

Destination Image of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose: People travel from one place to another for different purposes. Based on literatures, destination branding is found to be very significant to attract the tourists to places of interests. In Malaysia, there are variety of cities, beaches, rainforests, villages and mountains' sites to be visited. In addition, we should be proud that part of our cities and sites in Malaysia have been recognized and listed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as world heritage sites. One of the listed site, George Town, Penang was selected by Los Angeles Times as one of "16 must see destinations in 2016". This exploratory research looks into the tourists' expectation towards signages at the UNESCO World Heritage sites in Malaysia based on tourist expectation model. This research is intended to evaluate the reliability of signages in terms of the visual graphics and tourist experience expectation.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper identifies currently used signages system within the specific locations in Malaysia in portraying the brand of UNESCO as part of branding strategies through photo-based visual analysis.

Findings: The findings of this research show that there is inconsistent visual representation of signages found at the World Heritage Sites between Melaka, George Town and Kinabalu Park. This paper summarizes the element of visual identity found on the signages at the specific locations within the WH sites for this study. Overall, this article seeks to address the importance of tourist expectation when visiting the UNESCO World Heritage sites through preliminary investigations on the visual representations of the UNESCO destination image.

Practical implications: Destination image plays a significant role in increasing the number of visitors/tourists at specific places of interest. This study not only contributes to the new body of knowledge in tourism mobility, but also the design practitioners to develop a more effective signage system for UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Originality/value: The significant value of this research is emphasized on the understanding of UNESCO as an image to meet the tourists' expectations. The role of signs not only gives information and directions, but represents the brand of UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Keywords: Destination image, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Tourist Expectation

Introduction

Tourism industry has boost up the economic progress and gain widespread recognition (Mazumder, Ahmed & Al-Amin, 2009). In the contemporary tourism, rapid development of infrastructure, cultural production, and agricultural food importation have reshaped the urbanization patterns (Sheller & Urry, 2004). People travel from one place to another for different purposes. In Malaysia, there are variety of cities, beaches, rainforests, villages and mountains' sites to be visited. In addition, we should be proud that part of our cities and sites in Malaysia have been recognized and listed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as World Heritage site. One of the listed site, George Town, Penang was selected by Los Angeles Times as one of "16 must see destinations in 2016" (Reynolds, 2015). The UNESCO World Heritage Sites concept has proven successful in branding culturally heritage sites which attracts more tourist globally because of the media coverage than the general tourist destinations (Hasan & Rahman, 2015). The UNESCO World Heritage Sites encourages protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage of places around the globe that contributes to humanity.

'The prestige that comes from being a State Party to the Convention and having sites inscribed on the World Heritage List often serves as a catalyst to raising awareness for heritage preservation on the part of governments and citizens alike. Heightened awareness, in turn, leads to greater consideration and a general rise in the level of protection and conservation afforded to heritage properties. A State Party may receive both financial assistance and expert advice from the World Heritage Committee as support for promotional activities for the preservation of its sites as well as for developing educational materials' (UNESCO, 2000: 1).

Malaysia is fortunate to be one of the country that is embodied under the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972. Among the sites that are recognized under UNESCO World Heritage sites are:

(i) Cultural:

- Archaeological Heritage of the Lenggong Valley (2012)
- Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca (2008)

(ii) Natural

- Gunung Mulu National Park (2000)
- Kinabalu Park (2000)

In the UNESCO Operational Guideline for the implementation of World Heritage Convention, (July, 2015) there are guidelines that need to be followed in accordance to the placement of World Heritage emblem/logo on road signs/highway signs or other publication materials. Table 1 shows one of the guidelines outlined in the UNESCO Operational Guideline book.

Table 1: Example of graphic illustration used in road signs or highway signs (Source: UNESCO Operational Guideline for the implementation of World Heritage Convention, 2015)

Use and purposes	Uses		Authorization		Graphic Illustration
1- National Commission (continued)	Type of Logo the NatCom can use	Use of the Logo by the NatCom is authorized by	NatCom can authorize the use of the Logo for	Type of Logo the NatCom can authorize	Logo to be used and/or authorized by the NatCom
Road signs, highway signs	Choice of the logo according to the kind of sign and its location: UNESCO/World Heritage logo in full or simplified with site's name underneath	Statutory use	World Heritage site management authority	UNESCO/World Heritage logo in full or simplified with site's name underneath	
	World Heritage Emblem	Statutory use	World Heritage site Management authority	World Heritage Emblem	

One of the important aspect in measuring the tourist mobility towards signages at UNESCO World Heritage sites' is the place identity. According to Mac and Bhreithiún (2012), Amsterdam's current street signage system emphasized on the Dutch typographic and graphic design which reflects the place identity branding of Amsterdam city. In a recent research on brand awareness by King and Halpenny (2014), the authors seek to bridge the gap between WH brand (World Heritage) image and the identity in World Heritage areas in Australia. This is due to lack of adequate uniformity of signage and the WH emblem communicated from one site to another. The authors also illustrated that sixty percent of visitors to the Queensland sites and 19% of visitors to the Hawaii site were aware of the site's WH status; 96% of Queensland site visitors, and 99% of Hawaii site visitors could not recall what the WH symbol represented.

According to Bruner (2005), guides normally stopped at the WH sign for photos opportunity especially among the international tourists. Bruner also illustrate this as "dialogic narration" strategy which emphasize on how the tourists will relate their previous experience stories with other places they have visited with the one they are at that particular moment. In addition, based on the 9th Malaysian Plan and National Physical Plan agenda (2009), Malaysian towns are found to be lack of character and identity due to the urbanization development. In another research conducted by Jamil, Tarmiji, Fatimah and Norkamaliah (2013), the authors stated that signage is one of the infrastructure element that determines the tourist expectation and satisfaction towards Melaka as Heritage city. Even though in their research they did not specifically mentioned the design consideration of the signages, a destination brand can be influenced by the name, symbol or other graphic elements that identifies and differentiates specific destination.

Memorable experience which uniquely related to the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience at specific destination is considered as destination branding (Goeldner, Ritchie, & Mac-Intosh, 2000; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003). As a starting point for this research, we

will look into a previous research conducted by Rodríguez del Bosque, San Martín, Collado, and del Mar García de los Salmones (2009) on their conceptual model of tourist expectation of visiting specific destinations of their choice. However, this paper only illustrates important elements of destination image which reflects from the visual representation of WH symbol used in the locations of research.

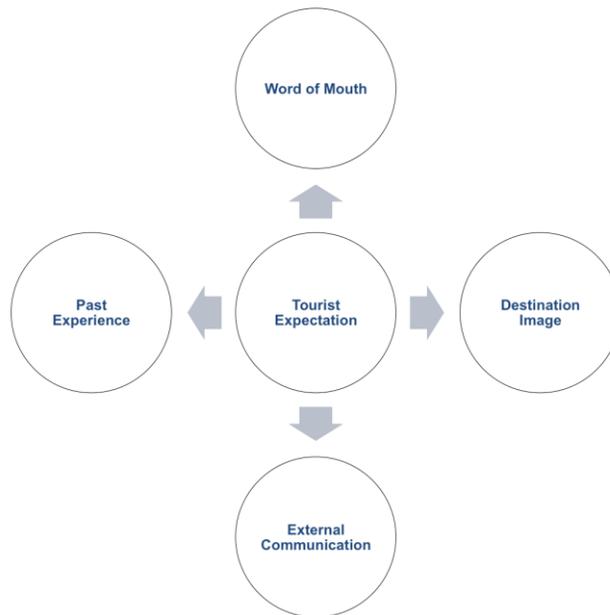


Figure 1: Model of Tourist Expectation (Source: Rodríguez del Bosque, San Martín, Collado, & del Mar García de los Salmones (2009))

Materials and Methods

This study uses qualitative research approach which combines the exploratory and descriptive contextual visual analysis on the visual representations of the UNESCO emblem on the signs and signages. The main objective for this research is to investigate the reliability of current signages to tourists' mobility. Signage design implemented through the government policy and regarded as environment aesthetic increases the visual quality of the area. (Suminar, Kurniawan & Usman, 2010). In a recent study conducted by Lai and Ooi (2015), the authors illustrated that cultural heritage in both Melaka and George Town are influenced by the policies and development plans by the stakeholder's groups. Thus, there are several differences that can be seen in terms of the implementation of branding the WH places in Malaysia. This paper will investigate three of the locations suggested for this study which include; George Town and Melaka (historical cities) and Kinabalu Park (nature). Based on literature reviews and visual sources on currently implemented UNESCO sites signages, this paper summarises the comparison of visual representation of the standard signs used. Preliminary investigations were conducted through open source website resources (for global overview) and using photo-based observations at the Malaysian WH sites. The findings of the investigation show variety of visual representation used in delivering the "UNESCO Brand" to the visitors.

Results and Discussion

In relation to the signages used in delivering information for visitors, there have been numerous sign design that are found globally at UNESCO sites. Figure 2 shows some examples of signages which reflect the brand image of UNESCO found in other countries.



Figure 2: Examples of UNESCO World Heritage Sites Signages (source: Google Images)

From the examples of UNESCO World Heritage Sites signages, it shows that the emblem of WH was the only uniformity used at each sites to reflect the World Heritage. Based on the examples, the UNESCO emblem are used differently for describing specific UNESCO WH Sites according to the local/federal authorities implementation. The differences can be seen through the use of type face, colour, material and well as the sign design. Through this research project, the standard use of visual representation and signage design system for UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Malaysian context will be proposed to promote the WH sites to the tourists. Table 2. shows comparative visual analysis of signages that can be found in three areas of the WH in Malaysia gathered during the first phase of this study.

Table 2: Visual representation of signages comparative analysis

Location	Type of Sign Design	Criteria
George Town		Directional sign pole with specific colour coded that shows places of interest nearby the placement of the sign.
		Directional sign that shows specific places with additional information such as the distance from specific location of the sign.
		Information sign, which shows the point of interest with specific color, used. This sign complies with the specification required by UNESCO that added the “City of George Town” at the bottom of the word World Heritage and the WH emblem. However, there is also unnecessary posted bill on the sign that should have been removed by the municipal/authorities.
		Information sign shows similar style from the previous sign but uses different colour code.

Melaka City



Wall sign can be found at the most touristic area in Melaka city.



Map sign can be found in several places in Melaka city with the emblem of WH representation.

Kinabalu Park



Entrance sign of this Kinabalu Park is visible from the parking area of the park. There is additional information such as the gazette period and year of WH inscription.



Map sign which shows the trail map for trekkers and important information related to the Park and Summit.



Information sign at specific locations nearby Kinabalu Park that shows specific distance to the park.

Based on Table 2, George Town city has implemented the most constructive used of UNESCO brand in their signages. The emblem used also shows consistent branding strategies for promoting George Town as a UNESCO WH Sites that can be found not only on the road signs but also on the information sign on the wall with descriptions of specific locations. Comparatively, Melaka has not implement more activities of branding the UNESCO WH sites in their city. Kinabalu Park on the other hand needs to improve the visibility of the UNESCO brand especially on the information sign which leads the visitors to the site. This paper has described the visual representations of the UNESCO brand that are found in three destinations of WH sites in Malaysia. Since this study is at the preliminary stage of gathering related information of the specific WH places, this paper only summarizes the element of visual identity found on the signages at the specific locations within the WH sites. Place identity is defined as a component of personal identity, which develops through the elements that typify a specific area and the nature of the interactions that occurred (Wester-Herber, 2004; Bernardo & Palma, 2005). According to Johansson and Carlson (2014), heritage tourists will revisit the places when they are convinced about the adequate facilities are satisfactory. Thus, in our next phase of research, we will conduct

more in depth photo-interviews and distribute questionnaires to specific sample within the WH areas. Destination image requires four main attributes from commitment of time, people, resources and changes in policies, culture and mindset (Balakrishnan, 2009). Currently, it is found that George Town has established George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) by the Penang State Government in April 2010 to develop consistent monitoring in protecting, promoting and preserving the George Town as a sustainable city.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to explore the destination image of UNESCO WH Sites in Malaysia. This study provides a potentially more in depth methods which have not been explored by other researchers in the study of UNESCO World Heritage Sites sign design identity for destination branding using the WH emblem in signages and other related marketing tools. The use of the World Heritage emblem as a marketing tool for promoting WH sites in Malaysia will be investigated in more detail, especially the perceptions of local and foreign tourists of specific WH destinations in Malaysia. Thus, this study will analyze the factors that determine the reliability of the signages in selected WH sites in Malaysia in the next phase. More in depth investigation of the tourists' expectation is required through visitors' experiences of specific Malaysian UNESCO WH Sites on their perceptions of the destination image.

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