



SUNSETS, SEAFOOD AND SEA GYPSIES: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS ON THE ALTERNATIVE DESTINATION IMAGE OF MALAYSIAN BORNEO AMONG CHINESE OUTBOUND TOURISTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to explore the online destination image perceived by Chinese tourists visiting Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Employing Leiper's tourism system as a guiding framework, the research utilized qualitative content analysis (QCA) to scrutinize a purposefully selected sample of thirty-seven Douyin contents, which is known outside China as TikTok. Findings indicate an alternative destination image, with Chinese tourists highlighting sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies as prominent attributes, deviating from the conventional association of sun, sea and sand. This distinctive perception contrasts with the perceptions held by Western tourists of Sabah. Informed by Leiper's tourism system, this study emphasizes the importance for coastal destination marketing organizations to convey a destination image that extends beyond the conventional sun-sea-sand concept. Effective communication requires a nuanced understanding of unique destination images tailored to specific market segments based on their respective tourist generating regions. This approach aligns with Leiper's emphasis on the interconnected relationships between the tourist generating region and the tourist destination region, providing insights for strategic destination marketing that cater to diverse tourist perspectives. The findings interpret user-generated content (UGC) within Leiper's tourism system, consolidating the importance of projected online destination images.

KEYWORDS

Leiper's tourism system, online destination image, qualitative content analysis, QCA, China, Douyin

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1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of image in marketing in order to distinguish a destination is emphasized due to intense rivalry among tourist destinations (Kislali et al., 2016). Tourist decision-making process, destination selection and level of satisfaction with visits are significantly impacted by their subjective perceptions of a destination (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2020; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The literature provides evidence to support the notion that a distinct or exceptional destination image has a positive impact on tourists' motivation and intention to travel there (Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018). Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have implemented diverse strategies to enhance the competitive advantage of their destination. A key approach involves the cultivation of an appealing destination image, which aims to shape the perceptions of potential tourists and ultimately influence their choice of destination (Ji & Wall, 2015). Destination marketing organizations possess an in-depth comprehension of the images derived from destination attributes that effectively meet the anticipations of prospective tourists, thereby exerting a positive influence on tourists' motivations (Pike, 2009; Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018). However, DMOs are no longer the only source of projected images and destination attributes. The rise of user-generated content (UGC) where tourists rely on social media for consumption choices has overtaken DMOs (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015). As suggested by Wengel et al. (2022), such informal UGC 'campaigns' allow destinations to gain excessive attention or 'self-branding' which could leave DMOs ill-prepared for the influx of visitors seeking alternative attributes.

Coastal destinations have always been promoted as sites for leisure and recreation through the use of the traditional images of sun, sea and sand, known as the 3S model, which laid the groundwork for mass tourism in the Caribbean in the 1960s and Europe in the 1980s (Cameron & Gatewood, 2008; Mendoza-González et al., 2018). Over time, many coastal DMOs have either retained the same 3Ss or expanded them to 4S (sex) or even 7S (safari, surfing, skiing and sky-viewing) in order to disseminate appealing destination images to their target markets (Cameron & Gatewood, 2008; Mendoza-González et al., 2018; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014; Stupart & Shipley, 2013; Xu et al., 2018). The purpose was straightforward: to enrich the contents of a destination's image attributes and eventually to improve their competitiveness. For the region of Sabah, located in northern Malaysian Borneo, the DMO, Sabah Tourism Board (STB), strategically promotes an image of a tropical destination emphasizing the key attributes of nature: picturesque landscapes, flora and fauna, pristine beaches, islands; adventure – scuba diving,

jungle trekking; and culture with over 35 indigenous groups (Kler & Wong, 2018). Although a popular nature and adventure destination, few studies have explored the perceptions of domestic and international tourists towards the destination image of Sabah in Malaysia (Kani et al., 2017; Kler & Wong, 2018; Mat Som et al., 2012; Zain et al., 2015). In contrast to Western tourists who tend to perceive Sabah primarily as a destination for marine, nature and cultural experiences, Chinese tourists, who constitute the largest group in Sabah based on arrival statistics (Sabah Tourism Board, n.d.), may have a different perception of this destination due to their distinct cultural background in terms of motivation, behavioral patterns and perceptions (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2018; Fawzi et al., 2018; Li & Lu, 2016; McCartney, 2008). However, there is a limited body of work that examines the perception of Chinese tourists, as the largest source market, on Sabah's destination image as a tourist destination. Since the portrayal of a tourist destination plays a crucial role in attracting a larger number of potential tourists, this impacts the sustained expansion of the destination within the mass tourism sector. However, the utilization of standard attributes across several target markets may hinder the efficacy of marketing efforts due to the presence of diverse cultural backgrounds. There is a need to identify the online destination image (ODI) as portrayed by UGC and, in the context for Sabah, to understand the attributes projected by Chinese tourists in relation to the DMOs. Therefore, the following research questions are raised:

RQ₁: What ODI of Sabah do Chinese tourists share during or after their visits?

RQ₂: What are the dominant attributes of Sabah's ODI as perceived by Chinese tourists?

This exploratory study contributes to understanding ODI based on the cultural background of the tourist generating region (TGR) (Leiper, 1979). The literature section presents four overviews: the 3S model, tourist destination image and the influence of culture on destination image, the role of user-generated content in shaping destination image, and a brief critique of Leiper's tourism system for destination image. This is followed by findings, discussion, conclusions and limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. 3S TOURISM MODEL

As the distinctive tourism resource in tropical regions, 3S has been utilized by the majority of coastal tourist destinations in the Caribbean islands since the 1960s, as these 3S attributes provide an appealing environment

differing from an individual's daily life (Stupart & Shipley, 2013). The 3S tourism model is representative of mass tourism and the influx of inbound tourists, relying on appealing themes for attraction (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014), particularly from TGR that do not have similar attractions (Leiper, 1979). Tourist destinations, particularly those in coastal areas, have promoted their tourism sector by emphasizing the 3S imagery (Mendoza-González et al., 2018; Stupart & Shipley, 2013). Nevertheless, the rise of niche tourism has meant the 3S model no longer remains as the focal point for tourists. Contemporary tourists are seeking experiences that go beyond the traditional 3S, so diminishing the allure of these elements (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014). Pike (2009) observes that in the era of UGC, the exclusive emphasis of coastal destination marketers on conventional destination characteristics, such as the traditional 3S, poses challenges in discerning any exceptional traits of a specific location. Therefore, it is imperative for tourism destinations that possess tourism resources related to 3S to actively seek out new and innovative tourism attractions, services, facilities and images to avoid stagnation. This requires a collective endeavor to go beyond the limitations of the 3S and explore other options (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2015; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2014), grounded in the cultural background of the TGR.

2.2. TOURIST DESTINATION IMAGE (TDI) AND THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

Potential tourists make travel decisions based on destination images divisible into cognitive, affective and conative properties of thought, emotion and action that are used to assess attributes, evoke sentiments and motivate visits (Baloglu et al., 2014; Kislali et al., 2016). Understanding these three elements of a destination image is crucial for developing an efficient marketing and promotion plan for the destination (Stylidis & Cherifi, 2018). In the context of tourist destination marketing, two primary trajectories exist for the purpose of constructing a tourist destination image (TDI): the projected image and the perceived image (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). The projected image refers to the dissemination of ideas and perceptions about a particular destination, primarily through the efforts of DMOs or other entities within the tourist industry (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018) while perceived image holds significant influence in the tourists' decision-making process (Chen & Tsai, 2007). However, the concept of perceived image pertains to a cognitive framework that arises from the interplay between the projected image and an individual's personal attributes. This construct is primarily oriented towards tourists and is regarded as a motivating factor, commonly referred to as a push factor, that influences

tourist behavior (Chan & Zhang, 2018; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). The compound nature of TDI is perceived as comprising identifiable and quantifiable elements of a location linked to the reactions of tourists throughout their travels. Perceived TDI by tourists is considered to be the precursor of the projected image, as it plays a substantial role in shaping it (Chan & Zhang, 2018; Kavatzis & Hatch, 2013). The perception and selection of a tourist's ultimate destination are influenced by the combination of an accurate projected image and efficient marketing methods (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). Studies demonstrate the presence of disparities between the perceived image by tourists and the projected images conveyed by DMOs (Chan & Zhang, 2018; Ji & Wall, 2015; Mak, 2017; Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). Such incongruities inevitably lead to confusion among tourists regarding the portrayal of tourist destinations, thereby negatively affecting destination marketing efforts. Hence, the ability to recognize these discrepancies or disparities between anticipated visual representations and actual visual experiences empowers destination marketers to effectively adapt their strategic approaches in order to communicate precise messages to prospective tourists (Li et al., 2015). According to Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell (2018), there exists a positive correlation between the alignment of projected images and perceived images, and the effectiveness of a destination's positioning and promotional endeavors.

Destination image plays a pivotal role in shaping a destination's development trajectory and establishing its brand equity (Day & Kour, 2021). Essentially, it encapsulates the perceptions and impressions that individuals hold about a particular destination influenced by a myriad of factors such as marketing efforts, word-of-mouth recommendations, historical and cultural significance, and personal experiences (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2018). Moreover, TDI is not merely a passive construct but rather an active and dynamic asset that is cultivated and shaped by various stakeholders (Day & Kour, 2021) and based on their cultural worldview.

Studies have indicated that the formation of TDI is significantly influenced by a range of internal and external factors, including demographic, psychological and cultural factors (McCartney, 2008; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Culture is commonly seen as the amalgamation of an individual's knowledge, beliefs, values, habits, rituals and principles within a certain society (Fawzi et al., 2018). One notable feature of mass tourism is the influx of tourists with diverse cultural norms originating from various countries and regions to specific places (Wengel et al., 2022) resulting in varying interpretations of things and phenomena. Consequently, tourists from different cultural backgrounds are likely to possess distinct perspectives of the value to be attributed to a particular

place (Fawzi et al., 2018). According to McCartney (2008), variations in geography and culture contribute to divergent perceptions of tourist destinations. Bonn et al. (2005) indicated the marketing communication approach for a destination should primarily rely on the image perceptions derived from the originating source. Chen and Tsai (2007) illustrated that tourists originating from diverse geographical regions and possessing distinct national cultures exhibit varying perceptions towards a shared destination. Studies assert that perceptions of a certain tourist destination are profoundly shaped by psychological variables, specifically cultural values, which exert a substantial influence on the formation of a destination's image (Fawzi et al., 2018; Kim & McKercher, 2011). For a nation engrossed in UGC, and comprising the largest outbound tourist market, there is a need to explore the types of destination images being projected by Chinese tourists through UGC.

2.3. USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC) AND ONLINE DESTINATION IMAGE (ODI)

User-generated content (UGC) is often regarded as a digital manifestation of word-of-mouth (WOM) and refers to a collection of internet-based apps that fall under the category of Web 2.0. These applications facilitate user interaction, as well as the creation and sharing of information (Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015). Some notable examples of popular social media platforms are Douyin (China's TikTok), Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, TripAdvisor, Twitter and other blogs. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) refers to individuals' inclination to recommend a destination through verbal comments and visual resources to other internet users who are looking for relevant information (Hidalgo Alcázar et al., 2014; Lee & Tussyadiah, 2010; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). The proliferation of e-WOM has led to the perception of UGC as a credible and valuable resource for obtaining information. Travelers generally place more trust in personal travel experiences that are posted on blogs as compared to the information provided by DMOs (Huertas & Marine-Roig, 2016; No & Kim, 2015).

The advent of the Internet's quick advance has led to significant changes in the way travelers seek and disseminate information regarding tourism suppliers and destinations (Kim et al., 2018). User-generated content, as an outgrowth of this development, is an important evaluative source of secondary information that has a role in shaping the perception and image of a tourist destination (Hidalgo Alcázar et al., 2014; Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Li et al., 2015; Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011). Consequently, the influence of UGC on the development of TDI experiences is continuous (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2020; Li et al., 2015; Marine-Roig

& Anton Clavé, 2016). Hidalgo Alcázar et al. (2014) assert that UGC plays a significant role in the transmission of information and has an impact on tourists' opinions of destinations. Moreover, UGC places significant emphasis on two main aspects pertaining to TDI. One is to explore the perceptions of different marketing segments towards various destinations. Another aspect to consider is the contrast between TDI created by UGC and that presented by different travel brokers, government sources and general media. The literal images and visual images offered by DMOs serve as a significant factor in enticing prospective tourists, and to influence tourists' perceptions about a particular destination (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011). Now however, there is competition from UGC which produces a separate ODI.

The significance of ODI in determining the success of a destination brand is linked to its effect on tourists' intentions to visit, as demonstrated by the effects of e-WOM and virtual experiences (Zhou, 2019). The term "ODI" is used to describe the online portrayal of a place, encompassing its collective thoughts, knowledge, sentiments, beliefs and overall impressions, as documented on the internet and social media (Mak, 2017). The utilization of online technologies, specifically social media platforms and the dissemination of e-WOM, has brought about significant changes in the tourism sector. Online platforms have the potential to impact tourists' inclinations to visit a particular destination (Litvin et al., 2008). The influence of UGC and e-WOM plays a significant role in shaping the ODI of a brand (Williams et al., 2017). This is particularly important because potential tourists often have limited familiarity with destinations they have not yet visited, and therefore rely heavily on the perceived image of a destination as portrayed through the information sources they consult to make informed decisions.

2.4. LEIPER'S TOURISM SYSTEM AND DESTINATION IMAGE

Leiper's tourism system (Leiper, 1979), serves as a comprehensive theoretical framework that explores the intricacies of the tourism process elucidating the interconnected relationships among three key components: TGR, transit route and tourist destination region (TDR). Tourist generating region represents the origin of tourists and its influence on motivations and behaviors. The transit route encompasses the journey from TGR to TDR, incorporating various stops and experiences. Tourist destination region, as the ultimate destination, includes attractions, accommodation and the overall tourism infrastructure. Leiper's tourism system offers a comprehensive viewpoint on the movements of tourists and the interconnected services that facilitate them, incorporating ideas such as tourist flow and the tourist industry. It is highly

beneficial in the field of destination image as it aids in understanding tourist behavior, and facilitating tailored destination marketing strategies based on the preferences of diverse tourist markets. The system emphasizes the alignment of the projected destination image with the perceptions held by potential tourists, crucial for effective destination management. The system sheds light on the impact of cultural values from TGR on tourists' perceptions of specific places, offering a structured approach to studying cultural influences on TDI. Overall, this system serves as a versatile tool for researchers and practitioners, providing comprehensive insights into managing and enhancing TDI. However, few attempts have been made to link differences in TGR and TDR from an ODI perspective as proposed by this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. STUDY SETTING

The study setting is Sabah situated in the northern region of Borneo. Sabah holds the distinction of being the second biggest state in Malaysia and is commonly referred to as the Land Below the Wind. Sabah is renowned for its key tourism resources, namely its rich marine biodiversity, abundant wildlife resources and distinctive cultural heritage. These remarkable attributes have consistently captivated a vast number of international tourists, drawing millions to explore the region. In 2018, the number international tourists arriving from China was 593,623 (Sabah Tourism Board, n.d.) via scheduled and chartered direct flights into Kota Kinabalu, the capital. On Ctrip, Sabah was chosen as a top ten destination for close to 6.5 million outbound Chinese tourists (Jaipragas, 2018).

3.2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an interpretivist inquiry methodology to explore Sabah's destination image as expressed by Chinese tourists on Douyin. The research design was led by a qualitative content analysis (QCA), a systematic approach for the encoding and interpretation of symbolic texts or pictures within the realm of communication (Camprubi & Coromina, 2016). This study collected a purposive sample of Douyin contents for the purpose of data analysis and interpretation.

Douyin is widely recognized as one of the most prevalent mobile applications in China; the rest of the world calls it TikTok. The application has garnered significant attention and engagement within the realm of Chinese internet culture. Users disseminate their

emotions and perceptions of the world and articulate their individual perspectives on societal matters via this platform. Its short-form video format enables anyone with a mobile device to create, watch, and share short videos. The total number of Douyin users had surpassed 732 million at the end of 2023 (Lai, 2024) gaining recognition as a valuable platform for marketing promotion due to its robust sociability and wide reach. Consequently, it has garnered considerable attention from marketers in the tourism sector (Zhou, 2019).

The objective of this study was to identify Sabah's ODI through the perceptions of Chinese tourists. The researchers opted for purposive sampling as a method to deliberately select information-rich samples that align with specific research objectives (Palys, 2008). Furthermore, given the constraints of time, resources and personnel, as well as the extensive number of primary samples (exceeding 10,000 videos of Sabah on Douyin), the utilization of purposive sampling emerged as the most suitable approach (Palys, 2008).

3.3. DATA COLLECTION

Data collection proceeds through keyword searches deemed relevant: 'Sabah', 'Sabah tourism', 'KK tourism', 'Kota Kinabalu', 'Yabi' (the Chinese name for Kota Kinabalu), 'sceneries of Sabah', 'Malaysia Sabah', 'Semporna' and 'Semporna Tourism'. Significantly, the utilization of keyword search yielded a substantial corpus of over 10,000 videos pertaining to the region of Sabah, spanning the temporal range from March 2018 to December 2021. The data gathering process was centered around the extraction of videos that met specific purposeful sample criteria as follows: (a) videos that received a minimum of 5000 'likes'; (b) videos posted by commercial influencers or vloggers excluded; (c) both textual comments and visual content of the videos must focus on tourism; and (d) nine specific keywords (mentioned above) guided the selection process. A total of 37 videos as shown in Table 1, together with their corresponding literal comments, were chosen for the purpose of QCA to identify and analyze the essential attributes of Sabah's ODI. In essence, once a video satisfied the established criteria, it was observed and pertinent information was recorded. In order to maintain precision, video comments underwent a consecutive translation procedure (Griffin & Dimanche, 2017). The researchers translated every chosen comment from Chinese to English and subsequently engaged another bilingual researcher, fluent in both English and Chinese, to review the translated content, a step taken to confirm the translations' accuracy. Once the assessment of the 37 videos no longer indicated novel insights nor categories, data collection was discontinued as it had reached the point of data saturation (Charmaz, 2006).

Table 1. The purposive sample of Douyin contents

No	Vlogger	Citation	Likes	Destination image attributes
1	静 byakuyai (Jing byakuyai)	One of the world's top three sunsets; are you aware of its location? It is beyond descriptively gorgeous	1,617,000	Sunset
2	Diodes	Experiencing the most exquisite sunset from the preeminent hotel in Sabah	29,000	Sunset
3	Cecilia	The sunset of unparalleled beauty in Sabah	159,000	Sunset
4	金达慧馆 (Jin da hui guan)	Sabah's picturesque sunset galvanizes visitors from around the globe. It truly is magnificent	40,000	Sunset
5	无规则的鱼 (Wu gui ze de yu)	Musang King durian is glutinous and fragrant	538,000	Durian
6	萝 bird (Luo bird)	The mermaid island is in Sabah, Malaysia	76,000	Island
7	礼拜五 (Li bai wu)	Desire to never return home	58,100	Sunset
8	Diodes	Traveling downtown in order to savor seafood	277,000	Seafood
9	魔女柠檬 (Mo nv ning meng)	Sabah at sunset has a more stunning sunset glow	13,400	Sunset
10	罗玺纳商贸有限公司 (Luo xi na shang mao you xian gong si)	Awesome!	4,705,000	Semporna water resort
11	小小皮妈妈 (Xiao xiao pi ma ma)	The sunset that is most picturesque in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia	16,000	Sunset
12	Joan	The magnificent sunset over K.K.	224,000	Sunset
13	大英雄k凌 (Da ying xiong k ling)	Seafood at the night market in K.K. is available for a very low price	13,000	Seafood
14	Cynthia	This island is Matakang	561,000	Island
15	我想静静 (Wo xiang jing jing)	The video on Douyin entices me to pay a visit to Semporna. It is beneficial to spend the night in the water resort	2,084,000	Semporna water resort
16	专打妖魔鬼怪 (Zhuan da yao mo gui guai)	It takes me two hours to go to the top of the mountain to see the amazing view of Semporna	47,000	Mountain hiking
17	Qing 青 (Qing qing)	As a boy lacking nationality, he is unable to spend his entire existence on land	543,000	Sea gypsies
18	Venice	Super seafood is available at reasonable prices at the seafood night market in K.K., and tiger shrimp are enormous	7,000	Seafood
19	欧尼 (Ou ni)	Flying with Mama in K.K.	96,000	Parasailing
20	陈教授 (Chen jiao shou)	The ideal place to enjoy the world's most magnificent sunset	6,000	Sunset
21	悦己者2018 (Yue ji zhe 2018)	At last, the enigmatic floating boat comes into view. Living in the amazing water house is terrific	240,000	Sea gypsies
22	涵之图 (Han zhi tu)	In Semporna, I also noticed this child dozing off on the boat. I bought a coconut from his sibling for ten RM	164,000	Sea gypsies
23	缓特星-爱嘉 (Huan te xing - ai jia)	Malaysia Sabah, Land Below the Wind	22,000	Sunset

24	国服张飞 (Guo fu zhang fei)	With the exception of traffic signals, Sabah excels at every aspect	76,000	Seafood
26	是 dogogi 呀 (Shi dogogi ya)	The sound of 'wow' from a street vendor selling durian drew me in	18,000	Durian
27	小叮当老姨妈 (Xiao ding dang lao yi ma)	Sabah's Holy Mountain, Malaysia's most beautiful paradise	6,128	Mountain Kinabalu
28	叫做你的那个人 (Jiao zuo ni de na ge ren)	I live with the years before accompanying you to the light of day	10,000	Sunset
29	陈敏之 sharon chan (Chen min zhi sharon chan)	Steam train in KK, Sabah, Malaysia	17,000	Steam train
30	Xinerchok	Malaysia/ Fantastic sea view/ Sabah/ Semporna	5,402	Sea, sand, sun
31	虫虫长城队 (Chong chong chang cheng dui)	Take a glass of water from the sky! Doesn't that mean it's here?	13,000	Scuba diving
32	爱格妈 (Ai ge ma)	The sea gypsies in Semporna	20,000	Sea gypsies
33	盐城小猪猪 (Yan cheng xiao zhu zhu)	After seven days of traveling, diving, watching the sunset, eating seafood, curry and bakKutteh, and swinging on a firefly in Malaysia, I decided that the world was worth it	13,000	Mermaid island, sunset, seafood, snorkeling
34	路人甲生活记 (Lu ren jia sheng huo ji)	I took my parents abroad for the first time in 2019, and they stated it will be a trip they remember for years to come	200,000	Sea gypsies, KK cityscape, seafood, Gaya street, sunset, scuba diving
35	Hulu shiba	There is always the most breathtaking scenery on the journey. # Semporna Kapalai Water house	7,186	Semporna water resort, mangrove, proboscis monkey, firefly, sunset, Mount Kinabalu, Desa Dairy Farm, paragliding, skybus
36	么么那个么么 (Yao yao na ge yao yao)	The sixty-second video in which I declare my admiration for the beautiful Semporna	122,000	Pearl island, sea gypsies, snorkeling, sunset, seafood, fruits
37	珊珊大宝贝 (Shan shan da bao bei)	I'll return after my vacation is over	26,000	Island

Source: authors.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1. CATEGORY DEVELOPMENT AND DATA CODING

In qualitative content analysis, the coding frame comprises a primary category and two subordinate categories (Schreier, 2014). The primary category encompasses a wide range of study, potentially incorporating supplementary information that can be further explored in a concept-driven manner. Subcategories pertain to the specific details within the material related to the main category, which can be generated through a data-driven approach (Schreier, 2014). Hsieh and Shannon (2005)

suggest the coding frame can be informed by existing theory or research. In this study, coding categories were based on two sources. First, the TDI attributes of Borneo (Markwell, 2001) namely, nature, adventure and culture (NAC), were used as the coding frame to analyze the key attributes of Sabah's ODI. Secondly, Wong et al. (2017) identified eight subcategories for Borneo's TDI, which also informed the Douyin comments and videos. Data was subjected to iterative review and analysis until no novel concepts were discerned. Subsequently, the subcategories were interpreted and consolidated into overarching categories. Table 2 presents the definitions of the NAC coding frame utilized in this study.

Table 2. Coding frame categories, definitions and sub-categories

Main category	Definition	Subcategories
Nature	The inherent natural features of Sabah, including landscapes, flora and fauna	a) flora and fauna b) landscapes
Adventure	The tourism activities in Sabah, including exploration and experience	a) hard adventure b) soft adventure
Culture	The values, beliefs or manifestations of native people, including local arts, handicrafts, traditions, customs and cuisines and tribes	a) architecture b) cuisines c) tribes d) artificial attractions

Source: adapted from Wong et al. (2017).

4.2. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The nature, adventure and culture (NAC) coding frame includes the first category coded as “nature”, referring to the intrinsic natural attributes of Sabah’s destination image with two subcategories: ‘flora and fauna’, and ‘landscape’ based on the data-driven contents of texts and videos. The second category was coded as “adventure”, with two subcategories: hard adventure, a tourism activity with high risk requiring high levels of professional skills; and, soft adventure, a tourism activity with low risk requiring a lower level of professional skills. The final category was “culture” referring to local people’s values, beliefs and manifestations, as well as the intangible and tangible cultural attributes of Sabah. Architecture, cuisine, tribes and artificial attractions are within this category.

The perception of Sabah’s ODI among Chinese tourists involved an analysis of the chosen Douyin contents and literal comments, followed by a comparison to provide a table outlining the predominant features associated with Sabah within each category, as defined by the NAC coding framework. Table 3 provides a summary of the code counts for the categories and their corresponding subcategories.

Table 3 presents perceptions derived from the tourists’ personal trip experiences and judgments revealing the category of nature as the main theme. This category was further divided into two subcategories: flora and fauna, and landscapes. Of the several natural aspects of Sabah, the sunset held the utmost significance in shaping its image. Fifteen Douyin contents garnered a substantial number of likes showcasing Sabah as a popular tourist destination for its breathtaking sunset vistas.

Table 3. High-frequency attributes in Sabah’s online destination image (ODI)

Main category	Subcategories	Attributes	Frequency	
Nature	Flora and fauna	Proboscis monkey	1	
		Firefly	1	
		Mangrove forest	1	
	Landscapes	Sunset	15	
		Islands	5	
		Sea, sand, sun	1	
		Mount Kinabalu	2	
		Desa Dairy Farm	1	
	Total			27
	Adventure	Hard adventure	Scuba diving	2
Snorkeling			3	
Soft adventure		Parasailing	2	
		Hiking	1	
Total			8	
Culture	Architecture	KK cityscape	1	
		Semporna water resort	3	
	Cuisine	Seafood	7	
		Special fruits	3	
	Tribes	Sea gypsies	6	
	Artificial attractions	Skybus	1	
		Steam train	1	
	Total			22

Source: authors.

Adventure can be defined as the result of the interaction between tourists and their surroundings. The findings illustrate four distinct attributes of tourism activity associated with the concept of “adventure” including snorkeling (3), scuba diving (2), parasailing (2) and mountain trekking (1). These attributes were not regarded as significant components of Sabah’s destination image because just eight videos met the established criteria. Additionally, the quantity of ‘likes’ was significantly lower compared to other

qualities. According to Kler and Wong (2018), Chinese tourists tend to consider Sabah as a leisurely tourist destination with lower levels of risk and time commitment, in contrast to Western tourists who predominantly associate Sabah with its reputation as a scuba diving paradise.

The categorization of Sabah's ODI for culture was condensed to six distinct attributes: Semporna water resort (3), seafood (7), sea gypsies (6), distinctive fruits (3), KK cityscape (1), skybus (1), and steam train (1). The portrayal of seafood and sea gypsies as the predominant qualities associated with Sabah's ODI was commonly observed within this particular category. The significance of partaking in local gastronomy has been widely recognized as one of the key incentives for tourists when selecting a destination. Findings revealed that Chinese tourists hold particularly favorable perception towards the seafood offerings in Sabah, mostly due to the affordable prices and diverse selection of fresh seafood available. Douyin contents have been utilized to depict the sea gypsy communities and water resorts situated in Semporna. Concurrently, the enigmatic tribes characterized by their nomadic and maritime lifestyle, along with their indigenous architectural structures, provided a remarkable encounter for Chinese tourists. Consequently, these distinctive attributes of Sabah's ODI were likely to be perceived in a favorable manner. Furthermore, it was apparent from the contents and accompanying comments that Chinese tourists were attracted to the 'Musang King' durian variety due to its esteemed reputation and popularity in China. The sales performances employed by the vendors also contributed to the tourists' perception of the fruit as an exotic and pleasurable experience.

5. DISCUSSION

This study employed Leiper's tourism system as a lens to understand the dynamics of Sabah's perceived ODI through an analysis of 37 Douyin contents, particularly how the TGR and the TDR interact. The interaction occurs through the act of sharing UGC by tourists, bound by their cultural background, on a visit to a coastal destination. This study interprets the tourism system by adding UGC to explain how eWOM is shaped by tourists producing an alternative ODI. Figure 1 indicates that UGC assumes the pull factor at the TDR based on experiences that are shared on via Douyin contents. Even before tourists depart for home, both the transit region and TGR are exposed to an alternative ODI to the one projected by DMOs. This is the power of eWOM through UGC which this study proposes is worth further consideration. Three key findings are discussed next.

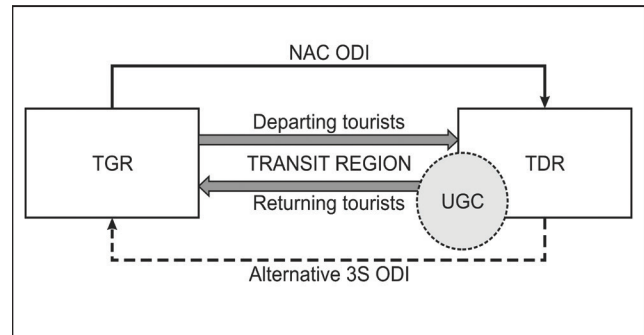


Figure 1. An interpretation of UGC-based ODI within Leiper's tourism system

Note: NAC – nature, adventure and culture, UGC – user-generated content, TGR – tourist generating region, TDR – tourist destination region, ODI – online destination image
Source: authors

First, Chinese tourists perceived Sabah's ODI as a tropical tourist destination that offers awe-inspiring beach sunsets. The following attribute focused on gustatory experiences of delectable seafood which is a cultural experience. However, the next cultural attraction was completely different to the projected image by DMOs featuring instead stateless sea gypsies. Notably, the sea gypsies are a contentious attribute as they are an unofficial addition to the tourism context in Sabah, a discussion which is beyond the scope of this article but worthy of future study as Douyin content is promoting these 'mysterious' peoples. Ultimately, the findings revealed a different perceived image among the Chinese which conforms to Leiper's notion on how cultural values influence TDI. These findings challenge the traditional 3S model by identifying an alternative 3S ODI shared by Chinese tourists indicating that they were influenced by the unique cultural context, shaping their preferences for participating in tourism activities they cannot experience at their TGR (Li & Lu, 2016). Influenced by Confucian philosophy and collectivism, they recognize the need for maintaining a balanced state of mind and emotional well-being, highlighting the importance of understanding the psychological aspects of the tourist experience (Kwek & Lee, 2010). In Sabah, this included gazing at, enjoying and photographing sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies. Hence, eWOM appeals to those seeking relaxation on holiday (Anantamongkolkul et al., 2017). This alternative 3S model provides more than just a picturesque view and unique cultural experience, it represents an indelible and distinctive holiday encounter for Chinese tourists, offering a departure from their routine environment. The marked difference potentially elevates tourists' sense of joy to a level that prompts them to share their experiences through Douyin contents. The distinction between the TGR and the TDR plays a pivotal role in shaping travel motivations. Understanding this interplay between the TGR and TDR through Leiper's lens

allows for a deeper exploration of the emotional aspects influencing Chinese tourists' travel decisions. The alternative 3S model is in contrast to activities sought by Western tourists, who have a greater inclination towards scuba diving and wildlife observation (Wong et al., 2017; Zain et al., 2015). Leiper's tourism system highlights the dynamic interplay between the TGR and the TDR, emphasising the significance of viewing the tourism experience. In tourism marketing, it is important to ensure projected and perceived image are coherent as a way to increase brand equity for destinations as this will effectively attract tourists and enhance the effectiveness of marketing efforts.

User-generated content is acknowledged as a reliable source for shaping the perceptions of potential tourists regarding a destination (Hidalgo Alcázar et al., 2014; Wengel et al., 2022). Leveraging platforms like Douyin, where video content is widely shared, becomes a significant aspect of this dynamic. The vivid portrayal of Sabah's alternative 3S image on Douyin has the potential to significantly shape the perceptions of potential tourists in China, providing them with a virtual experience that goes beyond conventional marketing approaches. Visual stimuli can act as motivating factors in the tourist decision-making process for destination selection (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023; Kislali et al., 2016; Pike & Page, 2014). In essence, the sunsets portrayed on Douyin became a symbolic bridge in Leiper's tourism system, as well as the dominant attribute of Sabah's destination image perceived by Chinese tourists, connecting the motivations, and the ultimate decision to choose Sabah as their preferred tourist destination. This nuanced understanding is crucial for destination DMOs who aim to utilize the influence of social media in shaping the ODI and attracting a wider range of tourists.

Lastly, Leiper's tourism system framework offers valuable insights into the dynamics of any promotional strategy emphasizing the interconnected relationships among the TGR and the TDR. Findings indicated that Chinese tourists exhibited a greater inclination towards an alternative destination image of sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies compared to the expectations set by the official projected image. This discrepancy suggested that the DMOs promotional efforts may need to consider the specific preferences and motivations of the Chinese TGR. There is an opportunity for the STB to diversify its promotional approach beyond the traditional focus on 3S for coastal-based destinations. This strategic diversification aims to enhance the overall appeal of these destinations and stimulate their development while aligning with the preferences of the target tourist market. Consequently, the implementation of effective marketing and promotion methods becomes essential in navigating the complexities of a diverse tourism system (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018).

6. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study delved into the role of Douyin in shaping the destination image of Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. To answer RQ₁, the findings illuminated a distinct perception towards Sabah's ODI among Chinese tourists, setting them apart from the Western tourists. The emergence of the novel trio, coined as the alternative 3S (sunsets, seafood and sea gypsies) challenges the traditional 3S (sun-sea-sand) image typically associated with Sabah achieving RQ₂. This study makes a few propositions. First, Chinese tourists share a different ODI from Western tourists due to different cultural values. Secondly, Chinese tourists have alternative ODI of coastal destinations that challenges the traditional 3S model. Lastly, UGC such as Douyin is useful for exploring tourist's perceived image and closing the gap between projected and perceived images. Coastal tourist destinations must undertake significant initiatives to enhance their brand equity, which entails expanding beyond the conventional 3S offers, utilizing alternative strategies to effectively convey a tailored image to the potential tourist market. Moreover, it is imperative for DMOs of TDR to adeptly disseminate the perception of ODI to diverse tourist markets, considering the specific regions from which these tourists originate (Marine-Roig & Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). By understanding the dynamics between TGR and TDR, DMOs can leverage this knowledge to shape a comprehensive and appealing ODI.

The theoretical implications suggest that destination branding strategies should not only focus on the traditional elements but also embrace alternative narratives and experiences that resonate with evolving tourist preferences. Moreover, this study highlights the significance of understanding the cultural dynamics between TGR and TDR in shaping the overall destination image, due to UGC which transforms e-WOM. Findings provide DMOs with valuable insights to craft tailored marketing strategies that effectively engage diverse tourist markets.

Three notable limitations are addressed. Firstly, the absence of a well-defined conceptual framework establishing the internal relationships between culture, TGR, and TDR raises concerns. Secondly, the findings are contextual and cannot be generalized. Thirdly, this study explores ODI solely based on the perspective of nationality. Due to the different nature of destinations' target markets, there are numerous criteria for target market segmentation. To enhance the accuracy of evaluating any target market's perceptions of an ODI, future work can employ various variables for a more precise assessment. Therefore, future work endeavors should aim to empirically validate these findings. The exploration of the impact of social media, particularly on platforms like Douyin and others, warrants further exploration within the realm of ODI research.

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