

Conference Paper

Destination Branding: Perceived Sacredness and Spiritual Tourism in Indonesia Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

All industrial sectors such as tourism have been affected by the outbreak of COVID-19. Struggling with the current crisis, spiritual tourism that is inseparable with physical experience, cultural, and religious practices should re-manage their destination branding activity through an intensive communication process. This research aimed to update the destination branding literature by applying a qualitative research method. It explored the concept of perceived sacredness as the basic element of spiritual tourism, which has an important role in retaining the existence of spiritual destination. Narratives from the visitors of spiritual destinations who were involved in the focus group discussions were interpreted by generating the meanings of the perspectives while using the context of recent communication and management research. The study identified eight criteria of perceived sacredness. Physical entities of spiritual destination included area, building, location, and tangible artefacts or objects which are dominantly considered to define sacredness in Indonesian spiritual tourism. Furthermore, this research elaborated on the perceived sacredness criteria with the current destination brand communication to deliver an adaptation strategy for spiritual tourism in the time of COVID-19.

Keywords: Destination Branding, Tourism Communication, Generating of Meaning, Spiritual Tourism

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1. Introduction

Destinations offer a unification of tourism products and services, which are consumed under the brand name of the destination, providing tourists with an integrated experience. Leiper (1995) explains that destinations are “places towards which people travel and where they choose to stay for a while to experience certain features or characteristics—a perceived attraction of some sort,” but a destination can also be a perceptual concept, interpreted subjectively by consumers, depending on their

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travel experience, cultural background, the purpose of visit, and psychographic and demographic characteristics (Buhalis, 2000). Before visiting, tourists develop destination image as well as a set of expectations based on previous experience, word of mouth, media reports, advertising, and common beliefs (Chon, 1991; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997) differentiates one destination from another. The complex process of creating a brand for a destination appears to be correlated with the desirable image of the destination, the experience of the destination, and consequent differentiation between destinations. Ekinci and Hosany (2006) argue that destination personality moderates the relationship between destination image (cognitive) and the intention to recommend.

Creating a destination image is important element to personify destination branding. It is an important reflection of how tourists feel about a destination (Marine-Roig, 2019). Besides, destination image also has significant influence on tourist behavior, especially the behavior of tourists to visit again (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Jun, 2016; Prayag, 2009). Tourism image also plays a key role in choosing the tourism destination, decision-making process, and selecting the tourist's favorite activities. It can be said that marketing the mental image of tourism is the starting point for successful tourism marketing (Mansuri & Soleymani, 2012). The destination image should meet the expected values of the tourists in such a way that the more positive the destination image is, the more tourists' perceptions of the destination quality will be positive; thus, destination image increases the perceived value (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). In this study, the image of sacredness in the spiritual destinations is considered as one of the influential factors in choosing spiritual tourism activity. Although the concept of destination branding has been widely discussed and studied by previous researchers, there is still very limited number of previous research explores the public perception toward sacredness as the unique attributes of destination branding in the context of spiritual tourism.

Spiritual tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in Indonesia (Agmasari, 2017). This is because Indonesia has a diversity of religious sites resulting from the interaction of various cultural belief systems in the past (Dinitri, 2018). Scholars (Norman & Pokorny, Jennifer, 2017) noted that there is no consensus about the definition of spiritual tourism. However, these scholars agree that a spiritual tourist is a person visiting a particular place to increase spirituality without being associated with any specific religions.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 since early 2020, has negatively affected all industries around the world, especially tourism. As a result, World Health Organization (WHO) restricted individuals' movements, closed tourist attractions, and suspended public events and business activities (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). Tourism and hospitality

businesses were, therefore, forced to suspend their operations and services, lay off their workforces, including spiritual tourism (Wen, Wang, Kozak, Liu, & Hou, 2020).

This research aims to explain the perceived sacredness which has important role to retain the existence of spiritual destination. As a sector that struggles in this situation, spiritual destination managers required to communicate their places, even though, they will face a sluggish growth of the visitors. Using generating of meaning perspective, this research will analyze the perceived sacredness of spiritual destination and the adaptation strategy of spiritual tourism surviving the COVID-19.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Destination Branding

Destination branding can be defined as a way to communicate a destination's unique identity by differentiating a destination from its competitors (Morrison & Anderson, 2002). Similar to the general knowledge of brands, destination brands exert two important functions: identification and differentiation. Identification involves the explication of the source of the product to consumers. While a product in general terms represents a physical offering, which can be easily modified, a place as a product is a large entity that contains various material and non-material elements to represent it (Florek, 2005). A destination brand itself is the sum of perceptions that someone has about a place (whether based on experience or prejudice), which influences attitudes towards that destination at an emotional level. It represents the mix of the core characteristics of the place that make it distinctive and memorable that makes it different from all other places (and competitors).

2.2. Spiritual Tourism

Spiritual tourism as an academic and business concept is a new area of tourism that can be considered as an offshoot (though a chronological predecessor) of special interest tourism and cultural tourism. Special interest and cultural tourism literature were used to develop a theoretical framework for the research on spiritual tourism. Some aspects of tourism research theory and a small part of the tourism business practice literature have also contributed to the foundation of the framework for the spiritual tourism concept (Kim, Savage, Howey & Hoof 2009; Tribe 2008; Riley & Love 2000). Spiritual tourism is one of the special tourism, such as visiting sacred places to carry out spiritual activities

and others according to their respective religions and beliefs. Spiritual tourism has been established as an informal part of the tourism industry for a long time. Throughout history, oral, archaeological, and written records document peoples' involvement with spiritual experiences and their journeys to engage in spiritual activities (Blomfield 2009; Timothy & Olsen 2006; Rountree 2002; Shackley 2002; Burton 1855).

2.3. Perceived Sacredness

Levi and Kocher (2013) claimed that the sacredness of a place can be derived from people's emotional experiences. People's emotional experiences in sacred places vary with individual and cultural backgrounds (Shackley, 2001). For example, religious visitors might feel a stronger sense of god's presence in sacred places and are more aware of the embedded spiritual values within those places. Furthermore, people also recognize sacred places using their place-based experiences and preferences which developed from local values and cultural expressions (Brown & Raymond, 2007). Their emotional experiences with sacred destinations also enhance their religious belief and contribute to their personal spiritual development. On the other hand, non-religious visitors generally feel a sense of serenity and peace in religious and sacred places, which may also help their personal spiritual development (Shackley, 2001).

2.4. Generating of Meaning Perspective in Communication

Communication aims to present certain meanings in the minds of audiences. A person communicating not only intends to send a message but also wants to create a certain meaning in the mind of the receiver. Therefore, the choice of signs and symbols in communication becomes very essential so that the meaning we send can be understood by the public (Fiske, 1990: 39-63).

The importance of signs in creating meaning is usually explained by the triangle meaning theory (see Figure 1). According to this theory, meaning is the result of the meeting process between the use of signs that refer to the object (which is marked) and the mind that digests the sign.

This research describes the perceived sacredness as the important attributes in determining spiritual tourism using a triangle of meaning to understand the visitor of spiritual destination based on their conceptual interpretation (knowledge), the referent (phenomenon), and representation (sign, term, and symbol).

3. Methods

A case study methodology (Yin, 1989) with a multi-method approach (Brewer and Hunter, 1989) was used for this study. Case studies offer depth and comprehensiveness for understanding a specific phenomenon, enabling inductive and rich description. Case research is specifically welcome in new situations where little is known about the phenomenon and in situations where current theories seem inadequate (Eisenhardt, 1989). For this study, primary data was collected through focus group discussion with nine tourists who has some experiences in visiting spiritual destinations in Indonesia.

The informant of this research is participants in spiritual tourism destinations in Indonesia. Participants in question include (1) managers of spiritual destinations, (2) visitors to spiritual destinations, and (3) communities in the environment around spiritual destinations. Spiritual tourists are described as individuals or groups who travel to sacred locations to find tranquillity both physically and mentally. A spiritual tourist is defined as someone who visits a place outside their environment with the aim of increasing their spiritual spirit (concerning God and religion) sincerely and without coercion from religion, is religious and holy, or non-religious (socio-historical) (Norman & Pokorny, 2017; Tilson, 2008; Haq & Wong, 2013).

4. Discussion

4.1. Understanding Perceived Sacredness

Levi and Kocher (2013) found that the perception of sacredness is highly related to the quality of tourist experience. This support the perception of some key informations that it is important that the entities owned by historical and/or cultural tourism sites in increasing the sacred and sacred values of the tourist destination. The perception of sacredness towards a historical and/or cultural site is influenced by the styles of belief held by various groups of society (Jackson and Henrie, 1983; Bremer, 2006; and Sharpley and Jepson, 2011). This finding also supports the exposure of McKrecher and du Cross (2002) statement that a historical and / or cultural tourism site has tangible and intangible assets, where both assets have an important role in increasing the sacred and / or sacred value of a tourist site. Tangible assets described by McKrecher and du Cross (2002) can be artefacts in the form of sculptures, paintings, and relics. Based on the key information obtained from informants during the Focus Group Discussion, tangible assets in the perception of Indonesian tourists are all forms of historical relics left by

someone who has an important influence on the historical and / or cultural tourism site. The intangible assets described by McKrecher and du Cross (2002) match the descriptions of the informants, which are spiritual and religious practices carried out by local people in a historical and / or cultural tourism site that can increase the sanctity and sacredness of the tourist site. The results of the FGDs shown that there are eight criteria of perceived sacredness.

5. Eight criteria that obtained from the FGD results

From nine participants of focus group discussion, this research classified eight criteria into two entities, physical and non-physical. Physicals are considered stronger than non-physical entities. Describing the physical entities' criteria, a sacred object such as area, symbols, building/architecture, and other supporting attributes cannot be separated from the sacred space conceptual framework. Sacred spaces are constituted of movable and immovable elements, but at the same time, they have a function in worship that is related to rites and festivals, including elements of the tangible heritage and intangible heritage (Aulet and Vidal, 2018).

The place not only has a location (it must be located in physical space) and a visible material form; it must also have some relationship with human beings and the human capacity to produce and absorb the meaning. Drawing on the theories of Agnew, Cresswell (2005) refers to the 'sense of place' as the emotional and subjective link that people have with a place. Shackley (2001) uses the term 'spirit of the place' to refer to the atmosphere that surrounds the sacred space—an atmosphere that can be affected by the inappropriate behavior of tourists and/or visitors. Seamon and Sowers (2008) adopt that the essence of the place is its definition as the center of human existence. Sacred spaces or religious heritage sites have a strong symbol and acquire a strong emotional and experiential component. According to Bremer (2006), there are two fundamental characteristics of the place: that it is a social construct and that it manifests a temporal dimension.

People's emotional experiences in sacred places vary with individual and cultural backgrounds (Shackley, 2001). For example, religious visitors might feel a stronger sense of god's presence in sacred places and are more aware of the embedded spiritual values within those places. Their emotional experiences with sacred places also enhance their religious belief and contribute to their personal spiritual development. On the other hand, non-religious visitors generally feel a sense of serenity and peace in religious

and sacred places, which may also help their personal spiritual development (Shackley, 2001).

5.1. Destination Branding of Spiritual Tourism in The Covid-19 Situation

The physical criteria represent to some degree the sacred space and reproduce, among other things, all the symbolism of the sacred. Besides place and location, the informants mention artefacts, spiritual symbols, and architecture as the strong attributes to identify sacredness in spiritual tourism. This heritage also includes those objects of the movable heritage, such as paintings, altarpieces, ornamentation, and elements of the liturgy, which can be classed as artworks. In contradistinction to the above, the intangible entities are made up of the rites, cults, and events that take place in these sacred spaces. We could say that this heritage is a clear manifestation of sacred time, of the devotion of the people toward a certain element and the rites of integration practiced in these places, and we could, therefore, associate these elements with non-physical elements of sacredness.

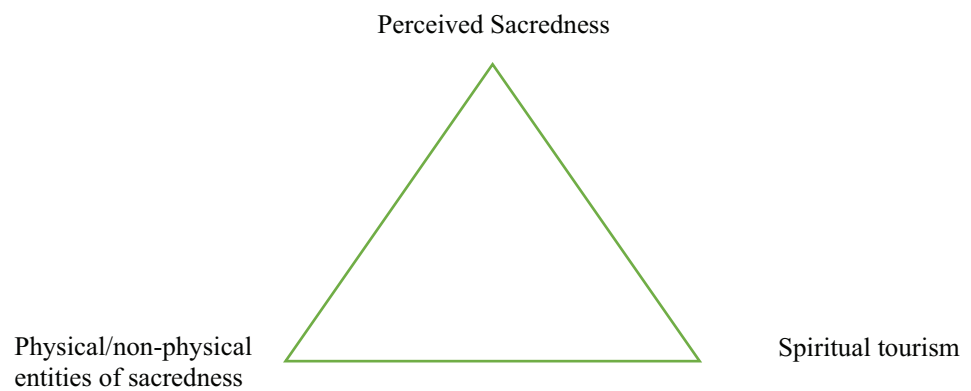


Figure 1: The application of Generating of Meaning Perspective in defining sacredness on Triangle of Meaning by Ogden & Richards in Berger (2020)

The triangle of meaning in Figure 2 is a model of communication that indicates the relationship among a thought, symbol, and referent, and highlights the indirect relationship between the symbol and the referent. Perceived sacredness is referred to as spiritual tourism, and so does the physical/non-physical entities. It is called “generating meaning” when arriving through the interaction between our nervous and sensory systems (experience of tourists in spiritual destinations) and some stimulus outside of them. Meaning is generated as sensory information is interpreted. Here we explore the perceived sacredness as a foundation to design an adaptive communication model for destination branding amid the COVID-19 crisis.

The complex process of communicating a brand for a destination appears to be correlated with the desirable image of the destination, the experience of the destination, and consequent differentiation between destinations. Ekinici and Hosany (2006) argue that destination personality moderates the relationship between destination image (cognitive) and the intention to recommend. From the result of focus group discussion, most of the visitors of spiritual destinations are attached with “sacredness” from the physical entities, like the area, objects, location, spiritual symbol, spiritual architecture, and supporting natural attributes that support their experience. Communicate the physical entities is much easier than non-physical because the tourist will associate the object with their experience and build the perceiving image of the spiritual destination with that.

Against the background on a pandemic situation that not allowed the people to extensively visit the tourist destination made some of them broadly use their gadget to find the tourist related-information. This phenomenon was captured well by the spiritual tourism manager to rebuild their existence in this limitation of physical activities.

Bali is one of spiritual destination which uses the virtual concept in promoting its potential. In early September 2020, the Head of Tourism Board of Bali announces the live streaming of spiritual tourism as its promotional program (<https://baliexpress.jawapos.com/read/2020/09/06/212517/pariwisata-buleleng-mulai-menggeliat>). The implementation of digital and intelligent technologies can also improve efficiency and achieve significant cost reductions in promoting spiritual tourism (Figures 3a and 3b). In the post-COVID-19, spiritual tourism could be more agile and effective in attracting Generation-Y and Z visitors if they continue to implement digital and smart solutions (Valle, 2020). Since that program has been implemented, the number of spiritual tourism visits to West Buleleng, especially in Such as the Pulaki Temple area, Pemuteran Temple, Batu Kursi Temple, and Gili Menjangan Temple is slowly rising.

Different from Bali, Daerah Istimewa Aceh (Special Autonomous Region of Aceh) is one of Indonesian’s territories which also have many spiritual destinations. Consisting of Muslims as the majority, Aceh is popular with their religiosity. In promoting its spiritual destination, Aceh used certain social media platform, like Instagram (Figure 4).

The “@wisatareligiaceh” is one of the most active accounts in promoting spiritual tourism in Aceh Regional. The account introduces spiritual tourism through photography. Focused on the sacred place or landscape of Muslim, @wisatareligiaceh ripens emotional experiences with the sacred places also enhance the religious belief and contribute to their personal spiritual development. On the other hand, this can generate non-religious visitors who generally feel a sense of serenity and peace in religious and

**Buleleng Barat Favorit Wisata Spiritual
Pariwisata Buleleng Mulai Menggeliat**

06 SEPTEMBER 2020, 18: 38: 15 WIB | EDITOR : I KOMANG GEDE DOKTRINAYA



PULAKI : Suasana di kawasan Pura Pulaki, di Desa Banyupoh, Kecamatan Gerokgak, yang mulai ramai dikunjungi pamedek. (istimewa)

Desa Adat Guwang Kelola Pura Beji Pancoran Solas sebagai Destinasi Wisata Spiritual

Bali Netizen
September 7, 2020



Desa Adat Guwang Kecamatan Sukamati Kabupaten Gianyar selama ini telah mengembangkan objek wisata Hidden Canyon.

Figure 2: (a) The illustration of spiritual tourism in Bali that growing gradually in pandemic situation (source: <https://baliexpress.jawapos.com/read/2020/09/06/212517/pariwisata-buleleng-mulai-menggeliat/> accessed on September 6th, 2020), Figure 3b. Bali Government who launch their spiritual tourist destination (source: <https://www.balinetizen.com/2020/09/07/desa-adat-guwang-kelola-pura-beji-pancoran-solas-sebagai-destinasi-wisata-spiritual/> accessed on September 7th, 2020)

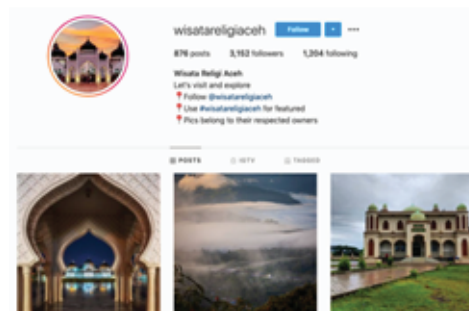


Figure 3: The Instagram page of “@wisatareligiaceh”

sacred places (Shackley, 2001). Sacredness is highly place-bound because it’s usually perceived and defined locally and it is used this.

A couple of aforementioned cases are exposed to the different characteristics of perceived sacredness. In Bali, the non-physical entities are expressed casually. The spiritual activities such as their cultural ceremony, the ambiance, and the spiritual values might be streamed to attract the tourist. While, in the second case study, the spiritual tourism for Muslims was developed from the physical entities such as the building or the area around the spiritual places which help to increase visiting intention. Supporting by Wilson et al. (2013), who claim through their ‘phenomenological portraits’ of people who undertake spiritual tourism that the fact these tourists feel ‘energized’, ‘inspired’ and ‘uplifted’ after their trips and also feel a sense of ‘connectivity’ with people from other parts of the world is a clear sign of the spiritual aspect of their travel for them. The Internet helps both platforms to communicate the spiritual destination brands. The Government of Bali use the Internet to expose the sacredness of spiritual tourism in streaming, taking the interest of Internet users during the pandemic situation.

The perceived sacredness criteria can also be positioned as the brand promise of spiritual destination, which requires that the brand's essence be communicated throughout various promotional campaigns, advertisements, and message types including the physical and non-physical entities. The presence of spiritual tourism in a new platform can increasing focus on the tourist experience, and marketing messages based on experiences will have greater importance in travel decisions in the future (Williams, 2006).

6. Conclusions

The research explored the perceived sacredness criteria of spiritual tourism in Indonesia by identifying eight criteria of perceived sacredness into two entities of spiritual tourists: physical and non-physical entities. Physical entities have played a main role in communicating the sacredness as spiritual experiences. However, the modification of the communication approach is no longer focus on the physical attributes but should also consider the meaning of perspective to unlock the knowledge of sacredness to create advanced continuum of tourists' experience.

This study provides a better understanding of crucial factors in part of managing spiritual tourism and destination promotion affecting the shifted behavior of domestic tourists. It could assist spiritual destinations managers to develop effective strategies to recover from the pandemic once the virus is restrained from the case study proposed. The results of the current study describe the perceived sacredness of spiritual tourism as an important identity to be managed even in a pandemic situation.

7. Limitation and Future Study

To produce a specific approach to spiritual tourism models, surveys about tourist behavior in the post-pandemic will help academics and experts to forecast the resilience response. Future studies can empirically investigate the influences of technology adoption on customers' experience, engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, and spiritual destination performances after a pandemic situation. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to investigate the benefits of live streaming marketing to promote destination branding, especially for the spiritual tourism sector.

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