

The Changes of Approach on Brand Identity Development in Langkawi Island, Malaysia

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Abstract: The topic of destination branding is discussed widely by scholars since the 90s. It was debated that understanding the process of image making through a brand building is crucial in positioning the destination competitively. Arguably, the process of brand development for a destination is generally discussed from the user point of view, namely the visitor or tourist. However, little was understood as to how the image making and later the branding of destination are projected by the stakeholders and the extent of their involvement in the process. Drawing on a qualitative case study of the brand identity development efforts of Langkawi Island, Malaysia over the last 35 years (1980-2015), this paper illustrates the brand building process from the supply side and its complexity when dealing with multiple key stakeholder groups. The data gathered were from multiple sources of evidence such as in-depth interviews and official reports and documents reviews. To explain how the branding campaign was developed and the involvement of the stakeholders in the brand identity development, a total of 35 participants were interviewed representing representatives from Destination Management Organization (DMO) in Langkawi Island, tourism operators, village headmen, non-government organization (NGOs) and industry associations, branding agency and academic consultant. The data were analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis and were organized into various themes and categories. The findings reveal an understanding on the brand identity development related to (1) the multiplicity of identities expressed by the stakeholders, (2) different level of participation among the stakeholders in the branding process and (3) the important role of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). This study offers new insights into the concept of multiple identities to consider by the brand authority which could evolve over a period of time based on changing market requirements

Key words: Destination branding • Brand identity • Langkawi Island • Stakeholders • Destination management organization (DMO)

INTRODUCTION

Many countries, regions and localities are increasingly investing a large amount of money to brand themselves as attractive places for tourism, investment and place of residency. Destinations have spent more on branding and marketing efforts through market research and creative aspects of branding such as logo designs and taglines [1]. Using the place name itself is not good enough to appeal visitors or tourists and to be differentiated [2]. As a result, many places particularly tourism destinations have resorted to developing catchy slogans or taglines to effectively position themselves in the crowded tourism market.

Destination brand is a powerful marketing tool. As suggested in the handbook on tourism destination branding, a brand can assist destinations in competing more effectively for visitors and projecting and transforming a destination overall image [3]. In the destination branding literature, the concept of brand image which is the way a destination is perceived by visitors is widely discussed [4]. However, little is understood the way the internal stakeholders perceive the brand and what are their needs to make the brand successful [5]. The involvement of internal stakeholders in the branding process is critical as their role to deliver and reinforce the brand message to the visitors and to make the brand strategy successful [6].

Different tourism slogans or taglines are applied in destination branding to capture the brand essence of a brand [7]. For example, New Zealand is recognized as among the successful destinations which has been able to position itself as an attractive tourism destinations based on its 100% Pure New Zealand brand [8]. Many other countries also are following suits such as Singapore with Your Singapore (previously it was Uniquely Singapore), Malaysia with its Malaysia Truly Asia and India with its Incredible India slogan hoping to get recognized by visitors. The current practice of branding strategy indicates that the brand building process is limited to logo design and creative logo design which is being criticized in the literature [9]. Branding a place or destination is a complicated process and it should go beyond the creative aspect of branding itself.

Drawing from the case study of Langkawi Island, Malaysia, this paper illustrates the brand building process of the island which has taken place since 2013 with its new branding campaign of Naturally Langkawi. It also describes the evolving of branding strategy as experienced by Langkawi since 1980 until 2015. This paper also argues for a dynamic of place brands based on the identity-based approach as discussed by [9]. The authors argue that in order to better understand the concept of place brands, brand authority need to fully understand the complexity of identity creation of a place which is based on constant dialogue and interaction among internal stakeholders. research scholars.

The Complexity of Destination Branding: Despite the important of branding to a destination, the process of building a brand is very complicated [2]. There are many challenges faced by destination marketers in developing a destination brand. Therefore, it is important for destination marketers to understand the various components of destination brand and its process in order to formulate destination branding strategies effectively. At the same time, marketers also need to understand the concept of tourism destination which also complex in nature [10]. A destination is managed by different stakeholders such as public and private organizations and host community where the interaction between visitors and these stakeholders create meaningful experiences [10]. In short, visitors consume and experience all sort of products and services rendered by different individual industry players. Therefore, in the context of destination brand building, marketers really need to understand the involvement of these various stakeholders and the difficulties in getting their cooperation to make the brand successful.

The Concept of Brand Identity: Destination brand identity as described in the literature is a problematic concept. In the literature, the concept of brand identity and destination identity are used interchangeably [11]. There are many terms discussed in the literature such as destination identity, destination brand identity or place identity. The terms used in the literature are confusing and there is no single definition of destination brand identity being accepted yet by the scholars. In the context of places or destinations, [12] explain that identities are constructed through historical, political, religious and cultural discourse; through local knowledge and influenced by power struggles. Identities are consists of unique characteristics or set of meanings that exist in a place and its culture at a given point of time which are subject to change and might include fragmented identities. These set of meanings or ‘the true identity of place’ should be the essence of destination brand attributes and destination projected images. In order to create destination uniqueness, the product offerings must be anchored by the true identity of the place or else the destination could be the same destination like any other destinations.

There is no single definition of brand identity agreed in business and management literature but scholars tend to accept that brand identity development is a concept best described from the supply perspective [13]. Rather than viewing the from the visitors’ perspective, a destination itself should define its brand and the contents. The purpose of having an identity is for a destination to identify and position itself or its products and services to the tourists [14]. Arguably, the source of the destination identity or desired image is relied upon the destination stakeholders [14]. Brand identity refers to self-image desired by the marketers, whereas brand image is the actual image held by consumers [15]. In short, brand identity for a destination communicates about how a destination to be perceived as what the brand owners (i.e. DMOs, host community, tourism operators) (supply side) wish for. Destination identity consists of many elements. For example, [16] describe food as one of the important attributes of destination identity. Destination identity also can be viewed from the historical perspective in particularly in looking back at the ancestors, heritage and nostalgia [17]. History and culture are among the powerful elements of destination brand. [17] argue that myths and legends create an interesting story that enriches tourists’ experience.

Stakeholders’ Involvement in Destination Brand Identity Development: In the previous studies on destination

brand, many scholars indicate that stakeholders' involvements in the branding process are important to develop an effective brand [18]. For example [18] points out that the issue of destination branding needs to be addressed from a different perspective namely among stakeholders involvement and not only visitors to the destination. They have identified major stakeholders as the local people and entrepreneurs interests of that particular destination. Based on their study of Castilla-La Mancha (CLM), a tourism destination in Spain, Garcia et al. developed a destination branding model measuring the success of the brands based on similarities and differences among the different stakeholders. The model argued that for a brand to be successful, destination marketers have to engage participation and cooperation both from residents and tourism operators in creating values for the visitors.

[19] also argues that stakeholders' participation and consultation in the brand building process are critical in order to deliver the brand promises to the visitors. It is suggested that destination marketers to strongly involve and to directly involve the stakeholders in the branding process. However, not many studies clearly address to what extent the involvement of the various stakeholder groups in the branding process is observed. At the same time, there is little mention how to effectively engage with the key stakeholders as suggested by the key informants from the key.

In the context of destination branding, it is important to determine who are the stakeholders involved in the branding process. [18] for example, investigate the effectiveness of brand from the interest of local people and entrepreneurs and propose a model to measure the success of branding strategy of one destination in Spain. Their finding highlights that DMOs need to focus on educating the local community about the brand and to engage with tourism operators in the process of brand building.

The Role of DMOs: Destination Marketing Organizations or Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are recognized as the central agency that coordinates diverse stakeholders especially in the brand building activity [20]. DMOs or commonly known as convention and visitor bureaus (CVBs) as mostly operate in the urban areas are in charge of being coordination efforts to attract potential visitors (mostly tourists from business and leisure) to their destination area and to improve the economic benefits of the community [21]. Historically, the role of DMO is limited to destination marketing activities. In the current practice, the role of DMO is moving beyond

marketing and functioning as destination management organization due to the evolving of the tourism industry which has become more competitive.

Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) are recognised as one of the vehicles that responsible for developing and marketing tourism destination. In order to manage tourism successfully, many destinations in the world establish DMO to provide leadership in managing destination effectively [22]. The roles of the DMO are multiples ranging from enhancing the quality of life of destination residents, providing memorable experience to the visitors to managing destination effectively. DMOs typically operates by getting funding from the government and public sector and being independently managed and not profit oriented organizations, however, there are some which operate as one of the government agencies and local councils.

In the branding literature, the role of DMOs is widely discussed. For example, [23] examines the function of DMOs in coordinating various stakeholders or from the supply side perspective of destination branding in Edinburg, Scotland. In Bregoli's study, the coordination of stakeholders working within the destination is defined as multiple involvements of different organizations in decision making process which is categorised under destination governance. The research finding indicated that the involvement of stakeholders in the brand building process is mixed: some are committed towards the brand, others are less interested and even some of them have no idea what the brand is. As a result, the research suggested that DMOs to organize events or workshops to educate tourism operators about the brand and to plan more activities that provide opportunities for them to learn more about the brand.

The Background of the Study: Langkawi Island, Malaysia: Tourism in Langkawi contributes RM4.6 billion in terms of total tourism receipts in the year 2013 [24]. In the year 2015, international tourists spent RM3.2 billion with a total number of 1 021 498 number of tourist arrivals [25]. Local visitors typically from the mainland Malaysia visit Langkawi during school holidays and multiple public holidays for a short three days two night trip. Local visitors prefer for duty-free shopping and enjoy cable car ride. For international visitors, they will go for nature-based activities such as bird watching, mangrove tours and island hopping. Currently, Langkawi Island, one of the iconic tourism destinations in Malaysia is embarking on Naturally Langkawi branding campaign to position the island as a top ten island destinations in the world. The government has allocated a large amount of

budget for achieving the objective. Following the release of Langkawi Tourism Blueprint 2011-2015 in the year 2011, the island was set to achieve its ambition as one of the global island destination. In the blueprint which has cost the government millions of dollars, one of the recommendations is for the island to work on its branding and marketing which is still lacking. In the blueprint, Langkawi was described as a destination which is lack of strong branding and marketing specific campaign with inconsistent messaging of what the island stands for and therefore offer little differentiation. Based on this recommendation, the government has decided to reposition the island with a new branding campaign. The government appointed LADA to coordinate the new branding campaign and at the same time exercised an open tender for potential advertising companies to develop a proposal for Langkawi's positioning. In the year 2013, one year after the release of the blueprint, Langkawi launched its new official positioning strategy based on the branding campaign known as "Naturally Langkawi". This paper analyzes the process that had resulted in this particular campaign and explains the previous positioning of the Langkawi prior to the commencement of this new branding campaign for the last 25 years. This new campaign also serves an exemplary case study to test a theory of place branding in called for reexamination of the roles of both stakeholders and brand authority in the branding process[9] using identity-based branding approach.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As mentioned in the previous section, the purpose of the study is to get the views from the multiple stakeholders towards the brand identity development and branding campaign of Langkawi over a period of 35 years (1980-2015). The study also investigates destination brand identity as perceived by the stakeholders as well as their involvement in the brand building exercise. To achieve the objectives, it was decided to conduct in-depth interviews with 38 stakeholders classified into six different groups: (1) DMO officials, (2) advertising agency, (3) Interests NGOs and industry association, (4) tourism operators (attraction sites, hotel operators), (5) local resident leaders and (6) academic consultant/tourism professor. All participants were selected based on their experience, knowledge and their roles in the evolving brand identity of Langkawi Island over a period of 35 years (1980-2015).

To explain how Langkawi identity has evolved from the 80s until 2015 and the involvement of stakeholders in

the branding process, a series of questions were addressed to the participants including: 1) what the participants think Langkawi in the 80s, 90s and 20s in terms of the island's progress towards being a tourist destination 2) efforts taken by the authority to position the island over that period of time, 3) their involvement, roles and responsibilities towards the brand identity development and 4) how the authority should position the island effectively to attract more tourists to the island. These questions were asked of most of the respondents to get the views on the way the authority develop a brand and the stakeholder's investment in the brand building activities.

The field work started over the month of November 2014- April 2015. Most of the interviews were tape recorded after obtaining permission from the participants. The venues of the interviews were decided by the participants and most of the interview session took place either in a hotel lobby or a restaurant. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants were free to talk in Malay or English and the majority of them used mix between Malay and English. The researcher had to translate all interviews into English. All the interview data were analyzed using steps suggested by [26] for a general data analysis process in qualitative research. The steps are systematic process for qualitative data analysis involving six steps of organizing the data for the analysis, reading the transcripts repeatedly, coding the data, identifying related themes and interpreting the meaning of themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on thematic data analysis, there are three important themes that emerge from the data. The following are the themes identified from the evolving process of Langkawi brand identity development efforts as viewed by the key informant of the stakeholder groups:

- Multiplicity of brand identities strategy
- The important roles of effective leadership
- The increase participation of NGOs and industry associations

Multiplicity of Brand Identities: The majority of the respondents expressed multiple brand identities projected by the authority since the island was developed from the 80s until 2015. Many suggested that the island's identity was significantly evolved when the government decided to declare Langkawi as a duty-free port island in the year 1987. At the same time, the government under the former

Prime Minister Mahathir (1980-2003) took the lead by organizing series of international events hoping to attract more international visitors and to promote the island's tourism at the international level. A president of taxi association of Langkawi (RP 4) explained the government's intention to declare the island as duty-free island in the year 1987:

Tun Mahathir, the former PM declared Langkawi as a duty-free island on 1st July 1987. That was the first stage of Langkawi branding, to promote as a duty-free island and to attract local market at the beginning. Langkawi changed immediately after it had been declared as a duty free island, meaning the government wanted to develop the island as international tourism destination. . (RP4-President of Langkawi Taxi Owner Association)

A CEO of LADA (RP 5) also inclined to believe that Langkawi needs to diversify its product preferences in order to attract a different type of target markets. The CEO opined that:

It is quite difficult and if you look at the products preferences, people go for nature such as geopark area, but you see, one of our preferred product, it's still our cable car and then second like Underwater World, meaning other than natural attractions, the other iconic products would also be very important, otherwise Langkawi can be very boring, tourist just come and look at the nature and then they go back and won't return.

This study provides evidence that destination attributes such as history, economic, natural attraction and events program represented identities of Langkawi which contribute to the island's popularity. The government efforts to pursue multiple brand identities approach since the 80s apparently has proven successful at least in sustaining domestic markets and stimulating the arrival of international tourists.

The Important Roles of Destination Management Organization (DMO): Various respondents made comments that Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) as the main government destination management organization (DMO) which is responsible for the island positioning as a tourist destination. According to a former Prime Minister (RP34), who also happen to be the LADA's advisor, LADA's role is critical developing the identity of Langkawi since it represents the federal

government in working with the state level. A former Prime Minister (RP36) mentioned that:

LADA was formed because Langkawi belong to Kedah (state), but the development can only be done by the federal government, Kedah(state) has no money, so we formed LADA, which is joint development authority chaired by the Chief Minister of Kedah and the minister of finance basically and of course we need to have the administration for the development of Langkawi in the form of LADA.

The success of LADA in developing the island as a tourism destination depends on its CEO or those who lead the agency. Again as stated by a former Prime Minister:

Langkawi developed based on the ideas of the CEO, some CEO I afraid seems to want to down grade Langkawi, get in the way of any development, very difficult to get permissions, a lot of official bureaucratic procedures, practice the procedures and all that, when you get a good CEO, Langkawi developed, when you get the bad CEO, who is not interested, who want to live in KL, then of course Langkawi growth was slowed down or even reverse.

In the year 2011, the government has released Langkawi Tourism Blueprint 2011-2015, a very important tourism plan to position Langkawi as a regional tourism destination and among the top ten ecotourism destinations in the world. The blueprint has cost the government millions including the initiative to improve Langkawi's branding and marketing strategy. According to a CEO of advertising company (RP34), LADA's roles are important to coordinate branding efforts and to communicate the brand.

LADA is a DMO (Destination Management Organization) so they managed the (Advertisement) agency. We worked closely with LADA. Over that period of time (2012-2015), we developed quite a number of communications and proposals for LADA particularly putting up series of ads, the public relation (PR) campaign, we assist them in developing the websites, developing a lot of marketing kits for them to sell the destination.

A LADA CEO (RP33) also indicated that LADA was responsible for developing a Langkawi commercial brand. Referring to the recent Naturally Branding campaign, the CEO explained:

I always believe that branding is very important; to get people to be addicted with the brand, previously, there were many slogans so people said which is the one? Now we come out with the Naturally Langkawi...We consider the impact of the branding, commercial branding is important. ...The commercial branding is Naturally Langkawi.

The role of LADA is not limited to island's marketing and branding but also other important roles prescribed by the government as explained by the same respondent:

We have our key performance indicators (KPIs) set by the government. One is the total tourist's arrivals, second, the investment come in and the participation from the private sector in developing Langkawi and third, job creation about 4, 200 additional jobs to be created within these last few years (2011-2015).

The Increase Participation of NGOs and Industry Associations: In the context of Langkawi Island, the involvement of non-government organizations (NGOs) and industry association in the branding campaign has been recognised by LADA as well as the island community at large. Most of the tourism operators actively participate in the NGOs by being a member and join various NGOs activities to protect the island's natural environment. One respondent, a president of taxi association (RP 4) claimed that the government agencies were ineffective in their jobs to develop and maintain the island as a tourism destination. As a result, some individuals took the initiatives to form an NGO to raise their concerns to the authorities.

All these failures by the authorities have urged certain individuals to form an NGO to monitor and try to solve the issues. In Langkawi, NGOs play their part to enhance Langkawi's image and reputation. Unfortunately, the enforcement agencies are not playing their part.

A five-star hotel operator (RP15) also took the initiative to form an industry association and worked closely with other NGOs to communicate and educate the public about the Langkawi Global Geopark brand, a status received by Langkawi from the UNESCO in the year 2007:

...I feel private sector must play a part, that's why we have started the Langkawi, Business Association

to help the government. Myself and my friend from another company, together with the Malaysia Association of Hotel (MAH) and the Rotary Club, we bring students to go and see the Geopark area, local students in Langkawi and also for outsiders, we do the same thing, to come and see and to learn about Geopark. We planned a number of field trips, here we do about 30 to 40 schools a year, no costs to the students and we collectively bear the costs to fund the programs.

From the authority side, working with NGOs and industry associations is important. According to one of the LADA officials (RP 19), there was informal engagement with the groups for meeting and consultation.

We still work with NGOs and we have platforms that we always meet and talk. Not formal engagement though. There are two groups of NGOs that we formally meet which are the consultative committee and then conservation focus groups. We ask these NGOs to sit down with us and we consult them.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explain the evolving brand identity of Langkawi Island through the perceptions of various stakeholders groups over a period of 35 years (1980-2015). Results revealed that identity is dynamic and consistently evolved to accommodate the changing markets in terms of product preferences. In the case of Langkawi Island, apparently the government has increasingly projected multiple brand identities to attract a different type of markets. The government's policy especially during the time of Dr Mahathir Mohammad (1981-2003) as a prime minister of Malaysia in diversifying the tourism products has contributed to the growth of the island's tourism industry. As a result, Langkawi is being projected as a multi-image destination; a legendary island, duty-free island, special events, geopark destination and nature-based attractions. Projecting various and diverse tourism images is expected due to the complexity of tourism destination where it is managed by different stakeholders with various interests and promotional objectives [27]. Different projected images are not of great concern if such images are managed and controlled by the DMO and they reflect the reality of the destination.

Over the last 35 years, many tourism products were developed to cater to growing number of visitors to the island both from the local and international markets. In the

early 80s, the island was projected as myths and legends tourist destination in addition to other attractions such as beautiful beaches and other natural attractions especially to attract the local markets. When the years progressed, the government decided to declare the island as a duty-free port in the year 1987 to facilitate tourism fast growth development and to attract international visitors. With the improvement of tourism facilities and infrastructures, the island was further developed with increasing number of international events and special meetings to position Langkawi as an international tourism destination.

Different stakeholders group have multiple views towards the brand identity and therefore it is difficult to achieve a single identity or clear destination image. In tourism, many suppliers are involved in providing different products and services such as accommodation, food and beverage, tourist attractions which include manmade and natural attractions. As a result, it is very challenging to define a brand identity where the products are beyond the control of brand authority. As pointed by [27], multiple projected images or identities are allowed as long as those images reflect with the destination reality. Such multiple images or identities also may reflect various representation of images perceived by local and visitors [28]. Instead, brand authority needs to manage the multiple views among the stakeholders by engaging them with dialogue or forum. Many tourism stakeholders in the island believed that such approach is necessary to build a successful brand. There are many advantages in pursuing the multiplicity of projected brand identities. For example, [29] argued that such multiplicity or diversity of the destination should be regarded as more appealing and truly differentiated brands to accommodate different needs and interests of the tourists as well various interpretations by the local stakeholders.

This case study of Langkawi provides evidence that the role of NGOs and industry associations in the branding process are becoming more relevant. Using NGOs and associations as a platform, the voice of the community has become stronger. As a result, the authority needs to seriously consider the views and opinion of these particular groups as they might represent the voice of the majority. Practically speaking, evidence in this case study shows that through the expressions of local community values with their participation in various NGOs and association could form another platform for the authority to effectively engage with the internal stakeholders.

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