DESTINATION POSITIONING AND BRAND ELEMENTS:
AN EVALUATION OF NTO WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

Effective positioning of the website can help to develop the country’s overall competitive advantage with slogan being the crucial element of a destination brand. This exploratory study seeks to evaluate the websites of four key destinations in Asia—Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. Using content analysis, the brand-building elements contained in the chosen four NTO websites are considered in terms of their consistency, relevancy and distinctiveness. The finding provides useful implications for NTOs and other destination marketers in assessing how well they communicate the destination brand through their websites.

Key words: Branding, Positioning, Destination, Website Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

With the intensified competition between tourist destinations and the increasingly demanding customer, the need for destinations to create a unique identity—to differentiate themselves from their competitors—is more critical than ever [6]. As destinations need to become more and more competitive, the key challenge facing the National Tourism Organization (NTO) is to act as the manager of the country, to transfer the organization’s marketing strategy, and then to manage the organization as a brand to ensure that customer value can be delivered consistently. Since internet plays a significant role in attracting visitors and facilitating their trip planning and reservations, the website of a destination has become a crucial branding channel. The World Tourism Organization Business Council (WTOBC) stresses the importance of marketing tourism destinations online that ‘If you are not online then you are not on-sale within your key market’. The World Wide Web is the ideal channel for promotion of destinations, as it is a global medium (with no extra cost than to market regionally) and it can offer interactivity and multi-media experience (text, images, sound, and video). With the increasingly popularity of the internet for tourism, tourists will primarily base their decisions about which destinations to visit on the information available to them. If one Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) can better represent its destination on the internet than another then it may win the tourist who is uncertain about where to travel [13].

The ways in which tourism destinations and NTOs measure the effectiveness of their activities, in attracting tourism, is still developing. Academics and consultants are constantly seeking to develop and improve the ways in which this can be achieved. However, given the importance of internet, electronic branding has yet to be adequately conceptualized, particularly in the context of destination marketing [5]. The current study aims to fill the gap through the analysis of the four key destinations in Asia—Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, in terms of their brand-building elements through their official tourism websites.

BACKGROUND

Today, tourism is the world’s largest growth industry with no sign of slowing down in the 21st century. According to a recent estimate by the World Tourism Organization 2005, international tourist arrivals reached an all-time record of 760 million at the end of 2004, corresponding to an increase of 10% growth since 2003, the highest in 20 years record. The regions in Asia and the Pacific showed a particular strong growth. The growing significance of Asia as both a generating and receiving region highlights the need to move from a Eurocentric or Westerncentric view of tourism to a more global view [3]. Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore are among the key destinations in Asia that have established their recognition in tourism industry. These countries are listed by WTO as the world’s top 25 tourism destinations in terms of international tourist arrivals with Hong Kong ranked as the 7th (21.8 millions), Malaysia ranked
as the 13th (15.7 millions) and Thailand ranked as the 18th (11.7 millions) from the data collected in May 2005. While Singapore, currently not on the list, was previously ranked as one of the world top tourism destinations.

**RELATED LITERATURE**

**Country as a Travel Destination**

Choice of holiday destination, i.e. the places where tourist choose to spend their increasingly squeezed vacation time and hard earned income, is a significant lifestyle indicator for today’s aspirational consumers [6]. The World Tourism Organization refers to destinations as tomorrow’s fashion items, suggesting that the next century will mark the emergence of tourism destinations as a fashion accessory. The choice of holiday destination will help define the identity of the traveler. Today’s consumers have more product choice but less decision making time than ever before. Consequently, a brand that can help simplify decisions, reduce purchase risk, create and deliver expectations is invaluable [2]. For country as a destination, the notion of branding is particularly important in placing the destination in a competitive ranking in the consumer’s mind, thus reducing the risk for consumer in choosing that destination over others.

**Destination Positioning**

Brand positioning describes how a brand can effectively compete against a specified set of competitors in a particular market [2]. It is becoming more difficult to base slogans on real differences among product or service offerings in the more crowded and highly competitive markets of our time. This leads to greater efforts of marketers to find differences, either real or imaginary, among one firm’s product or service offering and others in the same marketplace. Effective positioning can be a source of competitive advantage for organizations in any industry consisting of close substitutes [10] and in tourism markets, competing destinations are indeed close substitutes [8]. In this regards, Pike [8] states that positioning can aid the DMO to cut through to the minds of consumers in markets that are crowded with the clutter of promotional messages of competing destinations and substitute products and services. Pike adds that to position a destination effectively, it requires a narrow focus. Further, competing destinations play a prominent role by providing a frame of reference required for defining a position [11]. While branding is often used interchangeably with positioning, Plog [9] points out that the distinction is branding applies a label or sort phrase to the positioning concept that conveys the essence of the positioning platform, quickly and easily, making the benefits easy to understand and memorable.

**Brand-Building Elements**

Brand Slogan is integral to the success of online marketing. It helps the brand to build recognition and contribute to its overall success. The use of keyword phrase is part of the brand building process. Slogan itself is not the most valuable asset, but through consistently use of these brand building elements can make a whole difference. Projecting the image of the destination brand by careful selection and tactical utilization of an effective slogan is essential for a destination marketer. Keller [2] defines brand elements as ‘those trademarkable devices that service to identify and differentiate the brand, of which the main elements are brand names, URLs, logos, symbols, characters, spokespeople, slogans, jingles, packages, and signage.’ According to Keller, what gives brand strength is cohesiveness among the brand elements. They must consistently support a clear and distinctive theme. The image of a destination is created through pictorial components of promotional material (e.g., brochures, websites, and pamphlets) and verbal expressions such as slogans and positioning statements.

**Prior Research in Destination Brands**

When consumers decide on a destination for a holiday or a business conference, several brands compete for their attention. A strong brand is differentiated from others, has several strong advantages when compared to others, and has an attractive appeal to consumers. In tourism, while factors such as cost of travel, convenience, and quality of facilities are important, the strongest motivator is brand image. Brand image mage puts a destination on the consumer's shopping list and creates an emotional appeal, which enhances that destination's chances of being chosen over others.

A survey in 1998 commissioned by the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, interviewing tourist agents from the US, Japan, India, Germany, Australia, UK and Sweden, indicates that Thailand had a brand image of ‘exotic’, fun, and ‘friendly people’, Malaysia was seen as ‘multicultural’ with many ‘beaches’. Singapore was seen as ‘clean, ‘modern’ and ‘safe’. Hong Kong was considered as part of China, its dominant image was ‘culture’. Interesting to note is another destination research conducted by Orient Pacific Century in 2003 using face-to-face survey of counter staff employees in 190 travel agent companies specializing in Asian region travel. The result in Graph 1 shows that the highest top-of-mind recall for destination in Asia Pacific is Thailand. Over 50% of respondents recalls Thailand as the first destination, either by the country itself or by one of districts—Bangkok, Phuket or Pattaya, reflecting a strong
awareness as a travel destination in Asia. Other ‘top-of-mind recall’ countries are Singapore, Hong Kong, Bali and Malaysia.

Graph 1: Brand Recognition and Recall of Asia-Pacific Travel Destinations
(Source: Orient Pacific Century, 2003)

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

This paper uses the official national tourism websites of four countries—Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, as the units of analysis. The four countries are chosen due to their world tourism standing and their proximity, therefore they serve as a good frame of reference for destination positioning. Because the websites vary in terms of content and format, the analysis focuses on the common directories, such as ‘trip planner’, ‘destinations/regions’, ‘things to do’, ‘attractions’, ‘festivals’, and ‘governor’s message’ or equivalent. The front page of each website is the most important element in terms of evaluation of overall impression of the site as it serves as a gateway to the information. The overall approach for the analysis is content analysis, an approach commonly used in evaluating tourism website.

This study evaluates the branding element used in each site by exploring logos and slogans contained in the select pages of the websites. In addition to tourism slogans, the study also considers other image-building elements, including pictorial and verbal messages and the design of the websites. These elements are analyzed in terms of their consistency and relevancy in the use of branding element, as well as their distinctiveness as compared to other destinations under study. This also takes into consideration of Morrison’s website evaluation guideline \[7\] as follows.

- The graphic/verbal images are consistent with the slogan.
- The image elements do not contradict each other.
- The text messages reflect the Unique Selling Proposition (USP) delivered by the slogan.
- The target markets are clearly stated.
- The text is clear and readable and the pages are clean and uncluttered.
- The graphics and pictures are effective and aesthetically appealing.
- Pictures are available to reinforce the text content.
- Rich images are used to improve the aesthetics of the site.
- Color is used to enhance the site’s visual appeal.
- The site is appealing overall.

There are two steps taken for the present study. First is the review of the overall functions and services provided by the four NTO websites. Second is the keyword counting for measuring the use of brand slogan and theme. To assist in automating the content analysis of the online texts, the online keyword analysis tool developed by Hoskinson is used (http://seokeywordanalysis.com/seotools). It performs this function by breaking down the text into content categories
(key phrases), organizing by frequency of occurrence and displaying a list of related keywords and key phrases. Then, it is subjected to the researcher to pick the keywords and key phrases that are deemed to be used for promoting and branding the destinations for further analysis.

**FINDINGS**

The following provides a descriptive analysis of each country’s website and Table 1 summarizes the NTO website’s functions and services.

**Hong Kong**

Through the extraction of keywords from the homepage of Hong Kong’s official tourism website, the relevant promotional keywords and the frequency counts found are Hong Kong (6), celebration (3), culture (2), cultural (2), heritage (2) and festival (2). The finding shows that all the promotional keywords used in Hong Kong’s site convey the same mood—to boast the city as a lively and exciting city with the touch of ancient culture. The keywords do not directly match with those used in the main theme ‘Hong Kong, Live It! Love It!’, however the mood and the theme are somewhat relevant. Different pages adopt different wordings, yet reinforcing the same theme—‘Feel It!’, ‘Enjoy It!’, ‘Celebrate It!’, ‘See It!’ and ‘Sense It!’. The Hong Kong Tourism Board’s logo, ‘Sampan’ or the Chinese junk, appears consistently in all the pages, but the city’s symbol ‘Dragon’, appears only once in the homepage. The site offers 12 different languages with 7 customized websites for tourists in America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South East Asia and United Kingdom. The site is further segmented into different categories of travelers such as ‘business travelers’, ‘family fun’, ‘romantic holidays’, ‘mature perspective’ (senior travelers), ‘enhance your stopover’ (transit travelers), ‘barrier-free travel’ (disabled travelers) and ‘following a faith’ (religious travelers). Customized informative guides are provided to suit those with different needs. The strengths of the Hong Kong’s official tourism website are the comprehensive information coupled with enhanced features for potential tourists such as interactive itinerary, E-map, as well as high level of customization to tailor to traveler’s needs. However, with changing pictures along with running texts, different headings used on different pages, the Hong Kong site seems to be clutter with overload of information. Some sections seem to be redundant and serve the same purpose, for example, the section on ‘things to do’, ‘touring around’, ‘discover Hong Kong’, ‘tours’, ‘sightseeing’.

**Thailand**

The relevant keywords and the frequency counts found are Thailand (14), culture (4), Thai (4), grand (4), chiang mai (3), activities (3), bangkok (3), phuket (3), festival (3), people (3), culture festival (2), happiness (2), Thailand grand (1), grand events (1), Thai people (1), long grand festival (1). The finding indicates that the keyword ‘Thailand’, ‘Thai people’, ‘grand’, ‘culture’, ‘festival’ have been used extensively throughout the page, as well as the name of the key travel destinations such as Bangkok, Phuket and Chiangmai. However, ‘happiness’, which is the keyword used for the brand slogan ‘Happiness on Earth’, does not appear anywhere on the homepage. The homepage shows the logo and slogan of ‘Thailand Grand Invitation 2006’ which is the theme of the present year, however no country’s logo is found. The homepage provides 13 different languages that tourists can choose to view as well as linking to customized official websites for tourists from 5 countries, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Sydney, London and Stockholm. The site is interactive (hyperlinks and interactive maps) and integrated with multimedia features (music, video, virtual tour etc). However, some of the information that tourist may find helpful and help in promoting the destination to potential tourists such as sections in ‘introducing new province’ (attractions, festivals, how to get there), ‘tourist’s comments’, ‘featured story’, ‘long stay in Thailand’, ‘events & festival’ are hidden under the ‘Message from the Governor’ and ‘Governor’s Update’ which may be overlooked by potential tourists as the headings sound irrelevant to travel. Overall, the homepage provides a great deal of information for both potential tourists and travel agencies. When comparing between different pages, the layouts of the pages seem to be inconsistent due to the lack of slogan, different use of promotional message and different background pictures and colors. This indicates a lack of consistency of brand elements.

**Malaysia**

From the frequency counts, the relevant keywords found in promoting the brand image of Malaysia’s official tourism website are events (11), organizer (3), mice (3), gallery (2), sports (2), culture (1), heritage (1), activities (1), performances (1), adventure (1), festival (1), exhibitions (1), sport (1), conferences (1), convention (1), organizers (1). The finding does not show any keyword that forms the brand slogan of Malaysia, ‘Truly Malaysia’. Most of the keywords used in promoting its homepage centers around business travelers. The design of the website also seems to primarily serve the needs of business travelers by providing details of business functions, conventions and exhibitions.
On the other hand, information provided to leisure travelers are found under the section ‘State Branding’, which appears on the bottom of the homepage and needs to be further clicked in order to enter the site. The site is not designed to be user friendly and catered to the needs of potential travelers, nor does it serve as a one-stop shopping for tour operators. The site provides 10 different languages for viewers. No customized content is designed for tourists from different nations.

Singapore

The frequency counts find the relevant keywords as arts (5), heritage (4), fun (3), unique (4), festival (2), entertainment (2), uniquely (2), culture (2), buzz (2), performances (2) mice (2), spa (1), cuisine (1), beauty (1), culinary (1), nature (1), sport (1), colorful (1), museums (1), exhibitions (1), fashion (1), food (1). The findings show an extensive use of the keywords ‘unique’ and ‘uniquely’ which matches with the brand slogan of Singapore, ‘Uniquely Singapore’. Singapore provides 14 languages for viewers. The front page of its official website serves as an index page to allow visitor to choose from different categories of traveling, such as those traveling with family/ friends/special someone, those looking for luxurious holiday, those going for business trip and so on. The site is rich in information and features, yet all the pages provide consistent logos, slogans, background and headings, making it simple to navigate. The site is highly multimedia, equipped with flashing pictures and pop-up screen. It is eye catching and stimulating. However, the downside is that it requires longer time to download and that may discourage potential visitors from entering to the site.

Table 1: Functions and Services Offered by the Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homepage</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Logo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brief textual description of the destination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photograph of the destination</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have to click on icon or graphic to enter site</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Moving or changing text</td>
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<tr>
<td>List of internal links</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possibility of selecting the language</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>General Information within the Site</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Photographs of the destination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Climate, Geography, Topography</td>
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<td>Clothing</td>
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<td>Shopping hours</td>
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<td>How to get to the destination</td>
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<td>Public transportation</td>
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<td>Telecommunications</td>
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<td>Information on sub regions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture &amp; Customs</td>
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<td>Suggested itineraries</td>
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<td>Events &amp; Attractions</td>
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<td>Destination specific activities</td>
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<td>Maps</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Features of the Site</strong></td>
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</table>
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The homepage is the first point of contact most users have with a website. Consequently, its ability to represent a destination in a positive image and effectively communicate information from the first glance is fundamental to the usability of the site and its potential for increasing consumer interest and knowledge. In addition to the features and functions, the information in the website is also as important as the design and layout of the site, because it directly influences the perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the consumer.

The analysis shows that, overall, the four chosen NTO websites perform well from technical perspectives. They all provide useful features, are highly interactive and offer great deal of information. However, from marketing perspectives, the design of each NTO website varies and serves the purpose at differing degree. In terms of consistency, Singapore’s official tourism website demonstrates a good practice with consistent use of logo, slogan, jargon, design and layout throughout the website. On the other hand, Thailand’s official tourism website indicates very weak evidence of the brand-building elements due to the lack country’s logo and inconsistent use of slogans. In terms of relevancy, Hong Kong’s official tourism website shows the strongest evidence with all the promotional keywords congruent to the
brand slogan and theme. In terms of distinctiveness, Thailand’s official website is able to distinctively differentiate itself from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. The website showcases its beautiful scenery and the ‘Thainess’ or Thai people. On the other hand, the other three destinations are depicting their image of modern city with skyscrapers and traditional cultures through their official websites. This provides a good discussion on how destinations should attempt to build their brand on something that conveys a Unique Selling Proposition (USP). As [6] explains that USP is ‘something that uniquely connects a destination to the consumer now or has the potential to do so in the future. It must also be a proposition that the competitor wants and may be able to copy, but that they cannot surpass. The point of differentiation must also reflect a promise that can be delivered and that matches expectations’. Good destination branding is therefore original and different, but its originality and difference need to be sustainable, believable and relevant.

Marketing researchers [9] [2] repeatedly emphasize the need for constant use of a brand slogan for successful destination marketing. Although successful marketing campaign is the result of an integrated effort between all communication channels, the merits of the website should not be underestimated. It is cost effective and it provides immediate access to markets around the world. Especially the homepage which is the first point of contact to the website must enthrall customers with a desire to move into the website to seek more information and it provides the overall impression of the site. Both committed and uncommitted customers are influenced by the image conveyed by the creative design of the homepage, and ease of navigation [12]. The most effective homepages are not necessarily those with the most features, rather those that have a range of complementary features that provide enough information to enable a broad understanding of the contents of the entire site. Of equal importance is the home page’s capability of conveying a positive image of the destination [13].

The content analysis of the keywords provides a preliminary assessment of the brand personality of the four NTO websites. Interestingly is that the current projected image conveyed by the tourism authority of the three among the four countries, Hong Kong, Thailand and Singapore, do not deviate much from the prior survey commissioned by the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, given that the survey was conducted in 1998 which was seven years past. Malaysia’s projected image, however, seems to evolve from its earlier image of ‘multiple cultures’ and ‘lots of beach’ to featuring towering skyscrapers. However, this is not a surprise, as it is supported by [4] that country image is not a static phenomenon, but country images are long-lasting and difficult to change. Therefore, it is important that destination marketers carefully position or reposition the destination to establish the core values of the destination and its brand—these should be durable, relevant, communicable and hold saliency for potential tourists. This process should also consider just how contemporary or relevant the brand is to today’s tourism consumer and how it compares with its key competitors [6]. The brand positioning should define what the country represents and determine how this should be translated into a brand personality. Then, destination marketers need to decide what kind of site they want and what kind of ‘mood’ or ‘personality’ of the country they aim to convey in their websites. The personality of the website can help to develop the country’s overall competitive advantage [1].

**IMPLICATIONS**

This study seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of the countries’ positioning through its projected image as a travel destination. The results of the findings provide useful implication not only for the NTOs, but also provide an approach as to how other destination marketers can evaluate their websites and assess how well they communicate the destination brand. Logo and slogan are crucial element of a destination brand. Developing an effective brand strategy does not need to emphasize every component of a society or culture, but on the one best difference, relevant and compelling to the targeted audience. In building a meaningful destination brand, the essence is to create an emotional relationship between the destination and potential visitors.

Every tourist destination in the world has a brand image—whether it is strong or weak. If developed carefully, the brand serves to differentiate a destination from competing destinations. However some destinations do not have an effective brand strategy, and are supported by inconsistent advertising campaigns, creating a confused image to prospective customers. Image must be controlled by a clear projection of brand identity, and all the marketing efforts should build upon that brand identity in order to strengthen the brand.

Smart managers find out what is the meaning of their destination as a product to their potential consumer. They exploit that meaning in finding the value they can add to the sun and sand experience. Their advertising, when it’s done well, should reflect that added value, that point of differentiation [6].
REFERENCES