

NEW PERSPECTIVES FROM INTERNATIONAL VISITORS TO THAILAND

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INTRODUCTION

Competition for tourists and tourist dollars are fierce. Many countries in Asia have been vying for these international tourist dollars. With the increasing integration of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), unprecedented opportunities and challenges exist for tourism development and tourists' flows. The tourism industry is vital to the economy of Thailand and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has thrived to position Thailand as a cultural, historical, and natural tourism destination (Rittichainuwat, Qu, & Brown, 2001). In fact, tourism growth had quadrupled from 2001 when Thailand had received 10.13 million visitors to 39.8 million tourists in 2019 (TAT, 2019). Tourism has been promoted in Thailand as a major generator of national income for the country. However, Thailand had suffered from negative effects of uncontrolled tourism, which in part had led the Thailand government to take steps to search for ways to develop a more sustainable tourism product (Worrachaddejchai, 2019). In addition, Thailand as an international tourist destination has had the effects of competing other South East Asian destinations.

In 2020, international travel in Thailand plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bhaskara & Filimonau, 2021). Tourism is expected to rebound as vaccinations accelerate (Knight, 2021); however, the vulnerability of tourism to external threats such as COVID-19 and their associated impacts may have impact on the image of Thailand as a tourism destination. In tourism, the concept of image is generally explained in two distinct ways. Image can be either an associative image of a product that is developed by the consumer or a mental image of a product created by a marketing department (Kim & Agrusa, 2005; Kim, Holland, & Han, 2013; Tuohino, 2002). Tourism destinations must be cautious in reference to their image so the perception that they have is not different from the way that it is perceived by potential travelers.

According to previous studies in the tourism industry, the perceptions of a tourist destination are critical to its image which has a direct impact on the success as a tourist destination (Kim & Agrusa 2005; Wu, Li, & Li, 2018). The perception that a destination will meet their needs of a visitor, the more attractive that destination becomes, therefore, the greater the probability that it will be selected

as the final destination. A destination's attractiveness has a tremendous influence on determining: a person's destination of choice (Chen & Uysal, 2002; Cong, 2016; Hu & Ritchie, 1993), expectations of satisfaction (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999; Prideaux, Agrusa, Donlon, & Curran, 2004), intentions to revisit (Crompton, Fakeye, & Lue, 1992), perceptions of benefits and motivations (Kim, Botha, & Crompton, 2000; Prideaux et al., 2004), positive perceptions of opinion leaders (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999), and the amount of money spent along with the duration of stay (Kim, Botha, & Crompton, 2000). A number of studies have determined that destination attributes can also be classified by the characteristics of cognitive resources, such as entertainment, cultural/historical, natural, events, along with sports and recreation (Wu & Li, 2017; Wu, Li, & Li, 2018). In image and competitiveness studies of destinations, the destinations' attributes identified have included climate, atmosphere, comfort, safety and security, sports, recreation, sightseeing, food, beaches, culture, shopping, tourism infrastructure, ease of communication, service quality, friendliness of residents, cost, and entertainment (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Kim & Agrusa, 2005; Kim, Botha, & Crompton, 2000; Sharafuddin, 2015). Therefore, it is important to continue in understanding what international tourist perceptions are of the Thailand tourism product.

In previous research, personal business travel, corporate business travel, visiting relatives and friends, and for pleasure vacations are among reasons to travel (Wang, Kim, & Agrusa, 2017). This study is geared toward the pleasure vacation segment of the tourism industry and seeks to discover a relationship among the images that international travelers have about Thailand as a tourist destination. Additionally, the study results are compared to the findings from Henkel et al., (2006) to identify changing international tourists' images about Thailand.

METHOD

This study re-examines whether there has been a change in the perceptions of international visitors on their image of Thailand as a tourist destination after a previous study more than 10 years earlier (Henkel et al., 2006). International visitors were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the image of Thailand and if there have been any changes to the perceptions by international tourists. The population for this study consisted of international travelers. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire through a review of previous literature and previous study such as Henkel et al. (2006). The study analyzed and compared two sets of data collected in 2005 and 2021. T1 in Table 1 represents a sample group of 225 international travelers gathered in 2005, and T2 indicates a sample group of 350 international travelers in summer 2020. T-test was performed to analyze the data.

FINDINGS

The sample consisted of 52% males and 48% female with an average 35 years of age and with an average household income of 110,000 USD with the T1 sample. T2 consisted of 49% males and 51% female with an average 32 years of age. The majority of the sample 51% reported that they were single in T1 and 47% in T2. The results indicated significant differences between T1 and T2 regarding their cognitive perceptions toward Thailand, such as shopping, nightlife and entertainment, sports activities, budget vacation, historic architecture, erotic tourism, hiking, and health tourism. Related to international tourists' perception considering tourist destinations, significant differences were found between T1 and T2 regarding quality of public services, traffic flow, availability of entertainment, recreation, cultural activities and freedom from terrorism and disease.

Table 1. Significance Tests on Items Concerning Thailand as a Tourist Destination

Item	T1		T2		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Importance of cultural sightseeing	4.29	0.90	4.27	0.98	0.27	0.758
Importance of shopping	3.28	1.16	2.96	1.32	3.02	0.000**
Importance of beaches	3.62	1.15	3.89	1.23	-2.74	0.792
Importance of nightlife and entertainment	3.65	1.13	3.11	1.31	5.16	0.000**
Importance of nature, wildlife, and parks	3.68	1.03	3.83	1.09	-1.68	0.896
Importance of friendly people	3.97	1.07	3.77	1.12	2.19	0.057
Importance of sports activities	3.00	1.18	2.46	1.24	5.33	0.003**
Importance of an exotic destination	3.86	1.06	3.87	1.14	-0.14	0.258
Importance of a budget vacation	3.91	1.07	3.38	1.26	5.38	0.000**
Importance of food	4.10	0.96	4.30	0.94	-2.56	0.769
Importance of historic architecture	3.65	1.06	3.68	1.18	-0.33	0.036*
Importance of erotic tourism	2.40	1.38	2.09	1.30	2.76	0.050*
Importance of hiking	2.61	1.08	2.56	1.33	0.45	0.000**
Importance of health tourism	2.76	1.21	2.47	1.32	2.74	0.017*

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 2. Significance Tests on Perceptions When Considering Tourist Destinations

Item	T1		T2		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Cleanliness of the community	4.17	0.87	3.92	1.05	3.09	0.160
Quality of public services	4.01	0.93	3.60	1.14	4.59	0.000**
Traffic flow	3.51	0.97	3.09	1.24	4.37	0.000**
Distance traveling to tourist destinations	3.50	1.11	3.28	1.29	2.13	0.000**
Availability of entertainment	3.80	1.00	3.51	1.21	3.04	0.000**
Availability of recreation	3.96	0.88	3.65	1.14	3.50	0.000**
Availability of cultural activities	3.94	0.89	3.92	1.11	0.31	0.010*
Friendliness of residents	4.19	0.85	4.16	0.95	0.30	0.526
Freedom from threats of terrorism	4.26	1.06	3.82	1.26	4.42	0.004**
Freedom from threats of disease	4.44	0.94	3.86	1.16	6.40	0.005**

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

IMPLICATIONS

The study examines the tourists' changing images toward Thailand as an international travel destination through a longitudinal study. The data analysis showed that there have been significant changes to the destination images and tourists' perceptions when considering tourism destinations. Most importantly, the study revealed a possible negative impact of the current tourism disruption along with COVID-19 on the tourism destination images. By attempting to promote the uniqueness of the Thailand culture and country, the TAT (2019)

has announced the message that Thailand wants to develop sustainable tourism through leveraging the uniqueness of its unique food, culture, and friendly residents. As Thailand is expected to have a rebound in tourism by approving quarantine waiver for those who are vaccinated in Summer 2021 (Thanthong-Knight, 2021), the key to the success of the strategy will be whether or not tourists perceive Thailand to live up to the image that it is intended to be known and advertised. The study provides important implications for destination marketing, tourism policy and planning.

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