Mediating Impact of Perceived Destination Image on Intention to Recommend Malaysia as a Key Educational Hub

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Abstract

Perceived destination image is a key study area that relates to tourism and hospitality. Even within the niche area of education tourism, perceived destination image still holds a significant stand but the inclusion of perceived institutional image enhances the research area since there are still many inconclusive studies. The current study aims to investigate the relationship between cultural value, perceived destination image and intention to recommend Malaysia as destination for further education. The usage of perceived destination image as a mediator remains scarce in study. The study uses stratified samplings with a sample of 409 international students in Malaysia were obtained and analyzed using structural equation modeling. The result of the study found that perceived destination image have a complete intervention role between cultural value and intention to recommend. The study contributes to the theoretical lens whereby perceived destination image function as a mediator to strengthen the relationship between cultural value and intention to recommend a destination to others. Lastly, the research suggests that other significant contributor may affects perceived destination image. These areas still provide plenty of opportunity for research given the direct contribution to the country and world's economy and growth.

Keywords: Perceived Destination Image, Cultural Value, Intention To Recommend, Education Tourism, Perceived Institutional Image

Introduction

Tourism sector has always been one of the leading sectors in contributing towards the country's key growth. This is shown based on its inclusion as one of the key economic transformational program which is National Key Economic Area (NKEA) (Pemandu, 2016). Within the tourism industry, one of the niche sectors is the education tourism. Malaysia has aimed to be a global education destination by 2025 which under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) is to attract 250,000 international students by then (Jusoh, 2017. Based on the same report, international students currently contribute about RM5.9 billion a year to the country economy and the government has projected that this may

increase to RM15.6 billion by 2020. Higher Education Ministry Deputy Director-General (Private HEIs) Prof Datin Dr. Siti Hamisah Tapsir mentioned that each foreign student spent approximately RM30,000 per year just for tuition fees, accommodation, and food ("Economic impact of", 2012). Thus, attracting the international students is important and one of the methods is using word of mouth recommendation.

Before students are willing to recommend, the image of a destination is important. It was found that when coming to marketing and promotional activities, Malaysia higher education does not have a unique selling point or branding for coherent identity (MoHE, 2011). For instances, country such as United Kingdom uses "Education UK" between 1999-2014 and Australia's Melbourne uses "Study Melbourne" to distinguish themselves better and to set up a unique selling proportion in the eyes of the potential international students. Inconclusive results on how image affect intention to recommend led to the need for further empirical and theoretical development whereby some argued that destination image affects intention to recommend directly (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Rodríguez del Bosque and San Martín, 2008), while others argued otherwise where the relationship is indirect (Xie, 2011; Wang & Hsu, 2010).

Since, the educational tourism sector is unique from the mainstream of tourism sector; the inclusion of the perceived institution image is needed to measure the destination image. Institutional image is considered as the sum of outcome due to the interaction of the person's "beliefs, ideas, feelings, and impressions about an institution" at a specific time (Harrison-Walker, 2009). This is because using findings from other institutions and re-apply directly on others will create fatal mistake in marketing (Ngoc Dao & Thorpe, 2015) and create severe non-competitive advantage since image/reputation is the second most important component for higher education competitive advantage (de Haan, 2015). Thus, the incorporation of perceived institutional image is relevant given the competitiveness and importance to policy maker and higher education marketers in marketing their respective institutions. In addition, the present study aims to examine if cultural value has an effect on international students' intention to recommend through perceived destination image as a mediator. This is because the mediating effect of perceived destination image remains scarce (Kani, Abdul Aziz, Sambasivan & Bojei, 2017) with the theoretical examination of the link between the constructs is little to none.

Literature Review
Consumer behavior is defined as the activities that people undertake to obtain, consume, and dispose of products and services (Blackwell, D'Souza, Taghian, Miniard & Engel, 2007). Consumer behavior studies is particularly important because it determines the success of the marketing program, helps to formulate public policy and affects one's own personal life and well-being (Blackwell, Miniard, Engel, Pai, Mohd. Yasin & Hood (2012). Learning is a part of the process in the decision-making of an individual consumer which it focuses in terms of how they make decision to purchase certain product or services. This understanding helps the marketers to know how an individual make decision and thus able to create different value and preference over and above the competitors. Within learning a classical theory of conditioning (Pavlov, 1927) has led to the development of Stimulus-Response (SR) Theory (Watson, 1913) and subsequently brought upon the creation of Stimulus-Organism-Response

(SOR) Model (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Behaviorist believe that this model is more appropriate in justifying how an individual consumer behave is due to the impact brought upon by the environmental stimulus (S) affecting the organism's internal emotional reaction (0) that lead to the individual's behavior or response (R). Using the theoretical SOR Model, this paper uses the individual personal cultural value as the stimulus (S), perceived destination image as the internal organism (O) and how these collectively affect the final intention to recommend as the response (R).

Perceived Destination Image

The studies of destination image using attitudes as a basis in the tourism industry have been a focal point of studies since Crompton (1979) first supported empirically that destination image mainly consists of two components i.e. cognitive and affective components. Using different attributes to conceptualize destination image has been followed suit by many other researchers. Over the years, multiple authors have used different terms to represent what destination image stands for. Many of them have used terms which are quite subjective such as "impression", "perception" or even "mental representation" in defining destination image. This is because reality differs greatly from its perceived image (Gartner, 1989). Hunt (1975) as quoted from Mayo (1973) also agreed that, it is what exists in the mind of tourists that affects their choices and images and it may not be the true representation of the reality. Similarly, Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez (2001) also state that destination image becomes the subjective interpretation of reality made by the tourist. Thus, perceived destination image is defined as "expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imaginations, and emotional thoughts with which a person or group judges a particular object or place" (Canally, 2010).

Many different literatures have highlighted the importance of image conceived in affecting visitor's perceptions thus affecting their decision to visit or not. In Rodríguez del Bosque et al.'s (2009) study, they have shown that 'image represent the true capabilities of a tourist destination'. Thus, the usage of information sources helps to reduce uncertainty about the destination. In addition, it also helps to form expectations in relative to the future expected experience of the destination. The management of tourist's expectation is significant in determining the spreading of positive word of mouth (Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002) which is important for potential travelers in making decision for future visitation. Furthermore, MacKay and Fesenmaier (2000) argued that it is not appropriate to use the unidimensional understanding of cultural value to understand the image formation dimension by different tourists.

Cross-Cultural Study within Tourism Sector

Cross-cultural studies have been receiving more interest over the years from academicians (Risitano, Tutore, Sorrentino & Quintano, 2012). Culture is a term that many laypersons or professionals used in their daily lives. In Matsumoto and Juang's (2013) book, they have highlighted that there are no specific single understanding that refer culture to. It covers a wide spectrum from describing activities, behaviors, rules and norms, learning or problem solving, origins and heritage of groups of people. Culture is a term that has been used multiple times and very often whenever people want to distinguish themselves from others and often not when nationality is in view. Triandis and Suh (2002) as quoted from

Kluckhohn (1954) that "culture is to society as what memory is to individuals." They were trying to mean that whatever experiences encountered that works for the society that is worthwhile to be passed on for the future generations. Whenever the studies involve culture, researchers such as Hofstede, Schwartz, and Triandis have brought in the systems that researchers are studying about the beliefs, behaviors, norms, values, etc. In relation to this, the term value was more prominent where subsequently with each of the individual having their unique set of individual values. These values will be diffused to others which are part of the society and thus becomes the culture. These are known as cultural values (Liu, 2003). The basic values emphasize on the variability across individuals, however, when it is being viewed as part of culture, the shared cultural systems imply that there are 'some relative consensus about the importance of values within countries and some of the other values may vary across countries' (Fischer & Schwartz, 2011). It is these variations that differentiate one country's culture from another.

Linkage between Cultural Value, Perceived Destination Image and Intention to Recommend

The basis for classifying cultural value as an external stimulus was based on the conceptualization of culture where it is the external exposure that the individual encountered differently in their daily life (Schwartz, 2008). That is why norms, practices, beliefs, values, and how one works in a society may be different from another. In addition, most of the books on marketing includes the studies of macro environment views that cultural values are part of socio-cultural external environment (Kotler & Keller, 2011; Lantos, 2011; Stevens, Loudon & Wrenn, 2012). Thus, it justifies the reason why cultural value is included in the current study as an external stimulus.

The perceived destination image would be tested as the mediator in the model to mediate the relationship between the external stimuli that leads to the response which will be the behavioral intention, i.e. intention to recommend. Perceived destination image is treated as the organism because past research has mentioned that there are not much claims to signify that image are different from perception (White, 2005) and it originates from the individuals themselves.

The study uses intention to recommend as the behavioral outcome to examine this relationship is because attitudinal approach is measured based as intention but behavioral approach required the actual usage or purchase (actual behavior) such as repeated visit. Attitudinal approach was argued to be more dynamic compared to behavioral approach (Dick & Basu, 1994) and goes beyond overt behavior to express the intensity of affection towards the context of study (Mechinda, Serirat & Guild, 2008).

Thus, based on the preceding discussion, it appears that perceived destination image may alter the relationship between cultural value of the person and his/her intention to recommend. This leads to the proposed hypothesis:

There is a mediating effect of perceived destination image between cultural value and intention to recommend.

Research Design and Methodology

This research uses post-positivism research paradigm whereby it is guided by some theoretical lens to lend support towards the hypothesis testing. Therefore, the study uses primary data collection in its quest to test the purpose of the study. A total of 500 copies of questionnaire were distributed and collected. The final useable questionnaire is 409 copies after deletion and data cleaning. The data were collected between October to December 2016. The samples consist of international students from both public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia. Sample selection was based on stratified sampling where the calculations are based on the proportion of international students in private versus public higher education enrolment data from Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. Questionnaire were adapted from various sources which includes Mohamad and Ab Ghani (2014), Palacio, Meneses and Pérez (2002) and Hosany and Prayag (2013) for perceived destination image scales. Intention to recommend was adopted from Harrison- Walker (2001) and cultural value from Sharma (2010). Multivariate data analysis and Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS) - Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to examine the hypothesis proposed.

Data Analysis and Findings
Descriptive Statistics

The sample consists of more male respondents (53.8%) which mainly come from Middle Eastern countries (44.7%). The respondents mainly are undergraduate students (69.7%) studying in the field of social sciences (84.8%). The profiles of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Respondent's Profile

Items	Frequency N = 409	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	220	53.8
Female	189	46.2
Country		
African	14	3.4
Confucian	41	10
South-East Asian	171	41.8
Middle Eastern	183	44.7
Field of Study		
Pure Sciences	62	15.2
Social Sciences	347	84.8
Status of Study		
Foundation/Diploma	37	9
Undergraduate	285	69.7
Postgraduate	87	21.3
Status of University		
Public University	109	26.7
Private University	300	73.3

Reliability and Validity

Table 2

Factor Loadings and Reliability Test Result

Constructs and Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability
Cultural Value		0.907	0.975
CV_IND	.949		
CV_INT	.942		
CV_POW	.900		
CV_IEQ	.826		
CV_RSK	.810		
CV_AMB	.912		
CV_MAS	.869		
CV_GEQ	.914		
CV_TRD	.942		
CV_PRU	.828		
Perceived Destination Image		0.841	0.908
Cog_Image	.772		
Affect_Image1	.650		
Affect_Image2	.741		
Affect_Image3	.744		
Affect_Image4	.657		
Inst_Image1	.812		
Inst_Image2	.792		
Inst_Image3	.772		
Intention To Recommend		0.913	0.896
ITR2	.802		
ITR3	.800		
ITR4	.799		
ITR5	.775		
ITR6	.798		

As shown in Table 2, the standardized loadings for all the items on the latent construct met the minimal criterion of 0.40 (Ford, MacCallum & Tait, 1986). The Cronbach alpha ranges from 0.841 to 0.913 which is above 0.70 (Nunally, 1978). The composite reliability also shows that all construct is reliable since it is above 0.70 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The measurement model was evaluated and found to be fit with the following goodness-of-fit statistics: Chi – Square χ^2 (CMIN) = 1098.004 (df = 415), Relative χ^2 (CMIN/df) = 2.646, p = 0.000, GFI = 0.859, CFI = 0.938, IFI = 0.938, NFI = 0.904, TLI = 0.931, and RMSEA = 0.064.

Table 3
Correlation Table, Squared Correlation and Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

|	Cultural Value	Perceived Destination Image	Intention to Recommend
Cultural Value	**0.793**	-0.0324	-0.000121
Perceived Destination Image	-0.180***	**0.554**	0.0888
Intention to Recommend	-0.011	0.298***	**0.632**

Note: ***significant at 0.001 level
Note: Diagonal value in bold is the AVE value
      Values above the AVE are squared correlations

Convergent validity was supported because average variance extracted (AVE) values range from 0.554 to 0.793, exceeds the minimum criterion of 0.50 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) (Table 3). The discriminant validity criterion is satisfied as well because none of the square of the coefficient representing its correlation with other constructs exceeded the AVE value for each construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Structural Model and Hypothesis Result
Figure 1: Structural Hypothesized Model for Conceptual Model
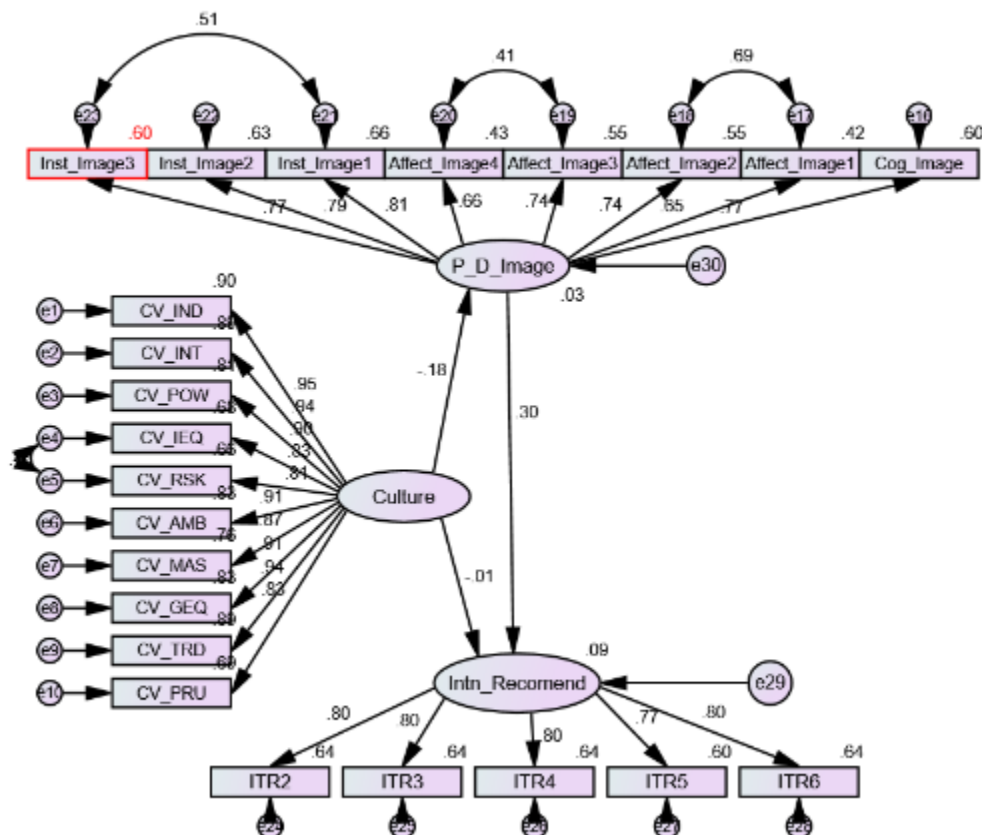
The structural model was tested using SEM-AMOS version 21. The model was presented in Figure 1 with the following fit statistics. Based on the model goodness-of-fit, Chi – Square χ^2 (CMIN) =513.740 (df = 223), Relative χ^2 (CMIN/df) = 2.304, p = 0.000, GFI = 0.902, CFI = 0.968,

IFI = 0.968, NFI = 0.944, TLI = 0.963, and RMSEA = 0.057. The result shows that the model is fit and acceptable for testing.

Table 4

Result of bootstrapping analysis - Effect on Intention to Recommend

Variable			Estimate	95% BC Confidence Interval		P-value
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Cultural Value	→	Perceived Destination Image	-0.180	-0.299	-0.080	0.004*
Cultural Value	→	Intention to Recommend	-0.011	-0.106	0.089	0.0803(not sig.)
Perceived Destination Image	→	Intention to Recommend	0.298	0.175	0.388	0.003*

*p-value<0.01(two-tailed)

In order to test for indirect effects of perceived destination image in the relationships between cultural value with intention to recommend, bootstrapping technique was applied based on the 95% bias – corrected confidence interval (Cheung & Lau, 2008). The decision criterion for significant indirect effect is when zero (0) is outside the confidence interval that is Lower Bounds (LB) and Upper Bounds (UB), then indirect effect is significant, otherwise the effect is insignificant (Byrne, 2010; Hayes, 2013). Results of the significance of mediating effect, direct effect and indirect effect test based on bootstrapping bias – corrected 95% CI is presented in Table 4. The result shows that there is an evidence of indirect effect of cultural value on intention to recommend through perceived destination image. The estimate of direct effect of cultural value on intention to recommend was found not significant (β = -0.011, p = 0.0803). Based on the indirect effect test using bootstrapping bias-corrected 95% confidence interval that has zero as outside the range of CI, it indicates that there is mediation effect. The usage of bootstrapping technique is considered to be more superior and better than Sobel test (Cheung & Lau, 2008; Goodwin, Groth & Frenkel, 2011). This means, there is a significant indirect effect of cultural value on intention to recommend through perceived destination image. Therefore, the study proves that perceived destination image fully mediates the relationship between cultural value and intention to recommend.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study is to examine perceived destination image as a mediator between cultural value and intention to recommend by international students in Malaysia. Perceived destination image as a mediator has been proven via other studies but mainly between service quality (Akroush, Jraisat, Kurdiehh, Al-Faouri & Qatu, 2016), perceived risk (Chew & Jahari, 2014) and perceived value (Moon, Ko, Connaughton & Lee, 2013) with behavioral intention. Although in a more recent study, Kani et al (2017) did include cultural value to examine the relationship with destination image and revisit intention; their study

focuses on general tourist rather than education tourist. Furthermore, their study yields a different result from the current study which the mediation impact was partial rather than complete intervention. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this study prove that indeed perceived destination image function as a mediator to strengthen the relationship between cultural value and intention to recommend a destination to others. From the current study, it is a complete intervention between the constructs. It means that how a person behaves is entirely impacted by their view towards a place. Thus, this also proves that empirically there is still plenty of research is needed in this area since inconclusive result yields.

Managerial Implications
The competitiveness among the destination managers and the fierce fight for students has always been a challenge to many country government and institutional players. These competitively will only increase over the years (Chi & Qu, 2008). As such, it is important for the destination marketers to ensure that an individual will have a positive perceived image towards a place to ensure the intention to recommend the place to others. Even though, the student's personal cultural value does not impact their intention to recommend directly but indirectly it shows that any individual student with their own cultural value inherited from their background will influence their view in forming the destination image and impacted directly on their desire to recommend the destination and institution. Thus, the destination and institution managers should carefully develop marketing programs to bring upon a positive unique image. Included in the marketing program would be the communication materials that shows a different and unique image compared to other destination and institution. This is because individuals also formed their image using secondary information sources (Kim, 2017) in addition to their own personal experiences.

Limitations and Future Research
Even though the current study provides valuable insights into the body of knowledge, perceived destination image function as a mediator is inevitable in future destination image research. However, the study is not without its limitations. From the theoretical viewpoint, it only examined the relationship between cultural value, perceived destination image and intention to recommend, but does not include other constructs or behavioral outcomes. Other antecedents such as destination personality or perceived risk could have affected their image of the destination and outcome such as intention to continue their studies in the future (repurchase intention). Additionally, a higher sample may be able to provide a more robust result. Lastly, the study uses a cross-sectional study and the future researchers can consider using longitudinal study instead.

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