmental, economic, social and cultural issues in all tourism activities (Marzuki, 2010) and as such, this was the strategy opted by the government to sustain the tourism contribution to the economy. In 2007, the government once again launched the Visit Malaysia Year (VMY 07). The program was run in conjunction with the 50th Golden Jubilee Celebration (Economic Planning Unit, 2006). Building destination and enhancing the offerings of tourist destinations have become a core element in strategizing tourism marketing. This study therefore outlines the importance of destination image and recognizes the role of the writers of tourism destinations who assist in the tasks of marketing specific tourism destinations. In line with this, the role of the government is also acknowledged as the financial contributor to the development of tourism destinations.

**Problem Statement**

The allocation of money by the government in tourism industry seems to be helping. Every year the returns increase steadily. However, despite the huge earnings, Malaysia must groom herself to be globally accepted. One of the biggest challenges facing destination marketers is that of creating and projecting a memorable and positive image of destination. To position Malaysia as a preferred world-class destination, the government needs to find out what are the perceptions foreigners have on Malaysia. One of the sources for such information credible for potential tourists to gain information relating to Malaysia as a tourist destination is through write ups by a group of travel writers who are being invited to the Familiarization (FAM) trips. The purpose of this program is to inculcate the image of Malaysia in travel writers' minds and provide them first-hand information. With the information and experiences, they gained, they must produce articles on Malaysia and publish in their home countries. However, there is scarce literature on how writing styles that they used to write destination image to stimulate tourists' interest. This study hopes to address the gaps between destination images theories and depiction of images by travel writers. The content of their writings would be projected into images of tourism locations and imprinted into the tourists' minds. Moreover, destination image is differing towards the perception of tourists and one of the necessary elements in constructing marketing program or a marketing mix (4P's or 7P's) especially the promotion mix. Quality products and prices are not the only information needed to be disseminated to the readers but also the elaboration of places, the benefit and some other related causes. Destination marketers will exploit that information to design appealing promotional mix (advertising, personal selling, sales promotion and public relation). Synonyms to product which mirrored by their features, tourism places are best portrayed by its destination image. Burhalis (2000) quotes destination competes principally through their images, irrespective of whether the image is favourable or unfavourable. In the promotional perspective, how Malaysia wishes to present itself must align with tourists' needs and wants.

### **Objective**

The study aims to determine what are the focus of attention of destination attractions as described by fam writers, and to interpret the conceptualization of destination image as described by fam writers. The attentions described by fam writers are dimensions needed to promote Malaysia as aligned with tourists' needs and wants.

### **Methodology**

In this research, the qualitative study attempts to identify images shaped from travel articles. Articles are examined using content analysis that is integrated with the analytical procedures of open, axial and selective coding as expressed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This analysis leads to the formation of images that emerged from the write up of travel writers. Although qualitative research methods are diverse ranging from action research, case study, grounded theory, historical method and ethnography, the underlying principle of interpretation is common in that they hope to develop the emerging themes relating to the focus of the study. Some examples of data collection methods in qualitative approach are interviews, field observations, diaries and letters. However, in the current study, the researcher uses the FAM articles as the focus of the analysis. In social sciences, content analysis or textual analysis is a method for analyzing the content of communication. It is a method to identify the characteristics of messages to construct inferences.

Neuendorf (2002), defines content analysis as a summarizing and a quantitative analysis of messages that depend on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, inter-subjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created and presented". Since the 1980s, this analysis has been the main tool in the measurement of public relations (media relations) programs. In 2004, Krippendorff shows that content analysis can be done in both the quantitative or qualitative methods and be used in the social sciences. This was underlined by Stemler (2001) who further stresses that content analysis "is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding." What was normally done was to use the concept of dictionary by searching the vocabulary of name, expression or phrase which were extracted from the textual data. In this study the FAM trip articles were analyzed in terms of their content and direction of writing. The mechanism of image creator was developed to observe the images that were formed in the writers' write-up. Dimensions of the images then led to the creation of the destination image. To suggest the right dimension of images, this study uses content analysis of FAM articles. Those articles were posted by travel writers to Tourism Malaysia in 2008. Only articles that were attached with the Publicity Evaluation Report form were used to content analyze. In addition, the procedure of analysis in this study relates very closely to the understanding of open, axial and selective coding processes. The way the analytical procedures were conducted was linked closely to the suggestion of Ross (1999) as cited in Xiao and Mair, (2006) who specifies that the qualitative approach of research is based on a "world view" which should be holistic (Son, 2011) and has the following beliefs:

- 1) there is not a single reality.
- 2) reality is based upon perceptions that are different for each person and change over time.

- 3) what we know has meaning only within a given situation of context.
- 4) It can also be used in different paradigms; positivist or critical.

Since qualitative method is deemed as the most suitable for the in-depth investigation of a small number of subjects, qualitative technique is the approach used in this study. Qualitative research methods like action research, case study, grounded theory, historical method and ethnography are useful in relaying richness of information. Commonly, qualitative research collects data through in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, field observations, diaries and letters. However, in the current study, the researcher uses content analysis, a qualitative approach that is more structured in interpretation as documents are the focus of interest and often the interpretation is based on the key issues highlighted in the articles. In social sciences, content analysis or textual analysis is a technique for investigating the content of communication (Krippendorff, 2004). It is a method to identify the characteristics of messages to construct inferences. Neuendorf (2002) defines content analysis in terms of a summarizing and quantitative analysis of messages that depend on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, inter-subjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability and hypothesis testing) and it is not restricted as to types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created and presented. Stemler (2001) explains that content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for squeezing many words of text into smaller content categories based on explicit rules of coding. Based on this understanding, content analysis is deemed appropriate for interpreting further FAM articles in which the description of the images is often embedded in the narration and style of writing of the FAM writers. In this study the FAM trip articles are scrutinized to discover the dimensions of images portrayed in the writers' write-up.

In order to understand the interpretive view point that exploits the qualitative approach, a researcher has to admit that epistemology is embedded within a theoretical perspective. The relationship between epistemology and theory are very much entangled with each other. Theory is the core of qualitative research because generating, building and refining theory is one of its prime goals. In qualitative research the process after data collection requires a rigorous process of determining categories and themes that are extracted from the articles. These usually will relate to other larger themes that are identified in the structured process of qualitative coding. Thus, qualitative researchers are very concerned in producing theory relying on an inductive basis where the theory develops directly out of the data such as that proposed by the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) or the phenomenological stance (Mostakas, 1994).

Qualitative research is a process of investigation that draws data from the context in which events occur, in an effort to describe these happenings, as a means of determining the process in which events are embedded and the perspective of those participating in the events, using initiation to derive possible explanations and phenomena (Gorman & Clayton, 2005). Hence, the crucial goal of doing qualitative research is to understand those being studied from their perspectives, from their point of views and such interpretation requires the research to both emphasize and be sensitive to the contextual implications. This means that the researcher as the analyst of the data will need to delve deep into the interpretation of the data. In this study, the researcher assumes the role of the data interpreter by

securitizing the FAM articles as a means of understanding how destination images of Malaysia are distinctively perceived by the FAM writers.

The research nexus consists of epistemology, theory and method but the relationship between theory and method is salient to the research process. In the methodology, theory and method are often segregated but the relationship between theory and method is essential to the research process. In the methodology, theory and method come together to be the guide in developing the research design and research questions formulation through analysis and representation. Essentially, qualitative research is a complex field of enquiry that draws on many varied assumptions but holds a few common characteristics and perspectives. A qualitative research project takes place in the field, relies on numerous methods for collecting data and calls on the researcher to be pragmatic, flexible, politically aware and self-reflective. It is essentially interpretive and emergent, characterized by a standpoint of openness, curiosity and respect (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The qualitative research also lies within the interpretive paradigm focusing on social constructs that are complex and always developing, making them less amendable to precise measurement and numerical interpretation. It is on this basis that the interpretive stance was taken in this study in order to really interpret the meanings associated with destination image as established by the FAM writers.

Qualitative research has been chosen to study the destination image phenomenon in Malaysia since it has three purposes, namely describing, comparing and forecasting. All these purposes might lead to theory building improvements in practices and even to policy changes. Thus, this study essentially attempts to define the destination image projected in the FAM articles with an emphasis on describing themes and the grouping of such themes into more coherent interpretation that may be of use to both marketers and the policy makers. Ultimately, a conceptual framework was proposed as guidelines for those parties desiring to embark on destination image exercise.

To commit to qualitative study requires the following to be carried out:

- Commit to extensive time in the field.
- Many hours spent on reading the content, collecting numerous data, and trying to gain access, rapport, and an "insider" perspective then sorting through large amount of data and reducing them to a few themes or categories, isolated time of struggling with the data.
- Write long passages to provide participants' perspectives. This also lengthens the study.
- Does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and changing constantly. This complicates telling others how one plans to conduct a study and how others might judge it when the study is done.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis also known as textual analysis is a social science methodology for studying the recorded human interactions based on the content of the conversations as described in the document of interest. It is a technique for making inferences by identifying specified characteristics of messages. Neuendorf (2002) offers a six-part definition of content analysis where a content analysis involves summarizing and the quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, inter-subjectivity, a priori

design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented. This means what is embedded in the documents will be the focus of interest in interpreting the meanings associated with the subject of interest.

Quantitative content analysis includes vast amount of textual information and many researchers methodically identify the frequencies of the most used keywords. This textual information must be categorized during the analysis, a substantial meaning at the end of the meaningful reading. Stemler (2001) described content analysis as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding. The coding process may differ in terms of methods which the researchers adopt when interpreting the content of the documents. This relates to a “concept dictionary” or fixes vocabulary of terms on the basis of which words is extracted from the textual data for coding or for statistical computation based on the content of the documents.

The current study embarks upon studying how destination image evolved from travel articles using content analysis and the coding processes that are used in interpreting the content of the articles is adopted from that of the grounded theory method as described by (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). The resolution of the content analysis is to describe and make inferences about the characteristics of interaction using messages as the source and to answer question of ‘what’. Hence the analysis is used to describe the theme in the communication of the content of the FAM articles, relate known characteristics of sources to message they produce and compare communication content to standards. Results from such analysis provide the themes used to portray destination image. It describes how an image evolved from the write up. This process is useful in building a framework of destination image from the perspectives of the FAM writers as well as the tourists who may have developed a lasting impression of Malaysia through their experiences in their visit to this country.

### **Analysis and Findings**

Using the qualitative method of analysing, the analysis lays down the ultimate propositions and framework relating to the destination image of Malaysia. The following discussion also addresses the implications of the findings in relation to existing literature on the issue of destination image and the marketing aspects of the image. From the analysis, destination image of Malaysia, written by travel writers are alienated into functional depiction, experiential image and auxiliary influence on destination image.

### **Functional Depictions of Image**

The FAM travel writers set out to describe the attractions that Malaysia has to offer by describing the contextual offerings. The descriptions are basically a characterization of the tourism sites and explanations of what to expect. For example, a common theme which many FAM writers dwell on is the nature and natural beauty that Malaysia has to offer. The descriptions of the landscapes, the physical beauty of specific geographical regions and the flora and fauna of the sites are commonly projected in the writings.

*“Overall this is a fascinating country. If you are at all interested in eco-tourism, then it’s definitely the place to go, with the world’s most diversified plant life growing in coastal*



*mangrove and mountain rainforest. It is home to the world largest flower, the Refflesia, and the famous carnivorous pitcher plant."*

Travel Writer D, A Journey to Wonderland

Nature is constantly a theme dominating the description of Malaysia as this is seen as an image that apparently describes this country to potential tourists. Malaysia is unique as a tourist destination because it has peculiar natural offerings that are not available elsewhere. Malaysia is also seen as different from other destinations as the resources available may be somewhat limited and those visitors, who have yet to experience them, must come whilst it is still in place.

Besides nature, historical destinations were also depicted as one of the unique offerings of Malaysia. This country is laden with historical events which differ from that of other countries and these are narrated by the travel writers to spur the interest of potential visitors.

A functional image as displayed by the offerings of nature and histories is indicative of the perceptual aspect of destination image. The attractions are inherent in the sites. They are unique to the destinations and no other places would have similar offerings. This is in line with Walmsley & Young's (1998) assertion that destination image is evaluated by the attributes of its resources and attractions which motivate tourists to visit that destination (Gallarza, et. al 2002; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Govers & Go, 2005). Functionality is derived from what exists in a particular destination and therefore nature is described as an offering of uniqueness which has to be experienced.

### **Experiential Presentation of Image**

The writing expresses the experiences that are to be absorbed if the destination is visited. The uniqueness that was established through the functional portrayal are extended further into experiencing the site. The details of the experience are shared with the readers. It is almost a description of events that are meant to invite the readers to imagine the worthiness of the destination. This experiential presentation of image is a projection of image that says that the destination is worth visiting and nowhere else in the world can this be experienced.

*"Our lunch on a pebble beach was a highlight in terms of wonderful food and a sense of living in the moment. Our hosts shared tuak, a home-made rice wine that tasted much better than anticipated, perhaps in part due to the sense of place. Here we were, in a remote jungle in Borneo enjoying a common interest in food and nature with people who live simply and very close to the land. Vancouver was far, far away."*

Travel Writer G, GSA

Within the tourism context, tourist experiences cannot be bought but can only take shape in the minds of the tourists when they have visited the sites. According to McIntosh and Siggs (2005), tourism experience is unique, emotionally charged, and of high personal value. Yuan and Wu (2008) cited that the critical point of business in hospitality industry is obtaining experiences which cannot be forgotten. Thus, it is this memorable experience that tourists seek when selecting the destinations to visit.

### **Auxiliary Influence on Destination Image**

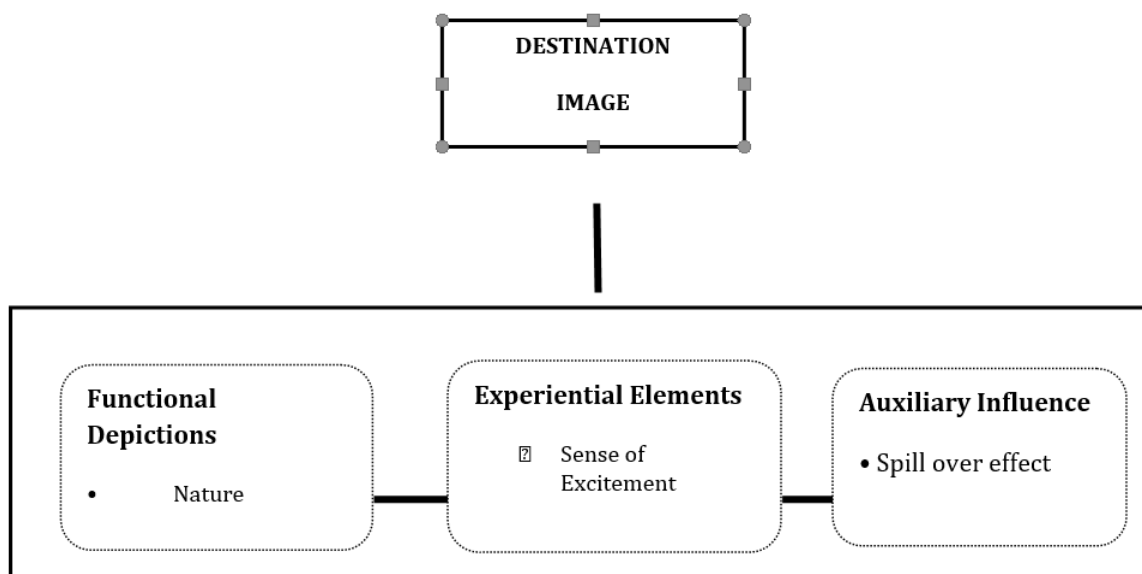
An interesting finding that is indicative of Malaysia's geographic position is that of the auxiliary influence which the destinations derived from other nearby attractions of

neighbouring countries. In particular, Malaysia is associated with Singapore and Thailand and other neighbouring countries like Brunei and Indonesia. As such a spill over effect is clearly seen when tourists described Malaysia.

Often, comparisons are made with other close destinations in order to enhance the visualization of the destinations Stimulating potential tourists' interest also implies the need to express the superiority of facilities that Malaysia have in comparison to other countries. The image of modern, advanced and convenient Malaysia is embedded in the expressions of the tourists when describing the country and this served as a valid platform to convey and describe the destination image. Stimulating potential tourists' interest also implies the need to express the superiority of facilities that Malaysia have in comparison to other countries. The image of modern, advanced and convenient Malaysia is embedded in the expressions of the tourists when describing the country and this served as a valid platform to convey and describe the destination image.

*"Green. That's the colour that strikes you as you land at the ultramodern Kuala Lumpur International Airport or the KLIA, for short. Coming from hot and dusty Dubai, the profusion of greenery in Malaysia is refreshing and energizing."*

Travel Writer N, The Colours of Truly Asia



**Figure 1. Malaysia's Destination Image Framework (Khalid and Roslin 2018)**

Malaysia's destination image is best described as a combination of the three main projections of functional elements, experiential aspects and auxiliary descriptions. Together these make up the destination image of Malaysia as seen through the eyes of the FAM writers.

There is always an effort to boost the tourist industry in Malaysia and indeed the findings from this study will enhance the understanding of the country's image as it is perceived by those who are writing about the country. Hence, findings from this study would be aid their efforts towards promoting tourism destinations in Malaysia. Travel related bodies like Tourism Malaysia as well as the many travel agencies in the country would have better comprehension as to how potential tourists view the country and therefore, this would help in the promotion of such destinations. Finally, this study will attest to the viability of the



efforts in sponsoring the travel writers with the hope of expanding the market for the country's tourist destinations. As part of the promotional efforts in marketing Malaysia, comprehending how the writers perceive Malaysia as a tourism destination will indeed justify the viability of the exercise. The study will open the doors for further strategies in increasing the number of tourists to Malaysia by expanding market support through travel writers' endorsement that will give strong support towards destination image formation for Malaysia's tourism industry.

Beerli and Martín (2004) suggest that it is critical that image building messages transmitted to the market correspond to the reality of the destination and is harmonised with what it really has to offer. In line with this, the argument is that the development of the image must be fully based on reality. FAM writers who participated in this FAM trip collected information and expressed tourists' destination image of Malaysia in their written articles. Nevertheless, the information is from credible sources which give a strong support specifically to Malaysia to identify the best image to market Malaysia to different market segments. Certainly, tourism products are mainly intangible and potential traveler has no or only limited knowledge. Image is believed to represent destinations and a power to influence destination choice. How Malaysia wishes to present itself must align with demands of her tourist.

### **Conclusion**

The correct formation of image needs to be derived from credible sources and as such a reliable means of analysing information that would lead to the right conceptualisation of image is necessary. Many factors influence the perception of destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004) and it has been attested that an image is subjective (Pike, 2017). Seraphin and Gowreesunkar (2017) further indicate that the type of information attached to a destination contributes to the image formation of a given destination. As such, using the most reliable source of information in deriving such image is pertinent.

As per Beerli and Martín (2004)'s above suggestion that it is critical that image building messages transmitted to the market correspond to the reality of the destination and is harmonised with what it really has to offer; thus the development of the image derived from the fam writers must be fully based on reality. If this is not so, the destination might not be able to satisfy those tourists who are lured into visiting such destinations. This ultimately may result in a negative image which they may well pass through word-of-mouth and much worse via online bad review which could reach the globe over. Such negative communications are likely to influence future visitors. As such, the depictions of the FAM writers although often project an excitement linked to the destinations, they must be real and are not just a figment of their imagination.

It has been established that the destination image projections may be grouped into three forms of image projections, the functional depictions, the experiential elements and the auxiliary characteristics of the destinations. Functional depictions portray the physical existence of the attractions and may include offerings associated with nature like the rainforest of Borneo, the islands of Perhentian or Redang and the high peak of Mount Kinabalu. Such functional depictions are then associated with the experiential elements in which the writers then project their unique experiences whilst visiting these attractions. To

further stress the experiences, the auxiliary characteristics are further described. Thus, a sense of comparison and FAMilarity are associated with the destinations. The idea of ensuring credibility of the images is further concretized by the study by Veasna, Wann and Chu (2013) who find that destination source credibility and destination image can affect tourists' satisfaction. Indeed, the source's credibility is an important antecedent leading to the formation of destination image.

As the study is based on the interpretation of destination image through the eyes of the travel writers when they underwent the FAMilarisation or FAM programs, the findings may only capture a snapshot of such images. Nevertheless, this study has established such destination images can be conjured from the way these writers express themselves through their first hand experiences visiting selected destinations in Malaysia and therefore are valid accounts of travelers. What they write are likely to influence others who read such articles. It is envisaged that the people in the country where the travel writers are residing and in which the articles are printed are likely to be lured by the depictions of the writers.

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