

Familiarity and Uniqueness Branding Singapore as a Revitalized Destination

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Creativity at Work:

Familiarity and Uniqueness: Branding Singapore as a Revitalized Destination

By Can-Seng Ooi

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Abstract

Destination branding attempts to frame the place in a unique manner, so that it will stand out in the global tourism market. The assertion of uniqueness has become an institutionalized global practice for celebrating destination identity. The emphasis on uniqueness in the destination brand however overshadows another important but complementary strategy: the accreditation approach. This paper gives attention to the accreditation strategy while presenting the Singapore case.

By looking at the newly inaugurated Formula One car races in Singapore and the soon-to-be-opened integrated resorts, this paper argues that the Singaporean authorities are actually making Singapore less unique and more similar to other places. This strategy is advantageous because these new attractions will draw the attention of the global masses and they will also accredit Singapore as vibrant, glamorous and trendy. So, this paper shows why – despite the attempt to be different – destination authorities are learning from each other and pursuing similar attractions for their destinations.

Keywords:

accreditation approach, car races, casinos, integrated resorts, brand Singapore

Note:

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Familiarity and Uniqueness: Branding Singapore as a Revitalized Destination

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Branding aims to make a destination stand out in the global tourism market. The brand asserts the place's uniqueness. The assertion of uniqueness has become an institutionalized global practice for celebrating destination identity. This uniqueness often emphasizes the historical, social and cultural values of the host society (Boniface & Fowler, 1993; Hall, 1999; Lanfant, 1995; Oakes, 1993; Richards, 1996). The emphasis on uniqueness in the destination brand however overshadows an important and complementary strategy in destination branding: the accreditation strategy. This paper gives attention to the accreditation strategy while presenting the Singapore case, so as to highlight the importance of this aspect of destination branding.

There are many reasons why destinations are branded (Ooi, 2002). The brands are meant to modify the perceptions of global audiences. They also selectively package the positive elements of the destination into an attractive story. Destination brands are also place identities, around which various tourism industry players rally. Tourists and residents may use destination brands as gaze lenses, through which they selectively interpret and acquire an understanding of the place. Regardless, tacit behind these brands is how the brands are formulated in relation to how global audiences perceive the place. The world is heterogeneous. This also means that different people will have different perceptions of a destination. As mentioned, a destination brand attempts to focus people's minds and provide a coherent and attractive story of the destination. This is easier said than done. The attempt to focus minds through a unique brand story is increasingly being complemented by the

accreditation approach. There are at least three levels in the accreditation approach.

At one level, the accreditation approach makes use of significant and popular events (e.g. the Olympics and World Bank meetings) to draw attention to the place (Brown, Chalip, Jago, & Mules, 2002; Burgan & Mules, 1992; Green & Chalip, 1998; Smith, 2004). An example of this first level of accreditation approach is the 2009 International Olympic Council (IOC) congress, during which Rio de Janeiro was selected for the 2016 games. It was held in Copenhagen. Because of the significance of the event, many famous personalities from competing candidate cities came to the capital. They included entertainer Oprah Winfrey, US President Barack Obama, Brazil President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, King Juan Carlos of Spain and footballer Pele. Thousands of journalists descended onto Copenhagen. The announcement of the result was telecasted “live” to more than a billion people, during which a promotional clip of Copenhagen was presented. Subsequently after the event, non-Olympic features and stories of Copenhagen were published, broadcasted and telecasted as journalists returned home with a new collection of stories. For instance, Oprah Winfrey made a feature on why Danes are “the happiest people on earth”, using Copenhagen as the backdrop (Oprah Winfrey Show, 2009). The hosting of important and popular events, like this IOC meeting, creates awareness of the destination because of the global publicity. These events provide globally-transmitted stories that are linked to the place. The destination also gets associated with famous celebrities. Just as importantly, the organizational capabilities of the destination are showcased and the place is given international recognition. In other words, besides generating awareness and stories, the events give recognition and credibility to the destination at various levels.

The second level of the accreditation approach makes use of globally-recognized tourist attractions like Legoland and Guggenheim Museum to build up the appeal of the destination (Braun & Soskin, 1999; Nilsson, 2007). These attractions do not make the destination unique but these attractions give a tacit badge of approval to the place. So, for instance, a Guggenheim Museum will increase and ascertain the cultural attractiveness of the destination, like for Bilbao. So, paradoxically, destinations want to host certain choice attractions that are also found in other destinations. In the context of destination branding, these “branded” attractions accredit and vouch for the destinations.

A third level of the accreditation approach taps into promoting established and well-tested types of tourist attractions because these attractions communicate specific positive messages to global audiences (Dybedal, 1998; ; Florida, 2003; Harmaakorpi, Kari, & Parjanen, 2008; Knox, 2008; Mossberg & Getz, 2006; Slater, 2004). People are familiar with these products (Kim & Jamal, 2007; Prentice, Witt, & Hamer, 1998; Weaver, 2005). Many attractions have taken on similar formats, such as film festivals, art biennales and pedestrian shopping streets. Using a similar formula, physical icons like the London Eye, Pearl Tower in Shanghai and Statue of Liberty are used to symbolise places. By

exploiting a famous name and following popular heritage village strategies, Finnish tourist authorities branded Lapland as “Santa Claus Land” and created a “Santa Claus Village and Workshop” (Pretes, 1995). These attractions are best practices in the tourism industry, one may argue. These events and attractions are readily appreciated and recognised by many tourists. By having these attractions, they also communicate certain images of the place and promote certain activities in local society, such as generating more bubbly street life, celebrate local film culture and generate a more vibrant art scene. They thus contribute to and accredit the place with certain characteristics.

I have discussed the search for uniqueness by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) when branding the city-state (Ooi, 2004). This paper looks at how the authorities use two of the most significant tourism projects to brand Singapore as a vibrant and exciting destination. Singapore has a clean, efficient and modern image. Such an image is a double-edged sword. The Singaporean government has been successful in transforming a small former British colony into an efficient business and financial city in the last five decades. The stable social and political environment, modern infrastructure, controlled industrial relations, no-nonsense approach to enforcing civic behaviour, pro-business policies and single-minded drive towards economic prosperity have led to the view that the country is sanitized and sterile. In other words, Singapore has a dull image. “Uniquely Singapore”, the destination branding of the city-state, wants to change that.

“Uniquely Singapore”

Over the years, the destination brand of Singapore, Uniquely Singapore, has celebrated the city’s multi-cultural population and has embraced the city’s blend of the exotic East and efficient West (Ooi, 2007). Its population is made up of three official ethnic groups: Chinese, Malay and Indian. Singapore is also the most economically developed country in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia is an exotic region for tourists of other parts of the world. But Singapore faces competition. “Malaysia – Truly Asia” and “Amazing Thailand” are only two of many successful tourism campaigns by competitors in Southeast Asia.

In March 2004, the STB launched the “Uniquely Singapore” destination brand. This slogan replaced the former brand “New Asia” (Ooi, 2004). Singapore has changed its tourism positioning four times since 1964. In the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore was “Instant Asia”, where one could find an array of Asian cultures, peoples, festivals, and cuisine conveniently exhibited in a single destination. In the 1980s, “Surprising Singapore” positioned Singapore by placing contrasting images of modernity and Asian exoticism together. The co-existence of East and West, old and new were highlighted. And in the 1990s, Singapore has promoted itself as “New Asia – Singapore”. There is a subtle shift in focus from “Surprising Singapore” to “New Asia – Singapore”. “Surprising Singapore” promised pockets of unexpected diverse and distinct ethnic cultures in a modern city, “New Asia – Singapore” offers ethnic cultures fused into

modern development. Metaphorically, “Surprising Singapore” describes a smorgasbord of various ethnic cultures in a modern environment, “New Asia – Singapore” presents Singapore as a “melting pot” of eastern and western cultures.

“Uniquely Singapore” is an attempt to renew Singapore in the global tourism industry. The story remains very much the same to “New Asia – Singapore” except that the old branding is found to be too abstract for many visitors. According to STB (2005, **emphasis** in original):

Uniquely Singapore - Unique is the word that best captures **Singapore**, a dynamic city rich in contrast and colour where you'll find a harmonious blend of culture, cuisine, arts and architecture. A bridge between the East and the West for centuries, Singapore, located in the heart of fascinating Southeast Asia, continues to embrace tradition and modernity today. Brimming with unbridled energy and bursting with exciting events, the city offers countless unique, memorable experiences waiting to be discovered.

Like in the previous branding, “Uniquely Singapore” is a response to the omnipresent modern and Western manifestations in Singapore. “Uniquely Singapore” self-orientalizes Singapore and accentuates the Asianness in the country by pointing out Asian practices, such as modern buildings arranged according to Chinese geomancy and western dishes cooked with Asian spices and flavours. And keeping in line with the vision of an exciting and energetic Singapore, the government has relaxed its regulations to encourage a livelier cultural scene and more vibrant nightlife (Ooi, 2005).

Communicating the image of Singapore as vibrant and exciting are done by several ways. One, various government authorities are actively searching for, and bidding to attract, major events to the country. As a result, spectacular activities are frequently staged in the city now. Two, besides hosting pop concerts by international mega stars, popular musicals and block buster exhibitions, Singapore hosts big events, for example, the 2006 World Bank and IMF meetings, the 2009 APEC summit and the first-ever Youth Olympics in 2010. Such events generate extensive international media publicity, not because Singapore is unique but because these events are globally important. Three, to “accredit” the promoted lively images of Singapore, the Singaporean authorities seek investments and endorsements from international firms. Besides searching for events, state agencies actively seek out opportunities to make Singapore into the hub of global and regional organizations, including those in the media, design, telecommunication, pharmaceuticals and financial sectors. Singapore is already a regional hub for the global media industry. MTV, Discovery, HBO and BBC have made Singapore their regional headquarters. These setups accredit Singapore as an innovative, cultural and creative place by just being there. Four, to become a respected arts and cultural city, Singapore has also established a number of cultural institutions. Three national museums were established in Singapore in the mid-1990s, and in 2002 Esplanade – Theatres by

the Bay was opened. The Singaporean government wants the city-state to be the cultural capital of Southeast Asia (Ooi, 2007). Many of these events, attractions and recognitions are not unique to Singapore but they would increase the credibility of the lively cosmopolitan city brand.

In the last few years, two major tourism development projects were launched – the Formula One races and the opening of two casinos. They are tourist attractions but more importantly, they contribute important brand messages about the destination. I will look at these case projects in some details to highlight the dynamics in the accreditation approach to branding.

Formula One (F1) and branding Singapore

In the 1960s, car races were popular in Singapore. These races were stopped in 1973 because they were thought to promote reckless driving. There were seven deaths over 11 years in the races along public roads (Lim, I.L.P. 2008). With limited physical space in Singapore, the island-state did not want to dedicate a racing course for car races. Furthermore, car races are for the masses and they do not make Singapore into a culturally refined city. That was the view of the prime minister then. In 2005, the Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew, the mentioned former prime minister, revealed that he regretted the decision on banning car races (Lee; 2005). He said that the Singaporean Government has come to consider popular culture, including F1, as big business today (Koh, L., 2005a):

[Pop singers and MTV programmes attract] millions of young viewers around the world, and there is big business in this. So from a business point of view, whether I like it or not, I should be – the Government should be – interested in this.

Singapore staged its first F1 races in 2008. It was also the first night race in F1's history. Each season costs S\$150 million (US\$ 100 million) to stage. 60% is borne by tax-payers. Public roads in the middle of the central business district have to be closed for weeks. Not only these, roads have to be upgraded before the start of each season. Because the races take place in the middle of the city centre, pedestrians and vehicle traffic flows are severely disrupted. While there are reports of brisk business during the F1 races, shopping centres surrounding the circuit area suffered because it is inconvenient for people to visit them (Lim, J. 2009; Tan & Lim, 2008;). The noises are also deafening. Because the races are held at night, strong lighting is needed, the strong lighting consumes massive energy and is not environmentally friendly.

Regardless, STB and the government talk up the races. S. Iswaran, Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry stated the importance of the races for Singapore (*Straits Times*, 2009):

The F1 continues to improve Singapore's international branding and improves mindshare. It also serves a very good platform for business networking, innovative activities and the creation of new opportunities

STB declares that the F1 races "will help to put us firmly in the global spotlight...the buzz will boost Singapore's efforts to be the entertainment and events capital of Asia" (Foo, 2008). How does F1 contribute specifically to the destination branding of Singapore?

One, F1 is part of the popular culture strategy for Singapore in branding itself. Popular cultures draw global masses. Singapore may not be unique in hosting these events but the island-state is associated with the fun and exciting images of popular cultural events.

Two, F1, besides being popular, is glamorous. Celebrities visited Singapore to perform, to visit or to be seen. In 2008 and 2009, some famous persons who were at the F1 events included singer Beyonce, actress Lindsay Lohan, businessman Richard Branson and actor Jackie Chan (Chee, 2009; van Miriah, 2009). Media stories about celebrities at F1 events give attention to Singapore. Singapore is glamorous by association.

Three, the telecast of F1 races makes Singapore sights familiar. The intangible benefits are considered invaluable; Singapore would move away from its dull image as millions of people could see speeding cars racing round the city centre. The races will also remind F1 fans of Singapore annually. The illuminated and spectacular night skyline has also made their way into new editions of computer racing games - *F1 2009* and *Need for Speed: Nitro* (Loh, 2009).

So, in sum Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, former prime minister, reiterated that the races are money well spent by STB (Lim, L., 2009):

We want to have a reputation that this is a good place to work, to live, to play. F1 helps us to acquire that reputation.

While F1 is constantly talked about in the branding of Singapore, holding F1 races does not make Singapore unique. Instead, F1 is popular and familiar to international audiences; F1 has a given image and reputation which by association, accredits Singapore as a glamorous, exciting and trendy city.

Casinos and Branding Singapore

In 2010, Singapore will have casinos in two Vegas-styled "integrated resorts" (IRs) - Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World at Sentosa. The former is located in the middle of the central business district, and will be run by Las Vegas Sands. The latter is on the resort island, Sentosa; the IR will be managed by Genting, a Malaysian casino operator. In March 2004, the then-Minister for Trade and Industry, George Yeo mooted the idea of hosting casinos in Singapore. Many religious groups voiced strong objections. Civil groups against any casino in Singapore emerged. The casino discussion was a lively money-versus-values

debate. The government cabinet was not unanimous and the casino debate was one of the most heated public discussions held in Singapore ever.

A STB officer, voicing his own view, was exasperated and complained to me about those members of the public who were against the casino. Not only has a tourism project become a focal point for criticism, he was alarmed that naysayers are ignoring the reality that Singapore is losing foreign exchange – Singaporeans were and are traveling overseas and taking cruises just to gamble. The socially conservatism prevalent in Singapore is giving the destination a boring image.

But eventually, the government decided to have two casinos in late 2005. It was and is considered that the casinos are important for tourism and the destination branding of Singapore. As part of the process to shape public opinion and appease civil society, the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) issued a brochure – *Why Integrated Resorts?* – to convince the general public of the decision (MICA 2005). The decision was a pragmatic one – Singapore tourism, while still healthy, is losing market share; Singapore is facing strong tourism competition in the region; the casinos will give a S\$1.5 billion (US\$ 1 billion) annual boost to the economy and create 35 000 jobs. The casinos will not only change the image of Singapore but shows that Singapore is changing with the time.

The oft-recognized founding father of Singapore, MM Lee Kuan Yew explained why he banned casinos in the past, “I did not want to undermine Singapore’s work ethic and breed the belief that people can get rich by gambling, something that is impossible.” (Lee, 2005) But now, he found that old “virtues are no longer sufficient” because international professionals and executives want an economically vibrant and exciting city to visit and live. Casinos and integrated resorts will eventually be built in competing destinations in the region. Like it or not, Singapore has to address the competition. The goal now for Singapore then is to make the city “more lively and exciting, a fun place and, at the same time, retain its virtues – clean, green, safe and wholesome.” (Lee, 2005). But how would the integrated resorts and casinos brand Singapore?

One, the IRs are important because they would boost the array of tourism attractions and facilities on the island. The reputation of Singapore as a congress centre, family-friendly destination and an eventful city would be enhanced. For instance, Las Vegas Sands won the bid because it would provide a 120 000 square metres convention centre. It will also have an “ArtScience” museum, exploring the connections between art and science. As for Resorts World at Sentosa, a winning point is the University Studios theme park. There will also be concert halls, restaurants, and theatres in both IRs. Although these are not unique in the world, these are facilities and attractions that make a tourism destination attractive as a whole.

Two, the casinos allude to a less strait-laced aspect of Singapore. This is part of the bigger strategy to change the image of Singapore. For instance, Members of Parliament voiced their worries about the loosening up of

regulations in Singapore to attract foreigners and to present a livelier image of Singapore. The then-Minister of State for Trade and Industry, Vivian Balakrishnan, replied (*Singapore Parliament Hansard*, 2004):

There was an article that Professor Richard Florida wrote, entitled "The Rise of the Creative Class". [...] His research found that cities, which are able to embrace diversity, are able to attract and foster a bigger creative class. These are key drivers in a knowledge-based economy. The larger lesson for us in Singapore is that we need to shift our mindset so that we can be more tolerant of diversity.

Three, the two projects will become physical icons of the city. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pointed out that the resorts will change the city's skyline (Koh, L., 2005b). For instance, the Marina Bay Sands resort will feature the "Sands SkyPark", a garden larger than two football fields, connecting three 55-storey hotel towers at roof level, 200 metres above ground. The image of an unusual floating garden will come to symbolize Singapore

The IR and casinos will market and brand Singapore, not by making Singapore more unique but by offering products and images of Singapore that global audiences can relate. They increase the credibility of Singapore as a congress hub, a family-friendly destination and a vibrant city. These attractions and facilities are found in many other cosmopolitan cities. Singapore wants to be considered one. These attractions and facilities accredit Singapore as a(nother) cosmopolitan city.

Lessons

This paper has shown that the "Uniquely Singapore" strategy goes beyond making Singapore unique. In the literature, there is an accepted claim that uniqueness is all important in destination branding. In practice, however, there are many strategies used to make the destination less unique in the branding process. Instead, "branded" attractions that are not unique to the country are pursued because the destination can be positively associated with these attractions. Some of the events will create awareness of the place. Events, attractions and facilities are also enhanced to make the city more cosmopolitan. The issue is not being more unique but more similar to other destinations.

To reiterate, there are three levels in the accreditation approach. At one level, the accreditation approach makes use of significant and popular events (e.g. the Olympics and World Bank meetings and F1 races) to draw attention to the place. At the second level, "branded" and familiar attractions, such as Universal Studios theme parks and the Guggenheim Museum are lured to set up in various destinations. These attractions inadvertently vouch for the place. At the third level, destinations used tested formulas and offer *similar* attractions to global audiences (e.g. film festivals, rock concerts, art museums).

There are some lessons from the accreditation approach to destination branding. One, in the branding of a destination, while a unique selling proposition is important, branding and tourism authorities are tapping into global audiences perceptions and trying to draw visitors' attention via popular and readily recognised attractions. These attractions readily draw attention and awareness to the destination. They are more accessible to mass international audiences than local stories, heroes, behaviours, which foreigners have to acquire the local knowledge. The uniqueness of these local elements may be too exotic and difficult to communicate. A unique destination brand story can thus be "too" unique. More research has to be done to look into this issue.

Two, the accreditation approach to destination branding accentuates how tourism and destination branding authorities follow certain "models" of destination development. Destinations learn, even copy, from each other, in the name of best practices. Art biennales, music festivals, observation towers, physical icons, museums and the staging musicals are just some examples. But as a result, tourism destinations will become more alike rather than unique. Regardless, tourists are not necessarily looking just for the unique, rather they also seek attractions that they are familiar with and want to reaffirm their preconceived ideas of what a particular destination is like (McIntosh & Prentice, 1999; Prentice, 2004; Ritzer & Liska, 1997; Weaver, 2005). Thus, a destination has an aspiration to be recognised as a cosmopolitan city will use available formulas to enhance the local night life, cultural scene and street buzz.

Three, the accreditation approach also demonstrates the dynamics amongst tourism destinations. As mentioned, tourism authorities are actively seeking to associate their places with and be accredited by branded tourist attractions. They innovate from tested formulas in other destinations. Essentially, destinations not only compete, they also interact via strategies and policies. In the context of destination branding, the challenge is to have a way to protect ideas and products. The only solution is probably to innovate and be more creative than competitors.

In contrast to the branding-through-uniqueness approach, the accreditation approach highlights a different perspective to destination branding. Both approaches complement one another. And the accreditation approach however reminds us that destinations are becoming more similar to, rather than more unique from, one another.

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