

TOWARDS DEVELOPING HIGH BRAND EQUITY FOR SUSTAINABLE ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOURISM INDUSTRY

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INTRODUCTION

Heritage tourism is a very big industry in the United States and worldwide. It is taking diverse and highly original directions. Heritage tourism as well was identified for further investigation because it offers such a significant public outreach opportunity to archaeology (Hoffman, Kwas & Silverman, 2002). In this research the scope that will be explored is how to developed high brand equity for sustainable archaeological tourism industry in Malaysia by referring to the case of the Lenggong Valley archaeological area.

Currently, the UNESCO is reviewing the Department of National Heritage Malaysia's proposal to declare the Lenggong Valley as a World Heritage Site for its archaeological heritage. Associate Professor Mokhtar Saidin (Director of the Centre for Global Archaeological Research) who had played an instrumental role in preparing the proposal is optimistic that the Lenggong Valley will be declared a World Heritage site by Feb 2011.

Joining the list of UNESCO's World Heritage Site gives a distinct advantage for tourism in the Lenggong Valley as tourists often use the list as must-visit destinations. According to Associate Professor Mokhtar Saidin tourism in George Town had increased by 40% since it was announced as a World Heritage Site. A key attraction of the Lenggong Valley is that it represents one of the longest culture sequence in Southeast Asia with human occupation history spanning across the Paleolithic (old Stone Age), Neolithic (new Stone Age) and the Bronze Age. The Lenggong Valley has also produced two major archaeological findings with global impact: 1) the Perak Man recognized as one of the oldest most complete Paleolithic skeletons in South East Asia, and 2) the oldest handaxes in the world dating back to 1.83 million years ago.

Despite its significant archaeological discoveries, the Lenggong Valley has yet to gain significant interest from tourists, and much remains to be done in building stewardship from the stakeholders (e.g. local residents, local council, state and federal government) to promote and preserve the site. We argue that developing the Lenggong Valley as a brand of archaeological tourism is imperative in ensuring its sustainability as an attractive, authentic and commercially viable tourist destination in the long run. Examples from commercial branding indicate that brands provide a host of values both to the customers and to the brand owners (Kevin L. Keller, Aperia, & Georgson, 2008). To consumers brands are symbolic devices for meaning-making, signal quality of products, used as risk reducers, and identify the source of the product (Kevin L. Keller et al., 2008). To brand owners brands can be used to endow products with unique associations, are sources of competitive advantage, sources of financial returns, signal quality to consumers, and act as a legal protection of unique features. Evidence on the positive effects

of destination branding on tourism is present in the literature (Cai, 2002; Kolb, 2006; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002)

In the case of Lenggong Valley, the Lenggong World Heritage brand as a symbolic device will help visitors as well as the stakeholders to develop a special meaning for the place, thus, encourage them to take stewardship in promoting and preserving the site. Visitors and stakeholders can use the brand as a signal of quality to endorse it to others, thus encouraging influx of tourists. Tourism developers can use the brand to endow it with unique associations (e.g. the unique archaeological as well as social and cultural interpretations) thus making it highly competitive as a tourist destinations. In short, turning the Lenggong Valley World Heritage Site into a brand with high equity will help distinguish it from other similar archaeological tourist destinations so that people (visitors and stakeholders) are keenly aware of its special meaning and its unique contributions, would want to visit the site, develop an emotional attachment to the site, would want to actively participate in conserving the site and also promoting and endorsing the site to others.