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# Prospective Tourists' Cognitive Image Prone to Safety and Security Destination

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## ABSTRACT

Safety and security are essential for tourists and the tourism industry. One of the features that influences travel intentions is the type and level of safety and security associated with the destination. It is generally accepted in the tourism literature that the image of a universally recognized important destination, is often used as a vital element for local tourists in choosing a holiday destination. The main focus of this study is to identify the cognitive image dimensions that influence the intention of tourists to visit Sabah. A total of 362 questionnaires were distributed to obtain information from prospective international tourists who have never visited Sabah before. Descriptive analysis was used to describe the sample profile. Exploratory factor analysis was performed to identify the basic dimensions of the cognitive image. Using this method, there are four main dimensions of the cognitive image have been identified which are natural environment, appealing activities, attractive conditions and essential condition. Based on the results, suggestions are made to develop strategies to improve and maintain the image of Sabah.

*Keywords: Cognitive image; prospective tourist; safety and security; travel intention.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourist destinations are very competitive based on their visible images relative to competitors. Whether preparing their tour or visiting a tourist destination, they are more likely to make decisions based on an image of the destination [1,2]. As an indication to identify the important role of each factor, current studies move towards studying the importance of other factors, such as a destination image, as well as investigating the relationship of several factors such as demographics and personality. However, there are still insufficient studies on the relationship between the destination image factor and intention to travel, especially looking at multi-dimensional construction. In fact, there is yet a lack of empirical studies to see an overview of tourism and travel destinations focused on safety and security perspectives. Understanding the role description of a destination can be used to suggest strategies to enhance Sabah's positive image for international tourists when making travel decisions.

It is crucial to understand the differences in destination images and travel intentions of prospective tourists to visit destinations that are exposed to safety and security issues. The literature reveals that more attention has been paid to international tourists in areas vulnerable to crisis management as the risk is considered an important factor in preventing international tourists from visiting certain areas of the world (Nik Hashim, Ritchie & Tkaczynski, 2018; Sharifpour, Walter & Ritchie, [3,4]. Although these studies only provide an understanding of the decline of international tourists in countries or

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geographical regions that are considered risky, but they fail to contribute an understanding of visitor decision-making behaviours that will focus on the destination, particularly for Sabah.

There are different behaviours that are perceived by different categories of tourists because the image of the destination is accepted differently by different tourism markets [5]. Therefore, it is important to understand the behaviour of prospective tourists while travelling to Sabah, Malaysia as a risky destination related to safety and security problems. Because past studies show that destination image is closely related to travel destinations [6], and it is also influenced by tourist characteristics such as past experiences (Lepp & Gibson, 2010; Zhang, Wu & Buhalis, [7]) tourist role priorities [8], demographic factors [9,10], therefore, this study is to examine the dimensions of the underlying cognitive image in the context of safety and security that will influence the prospective tourist travel destination.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Tourism is increasingly dependent on images [11]. Unlike regular products, prospective travelers buy non-existent products. Furthermore, the product cannot be experienced until purchased [12]. Thus, images play an important role in travel and destination choices [13,14,15]. From a destination perspective, projecting a positive image is necessary for the continuity and success of the destination [16]. The idea of goal image has been adopted for use in tourism research in various fields, such as in marketing, social and environmental psychology, and consumer behavior, for decades. The term 'destination image has been described in different ways between researchers since the 1970s [17,18]. Later it has been well known in tourism research areas ever since [19,20]. Several researchers have shown that the destination image focuses their research on tourist behaviour [21,22,23]. The concept of destination image can be known as "the perception of a person or a group of people about a place". This perception is formed by a number of beliefs, ideas and perceptions about the purpose [24,19]. In addition, it can also be related as an idea of purpose created in the mind of the traveler and is usually a mental picture, a set of traits or a set of perceptions that exist in the memory of the fans [25]. Destination image has been defined as the concept of attitude consisting of the amount of beliefs, ideas, and effects that tourists have on a destination [24,26,27,11]. Destination images are considered multidimensional constructs by several other scholars [28,19]. This view is further supported by Blain, Levy & Ritchie [29], who reflect that the destination image are intended to convey the overall idea or experience that visitors expect to a destination. It can include general or unique functional and psychological features or different or unique characteristics, events, feelings and auras [30]. For this study, the definition of destination image is defined as the effects, beliefs, ideas, hopes, and feelings accumulated in places related to safety and security risks.

A large number of past researchers have sought to form a conceptual framework of destination image formation (e.g. Fakeye & Crompton, [12]; Echtner & Ritchie, [31,23], Gartner, [32]; Pike, [33]; O'Leary & Deegan, 2003; Beerli & Martin, [10]; Gartner, 2007; Tasci et al., [15]; Stepchenkova & Mills, [34]; Kaur & Chauhan, [35]). For example, Echtner & Ritchie [31] stated that destination image can be very specific or holistic and include functional features such as price, accommodation or attractions and psychological features; e.g. hospitality, quality of service or local security (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). As a result, Echtner and Ritchie put forward that destination image are considered holistic components and attribute-based components, both of which have functional and psychological characteristics. For example, on the holistic side, the holistic psychological effect is described as the atmosphere or atmosphere of the destination. Functional effects consist of a mental images or an overview of the physical characteristics of the destination (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

In the study of destination image, Baloglu & Brinberg [36] and Gartner [32] considered that destination image include cognitive and affective components. Using these concepts for tourism contexts, cognitive image is the sum of beliefs and attitudes about a destination that leads to a picture of internally accepted attributes, often derived from factual information, while affective pictures refer to a person's feelings about a particular tourist destination [37,38,39]. The dimensions of the destination image are complex and different models have been developed to assess it; for example, studies by [32,23,7].

In earlier destination image studies, cognitive purpose images became the primary focus [40,13,41]. Various destination image studies [42,43] compare tourist assessments of destination attributes across specific destinations to illustrate positioning strategies for these destinations; Meanwhile, other studies (e.g. Gartner & Hunt, [41]; Ahmed, [44]; Chon, [45]; Court & Lupton, [46]) seek to classify target destination characteristics that are considered important or weak in providing appropriate tourism marketing strategies. According to Pike [33], affective destination image do not have a strong focus in tourism studies. The importance of affective image in future studies has also been supported by Rudez [47] who stated that further studies are still needed to understand the image of destinations in other areas. An example of a image study that includes the affective image component is a study by Chew & Jahari [48]. Thus, the study of image components has shown a complex and influential relationship with each other and with a comprehensive purpose picture. Accordingly, it is important to study the combination of these dimensions as a whole in one study.

### **3. TRAVEL INTENTION**

Intention is the tendency to act or do something that will lead to actual behavior [49]. By measuring intention, one can predict the actual behavior that an individual will perform in the future [50,51]. When tourists have the intention and motivation to visit a tourist destination, their actions will follow [52]. As mentioned by Croy & Walker [53], by imagining a destination through media, photos etc., and tourists will have the intention to visit the destination. In addition to media, pictures etc., knowledge of the purpose of cognitive images (WOM, books or magazines) can also influence the intention to visit a destination. Thus, the intention of tourist behavior becomes important to evaluate the success of a tourist destination [54].

### **4. CONTEXT OF SABAH**

The focus of this study is Sabah, one of the second largest states in Malaysia. This situation mainly and gradually receives tourists from domestic and international tourists; however, there are insufficient studies conducted to understand the characteristics of the state as a tourist destination because the government only focuses on promoting such tourism to the international market which believes the state as one of the best tourist destinations in Malaysia [55]. There are several strategies taken to ensure that the tourism industry in Malaysia strengthens as the most preferred tourist destination especially for Sabah in Malaysia Ninth Plan (2006-2010). In the strategy, there is a strategy to ensure the safety of destination comfort and well-being of tourists who come to any place in Malaysia. This strategy shows how serious Malaysia's commitment is and its high focus on security issues. This aspect is very important to provide quality in tourism and more than other economic activities, the success of a tourist destination depends on the ability to offer a protected and safe environment to visitors [56]. However, lately, Sabah, Malaysia reputation as a peaceful and affected place has been tarnished by many incidents and unwanted incidents. Hence, the results of this study will fill the limitations in understanding the importance of the image of Sabah international tourism destinations. The implications of this study will be very valuable to manage the image of Sabah destinations, especially for international tourism.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

This study used quantitative design research methods. About 362 questionnaires were distributed to tourists visiting Malaysia but have not visited Sabah (prospective tourists) from Australia and the United Kingdom in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The samples are chosen to meet certain criteria, for example, prospective tourists must be tourists who have never visited Sabah before. All participants must be ready to participate, 18 years of age and older, male or female and of all races. The data of this study were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 23. The three-part questionnaire was designed to collect data from respondents. Part A asks about screening questions. Part B asks about perceptions of Sabah as a tourist destination. Section C provides general information and biographies of respondents such as gender, age, and education background. For the tourist screening questions in part A; five questions are planned to assess whether the participants have gone to Sabah or not. The destination image section; contains 16 items that measure the cognitive image of Sabah as a tourist

destination. Cognitive image instruments were adapted from the study of Stylos, Vassiliadia, Bellou & Andronikidis [57]. A seven-point Likert scale was used for this item, ranging from (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). In terms of reliability, this study is based on four recommendations to improve reliability: (1) configure all constructs, (2) increase the level of measurement, (3) use some indicators, and (4) conduct a pilot study. Usually, a reliability of less than 0.6 is considered bad, while 0.70 is acceptable and more than 0.8 good [58]. Statistically, this study uses guidelines as suggested by Pallant [59] on Cronbach's alpha score between 0.7 to 1.00, which is considered good. Item scores below this score will be deleted or filtered. From the result, the loading of individual items for the study construct ranges from 0.741 to 0.773 and, hence, above the recommended value of 0.70 [59] indicating acceptable individual items.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Respondents' Profile

As demonstrated in Table 3, most of respondents were female (58.1%). Concerning age, most of respondents aged between 18 to 25 years represent 38.2%, around 31.2% 26-35 years, 14.9% age between 36-45 years, 12.9% age 46-55 years and 2.2% 56 -65 years. The university graduates representing 71.4% of the total sample which is the highest number of respondents. The remaining respondents graduated from college representing 19.4%, and another 9% graduated from Vocational / Technical schools. In terms of their ethnicity, about 53.5% are British, and about 46.1% are Australian.

**Table 3. Profile of respondents**

<b>Prospective Tourist</b>			
<b>Profile</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	146	41.9
	Female	207	58.1
<b>Age</b>	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
<b>Education</b>	Vocational/ Technical	32	9
	College	69	19.4
	University	252	71.4
<b>Origin</b>	United Kingdom	189	53.5
	Australia	164	46.1

#### 3.2 The Result of Factor Analysis

Sixteen likert statements are explored by key component factor analysis (PCA) and varimax rotation, which produces four factors. The rationale of implementing factor analysis is to take into account the number of variances and be able to detect unique variance factors [60]. In addition, it can also combine the statement into a smaller group of factors that are considered to represent the underlying dimensions of Sabah cognitive image. Factor loading below 0.33 was removed from further analysis. Cronbach's alpha test was used to examine the internal consistency of each factor.

As shown in the results, all alpha coefficients are above 0.7, which means that a high correlation exists between the items. Factor loading is used to give a name to each factor. In particular, items with higher factor loading are considered important items that have a greater influence on factor naming [60]. 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.

In short, the mean score for all factors is higher than 4.0 which assumes that international tourists have a positive image of Sabah. Particularly, 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 proves that most tourists think that shopping opportunities in Sabah are low.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, a destination with a positive image is most likely be considered a tourist destination and selected in the process of making travel decisions. Destination Image play an important role in the travel intention of international tourist about the development of various travel decision making models. Given the dimensional analysis of destination Image, this study contributed significantly to a comprehensive understanding of what influences the travel intentions of international tourist. An understanding of the underlying dimensions of cognitive image of tourists may be the solution to Tourism Malaysia and Sabah tourism players devise effective marketing strategies to attract tourists. In relation to safety and security concerns, by taking tourists' safety as the main concern, this study will advise governments and tourists to take a proactive approach to dealing with crises and disasters and establish crisis communication centers to disseminate accurate information about destination behavior. This is very crucial to create a positive image for the destination. As a final point, the results show that the image of the destination is not only the perception by the tourists' destination attributes but also includes the comprehensive effect created by the destination itself.

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#### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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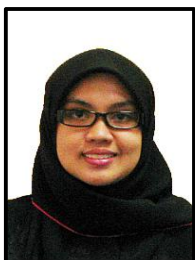
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