

## Luxury Branding as a Niche Tourism Segment in Langkawi

Amirah Mohd Shahril , Mohd Raziff Jamaluddin & Mohd Hafiz Mohd Hanafiah  
*Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
Bandar Puncak Alam, 42300 Selangor, Malaysia*

**Abstract:** Langkawi has become a topic of discussion among researchers in Malaysia whenever the destination competitiveness topic is discussed among scholars and policymakers. Langkawi's transformation into an international destination began in 1987 when it was merely a duty-free port, and it has since evolved into an international destination that benefits socio-economic development. The "less is more" principle does not apply to tourist purchasing decisions. Luxury travellers were a critical component of various tourism subsectors, particularly emerging destinations. Langkawi was chosen as the research setting due to its potential as a luxury island vacation destination. The initial potential of Langkawi drew various developments that were not driven by actual data but rather by the tourism industry's assumptions, resulting in a disaster of rapid development. Interviews, document reading, video viewing, and on-site visits were all used for this research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related travel restrictions, the interview with representatives of the local tourism agency and industry stakeholders was conducted in the most efficient manner possible. According to interview responses, Langkawi necessitated a significant overhaul of existing products to cater to the luxury segment. Shopping is not an attraction for foreign tourists; thus, Langkawi should focus on developing more experience-based products that can provide relaxation and act as a gateway for this group.

**Keywords:** Destination Branding, Luxury Branding, Luxury Island, Langkawi, Luxury Travellers

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### 1. Introduction

Langkawi's transformation into an international island began on January 1, 1987, when the island was gazetted as a duty-free port. This effort has been instrumental in refocusing the island's socio-economic development on community-based tourism. Luxury travellers played a significant role in the sector's expansion, particularly in terms of supply and demand for luxury tourism products. Malaysia performs admirably in this segment, having been ranked 29th out of 140 countries in terms of travel and tourism competitiveness in 2019, placing it fifth in Asia (World Economic Forum, 2019). In addition, Langkawi, an island off the northwestern coast of Malaysia's Peninsular, contributed significantly to this accomplishment by offering various products that attract foreign tourists to Malaysia. TripAdvisor named Langkawi one of the top 25 beaches in Asia and TatlerAsia.com as the best beach in Malaysia (Jayatilaka, 2021). Langkawi's ancient rainforests, pristine beaches, pleasant climate, and luxury beach resorts have all contributed to the island's steadily increasing tourist arrivals since 2015. Additionally, the famous Langkawi Sky Bridge is ranked among the top ten highest observation decks globally, as featured in travel publications such as National Geographic, Times of India, Travel Trade Gazette, and South China Morning Post.

The Malaysian government has successfully developed Langkawi as a tourist island resort with modern infrastructure and services since 1984. Most development takes place around Kuah's main town and along the

coast's distant beach resorts. Langkawi possesses all of the necessary components to become a global tourist destination, including an international airport, world-renowned hotel brands, and Malaysia's longest cable car. Langkawi's transformation into an international island began in 1987 when the island was gazetted as a duty-free port. This initiative has been essential in refocusing the island's socio-economic development on community-based tourism. Additionally, Langkawi's success in hosting major events such as the Langkawi International Maritime and Exhibition (LIMA), the Ironman Triathlon, and Le Tour de Langkawi since 1991 has contributed to the island's appeal in the event industry.

Over the past four decades, the island has advanced rapidly from a tropical island centered on fisheries, rural, community-based, and domestic retail to an advanced and contemporary island centered on international tourism. However, promoting Langkawi to the international market has resulted in Langkawi progressively slipping into deterioration (Ursinus, 2016). The initial potential of Langkawi drew further developments that were not driven by actual data but rather by conjecture by tourism players, resulting in disasters (Omar, Othman & Mohamed, 2016). Statistics showed that tourist arrivals declined from 3,679,158 in 2017 to 3,628,951 in 2018. (Immigration Langkawi Development, 2018). Moreover, the renowned Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) demonstrated a declining trend in attendance due to the absence of technological advancements (Razak, 2019).

From the literature reviews, it is noted that Langkawi faced the issue of strategic destination branding positioning. Several previous studies indicated that Langkawi promoted several branding concepts, including "Geopark Langkawi" (Yusof, Ismail & Ahmad, 2019), and "budget traveler destination" (Nur & Ruslan, 2018), and "Naturally Langkawi" (Halim & Choy, 2019). According to Omar (2015), most reviews on Langkawi note the island's affordability and suitability for backpackers. According to him, backpackers enjoy sharing their travel experiences in Langkawi online, cementing Langkawi's reputation as a backpacker's destination. Academic research is becoming hostile to the possibility of what Langkawi should be. Langkawi should be promoted as a holiday destination with safe and stable conditions, a positive image among domestic and international tourists, and a friendly tourism policy (Yusof & Ismail, 2016). The emergence of new luxury items in Langkawi like high-end hotels, first-class airlines travel, luxury yachts, and ziplines necessitates new research to determine Langkawi's suitability as a luxury island destination.

This paper aims to determine Langkawi's viability as a luxury island destination. The dearth of studies on luxury tourism makes it rational for the researchers in Malaysia to examine this concept. Additionally, no branding studies emphasizing luxury destinations had been undertaken in Langkawi, which served as a primary motivation for pursuing this topic. The main research question is "How luxury island destinations can be promoted in Langkawi as the niche tourism image?" Langkawi has demonstrated its importance as a topic of discussion among tourism researchers. While local scholars have conducted studies in the past, the number of studies remains negligible compared to Langkawi's tourism industry growth. The research topic should focus on niche areas that appeal to both researchers and policymakers. For example, Kayat (2002) examined the resident's attitude toward tourism solely through the combined utility effect of social exchange and power theory. Another study conducted a preliminary survey by Nair and Azmi (2008) to evaluate tourist impressions of the island's attractiveness. On the other side, Halim and Choy (2019) examined the influence of tourism development on the Langkawi community. Thus, by taking the bold decision of developing a new branding idea for luxury island destinations, it will pique policymakers' interest in developing future strategies, which will, in turn, encourage academic scholars to examine the influence of the new policy on the tourism sectors.

## **2. Related Work**

### ***2.1 Island Branding***

Destination branding has emerged as one of the prevalent concepts in tourism destination study that focuses on symbolism to create a destination competitive advantage (Yusof, Ismail & Omar 2014). Stiff competition in the tourism market requires the destination to offer a distinct brand image to attract a specific tourism market.

As Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005) mentioned, the idea of destination marketing is not new, but the topic of destination branding has started to be pursued by scholars since the 1990s. In the destination branding process, the benefits of branding give the destination an advantage in promotional activities (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003). Destination branding has several different interpretations, such as first position (Gilmore, 2002), image building (Curtis, 2001; Cai, 2002), and image reproduction (Hall, 2002).

The island branding is an underlying set of determinations intended for brand positioning (Leseure, 2014). Usually, the local government will craft strategies for the island branding through several prominent characters. The island brand might look like a solid character, but it has dynamism and substance to change over time. Instead of conceptualizing the island branding, the policymakers should prioritize the strategic process of image creation that combines social and economic activity (Leseure, 2014). According to Butler (1996), the island needs to differentiate its main characters from other islands. The differentiation is the form of recreational, climate, environmental, and cultural experiences that give tourists reasons to visit the island (Liang, 2017).

## 2.2 Luxury Branding

Luxury tourism refers to high-end facilities and amenities that include five-star accommodations, chartered aircraft, private jets, private boats, and limousines (Sukmawati, Ernawati & Nadra, 2018). According to Iqbal (2016), luxury tourism accounted for 44% of the total tourism market. Riley (1995) claimed that luxury tourism is extraordinary in the tourism industry since it refers to how an individual prefers to travel in style and elegance. However, understanding the luxury market segment is complicated due to how luxury tourists behave physically and emotionally. Typically, it is portrayed as an exceptional utility or over hedonism. The tourism industry capitalizes on the segment's varying demand and supply (Wiedman, Hennings & Siebels, 2009).

Socio-demographic characteristics of customers have been proven to be critical factors in shaping luxury tourism (Roper *et al.*, 2013). Brenner and Aguilar (2002) noted that studies on luxury tourism observed the thought processes of luxury buyers, sentiments, and mentality toward purchasing activity. He found out that luxury buyers demonstrate their prosperity and monetary status to stand out among others and love to shop extravagantly. In this sense, the term "demonstrate" refers to traveling to renowned locations to demonstrate the social status and engage in mental self-reflection due to being in an exceptional setting. However, Azcárate and Fuentes (2013) found that not all members of this segment live a life of luxury. Those who demonstrate a lavish lifestyle do so to demonstrate their social standing and to exhibit their societal status (Iloranta, 2019). Additionally, a high social status reflects the capacity to acquire and utilize different life goals. It is worth assessing luxury tourists' sophistication and their relationship with the destination.

The luxury brand embodies the product's or brand's unique social and cultural meanings (Becker, Lee, & Nobre, 2018). Additionally, it refers to the buyer's personal and social status as a person with a high financial standing (Chevalier & Manzalovo, 2008). The luxury buyer segment is significant because demand for premium goods continues to thrive despite the economic slump (Chevalier & Manzalovo, 2008). According to Reyneke, Sorokáčová, and Pitt (2012), there is no declining trend in luxury brand purchasing during financial cycles. However, there is no definitive framework for promoting the premium brand in the tourism industry.

Without a clear direction and credible findings in the luxury branding field, academics continue to debate the inconsistencies of the luxury brand findings. For example, researchers contended that financial concerns significantly impacted purchasers. However, the prior research findings were inconclusive on the impact of luxury buyers on the luxury brand. In addition, there are no established standards to measure the luxury standards in tourism destinations. Sung *et al.* (2015) attempted to structure the luxury brand characters that contribute to the utilitarian value of the luxury brand. On the other hand, Lee (2013) explored the structure of luxury brand character from a social class perspective.

The luxury brand along Mexico's beaches drew foreign direct investment in resorts, restaurants, tourism-related businesses, and retail outlets. As Katzman and Kalcevic (2009) note, luxury chains seeking to enter or expand their presence in Mexico can acquire and reposition existing properties with particularly appealing features or pursue new construction opportunities on freestanding sites or within master-planned resort residential communities. In the case of Langkawi, the presence of a few luxury brands has boosted the area's tourism business and brought in high-end travelers. However, due to a lack of healthy rivalry between domestic and international

luxury brands, the island remains relatively unknown on the international stage. Nonetheless, the significance of the luxury brand caused many governments to recognize its economic importance, which resulted in coordinated efforts to establish zones suitable for hosting the luxury brand. Tax incentives, tax reductions, subsidies, and funding are granted to support the expansion of luxury brands in designated luxury tourist regions.

### 3. Methodology

The researcher used a phenomenological technique in this study, including interviewing, studying documents and videos, and visiting locations and events. This technique provided a variety of perspectives on the research problems. An on-site interview was undertaken to collect the data. The unit of analysis in this study was a person who had visited Langkawi and used luxury products throughout their stay. The study used judgmental sampling to choose subjects based on screening criteria. The screening criteria are developed based on a study of prior findings and confirmed by an expert panel. Additionally, judgmental sampling demands the researcher's intuition to select a sample that will provide complete feedback that will assist in interpreting the research findings. As a result, the researcher must choose the most fruitful sample to provide insight into a luxury brand and island branding. Due to the luxury element of this study, the researcher must carefully strategize sample selection.

The study used a qualitative method in which sample size was not the main issue because the likelihood of respondents providing input was uncertain at the initial phase of the study. The study will gather primary data in narratives that include previously unpublished opinions, feedback, experience, and knowledge. This study will use a semi-structured interview, which is appropriate when no research framework is involved, and will incorporate pre-set questions in the interview. Given the researcher's limited experience conducting interviews, a semi-structured interview will assist in relaxing the interview process. There was no time limit for the duration of the interview session, which would have ensured the capture of more inputs.

The research assistants stayed in Langkawi for two months to ensure adequate data collection and observation. The interviews lasted approximately 40 – 60 minutes. When the saturation point was reached, the interview item was omitted. The following are the primary interview questions:

- Demographic profile: five items
- Basic Knowledge of Langkawi tourism products: three items
- Feedback on travel experience in Langkawi: two items
- Opinion on the progress of Langkawi: one item
- Opinion on luxury branding: one item

The researcher evaluated the transcript to understand the material and then organized the data by comparing it to the literature review. The researcher combed each transcript and established a theme from the general image to a specific luxury island location. Prior research on luxury brandings will be used to determine whether the retrieved image belongs within the branding category. The relevant section of the contents will be compared to a sentence from the established code. Creswell (2012) underlined the importance of conducting a thorough analysis of the data in order to compare it to the research question and suggested themes.

## 4. Analysis and Findings

### 4.1 Respondent's Profile

The interview elicited responses from twenty respondents, sixty percent of whom were foreign visitors and forty percent domestic tourists. The majority of them had visited Langkawi multiple times, which is one of the requirements for becoming a respondent in the study. According to the age distribution, 30 percent were under 30, 50 percent were between 31 and 50 years old, and 20 percent were over 50. Most domestic respondents stayed three to four nights in Langkawi, whereas overseas respondents stayed between five and seven days. Domestic respondents were predominantly accompanied by family, while family and friends accompanied international respondents. Only one overseas respondent indicated that she visited Langkawi alone.

## ***4.2 Langkawi Tourism Products***

For the second question, most respondents stated that Langkawi is well-known as a holiday destination based on the abundance of resorts and chalets available along the shore. Local tourists noted that Langkawi is famous for a short getaway to relax and spend time with family during school, weekends, and public holidays. High-end tourists choose Langkawi as a holiday destination to unwind and spend time with family in a peaceful location. The high-end tourists seek tranquility as the primary motive for vacationing, and tourist attractions become secondary. For a short getaway, respondents indicated that they believe Langkawi has the products necessary to fill the three-to-four-day vacation.

Interestingly, one respondent visited Langkawi as part of the trip to Phuket-Bali-Langkawi and stated Langkawi offers a relaxing and natural environment compared to Phuket and Bali. Nature is the most popular feedback received from the respondents. According to the respondents, the most prominent message they captured from their information search is sandy beaches and lush green rainforests, which align with the previous findings (Horwarth, 2021; Shariff & Abidin, 2020). It is discovered that other common travel motives such as sightseeing, visiting friends and family, visiting museums, art galleries, and historical sites, shopping, nightlife, festivals, and events are not the primary purpose of the luxury tourist segment. Another interesting finding is that the general purpose of trips like holidays, business, meetings, and honeymoon does not apply to holiday destinations like Langkawi.

## ***4.3 Travel Experience in Langkawi***

Travel experience is the most influential factor in determining future travel plans to any destination. There are differing perspectives on the travel experience in Langkawi due to two primary factors; specifically i) those who come to unwind and spend time with family, and ii) those who come to enjoy Langkawi's tourism products. According to one response, Langkawi is not an ideal beach vacation destination that offers thrilling water activities such as snorkeling, scuba diving, and island hopping, but rather a combination of rainforest and beach activities that make the vacation unforgettable. This finding is consistent with another image, "the lush green rainforest," where interaction with the environment, such as mangroves, mountains, and wildlife animals, is the most memorable part of the Langkawi trip experience. Customized and personalized activities, such as private tours, are the most pleasurable, particularly near sunset. One significant finding of Langkawi is its most distinguishing characteristic, which is "laid-back." The respondents appreciate the warmth, friendliness, and helpfulness of people who do not harass tourists to sell the products like other islands in the region. Another incredible experience is smooth and seamless arrivals at the Langkawi International Airport, where the process is swift and easy, unlike other international airports. The majority say that high-end restaurants provide an overall experience that makes them look forward to night activities for cuisine. "Affordability" was a top priority for respondents, especially when they could skip long queues and purchase in bulk to get the best deals. When the subject of shopping is brought up, the majority of them stated that it is not a priority in Langkawi since, in their opinion, shopping activities are limited, and perhaps the authorities made the right option by forcing tourists to spend time with the beach and nature. Finally, a few respondents noted that being able to do anything independently, including driving around the island without maps and navigation apps, made the trip enjoyable.

## ***4.4 The Progress of Langkawi***

This question is intended to elicit respondents' observations about the progress of Langkawi. Respondents' most frequently received opinion is that Langkawi has remained a safe area to visit, free of accidents, theft, and other undesirable situations. Additionally, they noticed that, despite the development of numerous tourist facilities in town areas, the landscape that dominated the visit remained primarily unchanged from the previous visit. Along the shore, improved tourist facilities were also evident with the expansion of the road and public parking spaces, as the island lacks public transportation. In addition, respondents felt that Langkawi is not overdeveloped, despite increased tourism and increased accessibility via foreign airlines. The responders take

note of the increased number of award-winning resorts built to attract international tourists. Moreover, more cars are driven by locals, which may imply that Langkawi has many offices, agencies, and training institutions, all of which contribute to the increasing population.

#### ***4.5 Luxury Island as a Niche Tourism Branding***

This section is the most critical component of the questionnaire, in which respondents were probed about the possibility of luxury island branding for Langkawi. One of the most significant responses was to carefully develop Langkawi to avoid “over-tourism,” which they believe will be best achieved by luxury tourism. In light of this, respondents feel Langkawi must maintain its environmental and sustainability initiatives to preserve the “green lush rainforest” for future generations to relish. Additionally, they believed tranquility was well suited to luxury, as they were willing to pay a premium to unwind in a natural setting. Further, the rainforest in Langkawi is ancient, dating back more than a hundred years, and must be maintained because it cannot be recreated anywhere. Artificial tourism products will never be capable of replacing the experience of engaging with nature, particularly for people who have an interest. Likewise, respondents believe that more international brands should be present in Langkawi to give the island a global perspective. International hotel and resort brands have become a significant draw for tourists in other emerging countries. They can use the membership or loyalty program to get the best deal, which Langkawi now lacks. They can use the membership or loyalty program to receive the best deal, but Langkawi currently lacks this prospect. Furthermore, Langkawi’s low cost of living makes it feasible for foreign brands to create luxury establishments there, resulting in lower operating costs and a higher margin. The presence of more luxury brands in Langkawi will indirectly benefit the country’s image.

### **5. Discussion and Implication**

#### ***5.1 Discussion***

Most respondents agreed that Langkawi’s luxury island should be promoted as a niche brand according to the analysis. Tourists are attracted to Langkawi for two primary reasons: the beach and the natural environment. As a result, the investment required to develop this destination image will be minimal, as most of the cost will be spent on maintaining the existing products. Moreover, additional investment in infrastructure improvement will be minimal, as it will not require a large sum of money from the local government. Langkawi’s luxury island branding will provide a one-of-a-kind marketing proposition that others will be unable to reproduce. This initiative will develop core competencies that may be leveraged in the strategic brand positioning. Reproduction is something that branding is attempting to prevent, and in the case of Langkawi, tourists will have to travel here personally to interact with the unique nature that is only available in Langkawi. Besides, more individuals can afford to visit and stay in Langkawi due to the lower cost of living than in other destinations in developed countries. As Wilson, Eckhardt, and Belk (2015) indicate, luxury brands have penetrated the middle class, where consumers are willing to pay for counterfeit goods to demonstrate their status. As it is now, respondents remarked that Langkawi excels at affordability.

By luring luxury brands to Langkawi, a new ecosystem of selling high-end products to high-end tourists would be created, transforming the Langkawi economic outlook. As the analysis revealed, shopping is not a priority for the luxury segment during their stay in Langkawi; thus, there is no issue with petty traders or substandard products offered in the luxury business environment. Finally, sustainability measures must be reinforced, as the products desired by this group cannot be overdeveloped and must be maintained appropriately. Interactions with nature could be the items that allow Langkawi to establish a new brand equity and loyalty niche. This finding is consistent with Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000), who assert that a distinctive brand image distinguishes the brand and its value and establishes a definite position in the consumer’s mind, hence contributing to possible brand equity enhancement.

## **5.2 Theoretical Implication**

While numerous researches have been undertaken in the past on the value of luxury branding, very few have analyzed the destination image, making the findings of the studies relevant and valuable for knowledge advancement. It has been observed that the generic brand image has shifted dramatically from being a symbol or logo to leveraging into niche segments. The strategic decision-making process must include targeting, segmentation, and positioning, contributing to the destination's unique selling proposition and, consequently, core competency. From a methodology standpoint, qualitative investigations enable a more in-depth analysis of the inputs from selected samples. This will provide new directions for branding studies, which have previously focused on straightforward objectives. As evidenced in the literature, numerous past branding studies demonstrate a directional relationship between the outcome of the variables selected in the research that address the "what" and "which" inquiries. However, by revisiting the "how" and "why" questions, it will be possible to comprehend the scope of the study subject. In today's highly interactive world, where people are captivated by technology and engaged in virtual platforms, luxury branding in Langkawi will introduce a new interactive dimension where people may immerse themselves in natural interaction. Perhaps it can revitalize future research by revisiting established marketing theories such as the Product Life Cycle, SWOT analysis, and AIDA model, among others, to determine how interactivity with nature might be incorporated into the model.

## **5.2 Practical Implication**

People have spent more time on their smartphones recently, most notably during the COVID-19 lockdown. Almost everyone is excited to receive updates on the latest cases during the pandemic, but people are looking for information on travel and other topics after more than a year. Interaction with nature will be something that people desire to engage with their self-image through active consumption, and this is another way for individuals to gain a new perspective on life. Thus, in the new normal era, tourist policy needs a pragmatic approach to comprehend the industry's prospects. There may be a new trend post-pandemic, and it is critical for policymakers and industry stakeholders to analyze case studies, facts, figures, and statistics to better understand the possible future scenario. Luxury branding may become one of the subjects that can bring together several popular initiatives, such as sustainable, rural, and community-based tourism, as well as address the issue of over-tourism and carrying capacity, particularly on the island, where there is talk of limiting consumption to protect the environment and wildlife. The shift in focus to comprehend the notion of niche branding may create a better understanding within the business ecosystem and a higher level of cooperation, information sharing, and trust among stakeholders involved in destination planning.

## **6. Limitations and Recommendations**

A few months before the pandemic began, the data collection took place, making it extremely difficult to interview samples. Additionally, the data collection is conducted during the off-peak season, which reduces the likelihood of obtaining high-quality samples. The interview session was close to the beach and natural surroundings, making it uncomfortable to extend the interview sessions in the island's humid climate. Apart from that, very little material can be gathered to comprehend the island's branding progression, necessitating the researcher to utilize online searching fully. For future research, it is recommended that the survey be conducted during both the off-peak and busy seasons to provide thorough coverage of the response. Additionally, this may provide better opportunities to observe luxury private yachts and cruises, which are extremely scarce during the off-peak season. Lastly, future research can integrate another branding component to better understand the strength of luxury branding.

## **7. Conclusion**

The impact of branding in promoting a strong destination image cannot be underestimated. It is necessary to establish a strong brand image by capitalizing on the most crucial characteristic of the destination. In this research,

it is concluded that luxury island branding should be the destination marketing organization's top concern. The island must continue its sustainability and conservation efforts to push into luxury branding. Lastly, it is concluded that the future blueprint should integrate the strategic brand positioning of luxury brands to revitalize the island's image.

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