

Destination Image, Hyperreality, Unreal Image through Films. A Case Study of The Film Crazy Rich Asians

¹ Sriganeshvarun Nagaraj, ²Anil Aaron Selvaram

^{1,2}INTI International University, Malaysia

Email: ¹Srivarun.nagaraj@newinti.edu.my, ²i16010605@newinti.edu.my

Abstract

Crazy Rich Asians was one on the biggest hypes of cinema, from the Asian community and worldwide. It had an even bigger impact for Malaysians as Singapore was a stone throw away from Malaysia. The movie was a huge success within the Asian community, box office forking in international gross of \$239 million, from just \$30 million production budget. In October 2018, it was crowned the highest-grossing genre of romantic comedy from the last decade. However, the movie portrayal of Singapore was but a mere hyperreality and unreal image. Malaysia was a huge part of the film and was not given the credit it was due. The data was gathered using qualitative research method. In-depth interviews conducted with the sample, which were nine locals and 2 internationals selected based on criterion sampling. The data gathered was analysed based on 5 main themes, Tourism of Malaysia, portrayal of Malaysia, emotions of viewers, misrepresentation, and the awareness of viewers. Based on the data gathered locals and internationals viewers of the film feel negatively towards Crazy Rich Asians because of the potential that it could have on the Tourism of Malaysia. The respondent felt that the director could have given Malaysia its due credit rather than in the end credits.

Keywords

Film, Unreal Image, Destination Image, Misrepresentation, Hyperreality, Case Study

Introduction

From the Cinema to the home television, films had always played an impact on the viewers perception of how they see the world. Film can plant specific images into the viewer minds, change the viewers minds on certain things and inspire the viewer through the story telling, visuals or ideas that the film projects. Film can also mislead or distort the viewers perception of reality. To portray hyper reality, and unreal image to match the point of view that the film wants to portray.

Crazy Rich Asians directed by Jon M. Chu, is a romantic comedy film released in 2018, based on the book Crazy Rich Asians by Kevin Kwan published in 2013. The film takes place in Singapore, where a Chinese American Professor; the protagonist Rachel Chu, is in shock when she finds out that the person, she is dating is from one of the most prestigious families in Singapore.

International Conference on Innovation and Technopreneurship 2020
Submission: 11 September 2020; Acceptance: 19 December 2020



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The movie was a huge success within the Asian community, and the box office forking in international gross of \$239 million, from just \$30 million production budget. In October 2018, it was crowned the highest-grossing genre of romantic comedy from the last decade. This is a case study of the film Crazy Rich Asians destination image, hyper reality, and unreal image through films.

The film Crazy Rich Asians locations was misrepresented as Singapore. Malaysia tourism industry could be at a loss because of the false image that the movie portrays. The movie also portrays Singapore as a hyperreality giving it attributes and credit that misleads the audience that would one day deceive to become tourist in Singapore. A big Hollywood movie like this would have a potential effect on the tourism of Malaysia and this study seeks to know how.

This study is to identify the effect the movie Crazy Rich Asians have had on the Tourism of Malaysia and seek to uncover how the Malaysians and non-locals feel on being misrepresented as another country.

If a high-status Hollywood film could misrepresent the country, we wanted to look deeper in how other movies shot in Malaysia portray Malaysia. To study if all international filmmakers are looking at Malaysia through the same lenses or have different narratives. When taken to consideration that all the non-local filmmakers portray the nation in the same light then it is a factor that the nation needs to solve or combat internally and taken to consideration. The main purpose of this study is to uncover the impact of Crazy Rich Asians on the tourism of Malaysia and how Malaysians and non-locals feel when a country gets misrepresented.

Research Objectives

- 1) Impact of Crazy Rich Asian on the Tourism of Malaysia.
- 2) Identify how other movies portray Malaysia as a destination image.
- 3) Identify how Malaysians and non-Malaysians feel when their country is misrepresented as Singapore in Crazy Rich Asians.
- 4) Identify why the directors would misrepresent the locations of the Film Shot in Malaysia as Singapore.
- 5) Identify if Malaysians and non-Malaysians were aware of this Misrepresentation.

Film Induced tourism

The films in a way generated the interest in the viewers to visit the country and not through tourism advertising. Film did what no advertisement could do. When people look at advertisements, they see a fake and shallow way of attraction to the county. But when a film shows the county in the scenes the audience takes notice and have that sense of familiarity of the country generating interest. (W. Glen Croy 2010)

Tourism Promoting in Films

In the thesis, Film Tourism: Study on How Films Can Be Used to Promote Tourism. Tanja Tanskanen states that, movies are incredible assets to shape perceptions, make new ones and strengthen the old ones. Energized by the development of worldwide travel and the advancement of media outlet film the travel industry apparently is a developing wonder, which ought to be viewed as a major aspect of any tourism marketing strategy. Due to the two components of film the travel industry; business and recreation, and in light of the fact that one can't exist without the other. (Tanskanen, T., 2012).

Destination Image

Books, Movies, News, and word of mouth are the most important types of media for gaining awareness of the destination image in people's minds. (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Riley, Baker and Van Doren, 1998; Busby and Klug 2001). Film and other fictional media have been identified to create connection with the stars, locations, and stories. In which then are associated to induce visitors to interpret the and enhance the awareness of the destination reducing barriers to travel and also creating incentives to visit this destination. (Croy and Walker, 2003, Beeton, 2005; Macionis and Sparks, 2009). Film has been also associated to be a credible tool to transform people's image of a certain destination as a personalising agent. (W. Glen Croy 2010). Films have the potential to create destination images in people's heads that would last for a long time and are perceived as credible depictions, thus last longer than advertisements. (W. Glen Croy 2010).

Hyperreality

According to Sine Heitmann in his journal, 'Film Tourism Planning and Development—Questioning the Role of Stakeholders and Sustainability', he mentions that hyperreality is a concept that affects the perceptions of the viewer based on TV, films, movies, and media. Marketing product placements or the film narrative motivates the tourist to this image of the location as a result of media authenticity. He states that people tend to believe what they see on the TV and in film. (Sine Heitmann, 2010)

Impact on the Malaysian Tourism Industry

In 2019 alone there were 26.1 Million tourist arrivals from other countries to Malaysia. (Tourism.gov.my. 2020) Which was the highest number of tourists recorded since 2007 (13 years) Malaysia is a go tourist destination because we have a spectrum of multicultural factors that give a different feel compared to other South East Asian countries. There is a diverse range of wildlife animals and many animals found only in Malaysia. Malaysia's Tourism has also invested billions into making hotels in exotic locations all over Malaysia. The Petronas Twin tower alone is found in hundreds of films because it helps film makers visually communicate the location of the scene to the audience. Film makers use landmarks to indicate where the setting of the film or a certain scene takes place. Based on past track record Malaysia has already been established as a notable film site for many filmmakers.

Malaysia as a destination image in other films

Based on B. Rittichainuwat, S. Rattanaphinanchai findings films can enhance destination awareness, appeal, and profitability. Previous studies suggest that film is a prime tool in raising destination awareness, creating place familiarity enhancing destination image by turning an unknown place into a tourist spot after the film was made, and motivating film tourism. (Rittichainuwat, B. and Rattanaphinanchai, S 2015) This shows that films do have a key role on how they portray the film in relationship to the perception that the audience has on the country showcased.

How Malaysians feel being misrepresented

In the conclusion of The Borat Effect, Stephen Pratt stated there has been little tourism research on film that negatively portrays destinations. Shani et al (2009) calls for more research on controversial films that deal specifically with tourists. This research contributes to this area. Tasci (2009) points out that low levels of familiarity with a destination can bring associated stereotypes, prejudices and biases and thus can negatively impact on the destination image, potential tourists' intentions to visit and foster a feeling of social distance towards its inhabitants. However, the increased familiarity brought about by this film, albeit with factually

incorrect information, must bring into question those implications. When a film portrays a destination negatively, stereotypes and prejudices may be reinforced. Nevertheless, the film helped to raise awareness of Kazakhstan as a tourist destination and to differentiate it from other Central Asian countries (Connell, 2012).

Directors Misrepresenting Malaysia

According to Stephen Pratt the official response to the film by Kazakhstan officials was to criticize film maker Sacha Baron Cohen. This only heightened interest in the film, but it had the adverse effect of reinforcing the image of Kazakhstani people as ignorant and parochial. As in Mordue's study (2009), the perception of the destination is fundamentally changed by the film and there is a significant amount of tension and angst among Kazakhs as a result of the 'myths' depicted in it. It could be argued that the adage 'there's no such thing as bad publicity' might be appropriate in this case. (Pratt, S. ,2015)

Methodology

The research method used to collect data for the study, would be qualitative method. In-dept interviews would be the chosen conduct for answering the five research objectives. The first research objective being, the impact of the movie on the Tourism of Malaysia, secondly the portrayal of Malaysia, thirdly how do Malaysians feel being misrepresented, fourthly reason for misrepresentation of Malaysia in the movie and lastly, the awareness of viewers of the misrepresentation of Malaysia.

The qualitative research is the study of human phenomena whereby data collected from respondents will be more clear, specific and a niche structure about the research objectives. The research objective will be looked into with great detail and inspection. The research will be more focused on the less obvious factors and more on the subtleties from the data collected and less of the metrics of the data that is being collected. The data collected would have more details and insight which provides more areas to touch on during the study and research analysis.

Results and Discussion

Textual Analysis

1. Astor Bar at St. Regis in Kuala Lumpur (Timestamp 15:22)



Figure 1. Astor Bar at St. Regis in Kuala Lumpur



Figure 2. Astor Bar at St. Regis in Kuala Lumpur

2. Be-landa House, Kuala Lumpur (Timestamp 7:26)



Figure 3. Be-landa House, Kuala Lumpur



Figure 3. Be-landa House, Kuala Lumpur

3. Carcosa Seri Negara, Kuala Lumpur (Timestamp 35:3)



Figure 4. Carcosa Seri Negara, Kuala Lumpur



Figure 5. Carcosa Seri Negara, Kuala Lumpur

4. Airport hangar Subang Jaya, Petaling District, Selangor, Malaysia (Timestamp 51:31)



Figure 6. Airport hangar Subang Jaya, Petaling District, Selangor, Malaysia



Figure 7. Airport hangar Subang Jaya, Petaling District, Selangor, Malaysia

5. Mines International Exhibition & Convention Centre (Timestamp 53:55)



Figure 8. Mines International Exhibition & Convention Centre

6. Four Seasons Resort Langkawi (Timestamp 56:15)



Figure 9. Four Seasons Resort Langkawi



Figure 10. Four Seasons Resort Langkawi

7. Eastern and Oriental Hotel, Penang (Timestamp 01:04:54)



Figure 11. Eastern and Oriental Hotel, Penang



Figure 12. Eastern and Oriental Hotel, Penang

8. Penang's Cheong Fatt Sze Mansion (Timestamp 01:41:32)



Figure 13. Penang's Cheong Fatt Sze Mansion

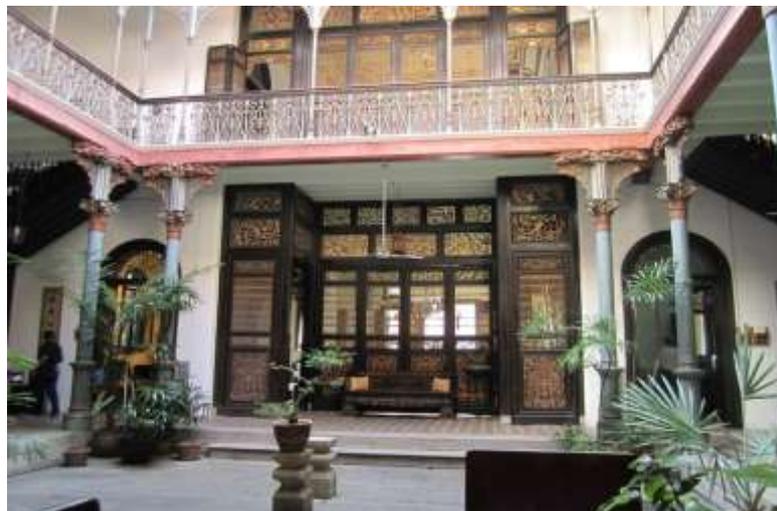


Figure 14. Penang's Cheong Fatt Sze Mansion

In-depth Interview

Impact of Crazy Rich Asian on the Tourism of Malaysia. From the respondent's majority think that the movie did not have an impact in any way on the tourism of Malaysia. This is because in the movie Malaysia is not even mentioned once and if non-locals are watching the movie, they would not realise that the Malaysia was a huge part of the film thus not having an impact on the tourism. Comparing to films like Lord Of The Rings which made a huge impact on the tourism of New Zealand, and Game Of Thrones locations are now turn into major tourism sites, Crazy Rich Asians did not make that impact or even come close it what these movies had made.

Identify how other movies portray Malaysia as a destination image. Form the respondents it was a split answer, where one half mentioned that the movies portraying Malaysia as a rural, jungle depiction, where the land is still undeveloped for decades and another half of the respondents, mention that the films portrayed Malaysia in a light where there had been

development and show cities with skyscrapers and the rise of technology in Malaysia. Based on the respondents they mentioned and gave examples of movies, and implied that these movies had nothing against Malaysia and need to use locations in Malaysia for the audience to visualise the narrative of the movie. In some movies like *Entrapment* and in *Bloodshot*, where they portrayed Malaysia as a futuristic and developing country for their narrative. A movie with takes a different portrayal on Malaysia is *The Viral Factor*, a Hong Kong movie shot locally where it portrays Malaysia as a backward country and the locals as the enemy. The Marvel movie *Venom* portrays Malaysia as both as a rural portrayal and an urban country showing the 2 sides of the coin of Malaysia.

Identify how Malaysians feel when their country is misrepresented as Singapore in Crazy Rich Asians. One of the respondents gave an example of what this movie did to Malaysia he says, “it’s like doing an assignment but someone else is getting the 100% credit for it”. Which was well portrayed, of what the movie did to Malaysia. The data collected from the respondents was a clear-cut answer that they all had in agreement of a form of negative feelings and emotions, from being misrepresented and not getting the credit due to Malaysia. Some say they feel sad because Singapore gets the recognition and Malaysia on the other hand at a loss because of no proper credit given. Some of the respondents also feel very discourage because, when asked about by other internationals about Malaysia their either not aware of Malaysia, or has a bad impression on Malaysia being a backward country, and now when a Hollywood mega production team, is making a movie and used Malaysia as one of their main shooting locations, they misrepresent the movie. By doing the film is portraying Singapore as a hyperreality.

Identify if Malaysians are aware of this Misrepresentation. Majority of the respondents walked into the theatre thinking that they are about to watch a film on Singapore alone, and only realised that the movie portrayed Singapore as a hyperreality when discovering the many articles published after the viewing of the movie. The other segment of respondents knew there were at least one to 3 locations but were not aware that there were around 13 locations used in the film, and that the production team spend forty-four days shooting in Malaysia alone. When realizing that Malaysia was a big part of the film was due to social media and online articles on the movie.

Participants

The research analysis will be based on the data collected from the eleven respondents who have watched the film, *Crazy Rich Asians*. Ages ranging between 20 to 50 years old. The respondents were from Nilai, Seremban, Kajang, Penang, Selangor, Mexico and Kenya. The researcher will analyse the 5 main themes in the table below.

The reason of the study was set out to investigate if the film *Crazy Rich Asians* had impacted the Malaysian Tourism Industry and how Malaysians feel being misrepresented in the film. This study also aims to identify, if the film *Identify how other movies portray Malaysia as a destination image*, identify why the directors would misrepresent the locations of the Film Shot in Malaysia as Singapore, identify if Malaysians were aware of this misrepresentation and identify why would the directors misrepresent the locations of the film shot in Malaysia as Singapore.

The main research objective is set out to investigate if the film *Crazy Rich Asians* had impacted the Malaysian Tourism Industry, study states that the tourism was not affected in

anyway and if it was impacted it was in a very short time period. Time period when the movie was in the cinemas and when the media was generating content and when the film was trending. Because Singapore got the credit for the entirety of the film their tourism industry would have been impacted.

The second objective is to identify how other movies portray Malaysia as a destination image. There were no one depiction of Malaysia in these movies. Some movies choose to show Malaysia as a backward rural country. Some other movies show the two sides of Malaysia the rural and urban and some other show Malaysia as a thriving county with a progressing society.

The third objective is how Malaysians and non-locals feel when their country is misrepresented as Singapore in *Crazy Rich Asians*. When a Hollywood mega production team, is making a movie and used Malaysia as one of their main shooting locations, they misrepresent the movie Malaysians and non-locals alike, were sadden and taken back to the fact that Malaysia did not get the credit it deserved in the movie. Some western countries already have a bad impression on Malaysia being a backward country. If the movie had given Malaysia its due credit the world would take closer look at Malaysia, this was how they felt.

The fourth research objective is to identify why the directors would misrepresent the locations of the Film Shot in Malaysia as Singapore. Despite over 70% of the locations being shot in Malaysia alone the Movie did not credit Malaysia even once. Instead misrepresented the Malaysian locations as a jewellery shop in Shanghai, which was shot in Kuala Lumpur, prestigious mansions in Singapore, shot in Kuala Lumpur, Samsara Island which is a fictional location shot in Langkawi, Malaysia. The directors had nothing personal against Malaysia. Malaysia Film incentives were a great opportunity for the director to save cost with the 30% tax rebate. The Malaysian Government is the one to blame here because the law does not state the film makers need to state and credit Malaysia in the movie, but only in the credits. Malaysia is the reason for the misrepresentation, the laws were too loose.

The last objective was to identify is Malaysian and non-Malaysians viewers were aware of the misrepresentation that was present in the film of Malaysia. Most of the respondent were not aware that Malaysia was misrepresented as Singapore to the extreme, where about 70% of the film was shot in Malaysia. The Malaysian viewers did find out that the movie was shot in Malaysia due to many news articles popping up when the movie was released but was not aware that majority of the film was shot in Malaysia. And while the movie was trending.

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