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Public relations and tourism: finding public relations' role in communicating tourist destination

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Abstract Public relations plays essential roles in communicating and building image of tourist destinations in order to attract a significant number of tourists. Starting from this consideration, this research investigates the role of hotel public relations practitioners in communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination. The growth of tourists arriving in Yogyakarta cannot be separated from the role of hotel public relations practitioners in communicating Yogyakarta as the great place to visit. This research employed descriptive qualitative approach. The data was gathered by conducting interviews with three hotel public relations practitioners in Yogyakarta who have experienced in this field at least one year. Based on activities they did to communicate Yogyakarta as the tourist destination, it can be categorised that hotel public relations practitioners in Yogyakarta play communication technician role by using the beautiful and unique cultures and landmarks as backgrounds to communicate their hotels to tourists, using both conventional and new media to strengthen the image of Yogyakarta.

Keywords: role of public relations; communication; tourist destinations; image

INTRODUCTION

Tourism industry plays a pivotal and dominant role on the development of a country. Arionesei and Ivan (2013) explain that this industry plays three main roles in terms of political, social, and economic perspective. In the last six decades, globally the tourism has been developing significantly to wheel the economic sector of a nation (Croce, 2008). Deeri (in Postma and Schmuecker, 2017) argues that tourism

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gives direct impacts on the economic, social, and environmental growth. Thus, tourism sector gives a big contribution to develop and strengthen the economic pillar of a country.

In Thailand, tourism industry becomes an industry developing significantly and gives a hug impact on the economy (Erawan, Krairit, and Khang, 2011) since there are many tourists coming to this country. Before deciding to visit Thailand, prospective tourists find information on the internet for it is the easiest way.

Indonesia also becomes one of the popular countries to be visited for it has many attractive tourist destinations. Therefore, Indonesia got international tourism awards such as UNWTO (United Nation World Tourism Organization) and ITB Berlin (Internationale Tourismus Borse) (Adinaya, 2018). Therefore, 28th Annual TTG Travel Awards 2017 gives a reward to Indonesia as the best destination of the year in Asia-Pacific (PikiranRakyat, 2017).

As an effort to increase both local and international tourists, some tourist destinations create their own branding based on its characteristics. Since 2008, government of Bali develops a tourism program that is well-known as "Aktivitas Tahunan Denpasar Visit" (Annual Activity of Visit Denpasar). The city branding that has been done by government of Bali is not only for creating a certain branding for the tourists, but also for the investors. The city branding gives advantages to the tourists in order to give them a description about the uniqueness of Bali (Setianti et al, 2017).

Another province in Indonesia that has a strong and unique identity as a tourist destination is Aceh. Anismar, Satria, and Ali (2018) in his research said that Aceh Singkil has branded itself as a religious tourist destination of Muslim. This branding has been developed because the local people realise that the development of the tourist destination in their province should give advantages for communities, particularly to increase the income (Anismar, Satria, and Ali, 2018).

As one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, Indonesia has many destinations providing beautiful and unique panoramas and cultures. Yogyakarta, one of the best cities in Indonesia, has also various beautiful tourist attractions (pesonaindonesia, n.d) that can stimulate people to visit this province. Comparing to the previous year, in 2017, The Indonesian Central Statistics Agency (BPS) noted tourist arrivals in Yogyakarta increase 21.57 percent (Tourist arrivals, 2017).

Hotel public relations practitioners play an important role to adopt changes and needs of modern market (Cerović-Milohnić, 2006). Thus, they have to be adoptable with any conditions and fast learners to understand the publics. On the other hand, they work to promote their hotels in order to increase competitive advantages (Cerović-Milohnić, 2006).

Therefore, public relations practitioners, especially hotel public relations, as communication experts play an important role in

communicating Yogyakarta as the best place to visit. Hotel public relations practitioners build a positive image in order to attract the tourists to come and enjoy the beauty of Yogyakarta. This means that hotels play significant roles in order to develop tourism industry (Deuschl, 2006, p.23). Deuschl also mentions that hotel public relations practitioners are needed in order to differentiate their hotels from others (2006, p.24). The more unique and comfortable hotels, the more tourists will consider Yogyakarta to be visited for they have many choices to stay.

Building and strengthening a destination's image are substantial factors that can contribute positively to enhance tourists' trust, satisfaction, and commitment with the destination. Here, public relations can drive behavioural intentions of tourists towards a destination (Jain and Chicaogo, 2014). Moreover, MacCannell (in Jain and Chicaogo, 2014) states that the main intention of tourists to visit a destination is mission for getting authentic experiences. They visit the destinations providing social, historic, and cultural values. Public relations can help the tourist destinations to develop a story in order to fulfil the expectation of tourists to feel the authentic experiences (Jain and Chicaogo, 2014).

Conceptually, public relations practitioners are functioned as a symbolic communication (Petersone, 2013). However, there is lack of the empirical evidence in the context of how public relations communicate the favourable image of a tourist destination in order to attract tourists, especially in Indonesia. Consequently, it finds difficult to optimise the role of hotel public relations practitioners in creating and communicating integrated messages. Therefore, this research aims to find the role of hotel public relations practitioners in communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination. This study then advanced the empirical evidence in order to enrich the basis of case study of public relations. Evaluating the role of public relations in the context of tourism can contribute the useful insight to develop communicating the tourist destination.

This study employed a qualitative design by using the case study approach to collect the data from three hotels in Yogyakarta namely Hotel A, Hotel B, and Hotel C. This approach allows in-depth investigation with multi-faced examinations of complex problems in the real-life settings (Daymon and Halloway, 2002, p. 105). To collect the data, in- depth interview was done personally with three key informants who have been working as hotel public relations practitioners for at least one year and the hotels where they work have a favourable image that can be seen from positive comments on online travel aggregators. Moreover, hotels becoming the objects of this research are located in a strategic place. Therefore, it is accessible for local and international tourists. Collected data is analysed by using three steps. The first, it is done by preparing data by making transcript of the interview, scanning the data, and grouping the data. The next is reading the whole data to

make general sense. The last, analysing data is done comprehensively by coding the data (Creswell, 2010, p. 276)

DISCUSSION

Landmarks as a Communication Background

As the tourist destination, Yogyakarta has many iconic landmarks and beautiful cultural heritages (Suparwoko, 2012). Hotel public relations practitioners use these landmarks and cultural heritages to communicate to tourists in order to attract them to visit Yogyakarta and stay at their hotels. They use the landmarks and cultural heritages that have the same value with their hotels such as Tugu Jogja (the Jogja Monument), Malioboro, Yogyakarta Palace, Borobudur Temple, and Prambanan Temple.

In communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination, hotel public relations practitioners have essential roles in creating creative messages to ensure the tourists about Yogyakarta. Seitel states that the roles they play can help establishing and maintain mutual relationship between their hotel and tourists (2001, p. 9). Therefore, giving information to tourists about the beauty of Yogyakarta become a basic foundation and vital to build a relationship that can bring benefits to the hotel. The uniqueness of Yogyakarta becomes matters to be communicated as the tourists' love visiting the destinations that will be memorable in their life. Consequently, they will consider and prioritise Yogyakarta as their destination to be visited.

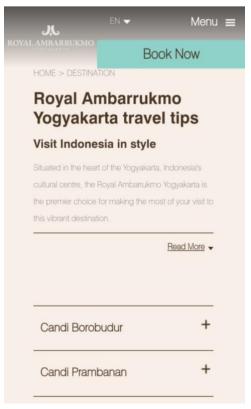


Figure 1. Royal Ambarrukmo's information of tourist destinations Source: www.royalambarrukmo.com

Gaining understanding from the tourists, hotel public relations practitioners build trust by providing opened and honest information in order to shape the image and reputation of Yogyakarta and their hotel. Based on the interview done with them, they communicate and describe the tourist destinations and their hotel consistently and honestly by framing the messages understandably in order to make the messages memorable in the tourists' mind. For instance, they use Tugu Jogja, where it is the most popular landmark in Yogyakarta located in the centre of Yogyakarta, as a background to communicate Yogyakarta and their hotel. Additionally, it has a symbolic value, a magic line that connects the Southern Ocean (according to the legend, this ocean that is well-known as Parangtristis Beach, is the domain of Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, a queen of the Southern Ocean), Yogyakarta palace, and Mount Merapi. Public relations practitioner of Hotel A and C utilise this landmark because this landmark represent Yogyakarta. This brings a benefit for Hotel B where it is only 50 meters from this landmark. The message created to communicate this hotel to the tourists is "the closest hotel to Tugu Jogja". Meanwhile, to communicate Hotel C, a message made is "one minute away from Tugu Jogja". The expected result of creating these messages is, the tourists will associate Tugu Jogja with these hotels. Therefore, when they plan to visit Yogyakarta or when they recommend their families and friends to visit this province, they strongly evoke these hotels.

Furthermore, Malioboro located in the downtown is the main tourist destination in Yogyakarta. It becomes an icon of this city and a shopping street providing many shops selling batik (Indonesia Heritage cloth made by using traditional technique of applying wax and dyes to fabric to achieve intricate and colour patters), clothes, souvenirs, and foods. Mostly, the tourists come to this iconic landmark to enjoy the beauty of Yogyakarta and purchase some stuffs for their families or friends. The location of this landmark is close to Hotel A and C. It becomes an essential reason why these hotels use this landmark as a communication background to the tourists. Hotel A communicates to the tourists that it is close and accessible to Malioboro. On the other hand, Hotel C produces a message "five minutes walking distance to Malioboro".

Yogyakarta Palace is not only a home to the Sultan of Yogyakarta and his family, but it also becomes cultural heart and soul of the city where Yogyakarta is well-known as a cultural destination. Hotel B use Yogyakarta Palace and its tradition as a communication background since the interior design of Hotel B is a historic heritage. This hotel is also an integral part of the heritage site of Royal Palace Residence. Moreover, the owner of the land of this this hotel is the king of Yogyakarta. Consequently, the colours of this hotel are dominated by natural white and brown and the design is inspired from the Yogyakarta palace and Javanese houses. This becomes the uniqueness of this hotel and it is valuable to be communicated to the tourists.



Figure 2. Harper Mangkubumi's information on its strategic location Source: www.harperhotels.com

Two other iconic landmarks used as a communication background of Hotel A, Hotel B, and Hotel C are Borobudur and Prambanan temple. Borobudur is a stone landmark and monument, a famous temple to Buddhism. Meanwhile, Prambanan is a beautiful Hindu temple. This temple is a magnificent manifestation and an icon of Indonesia's cultural heritage. Communicating these heritage landmarks can attract tourists loving archaeological sites.

Communicating Authentic Experiences

From the landmarks chosen to communicate their hotel, hotel public relations practitioners try fulfilling the expectation of the tourists to get authentic experiences when they visit to Yogyakarta. MacCannell (in Jain and Chicaogo, 2014) states getting authentic experiences is the main reason why the tourists visit the destination. The landmarks communicated are the icons of Yogyakarta. The tourists cannot find those icons in other provinces. Tugu Jogja, Malioboro, Yogyakarta palace, Borobudur temple, and Prambanan temple can only be found and enjoyed only when the tourists visit Yogyakarta.

Those tourist destinations are tourist products. Considering and placing those icons to be communicated become essential in order to compete with other destinations that also provide authentic experiences. Giving authentic experiences makes the tourists feel satisfied because they can enjoy a new experience directly and they will revisit this

province to memorise their beautiful memories or give recommendation to friends and family to visit this destination.



Figure 3. Promoting authentic experience of Royal Ambarrukmo Source: http://m.facebook.com>RoyalAmbarrukmo

Furthermore, hotel public relations practitioners have a unique function to communicate Yogyakarta as the tourist destination and their hotel is the right place to stay while enjoying the beauty of Yogyakarta in order to gain understanding and acceptance from the tourists. Petrovici (2014) mentions that gaining understanding and acceptance from the visitors is the most important way to build good relations between the hotel and its tourists. Thus, hotel public relations practitioners should have extra efforts to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between their hotel and its tourists by keeping in touch with the tourists, giving a good service, and providing updated information both about Yogyakarta and their hotels.

Regarding touristic destination, public relations have an exceptionally important even a deciding role in the process of encouraging the desire of the potential tourist to visit a touristic place, placement of destination that is touristic product (Zdravkovska, 2014).

Therefore, hotel public relations practitioners are functioned as storytellers who have a responsibility for narrating the unique association of tourist destinations with an organization (Jain and Chicaogo, 2014). Thus, in making association between their hotels and the landmarks, they make stories and communicate those stories to the tourists that can make them enthusiastic and excited to visit Yogyakarta. Good stories about landmarks communicated to potential tourists can

build favourable image because good and true stories can influence the beliefs of the tourists about destinations in Yogyakarta. Furthermore, they realize that Yogyakarta's landmarks are valuable manifestations to strengthen the image of this province.

To build the image of the tourist destination, identifying and shaping of its strong features are essential to be done before communicating to tourists (Jain and Chicaogo, 2014).

Therefore, the hotel public relations practitioners communicate the most iconic landmarks to strengthen the image of Yogyakarta as the tourist destination. Abrattcitated (in Hatch, 1997) adds that image is feelings and beliefs about the company that exist in the minds of its audiences. Therefore, public relations practitioners of Hotel A, Hotel B, and Hotel C understand that heritage and culture become the important characteristics of Yogyakarta. They communicate and articulate heritage landmarks and culture that have the same value with their hotels to the tourists by giving the best impression when the tourists come to Yogyakarta and stay at their hotel. By doing this, the tourists are expected to have feelings and beliefs that exist in the tourists' mind about Yogyakarta and their hotel since this is a valuable asset that can bring benefits for the hotels.

Communication Programs: Image and Business

In communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination, there are some programs or activities that have been done by hotel public relations practitioners in order to strengthen the image of Yogyakarta and increase the occupation of their hotel. Roostika (2012) notes that per year, the number of tourists visiting Yogyakarta increase more 10.000 tourists. Zdravkovska states that public relations practitioners in tourism sector are functioned to gain income of the country (2014). It can be seen from their activities aiming to spread good information which can attract tourist that will give impacts on the occupancy of their hotels. For instance, "A Heritage Walk" is a program designed by Hotel A. This is a tour package offered to the tourists to travel some heritage places nearby the hotel such as Tugu Jogja, Klenteng, and Malioboro. From this activity, the tourists get two benefits, both enjoying the beautiful heritage places and understanding the history of those places.

Hotel public relations practitioners try finding the media having strong influences to communicate the authentic experiences when they visit Yogyakarta. Hotel A uses social media, mass media, and blogger. These media provide information needed to targeted tourists. Social media is functioned as a tool providing tourist information such as recommended beautiful places to visit around the hotel and the benefits when they stay at Hotel A. Mass media is used to disseminate information of the events of Hotel A. Therefore, having good writing skills is important in order to create an interesting information.

The Hotel A also uses professional travel bloggers to introduce both facilities and values of the hotel and famous tourist destinations in

Yogyakarta having the same values with the hotel. In selecting professional travel bloggers, hotel public relations practitioner of this hotel investigates through their personal blog account whether they have many followers and readers. This is to ensure if the bloggers are credible. This hotel provides free accommodation for the selected bloggers and gives any information needed by the bloggers before they start writing. Moreover, the selected bloggers get tour package to some destinations such as Kali Biru, Goa Pindul, Ratu Boko temple, Prambanan temple, and Ramayana Balet dance. These destinations become backgrounds before writing the hotel.

Partnership was also conducted by hotel A to strengthen tourism communication. This hotel has a partnership with one of the airlines for making a short video about the beauty and uniqueness of Yogyakarta. Hotel A has partnership with one of airlines that have high traffic route from Yogyakarta to Singapore and vice-versa. Moreover, gaining partnership with local tourism government is essential for they have connection to travel agents that will do promotion to every country. Hotel A also gains partnership with the government, particularly with the tourism ministry. They work together to strengthen brand of Yogyakarta as a tourist destination. They travel to some countries such as Malaysia and Philippines to communicate what Yogyakarta has and how beautiful this province is.

By using digital communication, Hotel B promotes itself as a MICE hotel (Meeting, Incentives, Conferencing, and Exhibitions) where it has strong concept of Yogyakarta culture. To attract the tourists, this hotel also adds information about characteristic of people in Yogyakarta (friendly), good facilities in Yogyakarta, new airport that is bigger and has more direct international flights.

To feel the culture of Yogyakarta, Hotel B offers spa with Javanese dance technique, dinner in Keraton (palace) where waiters/waitresses wearing traditional clothes (abdi dalem), and site of Keraton located in the hotel. On the other hand, this hotel also communicates a shopping mall namely Ambarukmo Plaza as a shopping destination, especially for tourists from Singapore and Malaysia who love shopping. Moreover, this hotel also disseminates information that there is a museum in the hotel with collections of Soekarno (first president of Indonesia).

At Hotel B, all materials to communicate the hotel and tourist destinations are in English since it is a universal language. Moreover, to attract international tourists, these hotels use magazines and online news where they live. As a result, international tourists who stay in this hotel increase significantly (from 15% to 30%).

Hotel B also uses professional travel bloggers to communicate the hotel. Criteria of the bloggers that are looked for are having good writing skills and personality. A hotel public relations practitioner of this hotel will check track records of the bloggers. If the bloggers have good attitude, after staying at the hotel they write articles related to the hotel, he will contact the bloggers and make an agreement regarding how

many articles that will be produces and how many times that photos and stories will be posted on Instagram.

In communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination, public relations practitioner of Hotel C employs offline and online advertising, Google advertising, social media (Facebook, instagram, twitter, and Google+), radio, and local television, bloggers (foodies and travellers). The wish image communicated to tourists is, Yogyakarta and this hotel are comfortable and homey. By staying at this hotel, the tourists can feel the real atmosphere of Yogyakarta. Moreover, to support the tourism industry in Yogyakarta, Hotel C gains partnership with hotel and restaurant association of Indonesia and department of culture and tourism. This hotel also communicates traditional food and meeting package for foreign media in order to get publicity.

The data shows that three hotel public relations practitioners use different ways in communicating Yogyakarta and their hotels to the tourists because these hotels have different characteristics. However, they have the same perspective that in communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination, they have to communicate the heritage landmarks and culture consistently in order to create tourists' opinions and impressions about Yogyakarta as the best place to visit. Petrovici (2014) notes, in tourism industry, public relations practitioners should build favourable image in order to attract the tourists by harmonising all features of the destination. Thus, the hotel public relations practitioners try harmonising the characteristics of Yogyakarta with their hotel. The same features between the hotels and Yogyakarta are communicated in order to give a positive influence on the tourists.

Communication activities done by hotel public relations practitioners can be seen as an effort to support the tourism industry in Indonesia, particularly in Yogyakarta. The goal is to promote Yogyakarta as the right place to visit in order to increase the income of Indonesia, particularly Yogyakarta. Zdravkovska (2014) states that public relations practitioners in a tourism industry play important roles to enhance the income since public relations are functioned as a symbol communication. Therefore, to spread good and valuable information which can attract tourists, three hotel public relations practitioners use some trusted media; mass media, social media, radio, magazine, and bloggers. The media are functioned as tools to build trust by providing opened and honest information. This media can attract and help the tourists to find the information that they are looking for (Zdravkovska, 2014).

Bloggers become an effective tool to spread the information. Three hotels use bloggers to promote Yogyakarta and the hotels. Using bloggers can enhance the trust of tourists with a certain issue since bloggers have many followers as potential tourists. Moreover, bloggers can strengthen the identity and image of tourist destination. As a result, the tourists can memorise the tourist destination perfectly. The tourists

then become agents to communicate Yogyakarta to other potential tourists.

Based on the communication activities done by hotel public relations practitioners in communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination, it can be seen that hotel public relations practitioners play communication technician by doing technical jobs such as providing information about Yogyakarta and their hotel through some trusted media and make some programs to strengthen the image of Yogyakarta as the tourist destination. They do not consider research as a pivotal element in designing to evaluating programs. Research becomes matters only when they have to decide which communication mechanism is appropriate with their objectives. They focus on the implementation of the communication program. The skills needed to run their activities are writing news releases, editing house-magazine and developing websites (Glen Broom and David Dozier in Theaker, 2004:57-58). These activities can increase the number of tourists who travel to Yogyakarta.

CONCLUSION

Hotel public relations practitioners play important roles in communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination. In this case, hotel public relations practitioners play communication technician. The role that they play can perform in enhancing the image of Yogyakarta as the tourist destination. Therefore, hotel public relations practitioners have great contribution to develop the tourism industry in Yogyakarta. Activities done by them can strengthen Yogyakarta as a cultural tourism. They also gain partnership with some parties in order to attract the tourists to visit Yogyakarta and build long-term relations with the tourists by constructing the authentic experience. The uniqueness in communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destination is using trusted bloggers.

There are several opportunities can be developed based on these findings. First, evaluating the hotel public relations practitioners' programs in communicating Yogyakarta as the tourist destinations by using quantitative approach can be further investigated by asking the tourists after visiting Yogyakarta. Their perception about Yogyakarta becomes data to improve the quality of communication programs. The next, since bloggers take an important part in communicating the tourist destinations, a study on the roles of bloggers and tourism is needed to conduct in order to contribute the useful insight to develop communicating the tourist destination. The last, further investigation of how media portray the tourist destinations in Yogyakarta can be analysed by using content analysis.

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