

Thailand's Perceived Image As A Tourism Destination By Chinese Tourists After Covid

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ABSTRACT

Tourism industry always requires strong and positive destination image for the potential tourists, especially for those who have visited the destination or planning to visit Thailand in the future. To provide high-quality tourist experiences and promote a destination effectively, managers need to know the prospects think of the specific destination. Thus, the perceived image of Thailand was investigated from the perspective of Chinese tourists. Thorough literature review confirmed the factors to develop the measures about the Thailand as tourist destination. Convenience sampling method conducted to collect data from 380 usable participants during the time of 20th May to 30th July 2023 by Chinese tourists who have visited Thailand or in the future. The findings suggest that Thailand is appropriate for family vacations and multipurpose destination contains which have many natural and built tourists attraction include many popular sea beaches, Buddhist temples, and many other natural and environmental attractions. This study further confirms that Chinese tourists consider Thailand a destination due to available information and good services, and pleasant and restful atmosphere. However, marketing communication (MC) activities are required to create the perception of potential tourists by which tourists may feel safe while visiting. Further, it is suggested by researchers that, Thailand should provide food culture attractions, give tourists value for their money and allow tourists to communicate easily with the friendly local people.

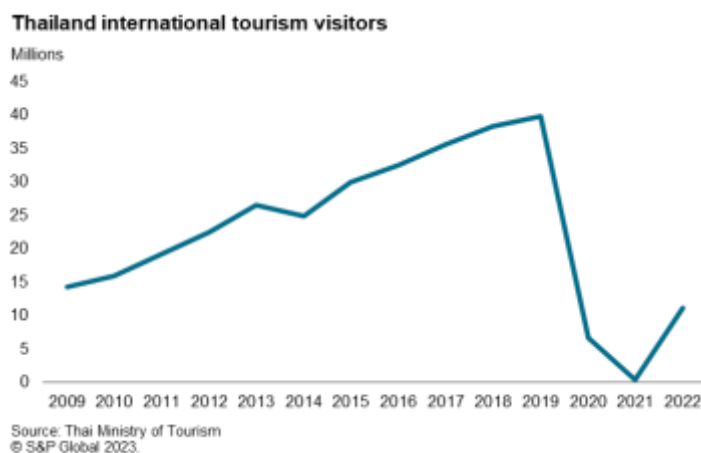
Keywords: *Thailand, Destination Marketing, Chinese Tourists in Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has severely caused a significant impact on the tourism industry [12]. Before the pandemic, 20% of Thailand's economy was driven by the tourism industry but¹ during the period of ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, tourism revenue dropped for 70% (KResearch, 2021). The pandemic resulted in a complete cessation of tourism and considerable reduction in economic activity. Thailand's economy decreased by 6.1% in 2020, the biggest fall since Asian financial crisis. The tourism industry, which accounts approximately a fifth of Thailand GDP and 20% of jobs, has been hit particularly hard by travel restriction (Irina V. Onyusheva Patthamaphon Chompuprapet Thawarat Panusukul Preeyaporn Lekwatthanarot, 2022).

The number of international tourist arrivals reached 11.15 million in 2022, compared with just 430,000 in 2021. However, the total number of visits was still far below the 2019 peak of 39.8 million, indicating considerable scope for further rapid growth in the tourism sector during 2023 as reported by S&P Global Market Intelligence 2023. As COVID-19 border

restrictions were gradually relaxed in Thailand and also in many of Thailand's largest tourism source countries during 2022, international tourism showed a significant improvement during the second half of the year as reported by S and P Global (2023).



Source: <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/thailands-tourism-sector-drives-economic-recovery-mar23.html>

Thailand has long been one of the most popular destinations among Chinese tourists which is making China the top source of international tourists and an economic pillar for the country.

In 2019, the income from foreign tourists accounted for 12 percent of Thailand's GDP. Among the 39.8 million foreign tourists who entered Thailand that year, nearly 11 million or 27 percent were Chinese tourists, according to the Globaltimes reported in 2023. This number was significantly reduced during the international travel has been badly hit by the COVID epidemic. Towards the end of 2022, China's government have made a complete and abrupt reversal of all COVID-prevention measures. According to China-Briefing 2023, one of China's largest online travel agencies (OTAs), reported that Southeast Asia was high on the list for Chinese travelers, with Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Bali being the most popular destinations.

New Normal Tourism (NNT) has become a new protocol of practical instructions for all tourism stakeholders involved in the Covid-19 pandemic (Joao, 2021; Brouder et al., 2020). Hence, NNT was established in preventing the spreading of Covid-19 infection and enhanced the procedures of tourism and healthy standards on cleanliness, sanitation and other possible factors to prevent the Covid-19 infection.

However, yet to our knowledge, there were few studies to investigate how COVID-19 changes people's travel behaviors, especially during the unique recovery period of the tourism industry in China. In this study, we hypothesized that COVID-19 significantly changes people's travel behaviors and willingness to travel due to high perceived risks. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the perceived image of Thailand from the Chinese tourist' perspective after travel restrictions were lifted by the government of China. Due to the facts that China considered is one of the potential tourist segments for the Thailand tourism industry. Once the managers of the tourism destinations know the prospective of their destinations, it might not be challenging for them to give high-quality tourist experience for potential consumers. It is more likely be true when destination image is assessed by from the potential tourist's perspectives and made some efforts to the best match expectations with reality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism Destination Image

Destination image is said to be one of the significant factors in attracting new tourists to the destination. Thus, marketing organizations and academic researchers in the tourism sector are thriving to make a better understanding on how an individual selects and evaluate the image and its nature in tourism sector. To discover the image and nature of a certain image, there are two major components of destination image includes traditional cognitive and the recent cognitive/affective component. These two components must be reviewed individually to see and measure destination image in a clearer way. The cognitive evaluation of tourism destination describes as the potential consumers' opinions or understanding regarding the characteristics and attributes of the destinations. On the other hand, the affective evaluation denotes is referring to consumers' feeling or attachments toward destinations. Previous study (Prayag, Disegna, Cohen, & Yan, 2015) extensively analyzed destination image by considering cognitive components as the main brand image. Nonetheless, several scholars have tried to propose the components of affective and cognitive regarding destination image the emotional aspects (affective) have overlooked by the previous researchers (F. Li, Wen, & Ying, 2018).

For example, King & Gardiner, (2015) proposed a model with three components includes cogitative, affective, and global that influence image development. Precisely, destination image is considered to be part of attitudinal construct comprising of individual's mental beliefs and feelings, and global impression about the destination (Miah, Vu, Gammack, & McGrath, 2017). Similarly, a study by Ma, Qu, Hsiao, & Jin, 2015 found the cognitive and affective image is positively related with tourism destination image. Another study also shown that tourism destination image consists of a combination of several aspects such as cognitive (knowledge), affective (feeling), and behavioral (visiting) components (Wu & Pearce, 2016). Later, Yang, Pan, Evans, & Lv, (2015) proposed a model about future tourists to have cognitive and affective evaluation of a destination ought be measured together to examine destination image.

Role of Destination Image in Tourism Marketing

In the destination marketing, destination image has received increasing attention as it influences tourists' perception, satisfaction and consequent behavior (Tse, 2015). An image of a potential tourism destination is crucial for marketing as image influences tourists' visit and revisit behavior. Images, based on the evaluation or selection process, connect motivations and destination selection; and images are prerequisite for successful marketing strategy. Moreover, when the selection is first squeezed down from a large number of probabilities to just a few ones, then images play a major role. Various destination image studies have agreed on its significance for the success of marketing program, the tourists' destination choice, visit and repeat visit decisions. Strong images, or brands, impact on people' views of specific places. Jin & Wang, (2016) developed a model where he shows how the set of potential destinations is narrowed down from a large opportunity set, through the perceived opportunity set (destinations familiar to the potential tourist) to the final holiday selection.

Ji, Li, & Hsu, (2016) reviewed twenty-three frequently cited studies of destination image and found that the role and influence of destination image in tourists' buying behavior and satisfaction were the most studied themes. Tourism destination image comprise the various attractions and characteristics that gives a total impression about the destination. Destination image comprise of number of different characteristics such as holistic, functional, psychological, common, and unique components (Fu, Cai, & Lehto, 2017).

As a result, creating an appropriate image of the tourist destination may control its ability to impress and make repeat visitors (Cheng et al., 2017). Selling a destination' image is the beginning of effective tourism marketing (Jørgensen et al., 2017) as the image of a place held by tourists play a crucial role for taking travel decision (William et al., 2015). For

capturing tourists and maintaining the market competitiveness of a place, marketers need to create a competitive market position and favorable destination cognitions in the target market segments. In brief, for attaining effective marketing of destinations, tourism marketers must try to generate a meaningful and suitable image that would be believable, understandable, unique, valid, and impressive (Wang, Wu, Luo, & Lu, 2017).

Thailand as a Tourism Destination

According to past researches studied by Mishra (2013), Wenghang and Tungzong (2016), Wadecharoen (2016) and Tourist Authority of Thailand (2015), they pointed out that Thailand's tourist destinations are influenced by these 6 factors as Place of Tourist Attraction, Infrastructure, Accommodation and Food, Environment and Atmosphere, Hygiene and Sanitation and Promotion and Marketing. Therefore, this paper developed a research model which aims to enable in-depth analysis of destination image, influence of these factors. Thailand has long been one of the most popular destinations among Chinese tourists, making China the top source of international tourists and an economic pillar for the country. Therefore, to provide high-quality tourist experiences and promote a destination effectively, Thai Tourism Authority needs to know the prospects think of the specific destination. Thus, the perceived image of Thailand was investigated from the perspective of Chinese tourists. Thailand is one of top tourism countries which is highly depending on the tourism sector that contribute to greater gross domestic product growth (GDP), generate employment, earn huge amount of foreign exchange, and enhance the payments (Hughes, Wang & Shu, 2015). There is no doubt that, tourism industry is very competitive, more specifically in the context of Thailand. In order to handle such competition, tourism authorities and stakeholders must understand the influential factors on destination image perception. It is significant to the industry as destination image is playing very vital role on attracting new tourists and to become a tourist destination from economic point of view (Wei, Meng, & Zhang, 2017). The existing stiff competition among tourism destinations has highlighted the critical role of the image possessed by actual visitors and also it is needed for public managers (X. R. Li, 2016). Indeed, the importance of destination image in tourists' travel behavior has enhanced academic research in the area (Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017).

In addition, some tourism player countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia are the greater competitor for Thailand. For example, Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand are the "stars" in the Asian tourism destination brands (Huang & Lu, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The underlying objective of this present study is to identify how the Chinese tourists perceive Thailand as a tourism destination post Covid 19. The cross-sectional survey carried out with newly developed instrument. The scales used to measure each construct were based on the previous studies were conducted on destination image, specifically, by Mishra (2013), Weng hang and Tung zong (2016), Wadecharoen (2016) and Tourist Authority of Thailand (2015). Before the main data collection, pilot study was conducted for the internal reliability of the instrument. Convenience sampling used to distribute the questionnaire among Chinese people in China those have visited Thailand or will visit Thailand in the future. First part of the questionnaire comprises the personal and demographic profile, while second part of the questionnaire includes the perceived image of Thailand. Respondents were asked to answer the questionnaire with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7).

The following six factors were adapted from the previous studies identified for the common attributes included Place of Tourist Attraction (6 items), Infrastructure (5 items), Accommodation and Food (6 items), Environment and Atmosphere (7 items), Hygiene and Sanitation (6 items) adopting the New Normal Tourism (NNT) questions in the Covid-19

pandemic and Promotion and Marketing (6 items).

Convenience sampling technique used to collect data during the time of 20th May to 30th July 2023. A total of 380 respondents were approached for data collection in the four main cities comprised of Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Pattaya and Phuket. A reliability test was conducted among variables to check internal consistency of the items. As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach Alpha values among the variables are in considerable range which demonstrates high consistency of the measurements for further analysis.

Table 1: Results of Reliability Test

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach Alpha
Place of Tourist Attraction	6	0.749
Infrastructure	5	0.787
Accommodation and Food	6	0.801
Environment and Atmosphere	7	0.836
Hygiene and Sanitation	6	0.911
Promotion and Marketing	6	0.855

As shown in Table 1 Cronbach Alpha ranged from 0.749 to 0.911 which is considered in very good range. Thus, it can be concluded that, the internal consistency among the measurement of the variables shows considerable consistency and fitted for further analysis of the study (Nunnally, 1978).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Upon completion of the data collection, the data was screened for violations of underlying assumptions based on descriptive statistics, using SPSS 26. Table 2 discusses the demographic profile of the respondents. In terms of gender, more than half of the respondents are male (54.7%) and female are 45.3%. That means, in terms of gender, distribution of the questionnaire is almost equally maintained by the researchers. Marital status was divided into two categories, single and married, as per this study concerned, 139 (36.6) of the respondents were single and 63.4% of them were married.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic	Frequency	%	
Gender	Male	174	45.3
	Female	206	54.7
	Total	380	100%
Marital Status	Single	138	63.4
	Married	242	36.6
	Total	380	100%
Occupation	Private sector	119	31.3
	Government Sector	150	39.5
	Students	40	10.5
	Self-employed	44	11.6
	Housewife	14	3.7
	Unemployed	13	3.4
	Total	380	100%
Education	Primary school and lower	13	3.4
	Secondary school	83	21.8
	Certificate	20	5.3
	Diploma	82	21.6
	Bachelor's degree	154	40.5
Master degree	22	5.8	

PhD degree	6	1.6
Total	380	100%

Descriptive Statistics for Thailand Image as a Tourism Destination

While looking into the standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis as shown in Table 3, the values are very much consisted with as suggested for data distribution of the study. As far standard deviation of the variables is concerned, the values are above 1 for each variable. Place of Tourist Attraction consist of highest mean values of the variables which is (5.608) followed by Hygiene and Sanitation (5.519), Environment and Atmosphere (5.497), Accommodation and Food (5.442), Promotion and Marketing (5.100), and Infrastructure (4.6658). By considering the shopping facilities in Thailand, the tourists from China also put importance of doing the shopping while visiting Thailand as their second main priority. Nonetheless, other facilities available in Thailand, given priority by the Chinese tourists such as local hospitality, night life and cultural environment in Thailand.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the variables

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Place of Tourist Attraction	380	5.608	1.236	-1.136	0.125	1.328	0.250
Hygiene and Sanitation	380	5.519	1.195	-1.047	0.125	1.792	0.250
Accommodation and Food	380	5.442	1.202	-1.058	0.125	1.786	0.250
Environment and Atmosphere	380	5.497	1.307	-1.180	0.125	1.626	0.250
Infrastructure	380	4.666	1.493	-0.773	0.125	0.113	0.250
Promotion and Marketing	380	5.100	1.035	-0.546	0.125	1.001	0.250

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the influence of Place of Tourist Attraction, Infrastructure, Accommodation and Food, Environment/atmosphere, Hygiene and Sanitation and Promotion and Marketing on perceived overall image of Thailand as a tourist's destination for Chinese tourists.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis for the most Influential Factor towards Destination Image

Variable	Coefficients	Standard Error	t-value	p value
Place of Tourist Attraction	0.262	0.032	7.996	0.000
Infrastructure	0.142	0.029	-1.453	0.146
Accommodation and Food	0.176	0.027	2.813	0.005
Environment and Atmosphere	0.071	0.027	2.674	0.008
Hygiene and Sanitation	0.082	0.026	-3.226	0.001
Promotion and Marketing	0.312	0.034	9.176	0.000

R² = 0.217; F = 39.858
Sig. = 0.000

*Dependent variable: Perceived Overall Image

As shown in Table 4, the independent variables significantly influencing overall perceived image of Thailand (p value=.000). However, while looking into the influence separately, Place of Tourist Attraction (p value=.000), Accommodation and Food (p value= .005), Environment and Atmosphere (p value= .008), Hygiene and Sanitation (p value= .001) and Promotion and Marketing (p value= .000) on perceived overall image, except Infrastructure (p value= .146). Therefore, it can be concluded that, while measuring the perceived overall image of Thailand among Chinese tourists, these factors are really important to look at by the authorities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to predict travel intention and willingness to support a destination of prospect Chinese tourists to visit Thailand after the post COVID-19 era. The results of this study showed the high predictive power of model for respondents with past experience to visit Thailand. The results showed significant effects of Place of Tourist Attraction, Accommodation and Food, Environment/atmosphere, Hygiene and Sanitation and Promotion and Marketing on perceived overall image of Thailand as a tourist's destination for Chinese tourists. One possible explanation for this is that those with prior knowledge of a destination gained through a prior visit have certain trust and this minimizes uncertainty and the perception of risk in future travel (Han & Hyun, 2015). This is consistent with the findings of other studies which found that repeat visitors tended to have a stronger intention to return and word-of-mouth communications (Li et al., 2008).

It is obvious and important that to improve the perception of the potential tourists about Thailand as tourism destination, greater attention, focus, and investment require in the marketing communications (MCs) activities. There are several other attributes such as leisure and tourists' attractions, cultural and shopping attractions, nightlife entertainments, local hospitality have greater influential impacts to the formulation of overall image of Thailand as a tourism. The tourism authorities must take note out of this, as shopping facilities perhaps not up to the standard in accordance with Chinese tourists' expectation. Suggestions added by researchers in order to attract new tourists in Thailand. It is obvious that marketers should introduce what the destination offers for its tourists. There is no doubt that strategic planning and marketing decision of tourism provisions need the knowledge of features that influence type of trips and destination choice and forecast short-term and long-term tourism flows. To enhance precision international tourism marketing in China, Chinese tourists take inspiration from influencers across social media platforms, such as TikTok (Douyin), Xiaohongshu, as well as the traditional super app WeChat, The Ministry of Tourism and Sports need to invest more in precision marketing particularly through engaging local partners (for example, travel websites and recommendation platforms), which would brand awareness

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