

# Effect of information source on Sabah destination image and non-visitors' behavioral intention

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## Abstract

This study investigates the image of Sabah, Malaysia held by the non-visitors, and how the image was formed and its influence towards their travel intention to Sabah. This study uses both quantitative and qualitative instruments to evaluate destination image: a quantitative approach for the identification of common characteristics and attributes and a qualitative approach for determining holistic and psychological impressions associated with the image of Sabah. The view of three hundred four people who never visited Sabah was obtained via an innovative open-ended research instrument. Findings indicate that the most frequent sources that were used by non-visitors in searching information are through social media, friends and/or family who had visited Sabah before and mass media. Moreover, Sabah has acquired a strongly positive appreciation by the non-visitors when it comes to evaluating its tourism destination image.

## Keywords:

Destination image, non-visitors, information source, travel intention

## **1 Introduction**

Over the past six decades, tourism has experienced continuous development and expansion, becoming one of the leading and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world (United World Tourism Organization, 2015). But, unfortunately in today's interconnected world, tourism is progressively affected by forces and events in its external and internal environment, even for a minimal crisis, it still gives an impact on the destination whether the occasion happens in its region or not (Ritchie, 2004). For example, when the media publish the crisis events happened to public, it will influence people's judgment and may affect travelers' decision making (Bagans & Tapola, 2011) because, what the media has published will give a certain image to people about the destinations especially related to the safety and security (Hall, 2003).

The incident that happens in Malaysia have raised the safety and security concern among tourist, especially Sabah which has become infamously recognized for an abduction and terrorism, which has make Sabah an image from world class tourism destination (Sabah Tourism Board, 2012) into a risky dangerous destination in Malaysia especially at the east coast of Sabah (Yang, Sharif & Khoo-Lattimore, 2015). Due to these unfortunate incidents, many countries issued a travel ban against Sabah especially at the east coastal area, which include Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, 2015), New Zealand (Foreign Affairs & Trade, New Zeland, 2016), the United States (Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S., 2016), Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ireland, 2015), France (France Diplomatic, 2014), Switzerland (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2015), China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 2015), Hong Kong (Security Bureau, The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2016), Taiwan (Bureau of Consular Affairs, Republic of China, 2015), and Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, 2015). In line with these, Sabah has also been ranked from 'general' to 'high' terrorism threat level by British Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (The Star, 2016).

Therefore, for marketers to bring back the positive image among non-visitors there is need to investigate what is the source and which is the one that influenced the most their perception toward the destination image. The non-visitors' perspective is chosen because the view of those who visited Sabah especially repeaters may be positive since the mentioned ones are of the remote incident, while non-visitors may have a different perception. In addition, there are only few study that focuses on non-visitors (Cherifi, Smith & Stevenson, 2014) and most of the studies seem to focus on only a few countries as well as state and regions in the USA, neglecting most emerging tourist destination in developing countries (Sonmez & Sirkaya, 2002). Thus this study is carried out to fill the gap and investigate how the formation of destination image of non-visitors affects their intention to visit. Understanding the type of information source and destination image held by the non-visitors will help the stakeholders to use

the correct information source and design a better image when marketing the product (destination) to the tourists especially in attracting non-visitors.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Destination image**

The interpretation and study of the destination image have become the most popular topic related to the academic literature and made a huge contribution to the tourism industry (McCartney, Butler & Bennett, 2008; Orteg & Gonzalez, 2007; Pike, 2010). Kim and Richardson (2003) define destination image as a total impression, belief, ideas, expectations and feelings accumulated toward a place over time. A variety of terms used to describe the image held by non-visitors (Hughes & Allen, 2008). As Cherifi, Smith and Stevenson (2014) suggest that non-visitors are relatively new term and definition of non-visitors is important, as Pike (2008, p.206) define non-visitors as “those who would like to visit, but have not yet been able to for various reasons, as well those who chosen not to visit”. Other existing studies make comparisons between pre-and post-visit images (Jani & Hwang, 2011) and some explore images of potential visitors, defined as those likely to visit the destination (Kolb, 2006).

However, the destination image that tourists held towards a destination is quite subjective, because it is based and affected by the perception that each one has on the different destination that they visited or have heard (San Martin & Rodrigues, 2008) and been considered as a critical factor and driving force behind tourist behavior (Boo, Busser & Baloglu, 2009; McCartney, Butler & Bennett, 2008). Therefore, tourist will select the destination with the most favourable image, since the positive image promises the tourist a satisfying life experience (Leisen, 2001). Today, the destination is trying to gather as many positive image attributes as possible, causing an escalation of the global travel market (McCartney, 2008) which makes the stakeholder treats promoting and communicating the image of the destination as the mixture for leisure marketing (Sarma, 2007). However, since the tourism services are intangible, portraying an attractive and positive image to target tourist has become a greater challenge for the destination (McCartney, 2008).

Thus, it is important to understand how tourists gain information about a destination. This is because, the main stimuli variables or agents of image formation of tourist image are related to the number and variety of sources of information used (Baloglu & McCleary 1999; Gartner, 1993). Andereck and Caldwell (1993) stated that information sources are the processes of consulting multiple sources by the tourist in advance before making a decision. The role of the information source in the formation of the destination image has been explained by Tasci and Gartner (2007), where both of them claimed that image as a construction of a mental representation of a

destination on the basis of information cues delivered by the image formation agents and selected by a person.

For instance, Castanede, Firas and Rodriguez (2009) concluded that the type of information used actually influence the nature of the image held and the destination image being formed in tourist mind is worse when they used a combination of information sources to find information before visitations and may relay the information when choosing a destination (Hyde, 2008). Thus, in this study, the intention is being defined as a respondents' anticipation of a visitation to Sabah. As such the following hypotheses are postulated:

- H<sub>1</sub>: There is a positive relationship between information source and travel intention.
- H<sub>2</sub>: There is a positive relationship between information source and perceived destination image.
- H<sub>3</sub>: There is a positive relationship between perceived destination image and travel intention.
- H<sub>4</sub>: Perceived destination image will mediate the relationship between information source and travel intention.

### **3 Methodology**

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative instruments in order to evaluate destination image: a quantitative approach for the identification of common characteristics and attributes and a qualitative approach for determining holistic and psychological impressions associated with destination image.

#### **3.1 Instrument**

The instruments of this study are self-administered questionnaire used to identify the information source might influence the destination image and travel intention to Sabah. The types of information source used by the tourist in obtaining information were derived from a study by Frias, Rodriguez, Castaneda, Sabiote and Buhalis (2012) and were measured on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (Very Unimportant) to 5 (Very Important). The question on the destination image was derived from a study by Echtner and Ritchie (1991), which includes an open-ended question related to the holistic distributed image and items regarding cognitive image attributes were measured by a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Then, the question on the intention to visit was modified from the instruments study by Ajzen (1985), the items regarding the willingness of the non-visitors to visit Sabah were measured by a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Lastly, the question about the demographic profile of the respondent was derived from a study of Di Marino (2008).

### 3.2 Data collection

The target population was tourists who never visited Sabah before but know its existence. A screening question (“Have you heard about Sabah before?” and “Have you visited Sabah before?”) will be asked before the potential respondent can proceed. This study used non-probability sampling design which is convenience sampling technique.

### 3.3 Data analysis

First, a descriptive statistics analysis was run to determine frequency distribution. Second, correlation analysis was run to determine the variables have positive correlation with each other. Third, multiple regression analysis was run to explore the relationship between dependent variable and independent variable. Finally, mediating analysis was employed to quantify and test either destination image mediates the relationship between information source and travel intention of non-visitors.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Descriptive information

Table 1 reflects the information of the constructs. Respondents are famed to rate highly on Sabah perceived image and show that Sabah has moderately fine image among tourist who have never visited Sabah. The perceived attractiveness of Sabah as a vacation destination is based on the scenic and natural beauty. All the items under induced information sources, the most important information in influencing the respondent travel decision is Friends and/or family who had visited Sabah. Further, the intention to visit or choose Sabah as a vacation destination is relativity high. Respondents have agreed to fact that they would be likely to visit Sabah, intend to visit Sabah and express their wants to visit Sabah in the near future. Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis result.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis

Descriptive Information	Mean	SD
<i>Information Source - items<sup>a</sup></i>		
1. Friends and/or family had visited Sabah	2.888	1.971
2. Social Media	2.838	1.874
3. Mass Media	2.661	1.914
4. Online reviews/blogs	2.427	2.005
<i>Perceived Destination Image - items<sup>b</sup></i>		
1. Scenic and natural beauty	4.319	0.699
2. Beautiful beaches and island	4.302	0.783
3. Beautiful diving and snorkeling site	4.289	0.771
4. Restful and relaxing place	4.109	0.728

5. Traditional festival	4.095	0.74
<i>Travel Intention - item<sup>b</sup></i>		
1. I would like to go to Sabah	3.901	1.141
2. I plan to go to Sabah	3.753	1.111
3. I will go to Sabah	3.710	1.186

Note: Scale 1 - very unimportant, 5 - very important, <sup>b</sup>on scale 1 - totally disagree, 5 - totally agree

#### 4.2 Multiple regression analysis

Multiple regression with the enter mode was used to identify the relationship between the two variables and answering the research hypothesis number one, two and three. From Table 2, it could be interpreted that, 13.9% of the variation in travel intention and 1.5% of the variation in destination image can be explained by information source. 14.6 % of the variation in travel intention can be explained by destination image. Overall model was statistically significant (p-value  $\leq 0.05$ ). Table 2 shows the regression analysis result.

Table 2: Multiple regression analysis output

Model <sup>a</sup>	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	ANOVA sig	
1	.373	.139	.136	.000	
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.059	.120		25.546	.000
Information Source	.390	.056	.373	6.981	.000
Model <sup>b</sup>	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	ANOVA sig	
1	.124	.015	.012	.031	
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.750	.056		67.356	.000
Information Source	.056	.026	.124	2.169	.031
Model <sup>c</sup>	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	ANOVA sig	
1	.383	.146	.144	0.000	
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		

(Constant)	3.226	.091		35.378	.000
Destination Image	.166	.023	.383	7.197	.000

Note: Dependent Variable: <sup>a</sup>Travel Intention, <sup>b</sup>Destination Image, <sup>c</sup>Travel Intention

### 4.3 Mediating Analysis

Mediating analysis was conducted to quantify and test the pathway of influence X to Y, which one of those pathways consists of a sequence of casual steps which X affects a *mediator* variable M, which in turn casually influence Y. This indirect effect of X- the conjunction of the effect of X on M and the effect of M on Y- quantifies the degree to which M act as the “*mechanism*” by which X affect Y. An indirect effect that is different from zero by an inferential test is used to support (but by no means definitively establishes or proven) a claim of mediation of X’ effect on Y by M.

The results indicate that information Source was a significant predictor of Destination Image positively,  $\beta = .06$ , SE = .03,  $p < .05$ , and that Destination Image was a significant predictor of Travel Intention,  $\beta = 0.79$ , SE = 0.115,  $p < .05$ . These results support the mediating hypothesis. Other than that, the Information Source is also a significant predictor of Travel Intention,  $\beta = 0.35$ , SE = .05,  $p < .05$ . But when the Perceived Destination Image entered, approximately 25.4% of the variance in Travel Intention was accounted by the predictors ( $R^2 = .254$ ). Figure 1 below concludes the results of the analysis.

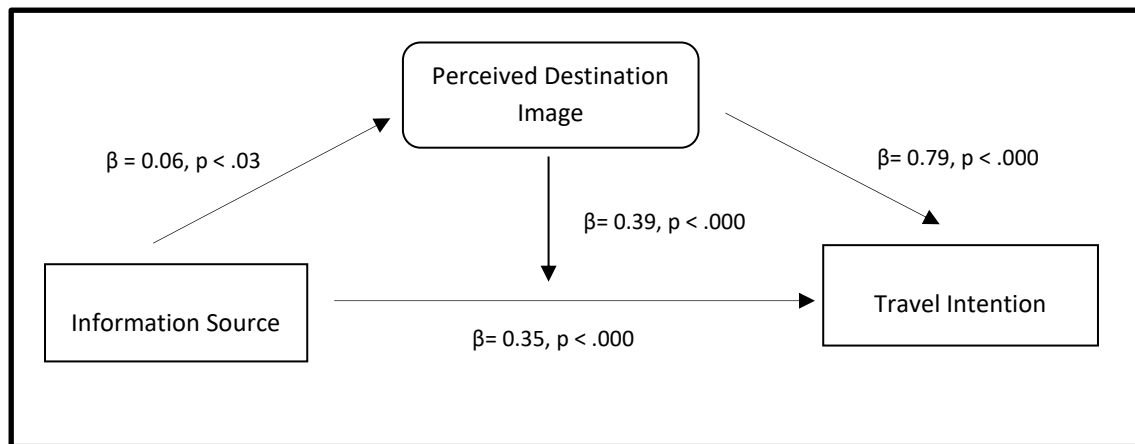


Figure 1: Path analysis of the model

## 5 Conclusion

A clear understanding of tourist image especially the non-visitors is crucial for A clear understanding of tourist image especially the non-visitors is crucial for

developing successful marketing strategies in promoting and positioning a destination. The overall results obtained from this study have suggested that Sabah has actually acquired a strongly positive appreciation by the non-visitors when it comes to evaluating its tourism destination image, where most of the non-visitors know Sabah based on its natural attraction. The fact is confirmed not only by the high grades obtained from the attribute-based scale items but also from the description of the most relevant holistic and unique elements referenced in the three open-ended questions.

From this study, it also identifies the most frequent and influenced information source that is used by the non-visitors that influenced their image of a destination and travel intention. This can help stakeholders (i.e. STB, Tourism Malaysia, travel agency) to use the correct information to deliver the message (information) about Sabah to the tourists and at the same time improving the tourism business in a very complex and competitive business situation nowadays.

However, it is undeniable that this study has limitations. Primary, the research of destination image which focuses on non-visitors is still at its infancy stage, especially in Malaysia. Thus, there is an insufficiency of literature related to this field setting. Therefore, without much option, the researcher was generally dependent on literature from established overseas journals, publications, and even unpublished papers. In addition, most of the respondent of the study is basically aged between 18-24 years old and student, where the results can only be used towards young tourists but not towards a general population and help the stakeholders especially Sabah Tourism Board (STB) in creating the image of Sabah based on the characteristics (natural, island and culture) that are being recognized by the non-visitors when marketing the product (destination) to the tourists especially in attracting the young non-visitors.

To enhance the generalization of the result, replicated studies are suggested in the future., whereby the future research could replicate this using study among different setting, such as focusing on country rather than state, focuses on certain nationalities or compare two different nationalities, etc. it would be more constructive to have a sufficient sample size for each group. The study would be more interesting to see the different perception between nationalities groups.

Other than that, future research could explore the relationship between the travel motivation on destination image and travel intention or the travel constraint variables that influence the travel intention or the categories of tourist in influencing their travel motivation, destination image, and travel intention. It would help to understand the categories of non-visitors, the travel motivation and constraints that they have towards a place that they never visited before. To sum it up, it is expectant that the study findings may provide insightful information to the stakeholders in Malaysia specifically to the stakeholders in Sabah.



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