An Investigation On How Brand Image Influences Tourist Destination And Customer Satisfaction: A Case Of The Tourism Sector

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Abstract—Purpose-The purpose of the research was to explore how branding in the tourism sector influences tourist destination and customer satisfaction. **Design/methodology/approach-**A qualitative narrative method was used in the research. Secondary sources were used as data collection techniques. Journals, books, peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2019, and written in the English language were used to answer the research questions. **Findings-**The results indicate that branding in the tourism sector has significant positive impacts on tourism destinations through customer behavior and the quality of services provided. Branding ensures that the needs and expectations of tourists are met, which enhances their decisions to choose the best accommodation and improves their loyalty towards the tourism sector. **Originality/value-**The impacts of branding on tourism destination and customer satisfaction was investigated in the context of the tourism sector. Implications are presented for the tourism sector to focus on implementing branding for improved tourism destinations and to meet customer satisfaction.

Index Terms— Branding, Brand Image, Tourism Destination, Customer Satisfaction.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry around the world has significantly developed where producers and consumers are widely spread. The tourism industry is among the leading contributors to various countries (Lahap, Ramli, Said, Radzi, & Zain, 2016). The industry has emerged as an essential sector that strengthens the business economy. Lahap, Said, Rose, Sumarjan, and Mohi (2014) asserted that in Malaysia, tourism industry, especially the hotel sector has emerged as an essential subsection that has contributed to the significant transformation and economic expansion in the country. Tourism Malaysia (2014) presented economic expansion in 2013 due to the transformation of the hotel industry in which nearly 26 million tourists visited the country. There was an increase of 7.3% in the tourism revenues from MYR 60.6 million to MYR 65.4 billion (Tourism Malaysia, 2014). Lahap et al. (2016) explained that due to such significant contributions, the tourism sector in Malaysia has grown to the extent that promotes the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the country. Malaysia is ranked by the United Nations World Tourism Organization as the among the best ten tourist destinations with a total of 2, 724 hotels and 195, 445 hotel rooms that accommodate the inflow of international tourists and to cater to the domestic consumption (Lahap et al., 2016). Lahap et al. (2016) established that the nature of the tourism sector in achieving service excellence motivates tourism operators to seek an innovative approach that would assist them in establishing a secure positive experience for the tourists and other revelers. As a consequence, tourism operators or employees have to stay abreast of the existing and future needs of the customers to advance in their operations and meet all the wants and needs of their guests. Innovation and creativity are significant factors to assist the tourism sector in advancing the business. Lahap, O'Mahony, and Dalrymple (2014) pointed out that Staying adhered to the needs is associated with creativity and maintaining innovation, which is a vital element in maintaining a competitive position in the industry. Subsequently, tourism operators have a pivotal responsibility to explore unique and distinctive approaches they can use to meet and exceed the expectations of their guests (Lahap et al., 2016). Thus, the purpose of the research was to explore how branding in the tourism sector influences tourist destination and customer satisfaction.

1.1 Problem Statement

According to Shafaei and Mohamed (2017), Malaysia is aiming to become the most popular tourist destination worldwide owing to the Islamic environment in the country. As such, Malaysia is attempting to establish a halal hub for financial services and financial products to Islamic guests worldwide. While Malaysia has the potential to advance the Islamic tourist destination and its ability to promote the growth of hospitality industry in terms of unique culture, arts, and heritage, the strategic efforts towards branding or brand image have rarely been studied. A study by Salman and Hasim (2012) that studied Malaysia's Arab tourists revealed that a minimal number of tourists were aware of the brand image of Malaysia as the Islamic region. The study confirmed that due to a lack of branding efforts in Malaysia as an Islamic tourist destination, tourists from the Middle East feel that the Islamic experience in the country is not satisfying. Besides, two previous studies found that the Islamic environment in Malaysia was limited to halal hospitality and halal food, especially in the hotel sector (Samori & Rahman, 2013; Sripraset, Chainin, & Rahman, 2014). The study by Sripraset et al. (2014) showed that there were poor Islamic experiences in the hotels because of established rules and tourist behaviors, which are unacceptable or outlawed by Islam. Thus, there was a need to determine how branding impacts the ability to become a tourist destination and how it impacts customer satisfaction.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions that guided the study were:
i. How does brand image shape the tourist destinations in the tourism sector?
ii. What are the impacts of brand image on customer satisfaction in the tourism sector?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Dealers have found the importance of branding in promoting the delivery of services and goods to customers. Almeyda-Ibáñez and George (2017) pointed out that developing, maintaining, and protecting brands is one of the significant

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business strategies in tourism that promotes customer satisfaction. Through the branding process, the tourism sector has adopted branding practices as the best storage market their operations to potential guests. Lahap et al. (2016) pointed out that using brand images and maintaining brand loyalty plays a significant role in promoting tourist destinations. Branding is the key factor that most tourists consider and comply with when choosing their accommodation. As such, hotel operators in the tourism sector take the critical step to plan, develop, formula, and make decisions on improving the branding image that would allow the tourism sector to compete with their rivalries in the long run (Lahap et al., 2016). In this section of the study, extensive literature research was performed to explore whet other researchers have found on branding in the tourism sector. Scholarly articles that relate to the topic in the study are reviewed. Relevant studies are obtained from reliable databases like Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Emerald. Search terms are used to find reliable studies, and they are branding, brand image, brand loyalty, the tourism sector, tourist destination, branding and customer satisfaction, hotel industry, and branding in the tourism sector. The section of the study is structured in terms of themed subsections consisting of brand image, customer satisfaction, branding and tourist destination, and brand image and customer satisfaction.

2.1. Brand Image

Dhillon (2013) explained that in the tourism sector, especially in hotels, brand image is an essential influential factor because of its exceptionality like inseparability, tangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, and perishability. The brand image encourages customer's decisions to select their tourism destination. Saleem and Raja (2014) asserted that brand image shapes customers' decisions on accommodation. When the guests find the brand name, they can suddenly consider the features of the brand and choose the images that impress them. Since guests in the tourism sector have different experiences, expressions, and contacts with the hotel, they have varying image expectations that hotel operators consider. Fung So, King, Sparks, and Wang (2013) explained that brand image in any service organization like the tourism sector is diverse and tourism or hotel operators develop a solid brand image, which has the potential to improve organizational esteem, which in turn attracts more customers. Through such branding, the tourism sector is promoting its financial performance, the degree to achieve profitability, average pricing increased revenue generation, and provide a better occupancy. Maroofi, Nazaripour, and Maaznezhad (2012) established that the brand image is beneficial to the tourism sector because it assists in realization of customer's personality traits and their attributes, which guide hotel operators to make organizational decisions to attract more guests. Brand image can be developed in a way to address the customers' needs. Lahap et al. (2016) discussed how the branding process or brand image allows hotel operators to translate their practices into what guests could benefit by taking into considerations personality traits and attributes of their customers. Similarly, Hur, Ahn, and Kim (2011) explained that brand image is designed based on customers'

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expectations through direct contact with customers, promotion, public relations, and promotions. Martins (2015) asserted that tourist imagery with unique dimensions influences the travel decision making of tourists and their behaviors in choosing the best destination. The perceived tourist image influences their satisfaction levels and allows tourist to make good decisions on destination selection. The brand image is mainly used to succeed in the huge competition facing the tourism industry. Latif et al. (2016) discussed that following increased competition facing the tourism industry brand image plays a crucial role in shaping customers' mind to develop a positive its the services and goods provided. Brand image, as the conceptual framework, assists the tourism sector in exploring their services for continued growth and in succeeding in the competitive environment. Also, Latif et al. (2015) asserted that due to huge competition, the tourism sector uses efficient and effective marketing strategies that support the imagination of tourism services and goods in the modern business world. Through this branding and tourist imagery, tourists build a strong relationship with the organization. Additionally, Latif et al. (2016) pointed out that a strong brand image promotes friendliness of tourists and hotel employees, convenience, and quality services in the reservation systems. Developing such friendship and improved convenience in the reservation systems promotes tourist satisfaction.

2.2. Branding and Customer Satisfaction in the tourism sector

Customer satisfaction is the practice in which customers perceive their needs and expectations throughout the life cycle of product development are beet. Customer satisfaction is an essential aspect of creating business value and managing customer expectations (Usta, Berezina & Cobanoglu, 2014). Organizations take the responsibility to satisfy their customers by ensuring that the products and services provided align with market demands and expectations. Customer satisfaction has been a crucial business belief in the tourism sector. Amirreza, Mohammad, and Gilani (2013) established that Customer satisfaction is one of the essential antecedents that the tourism sector should achieve while providing services to their guest or customers. Achieving customer satisfaction is an important indicator of an organization towards the future generation of income and profitability (Amirreza et al., 2013). The main objective of service providers in the tourism sector is to put their priorities towards fulfilling the needs of their customers. According to Della Corte, Sciarelli, Cascella, and Del Gaudio (2015), the service providers in the tourism sector like in hotels prioritize customers' needs as a way to achieve tourist satisfaction. The providers develop strong brand images with a set of values and impressions to attract more tourists. Through such impressions, service providers focus on delivering high-quality services and products based on customers' needs. The need to fulfill customers' needs in the tourism sector is the key determinant of business success. Amirreza et al. (2013) pointed out customer satisfaction is the predictable aspect and a primary determinant of success in the tourism sector. Therefore, the tourism sector cannot compete with their business opponents without satisfying their tourist or customers. Further Amirreza et al. (2013) pointed out that analyzing customer satisfaction assist service providers in the tourism sector to assess their business strengths and weaknesses, as well as a flaw so that they can solve their problems as a way to meet customers' expectations.

Similarly, customer satisfaction is met in the tourism sector when the customer's needs are met or when services delivered exceed customer expectations. According to Torres and Kline (2013), the tourism sector focuses on providing products and services that meet or exceed customer expectations. Prioritizing customer needs and expectations facilitates customer satisfaction, which reflects the benefits of brand image in the tourism sector. Usta et al. (2014) cited that through brand, the tourism sector meets customer satisfaction by ensuring that the brand image reflects the needs and expectations of their potential tourists. The branding thus assists the tourism sector to create value for their customers, which is essential towards promoting customer loyalty and achievement of greater. Destination branding is used as a marketing strategy that assists stakeholders in the tourism industry to improve their services for customer satisfaction. According to Zenker and Martin (2011), destination branding assists the tourism sector to expend their brand experiences based on customers' expectations. The stakeholders from the tourism sector take up the branding initiatives in their destinations, taking into considerations emotional impressions and feelings of customers about the services provided. Zenker and Martin (2011) stated that the motive of destination branding is to lure more customers in the tourism sector by delivering relevant products and services that satisfy customers' needs and expectations. Also, Zafiropoulos, K., Vrana, and Antoniadis (2015) viewed destination branding as a multidimensional strategy that allows the tourism sector to improve their performance and meet customer satisfaction. Destination branding marketers in the tourism sector embrace the idea to improve customer satisfaction by ensuring that the brand images win the trust of their customers and improve the development of good relationships. Chatzigeorgiou and Christou (2016) discussed that the destination branding markers in the tourism sector improve the brand images based on customer satisfaction with past outcomes. Improving the brand image leads to a continuous relationship between the tourists and the tourism industry. Using such a strategy increases tourists' positive encounters and ability to reselect a similar tourism destination, and this promotes profitability due to customer retention.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Method and Design

A qualitative research method was the selected methodology for the proposed research. Aspers and Corte (2019) stated that when using qualitative research methodology, exploring the perceptions of people or their lived experiences with the specific social problem is the focus. The researcher seeks to uncover what other people perceive concerning the problem in question. Sutton and Austin (2015) explained that a qualitative method allows the researchers to access to peoples' feelings and thoughts, which enable in providing better insights of the problem and find the actual meaning from the perceptions of those ascribed to the experience. Therefore, selecting a qualitative method for the research was helpful in exploring the perceptions of different scholars about the branding and how it influences tourist destination and customer satisfaction in the tourism sector. Using a qualitative method helped to uncover the perceptions and thoughts of other scholars to get the real meaning about branding or brand image in their tourism sector. Additionally, using a qualitative method was useful in collecting detailed information, which helped in acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the topic of interest. Qualitative research helped in refining the existing literature to get appropriate information to answer the research questions. An integrative or narrative literature review was used in the research. According to Jesson (2011), narrative literature focuses on summarizing the existing body of literature related to the topic of interest to create new themes that baste describe the study questions. Using a narrative review provides better insights into the topic as perceived by other scholars. As such, a narrative literature review was used in the study to understand what other researchers perceived on the impacts of branding in the tourism sector. Also, a narrative review was used to explore and elaborate on the existing literature to expand on what is already known and what is not know about the branding in the tourism sector. The existing literature was explored and summarized to find new themes that best describe the research questions. Also, using the narrative review provided a comprehensive overview, which helped in refining the research questions and determine the gaps in the research.

3.2. Data Collection

Secondary sources were the primary techniques used for data collection process. The existing documents, including peer-reviewed articles, books, journals, and other scholarly materials, were used to collect detailed information related to the topic in question. A document review was done to obtain secondary data that were used to answer the research question. Johnson (2017) pointed out that document review is used in qualitative research to collect information from conference proceedings, journals, reports, dissertations, and academic reports to expound on what scholars have found on the similar topic. Thus, reviewing the existing articles helped in expounding the existing literature and elaborating on what other scholars have found on the topic. During the data collection process, search database like EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Web of Science, Emerald, and ScienceDirect was used to retrieve relevant articles. Like in the literature review section, similar search terms were used to retrieve useful articles. Selection criteria were used during the data collection process. Only articles published from 2010 to 2019 were eligible for qualitative analysis. Also, articles written in the English language and focused on branding in the tourism sector were included. However, articles older than 2010, written in a language other than English, and did not discuss branding in the tourism sector were excluded.

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is the most appropriate data analysis method to use in the research. Thematic analysis is used in a qualitative approach to identify, analyze and explain, and report appropriate theories or themes found within a given set of data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The method focuses on identifying similarities and differences between the data set and assigning preliminary codes to similar phrases. Using codes help in grouping similar concepts, which are used to generate themes (Nowell et al., 2017). In the present research, thematic analysis was the approptate data analysis method used to analyze the data set obtained from existing articles. Similar phrases or concepts were identified from the collected data, which were used to generate new themes that best described the research questions. Similarly, thematic analysis was acknowledged as the best data analysis method

to compare the information across different studies the interview transcripts based on what other scholars have on the topic of interest. Similar phrases obtained from the articles were grouped together and assigned preliminary codes. The coding process was useful in determining the final themes across different interviews conducted. The identified themes were reviewed based on the research questions, and were used in discussing the problem this present study aimed to address. Each research question was assigned appropriate themes as discussed in the subsection section of the research.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section of the research, the study findings obtained after data analysis process are presented. The findings are presented based on themes identified for each of the research questions. Also, the results are discussed in alignment with the information in the existing body of literature. The research findings are discussed by comparing with the perceptions of other scholars to provide a better understanding of the topic in the question.

4.1. Research Question One

Research question one of the research determined the How brand image shapes tourist destination in the tourism sector. The existing literature was reviewed to find suitable themes that best describe the research question. The key themes identified were: branding and customer behavior and quality of services.

4.1.1. Branding and Customer Behavior

Theme of branding and customer behavior entails the impacts of branding in shaping the behaviors of tourists in choosing their tourism destination. The research found that branding tourism destination attracts the attention of guests, which make them choose specific sector due to the brand images on the services provided (Hur et al., 2011). The tourism sector maintains brand dedication of its customers to emulate the positive branding adopted by successful sectors. The tourism image, especially in hotels is thus a crucial variable, which either negatively or positively impacts the marketing strategies of the organization itself (Hur et al., 2011). From the assumptions, brand image is an essential element to any organization, including the tourism sector due to the ability of branding to influence the perceptions of guests or customers towards organizations' services. Minsung et al. (2011) cited that brand image has significant impacts on the buying decisions and buying behaviors of customers. When customers are committed to the company's brand image, they actively cooperate and ignore the services or goods from the competitors, which in turn sustains the profitability of the company in the long run. Schulz and Omweri (2012) proposed that high-quality services are crucial to the tourism sector because it adds value and results in customers' retention and loyalty. The organization appreciates the usefulness of creating a strong image of products and services that would lead to increased profitability and customer loyalty. Besides, Mirzaee, Rad, and Molavi (2013) explained that despite satisfaction is crucial in the organization, it is not sufficient to maintain customers' loyalty. This implies that although hotel guests show satisfaction with the services they receive, they still keep deserting the organization because they believe they may get a better comfort or quality of services and better value

elsewhere. As a consequence, tourism operators focus on developing a corporate image to improve the quality of services to improve customers' satisfaction and customer loyalty (Mirzaee et al., 2013).

4.1.2. Quality of Services

Theme of quality of services entails the influence of branding on the services and products delivered to tourists. The study found that through branding, the tourism sector promotes the quality of services they deliver to tourists (Latif et al., 2016). Nam, Ekinci, and Whyatt (2011) discussed the main unique dimensions to achieve superior quality and improve staff behavior. Their study indicated two image dimensions, namely the attribute and holistic dimensions. The attribute dimensions involve the physical environment and facilities that influence the quality of services or products in the organization. Nam et al. (2011) asserted that in the tourism sector like in hotel industry, the operationalization of attribute dimension depends on the perceptions of customers about the location of a hotel, prices, physical facilities, the quality of goods and services provided in the hotel, interior design, and employee performance in the organization. Conversely, the holistic dimension of brand image is the mental imaginations of the goods and services provided (Lahap et al., 2016). It is the imaginary variable of hotel image, which encompasses the organization's total impression and customers' feeling to the services and goods resented. Latif, Islam, Noor, Mohamad, and Kongsompong (2016) asserted that the imagination is essential as it creates differential impacts on customers' response towards marketing of the brand in the tourism sector. Imagination is a framework of brand imaging in the tourism industry. As a result, it enhances the development of a positive brand image that allows customers to create a strong mindset about tourism services and activities. Lahap et al. (2016) asserted that the operationalization of this holistic image dimension of the hotel industry is the perceptions of customer towards external environment or appearances of the company, hotel's layout, and atmosphere, and reputation. The dimensions thus pose positive impacts in promoting the performance in the tourism sector. Latif et al. (2016) asserted that image dimension, in the context of brand image in the tourism sector, is a potential aspect to build a strong tourism brand, especially in the modern competitive market environment. Building strong imagery is associated with moderators and antecedents of the brand image that provide valuable implications that assist brand managers in the tourism sector to improve their delivery of services. Additionally, Latif et al. (2015) explained that creating a strong brand image is useful because it helps tourism brand managers to build customer relationship in the competitive marketing environment. Similarly, Latif et al. (2016) asserted that tourist imagery promotes brand affection, tourism management, corporate social responsibility, tourism advertisement, and increases brand awareness in the competitive marketplace.

4.2. Research Question Two

Research question two determined the impacts of branding on customer satisfaction in the tourism sector. Two themes emerged, and they were: Tourists' decisions and customer loyalty.

4.2.1. Tourists' Decisions

The theme of tourists' decisions shows that branding in the tourism sector promotes the delivery of services the meet the needs and exceed the expectations of customers. Lahap et al. (2016) asserted that the brand image improves the customer ability to choose their destinations and accommodation. Destination brand is also essential in promoting customer satisfaction. Singh and Mehraj (2018) asserted that the notion of adopting a destination branding is a strategy that helps the tourism sector to differentiate their destinations from competing destinations. The tourism sector can use unique logos and taglines of their companies that meet the expectations of many tourists. Also, Singh and Mehraj (2018) cited that through the company's logo and taglines, the tourism sector can develop products and provide services that satisfy many customers. Therefore, developing destination brand images enhances customer satisfaction and selection of the best-accommodating the tourism sector.

4.2.2. Customer Loyalty

Destination brand provides a link for destination organization, and the visitors and customers can develop loyalty to the destination because of the set of values and impression set by the organization. According to Martins (2016), destination branding profoundly influences loyalty development to respective destination. In the tourism sector, destination branding provides an attachment between the tourists and the organization. As such, the service providers in the tourism sector aim to build and maintain trust and tourist-brand relationship by ensuring that their services satisfy customer need or exceed their expectations, especially in the competitive markets. Chatzigeorgiou and Christou (2016) discussed that tourism destination marketers depend mainly on the brand image as a powerful tool to attract more tourists. The marketers choose alternative brand strategies from those used by their rivals to meet customer satisfaction. The branding satisfaction enhances tourist trust and development of brand loyalty, which, in turn, enhances tourists' positive encounters and visitation. Küçükaltan and Pirnar (2016) explained that tourists increase their trust with the destination brand, and this improves their ability to reselect the organization due to the products and quality of services they receive.

5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of the research was to explore how branding in the tourism sector influences tourist destination and customer satisfaction. Branding serves as the marketing strategy in the tourism sector, which impacts tourist destination by influencing the perceptions of tourists to choose specific destinations. The brand image targets the needs and expectations of customers, which in turn positively shapes customer retention. Also, branding allows the tourism sector to improve the quality of services. Branding provides useful information for brand managers in the tourism sector to improve their services. The research showed that branding influences customer satisfaction in the tourism sector. Service providers in the tourism sector put their efforts in branding their organization as a way to satisfy their customers, which is crucial in promoting the ability of guests to select accommodation. Additionally, tourist experience with destination brand promotes customer loyalty and their ability to predict the services offered by the destination management organization.

6 IMPLICATIONS

This current research confirms the impacts of branding in shaping tourist destination and customer satisfaction in the tourism sector. Branding in the tourism sector extends understanding of the use of brand images in tourism destination to attract and retain more tourists. Besides, the present research widens the scope of branding in promoting customer loyalty. The research implied that branding is an essential component to improve performance, quality of services, and meet the needs of customers in the tourism sector.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

The research identified the impacts of branding on tourism destination and customer satisfaction in the tourism sector. In particular, the research provided evidence of the saliency of branding in meeting the tourist's needs and expectations in the tourism sector. However, the research used secondary data. As such, extending this research with the use of other data collection methods like interviews and questionnaires is necessary. This will assist in replicating the study across research methodologies. Also, more research is needed to explore the perceptions of people to broaden understanding of this branding in different countries around the world.

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