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## Does 'Voyage Image' Affect Overseas Education Choice?

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### ABSTRACT

The higher education market is experiencing tremendous growth supported by strong economic contribution in developing countries with the opening of some new markets especially in the Asian region. Previous study highlights that it is essential to analyse international students' travelling behaviour, as this could spark changes in their long-term decision making for selecting higher education. It indicates that the trend has changed, from conventional type of students' decision making towards new dimension which is including host travel destination image. In addition, students who travel during their education time would provide the feelings that host country experience is just not only regarding about knowledge in the higher institution, but it is also to other life experience which could not be measured-e.g.: exciting, novelty or relaxing that motivates them to study further for examination. As such, this paper presents a conceptual model integrating higher educational and tourism factors that may influence international students' decision for studying overseas. This research contributes in the higher education and tourism literatures while also bridging the two continuum's gap closer.

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## INTRODUCTION

Everybody hunt for best education in their lifetime. Other than heading to notorious education hubs like United Kingdom, United States or Australia, it is interesting to discover that there is a growth in higher education's foreign direct investment with a significant intake of overseas students into new countries like China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and Malaysia (IE, 2008). Malaysia educational hub has becoming main beneficiary derived from the emerging trend where the respective higher educational institutions actively promote themselves to the students from overseas (Knight, 2011).

Many international students are heading to Asian countries for cheaper and yet getting good quality of education. In Asia Pacific, Australia remains as the main host country for international students' educational destination choice; to be closed-substitute for United States of America especially after the September 11<sup>th</sup> Attack tragedy by the terrorists (Labi, 2006). However, due to stronger Australian Dollar currency exchange, many international students are considering other Asian countries. One of the fine options is Malaysia.

Up to date, Malaysia is ranked 11<sup>th</sup> for top educational destination. It boasts about approximately near to 500 HEIs, including international universities, seven international branch campuses, 37 private universities, 20 university-colleges, 414 private colleges and 20 public universities (The *Star*, 2013a) with over 90,000 international students from more than over 100 countries studying in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Latest quote would be Xiamen University, which is listed as top 20 universities in China has chosen Malaysia for the first overseas branch campus in year 2015 (The *Star*, 2013b).

Meanwhile in tourism statistics, international students may be considered tourists by looking on their staying time in the host country. According to World Tourism Organisation [WTO] (1995), an individual considered to be tourist if they stay in a different country for up to 365 days. In Australia itself, approximately 58% of peregrinators stated that education is their priority for coming to Australia and enrolled in a more than one-year educational course (Tourism Research Australia, 2007 cited in Glover, 2011). International students can be categorised as ephemeral residents in the host country due to their educational purpose, which usually takes more than a year. These temporary residences can prolong for many years, especially when they further study or planning for another programme. It is suggested that their tourism behaviour during the temporary stay

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is guided not only by the information gained since arrival to the host country but also may be influenced by the travel image and marketing information promoted in their home country before arrival (Glover, 2011).

In other word, international students may form an image of a country before they arrive and study there. Glover (2011) argues that the decision to study overseas can also to be influenced by tourism imagery. As we know that 'travel image' or in the previous studies researchers positioned it as destination image which has been recognised as an essential factor for a traveller's decision making process (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Crompton, 1977). However, to date there are only limited studies that exploring or linking country's travel image and overseas study decision.

Initially, Cubillo, Sánchez, and Cerviño (2006) propose a conceptual framework that integrate 'country image' and 'city effect' with typical educational factors of 'institution image', 'programme evaluation' and 'personal factors' towards higher education purchase intention. Later, Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008) investigate the relationship of higher education and tourism further on student exchange programmes. Recently, Glover (2011) started conducting a survey involving international students enrolled at an Australian university to explore the linkage between international education and tourism.

Hence, this authenticity argues that the preference of the international students is an inordinately fascinating subject worth to explore, not only focusing on higher educational institution's image and efforts in its promotional strategies but, considering also the host country's factors with the influence of travel image aspect. Gunn (1977) argues that without travel attractions, then leisure tourism would not exist and tourism studies would not be possible without higher education. The sole existence of either travel image or educational institution establishment is insufficient to attract tourists from their country to the host destination (Glover, 2011). Do they come along together? We need to have a thorough study.

As such, this study proposes a conceptual model that integrating the different educational and travel factors that influence the international students' choice. This work tries to explain travel destination images that could influence international students' destination choice by reviewing available tourism literature.

#### ***Push-Pull Theory:***

'Push' defined as various factors mostly existing barriers that force the international students to seek overseas education. McMahon (1992) is one of the earlier researchers using push-pull model by exploring the pattern of international students from 18 countries from 1960s to 1970s. Her push model suggested that international students were forced to leave the home country due to lower level of national economic wealth, the cooperation between home country with the global economy, the home government support for international education policy and low accessibility of higher education in the home country. Then, McMahon's work has been extended by Mazzarol and Soutar's study by incorporating cultural and migration intention aspects and described the push theory on international students in Australia. Dreher and Putyaara (2005) also describe economic and cultural forces are push motives in shaping international students' overseas choice. Other push relevant factors like lack of career opportunities if having a local degree (Maringe & Carter, 2007), home country's political uncertainty (Dzvimbo, 2003), and home university's high standard entry requirement (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002) push them for overseas education. In addition to this, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also acknowledged that other relevant factors within the push model can be differed from country-to-country. As such, we believe students would have decided to study away from their home country before determining on the host country.

On the other hand, 'pull' defined as attractions created by the host country or institution to attract international students as customers to study there. There are various educational, social and country attractions that influence international students' perception on destination choice. McMahon (1992) discovered that pull factors of relative sizes of the home and host countries economic growth, economic links, host and home countries' political, cultural and social links and host scholarships influence international students' preference to study in a host country. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) describe further on pull model by including strong international students' awareness and knowledge on the host country, recommendation by student's family, relative or friend from home, direct and indirect costs, geographic and social links between home and host countries. Maringe (2006) summarises that pull factors that influence international students to select developed countries are economic prospects, safer on political and study environment, higher institution's good quality of education, part time job and advanced degree opportunities. But, again, previous literature do not emphasise on the host country's travel image even though it may be essential to change decision making pattern until Cubillo *et al.*, (2006) conceptualise that country image can be another main point to be included in the international student's selection model as illustrated in Table 1.

#### ***Travel Destination Image:***

Travel destination image (TDI) refers to the perception held by tourists towards a destination. Travel in French language is referred as 'voyage'. Past literature defines perception as the process when someone chooses, organises, and interprets stimuli into significant and coherent picture of the object positioned into his or

her mind (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1991). According to Hunt (1975), image is the feelings of individuals towards a destination in which they do not occupy before. Crompton (1979) defines TDI as “*the aggregate sum of beliefs, ideas, impressions and expectations that a tourist has about a tourist destination area*”. Echtner and Ritchie (1991) believed that TDI is the perceptions of individual towards destination attributes and the holistic impression made on it. Besides, Gallarza *et al.*, (2002) comment that there are many interpretation of image as many researchers dedicated to its conceptualisation. The most recent studies (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Gartner, 1993; Walmsley & Young, 1998) have considered image as a concept composed by the consumer’s reasoned and emotional interpretation due to the consequences of two closely interrelated components: *perceptive/cognitive evaluations* referring to the individual’s own knowledge and notions about the object (an evaluation of the perceived attributes of the object) and *affective appraisals* relating of cognitive images and travel motivations. Up to date, there is no any final decision on the concrete definition of tourist destination image. However, many researchers have agreed that destination images should also consist of both perceptual/cognitive (beliefs) and affective (feelings) components (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Beerli *et al.*, 2004; Burgess, 1978; Gartner, 1993; Holbrook, 1978; Son *et al.*, 1995; Walmsley & Jenkins, 1993; Ward & Russel, 1981; Zimmer & Golden, 1988). Besides, in our opinion, there might be possibly ‘pull’ factors that motivate tourists to visit a destination as well. Phau *et al.*, (2013) describe in their study that tourists are pulled to visit Araluen Park in Australia because of the natural beauties, easy accessibility to travel information, facilities and accommodation.

**Table 1:** Pull factors in selecting host destination.

Pull Factor	Items
Personal	More career prospects / job prospects Getting higher status Getting international contacts Family/ friend/ individual recommendation
Country	New cultural experience Cost of living Immigration procedures Safety and security Social facilities
Institution	Institution image Ranking position Quality of staff Professional experience Campus environment Infrastructure and facilities Programme suitability Future employer’s recognition Tuition fees

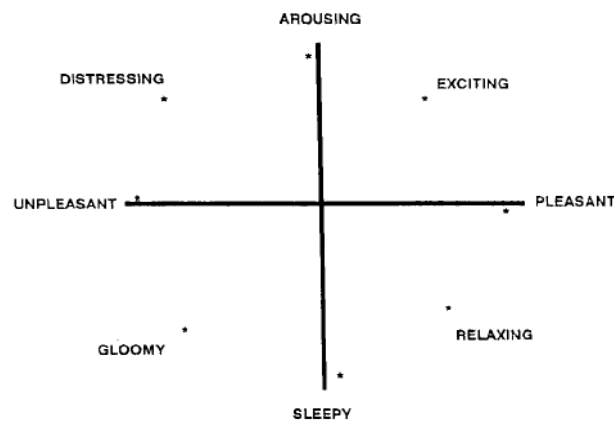
Source: adapted from Cubillo *et al.*, (2006)

In terms of cognitive image, it refers to the notions or knowledge about a destination’s attributes whereas affective components refer to feeling towards the place (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Holbrook, 1978). Gartner (1991) defines cognitive image as intellectual evaluation of known attributes towards a destination and affective images as emotional; related to individual personal motives in selecting a destination. Affective components refer to how visitors feel about the destination (Mao & Zhang, 2014). Sonmez and Sirakaya (2002) examine the function of destination image and traveller perception along with other behavioural variable that influence vacation choice of potential travellers. Through a survey, they find that four of them are cognitive image factors (safe and hospitable environment, general mood and vacation atmosphere, past international travel experience, perception of relaxation, authenticity of experience) and two are affective image factors (local attractions and hospitality, comfort/safety and tourist facilitation) which are significant predictors of the likelihood of travel to Turkey. Gallarza *et al.*, (2002) select 25 empirical destination studies that measured attribute-based image, reviewing all the attributes used in these studies and organising the most common ones into a functional or psychological axis. They found that residents, receptiveness and landscape and /or surroundings were the most mentioned attributes in previous image research; and there was a balance between functional and psychological attributes being studied. In addition, they also summarised the various scopes of previous studies as well as methodologies used in previous studies. Based on their thorough review of literature, they concluded that the nature of TDI is complex, multiple, relativistic, and dynamic. Different countries have unique travel destination attractions.

However, Russell and Pratt (1980) and Russel *et al.*, (1981) suggest that travel affective images should compose positive (arousing, pleasant, exciting and relaxing) and negative (sleepy, unpleasant, gloomy and distressing) dimensions (see Figure 1). The authors comment that only two scales of pleasant-unpleasant and arousing-sleepy are theoretically needed to adequately represent the affective images. They illustrated that exciting is a combination of pleasant and arousing whereas relaxing is a combination of pleasant and sleepy.

However, Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) argue that eight unipolar scales represent four bipolar dimensions of pleasant-unpleasant, arousing-sleepy or exciting-gloomy and relaxing-distressing could better enhance the reliability and better representation of the affective images.

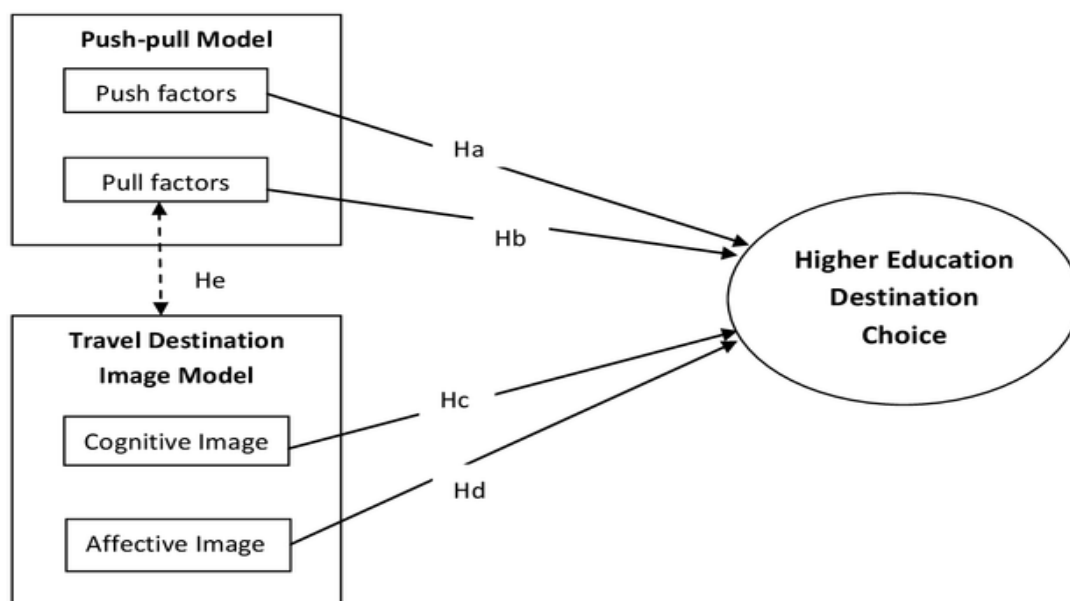
Russell and Pratt studies have been discussed and tested empirically later using different measurement for the four bipolar scales (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Noh & Vogt, 2013; Son *et al.*, 2005; Walmsley *et al.*, 1998). For example, Hanyu (1993) examines residents' perception on various cognitive and affective images of Tokyo cities and find out that pleasant, arousing, and exciting dimensions influence their length of residence and confirmed Russel and his colleagues' findings. However, it is interesting to note that the affective components of this travel image always been overlooked by tourism and travel researchers (Ekinici&Hosany, 2006). Even, previous study of Glover (2011) that pioneered the integration between education and travel concepts did not discuss on the affective elements.



**Fig. 1:** Two-Dimensional Representation of Affective Images (*Source: Russell and Pratt, 1980, p.313*)

#### **Conceptual Framework:**

Based on the arguments and literature search, this study proposes a conceptual framework linking higher education and tourism aspect. The framework consists of four factors identified as independent variables that might influence destination choice as the dependent variable. The factors identified are push factors (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992; Lam *et al.*, 2011), pull factors (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Maringe, 2006; Maringe and Carter, 2007; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992; Lam *et al.*, 2011), cognitive travel image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Glover, 2011; Qu, Kim & Im, 2011) and affective travel image (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Russell & Pratt, 1980). The model is illustrated in Figure 2.



**Fig. 2:** A proposed education-tourism model of international students' destination choice.

**Research Hypotheses:**

The above conceptual framework enables us to investigate the following research hypotheses;

Ha: Push factors positively influence the international students' destination choice

Hb: Pull factors positively influence the international students' destination choice

Hc: Travel cognitive image positively influence the international students' destination choice

Hd: Travel affective image positively influence the international students' destination choice

He: Travel destination image has positive relationship with the pull factors

**Conclusion:**

Up to date, the research on the international higher education has focused on several aspects namely institution and programmes factors that might influence international students' choice. Very little literature has focused on highlighting travel element which may play an essential role in their decision making choice. Though Mazzarol and Soutar (1999) argue Australian international educational institutions display too many touristy sentiments in the institution marketing campaigns to attract potential students' enrolment but, it is undeniable that touristic environment does influence their selection process. As such, our study aims to contribute in bridging the gap closer between education and travel factors.

Somehow the nature of the study itself has caused the researchers some limitations. As a conceptual paper, it intends to integrate the underlying factors in the current higher education and tourism literatures. Therefore, future research needs to be carried out empirically to investigate further on the proposed relationships. In particular, more potential studies ought to be carried out to investigate the weight of each factor that influence destination choice and the relative paramount of each factor that it belongs to. Once the relevant factor has been highlighted, then, it is easier for both industry players- higher education and tourism to work out better marketing programmes to target the international student markets.

In order to provide better visualisation of the educational tourism market, more studies should be expanded towards students in higher education across the countries for comparison purpose, as well as respondents from short courses, vocational education and secondary education.

The incrementing number of international students over the past decade in South East Asia and particularly Malaysia has sparked this research interest. Given the economic and social contributions of the higher education and tourism, greater integration of research study seems timely. In the near future, this niche higher education study could lead to better understanding in the international students' complex decision making process and improve the host efforts in product development, promotions, pricing and educational tourism branding.

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