The emerging green destination: An empirical study of Phatthalung’s value-based identity

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Abstract. Regarding as a unique natural wetland where biogeographic region is under Ramsar convention, Phatthalung is also well-known for its iconic natural landmarks and geographical origin. However, the city itself are deemed to be either a short-visit destination or a secondary tourism destination amongst visitors. The aim of this paper is to explore a strategy of green branding on an emerging destination and to identify a value-based identity as a medium of persuasive communication tool. The paper establishes the conceptualization by a thorough case study analysis of Phatthalung’s destination brand from a geographic perspective to deep-rooted characteristic of local people. In order to critically find out the factors which have an effect on eco-tourism driven, the correlation between the influence of place equity and sense-of-place is analytically reviewed. Thus, it is clear that strategic place branding and destination branding play an important role in multidimensional meaning towards Phatthalung’s identity.

1. Introduction

Due to a gradual growth of green tourism amongst destinations in Thailand, groups of tourists begin to recognize the meaning of human-nature relationship when it comes to travelling. Various areas in southern part of Thailand where numerous natural resources can be found – from expansive beaches to lavish rainforest and limestone mountain. Despite the varieties, a top-of-mind-awareness is still a seaside and islands. There is no obvious distinguish communicative elements that can differ one province from another.

For Phatthalung, a hidden gem in the far south of Thailand, it is a lesser-known area comparing to its southern neighbour with resort town. With a rising number of visitors each year, Phatthalung has recently become a household name. Revenue from tourism has ranked the highest in secondary tourism group. Phatthalung consists of emblematic landscape and internationally recognized wetland. The diverse scenery of brackish river, swamp forest, iconic mountain and local living is a core component of Phatthalung’s image. However, this image is lack of consistency in strategic approach which generates conflicting information. And this unclear message can confuse the image of Phatthalung as a green destination. A strong brand identity will help shaping a framework of how the green concept employs to place as destination brand.
The conception of strategic branding together with place branding and sense of place are the tools for building place image. In order to encourage investments in cities, place image plays an important role for decision made regarding where people desire to stay, visit and work [1]. An environment of destination is considered as an essence of its image [2]. While a collaboration between local people, government, private sectors and tourists is a key principle toward sustainable travel [3].

The idea of turning a green attraction in Phatthalung to a green destination requires a place to be branded in multidimensional aspects. In essence, not only to communicate a desired image but also to manage a perception, the purpose of this study is to redefine an identity of Phatthalung in the context green tourism. To achieve this objective, the study primarily investigates theory-based insight that links between communications and destination branding. The study analyses a concept through the lens of first-time visitors and non-visitors with the aim of understanding its applications and limitations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Relation between place and people: Sense of place and place brand identity

To comprehend the terminology of place, place and space is used interchangeably. Place plays the role of experience indicator of people existence; it is a way of people sensing the world. Place is a locale full of meaning [4]. Besides, a combination of experience and meaning is an outcome of the interchange between individuals and their environment so called social-geographic [5].

Apart from cultural, economic, political, social, technological matters, Adam and Guy [6] explain that experience of the city is built through human senses. Places are sites of human experiences which demonstrate an emotional bond through olfactory, sight, sound, tactility and taste [7]. Medway et al. [8] support that people give a meaning to place by their multisensory experiences. In essence, such sensuous experiences dominate remembrances, sentiments and preferences, as well as consumer choices [9].

Sense of place is basically established when people are able to interact and involve themselves with activities in the spaces. Tournois [10] believes that a sense of place will be generated when people feel liveability. Likewise, a positive experience of visitors can be created from sensory benefit gained from destination [11]. Furthermore, instead of using sense of place, some reviews apply the term place attachment to point out the relationship between people and places.

Uniqueness, cultural stories along with images that nations, locality or cities transmit shape an idea of place branding [12]. “Place brands resemble corporate umbrella brands, to some extent, and can benefit the value of a place’s image” [13]. To deliberately looking at the value of place brand, Gertner [14] adds that a true value is its brand equity. In conclusion, a branding approach creates a competitive and distinctive identity of place which offers a significant value related to products and services [15]. A place image needs to be identified in order to apprehend how marketing plan can exploit this image and product or services associated with it [16].

Several studies confirm that place branding correlates with place identity and place image. Kavaratzis and Hatch [17] clarifies that the notion of place brand building is derived from a connection between identity, experience and image that brand passed to consumers. An identification of the identity of the place as well as an image communication projected from place are core components. Consumption of place denotes the landscape of place being consumed by people who using it [18]. Anton and Lawrence [19] outline that place identity is a foundation of self-identity. A cognitive connection amongst an individual and a locality structures place identity. And this cognition could be developed from personal significances, thoughts, feelings and preferences related with a place. Thus, place identity could be eventually grown since the place comes to be meaningful for an individual’s identity. Lee et al. [20] describes that “an individual’s sense of the self in a physical environment”. Place identity shall be measured in five features i.e., attachment, perception of familiarity, continuity with the past, cohesion and commitment.
Hence, place branding is not a new phenomenon, applicable place branding strategies help driving tourism growth [21]. Place branding is a connection between culture, heritage, and values in a geographic site [22]. Furthermore, it can be noticed that successful place brands incorporate internal and external stakeholders who work together to convey a message across several brand touchpoints. The key question is how to differentiates a place from its rivals and draw the common interests from the stakeholders at once [23].

2.2 Adding value to a place

Urde [24] illustrates three different aspects on core values that are principle for the process of brand building which are values of organization, values of brand essence and values from customers’ experiences. Therefore, a utilisation of branding is employed to add value to the place together with existing users [25].

Since consumer preferences focus on certain topography, for Phatthalung, place brand value has been applied to its local product with GI like Sangyod Rice Breed. Place value proposition generates a convincing and competitive advantage towards selected target groups. Foremost, it is necessary for the place to truly acknowledge its core value in consumer’s minds as a vehicle to communicate and as an opportunity to enhance place as a destination more than just an attraction.

2.3 Relation between place and people: Sense of place and place brand identity

Green-related issue has been focused amid researchers and tourism industry. To thoroughly consider a theory of green concept, green has been employed as a token for brands to position in the market as natural or environmentally friendly. Aside from functional benefit, consumers utilize experiential benefit from the green brands [26]. Green-related issue has been focused amid researchers and tourism industry. To thoroughly consider a theory of green concept, green has been employed as a token for brands to position in the market as natural or environmentally friendly. Aside from functional benefit, consumers utilize experiential benefit from the green brands [26]. Since there are a number of validations for green marketing activities in different industries, Chen [27] proposes that green brand equity can be developed by constructing green image, gaining green satisfaction and trust. Green brand positioning requires an effective communication. Ecological sustainability cannot be achieved without communicative green brand attributes [28]. Many scholars demonstrate the successful use of green resources in city branding to display attractiveness, competitiveness and liveability [29]. Considering green dimension as a vehicle for strategic framework of city brand building, “Green Brand Hexagon (GCH)” includes six green dimensions namely green status, green space, green pulse, green potential, green citizenship and green prerequisite [30]. de Charnatony [31] advocates the values of environmental sustainability as a means to leverage a prominent benefit. An implementation of destination branding help creating a distinctive position of the destination in consumer’s minds. The capability to dispense a set of unique values relevant to target audience can differentiate the brand from its competitors.

In fact, eco-destinations and green destination brands are not identical. An indicator of green brands from greenwashing brands is green values. A comprehension of the values strengthens brand identity which provides functional and emotional attributes for consumers [32]. However, to eliminate an uncertain characterization of green brands, accreditation system such as ISO 14001 EMS is a resolution to this [33].

Comparing destinations with conventional products and services within a framework of green marketing, Walker and Hanson [34] find out that there are significant differences. In contrary with green products, ownership of destinations cannot be taken by tourists. Destination marketing plan involves stakeholders and supervisors instead of users. Hankinson [35] believes that a co-creation value is worthwhile in a context of tourism destination where visitors and providers interactively co-
create experiences. Pike [36] suggests that features of destination branding are comprised of destination brand identity development, destination brand positioning and destination brand equity measurement and tracking. Nevertheless, these subjects are insufficient for profound analysis.

3. Methodology
The paper focuses on exploring a theoretical background which covers subjects from a perspective on place identity to the green destination. As mentioned in the introduction, this study was conducted in Phattalung province, in the far south of Thailand. Phatthalung is regarded as a new frontier for tourism in southern area. With the unique biogeographic nature assets, a vision and a strategic brand planning for how tourism can grow sustainably need to be clearly defined.

Phatthalung serves as a platform to examine the place in the context of green destination ingredients and value-based brand identity. Because building a sustainable place brand demands a longstanding commitment, the examination needs to be conducted in a holistic approach amid private and public sectors. An in-depth interview with a range of stakeholders like provincial governor, local people, and Private tourism-related entrepreneurs. The study also scrutinizes target audiences and prospects selected according to their green purchasing decision towards tourism. First-time visitors and non-visitors are questioned in order to review and overcome the gaps of misleading brand image. Accordingly, the relevant data collection shows the components of destination’s brand identity and insight through sensory engagement. So as to gain a precise information, the interpretation of activities was carried out by an observation.

3.1 In-depth Interview
Values of place brands represented from different stakeholders are diverse. Open-ended questions were used in the interview process with an intention to encourage respondents to share their sentiments and opinions whilst the interviewer gathered insights from qualitative data. The purpose of the in-depth interviews is to investigate how Phatthalung has been described and viewed as a destination. The interview questions are proactive. From the findings, certain key components have been highlighted based on spectrum of place brand identity as seen below:

- To consider Phatthalung in a green tourism context - Does what include in a promotional message meet what they have in mind? Respondents explain that information dissemination now only focuses on travellers’ awareness towards Phatthalung as a preserved hideaway. However, there is nonofficial training program to educate residents about the concept of green tourism. As locals play a role of host, without correct information in mind, brand message as a green tourism cannot be conveyed and positive brand image cannot be built.

- To underline the idea of place multi-functionality, what is a connection between natural assets and tourism-related activities? Phatthalung as a place where they participate in its activities. This province offers businesses, culture, leisure, natural resources, heritage, way of life, people and products.

- How far a green consciousness has been developed in the local community? It can be generally seen that environmentally conscious is at an intermediate stage amongst local community. For travellers, green advertisements strongly create favourable responses from them.

- What are key elements of persuasive travelling information? With the reason to build pre- and post-visit images of Phattalung, a place image held by potential-visitors and visitors is very imperative. The credibility of information sources is a key fundamental help building up a persuasive message in visitors’ mind. In addition, the variation of contents provides a richness of destination selection criteria. Surprisingly, visitors choose to seek an information from autonomous sources which they believe it is more convincing rather than information from authority of tourism. However, the study from interview shows that the believability of Phatthalung’s image is up to individuals.
Table 1. Interview Result.

| Place Attribute       | Place Brand Building Criteria                                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sense of place        | Deep-rooted characteristic of local people with place               |
| Place multi-functionality | Diversified activities                                               |
| Place Value           | Natural heritage and biodiversity                                    |
| Place Promotion       | Place Education                                                      |

3.2 Observational study

While nature assets and iconic landscape complement local people as crucial part of their way of life, there is little awareness of how these green resources could help driving Phatthalung as a green destination brand. Behaviours from focus group ranges from community leaders, villagers and visitors were observed and recorded. The aim is to acquire certain characteristics of each group of participants by submerging into the life of place.

The inspected locations cover distinctive areas with diverse characteristics of locals, and tourist spots. This study uses naturalistic observation and participant observation to collect data of participants’ behaviour in the area where green attractions located namely Thale Noi; including Kuan Ki Sian Ramsar Site, Thung Kai Botanical Garden; Nhanmoddang Pa Phyom, Sangyod Phatthalung paddy field, handicraft village, Tai Nod green market.

![Figure 1. Thale Noi, Phatthalung(First Ramsar Site in Thailand).](image)

Observational studies explain how visitors and residents differently perceive the association of place identity and green resources in Phatthalung. This objective is obtained by correlating elements for the value for green place identity by the groups.
4. Results and Discussion

A destination constitutes of fundamental components which are characterized as the 4A: Attraction, Accessibility, Amenities, and Ancillary [37]. To be a green destination, one of the most concerned issues is an appropriate preservation and a cautious usage of existing natural assets.

Phatthalung is a tranquil province with its unique ecosystem. It used to be a remote destination and was considered as a gateway to its neighbouring provinces; Songkhla, Trang and Nakon Si Thammarat. Dubbed a secondary tourism destination or so-called second tier tourist province for the past few years, Phatthalung has gradually become more well-known for its pristine environment where nature is preserved. The place has garnered attention partly due to its Ramsar Site by UNESCO. Thalae Noi, Phatthalung, is the first established non-hunting area in Thailand, where traditional lifestyle can still be witnessed. Preservation of natural resources in the district is closely related to a limit imposed to how the local earn their living through activities like fishery in conservation area. With a giant square-shaped nets mounted on a wooden frame named “Yo Yak”, fishermen are allowed to catch the fish in this wetland. Thalae Noi is home to almost 300 species of aquatic birds inhabiting in greater harmony with carpets of water lilies. Apart from birds and water lilies, animal life like water buffalo can be easily spotted here. The sight of water buffalos grazing on the swampland shows how villagers and water buffalos adapt themselves to the surrounding due to the water level.

The images of “Yo Yak” and water buffalos taken by travellers then become a key visual of the place. As information seeking becomes easy, these portraits have become the emblem of Phatthalung tourism. And these emblems in turn establish Thalae Noi as a must-visit and a top attraction for any travellers interested in biological exquisiteness. Since tourism is on the rise, it means that local communities should be educated of what sustainable development is in order to preserve the environment in the district and pay attention to another green value-based potentialities in tourism. In order to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity, local authorities should enforce a policy to control an eco-tourism in Ramsar Site. While message of Phatthalung as ecological district is disseminated, this value subsequently linked to the place.

Furthermore, Phatthalung rice production is certified under the trademark approach with GI (Geographic Indications). With a support from DOA (The Thailand Department of Agriculture), sustainable system of rice cultivation has been encouraged among rice-growing communities in the district. Rice cultivation not only drives an economy in Phatthalung, but some areas of paddy-fields have also been converted to restaurants. Lush greenery of paddy fields depicts picturesque landscape and way of farmer’s life which in turn draw attention of travellers. Yet, way of life in Phatthalung is more than agriculture, fishery and livestock; locals here still hold to the traditional craftsmanship by applying the wisdom and skills passed from their ancestors. Products from woven “Krajood” (grass-like plant) has been merchandised at local retailers and export to international market. Combining local expertise and cultures in tourism confirms that economy will be driven, and ecotourism will be generated.

Looking at Phatthalung in another dimension, Thai dancing performance named Manorah dance is originated here two thousand years ago. With its wealth in crafts and local myth, Manorah is regarded as a national heritage. Meanwhile, for those who are seeking for thrill, white water rafting along the river at Nhammoddang is an alternative. Several accommodations locate next to rafting spot as on-site attraction access. Thus, it can be explained that a value of an experience economy added to the ecotourism supports the place to expand its target market. To raise awareness of natural attractions amongst group of experiential travellers, advertising campaigns depicted Phatthalung’s landscapes are propagated. Based on value of the place; Phatthalung has a potential to be a green destination in accordance with 4A’s framework.

4.1 Attraction

Employing green branding as a tool, existing attraction i.e., natural attractions, non-heritage attractions, cultural attractions, experiential attractions in Phatthalung has a potential to develop to be a destination.
4.2 Accessibility
Although Phattalung is just an hour away from Hatyai airport and Trang airport by car. Without airport in the province, many travellers feel that it is inconvenient to go straight to Phatthalung which instead makes Hatay and Trang a main destination. Therefore, to support a domestic tourism in Thailand, a ministry of transport has granted to fund the construction of the airport in Phatthaling. Now it is in a process of studying the possibilities and location selection. It can not be argued that airport will drive a tourism growth and build opportunities for commercialisation.

4.3 Amenities
Numerous accommodations can be easily found both in the city of Phatthalung and rural attraction spots. The availability of services also facilitates travellers with an access to restaurants and local shops.

4.4 Ancillary
Phatthalung tourism authority and sport department is there to help administer service sectors in the province. However, the local government need to be systematically managed in order to educate villager and entrepreneurs to promote content in the same direction. With education and organizational structure, the ancillary will unquestionably strengthen Phatthalung’s tourism as a main destination.

In this case, the result shows that nature-based attractions which represent green space and natural assets have outperformed place identity. Despite enhancing overall experience of the place, local authorities should focus on highlighting existing natural attractions. Induced green images have been communicated by official means. The local authorities clearly overlook the importance of place value proposition which causes a place brand identity trap. Key stakeholders have not emphasized what Phatthalung stands for as a place brand, except for the publicity of certain nature-based attractions.

Figure 2. Green destination brand building model.

5. Conclusion
There is no destination that is 100% sustainable. Although there is difficulty in balancing environmental, economic and social challenges faced by increasing demand for expeditions in Phatthalung. The possibility of place development from an attraction to a green destination has an effect on the perception of value-based place identity projected outbound. Indeed, a story of a green destination branding focuses on the phenomenon of people-place characteristics. Place branding
process is a cooperative mission that involves public and private stakeholders. User-generated content is also as important as official source of information. The meaning of Phatthalung can be ideally comprehended by co-creating its place brand identity with all key stakeholders. Therefore, managing perception of locals has an impact on how travellers perceive Phatthalung as a preferrable destination.

This study attempts to review a concept of a sense of place with green aspects. To enhance Phatthalung competitiveness, place identity, place values and physical environment must be aligned with the understanding of green brand positioning. Besides, sustainable issues need to be integrated with a strategic plan. To consider an appropriateness of value-based elements, Phatthalung is analysed by both of its physical and experiential attributes. A conceptual framework on how to build a green destination brand preference based on what is observed is proposed as guiding key ingredients. The structure of this model is based on theoretical framework of Chan and Marafa on “Green (Resource) Brand Hexagon” (GBH).

An ecologically sustainable place will not be marketable if green brand attributes are not efficiently corresponded and managed. From a study, the definition of place identity exhibits a human-nature relationship, and this relationship creates an adaptive synergy which helps driving tourism growth. User-generated content is also as important as official source of information. The meaning of Phatthalung can be ideally comprehended by co-creating its’ place brand identity with all key stakeholders. Co-create place brand strategy creates meaningful values which strengthens brand-customer relationship. Therefore, managing perception of locals has an impact on how the travellers perceive Phatthalung as a unique and pleasurable place. Indeed, a story of a green destination branding is focused on the phenomenon of people-place characterisics.

As Aaker states that “brand identity provides direction, purpose and meaning for the brand. It is central to a brand’s strategic vision and the driver of one of the four principal dimensions of brand equity: associations, which are the heart and soul of the brand”. From the above figure, to brand Phatthalung as a green destination, the place contains tangible, intangible, symbolic and sensory elements. Meaningful green experiences provide a unique prospect to employ “green” to the place’s convincing and competitive advantages. These can be interpreted as a value proposition which bestow an advantage against its competitors. Green brand ingredients are represented in categories as a core communication perspective so as to elaborate the characteristics of desirable place brand identity. Since travellers nowadays are moving away from an overtourism towards a new mindset of experiential and symbolic benefits obtained from environmental awareness, becoming a trusted green brand is more than making a promise. With a construction of place brand identity, a sense of a common Phatthalung identity is developed. Under this circumstance, formal definition of green destination brand can be clearly understood and incorporated in the place multisensory identity.

Though there are impediments to encapsulate the diversity of the place in a definite identity amid various stakeholder groups. A strong place brand identity must be built so as to avoid a green destination brand image trap. Since destination brand images held by non-visitors and visitors are varied, place brand communication is definitely challenging.

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