MANAGING DESTINATION IMAGE FOR POTENTIAL GULF COUNTRIES TOURISTS VIA COMMUNICATION EFFECTS ASSESSMENT: THE CASE OF MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study responds to the call for more empirical evidence and theoretical framework for tourism destination consumer based brand equity (CBBE), and for more effort to link marketing communication (MC) as information sources on destination awareness and image across different fields. Using Malaysia as the context, this study focused on potential tourists from two Gulf countries (GC) i.e. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). 405 responses were collected via self administered questionnaire on purposively selected samples in Dubai and Jeddah. The findings indicate that uncontrolled MCs have significant effect on the awareness and image dimensions of CBBE, while controlled MC has significant effect only on destination image. Several implications of the findings were later discussed. The managerial implications are that destination marketers targeting potential GC tourists need to satisfy existing GC tourists to Malaysia to create positive WOM. They also need to focus on integrating both Controlled and Uncontrolled MCs strategies to reduce confusing image of the destination.

Keywords: Communication; Marketing; Consumer Based Brand Equity; Gulf-Countries; Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive market place, destination image is commonly accepted as an important aspect in successful tourism management and destination marketing (Molina, Gómez, and Martín-Consuegra, 2010). Realizing this, tourism marketing organization and researchers have tried to improve understanding on the dimensions that tourists use in formulating the destination image, the role of the marketing efforts in positioning of destination image to enhance its attractiveness, and increase its market competiveness (Beerli and Martin, 2004a; Martin, Ignacio, and Bosque, 2008; Gartner, 1993). Since image affects tourists' perceptions, it is important to understand what affects image formulation in the tourist's mind. From the

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theoretical standpoint, Bianchi and Pike, (2009); Boo, Busser, and Baloglu, (2009); Konecnik and Gartner, (2007); and Pike, (2007) highlighted that empirical evidence and theoretical framework for the tourism destination consumer based brand equity (CBBE) is lacking. In addition, authors such as Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000) stressed that studies linking MCs as information sources on the CBBE is needed across different fields. Thus this study aims to contribute to the body of literature by responding to the need for empirical research on the CBBE for tourism destination using a new socio-cultural context (i.e. two major gulf countries' prospective outbound tourists to Malaysia). It also seeks to either validate or disconfirm findings of previous studies in the area of MCs influence on CBBE dimensions. The focus of the study is on destination image management via assessment of long-term communication effects. Using Malaysia as the study context, it looks at MCs influence on awareness and image among tourists from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

MC activities refer to the overall communication of an organization to its consumers, both controlled and uncontrolled (O'cass and Grace 2004). Controlled MC refers to the marketing activities undertaken by destination marketers namely advertising and promotions. On the other hand, uncontrolled MCs are activities that destination marketers have no controlled over it namely Word-of-Mouth (WOM). Both controlled and uncontrolled MC activities are important in service brand success (Berry, 2000; O'Cass and Grace, 2004), as they establish awareness and positive image of a brand. For potential tourists who have never had a direct experience with the destination, MCs are the only source of information that they rely on in making their travel decisions. Past studies that tested the effects of the information perceived by the consumer from different marketing actions on the formation of destination image and awareness demonstrated that MC activities is antecedent of these dimensions as it represents the effect of accumulated marketing investments into the brand (Yoo et al., 2000). These studies confirmed that through long term investment in MCs, destination image and awareness could be created and developed, and by doing so, the company will have strong CBBE. Being able to understand how these MCs influencing the destination image and awareness will give marketing managers a great insight into how to create effective MCs strategies. Hence, the relation between the MC and destination image and awareness must be determined in order to create strong brand equity from the consumer perspective (Keller, 2003).

With the absence of actual visitation to the tourism destination, destination awareness and image are formed in the potential tourists' mind from controlled and uncontrolled information sources that consumer experience over time. The common theme to findings in the literature suggests so. This is supported by Berry's (2000) theory of service branding as well as the theory of tourism destination image formulation by Gunn (1972). These two theories suggest that there are three information sources that could form the destination image and awareness in the consumer mind. These are: controlled MC, uncontrolled MC, and past experience. Evidence suggests that travelers are likely to utilize the following broad, external information sources when planning their trips: family and friends, destination specific literature and advertising (Snepenger and Snepenger, 1993). The role of MC activities as information

sources here is to influence the destination image and awareness from the potential customer mind which ultimately will increase the possibility for the brand to be chosen. As suggested in the literature, in an absence of actual experience with the service brand, potential consumers struggle to attach meaning to intangible brand elements. In this regard, MCs create awareness of the brand in the first place, and play a critical role as consumers use it to form their image of the service brand. While MCs (whether controlled or uncontrolled) can be used to create awareness and perceived image about the brand by communicating information to potential consumers, it is well established in the literature that it is the degree to which the information is meaningful to consumers that is important (O'Cass and Grace, 2004; Grace and O'Cass, 2005). In other words, the more favorable the consumers' feeling and attitudes are toward the communication channels, the more likely it is that the communications will be effective in transferring relevant meaning about the brand. Hence, it is their attitude and feeling toward the communication channel that will impact their response to the brand. MCs are communicating information about the brand specific attributes and characteristics. If the communication is seen as favorable by consumers and is persuasive enough to improve these attributes, it should positively impact the perceived image and quality of the brand.

2.1. Destination awareness

Aaker (1991) defines brand awareness as *"the ability of the potential buyer to recognize and recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category"* (p. 61). Understandingly, it is impossible for any brand or product to be considered into customers' consideration set (the third stage in the consumer behavior model that includes the group of brands from which the consumer will chose) if the potential customers are not aware of the brand (Romaniuk, Sharp, Paech, and Driesener, 2004; Hoyer and Brown, 1990). Brand awareness is also considered one of the CBBE dimensions (Aaker, 1991), as well as the first step in the consumer loyalty (Tepeci, 1999). Further, Larson (1989) pointed out that top-of-mind (TOM) awareness has a big correlation with the market share of product and service. In addition, tourism products intangibility plays a critical role in marketing strategies. Because potential customer cannot test the service before, brand awareness is an instrument of predominant selection amongst consumers without previous experience (Hoyer and Brown, 1990). It is also very important as it has positive influence on the customer decision making process especially under low involvement (Macdonald and Sharp, 2003). In fact, brand awareness is the first effect that MC should create among the target audience. Nevertheless, as potential tourists will be under high level of involvement when they think of traveling to another country for tourism purposes, brand awareness is not enough to influence the customers' decision making (Kotler, Bowen, and Makens, 2006). Under such condition, destination must also be perceived to have a positive image in the customer mind in order to be successful (Konecnik and Gartner, 2007).

Meanwhile brand awareness could be created by different ways such as WOM and advertising communications. When the consumers are repeatedly exposed to the brand through MCs, their familiarity with the brand will increase (Keller, Aperia, and Georgson, 2008). Awareness comes under the information role of advertising which means that the customers must recognize the brand and the products as a member of the product category (Briggs, 1997). Various authors have confirmed positive relationship between MC - especially advertising and

WOM - and brand awareness (Villarejo-Ramos and Sanchez-Franco, 2005; Dubow, 1994). According to Dubow, (1994) one of MC strength particularly advertising is its ability to create TOM awareness and the ability of the customers to recall the promoted brand. In tourism industry where the product or the service is intangible, TOM awareness ensure that a brand has a competitive advantages over the other brands (Kotler and Keller, 2006; Dubow, 1994). Based on these arguments, the hypotheses are as follows:

$H1_A$: Controlled MC positively influence destination awareness.
$H2_A$: Uncontrolled MC positively influence destination awareness.

2.2.   *Perceived destination image*

Milman and Pizam (1995) defined destination image as the visual or mental impression of a place or a product experienced by the general public. The significance of perceived brand image is that brand image enables the potential customer to recognize a product, evaluate the quality, lower purchase risks, and obtain certain experience and satisfaction out of product differentiation (Lin and Lin, 2007). In addition, brand image is often used by consumers as an extrinsic cue to make a purchase decision (Richardson, Dick, and Jain, 1994). Destination with positive image has the ability to eliminate risks that the potential customers will face when they make their decision (Molina, Gómez, and Martín-Consuegra, 2010; Lin and Lin, 2007). However, a brand image is something brought out by promotions, advertisements, and/or experience (Lin and Lin, 2007). Beerli and Martin, (2004a) argued that because potential tourists have no pervious visit to the destination and usually they have limited knowledge about the destination, destination with strong, positive, and recognizable images has more probability of being chosen by the tourists. This shows the importance of destination image especially for prospective tourists. With this in mind, and as confirmed by tourism image formulation theory (Gunn, 1972), and service branding theory (Berry, 2000), the brand image is actually built in the consumer mind from external sources of information (promotional activities) and/or by the actual experience of the brand. Therefore, potential consumers rely on these information sources to make a decision. As this study looks at the potential tourists who never had direct experience with the destination before, without a doubt the image that they have about the destination is coming from external sources of information. Hence, when measuring the perceived destination image, the effectiveness of these external information sources in formulating the image will be predicted (Martin, Stewart, and Matta, 2005).

It is highlighted in the literature that MC activities as information sources are a force which impacts only the formulation of the cognitive evaluations and not the affective component of image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Woodside and Lysonsky, 1989; and Um and Crompton, 1990). For example, Um and Crompton's (1990) model of pleasure destination choice emphasized on that cognitive image of the destination is formed by information sources such as controlled and uncontrolled MCs. With this in mind, in this study the individual's perception toward the destination based on their knowledge (cognitive) were investigated in order to capture the image of the tourism destination as a result of the MC as information sources. Based on these arguments, the hypotheses are as follows:

H1$_B$: Controlled MC positively influence destination image.
H2$_B$: Uncontrolled MC positively influence destination image.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to measure controlled and uncontrolled MCs as independent variables, 11 items in 5 point Likert scales developed by Bansal and Voyer (2000) and Grace and O'Cass (2005) were used. To measure destination awareness as dependent variable, 5 items were adopted from Bianchi and Pike (2009) and Yoo and Donthu (2001). Six factors are identified from the literature as common factors for measuring destination images as a dependent variable. These are Leisure and tourist attractions (13 items) were adopted from Martin and Bosque, (2008) and Echtner and Ritchie, (2003, 1993), Local Hospitality (4 items) were adopted from Hui and Wan, (2003), Nightlife (3 items) were adopted from Hankinson, (2005) and Baloglu and McCleary, (1999), Political stability (3 items) were adopted from Hui and Wan, (2003), Heritage and historical buildings/cultural environment (5 items) were adopted from Hankinson, (2005) and Baloglu and McCleary, (1999), Natural environment and atmosphere (9 items) were adopted from Stepchenkova and Morrison, (2007) and Hui and Wan, (2003). The instrument was translated to Arabic and back translated to English using the service of a professional translator.

The unit of analysis was the Gulf Countries' potential tourists that are operationally defined as those who have at least some idea about Malaysia and never been in Malaysia before. The GC tourist markets were chosen because they were considered the most important market segment for the Malaysian tourism industry due to their tendency to stay longer and be big spenders during their visit to Malaysia. The sampling considered the reality that only those willing to participate can be taken as a respondents while discounting the illiterate and young. Thus, the strategy was purposive sampling to get respondents that fit the demographic profile identified by Tourism Malaysia (2007). The determination of sampling size was largely based understanding about techniques used in past literatures on measuring country's image as tourism destination (Kline, 1998; Roscoe, 1975; David and Sutton, 2004) and the items number used in the questionnaire (see Veal, 2006; Burns and Bush, 2000; Hinkin, Tracey, and Enz, 1997; Tinsley and Tinsley, 1987) that a positive relationship between the number of items and the sample size stand for ratio of at least (1:5). Based on this, this study would need at least 320 questionnaires since it has 64 items. The researchers also took heed of Veal's (2006) suggestion that there can be small difference in sample size required for small and big population - the sample size of 10,000 population equals 370 sample units, and for 500,000 and above equals 384. Earlier, Fowler (1984) have opined that regardless of the methods used to collect data, a high response rate is extremely important when results are intended to represent a larger population (Fowler, 1984). Fowler (1984) further contends that, the lower the response rate, the greater the sample bias.

To counter the perceived high possibility of poor response rate (due to high number of unusable questionnaires), and increase the chances of getting at least the minimum required sample, this study had begun by distributing 409 questionnaires in both chosen sites. Dubai in UAE and Jeddah in KSA were chosen as data collection sites for this study because Tourism

Malaysia has promoted Malaysia in both these cities (Tourism Malaysia, 2008). Mall intercept was chosen as data collection method because it is a method frequently used by marketers to collect data efficiently. It involves having an interviewer at a shopping mall intercepts a sample of those passing by to ask if they would be willing to participate in a brief research study. Taking into consideration the probability of having a bias result (as mall shoppers can be a demographically biased group), data collection were planned for different shopping malls at different times and in areas that represent the high, middle, and low income populations in both countries. Data collection involved the enumerators first approaching potential respondents to elicit participation in the research, followed by allowing the respondents to complete the survey. Seven Jordanians who were also students in Dubai and Saudi Arabia (four in Dubai and three in KSA) were properly trained as enumerators to ensure that they understand the research objectives, the questions, the probable answering approach, how to approach the respondent, and the method of distributing the questionnaire so they understand how, when, where, and who to approach so as to avoid improper or unethical conduct.

In UAE, respondents were approached in three different areas which reflect three levels of income namely, mall for high income people (DUBAI MALL), middle income (IBN BATTUTA MALL), and for low income (AL-REEM MALL). In KSA, respondents were approached in JEDDAH'S MALL OF ARABIA (famous among high income people) ALTAHLIA Shopping center (for middle income people), and REFRAF shopping mall (for low income people. Overall, the methodological approach of this study has been carefully designed to ensure that accuracy of instrument and representativeness of the targeted population are taken care of.

4. RESULTS

For factor analysis purposes, the items in the questionnaire were grouped into two components (1) the MCs (controlled and uncontrolled) items; and (2) destination image and awareness items. As Table 1 show, factor analysis conducted on MCs produced two factors as expected, namely "controlled MC" and "Uncontrolled MC". These two factors captured 63.4 % of the total variance in the items. In terms of perceived destination image and awareness, as can be seen in the Table 1, factors analysis produced nine factors which explained 73.0 % of the variance. All these factors have acceptable Cronbach alpha which ranged between 0.73 to 0.91 (Nunnally, 1978).

The fieldwork generated a total number of 405 useful responses, higher than the minimum required sample. The researchers decided not to waste them but to proceed with subsequent analysis with this number to help enhance data accuracy and representativeness. The demographic profile of the respondents indicated that the majority of the respondents were male as they represented 71.6 % of the sample. The majority of the respondents were relatively young between the ages of 25 to 34 years as they represented 46.7%. This is followed by the age group of 35-44 years which represented 21.7 % of the respondents and the age group of 18-24 as they represent 19.8 % of the respondents. While respondents in the age group of 45 and above represented only by 11.9 % of the total respondents. Of the respondents, 57.5 % were from KSA and 42.5% were from UAE. Of the respondents, the majority had a university

Table 1: Comparing Original Dimensions to Final Dimension after Factor Analysis

Original dimension	Dimensions derived after factor analysis	Mean	N. Items	Alpha (a)
Uncontrolled MC	Uncontrolled MC	**3.76**	5	.86
Controlled MC	Controlled MC	**3.52**	6	.87
Awareness	Awareness	3.77	5	.76
Leisure and Tourist Attractions	Natural environmental attractions	**4.07**	7	.73
	Multi purposes destination	**4.05**	3	.85
	Information and services	**3.75**	3	.78
Shopping	Shopping attractions	3.54	6	.91
Nightlife	Nightlife attractions	3.25	3	.90
Local Hospitality	Local Hospitality	**3.25**	4	.89
Natural Environment and Atmosphere	Pleasant atmosphere	**3.67**	3	.75
Cultural environment	Cultural attractions	3.47	3	.81
Islamic elements	Islamic elements	**3.96**	3	.84
Overall perceived image		**3.96**		

Note: On a scale 1 = strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree

degree as they represented 66.0 % of the respondents with 50.4 % undergraduate and 15.6 % postgraduate (higher education). Approximately 21 % of the respondents had diploma while only 13.3 % were under secondary education (high school).

Descriptive results suggest that Malaysia is a powerful brand in terms of its destination image with an overall summated mean score of (3.96), which is close to the "agree" rating on the five point scale (see Table 1 above). None of the image factors fell below the lowest means scores (below 2.33). The five variables perceived to be the most important from the GC potential tourists point of view were "Natural Environmental Attractions" with a mean score of (4.07), "Multi Purposes Destination" (4.05), "Islamic Elements" (3.96), "Information and Services" (3.75), and "Pleasant Atmosphere" (3.67).

Overall, respondents picture Malaysia as suitable for multipurpose destination and family vacations, a destination that has variety of beautiful leisure and environmental attractions such as beaches, relaxing places, natural and theme parks, an Islamic country with a Muslim majority where Halal food and mosques are available everywhere, a destination where tourists information and services are easily available and a destination with pleasant and restful atmosphere. It is also evident in the descriptive analysis that both controlled and uncontrolled MC has been shown to be effective in perception creation of Malaysia as a tourism destination, with uncontrolled MC having a greater influence on their perception (with summated mean score of 3.76) than marketers driven information sources such as advertising (summated mean score of 3.52).

Meanwhile, multiple regression analysis of the study indicates that the model is significant with F-value of 12.522 and an adjusted R square of .059. Uncontrolled MCs alone significantly contribute to destination awareness ($\beta = 0.242$, p<0.001). Controlled MC on the other hand, appears to have no significant effect on destination awareness ($\beta = .002$, p=0.969). As such, hypothesis $H2_A$ is supported while $H1_A$ can be rejected.

Multiple regression analysis was also performed on both controlled and uncontrolled MCs in relation to several perceived image constructs (see Table 2 below). The result shows that controlled MC alone significantly contributes to five out of nine factors. These factors are Nightlife attractions ($\beta = .136$, p<0.01), Cultural attractions ($\beta = .197$, p<0.01), Information and services availability ($\beta = .152$, p<0.01), Pleasant atmosphere ($\beta = .278$, p<0.01) and

Table 2: The influence of MCs (controlled and uncontrolled) on each perceived image factors

Dependent Variables	Independent Variable	Standard error of regression coefficient (SE B)	Beta coefficient (β)	Sig. P<.05	R square	F	Sig. F; p<0.01
Shopping	Controlled MC	.051	.075	.152	.012	2.348	0.97
	Uncontrolled MC	.047	.059	.261			
Nightlife	Controlled MC	.055	.136	.008	.055	11.450	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.049	.158	.002			
Local residents	Controlled MC	.053	.094	.060	.110	24.166	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.048	.294	.000			
Cultural attractions	Controlled MC	.047	.197	.000	.062	12.748	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.043	.105	.042			
Leisure and environmental attractions	Controlled MC	.040	.142	.003	.258	64.121	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.037	.449	.000			
Information and services availability	Controlled MC	.054	.152	.003	.052	10.635	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.049	.133	.011			
Pleasant atmosphere	Controlled MC	.049	.278	.000	.178	44.014	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.045	.261	.000			
Islamic elements	Controlled MC	.054	.009	.852	.134	29.334	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.049	.363	.000			
Multi purposes destination	Controlled MC	.060	.099	.064	.048	9.277	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.055	.167	.002			
Overall perceived image	Controlled MC	.028	.184	.000	.253	61.642	0.00**
	Uncontrolled MC	.025	.417	.000			

Natural and environmental attractions (β = .142, p<0.01) where the F-statistics that indicates the relationship between independent and dependent variables are significant.

With regard to Uncontrolled MC, the results show it significantly contributes to eight out of nine factors. These are Nightlife (β = .158, p<0.01), Local Hospitality (β = .294, p<0.01), Leisure and environmental attractions (ß = .449, p<0.01), Pleasant atmosphere (ß = .261, p<0.01), Islamic elements (β = .363, p<0.01), Cultural attractions (β = .105, p<0.01), Information and services availability (β = .133, p<0.01) and Multi purposes destination (β = .167, p<0.01) where the F-statistics that indicates the relationship between independent and dependent variables are found to be significant.

Based on the data, it can therefore be concluded that $H1_B$ and $H2_B$ are partially supported. More specifically, the relation between controlled MC and image factors such as Nightlife attractions, Cultural attractions, Information and services availability, Pleasant atmosphere as well as Natural and environmental attractions of the study context are supported, while its relation with image factors such as Local residents, Islamic elements, Multi purposes destination and Shopping are not. Similarly, the relations between Uncontrolled MC with all but one image factors are found. Those image factors are Nightlife, Local Hospitality, Leisure and environmental attractions, Pleasant atmosphere, Islamic elements, Cultural attractions, Information and services availability as well as Multi purposes destination.

Meanwhile, when MCs were regressed on the overall perceived image, the results show that the model is significant with F-value of 61.642. The R square obtained indicates that the MCs account of 26 % of the variation in the overall destination image. Both controlled (β =.184) and uncontrolled (β = .417) MCs are found to be significant predictors of the overall perceived image, with Uncontrolled MC having greater influence compared to the Controlled MC. Thus it can be concluded that within the study context both controlled and uncontrolled MCs play varying degrees of significance as predictors of destination awareness and several perceived destination image constructs. This finding parallels findings by Fakeye and Crompton (1991) and Stepchenkova and Morrison (2007).

5. DISCUSSION

From the GC tourists point of view, both controlled and uncontrolled MC have been effective in perception creation of Malaysia as tourism destination. However, uncontrolled MC has a greater influence and perceived to be more reliable information source than marketers driven information sources. WOM ranked first in this study as information sources that form the perception of a destination. This is followed by the TV advertising, internet and travel magazines.

Deeper analysis shows that only Uncontrolled MC has significant relationship with destination awareness. This warrants greater emphasis on uncontrolled MC to enhance awareness of potential GC tourists about a destination. Providing high quality services and unforgettable destination experience to existing tourists to create positive WOM is a good strategy to take. As reported in the Malaysia Profile 2007 of Tourists by Selected Markets, 65.5 % of the tourists

from UAE who visited Malaysia in 2007 have obtained information about Malaysia from friends and relatives. About 70.7% of KSA tourists used WOM as information source before visiting Malaysia (TM, 2007). This provides further confirmation and support for these study findings.

Out of the nine factors of the perceived image, controlled MC is found to have greater influence on 'Cultural attractions', 'Information and services availability' and 'Pleasant atmosphere' factors. Uncontrolled MC on the other hand influenced 'Leisure and environmental attractions' factor, 'Local residents' factor, 'Multi purposes destination factor and 'Islamic elements' factors. Clearly, uncontrolled MCs have a greater influence compared to Controlled MC. However, both are significant predictors of overall perceived image.

Even though none of the MCs influenced the 'Shopping attraction' factor, the β value indicates that advertising has more impact with β=.75 and .152 significant level compared with β=.059 and .261 significant level for the uncontrolled MC. This shows that the destination marketers attempt to promote shopping through advertising have had some effect, but perhaps less effectively received due to lack of consistency with WOM messages.

In sum, greater emphasis on the uncontrolled MC will enhance favorable perception of potential GC tourists about a destination. Destination marketers targeting potential GC tourists need to satisfy existing GC tourists to Malaysia to create positive WOM. They also need to focus on integrating both Controlled and Uncontrolled MCs strategies to reduce confusing image of the destination.

The finding that both types of MCs are significant predictors for perceived destination image is consistent with the findings of several prior studies (such as O'Leary and Deegan, 2005; and Fakeye and Crompton, 1991), and along similar line to the argument of Bansal and Voyer (2000); Beerli and Martín, (2004a) who suggest that WOM communication is more powerful than advertising and promotions. However, the results contradicts with O'cass and Grace, (2004) and Grace and O'cass, (2005) who claim that advertising and promotional activities have a greater influence compared to the uncontrolled MC namely WOM on the consumer perception of the brand.

6. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence to support the tourism destination image formulation theory (Gunn, 1972) as well as the service branding theory (Berry, 2000) which claimed that with the absence of actual experience with the brand, both controlled and uncontrolled information sources create the perception of the brand from the potential consumer point of view. This is also consistent with Phau et al. (2010) and Baloglu and McCleary (1999) contention that information sources are an important antecedent of destination awareness and perceived destination image. Further, this study confirmed most of the literature that suggest that Uncontrolled MC as information sources has a greater influence on the perception creation compared to the MC that are driven by brand marketers (Beerli and Martín, 2004a). The findings show the important role of uncontrolled communications in the communication of

tourism destination brand. In fact, this communication avenue is shown to exert the strongest influence on all consumer response variables tested i.e. awareness and perceived image. Thus, it is recommended that since WOM is an important source of information for destination choice among Gulf countries tourists, Malaysia must focus on enhancing the existing tourists' experiences so that they will hold positive images that would lead to a positive WOM about the country to potential tourists.

6.1. Managerial implications

When managers know what their prospects think of their specific destination, and information sources their prospect use to formulate impression of the destination, it would be easier to try and match prospects' expectations with destination offerings. In this case, destination marketers of Malaysia need to ensure the destination is one with many leisure and environmental attractions. It must live to the expectation of being suitable destination for family holiday with plenty of Islamic amenities and HALAL food. The destination must also ensure readily available tourists information and services, safety of tourists, and pleasant and restful atmosphere. When these attributes are experienced by actual GC visitors to Malaysia, positive WOM will be generated for future GC tourists who are considering the destination.

Destination marketers must also addressed weak attributes such as communication difficulties with the locals, cultural attractions, and food culture attractions. Communication can be improved by having front liners that could speak Arabic well, and by having information materials in Arabic language. GC tourists are also looking for the familiar in terms of culture and food. Therefore, destination marketers should not waste promotional budget by focusing on Asian cultural and food offerings.

6.2. Theoretical contribution

Though the study offers no new theoretical insight, it did empirically confirmed existing theories on destination image formulation (Gunn, 1972) as well as the service branding theory (Berry, 2000) within a new socio-cultural setting (Gulf countries' prospective outbound tourists to Malaysia). The results supported both theories which claimed that with absence of actual experience with the brand, both controlled and uncontrolled information sources create the perception of the brand from the potential consumer point of view. This was consistent with Phau, Shanka, and Dhayan, (2010); O'Leary and Deegan, (2005) and Baloglu and McCleary, (1999) who revealed that that information sources are an important antecedent of perceived destination image. In addition, it confirms the idea that Uncontrolled MC information sources have a greater influence on tourist's perception creation. Most importantly, this study filled the gap in the literature by providing theoretical framework that investigates the influence of both controlled and uncontrolled MCs on brand awareness and perceived image.

6.3. Limitations and suggestion for future studies

From a methodological standpoint, focus on GC from KSA and UAE may result in limited generalization to other parts of the Arab world. Therefore, future researches for other

countries in the Middle East especially those countries that demonstrate low tourists arrivals to Malaysia which help to identify the reason behind such phenomenon. Furthermore, as the travel behavior is a complex phenomenon, further studies must include not only the CBBE dimension of a single destination such as Malaysia, but also the relative position of that destination of other Asian Pacific countries such as Thailand and Singapore as Baloglu and McCleary (1999) have done. It is also important to note that the study examined behavioral intentions, as opposed to actual behavior. There is no guarantee that increase in the mean score of the behavioral intentions will be translated to actual visitation to Malaysia. Another caveat of the current study concerns with the fact that it is a cross-sectional study. Future studies, can use longitudinal studies which may provide different results from the cross-sectional studies. In addition, this study adopted a quantitative approach to accomplish it objective. Thus, further studies could use innovative and holistic approaches that combine quantitative methods along with qualitative approaches that could increase the reliability and validity of the studies. A clear understanding of the CBBE dimensions as perceived by potential tourists and the influence of MC activities on these dimensions is crucial for developing successful marketing communication and positioning strategies. However, the body of literature establishes that alongside MCs as information sources, a number of other factors such as motivation, travel behavior and socio-demographic variables could also influence the forming of destination perceptions prior to the visit are excite. Therefore, further studies should investigate the role of these factors along with MC activities.

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