

# Malaysia's Perceived Image as a Tourism Destination for Gulf Countries Potential Tourists

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## Abstract

As tourism is a fickle industry, it is very important for a destination to have a strong and positive destination image from the consumer perspective, particularly the potential consumers who have no past experience with the destination. The challenge of providing high-quality tourist experiences as well as promoting tourism destination effectively becomes less difficult when managers know what their prospects think of their specific destination. Thus, this paper looks at the perceived image of Malaysia as a tourism destination from the perspective of two out of six Gulf Countries. Factors were adapted from previous literature about Malaysia image as a tourism destination and from previous studies about similar countries. Data collection was conducted from 19 February till 26 March 2010 on Saudi Arabian and Emirati potential tourists using mall intercept survey method. A total of 995 respondents were approached in both cities of Dubai in United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jeddah in kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) within the data collection period. Out of this number, 491 agreed to participate. However, 405 were usable. Hence, the effective response rate was 41%. Data analysis showed that research respondents picture Malaysia as suitable for multipurpose destination and family vacations, a destination that has variety of beautiful leisure and environmental attractions such as beaches, relaxing places, natural and theme parks, Islamic country with the majority of Muslims residents and where the Halal food and Mosques are available everywhere, a destination where the tourists information and services are easily available, and a destination with pleasant and restful atmosphere. However, Malaysia still need to invest more in the marketing communication (MC) activities to improve the perception of the potential tourists about its ability to make tourists safe while visiting, provide food culture attractions, give tourists value for their money and allow tourists to communicate easily with the friendly local people.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Destination Marketing, Gulf Country Potential Tourists

## 1. Introduction

It has been long accepted that tourism is an economic activity of attracting tourists and catering to their demand and needs (Che-Mat, Zakaria, and Jusoff, 2009). The tourism industry today is a major source of income generation in many countries. It plays a very important role in the economic growth as well as in its non-economic benefits. Because of tourism contribution to the national economy, it becomes an important field of study that has attracted attention of researchers (Ortega and González, 2006). Due to factors such as globalization, fierce competition, and new destinations coming up in the tourism market place, the available choice of tourism destinations has been expanded. As a result, it becomes harder for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to distinguish their destinations from their major competitors. As such, in order to survive in market place, tourism destination must be recognized in addition to favorable and strong image from the tourist's perspectives (Echtner and Ritchie, 2003). Therefore destination image is important factor in ensuring the long term success of the tourism destination.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Tourism Destination Image

Brand image in general is defined by Keller (1993:3) as an association or perception consumers make based on their memory towards a product. In terms of tourism destination image, Milman and Pizam (1995) defined it as the visual or mental impression of a place or a product experienced by the general public. The significance of perceived brand image is that brand image enables the potential customer to recognize a product, evaluate the quality, lower purchase risks, and obtain certain experience and satisfaction out of product differentiation (Lin and Lin, 2007). In addition, brand image is often used by consumers as an extrinsic cue to make a purchase decision (Richardson, Dick, and Jain, 1994). Brand with positive image, has the ability to eliminate risks that the potential customers will face when they make their decision (Lin and Lin, 2007). However, a brand image does not exist in the actual product itself, but it is something brought out by promotions, advertisements, and/or experience (Lin and Lin, 2007). Beerli and Martin (2004a) argued that because potential tourists have no previous visit to the destination and usually they have limited knowledge about the destination, destination with strong, positive, and recognizable images has more probability of being chosen by the tourists. This shows the

importance of destination image especially for prospective tourists.

### 2.2. Destination Image Formation

Realizing the importance of destination image in tourism destination selection and evaluation from the individual perspective, tourism marketing organization and researchers have tried to improve the understanding of the nature of tourism destination image. In order to explore the nature of tourism destination image, two main streams of destination image must be reviewed as well as distinguished. Those are the traditional cognitive and the recent cognitive/affective component of tourism destination image from the individual point of view. While the cognitive evaluation refers to the beliefs or knowledge about the destination's attributes and characteristics held in the consumer mind, the affective evaluation refers to feelings or attachment toward it (Martin and Bosque, 2008; Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). In the tourism destination image literature, the cognitive component of destination image has been extensively analyzed as the only structure of destination image. For example, studies by Chen and Kerstetter (1999) Hui and Wan (2003) Leisen (2001) Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Kim (1998) have analyzed only the cognitive component of the brand image. In these studies, where the researchers have only focused on the cognitive component, the emotional aspects (affective) have not been captured and only the individual's perceptions of the destination attributes were included. Only recently some researchers have proposed the affective and cognitive components of destination image (Konecnik and Gartner 2007; Martin and Bosque, 2008; Beerli and Martin, 2004b; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Walmsley and Young, 1998; Baloglu and Brinberg, 1997; Leisen, 2001).

For example, Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) proposed a model that provides a framework for studying the factors that influence image development. In their work they proposed a relationship between the three (cognitive, affective, and global) components. Therefore, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) defined destination image as "*an attitudinal construct consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about an object or destination*" (p. 3). This was supported by Martin and Bosque (2008) who proposed a model for tourism destination formation process and confirmed that the formation of destination image from the potential tourist point of view has both perceptual/cognitive and affective evaluation. In the same vein, study conducted by Beerli and Martin (2004a) found that tourism destination image structure has both cognitive and affective evaluation and supported the same positive relationship between the cognitive and affective image. White (2004) was on the same line with Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Baloglu and Brinberg (1997). In his study White (2004) has conceptualized the tourism destination image as combinations of cognitive (knowledge), affective (feeling), and behavioral (visiting) components.

Though this approach of combining both cognitive and affective components considers destination image as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that include both knowledge about the destination attributes as well as the individual feeling toward it, nevertheless, it is highlighted in the literature that information sources are a force which impacts only the formulation of the cognitive evaluations and not the affective component of image. For example, Um and Crompton's (1990) model of pleasure destination choice emphasized on that cognitive image of the destination is formed by information sources such as (promotional efforts) and word of mouth (WOM). Further, the role of information sources in formulating the cognitive image is also highlighted in Baloglu and McCleary's (1999) destination image formulation model and Woodside and Lysonsky's (1989) destination choice model (cited in Woodside, 1996). According to both models, the information sources are a force which influences the formation of cognitive evaluations but not the affective component of image. With this in mind, in this study, the individual's perception toward the destination based on their knowledge (cognitive) is investigated in order to capture the image of the tourism destination from the perspective of potential tourists those without past visitation.

### 2.3. Dimensions of Destination Image

Tourism destination's image is a composite of various attractions and attributes woven into a total impression. According to (Echtner and Ritchie 2003) components of destination image could be considered in terms of attribute-based and holistic component. Image could be based on measurable characteristics like price level or intangible characteristics such as safety. Echtner and Ritchie, (1993) pointed out that destination image consists of attribute, holistic, functional, psychological, common, and unique components. It captures separate attributes like climates, hotels and service also encompassing functional characteristics concerning price levels, transportation, infrastructure, and certain psychological characteristics such as level of friendliness, safety, quality of service and fame.

On the basis of the above discussion it can be concluded that any tourism destination has its attributes and these attributes could be classified as a common (can be found in many destinations in the region) and specific or unique attributes (definite attributes and/or what destination marketers focus on). In another words, destination image encompasses not only the "perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impression made by the destination and the image of the destination formed is based on perceptions about such

characteristics. For the purpose of this study both common and unique attributes of Malaysia as a tourism destination will be evaluated.

#### *2.4. Malaysia as a Tourism Destination*

Malaysia is one of many countries who rely on tourism in contributing to gross domestic product growth (GDP), investment and employment, foreign exchange earner as well as strengthening the services account of the balance of payments (Jalis, Zahari, Izzat, and Othman, 2009; Mohamed and Hussin, 2003). However, It is widely recognized that tourism industry is a consumer driven industry, which make it extremely susceptible to crises and calamities both natural and man-made (Malaysia Government Publication, 2007). In general, over the time, tourism industries in Asian countries have been greatly affected by a number of factors. These included the financial crisis in 1998, government travel advisories against travel in certain countries in Asian, the US/Europe economic slowdown, the Bali bombing, airline bankruptcies and capacity reduction and the SARS epidemic (Tourism Malaysia, 2006). On the other hand, there is no doubt that tourism in Malaysia is facing a fierce competition from Tourism players like Singapore and Thailand (Malaysia Eight Plan 2001-2005, 2001). Davies (2003) pointed out that Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand remain the "stars" of the Asian tourism destination brands. All of these factors put much more emphasis on the need to have a strong and positive perceived destination image from the consumer perspective especially those without past experience with the destination. It is no secret that the challenge of providing high-quality tourist experiences as well as promoting tourism destination effectively becomes less difficult when managers know what their prospects think of their specific destination. This is particularly true when destination image is assessed from the potential tourist's perspectives so that efforts can be made to match expectations with reality. Besides, misconceptions can be corrected and perceived unique selling features can be exploited. Toward this end, this paper aimed to identify the Malaysia perceived image as tourism destination from the gulf countries (GC) potential tourists who were identified as one of the most important segment market for the tourism industry in general and for Malaysia in particular.

#### *2.5. GC Segment Market and Outbound Tourists*

The Gulf Countries are 6 in total. These are United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. All are rich in oil and oil reserves. Located in the Middle East, the Gulf States produce about one-fifth of the total world oil production. They have more than half of the world's oil reserves. Tourists from the GC (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar) are the most important among Arab tourist as they alone generate 68 per cent of total outbound travel from the entire Middle East region and contributed 2.5 per cent or USD11.9 billion from the world tourism receipts in the year 2000 (IPK International, 2000). This due to the fact that The Middle East region is also a very viable market for tourism as it is home to a growing population of young people with a high per capita income, particularly the Saudi Arabia and UAE (Ariffin and Hasim, 2009).

With more than nine million arrivals forecasted in 2020, Saudi Arabia is expected to be the Middle East's largest contributor to the outbound arrivals, followed by UAE with two million. Although the UAE has only 12 per cent of the population of the Gulf nations, it generates 18 per cent of total outbound tourism from the Gulf (Ariffin and Hasim, 2009). According to Tourism Economics/Tourism Decision Metrics (2010), outbound travel from United Arab Emirates has increased from 906,000 in 2000, to 3.5 million in 2009. In 2009, United Arab Emirates travelers' top destinations (excluding the Middle East) were the UK with 280.000 tourists, Thailand, 90.000 tourists, Egypt, 60.000 tourists Malaysia 50.000 tourists and India 40.000 tourists. This further strengthens the importance of the GC tourists to any destination in general and to the Malaysia tourism industry in particular. Despite having a seasonal traveling pattern, West Asia market (including Arab tourists from GC) is without a doubt, one of the most important tourism target markets for Malaysia. In 2004, West Asia market has a high growth potential and has demonstrated to be a high yield market in terms of average expenditure per tourist and length of stay (Tourism Malaysia Promotional Plan 2005-2007, 2004).

As mentioned by Tourism Malaysia (TM) in the West Asia market, Saudi Arabia and UAE comes first in the number of tourist's arrival to Malaysia, while Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman come as secondary markets. The numbers of tourist's arrivals from West Asia market have grown extremely since Malaysia stepped into this market in 1999 (TM promotional plan 2005-2007, 2004). Arab tourists who used to travel to Europe and the United States as a commonplace for their vacation, facing a chillier reception in those countries, and often being unable to obtain visas specially after 11/September/ 2001. Thus, their plans are shifting eastward (Ibrahim et al. 2009; Che-Mat et al. 2009). Malaysia as well as other Southeast Asian nations took advantage on the shift in preference of the West Asian market which had less interest in traveling to Europe and US caused by the general hostility towards Arabs in those countries (Mohamed and Hussin, 2003; TM promotional plan 2005-2007, 2004), and started improving their marketing strategies as well as tourism products to promote their countries as family-friendly destinations. Some countries play up their Muslim identities beside other promotional efforts that led finally to the increase in Arab tourists to those countries year after year (Ibrahim et al.

2009). Beside the Malaysians promotion and marketing efforts, the development of new tourism products, and facilities offered, Arab tourists enjoy the sense of safety and security and the relative peace of Malaysia's cities which make Malaysia as favorite destinations of tourists from the Middle East (Ibrahim et al. 2009). In addition, Malaysia was able to bank on its Islamic credentials to attract more tourists from the Middle East countries. In the recent years Malaysia has focused more on the Middle East market segment due to previous mentioned reasons in addition to the fact that it is expected around 50 % of Arabs going for vacation usually every summer time in their country.

The GC tourist markets were chosen because they were considered the most important market segment for the Malaysian tourism industry due to their tendency to stay longer and be big spenders during their visit to Malaysia.

### 3. Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to examine the perceived image of Malaysia as a tourism destination by GC potential tourists. The study was carried out in two stages including instrument development and cross-sectional survey. In the first stage, a thorough review of relevant literature was conducted to extract variables for each research concept. The variables were modified to suit the research site and target population. Expert panel opinions were consulted to develop a valid instrument for data collection. Before going on to the data-collection, a pilot test was conducted among the survey population to test the reliability and validity of the instrument. The second stage conducted a cross-sectional survey on GC potential tourists at their countries by using the finalized questionnaire designed at the first stage.

This study is confined to GC potential tourists particularly United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jeddah in kingdom of Saudi (KSA) citizens who have never visit Malaysia before but have some idea about Malaysia as tourism destination. The sampling take into consideration the reality that only those willing to participate can be taken as a respondents while discounting the illiterate and young. Thus the strategy of this study was to keep approaching potential respondents that fit the demographic profile identified by TM (2008) until the target sample required is fulfilled (purposive sampling).

The questionnaire consists of two parts, first part of the survey about the personal and demographic factors, and the second part about the perceived image of Malaysia as a tourism destination by GC potential tourists. For the perceived image of Malaysia as a tourism, respondents were asked to answer questions using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

In measuring tourism destination image, both common and specific attributes should be identified. To measure the common attributes in the present study, six factors are identified from the literature as common factors for measuring the destination images. These are: leisure and tourist attractions (13 items), Local Hospitality (4 items), nightlife (3 items), political stability (3 items), heritage and historical buildings/cultural environment (5 items), and natural environment and atmosphere (9 items). The common image measurement instruments that were used in this study are adapted from previous work by Martin and Bosque (2008) Pike (2002) Echtner and Ritchie (2003, 1993) Konecnik and Gartner (2007) Baloglu and McCleary (1999) Stepchenkova and Morrison (2007) Hui and Wan (2003) and Choi (1999) and Hankinson (2005). These scales have a reliability coefficient alpha range between .70 and .91 in these past studies.

For the purpose of identifying the specific destination image attributes, factors were adapted from previous literature about Malaysia image as a tourism destination (Ibrahim et al. 2009; Jalis et al. 2009; Mohamed and Hussin, 2003) and from previous studies about similar countries namely Choi et al. (1999) and Hui and Wan (2003). In addition, as mentioned by TM website (2008) that “*Key segments promoted in West Asia market includes leisure holidays such as beaches and islands, shopping...The special interest promotions are; education tourism, medical and health tourism, honeymoon*”. Based on the previous discussions, the specific destination image factors that were identified in this study are: Shopping attractions (6 items) and the Islamic elements (3 items). This scale has a reliability coefficient alpha of .77 and .82 respectively in these past studies.

Data collection was conducted from 19 February till 26 March 2010 on Saudi Arabian and Emirati potential tourists using mall intercept survey method. A total of 995 respondents were approached in both cities of Dubai in UAE and Jeddah in KSA within the data collection period. Out of this number, 491 agreed to participate. However, 405 were usable. Hence, the effective response rate was 41%. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences "SPSS" version 18 was used to analyze the quantitative data.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Demographic Profile

The first part of the questionnaire generated information on selected socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. This section describes the background information of the respondents who had participated in this study. Specifically, it provides the demographic information about respondent's age, gender, education level,



marital status, monthly income, and country of origin. Table 1 below presents the respondents characteristics profile.

Table 1: Profile of the respondents (N= 405)

Demographic		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	290	71.6
	Female	115	28.4
	<i>Total</i>	405	100%
Age	18-24	80	19.8
	25-34	189	46.7
	35-44	88	21.7
	45 and above	48	11.9
	<i>Total</i>	405	100%
Status	Single	150	37.0
	Divorced/Widowed	15	3.7
	Married without children	18	4.4
	Married with children	177	43.7
	Newly Married	45	11.1
	<i>Total</i>	405	100%
Income	Less than 1000 USD	33	8.1
	1000-3000 USD	257	63.5
	3000 USD and above	115	28.4
	<i>Total</i>	405	100%
Education	High School	54	13.3
	Diploma	84	20.7
	Undergraduate	204	50.4
	Postgraduate	63	15.6
	<i>Total</i>	405	100%
Nationality	KSA	233	57.5
	UAE	172	42.5
	<i>Total</i>	405	100%

The demographic profile of the respondents indicated that the majority of the respondents were male as they represented 71.6 % of the sample. The rest were female who represented 28.4 % of the sample. The majority of the respondents were relatively young between the ages of 25 to 34 years as they represented 46.7%. This is followed by the age group of 35-44 years which represented 21.7 % of the respondents and the age group of 18-24 as they represent 19.8 % of the respondents. The table (1) also shows that 57.5 % were from KSA and 42.5% were from UAE. Of the respondents, the majority had a university degree as they represented 66.0 % of the respondents with 50.4 % undergraduate and 15.6 % postgraduate (higher education). The distribution of respondent's monthly incomes across the sample is also illustrated in the above table. Of the respondents, 28.4 % earned an income above the 3000 USD, while the majority earned an income of between 1000-3000 USD which represents 63.5 % of the respondents. Only 8.1 % of the respondents earned less than 1000 USD.

#### 4.2. Malaysia Image as Perceived by GC Potential Tourists

In terms of perceived destination image, factors analysis produced nine factors namely natural environmental attractions, multi purposes destination, information and services, shopping attractions, nightlife attractions, local hospitality and pleasant atmosphere which explained 73.0 % of the variance. All these factors have acceptable Cronbach alpha which ranged between 0.73 to 0.91 (Sekaran, 2006).

Table (2) below shows descriptive information of the variables used in the present study. Results suggest that Malaysia is a powerful brand in terms of its destination image with an overall summated mean score of (3.96) , which is close to the "agree" rating on five point scale. In general, none of the image factors fell below the lowest means scores (below 2.33). More specifically, research results show Malaysia image as tourism destination found to be positioned on five variables perceived to be the most important from the GC potential tourists point of view. These were "Natural Environmental Attractions" which is noted as possessing the highest importance among other attributes with a mean score of (4.07), "Multi Purposes Destination" (4.05), "Islamic Elements" (3.96), "Information and Services" (3.75) and "Pleasant Atmosphere" (3.67).

Overall, it can be summarized that the respondents picture Malaysia as suitable for multipurpose destination and family vacations, a destination that has variety of beautiful leisure and environmental attractions such as beaches, relaxing places, natural and theme parks, Islamic country with the majority of Muslims residents and where the Halal food and Mosques are available everywhere, a destination where the tourists

information and services are easily available, and a destination with pleasant and restful atmosphere. Leisure and Environmental Attractions are tourists attractions based on the nature and environmental resources available in the destination which is mainly managed by the destination. For this factor, the mean score for the items range from 3.67 to 4.24. This indicates that TM has successfully communicated Malaysia's beautiful natural and theme parks with variety of fauna and flora, beautiful beaches and landscapes which make a good relaxing place to the GC market.

Potential GC tourists' recognition of Malaysia as a multipurpose destination is shown in this study, especially the recognition that it is a 'family oriented destination' (with a mean score of 4.24 for its item). The findings explain the increasing number of tourist's arrivals especially those who travel as a family. According to TM (2007), among tourists coming to Malaysia from the GC region, 90.0 % were married people who came with spouse only and/or family.

Pleasant atmosphere is the nice weather and restful atmosphere that tourists believe they could experience during their visit to Malaysia. This attribute was highly recognized as important elements that influence their favorable feeling toward Malaysia before visitation. This could be reflected by the high item scores in 'Malaysia has restful atmosphere' (3.79) and 'Malaysia has a pleasant weather' (3.76). Such findings were expected as the weather in the GC region is hot and dry weather throughout the year, with very little rainfall. As such, a pleasant weather and atmosphere are considered important factors which contribute to create a positive image of Malaysia from that region potential tourist's point of view. Study by Wong (2009) suggested that this pleasant weather is what typical Middle East tourists look for when coming to Malaysia as they travel to escape the summer season in their countries.

Tourist's information and services attributes of Malaysia has been perceived favorably by the GC potential tourists as the all in all mean score was 3.67. This means TM has successfully communicated the availability of basic information for tourists starting from the airports and on sights as well as more sophisticated services such as packaged tours to the GC market.

Islamic elements are the availability of Halal food and Mosques in the destination. As most of the Malaysian residents are Muslims, potential tourists from the GC region regard and picture Malaysia as a Muslim country where Mosques are available everywhere and it is easy to find Halal food. This point can be seen in the summated mean score of 3.96 and in particular in the high mean score of 'Majority of Malaysian are Muslims' (3.96). This finding shows that TM has managed to play out the Malaysian Muslim identity to attract Muslim tourists especially from the GC. When destination marketers attempt to raise up the awareness among their target market about any specific destination attributes by using marketing communication (MC), the perception of that attributes are more likely to be high among the prospects as they frequently exposed to that media (Kotler et al. 2006). This is the case here, and it can be inferred that TM has successfully taken advantage on the so called Islamic phobia in USA and most of the Western nations, which caused a distinct trend toward increased of outbound travel to Islamic friendly countries, and focused more on its Muslims identity in the advertising and promotional activities (TM personal communication, October 14, 2008).

Overall, it can be summarized that the research respondents picture Malaysia as:

- Suitable for multipurpose destination and family vacations,
- A destination that has variety of beautiful leisure and environmental attractions such as beaches, relaxing places, natural and theme parks,
- Islamic country with the majority of Muslims residents and where the *Halal* food and Mosques are available everywhere,
- A destination where the tourists information and services are easily available, and
- A destination with pleasant and restful atmosphere.

Though the overall image of Malaysia as tourism destination found to be positive (with a summated mean score of 3.96) and five of its attributes fall in the high mean score which is around the agree rating, nevertheless, it is evident that there is still an opportunity to enhance these five highly perceived attributes as their current evaluation can still be considered as above the moderate average but did not reach or get close to the "strongly agree" rating.

Table 2: Comparing original dimensions to final dimension after factor analysis

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

\*On a scale 1 = strongly disagree 5= strongly agree

#### 4.3. T-Test Analysis Results

A summary of the test of differences is tabulated in Table (3) below. In terms of gender, there were no statistical differences in the mean scores of perceived image between male and female. However, there were significant differences in terms of perceived image between KSA and UAE potential tourists.

It is found that potential tourists from UAE exhibit higher score in perceived image than potential tourists from KSA. More specifically, the significant differences by perceived destination image between potential tourists from KSA and UAE are found on six factors. In all of these factors, potential tourists from UAE tend to have higher and positive perceptions about Malaysia as a tourism destination than those from KSA. These factors are value for money (mean score for UAE potential tourists = 3.59;  $p < .05$ ), Information and tourist's service (3.97;  $p < .05$ ), Atmosphere (3.78;  $p < .05$ ), Communication (3.38;  $p < .05$ ), Suitable destination (4.19;  $p < .05$ ), and Safe Destination (3.72;  $p < .05$ ).

Table 3: (T-test analysis)

Independent variable	Perceived Image			
	M	SD	F-value	p-value
Male	3.69	.445	1.4	.979
Female	3.69	.411		
KSA	3.63	.406	8.1	.001
UAE	3.78	.460		

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Clearly, it is important and significant for Malaysia success as tourism destination to focus more and invest more in the MCs activities in order to improve the perception of the potential tourists regarding these attributes. This could be done by showing these destination attributes in their TV and internet advertisings as those media found to be the most important information source for the GC market. It would be better if each advertisement focuses on each attributes. For example one advertising that show only the Muslim identity of Malaysia where Halal food and Mosques are available everywhere. Such approach will strengthen these attributes from the target market point of view as well as ensure the ability of the target market of having unconfused image of the destination. Nevertheless, it is what the destination has to offer for its tourists and not what its marketers trying to say. That is, MCs alone cannot change the destination image. As such, destination marketers need to ensure that the promoted attributes of the destination will match with what potential consumers expected. In this case, consumer satisfactions will occur and consequently a positive WOM will be separated. This requires that destination marketers must ensure that their current tourists from that region will experience these attributes during their stay.

It should be noted that the overall image of Malaysia does not only include these five attributes, but other attributes such as cultural attractions, shopping attractions, nightlife entertainments and friendly local hospitality are also important factors that contribute to the formulation of overall image of Malaysia as a tourism destination. According to the findings of this study, these four factors are found to be moderate in their mean scores. In these latent factors, GC potential tourists exhibits a moderate mean scores ranges from 3.25 for 'Night life entertainments' to 3.52 for 'Friendly local people' where their overall mean scores can still be considered as above the low score but still not reaching the "agree" rating. Although the summated means for these factors were well above the neutral point of 2.5 and fall in the moderate rating, it should be highlighted that Nightlife entertainment obtains the lowest summated means score of 3.25. This may be due to the fact that Malaysia is seen by Arabs as a Muslim country. Indeed, this can be seen in the high summated mean score for Islam elements as perceived by GC potential tourists (3.96). Hence, and based on the findings of this study, it is

important to invest more in the MCs activities in order to improve the perception of the potential tourists regarding these attributes so that GC potential tourists can be more convinced of its ability to make tourists safe while visiting, provide food culture attractions, give tourists value for their money and allow tourists to communicate easily with the friendly local people.

Such attributes are not optional. Every successful destination must provide a safe place for its tourists with no or little communication barriers with friendly local as well as Value for Money. For example, if any destination is perceived to be unsafe to be visited, the tourists will not consider this destination. As such, it is a must for TM to better communicate with the GC potential tourists on these attributes and matching expectations with reality. However, attributes like nightlife entertainments are not recommended to be promoted. First of all, it contradicts with the Muslim identity of Malaysia, and second, it considered as head to head competition with other destination in the region.

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