



PORTRAYING A COUNTRY'S IMAGE: A CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN YOUTH'S PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

There have been many indexes produced by different research agencies such as Malaysia Well-Being Index (Indeks Kesejahteraan Rakyat Malaysia), Religion Harmony Index (Indeks Keharmonian Agama) and Social Tension Index (Index Ketegangan Sosial) to measure Malaysians from different aspects. However, as the titles of these indexes imply, none of the indexes really look into the perceptions Malaysians have towards their country. The perception is important as it serves the foundation that generate Malaysians feelings towards Malaysia. Positive perception would eventually generate positive bonding towards Malaysia and signify a successful nation building process and vice versa, negative perceptions signify an unsuccessful process. This study aims to fill this gap by producing a way to measure such perceptions. It examines how young Malaysians (aged 18-30) perceive Malaysia using an integrative model that proposed by Alexander Buhmann's (2016). An online survey was conducted to gather feedback from Malaysians youth. The study measures perceptions across functional, aesthetic, and normative domains, revealing that young Malaysians are generally 'comfortable' with Malaysia, with the aesthetic domain receiving the highest score. The study also identifies areas for improvement, particularly in politics and normative aspects, and suggests strategies to enhance Malaysia's country image.

Keywords:

Image, Malaysia, Nation, Perception, Youth

Introduction

The study of country image is an emerging field, and Malaysia's multi-ethnic identity provides a unique backdrop for such studies. Under normal circumstances, the outcomes of such study are used to build strategies to improve a country standing in the eyes of an international community. An improved international standing would bring economic benefits such as improved confidence on a country's product and generate good public diplomacy (Dana-Nicoleta Lascu, et.al., 2019; Banterng, 2021). Nonetheless, this study views the country's image studies beyond such benefits. In general, this study opined that managing a country's image is a vital component of nation building process. The success of nation building process is measured by the willingness of its citizens to identify with their nation. A good country image will certainly affect such willingness. It is about how the people of a country conceptualize the meaning of their nation. Nation, as pointed out by Benedict Anderson (1983) is a large community that is imagined and should not be distinguished as an entity that is entangled to a set of definition but rather distinguished by the style of in which the members wish to interpret it. Nation is socially constructed.

In relation to this matter, Malaysia needs to ascertain its standing among its citizens. The nation building process in Malaysia is still ongoing. In fact, scholars such as Shamsul A.B. (1996) and Frederick Holst (2012) had claimed that Malaysia nation building process has not generated the effects that it should have. There are some studies on how Malaysians are experiencing their life as Malaysians. Existing indexes such as the Social Tension Index and Inter-Religions Harmony Index are measuring ethnic relations while other indexes such as the National Well-Being Index measures Malaysians quality of life. However, none of the existing indexes in Malaysia measure the perception a Malaysian would have towards their nation. Such perception is important as Malaysians across ethnicities are looking forward to be associated with a country that they are proud off. These perceptions should be categorized and used as key indicators to lead the nation building process by examining how Malaysians view their nation. This study would like to fill this gap by doing a country image study that is to measure the images of Malaysia in the eyes of Malaysians. As mentioned earlier, if Malaysians were to view their country's image positively, their willingness to associate themselves to their country would be higher hence strengthening nation building. Using Alexander Buhmann's (2016) integrative model, this research attempts to do such a study by examining how Malaysia is perceived across functional, aesthetic, and normative domains by Malaysians.

Literature Review

There have been studies conducted on the image of Malaysia, from the perspective of nation branding. For example, Dinnie (2008) highlights the significant role of nation branding in shaping a country's global image, which provides a foundational context for understanding Malaysian perceptions. In addition, Zhang & Seltzer (2010) explore the media's powerful influence on shaping national images, an aspect that is critical to understanding Malaysia's international representation. In his study, Fetscherin (2010) emphasizes the impact of a country's origin on its brand image, which is an essential factor in Malaysia's international branding efforts. These studies and research papers focused on the usage of Malaysia's nation branding for economic purposes particularly at an international level. Malaysia in such context is a product, a brand that needed to be enhanced to attract investment and consumption of Malaysia's goods and services.

However, there is another aspect of such study that has not been explored sufficiently. While Malaysia's images will influence its "branding" internationally, it will also affect how Malaysians view their nation too. The "country image" generated by Malaysia affects the confidence, sense of belongingness and passion that eventually affect their attitudes – nationalism. Building such emotive impacts is the foundation of nation building. Similar studies were done in other countries. For instance, Mariutti, Medrios & Buarque (2019) had done a study on how the residents in Brazil view their own country. The outcomes of this research raised many points that worth actions from the authorities of Brazil to improve situations that are troubling the Brazilians.

The current nation building efforts in Malaysia are not focusing on such impacts. To be exact, Malaysians are driven to view Malaysia from an ethnic perspective and consequently generates multiple nation building issues. Past research papers such as those published by K.J. Ratnam (1965); Vasil (1980); Segawa (2013) highlighted such phenomenon. Though Malaysians are generally living harmoniously, issues related to ethnic, and religion often crop up and subsequently reflected Malaysian nation building process is not in the right pathway. A change of paradigm is needed, and it should start by cultivating a view that Malaysians must see Malaysia as a nation that provide satisfaction to its people, thus generating the emotive factors that bind Malaysians to their nation. This paper is proposing to divert the usage of country image studies to generate a model that eventually will be useful to nation building in Malaysia. Studies on country perception have been approached through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Alexander Buhmann's integrative model is a macro approach to measure country image, considering the impact of functional, aesthetic, and normative aspects on perception (Buhmann, 2016). Buhmann's model of country image measurement has become a significant framework in the study of national branding and public diplomacy (Fan, 2006; Kotler & Gertner, 2002). It offers a structured approach to assess various facets of national perception, contributing to the broader discourse on how young populations shape and are shaped by their country's image. This study intends to diversify the usage of the model proposed by Buhmann. The context of the model proposed by him is useful as in it includes the dimensions needed to understand how a citizen views his or her country. In the context of this study, how Malaysians view Malaysia.

Functional Domain

The functional domain in Buhmann's model encompasses the beliefs and knowledge individuals have about a country's political, economic, and education aspects. It includes the tangible attributes people associate with a country, such as political stability, economic prosperity, healthcare advancement, and public security. Building on earlier models like the Anholt-GfK Nation Brands Index, Buhmann's framework provides a more detailed categories within the cognitive domain, enabling a granular assessment of specific areas shaping a country's image (Anholt, 2007). In the context of Malaysia, this dimension examines how young Malaysians observes the nation's political landscape, economic development, education system, infrastructure, healthcare services and public safety. These factors are the factors that determines liveability, a key ingredient that shapes perception towards a country. This study maintains this key ingredient. A Malaysian who perceives Malaysia's liveability as below their expectation can't develop positive emotive bonding towards this nation. Green (2019) pointed out that there is correlation between public goods and nationalism. Her study shows that an equitable distribution of public goods will influence the shaping of a nation. In other words, if most Malaysians feel good about the delivery of public goods to them, their perceptions towards this nation will be positive and hence their emotional attachment to this nation will be enhanced.

Aesthetic Domain

The aesthetic domain addresses the emotional responses individuals have toward a country. It reflects attitudes and sentiments, ranging from admiration and respect to distrust and indifference. In fact, some scholars such as Clarke (2003) believes “aesthetic nationalism” is the most important component in nation building. His thoughts on this matter was based on his observation of the reconstruction of Japanese nationalism through their arts and culture. The art, culture history and even cuisine forms the foundation that build the ethos of a nation. Buhmann (2016) highlights that emotions play a crucial role in shaping a nation’s overall image, influencing how people interrelate with the country. Unlike earlier models that primarily focused on functional attributes, Buhmann’s framework highlights the significance of affective responses in determining a country’s global reputation. This focus is relevant for Malaysia, a country characterised by its rich cultural heritage and diverse social fabric.

Normative Domain

The normative dimension reflects the behavioural intentions and actions that emerge from a country’s cognitive and emotional perceptions. This includes an individual’s willingness to visit, invest in, or engage in collaborations with the nation. Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005) suggest that a nation’s aesthetic and normative aspects play a critical role in its identity formation and global perception, as seen in Malaysia’s cultural contributions. Robertson (1992) provides a theoretical framework on how globalization influences national norms, offering insights into the global values that shape young Malaysians’ perceptions. Similarly, Simonin (2008) stresses the importance of sustainable development in fostering a positive national image, a key area for improvement in Malaysia’s normative perception. Buhmann (2016) argues that a comprehensive evaluation of a country’s image must account for behavioural intentions, as they serve as indicators of a nation’s success in international engagement and diplomacy. In the context of Malaysia, exploring young people’s normative responses can have a better understanding of their readiness to support national initiatives, take part in civic activities, and promote the country abroad.

Relevance and Application

Buhmann’s model is particularly suited for studies targeting specific demographic groups, such as young Malaysians, due to its comprehensive approach in measuring national image. This study focuses on young Malaysians currently pursuing their tertiary education. This group of young Malaysians are internet savvy, knowledgeable and represent the future of Malaysia. Understanding their perceptions of Malaysia is crucial, as their values and expectations will significantly influence and shape the future of this country.

One of the primary reasons to adopt Buhmann’s model is its analytical depth. By categorizing perceptions into functional, aesthetic, and normative domains, researchers can obtain an all-encompassing view of perceptions, allowing researchers to identify areas that may require policy interventions or marketing strategies. For instance, the model allows for the identification of gaps between young Malaysians’ understanding of the country’s economic status and their emotional connection to its cultural identity.

In recent studies, Buhmann’s model has been utilised to assess country image across various contexts, highlighting its adaptability and robustness. Research suggests that national perception is influenced by various factors, including media representation, historical events, and governmental policies (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). These

studies emphasise the model's effectiveness in capturing the complexity of national perception, especially in dynamic socio-political environments like Malaysia.

By incorporating Buhmann's model, studies on Malaysia's national image can contribute to broader discussion on nation branding, public perception, and international relations. This approach offers a better understanding of how young populations shape and are shaped by their country's image.

Research Methodology

This study aimed to measure young Malaysians' perceptions of their country using a quantitative research approach. Creswell (2014) highlights the importance of a well-structured research design, which has been incorporated in the current study's methodology to ensure a comprehensive and systematic analysis. The research was guided by Alexander Buhmann's (2016) model, an integrative framework that evaluates a nation's image through functional, aesthetic, and normative domains.

The methodology consisted of several key stages, including instrument development, data collection, and analysis. A structured questionnaire, designed based on Buhmann's model, was employed to capture diverse aspects of Malaysia's national image. A total of 391 respondents participated in the survey, providing insights into the perspective of Malaysian youth regarding their country.

Instrument Design

A structured questionnaire was designed based on Buhmann's model to capture multiple aspects of Malaysia's national image. The instrument was divided into four sections, ensuring a comprehensive assessment:

Section 1 – Socio-Demographic Information: This section collected background details of the respondents, including age, gender, ethnicity, and other relevant demographic attributes.

Section 2 – Functional Domain: This section measured key aspects affecting both citizens' and visitors' livelihoods, including economy, politics, healthcare, education, public safety, and infrastructure. Respondents evaluated Malaysia's performance in these areas, as a nation's ability to provide stability and essential services significantly influences public sentiment.

Section 3 – Aesthetic Domain: This section assessed Malaysia's ability to generate positive impressions through its historical sites, cultural products, and cuisine. Respondents were asked to evaluate Malaysia's aesthetic appeal, reflecting the extent to which the country nurtures positive feelings through cultural experiences.

Section 4 – Normative Domain: This section evaluated respondents' perceptions of Malaysia's adherence to universal values, including environmental protection, international social responsibility, and civil rights. The domain provided insights into how Malaysia's image was shaped through its ethical and social actions.

A total of 48 questions were examined across these sections, with respondents rating each item on a 5-point Likert scale. The content validity of the instrument was reviewed by an expert in international relations and political science, ensuring its alignment with the study's objectives. The internal reliability of the instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.9653, indicating high consistency and reliability.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through an online survey platform hosted by the Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre of UTAR and the Akademi Pengajian Islam Kontemporari of UiTM Perlis. The survey link was distributed to several universities across Malaysia, including Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (Sabah), Universiti Teknologi Sibu (UTS), Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Islam Selangor, Universiti Teknologi Mara (Sarawak campus - Samarahan), HELP University, and New Era University College. The data collection commenced on 16th August 2024 and concluded on 31st August 2024. A total of 391 responses were received, providing a 95% confidence level at a 5% margin of error.

Analysis and Calculation of Perception Score

Perception scores for each item in Sections 2, 3, and 4 by were calculated by aggregating individual scores and dividing by the maximum possible score, resulting in a percentage that reflects respondents' concurrence with the statements. Sub-domain scores were computed by averaging the scores of all relevant items, while domain scores were derived by summing sub-domain scores and normalizing them. The final perception score for Malaysia was obtained by averaging the scores of all domains, serving as an indicator of how young Malaysians perceive their country.

To improve the model's accuracy, future steps may involve consulting experts to assign appropriate weighting to each item. This methodology provides a structured and reliable framework to assess youth perceptions, offering policymakers valuable insights to enhance Malaysia's national image and identity

Findings and Discussion

The study reveals that young Malaysians generally perceive Malaysia as 'comfortable', with an overall perception score of 3.42. Among the three domains, the aesthetic domain received the highest score (3.84), demonstrating a strong appreciation for Malaysia's history, culture, and cuisine. The functional domain scored 3.24, reflecting views on Malaysia's economic stability, infrastructure, and public safety. In contrast, the normative domain received the lowest score (3.18), suggesting areas for improvement, particularly in environmental protection and civil rights.

This section provides an analysis of the survey findings on young Malaysians' perceptions of their country. Each domain was further divided into sub-domains, with the results calculated into a perception score to gauge the level of favourability. Table 1 shows the respondents' overall perception of Malaysia, followed by an analysis of the findings across each domain.

Table 1: Respondents' Perception Score Towards Malaysia

Sub-Domain	Sub-Domain Perception Score	Domain	Domain Perception Score	Overall Perception Score
Economy	3.16	Functional	3.24	
Politics	2.80			
Infrastructure	3.46			
Education	3.29			
Public Security	3.31			
Health	3.41			
Historical Sites	3.60	Aesthetics	3.84	3.42

Cultural Goods	3.63			
Food and Cuisine	4.29			
Environmental Protection	3.13	Normative	3.18	
Social Responsibility	3.24			
Civil Rights	3.16			

Functional Domain

The functional domain measures perceptions related to a country's economic, political, and social infrastructure. In this survey, respondents evaluated Malaysia's performance across six key sub-domains: economy, politics, infrastructure, education, public safety, and healthcare. The overall functional domain score was 3.24, signifying that young Malaysians view their country as relatively liveable and functioning state but with room for improvement in certain areas.

Economy

Malaysia's economic performance was rated 3.16, placing it within the "comfortable" category. While this suggests that young Malaysians are generally satisfied with the country's economic stability, the score remains on the lower end, reflecting concerns about economic challenges, including the weakening Ringgit and rising inflation. Respondents view the economy as stable but not thriving. Addressing inflation, unemployment, and economic growth through targeted policies could to improve public perception in this sub-domain.

Politics

The political sub-domain presented the lowest score of the functional dimensions, at 2.8, falling into the "acceptable" range. This low rating highlights respondents' dissatisfaction with Malaysia's political climate, particularly following the political instability from 2020 to 2022, where the country witnessed the change of three prime ministers within three years. Political instability has eroded trust among young Malaysians, and the low score indicates a lack of confidence in the government's ability to maintain stability and offer effective leadership. Mohamad (2020) notes that youth political engagement in Malaysia is often a reflection of their broader trust in governmental institutions, which has been impacted by recent political developments. Implementing political reforms and ensuring transparent, stable governance may help to improve the perception of Malaysia's political leadership among the youth.

Infrastructure

Infrastructure was one of the better-rated sub-domains, receiving a score of 3.46, suggesting that young Malaysians are fairly satisfied with the country's infrastructure development. Respondents expressed confidence in Malaysia's transportation, utilities, and public amenities, all of which contribute positively to the country's liveability. Continued investment in urban development, public transportation, and digital infrastructure can further enhance this perception.

Education

Malaysia's education sub-domain received a score of 3.29, positioning it within the "comfortable" range. This suggests that respondents believe Malaysia's education system is functional, though not without challenges. The ongoing efforts to reform the education sector, particularly in terms of quality and accessibility, will be crucial to maintain and improve this

score. Expanding equitable access to quality education, particularly in rural areas, can boost public confidence in Malaysia's education system.

Public Safety

The score for public safety was 3.31, indicating a general sense of security among young Malaysians. This is a positive result, as public safety is a critical factor in assessing a country's overall functionality. While this is a promising indicator, there remains room for improvement, particularly in reducing crime rates and strengthening law enforcement efforts. Enhancing public safety measures, particularly in urban centres, will be key to improve this perception.

Healthcare

Malaysia's healthcare system received a score of 3.41, reflecting a high level of satisfaction among respondents. The accessibility of public healthcare services, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely contributed to this favourable score. However, challenges remain, including long waiting times and unequal access to medical care in rural areas. Improvements in healthcare infrastructure, increased funding for public hospitals, and greater access to healthcare professionals would further enhance perceptions in this sub-domain.

Aesthetic Domain

The aesthetic domain, encompassing perceptions of Malaysia's historical sites, cultural goods, and cuisine, received the highest overall score of 3.84. This indicates that young Malaysians take immense pride in their nation's cultural and aesthetic contributions, and view them as integral components of the Malaysia's global image.

Historical Sites

With a score of 3.6, Malaysia's historical sites are highly valued by respondents, indicating a strong appreciation for the country's architectural and cultural legacy. The country's rich history, reflected in sites such as the UNESCO World Heritage-listed George Town and Melaka, has resonated deeply with young Malaysians. Strengthening conservation efforts and increasing awareness of these sites will not only enhance national pride but also contribute positively to the perception of Malaysia.

Cultural Goods

Cultural goods, including traditional arts and crafts, festivals, and cultural practices, were also well-rated, scoring 3.63. This highlights the deep sense of pride Malaysians feel for their nation's rich cultural diversity, which is showcased through various festivals celebrated by different ethnic communities across the whole country. The promotion of Malaysia's cultural products in global markets can further reinforce this positive perception. Moreover, increasing support for local creative industries, such as film, music, and the arts, will help to sustain and promote Malaysia's cultural presence both domestically and globally.

Food and Cuisine

The highest-rated sub-domain within the aesthetic category, and across all measured aspects, was food and cuisine, receiving an impressive score of 4.29. Malaysia's vibrant and diverse culinary scene is widely recognised and acts as a significant source of national pride, with young Malaysians overwhelmingly view this as a defining aspect of their national identity. This score reflects the importance of food as a cultural connector, and Malaysia's reputation for its culinary offerings is well-established. Promoting Malaysian cuisine as part of its national branding can further solidify this positive reputation both locally and internationally.

Normative Domain

The normative domain assesses Malaysia's adherence to universal values such as environmental protection, social responsibility, and civil rights. This domain received the lowest overall score of 3.18, indicating that while respondents are moderately comfortable with the country's performance in these areas, there remains significant room for improvement.

Environmental Protection

With a score of 3.13, environmental protection reflects a moderate level of approval related to Malaysia's conservation efforts. While the country has made progress in environmental conservation, particularly in safeguarding its rainforests and wildlife, more needs to be done to address challenges such as pollution and sustainable development. Strengthening environmental regulations and advocating for green initiatives, particularly among younger generation, will be crucial to improve perceptions within this sub-domain.

Social Responsibility

Malaysia's performance in international social responsibility was rated 3.24, indicating a fair level of satisfaction but also highlighting expectations for stronger global engagements. Young Malaysians anticipate a greater national role in international affairs and humanitarian efforts for the common good. Enhancing Malaysia's involvement in global organizations and initiatives could help improve its image in this area.

Civil Rights

The civil rights sub-domain received a score of 3.16, reflecting a mixed of perspectives on the protection of individual rights in Malaysia. While some progress has been made in recent years, concerns about freedom of expression, minority rights, and democratic governance remain prevalent. Continued efforts to strengthen civil liberties, ensure judicial independence, and upholding equal rights for all citizens will be essential to improving perceptions in this category.

Comparative Analysis of Ethnic Groups

The survey also examined perceptions among different ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Bumiputera Sarawak. According to Yousaf & Li (2015), Malaysia's ethnic diversity contributes to differing views on the country's political and social structures, a pattern which is reflected in this study's findings. The data reveals distinct variations in how these groups perceive Malaysia across the three domains.

- **Malay respondents** generally held more positive perceptions, particularly in the functional domain, where they rated the economy and politics higher than other ethnic groups. This suggests a greater level of satisfaction with Malaysia's governance and infrastructure among Malays.
- **Chinese respondents** were more critical, particularly in the political and normative domains, expressing lower confidence in Malaysia's political stability and commitment to civil rights. This indicates a higher degree of scepticism among Chinese youth regarding the country's direction.
- **Bumiputera Sarawak respondents** gave the highest scores across the aesthetic domain, demonstrating a strong sense of pride in their state's cultural diversity and historical significance. This highlights the importance of promoting Sarawak's unique cultural heritage as part of Malaysia's broader national identity.

Recommendations for Improving Perceptions

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to improve Malaysia's perception among its youth. First, it is essential to ensure and maintain Malaysia's political stability and transparency in order to boost public confidence. The government should prioritize comprehensive political reforms, advocating for transparent governance, and encouraging youth participation in the political sphere will be key strategies in restoring trust.

Second, targeted efforts, particularly in addressing inflation, stabilizing the currency, and creating employment opportunities for young people are required to boost the country's economic performance. Implementing economic policies that directly benefit youth, such as job creation programs and support for entrepreneurship, will likely to enhance the young Malaysians' perception of the nation's economy.

Third, Malaysia should enhance its environmental policies by prioritizing sustainable development and minimizing pollution. Actively engaging young people in environmental initiatives and advocating for green technologies will raise their awareness of government's green initiatives and improve their perceptions within the normative domain.

Fourth, sustained efforts to safeguard civil liberties, uphold freedom of expression, and ensure equal rights for all Malaysians are essential to enhance the country's reputation in this area. Last but not least, Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage, specifically its cuisine, historical landmarks, as well as traditional and cultural goods, should be further promoted as a key element of the country's national branding initiatives. Strengthening the creative industries and expanding the tourism sector will further cultivate positive perceptions, particularly in the aesthetic domain.

Limitations of the Study

Though the survey offers meaningful insights into young Malaysians' perceptions of their country, several limitations should be acknowledged to ensure the findings are interpreted with appropriate caution. The study is sufficient at this stage, to indicate the presence of certain perception patterns among Malaysian youth. A more conclusive study, incorporating face-to-face interviews with a larger and more diverse sample is necessary to ensure the findings are generalizable to the population.

Limited Sample Size

The sample size of 391 respondents, while providing a reasonable representation of young Malaysians, it may not fully represent the entire 18-30 age group. The sample was drawn from specific universities and other institutions that could result in an overrepresentation of individuals from academic or urban backgrounds. This imbalance may limit the extent to which the findings reflect the views of young Malaysians from rural areas or those with less formal education.

Sampling Bias

This research study was predominantly distributed through online platforms linked to certain universities, which may lead to selection bias. Individuals with digital access and affiliations with academic institutions might hold different perspectives compared to those who are less digitally connected or come from less privileged educational backgrounds. As a result, the findings could be skewed toward more educated and urban youth, thereby potentially not fully representing the diverse experiences and views of young Malaysians.

Geographical Limitations

Most of the responses were collected from urban areas and universities in Malaysia, resulting in an urban-centric perspective that may not fully represent the views of rural youth or individuals in remote regions, such as the interior areas of Sabah and Sarawak. Considering the cultural, economic, and social distinctions between urban and rural populations, the geographical concentration of the sample could impose limitations of the conclusions drawn regarding Malaysian youth perceptions as a whole.

Self-Reported Data

Another limitation of this study is its dependence on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Respondents may have responded by giving more socially desirable answers rather than their genuine views, especially on sensitive issues such as politics or civil rights. This tendency could result in either an overestimation or underestimation of certain perceptions. In addition, variations in how respondents interpret survey questions, based on their understanding of the specific terms, may contribute to the inconsistencies of the findings.

Time Constraints

Data collection was conducted over a short period, from 16th to 31st August 2024, which may have constrained both the total number of participants and the depth of responses. Furthermore, perceptions related to specific domains, such as politics and the economy, are highly dynamic and could fluctuate in response to unfolding events. For instance, Malaysia's political landscape remains fluid, meaning that young Malaysians' views could change depending on when the survey is conducted, potentially affecting the long-term relevance of the findings.

Lack of Qualitative Data

While this study employs a quantitative method to assess perceptions, it does not incorporate qualitative data, which could add greater context and depth to the findings. Insights derived from qualitative approaches, such as open-ended questions or focus group discussions, could deepen the understanding of the underlying reasons behind specific perceptions and offer a more detailed interpretation of the survey results.

Absence of Weighting for Domains

The overall perception score in this study was calculated without applying any weights to the three domains—functional, aesthetic, and normative. As individuals may prioritize these domains differently based on their personal experiences and values, the lack of weighting could obscure a more accurate representation of the country's image. Implementing a more integrated model that incorporates domain-specific weighting according to their perceived importance would likely produce a more precise and representative perception score.

Future Avenues for Improvement

To address the limitations mentioned and to improve the robustness of future research, several recommendations can be made to enhance the study's methodology and scope:

Increasing Sample Size and Diversity

To enhance the representativeness of future research, efforts should be directed toward increasing the sample size to encompass a more diverse group of young Malaysians from different educational backgrounds, regions, and socioeconomic levels. Broadening the scope to include more participants from rural areas, vocational institutions, and non-academic settings would

offer a wider perspective of youth perceptions. In particular, targeted initiatives to engage marginalized groups, such as indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak, would contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive representation of the nation's youth.

Incorporating a Longitudinal Study Design

Given that perceptions about the country are subject to change over time, a longitudinal study design would help to monitor how these views evolve in response to political, economic and social changes. Conducting the survey at consistent intervals, such as annually, would yield valuable insights into emerging trends and shifts in youth perspectives. This would allow researchers as well as policymakers to better understand the long-term effects of policy changes and major events on the country's overall image.

Balancing Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Incorporating a qualitative component into the survey could offer deeper insights into the factors shaping certain perceptions. For instance, conducting interviews or focus groups with respondents might uncover underlying factors that influence their views regarding sensitive topics such as politics or civil rights. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, researchers would gain a better understanding and comprehensive interpretation of the data, enabling them to better explain any disparities identified in the quantitative findings.

Addressing Geographical Gaps

To ensure comprehensive representation in future studies, deliberate efforts should be made to include participants from all regions of Malaysia, including the rural and remote areas of Sabah and Sarawak. Specific outreach initiatives, such as partnering with local organizations, community hubs, and regional universities, could help incorporate these often-marginalized populations into the survey. This approach would yield a more accurate and complete picture of young Malaysians' perspectives across different geographical settings.

Mitigating Social Desirability Bias

To minimize the impact of social desirability bias in future surveys, researchers could adopt techniques such as indirect questioning, where participants are asked to estimate how others perceive specific issues, or randomized response methods that enhance anonymity. In addition, using online surveys with anonymous responses can help respondents feel more comfortable, encouraging them to express their true opinions, particularly on sensitive topics.

Incorporating Current Events Context

Given that young Malaysians' perceptions, especially regarding political and economic matters, may shift based on current events, it would be beneficial to incorporate additional questions about the impact of recent political or economic developments on their views. By doing so, researchers would be able to better contextualize the responses and understand the factors driving changes in perceptions.

Implementing a Domain Weighting System

Future research should consider the development of a system that assigns weights to the three domains based according to their perceived significance among respondents. A preliminary survey to identify the domains prioritized by young Malaysians would facilitate the construction of a more advanced scoring model that reflects the varying significance of functional, aesthetic, and normative domains to different individuals. This would improve the

precision of the overall perception index while offering a clearer insight into Malaysia's strengths and areas requiring improvement from the perspective of its youth.

Expanding the Research Scope

While this study primarily examines how young people perceive Malaysia, future research could expand its scope to explore their views on other nations. A comparative study between Malaysia and neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia, Thailand, or Singapore, could be conducted to provide valuable insights into Malaysia's regional image. This would offer a foundation for understanding how young Malaysians' perceptions of their own country align or contrast with their perceptions of others.

Exploring Additional Domains

The current study focuses on the functional, aesthetic, and normative domains, but future research could expand the model to include other relevant domains, such as environmental sustainability, technological advancement, or international diplomacy. These additional dimensions could provide a more comprehensive assessment of Malaysia's image, especially as the country continues to develop its role on the ASEAN as well as global stage.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that young Malaysians generally perceive Malaysia as a 'comfortable' nation, with an overall perception score of 3.42. This suggests a predominantly positive national image among the youth, which in turn enhances their sense of identification with the country. Such a strong association is likely to contribute to the reinforcement of nation-building efforts.

Young Malaysians exhibit pride in Malaysia's aesthetic aspects, while challenges remain in political and economic stability. Improvements in the normative domain are necessary to enhance Malaysia's overall image. Promoting Malaysia's cultural diversity and addressing perceived weaknesses can help strengthen the country's reputation and foster national unity.

These points are highlighted and proven through this study. In other words, the method employed by this study, that is to use the "country image" model to study how Malaysians view Malaysia will be able to generate some inputs. The Malaysia culture aesthetics are known to be an agent that can be utilize to build inter-ethnic relations. It serves as a social sphere that can utilized to bind Malaysians together and to build emotional attachment to their nation. At the same time, this model is able to pin point certain qualities of Malaysia that need enhancements. Based on the feedback discussed above, it is visible that the respondents wanted more steps to be taken to enhance the normative values of Malaysia. Similarly, on the functionality of this nations towards them.

A good and reliable country image study is just like a person doing a review of himself. It is an honest evaluation for self-improvement, a step that has to be taken based on self-consciousness. It is also based on a realistic approach, one that traverse factors that are hindering nation building and focus on what an effective nation should be offering to its people.

The researchers of this study understood this study and would like to call upon researchers to create similar research to ensure the nation building process is in its right direction, in Malaysia as well as the rest of the world. The researchers intend to conduct this study, by incorporating

the recommendation discussed above, on an annual basis, to facilitate comparative analyses, enabling a more comprehensive evaluation of trends and patterns over time.

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