

## Prospective Tourists' Cognitive Image Prone to Safety and Security Destination: The Case of Sabah, Malaysia

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v8-i16/5126>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v8-i16/5126

**Published Date:** 31 December 2018

### Abstract

Safety and security are important for travellers and the tourism industry. One characteristic that influences travel intention is the type and level of safety and security related to destinations. It is generally accepted in tourism literature that the importance destination image of which is universally acknowledged, is often used as a significant element for local tourists in the choice of a vacation destination. The main focus of this study was to identify the underlying dimensions that influence prospective tourists' travel intention to visit Sabah. A total number of 362 questionnaires were distributed to gain the information from a prospective international tourist who had not visit Sabah before. Descriptive analyses were used to describe the sample profile. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to identify the underlying dimensions of the cognitive destination image. Using this method, four main dimensions of cognitive destination image; natural environment, appealing activities, attractive conditions and essential condition were identified. Based on the results, suggestions were made to build up strategies for improving and maintaining the Sabah image. Furthermore, the limitation and implications for future research are also provided.

**Keywords:** Destination Image, Prospective tourist, Safety and Security, Travel Intention, Sabah

### Introduction

Travel destinations are particularly competitive based on their visible images relative to competitors. Whether planning their trip or visiting tourist destinations, they are more likely to make decisions based on the destination image (Lepp, Gibson, & Lane, 2011). In a lead of identifying the important role of each factor, the current study moves towards studying the importance of other factors, such as destination images, as well as investigating the connection of several factors such as demographics and personality. However, there is still limited research on the relationship between destination image factors and the intentions to travel, especially looking at the construction of various dimensions. In fact, there is still a

lack of empirical studies to see the image of tourist destinations and travel intent focused on security and safety perspectives. Understanding the role image of a destination can be used to suggest strategies to enhance Sabah's positive image for international travellers when making travel decisions.

It is important to understand the difference in destination images and travel intentions on prospective travellers to visit destinations vulnerable to safety and security issues. Literature reveals that more attention has been paid to international travellers in vulnerable areas of crisis management because the risk is considered as a crucial factor in preventing international tourists from visiting certain regions of the world (Sharifpour, Walter & Ritchie, 2014; Kozak, Crofts & Law, 2007). While these studies only provide an understanding of the deterioration of international tourists in countries or geographical regions that are considered to be risky, they fail to provide an understanding of the visitor's decision-making behaviour that will focus on the destination, especially for Sabah.

There are different behaviours perceived by different categories of tourists because the image of a destination is accepted differently by the different travel markets (Dolnicar, 2005). Hence, it is vital to understand the behaviour of prospective tourists towards travelling to Sabah, Malaysia as a risky destination related to safety and security issues. Because past studies have indicated that destination image is closely related with travel intention (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989), and it is also affected by characteristics of a tourist like past experience (Lepp & Gibson, 2010; Zhang, Wu & Buhalis, 2018) tourist role preference (Lepp & Gibson, 2003), demographic factors (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004), thus, this study was to examine the underlying dimension of cognitive image in a safety and security context in which will influencing the prospective tourist travel intention.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Concept of Destination Image***

Tourism is increasingly dependent on images (Tasci, Gartner and Cavusgil, 2007). Unlike usual products, the prospective tourist is purchasing intangible products. In addition, the product cannot be experienced until after purchase (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Thus, the image plays an important role in travel and destination choices (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008; Tasci et. al., 2007). From the perspective of a destination, projecting positive images is needed for sustainability and successful of destinations (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005). Destination image ideas have been adopted for use in tourism research in several areas, for instance in marketing, social and environmental psychology, and consumer behaviour, for decades.

The term 'destination image' has been defined in a different way between researchers since the 1970s (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Martin & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008). Then it has been well-known in tourism research area since then (Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2006; Sahin & Baloglu, 2011). Some researchers have pointed out that the destination image focuses their research on tourist behaviour (Hunt, 1975; Pearce, 1982; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). The concept of destination image can be known as "the perception of a person or a group of people regarding a place". This perception is formed by one's sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions about that destination (Crompton, 1979; Hosany et al., 2006). In additions, it also

can be referred as a destination idea made in the mind of a traveller and is usually a mental representation, a set of properties or a set of perceptions inherent in the memory of the fans (Keller, 1993).

Destination image has been defined as an attitudinal concept consisting of the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination (Crompton, 1979; Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Tasci, Gartner & Cavusgil, 2007). The destination image is regarded as a multidimensional construct by some other scholars (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977; Hosany et al., 2006). This view is further supported by Blain, Levy & Ritchie (2005), which reflects that the destination image aims to convey the overall idea or experience expected visitors to the destination. It can include the common functional and psychological features or different or unique features, events, feelings and aura (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007).

It also influences the intention to visit for the first time or intention to revisit a destination. The term 'destination' refers to the location visited by a tourist and may be interpreted as a city (Opermann 1996), region (Ahmed 1991; Fakeye & Crompton 1991), or country (Echtner & Ritchie 1993). Some countries have an image, and whether or not the country consciously manages this image (brand), these images can be activated by simply mentioning the name of a country, thereby influencing the purchasing, travelling, and investing as well as relocation decisions of consumers (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). As for this study, the definition of destination image was defined as impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations, and feelings accumulated towards a place overtime-related to safety and security risk. The previous descriptions of the destination image are various, as depicted in table 1.

The image of a tourist destination according to Baloglu and McCleary (1999, p.870) is "an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about an object or destination". It is said that the destination image is important and plays many roles in the decision-making process, because all decision-making like money, time and family depend on the capabilities of each destination image to satisfy decision-maker motivation (Gartner, 1993). It also affects the intention to visit for the first time or the intention to revisit the destination.

The term 'destination' refers to a location visited by tourists and can be interpreted as a city (Opermann 1996), territories (Ahmed 1991; Fakeye & Crompton 1991), or country (Echtner & Ritchie 1993). Some countries have images, and whether the country is consciously managing this image (brand), these images can be activated by simply naming a country's name, affecting the purchases, travel, investment and consumer relocation decision (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). As for this study, destination image definitions are defined as impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations, and feelings accumulated in places related to safety and security risks. The previous description of the destination image is varied, as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1

*The Definition of Destination Image from different authors*

Authors	Definition
Costa (1987)	An idea of a destination created in the traveller's mind, usually a mental representation or a set of attributes
Keller (1993)	An idea of a destination created in the traveller's mind, usually a mental representation or a set of attributes or a set of perceptions that exist in a traveller's memory
Baloglu & McCleary (1999)	An attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about an object or destination
Bigné, Sánchez & Sánchez (2001)	A reality of tourist personal understanding
Kotler and Gartner (2002) Tasci, Gartner and Cavusgil (2007)	An attitudinal concept consisting of the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination

***The Dimension of the Destination Image***

Many of past researchers have attempted to form a conceptual framework of destination image formation (e.g. Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993, 2003; Gartner, 1993; Pike, 2002; O'Leary & Deegan, 2003; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gartner, 2007; Tasci et al., 2007; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010; Kaur & Chauhan, 2016). For instance, Echtner & Ritchie (1993) stated that destination images could be very specific or holistic and include functional features such as price, accommodation or attraction and psychological traits; e.g. local hospitality, service quality or safety (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). As a result, Echtner and Ritchie propose that destination images are considered to be both a holistic component and attribute-based components, both of which have functional and psychological features. For example, on a holistic side, the holistic psychological impression is described as the atmosphere or mood of the destination. Functional impressions consist of mental images or an overview of the physical characteristics of a destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

In the destination image study, Baloglu & Brinberg (1997) and Gartner (1993) consider that destination images include cognitive and affective components. By using these concepts for the context of tourism, cognitive images are the sum of beliefs and attitudes about the destination leading to some internally accepted picture of its attributes, which is often derived from factual information, while the affective image refers to a person's feelings about a specific tourism destination (Gartner, 1994; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008; Lee, Busser & Yang, 2015). Destination image dimensions are complex and different models have been developed to evaluate it; for instance, the study by (Gartne, 1993; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Zhang et al., 2014).

In the previous studies of destination image, cognitive destination image was the main focus (Ramkisson, Uysal & Brown 2011; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Gartner & Hunt, 1987). Various destination image studies (Javalgi, Thomas & Rao, 1992; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007) compares travellers' evaluations of destination attributes across specific destinations to illustrate positioning strategies for these destinations; while, other studies (e.g. Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Ahmed, 1991; Chon, 1991; Court & Lupton, 1997) attempt to classify the characteristics of a target destination considered important or weak in providing appropriate tourism marketing strategies. As mentioned by Pike (2002), affective destination image has not had a strong focus in tourism studies. After evaluating 142 studies, only six studies that explicitly focused their examination on affective destination image (Pike, 2002). The importance of affective images in any future study has also been advocated by Rudez (2014) who stated that further studies are still needed to understand the image of destinations in other areas. The examples of image study that include affective image components are the study by Chew & Jahari (2014), Baloglu & Brinberg (1997), Baloglu & McCleary (1999b), and Gartner (1993).

In addition, previous studies have discussed the connection among cognitive and affective components and argue that they are conceptually different from one another, but extremely interrelated (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Lee et al., 2008; Phillips & Jang, 2008). The positive relationship between these two components is proposed by Gartner (1994) and is broadly accepted as the outcome of further studies (for instance; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Lee et al., 2008). A number of studies propose that affective images are shaped as a function of cognitive influences (Gartner, 1994, Mayo & Jarvis, 1981; Russel & Pratt, 1981; Stern & Krakover, 1993), and these two dimensions combination produce an overall image of destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). It is argued that the number of destination images cannot be understood without considering the cognitive and affective components (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Garner, 1993). It should also consider unique images that are scarcely explored in studying travel behaviour (Chew & Jahari, 2014). This fact was also supported by Echtner & Ritchie (1991) stating that there are other dimensions called 'unique common dimensions'.

Researchers suggest that an analysis comprising only two dimensions of destination image -attribute-holistic and functional psychological- is insufficient to discover destination images; therefore, they include the unique-common dimension. Echtner & Ritchie (1991) argue that previous studies on destination images have overlooked the consideration of whether image perceptions are based on common characteristics or unique characteristics. With this in mind, the destination image can consist of an image based on a regular to a unique feature. As stated by Echtner & Ritchie (1991), unique functional features are found in many different destinations. Therefore, the study of image components has revealed a complex and influential relationship with each other and with a comprehensive destination image. Therefore, it is important to study this combination of dimensions comprehensively in a single study.



### ***Travel Intention***

Intentions are the tendency to act or do something that will lead to real behaviour (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975). By measuring intentions, one can predict the actual behaviour that individuals will take in the future (Quintal & Pau, 2014; Kim & Jun, 2016). When tourists have the intention and motivation to visit the tourism destination, their actions will follow (Jang & Namkyung, 2009). As stated by Croy & Walker (2003), by imagining the destination through the media, pictures etc., and tourist will have the intention to visit the destination. Besides the media, pictures etc., the knowledge of the destination from the cognitive image (WOM, books or magazine) can also influence the intention to visit the destination. Hence, tourist behavioral intentions have become essential to evaluating the success of a tourist destination (Stylidis, Belhassen, & Shani, 2015)

### ***Context of Sabah***

The context focus of this study is Sabah, one of the second largest states in Malaysia. This state mainly and progressively receives tourist from domestic and international tourists; however, there has been limited study conducted to understand the characteristics of the of the state as a tourism destination because the government only focuses on promoting the tourism to international markets who believe the state as one of the best tourist destinations in Malaysia (Musa & Thirumoorthi, 2016). There are some strategies taken to guarantee that the tourism industry in Malaysia strengthens as a most preferred destination for tourist particularly for Sabah in Malaysia Ninth Plan (2006-2010). Within of the strategies, there are had a strategy to guarantee the safety of the destination, comfort and welfare of the tourist who comes to any places in Malaysia. This strategy revealed that how serious Malaysia committed and gave the high focus to the safety issues. This aspect is very important to provide a quality in tourism and more than other economic activities, the success of tourism destination depends on being able to offer a protected and secure environment to the visitor (JohnRose, 2014). However, lately reputation of Sabah, Malaysia as a safe and secure place has been tarnished in numerous of unwanted incident and event.

Malaysia faced a crisis when more than 100 army groups known as Royal Army of Sulu Sultanate landed in Lahad Datu in February 2013. The militant military group claimed Sabah as part of their country and decided to invade and attack which have led casualties, including hundred of militant lives, eight Malaysian royal police officers and two soldiers (Ayob & Masron, 2014). As mentioned by J.L Tan who is the MATTA Sabah chapter chairmen, following the fateful incident, certain countries have warned their citizen to keep away from travelling to Sabah without taking into consideration that the incident only happened in the isolated area of Sabah. This incident has given a negative effect toward the tourism industry in Sabah with hotels operators and tour operators receiving cancellations from the tourists (Lahad Datu, 2013). The continuing incident of kidnapping, shooting and piracy in Sabah in this few years had also done further damage to the image of Sabah. Besides that, fake and misleading reports from irresponsible journalists about Malaysia are considered as a new threat to Malaysia image. Therefore, the results of this study will fill the limitation in understanding the importance of international tourist destination image of Sabah. The implications of this study will be valuable for managing the destination image of Sabah, in particular for international tourism.

### Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative design research method. 362 questionnaires were distributed to the traveller who visited Malaysia but have not visited Sabah (prospective tourist) from Australia and United Kingdom in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Out of 362 questionnaires of prospective tourist, 353 of prospective tourist questionnaires were returned with 97.51% response rate which is a very high response rate. The samples were selected to meet specific criteria, for instance, the prospective tourists must be travellers who have never visited Sabah before. All participants must be willing to participate, aged 18 years and above, male or female and constitute any race. The data of this study was analysed using the IBM SPSS version 23. The detail of the data collection procedure is listed in table 2.

Table 2  
*Data collection procedures*

<b>Target Population</b>	<b>International Tourist</b>
<b>Data Analysis</b>	IBM SPSS Version 23
<b>Sampling</b>	Prospective International Tourist from Australia & UK
<b>Method of sampling</b>	Quota Sampling
<b>Research Technique</b>	Quantitative Technique
<b>Data collection method</b>	Distribution of questionnaire

### Instrumentation

A three-section questionnaire was designed to collect data from the respondent. Section A asking about screening questions. Section B requested participants' perceptions of Sabah as a tourist destination. Section C elicited general and biographical information about respondents such as gender, age, and education background. For the tourist screening questions in section A, five questions were designed to assess whether participants had travelled to Sabah or not. The destination image section was contained 16 items that measure cognitive images of Sabah as a tourist destination. The instruments of the cognitive image were adapted from the study of Stylos, Vassiliadia, Bellou & Andronikidis (2016). Seven-point Likert scales were employed for these items, ranging from (1= very strongly disagree to 7=very strongly agree).

### Reliability and Validity

In terms of reliability, this study is based on four suggestions for improving reliability: (1) configuring all constructs, (2) improving measurement levels, (3) using some indicators, and (4) conducting pilot studies. Generally, reliability is less than 0.6 is considered poor, while 0.70 is acceptable and more than 0.8 is good (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). Statistically, this study uses the guidelines as suggested by Pallant (2005) regarding alpha Cronbach score ranging from 0.7 to 1.00, considered good. Scores of items below this score will be deleted or filtered. In table 3, the loading of individual items for the research constructs ranges from 0.741 to 0.773 and, thus, above the recommended value 0.70 (Pallant, 2005) which indicates acceptable individual items.

## Results

### *Respondents' Profile*

As shown in table 3, the majority of respondents were female (58.1%). Regarding age, the majority of the respondents are between 18 to 25 years old representing 38.2%, about 31.2% 26-35 years old, 14.9% age between 36-45 years old, 12.9% age of 46-55 years old and 2.2% 56-65 years old. A majority of the respondents were university graduate representing 71.4% of the total sample. The remaining respondents were graduated from college representing 19.4%, and another 9% were graduated from Vocational/ Technical school. In terms of their ethnicity, about 53.5% were the UK, and about 46.1 % were Australian group.

Table 3

#### *Profile of respondents*

Prospective Tourist			
Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	146	41.9
	Female	207	58.1
Age	18-25	135	38.2
	26-35	111	31.2
	36-45	53	14.9
	46-55	46	12.9
	56-65	8	2.2
Education	Vocational/ Technical	32	9
	College	69	19.4
	University	252	71.4
Origin	United Kingdom	189	53.5
	Australia	164	46.1

(n=353)

### *The Result of Factor Analysis*

The 16 Likert statements were explored by principal component factor analysis (PCA) and varimax rotation, which resulted in four factors as shown in table 3. The rationale of conducting factor analysis was to take into account the total variance and can detect factors that have unique variance (Hair, Money, Samouel & Page, 2010). Furthermore, it also can combine the statements into a smaller group of factors that were deemed to represent the underlying dimensions of Sabah cognitive image. The factor loadings under 0.33 were removed from further analysis. The Cronbach's alpha tests were used to examine the internal consistency of each factor. As shown in table 3 all the alpha coefficients were above 0.7, which means that high correlation existed among the items. Factor loadings were used to assign a name to each factor. Particularly, items with higher factor loadings were considered as an important item which has a greater influence on factor naming (Hair et al., 2010).

Factor 1 was composed of four (4) items named as Natural Environment. Great Beaches, Good Climate and Good opportunities for biking/fishing/hunting/climbing were examples of higher factor loading for this factor. Factor 2 was named as Appealing Activities which consists of four (4) items. Beautiful landscape, Cultural attractions and Interesting



historical monuments & relevant events were examples of higher factor loading for this factor. Factor 3 was named as Attractive Conditions which consists of four (4) items. The good reputation of destination was the higher factor loading for this factor. Factor 4 included four (4) items named Essential conditions which consist of four (4) items.

Table 4

*The results of Factor Analysis on Cognitive Image for Prospective Tourist*

Item	Factor Loadings	Mean	Eigenvalue	Cronbach's Alpha
<b>Factor 1 (Natural Environment) (4 Items)</b>		<b>5.28</b>	<b>5.697</b>	<b>0.768</b>
Great beaches	0.747	5.58		
Implementation of policies towards sustainability & environmental protection	0.726	4.80		
Good climate	0.662	5.38		
Good opportunities for biking/fishing/hunting/climbing	0.556	5.37		
<b>Factor 2 (Appealing Activities) (4 Items)</b>		<b>4.92</b>	<b>2.007</b>	<b>0.766</b>
Interesting historical monuments & relevant events	0.842	4.64		
Cultural attractions	0.790	5.22		
Various shopping opportunities	0.766	4.17		
Beautiful landscape	0.502	5.64		
<b>Factor 3 (Attractive Conditions) (4 Items)</b>		<b>4.93</b>	<b>1.642</b>	<b>0.773</b>
Political stability	0.813	4.74		
Standard hygiene & cleanliness	0.752	4.92		
Good quality of infrastructure	0.722	4.65		
The good reputation of the destination	0.553	5.42		
<b>Factor 4 (Essential Conditions) (4 Items)</b>		<b>5.28</b>	<b>1.043</b>	<b>0.741</b>
Availability of accommodations	0.849	5.40		
Customer care from tourism operators	0.711	4.92		
Friendly People	0.622	5.37		
Relaxation from the daily routine	0.463	5.41		

Total variance explained 64.94%

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measures of 0.815

Sampling Adequacy (KMO)

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity :

Approx Chi-Square	2514.2
df	6
Sig	120
	.000

(n=353)

In summation, the mean score for all factors higher than 4.0 which considered that international tourists had a positive image of Sabah. Specifically, factor 2 and factor 4, which consisted of four (4) items each of the factor related with Natural Environment and Essential Conditions had a mean score of 5.28. In addition, international tourists look like to enjoy the ambience of Sabah, as reflected by the high means scores of Beautiful Landscape' (mean 5.64) and Great Beaches (mean 5.58). Appealing Activities were the lowest mean score (mean 4.92). It seems that Sabah is not considered as shopping heaven since the lowest mean scores were gained for the item various shopping opportunities (4.17). This suggests that the majority of tourists thought that shopping opportunities in Sabah were low.

### Limitation and Future Research

Although the study contributes to the literature on tourism destination image in some way, it is also important to highlight its boundaries, potentially affecting the strength and generalisation of the results and leading to suggesting future research study. The first limitation of the study is that this study only focuses on prospective tourists who have never visited Sabah before. It has been recognised that different types of tourists do perceive and experience a destination in a different way with a various set of motivation, anticipation, and expectation (Bonn, Joseph & Dai, 2005). It may be interesting to conduct the similar study by focusing on both prospective and actual tourist and compare the findings. Second, respondents in this study are limited to tourists from Australia and the UK. Therefore, in delivering a more comprehensive picture of Sabah's destination image and strengthening the results of this study, further studies may replicate with different travellers from other regions. A deeper qualitative approach is complemented by participants' observations, autoethnography, or in-depth interviews with prospective and actual tourists and local destination marketers. Furthermore, other image variables such as affective image and unique image could be included in the model to examine the underlying dimension of prospective tourist about Sabah image.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the destinations with positive images are more probably to be considered as a tourist destination and chosen in the travel decision-making process. Destination Image has a critical role to play in the travel intention of international tourist regarding the development of various models of travel decision making. Given that analysis of the destination image dimension, this study was contributed importantly to a comprehensive understanding of what influences the travel intention of prospective international tourists. The understanding of underlying dimensions of the cognitive image of tourist may be the solution to Tourism Malaysia and tourism players of Sabah planning an effective marketing strategy to attract tourists. In a relationship with safety and security concern, by taking tourists' safety as a priority concern, this study will suggest to the government and tourism players undertake proactive approaches to crisis and disaster management and establish a crisis communication centre to disseminate truthful information

about destination behaviors. This is very important to create a positive image for the destination. As a final point, the results indicated that destination image is not only the perception by the tourists' destination attributes however it also covers comprehensive impressions made by the destination itself.

### Acknowledgement

The authors thank The University of Queensland Business School, Australia for funding this research.

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