

Bujang Valley Tourism Co-Creation in Place Branding: The Role of Local Community

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ABSTRACT

Despite its well-known reputation for its unique archaeological artefacts' findings and its historical sites, Bujang Valley or locally known as Lembah Bujang situated in Kedah Malaysia is unable to attract tourists in large numbers, specifically during post Covid-19 pandemic. This study aims to fill the gap by defining the role of local communities in branding Bujang Valley since local community engagement is imperative since they fulfil multiple functions in place branding. 20 locals were approached through convenience sampling for a semi-structured interview in defining their roles and views on the distinctiveness of place identity, culture, economy and hopes as well as their major involvement in the co-creation of the place branding. This exploratory study reveals that the local community are positive and share collective values towards uplifting the brand image specifically in respect to tourism factors, yet the authenticity and the core value should be sustained. The insights gathered provides a novel conceptualization in reproposing a new brand for Bujang Valley. In the future, Bujang Valley should continue to leverage its unique and well-received characteristics, highly considering the direct and indirect roles of the local community towards the process of place branding.

Keywords: tourism, place branding, local community



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Bujang Valley

Bujang Valley, or *Lembah Bujang*, located in the Malaysian northern state of Kedah, covers an area of 224 km², stretching from Gunung Jerai (Jerai Mountain) in the north to the Sungai Muda (Muda River) in the south (Jabatan Warisan Negara Malaysia [JWNM], 2021). The valley, located in the rice-growing region of Kedah, was once the site of a flourishing kingdom in the fourth century A.D. As trade in the Straits of Melaka grew, the Bujang Valley became a centre for collecting and trading products from the Malay Peninsula, evolving into an entrepôt by the seventh century. In 670 A.D., the Bujang Valley kingdom was influenced by Srivijaya, but regained its power when the Srivijaya Empire weakened at the end of the 11th century. Although it persisted until the 14th century, it declined with the advent of Islam and the emergence of Melaka as an entrepot (Omar et.al, 2010). One aspect of the fast-growing global tourism sector is visiting archaeological sites and historical places. This sector is also often associated with tourism activities that are based on historical and heritage elements. Due to fast changes in technology and the shift from local to a globalised environment, potential tourism places

are forced to compete to be attractive tourist destination, workplaces, culturally rich places and much more (Kotler, 2002).

Based on the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), the population of Kedah State in 2020 was estimated to be 2,185.2 million people with an annual growth rate of 0.5 percent. The population of Kedah State has shown an increase from 989.5 thousand people in 1970 to 2,185.2 million people. The population growth rate has also decreased from 2.4 percent in 1970 to 0.5 percent in 2020. Sadly, though Bujang Valley has several unique archaeological findings, historic sites, and interesting monuments, it is unfortunately not able to attract tourists in large numbers (Jusoh & Sabin 2017). To enhance their tourism revenues, potential tourist attraction places must develop effective branding strategies to stand out in potential tourists' minds as viable choice possibilities. This kind of strategy will effectively build upon such attributes as unique cultural heritage and local amenities (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009 in Yuwo et al., 2013). New perspectives of potential tourist attraction and their cities, knowledge, creativity, and motivation is needed to find new ways to develop strategic city management (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). This study focuses on a tourist attraction, Bujang Valley or locally known as *Lembah Bujang* located in the Malaysian northern state of Kedah.

1.2 Place Branding

Place branding has become increasingly significant worldwide, particularly among major cities such as New York, Lyon, London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Barcelona, and Paris. This marketing tool aims to develop an attractive territorial offer centred around a brand name associated with a place. Place branding is now considered an essential component of economic development for many places (Lucarelli and Berg, 2011; Cleave, 2014; Kavaratzis, 2005; Papadopoulos, 2004; Pasquinelli, 2013; Rainisto, 2003).

According to Braun et al. (2010), the definition of place branding is a “network of associations in the consumer’s mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place”. It is the creation of a brand for a place which integrates and defines its uniqueness, values, and attributes through place branding. The concept of place branding involves identifying of cultivating a distinctive identity that sets a location apart from others, with the goal of establishing a competitive brand identity (Ashworth, 2009; Nursanty, 2021). Given that the utilisation of marketing as a means of planning and management has been in practice in places for a considerable time and has been discussed extensively elsewhere, it is not unexpected that the concept of place branding is becoming more widely adopted (Florian, 2002).

The definition mentioned above defined that place branding is a customer-oriented approach. The aim of place branding is to create, communicate, and deliver value to the customer which in this study are the local community. The success of these approaches relies on understanding and meeting the needs, expectations, and preferences of the targeted local community . Therefore, customer-centricity is a critical aspect of place branding (Kavaratzin & Hatch, 2013); Kavaratzis, 2017; Zenker & Rutter, 2014).

1.3 Role of Local Communities

To date, existing literature often considers the local communities as a target audience for place marketing and branding. Based on the earliest place branding literature by Ashworth and Voogd (1990); Van den Berg et.al. (1990); Kotler et.al., (1993), these three main groups: *residents*, *companies*, and *visitors* are the people who are significant for the functioning of the place since they are the targeted group who *live*, *work* and *visit*. While attracting new residents is only a part of the place marketing strategy in many places worldwide, the current local communities have a more active role to play (Braun et al. 2010).

This initiative is a collaborative effort that involves a wide range of individuals and groups, including the local community. In fact, the issue of the community's role in tourism has been widely debated, particularly since the publication of Murphy's book "Tourism: A Community Approach" in 1985 (Murphy, 2018). It should be acknowledged that since 2017, there have been diverse views on what community-based tourism (CBT) encompasses and critical evaluations of the extent to which it is genuinely community-oriented (Mayakaet al. 2017). Involving the local community is critical to guarantee that place branding is founded on an authentic portrayal of the location, which includes its cultural legacy, principles, and ambitions (Zenker & Braun 2010). However, research on community roles and participation within the context of CBT is limited (Park et al. 2017; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018). In addition, the current scholars have notable deficiencies in these areas, as pointed out by Zenker et.al (2010), as it predominantly concentrates on providing a descriptive account of a particular city brand, while neglecting to consider the crucial role of the local communities in this process (Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2009).

Significant insights from the local community are critical to provide the expectations and requirements of visitors and investors, in addition to contributing to the creation of effective communication strategies since various methods have been developed to facilitate communication activities (Mohd Tahir et al. 2020). Furthermore, involving the local community in the process of place branding should be able to foster a sense of ownership and pride to more successful implementation and enduring outcomes of the place branding initiatives (Zenker & Braun 2010). As mentioned by Ashworth (2009), understanding and impressions of places are developed through three primary types of interaction; **i) Personal experiences ii) Exposure and iii) Influence** since the local community are an integral part of a place brand (Braun et al. 2010). These perceptions and impressions are mentally processed to facilitate understanding and interaction with the surrounding environment. The creation and management of place branding is an attempt to influence these processes towards a specific aim.

2. METHOD

This study takes a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews to define the role and insights in relation on place identity, brand co-creation, expectations, and hopes of Bujang Valley tourism co-creation in place branding. Convenience sampling was employed where 20 locals were selected as informants. Informants were provided with a comprehensive information sheet and informed of their rights to withdraw from the study, ask questions, and refuse to answer any questions at any time. Written consent was obtained from each informant. Throughout the data collection process, similar information was obtained from the first 15 informants, yet the interview continued until the 20th participant where the data saturation point was reached (Guest et al. 2006; Fusch and Ness, 2015). The number of informants selected for the study falls within the recommended range of 5 to 50 informants, which is considered adequate for qualitative research (Dworkin, 2012).

The discussion took place within the area of Bujang Valley (Kampung Bujang - Merbok-Tanjung Dawai – Yan - Sungai Batu). The interviews conducted were recorded with the permission from the informants, however, notes were also taken, and the transcripts were verified to ensure accuracy. These transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to define the role and insights on branding Bujang Valley (Stepchenkova, Kirilenko, & Morrison 2009; Alam 2005). The discussions followed a common semi-structured protocol that began by inviting a general discussion about Bujang Valley, prior to exploring the insights and potential of branding Bujang Valley. To accommodate the preferences of most informants, the interview sessions were conducted in Malay language and later translated into English to reach an authentic communicative situation (Codó & Wei, 2008).

2.1 Research limitations/implications

The study was conducted qualitatively using only 20 informants. Moreover, a thematic analysis offers flexibility from basic to organising and global themes, but, in this case, there may be a lack of deeper understanding, for example, in technological advancement viewpoints.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on individual responses and utilises the informant's own words to reflect a more comprehensive consensus within the community and the larger sample. Following Morgan's (2010), individual quotes are highlighted reflecting the larger group as a whole. The study began by welcoming the informants to describe the uniqueness of Bujang Valley. In general, all informants were able to provide distinctive uniqueness of Bujang Valley which justifies the place's attachment among the community. Receiving positive responses and appraises of a place or feelings attached to it immensely reflects high environmentally responsible behaviours and this is a factor in shaping the community's acceptance and attitudes towards the development of a place branding (Goudy, 1990; Choi and Murray, 2010; Scannell and Gifford, 2010; Stedman, 2002; Vaske and Kobrin, 2001; Styliadis & Quintero 2022). The community responses were categorised into the following sub-themes:

3.1 Role of Local Community

The local community were honoured to be selected as part of the process in branding Bujang Valley as they felt that they are the right people as this place is where they feel "*belong*", "*home*" and "*safe*".

This is our place, our home.
We lived here from generation to generation.
The safest place.
We belong here, and hope our generation will stay here too.

This is aligned and supported in a study by Braun et al. (2010), which stated that residents (local community) belonged to four different roles; i) **target group**, ii) **Integrated part** of a place brand, iii) **Ambassadors**, and iv) **Citizens**. Hence, it is important to consider their roles, interconnections, and influencing relationships in place branding as their insights (positive or negative) could significantly impact the success of place branding efforts. Involving and ensuring the participation of the local community in the place branding process is crucial for building a positive perception of the place.

3.2 Uniqueness of Bujang Valley

3.2.1 Historical Sites

The process of building a brand identity involves multiple factors, including both tangible cultural elements such as architecture, historical monuments and artefacts, as well as intangible elements like traditions and values which consequently shape the community (Daldanise, 2020). The community stated that Bujang Valley is highly significant with the historical values, and it has been one of the search landmarks. The conservation or archeological sites is crucial as they represent a distinctive and invaluable inheritance, something that has been handed down by previous generations and should be transmitted to the forthcoming ones (Barghi et.al, 2017).

The name itself reflects historical, right?

The history of the ancient people who started civilization here in this region...and the rest is history...the stones left in the temple are considered unique...and now it has become one of the tourist attractions...

*Candi, Sungai Batu, Telaga Getah, Kg Pial, Kedah Tua,
Sungai Merbok, Masjid Tertua Sungai Kakap,
Makam Sultan Muzzafar.*

Bujang Valley is a research area for researchers, public, and school students. These are the places that uplift the name of Bujang Valley.

3.3 Food Tourism

Bujang Valley offers distinctive food experiences and most of the informants provided similar local food and local products suggestions which have been a favourite among the locals and tourists. Food is recognized as an essential component of a place's culture and identity, along with its history, symbols, myths, and narratives (Smith, 1995 ; Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016).

Local Food

Mee Kuah Udang, Mee Kuah Tulang, Cendoi Pulut, Cendoi Pak Nik (Sungai Petani),
Restoran Terapung, Tanjung Dawai, Mee Udang D'Sawit, Sate Pok Saad, Mok Cun (Kuala Sungai Segantung Garam), Tiram Sungai Batu, Kuih, Laksa Beras, Laksa Syukri, Laksa Nipah, Sate.

Local Product

Ikan Bilis Mata Biru (Blue eyes' local anchovies), *Belacan*, *Keropok* (Fish Crackers),
Ikan Masin (Salted Fish)

3.4 Landscape

Findings also suggest that the landscape amenities of a place are crucial in capturing the essence of the place through branding. Utilising the visual landscape as a key element creates a new perception of the place that is based on a visually appealing story, making the place desirable not only for tourism but also for investment, infrastructure development, and attracting strong visual identity (Vela et al. 2017). This study also suggested that since Bujang Valley is situated in the rural regions, the meaning of landscape is essentially significant to be highlighted in the process of place branding.

Paddy Field,
Recreational Site (Tupah Waterfall),
View Gunung Jerai,
Mangroves.

The landscape *-lah!* would be the best to attract tourists, especially in the field of eco-tourism...experience the paddy field...enjoying fruits at the fruit orchard...exploring the mangrove forest...

This place is very near to the Jerai Mount (*Gunung Jerai*)...The landscape is beautiful, and the weather is just very calm and breezy...

The view of nature...paddy field..mountains...rivers..

3.5 The People

The establishment of a place's reputation is primarily driven by individuals who share a strong bond with that location. This process commences by acknowledging the common perception of identity, sense of affiliation, and objectives shared among them (Govers, 2020). This study has justified that Bujang Valley's community is comprised of harmonious and collective individuals.

The people here are friendly, approachable, and sociable...

Despite different races and religions, we are able to communicate and mix around.

Life is better with the people here...

We are very united here, probably because everyone speaks the 'Kedah' dialect.

3.6 Tourist Attraction

A place's strong branding has various crucial functions such as attracting tourists and investors, skilled individuals, promoting mutual respect, and marketing unique local products and crafts. Crafting a diverse identity can result in positive social impacts. To achieve a powerful city branding, establishing environmental harmony and fostering social solidarity in the community are significant factors that can bring about a substantial effect (Hankinson, 2004; Govers, 2020). In fact, the integration of academic institutions, travel agencies and local communities should be highly considered to increase the persuasion of specific place branding (Man 2018).

There are a lot of tourist attraction places which are popular even among domestic tourists such as Sungai Bakau, Tupah, Bukit Batu Pahat, Tanjung Dawai, Chalet Terapung, Ladang Nira Napih, Bujang Valley Museum, and Archaeological Sites.

Actually, a lot of new potential places should be discovered and could be commercialised here in Bujang Valley. For example : The beach area at Tanjung Dawai could be a hot-spot for tourists if it is well developed.

Mangrove species here are very rare in the world and some of the species could only be found here in Merbok, Bujang Valley.

Some of the tourist places like the Floating Restaurant 'Chalet Terapung' is not well-maintained which decreases the popularity even it has a huge tourism potential.

3.6.1 Place Branding Bujang Valley: Are you ready?

All informants revealed their readiness to see some changes in Bujang Valley. In fact, the community mentioned it is time to uplift the image of Bujang Valley aligned with the current technology and environment today. Nevertheless, there were few concerns.

Yes, we would like to see some changes and improvement of this place, the world, technology is changing...especially new changes from the **socio-economic status** here...but need to sustain the **value** of Bujang Valley.

The **authenticity** of Bujang Valley needs to be sustained...if there should be changes in the future, it needs to be **well-planned**...

Whatever we have now is okay, we are afraid if this place is too developed, **social issues** will arise.

Yes, we are ready and excited if the changes could **help the community** here.

The concept of CBT as mentioned earlier justifies the concept of achieving balance and harmony among the interests of various stakeholders involved in tourism development, including the government, private sector, and the local community (Kavoura 2014; Pratono & Sutanti, 2016). Ideally, tourism development should follow the principle of *"From the community, by the community, and for the community"*.

Local communities should be actively involved in every stage of tourism development, including planning, development, management, monitoring, and evaluation, as the ultimate goal is to enhance the welfare and quality of life of the community (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2014). The process of place branding does not rely solely on the community, however, the government and private sector should also play crucial roles specifically in providing support in ensuring the success of place branding (Kagungan & Zainal, 2023). The ultimate goal is to have a collective approach that will benefit the whole system involving the local community, tourists, and environment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study emphasises the importance of involving local communities in the process of place branding and developing a co-created destination brand. The role of community in place branding process is very essential and influential in order to create, select, and influence place brand attributes, define place identity, communicate the brand, contribute to deliver the brand promise to target customers and succeed their brand experience (Berrada 2018; Mohammadifar and Rousta 2018). The process of place branding involving the community is a collaborative effort specifically among economic operators, institutions, and the community towards a shared identity for Bujang Valley. By incorporating external and internal insights of the locality and addressing market challenges, participatory place branding can lead to a more harmonious and sustainable place brand (Park et al. 2017). This collaboration is driven by the common goal of enhancing the value of the place and making plans and actions towards branding Bujang Valley feasible. The focus of this discussion is not on the ideas or reasoning behind the application of branding to places, but rather on how it is implemented at the local level, particularly as an aspect of broader conventional place management policies. This includes negotiations of meaning and change, capturing the ways in which place brands actually form and operate.

This study suggests that place branding should focus on the role local community as the key element to foster the city's uniqueness and to obtain an organic storytelling in a sustainable way (Rizkavirwan & Tirtadarma 2022; Montoya 2002). Rather than treating culture as a mere decorative element, it should be viewed as a key factor in reinforcing the city's distinctiveness. In the future, Bujang Valley should continue to leverage its unique and well-received characteristics, particularly highlighting the key tourism areas mentioned. Due to the constant change in technological and digital landscape, Bujang Valley is ready for new and improved changes. Nevertheless, the authenticity and core-value of Bujang Valley should be sustained. The future of place branding will rely heavily on the recognition and understanding of the elements that have been passed down from generation to generation, including tangible and intangible heritage that represent the uniqueness of the local community (Kagungan & Zainal, 2023).

The study concluded that the distinctive characteristics of Bujang Valley is significantly impacted by the choices made by local communities in their interaction with the environment in which they live. As a result, the relationship between the local community and the place they live would be an influential factor towards the advancement of place branding and the enhancement of the city's competitive edge since recently, scholars have recognized the strategic importance of involving residents in place branding, which was previously neglected by many (Berrada, 2018). In fact, the concern is not for the incoming new residents, but for sustaining the current and satisfied community (Braun et al. 2010). The findings mentioned provided important implications in terms of heritage, education, community engagement, and environmental relations in Bujang Valley which would be useful.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Neesa Ameera Mohamed Salim leads the direction and the main content of the manuscript, while Abdullah Kula Ismail and Syafiq Abdul Samat contributed more on the data collection and analysis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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