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**ANALYSING PENANG DESTINATION IMAGE FROM ONLINE
TOURISM DOMAIN**

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Abstract

Penang, which is rich in cultural heritage and golden sandy beaches, is one of the major tourist destinations in Malaysia. From the marketing perspective, destination image is one of the important factors that influences tourists' destination selection. Nevertheless, studies on investigating the online tourism image of Penang, in particular, are limited. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore the image formation of Penang on the Internet by examining the contents of several selected websites from Online Tourism Domain (OTD). This study used a qualitative approach that combined QDA Miner 4.0 and Word Stat 7.1 software, which were used to analyse the textual content from 25 different OTD. The websites were classified under five sub-categories; Government tourism portal, news and media websites, travel agency websites, travel guide websites, and travelogue websites. The finding of the study suggested that each sub-category is unique to itself, and has its own focus and possibly target market. 'Malaysia', the top projected image generated from the study indicated Penang as a location rather than a destination. However, a few images that were also listed subtly suggested that Georgetown, the capital of Penang is a part of the World Heritage sites. This research could create awareness among local tourism marketers, by assisting them to improve Penang's image projection. Several major attractions and activities in Penang that were not related to heritage and food seemed to be less discussed on the studied websites. Such information should not be disregarded as it creates a competitive advantage and is vital to gain tourists' satisfaction.

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Keywords: Destination Image, Penang, Tourism, Travel website.



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1. Introduction

The scenario of the last four decades has shown us the vital value of destination image as the concept to unveil tourists' decision-making in selecting their destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Chen and Tsai (2007) also discussed the influence of destination image on tourists' destination choice and the significance of having a perspicuous image as it provides a competitive advantage to one place. It is learnt, however, projected image may not always fulfil the expectation of travellers. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) stated that travellers' satisfaction is purely based on their previous perceived image and the reality faced at the destination.

In this digital age, online technology has allowed prospective tourists to have direct access to any travel information that they require, such as trip ideas, places of interest as well as travelling packages. Apart from that, freedom in sharing the information over the internet also has permitted travellers and travel industry professionals to share their experience and knowledge through social media, e-travel magazines and travel websites. Likewise, some materials posted online by previous travellers become sources that serve as image formation agents for the potential visitors (Koltringer & Dickinger, 2015). This shared information not only provides the potential tourists with some idea about their destination but also mentally and physically prepares them.

Due to its complexity and the significance of this concept; many scholars were fascinated to explore topics that evolved around destination image. Nevertheless, only limited studies researched on Penang as a touristic destination, and even fewer discussed online destination image of Penang. Therefore, this paper aimed to identify online images that represent Penang. To achieve the aim, this paper analysed the image formation of Penang on the internet by looking at the contents of a variety of web information sources. These included webpages from Malaysia Tourism, tour operators, travel agents, online travel magazines and travel guide as well as online travel blogs or travelogues.

2. Internet Content Analysis of Previous Research on Destination Image

Internet as a new technology has dramatically changed the way we do both business and implementing strategies (Porter, 2001). The usage of the technology is not limited to businesses, Buhalis and Law (2008) suggested that tourists as consumers are taken by this technology. They reasoned that the internet assists in spreading tourism related information reshapes the way people travel and the tourism industry as a whole. The success of this industry is depending heavily on information, hence, it is crucial for the industry players to comprehend the shift in technologies that influence the spread of travel related information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). It is safe to include destination image as one of the elements in travel related information; Jenkins (1999) described destination image as the idea and impression that one possesses of a place. There are an abundance of destination image related data and other travel-related features available on the internet; and this internet function is what Xiang and Gretzel (2010) considered as Online Tourism Domain (OTD).

OTD is proven to be beneficial not only to the industry and travellers, but also the scholars. Stepchenkova and Morrison (2006) retrieved data from 212 American and Russian websites of OTD, such as tour operators and official sources. Their study aimed to compare "US and Russian website materials

related to travel to Russia to determine whether the two sides differed in: (1) most frequently mentioned places in the country; and (2) descriptions of Russia as a travel destination” (Stepchenkova and Morrison, 2006). To analyse their data, Stepchenkova and Morrison utilised *Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software* (CAQDAS), namely CATPAC II and WORDER. Their findings suggested that American travel agents through their websites primarily focused on the western region of Russia, and placed the country as a historical and cultural destination. Meanwhile, the Russian webpages, despite “loaded with information” required upgrades that cover specific market segments and travel interest.

In destination image study, OTD works hand in hand with CAQDAS. Another scholar that applied the same approach in his study is Son (2011). Son’s research was to identify the westerners’ image of Zhangjiajie, China as a destination based on negative and positive contents of travel blogs. Unlike many other touristic destinations, Zhangjiajie was not popular until the 1980s. Therefore, this destination still has a lot of academic mysteries to be unlocked. This motivated Son to pilot the travellers’ experience study in Zhangjiajie. The OTD in this research were travel blogs, and 15 of them were identified and analysed. The CAQDAS that Son employed was NVivo software. The findings indicated that the western travellers were captivated by Zhangjiajie’s natural beauty and pleased with the “nature-based tourism attractions”. Despite the positive remarks, the study proposed a few features to enhance the future travellers’ experience.

2.1. Tourism in Penang

Tourism is the second biggest sector when it comes to Penang’s economy (OECD, 2011), making it one of the most visited states in Malaysia (Ghaderi et al., 2012). Most tourists are drawn to Penang’s culture, heritage and nature. Ranjanthran and Mohammed (2011) explained that the historical background of Penang also promotes tourism industry in the state. Chai (2011) noted that Penang’s exclusive features would not have been materialised without its people, which are the main legacy of the colonial era. For instance, the fusions of *Baba-Nyonya* (Straits Chinese), *Peranakan Jawi* (Indian Muslim) along with other races like the Malay, Chinese and Indian have created diverse food, unique colonial architectures, and other cultural practices that are uniquely Penang.

In addition, 2008 became a notable year for Malaysia as 2 of her colonial cities, Georgetown in Penang, and Melaka have been recognised as World Heritage (UNESCO, 2017). This international recognition creates an excellent image for Penang and pins her on the world travel map. The UNESCO award is an outstanding addition to the long existing marketing activities endorsed or hosted by the government. Among the annual events that pull both the international and local crowds are *Pesta Pulau Pinang* (Penang Festival), *Chingay* (big flag), and Penang Bridge International Marathon (Penang Tourism, 2009). Apart from these events, Penang also has other physical attractions as shown in Table 1.

Table 01. Tourism products offered in Penang

Tourism Products	Product Types	Locations
Natural Beauty Attractions	Beaches	Batu Ferringhi, Tanjung Bungah, Teluk Bahang and Muka Head
	Hills	Bukit Bendera
	Reserved Forests	Botanical Gardens, Butterfly Farm & Penang Youth Park
	Waterfalls	Titi Kerawang
	Dam	Air Itam, Teluk Bahang
	Small Islands	Pulau Aman, Pulau Kendi, Payar
	Fruits	Tropical Fruit Farm, Balik Pulau
Man-made Attractions	Museums, Art Galleries, Places of Worship, Heritage Buildings and Sites	Wat Chayamangkalaram, Kek Lok Si, Padang Kota, Snake Temple, Kuan Yin Temple, Aceh Mosque, Mariamman Temple, St. George Church, St. Ann Church, Chinese Clan Houses, Clock Tower
Infrastructure	Airport, Bridges, Railroads, Basic Amenities, Hotels	Bayan Lepas Airport, Penang Bridge, Railway Station
Other Forms of Tourism Products	Shopping Complexes, Culinary Options, Night Life	Gurney Plaza, Upper Penang Road, Gurney Drive, Penang Times Square, Queensbay

(Source: Ranjanthran & Mohammed, 2011)

3. Methodology

This study sought to identify the images of Penang on travel related websites. To achieve the aim, this paper opted a qualitative methodological approach known as ‘content analysis text based CAQDAS package’. Google search engine was used to browse the OTD and germane pages were selected. These chosen websites were based on the keywords, which included ‘Penang Travel’, ‘Penang Travel Blog’ and ‘Penang Travel Websites’. From the total lists of websites collected, irrelevant blogs that did not contain specific travel experience on Penang were excluded from the analysis. All the websites were then divided into 5 sub-categories:

- i. Government Tourism Portal,
- ii. News and Media websites,
- iii. Travel Agency websites,
- iv. Travel Guide websites,
- v. Travelogues.

To keep the relevance of the study, top 5 most frequently visited websites from each sub-category were chosen. In total, 25 websites were then placed in a file for further analysis through QDA Miner 4.0 and Word Stat 7.1. In the QDA Miner software, every file was coded and analysed before transferring the

data to the next software, Word Stat 7.1. The last software filtered away words with trivial details like 'before', 'the' and 'I'. The analyses from the selected websites were gathered and the words with the highest frequency would be taken as the online Penang destination image.

This study was limited to OTD websites that focused on Penang, hence, international opinions or ideas might be missed out. Apart from that, the results of the study were only restricted to English language webpages since the employed software did not recognise other local languages except for English.

4. Findings

4.1. The Most Frequently Used Words Based on Website Category

The results of the analysis using Word Stat 7.1 appears as in Table 2. The table compares the most frequently used words for each website sub-categories.

Table 02. Analysis on the most frequently used words per website sub-category

Rank	Government Tourism Portal	News & Media	Travel Agencies	Travel Guides	Travelogues
1	Malaysia	Tourism	Travel	Island	Food
2	Tourism	Georgetown	Malaysia	Malaysia	Hotel
3	World	Food	Tours	Beach	Street
4	Heritage	Malaysia	International	Georgetown	Temple
5	Island	Hotel	Company	Temple	Trip
6	International	World	Industry	Hotel	Art
7	Georgetown	Festival	Services	Bridge	Georgetown
8	Travel	Heritage	Customers	Hill	Famous
9	Festival	Street	Regional	Street	Café
10	Golf	Art	Island	Travel	Chinese

All the top 10 words from each subcategory are grouped into three classifications, based on their attributes:

- i. Geographical features (words that are linked to the setting of Penang as a location): Malaysia, Georgetown, and island.
- ii. Physical features (words that describe specific physical features related to Penang tourism): hotel, café, food, street, hill, temple, and beach.
- iii. Subjective features (words related to activities, or descriptions): famous, the world, heritage, travel, company, industry, services, regional, tourism, trip, art, festival, golf, international, and Chinese.

The geographical features repeatedly appeared in every sub-category, except in Travelogues. These words described the location of Penang and were helpful for those travellers who had little idea about Penang. Unlike Travelogues, other sub-categories used the word 'Malaysia' to elucidate the location. 'Malaysia' also appeared as the dominant word but without any significant distribution between the

rankings. The subjective feature words were found in all sub-categories but they were mostly located at the bottom 5 of the rankings.

Table 2 also shows that each website category had a different focus. In the Government Tourism Portal, only geographical and subjective feature words were used; among these words were 'world' and 'heritage'. Understanding that 'World Heritage' status (as discussed before) was one of the top selling points for Penang, hence it was natural to assume that the government was taking pride in that as well as seeing it as the marketing advantage for Penang. Other words in the government page like 'festival', and 'international' pictured many festive celebrations, and cultural and international events in Penang. The one and only word 'golf' appeared under the government sub-category; this was mainly due to 'golfing' being one of the highly promoted tourism activities and a niche product of Tourism Malaysia (Tourism Malaysia, 2017).

News and Media sub-category shared many similarities to the government website except there were some physical features represented in the ranking. This channel often reported on the locations or address of events, hotels and food reviews. Meanwhile, the Travel Agencies set their focus on tourism business related topics; as the words 'travel', 'tours', 'company', 'industry', 'services' and 'customers' suggested. These words were unique to the Travel Agencies as they did not appear in other sub-categories.

Travel Guides tend to show different pictures of Penang. Apart from its geographical feature words, physical feature words dominated the pages. Words like 'hotel' or 'street' could be linked to necessary tourism infrastructures or a direction to specific sites. Furthermore, the term 'beach', referring to Penang's famous beaches, 'hill', describing Penang Hill, and 'bridge', which referred to the two bridges connecting Penang to the mainland, were used to describe distinct physical features of Penang. Compared to other website categories, the travel guides seemed to be more balanced in term of the information they presented.

Travelogues did not discuss the geographical features of Penang that much. Presumably, the authors of travelogues believed that the readers were well aware of Penang's location. Physical features like 'food', 'temple', 'art', and 'café' or tourism related infrastructure such as 'street' or 'hotel' were frequently mentioned in travelogues, which were also linked to the experience of the authors of the pages. Meanwhile, 'street' could also be combined with 'food' to describe the well-known Penang street food.

4.2. The Representation of Penang's Image Based on Travel Related Websites

The results in Table 3 is further analysed in order to gain knowledge on how Penang is depicted by the travel related websites. In contrast to Table 2, Table 3 concluded the image portrayed in the studied websites based on the total word frequency count.

The geographical feature words conquered the top 3; again these words were used to educate the viewers about Penang, hence projecting a slight image or idea about the destination. The rest of the words (images) were heavily interrelated; Penang's status as one of the World Heritage sites is deeply linked to tourism. As it is known, the status assists in stimulating tourism activities of a destination. In this research, the images that were wholly linked to the status were 'Georgetown', 'world', 'heritage', and 'temple'. Other images like 'tourism', 'travel' and 'hotel' might be connected to the status and Penang generally, however, these terms were rather broad and commonly used by many other websites on OTD.

Table 03. Websites' Word Frequency Count.

Rank	Image	Govt. Tourism Portal	News & Media	Travel Agencies	Travel Guides	Travelogues	Total
1	Malaysia	160	83	16	139	10	408
2	Georgetown	62	101	2	127	15	307
3	Island	75	34	11	152	3	275
4	Tourism	153	102	5	3	1	264
5	World	97	69	4	49	5	224
6	Food	40	83	-	47	52	222
7	Travel	58	30	61	54	4	207
8	Hotel	10	73	9	79	30	201
9	Heritage	85	55	3	40	7	190
10	Temple	25	33	3	100	17	178

Travel Agencies and Travelogues represented a totally different image to the other three. As discussed before, these pages had a different focus and might as well had different target market. Travel Agencies manipulated the word 'travel' that showed insignificant images for Penang, whilst Travelogues emphasised on the word 'food', which was deemed as among the top images of Penang. Although each sub-category projected the image of Penang differently but on the average, some of the studied websites did present the suitable images that rightfully described Penang.

5. Conclusions

This research could bring practical implications to local tourism marketers, by assisting them to improve Penang's image projection in different online channels. The study also concludes, several Penang major attractions and activities that are not related to heritage and food seem to be less discussed. This might be a drawback for Penang as travellers' satisfaction of a destination also depends on their preparation before their journey.

Language barrier, as mentioned above, was an issue that caused the findings of the study to be less accurate in depicting the image of Penang. There were some other minor glitches in the findings; the words 'tourism', 'travel' and 'hotel' were too general to be classified as appropriate destination images. Nevertheless, these issues did not affect the credibility of the study since the methodology of the study was purely based upon word frequency counts. A number of arguments derived from this study that require further investigations; such as the Travel Agencies' websites were only focusing on their travel packages rather than aiming at giving away information about Penang as a destination. This may result in destination's misconceptions, or certain important information may be not delivered.

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