

## DOES CRUISE TOURISM DESTINATION BRANDING CONTRIBUTE TO ECONOMIC GROWTH IN PENANG, MALAYSIA?

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**Abstract** - This research note investigates the potential for economic growth in Penang, Malaysia, through strategic destination branding for the cruise tourism sector. Penang, a key economic hub, needs help fully harnessing its economic potential, with existing statistics indicating a troubling rise in the unemployment rate. This emphasises the need for effective economic interventions to promote growth and job creation. Despite these challenges, Penang possesses significant untapped potential in cruise tourism. The island's rich cultural heritage and strategic location make it an attractive destination, yet the number of cruise tourists still needs to grow compared to tourist arrivals. This disparity presents a unique opportunity to leverage cruise tourism destination branding as a catalyst for economic growth and employment generation. Penang could address these issues by aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), which promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. By addressing these issues, Penang could make significant strides towards achieving SDG 8, transforming the illusion of cruise tourism-driven economic development into a tangible opportunity.

**Keywords** - Cruise Tourism Destination Branding, Economic Growth, Employment Generation, Sustainable Development Goal 8, Penang, Malaysia.

### INTRODUCTION

Although the origins of the cruise industry date back to the nineteenth century, the contemporary cruise tourism sector began to flourish in the 1960s (Marques, 2020). Since then, it has significantly expanded and diversified, transitioning from small-scale luxury and adventure cruises to large-scale vessels that serve as global floating destinations. Numerous studies have recognised the cruise sector as one of the fastest-growing segments within the tourism industry (Papathanassis, 2022; Peručić & Greblički, 2022). The number of international cruise passengers has surged impressively, from 17.8 million in 2009 to 31.7 million in 2023 (CLIA, 2024).

The cruise tourism sector in Malaysia is experiencing rapid growth, with an 85.71% increase in cruise tourist arrivals reported in recent years (Dermawan, 2024). Renowned cruise ships operate in Malaysian waters, providing an excellent mix of recreational facilities, entertainment options, gourmet dining, and exotic destinations (Rashid, 2020). Malaysia's 14 ports, including notable ones like Port Klang, Penang, Malacca, Kuching, Kota Kinabalu, and Langkawi, are well-equipped with modern facilities to accommodate cruise ships worldwide (Tourism Malaysia, 2024).

Penang is emerging as a promising cruise tourism destination in Malaysia, with the Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal ranking among Asia's top ten busiest harbours (Piraeus Port of Athens, 2021). Penang receives significant tourists, but the number is negligible for cruise tourists. In 2023, Penang welcomed 7 million tourists; among them, 0.57 million were cruise tourists (Dermawan, 2024; Dermawan, 2024a). Tourism is vital for Penang's economy, contributing significantly to the service sector, which makes up 16.8% of the state's GDP of the state's GDP (Penang Economic and Development Report, 2020). Despite these contributions, Penang faced its highest budget deficit of RM514.53 million in 2024 and saw a rise in unemployment from 2% in 2019 to 2.7% in 2022 (Leng, 2021; Mok, 2024). Focusing on the cruise tourism sector could boost revenue and employment, aiding the regional economy.

Several authors identified destination branding as an effective strategy to enhance tourists' visit intention and arrival growth (Chi et al., 2020; Giannopoulos et al., 2021; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020; Rather et al., 2021). Meanwhile, tourist arrival growth has an economic impact on the destination, which

indicates the significance of conducting a study on cruise tourism destination branding in Penang, Malaysia.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptualizing Cruise Tourist-Based Destination Brand-Equity Pyramid (CTDBBEP)**

The Customer-Based Brand-Equity Pyramid (CBBE) model, developed by Kevin Lane Keller, is a comprehensive framework for building, measuring, and managing brand equity (Keller, 2001). It comprises four levels and six brand-building blocks that form a pyramid structure, each representing a critical stage in developing a strong brand:

#### **Brand Identity (Who is the cruise tourism destination?)**

Building substantial brand equity starts with establishing a clear and distinct brand identity (Keller, 2001). In the context of the Customer-Based Brand-Equity Pyramid (CBBE), brand identity is primarily about brand salience, which refers to how well the brand stands out in the minds of consumers (Jain, 2017). This involves ensuring customers can easily recognise and recall the brand under various circumstances, particularly during purchase and consumption (Keller, 1993; Keller et al., 1998). High brand salience means the brand comes to mind when a consumer considers a particular product category or need (Bergkvist & Taylor, 2022). Keller (2001) indicated this stage as crucial as it lays the groundwork for all subsequent efforts to build deeper customer connections. Nguyen (2020) stated that effective brand identity involves consistent messaging, visual elements, and a strong presence across all marketing channels.

Yousaf et al. (2017) aligned the CBBE pyramid in the tourism destination context. They proposed the Tourist-Based Brand-Equity Pyramid (TBBEP), where authors shift their focus from brand salience to destination brand salience. Destination brand salience is about making the destination easily recognisable and memorable for tourists, which involves creating a solid brand image for the destination that can stand out amidst numerous travel choices (Bianchi & Pike, 2011; Jraisat et al., 2015; Sartori et al., 2012). This can be achieved through iconic landmarks, unique cultural experiences, and a strong online presence (Jraisat et al., 2015). For instance, Tokyo is instantly recognisable due to its association with modern technology, historical landmarks, and vibrant culture. Yousaf et al. (2017) mentioned that establishing such salience helps potential tourists easily recall and consider the destination when planning their travels.

Regarding the Cruise Tourist-Based Destination Brand Equity Pyramid (CTDBBEP) (see Figure 1) focusing on Penang, Malaysia, brand identity involves creating a distinct and memorable image for Penang as a cruise destination. Given the competitive nature of the cruise industry, Penang needs to stand out through unique offerings, such as cultural heritage sites, culinary delights, and vibrant local festivals. The goal is to make Penang easily identifiable and top-of-mind for potential cruise tourists. Penang's brand identity can be strengthened by promoting its multicultural heritage, historic George Town, and beautiful beaches, making it an attractive and memorable cruise destination.

#### **Brand Meaning (What is the cruise tourism destination?)**

The next level in the pyramid, brand equity, defines what the brand stands for and offers (Keller, 2001). The CBBE model is formulated through brand performance and imagery (Stukalina & Pavlyuk, 2021). Brand performance encompasses the functional aspects of the brand, such as quality, reliability, and features, ensuring that the product or service meets customer needs effectively (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Molinillo et al., 2019; Syed Alwi et al., 2016). For instance, Apple's brand performance is highlighted by its high-quality, innovative products that offer a seamless user experience. On the other hand, Lee et al. (2014) mentioned that brand imagery relates to the extrinsic properties of the brand, and it addresses customers' psychological and social needs (Alvarado-Karste & Guzmán, 2020). Apple's brand imagery is associated with creativity, innovation, and a premium lifestyle, further enhancing its appeal.

Aligning the CBBE pyramid to the TBBEP, the focus is on destination performance and imagery (Yousaf et al., 2017). Destination performance involves tangible aspects such as the destination's facilities, attractions, and services. Tourists can rate or compare destination performance based on attributes such as destination reliability, effectiveness in satisfying entertainment needs, design and style, and the price of facilities (Yousaf et al., 2017). Penang performs well due to its rich cultural heritage, diverse culinary scene, and well-preserved historical sites, offering reliable and effective entertainment (Chong, 2023). Destination imagery involves the symbolic attributes tourists associate with the place, such as cultural richness, culinary adventure, and a blend of tradition and modernity (Cardoso et al.,

2019). Penang's imagery includes multicultural festivals, vibrant street art, and a unique mix of old and new, making it a compelling choice for travellers (Mohamad et al., 2014).

In the CTBDBEP with Penang as the focus, brand meaning encompasses both the performance and imagery of Penang as a cruise destination (see Figure 1). The performance involves unique experiences and services, such as visits to heritage sites, culinary tours, and vibrant cultural festivals. Penang offers performances through attractions like George Town, Kek Lok Si Temple, and Penang Hill. Imagery in this context involves the perceptions and emotions that tourists associate with Penang. Penang is often associated with cultural diversity, historical richness, and culinary delights, making it an attractive destination for cruise tourists seeking relaxation and exploration.

#### **Brand Response (What about the cruise tourism destination?)**

Once brand meaning is established, the next step is understanding and influencing how customers respond to the brand. The CBBE model captures this through brand judgments and feelings (Keller, 2016). Brand judgments are customers' opinions and evaluations of the brand based on its perceived quality, credibility, and superiority (Keller, 2001). Abosag and Farah (2014) indicated that positive judgments are associated with a favourable brand image. On the other hand, brand feelings pertain to the emotional responses that the brand elicits from customers (Keller, 2016; Sung & Kim, 2010). These can range from a sense of security and trust to excitement and pride.

In the context of the TBEP, destination judgments and feelings are crucial. Tourists' judgments about a destination are based on their experiences and the perceived quality of services and attractions (Yousaf et al., 2017). Positive judgments about a destination include its well-preserved heritage sites, diverse culinary offerings, and friendly locals. Destination feelings involve tourists' emotional responses towards the place, such as joy and relaxation (Hosany et al., 2015). For example, Penang evokes cultural curiosity, gastronomic delight, and historical fascination, making it a favoured destination for many travellers (Yeap et al., 2020).

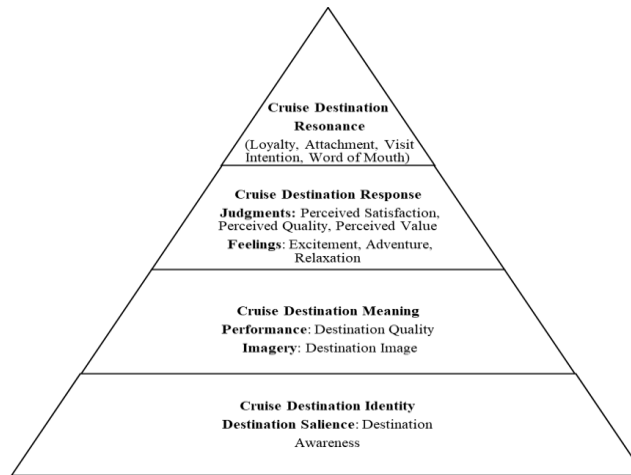
For the CTBDBEP with Penang as the cruise destination, the brand response involves assessing cruise tourists' judgments and feelings towards Penang (see Figure 1). Judgments include evaluations of the destination's cruise tourism offerings, safety, and overall experience. Penang might be judged positively for its cruise destination, cultural richness, vibrant local markets, and welcoming atmosphere. Feelings towards the destination are also critical, influencing repeat visits and recommendations. As a cruise destination, Penang evokes feelings of adventure, cultural immersion, and culinary excitement, compelling tourists to return and share their experiences with others.

#### **Brand Resonance (What about the cruise tourism destination and tourist?)**

The pinnacle of the brand equity pyramid is brand resonance, which signifies the depth of customer relationship with the brand. In the CBBE model, brand resonance encompasses behavioural loyalty, emotional attachment, a sense of community, and active engagement (Keller, 2016). Behavioural loyalty refers to customers' repeat purchases and habitual use of the brand (Bandyopadhyay & Martell, 2007), while emotional attachment reflects the emotional bond and commitment customers feel (Thomson et al., 2005). A strong sense of community is seen when customers identify with a brand and connect with other brand users (Carlson et al., 2008), and active engagement involves customers' willingness to invest their time and energy in interacting with the brand (Dwivedi, 2015).

In the context of TBEP, destination brand resonance is about the psychological bond that tourists develop with a destination. High brand resonance means that tourists have a strong attachment to the place, are loyal to it, and actively engage with it through repeat visits and advocacy (Yousaf et al., 2017). A destination like Penang, which fosters deep emotional connections through its unique culture, historical sites, and memorable experiences, achieves high brand resonance. Tourists who develop a strong bond with Penang will likely return, recommend it to others, and participate in activities promoting the destination.

For the CTBDBEP with Penang as the cruise destination, brand resonance in cruise tourism fosters a robust and lasting relationship between the tourists and the cruise destination (see Figure 1). This includes high levels of loyalty, where tourists repeatedly choose Penang for their cruise travels, and deep attitudinal attachment, where they feel a strong emotional connection to the experiences offered. Penang achieves high brand resonance by offering a unique combination of cultural immersion, historical exploration, and culinary adventures that deeply resonate with cruise tourists. These tourists will likely return to Penang, recommend it to others, and engage with the destination through social media and travel communities, enhancing its brand equity.



**Figure 1.** Cruise Tourist-Based Destination Brand-Equity Pyramid (CTBDBEP)

### High Cruise Tourist-Based Destination Brand-Equity- What Next?

The Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) posits that tourism, including cruise tourism, can catalyse economic development in destination regions through various channels (Punzo et al., 2012). Cruise tourism, characterised by its substantial influx of tourists and associated expenditure, is pivotal in stimulating economic growth (Luković, 2012; Nikčević, 2019). According to research by Dwyer and Forsyth (1997), increased tourist arrivals contribute significantly to local economic development by generating employment opportunities, fostering infrastructure development, and boosting investment in related sectors such as hospitality and retail. This growth is often fueled by increased tourist spending on local goods and services, creating a multiplier effect within the economy (Dwyer et al., 2000; Saayman & Saayman, 2006; Shvets, 2020).

The TLGH framework becomes particularly relevant in the context of Penang, Malaysia, a burgeoning cruise tourism destination. Penang's strategic geographical location and cultural richness attract a growing number of cruise tourists each year (Dermawan, 2024a), contributing substantially to its economic landscape. Establishing cruise terminals and associated infrastructure improvements have enhanced the destination's attractiveness and facilitated economic diversification beyond traditional sectors.

Moreover, the branding initiatives positioning Penang as a sustainable and culturally immersive cruise destination align with TLGH principles by enhancing destination appeal and visitor expenditure. This integrated approach underscores the transformative potential of cruise tourism under the TLGH framework, illustrating its capacity to drive sustainable economic growth while preserving cultural and environmental integrity. Therefore, while acknowledging the complexities and challenges associated with managing cruise tourism growth, empirical evidence supports the TLGH's premise that effectively harnessing cruise tourist arrivals can significantly contribute to economic advancement, as evidenced by Penang's evolving tourism landscape. This economic advancement includes creating jobs and employment opportunities in various sectors such as hospitality, retail, transportation, and local services, thereby substantially benefiting the local community and boosting overall economic health.

### CONCLUSION

This research notes on Penang's cruise tourism destination branding underscores its potential as a catalyst for economic growth and employment generation. By leveraging its cultural heritage and strategic location, Penang can capitalise on the increasing global interest in cruise tourism to enhance visitor numbers and economic benefits. Applying the Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) framework highlights the substantial impact of cruise tourism on local economies through infrastructure development, job creation, and revenue generation. Penang's efforts to brand itself as a sustainable and culturally rich cruise destination align well with these principles, aiming to attract more tourists and ensure long-term economic sustainability.

Furthermore, Penang can effectively address socio-economic challenges by focusing on Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8), which promotes sustained, inclusive, sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work. The development of its cruise tourism sector not only contributes to economic growth but also fosters employment opportunities across various

sectors, supporting local communities and contributing to overall regional development. Therefore, cruise tourism destination branding in Penang holds genuine potential to transform economic aspirations into tangible outcomes, affirming that Cruise Tourism Destination Branding has Real Potential and is not an Illusion. Therefore, cruise tourism destination branding in Penang holds genuine potential to transform economic aspirations into tangible outcomes, affirming that Cruise Tourism Destination Branding has Real Potential and is not an illusion.

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