



Measuring Post-Crisis Destination Image of Thailand as a MICE Destination

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Abstract

The study aims to assess how stakeholders in the MICE industry view and perceive Thailand as a MICE destination, and determine the impacts of the recent political crises and other factors on the image of Thailand. The study employed the qualitative approach. Fifteen in-depth interviews with managers in hotels, event organisers and Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) were conducted to capture attributes and their feelings towards Thailand a destination for MICE market. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and content analysed. The results identify a number of changing images of Thailand. Overall, Thailand is now perceived as a politically unstable destination largely shaped by several incidents particularly the politically-related events such as the closure of Suvarnabhumi Airport in 2008 and the political riots in 2010. Organisers have been more reluctant to select the country as the final destination for their events and rather prefer other destinations to Thailand. Provided that Thailand was selected, the organisers would wait to ensure that no major incident would occur before making the deposit. Hence, the study provides further empirical evidence to support that destination images measured at one point tend to differ after the occurrence of major incidents in the destinations. However, the study also gives insights into the current positive positioning of Thailand as a MICE destination after time of many crises which indicate the strengths of Thailand. Implications for relevant tourism agencies and future research are also discussed.

Keywords: *Crisis, Destination image, MICE, Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

Rationale for the research

Thailand has made considerable efforts in promoting its tourism industry and their attempts have been very successful as Thailand is now known as one of the top tourist destinations for both leisure tourism and business tourism (Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau or TCEB, 2010). Thailand has become the emerging destination for business tourism, namely meeting, incentive, convention and exhibition (MICE) market with great potential to be one of the leaders in Asia Pacific



region. Thailand have many positive attributes that help putting the country as the world's leading MICE destinations which include the country's natural beauty, culture and traditions, hospitality of people, and high standard of services and facilities (Vimolsiri, 2010).

However, over the recent years the growth of this industry has been impeded largely because of negative image of the country as a consequence of the continuing crisis within the country (Vimolsiri, 2010; Custom Asia, 2008). The effects of crisis on destination image and level of confidence tourists have about a particular destination are likely to be greater among MICE visitors due to the market's sensitivity and vulnerability to crisis than other sectors of tourism industry (Campiranon, 2006). Organising companies are reluctant to have their employees travelling to a destination that is perceived to be unsafe as they have to be liable for any loss and suffering if their employees are injured during the trip to unsafe destination (Campiranon, 2006).

Hence, to guarantee the success of Thailand as a MICE destination, relevant destination organizations such as TCEB has to realize that by examining the current image potential tourists hold about a particular destination it provides a basis for the next logical actions needed to rectify current destination image problems (Avraham, 2004; Ryan and Gu, 2008). Thus, it is the objective of the current study to assess the current images of Thailand as a MICE destination and determine the impacts of political crisis and other factors on the image of Thailand.

Destination image: Definitions and Importance

Destination image has also been the subject of much attention in tourism literature as Pike (2002) supported with the evidence of over 142 destination image papers published during 1973-2000. Several definitions of destination images have been proposed. One of the first definitions was proposed by Hunt (1971 cited in Gallarza, Saura and Garcia, 2002) who defined it as the impressions that a person holds about a place. Other definitions tend to focus on the multi-dimensionality of the concept (Gartner, 1996; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). One of the widely cited definitions is by Gartner (1996, p. 457) who defined destination image to be "made up of three distinctively different but hierarchical interrelated components: cognitive, affective and conative". Cognitive component is conceptualized as the sum of beliefs and attitudes of the destination attributes, while affective component is related to the feelings and values an individual places on destination based on travel benefits or motives for which they seek (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Lastly, conative component is referred to the action and decision of an individual of whether or not to travel to a particular destination (Gartner, 1996).

Destination image is regarded as one of the important factors in ensuring the long term viability of any tourist destination since destination image or a mental



picture of the destination can exercise great influence on consumer decision-making process in many ways (Beerli and Martin, 2004). For instance, prior to visiting the destination tourists are more likely to choose a destination with strong, positive and recognizable images. In addition, negative images are also thought to be obstacles to the future of a destination as tourists may be reluctant to visit or return to a destination with a negative image.

Effects of crisis on destination image

Destination images are very dynamic and may subject to change; particularly destination images measured at one point tend to differ after the occurrence of major incidents in the destinations (Avraham, 2004; Beirman, 2002; Kim and Morrison, 2005). In a positive way, mega events like Olympic Games and World Cup can help to positively shape how people perceive the host destinations as a consequence of the extensive media coverage about the destination before and during the event (Allen, O'Toole, Harris and McDonnell, 2008). Nevertheless, the occurrence of unfavorable incidents or crisis in the destinations could lead to the formation of negative destination images (Kim and Morrison, 2005, Avraham, 2004; Beirman, 2002).

From tourism-related perspectives, crisis may include deteriorating destination's physical conditions, on-going crime rate, and high unemployment rate (Beirman, 2002). However, with greater impact images of the destination tend to be negatively affected following such major crises like terrorist attacks, epidemics, assaults on tourists and natural disasters (Beirman, 2002; Avraham, 2004). Similarly, Ichinosawa (2006) argued that although direct impacts of any crisis may be more noticeable than non-direct (secondary), some secondary impacts like negative image can have more prolonged effects on the affected destination than direct impacts.

Among these crises, political crisis can cause longer and far-reaching negative impacts on the marketing of any destination and the image of the destinations (Beirman, 2002). Unlike natural crisis, continued political problems in the destination tend to receive much more media attention than the cities would normally receive before the crisis, and the extensive media coverage of the situations could last for a long period. Consequently, these often result in much considerable impacts on how people perceive the image of destination. For example, the growth of tourism industry in Thailand has recently been impeded by numerous recent crises, particularly the political crises (Tansuwannarat, 2009).

However, research has also been found that the effects of crisis on the destination may be short-lived when there are effective marketing and communication strategies (Hughes, 2008). For example, Pizam and Smith (2000 cited by Hughes, 2008) found that the effects on tourism were short-lived.



Thailand as MICE destination

The popularity of Asia region as hosting destination for MICE market has been noted in the recent years (Rogers, 2003; Campiranon, 2006). The Union of International Associations (UIA) reports the larger size of market share for MICE sector during 2007-2009 (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Market share of MICE market by continent

Continent	2007	2008	2009
Europe	53.7%	52.73%	54.1%
America	19.2%	17.83%	15.7%
Asia	19.9%	21.67%	23.1%
Africa	3.9%	4.70%	4.9%
Australasia/Pacific	3.2%	3.07%	2.4%

Source: UIA (2007, 2008, 2009)

As reported in Table 1, the number of international meeting hosted in Asia region continually rose from 19.9, 21.67 and 23.1 percent in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively. The growth of the international meeting market in Asia is a good indicator for the growth of this market for this region. Among the countries in the Asia region, Thailand is recognised as one of the top tourist destinations welcoming more than 14 million visitors annually (Vimolsiri, 2010).

Particularly, the country has also acknowledged the importance of business tourism, commonly known as MICE industry. Over the past two decades, the industry has received much government support in promoting this form of tourism (TCEB, 2010). The market has witnessed rapid growth in terms of improvement with better purposely-built convention centers, new hotels, and other improved supporting infrastructure (TCEB 2010). TCEB has also been established since 2004 to act like a marketing agency in charge of promotion and development of Thailand's MICE industry to compete with strong competition of global MICE market.

As the meeting and incentive industry is highly sensitive to crises and safety and security of a destination is one of the most important factors in the site selection process, the growth of MICE industry in Thailand has been recently hindered by series of crisis (Roger, 2003; Campiranon, 2006; Meetings & Conventions magazine, 2002; Custom Asia 2008). In fact, it is the country's political conflicts which have caused such considerable impacts that almost wiped out the country's MICE industry. According to TCEB (2008), number of MICE visitors was on a decline from 857,224 in 2007 to 727, 723 in 2008 as a result of continued political conflicts in the country. Immediately after the media coverage of the crisis there were massive cancellations and postponing of the events in Bangkok forcing TCEB (2010) to revise their expected



MICE visitors from 780, 000 to 551,800 representing 11 percent lower than initially forecasted (TCEB, 2010).

The importance of restoring destination image after crisis has been acknowledged by Thai government and TCEB (Vimolsiri, 2010; TCEB, 2010). In response to the crisis, image revival is considered a crucial part in stimulating the country's tourism industry as TCEB and Thai government are extensively focusing on restoring positive image and portraying the image of Thailand and Bangkok as "business as usual" (TCEB, 2010). This is because it is widely accepted that safety and security is one of the most important factors organizers often take into consideration when selecting a particular destination for the next event (Clark and McCleary, 1995; Crouch and Ritchie, 1998; Custom Asia, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

During July- August 2011, the study was qualitatively conducted. In-depth personal interviews and telephone interviews were carried out with fifteen informants. These informants were selected using the following criteria:

- Those are the experts, key staff members of TCEB, major MICE operators (professional conference organizers, hotels, convention centers, travel agencies)
- They must have experience working in MICE-related industry at least 5 years to ensure that their working experiences cover major crises that have occurred in Thailand during the past 5 years.

The main purpose of the interview was to assess attributes determining the perceived destination image of Thailand as a MICE destination and examine the impacts of political crisis on the perceived image of Thailand as a MICE destination. Telephone interviews were conducted with the informants in Bangkok, while personal interviews took place in Phuket.

A total of fifteen Interviews were conducted and on average, the interviews lasted about 1 hour.

The procedures as suggested by Flanagan (1954 cited in Callan, 1998) were followed in regard to how to conduct the interviews:

- Make a statement about the purpose of the study
- Explain why the informants were chosen to comment
- Ensure the informants on the anonymity and confidentiality of the data
- Follow the interview questions



- Allow the informants to do most of the talking and avoid asking leading questions
- Ask follow-up questions to ensure that a comprehensive and detailed account has been given

The questions were mainly used to elicit the list of destination image attributes that organizers think, perceive of Thailand as a MICE destination before and during the major political crisis, and the current period of time.

Qualitative data analysis

Interviews were tape-recorded, fully transcribed and checked for accuracy. All transcripts were content analysed using NVivo Software Program. Qualitative data were analysed using the predefined coding approach as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The predefined coding involved using a provisional start list of the codes which were the destination image attributes compiled by Beerli and Martin (2004, p.625) and other relevant literature in destination image. Initially, two coders independently coded a sample of the interview transcripts using the list of the destination image attributes by Beerli and Martin (2004, p.625). During the process of the initial coding, new attributes were allowed to be added into the coding schemes.

In order to ensure the reliability of the codings, procedures were undertaken to ensure its inter-judge reliability. Results of the initial analysis were later compared between the two coders and the final list of coding were discussed and developed which were used as general guidelines for the subsequent data analysis. As a result, new destination attributes were added to the coding scheme developed by Beerli and Martin (2004, p. 625). The final destination image attributes consist of 10 dimensions. They are Natural resources, General infrastructure, Tourist infrastructure, Tourist leisure and recreation, Culture, history and art, Political and economic factors, Natural environment, Social environment, Atmosphere of the place, and Professionalism of service.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section reports the relative importance of these factors. Table 2 reports the frequency of each factor being coded.



Destination image	Frequency of being coded
Political stability	32
Prices	29
Professionalism of service and high quality of service	28
Safety	20
Hospitality and friendliness of people	8
Ease of access to the destination	8
Capacity of convention facilities	7
Attractiveness of the cities	5
Availability of flight services	4
Entertainment and sporting activities	4

Table 2. Important destination image attributes

As shown in Table 2, the most frequently mentioned destination image attributes of Thailand as a MICE destination is *Political stability* as it was mentioned in 32 times.

Other destination image attributes were frequently mentioned are *Prices* and *Professionalism of service and high quality of service*, being mentioned 29 and 28 times in the interviews respectively. Another frequently mentioned image attribute was *Safety* being coded 20 times.

The following section describes in detail the key findings relating to the top five important destination image attributes.

1) Political stability

The findings of the study revealed that destination images of Thailand are very dynamic and shaped by the occurrence of major incidents in the destinations, particularly the political-related incidents. This is similar to the studies by Avraham (2004), Beirman (2002), and Kim and Morrison (2005). As one informant reported:

“Overall, because of the politics many people have different feeling towards Thailand. They do not have 100% confidence as compared to 3 years ago. The stress, bad memories are still in their mind. If nothing happens or things remain stable for a while, they would feel better and have more positive feeling.”

The study also supports that major recent crisis in Thailand have transformed Thailand from confidence to crisis since many organisers from overseas feel that there is no stability and many uncertainty within the country. This point is confirmed by one informant:



“When the political situations are unpredictable, other things like business investment, tourism, MICE tourism are all affected.”

As a result, Thailand has been perceived as a risky destination for MICE event and lost their competitive advantage to other competing destinations and organisers have to wait before selecting Thailand to ensure that no major crisis would occur at the time of their event. As informants reported:

“When the Prime Minister dissolved the parliament, request for proposal stopped coming, confirmation was delayed, and some who were deciding to choose Phuket eventually chose to move to another destination.”

“Many clients feel that Thailand is no longer suitable for MICE events due to the country’s political situations which are worsening every year.....They then prefer other destinations that appear to be more stable. For example, one client said Thailand is very risky. ”

Based on the study, the effect of political stability has not been limited within Bangkok where major crisis took place; the effect has extended to other destinations within the country. This is similar to the ‘neighboring effect’ when tourists often form their risk perceptions to one area to the whole region (Hollier, 1991). The findings revealed that many clients assumed that the whole country were affected and no longer safe to visit. It is particularly the case for Chiang Mai, one of the country’s MICE cities as one informant reported:

“During 2010, some events were moved to other countries as they were not confidence with the safety. Chaing Mai was not even considered and organizers only looked at Pattaya, HuaHin and Phuket”.

2) Prices

The findings indicated that Thailand is highly perceived as a value for money destination. The cost of organising an event in Thailand is reasonable as compared to other competing destinations such as Singapore and Hong Kong. This point is in line with the study of Custom Asia (2008) which reported value for money as one of the most significant strengths of Thailand. Some informants pointed out that costs of accommodation, food and other expenses were some of the deciding factors when organisers choose Thailand as the destination.

“It is about the cost. Thailand is value for money when compared to Hong Kong and Singapore. They have to pay more if choose Hong Kong or Singapore but Thailand has many things to offer, value for money plus culture”.



“We can offer many things, meetings during the day and other activities at night time. Patong is very exciting. Hotel room rate is not as expensive as charged in other foreign countries. They pay only US 100 for a room in Thailand but US 300-600 in other countries”.

3) *Professionalism of service and high quality of service*

Based on the findings, another important positive image of Thailand is the level of professionalism and high quality of service of those who work in Thailand’s MICE industry. Organisers felt very confident that Thai MICE operators are very dependable, creative and highly professional as the informants said:

“They were amazed that we could organise their event in 4 weeks. They were impressed with our services because we could run the event even when we had only a few weeks to plan. They know our potential. Just last week we organised the event of 600 participants and we had only 4 weeks to do so. They are also very happy to come back and bring more businesses to us”.

“They like us because of our creativity. We can propose creative ideas for their opening ceremony and other social nights”.

The findings also pointed out that Thailand is perceived strongly in the aspect of service minded and Thai hospitality. Many organisers reported to overlook other minor drawbacks of Thailand and prefer Thailand over the rival destinations because of their reliable, dependable services and Thai hospitality. The point is illustrated by the following quotes.

“Our strength is our service mind. Our technological aspects may not be as good as Singapore but events need good human resources and Thailand is second to none in that perspective”.

“Our hospitality and service mind is really our strength; Singapore and Hong Kong have tried to copy us but failed. Also, a lot of people working in hotels in Singapore and Hong Kong are not really native, so their services may not always be that good”.

“We have everything, good destination, and a variety of activities and most important of all is our high quality of service”.



“They know that they will be well taking care if choose Thailand. Working for MICE is not easy; you are often pressured by organisers. So, you need to have a very good human skill”.

4) Safety

The study found safety as the negative aspect of Thailand which is similar to the study by Custom Asia (2008). The current study demonstrates the strong effect of the closure of Suvarnabhumi Airport on the formation of negative destination image of Thailand. As a result of the airport closure, Thailand is perceived to be an unsafe and highly risky destination to host an event since good accessibility to destinations appears to be the basic requirement one expects from the host destination (Clark and McCleary, 1995; Crouch and Ritchie, 1998). The point is demonstrated by the quotes below.

“The closure of the airport has caused such impacts that almost ruined the country’s reputation and image. They think that airports must be safe and have no problem. But now they do not have that confidence over our safety”.

“Safety is the key thing when they choose a destination. One pharmaceutical company has been talking with us for 3 months, now they are not sure about the safety because the Prime Minister has dissolved the parliament. They are not very confident”.

“The closure of the country’s airport has caused such big impacts to our tourism industry that no one really trusts about our safety. Thailand is no longer safe”.

The negative image of the country’s safety has effect on the confidence level organisers feel towards Thailand. This supports the studies by Clark and McCleary (1995) and Crouch and Ritchie (1998) and highlights the importance of safety and security as one of the destination selection factors. Based on the study, organisers are very sensitive to the situations in Thailand and regularly monitor before making their confirmation. The following interviews exemplify the issue.

“The closure of the airport results in bad image of Thailand, especially the image of safety. Now, organizers would monitor news to ensure that Thailand would have no problem during their event before they make the final confirmation”.



“They were very concerned over the issues of safety. They were questioning whether airports would be closed if there was a protest. Large events like some exhibitions need 2-3 years of planning, so it is risky for them to choose Thailand and they needed to monitor news and keep alert of new development before they could make a final confirmation”.

5) *Hospitality and friendliness of people*

The study reports the contradicting results over the images of hospitality and friendliness of people. Some still perceived Thailand as the ‘Land of Smile’, however others argued that Thai people are not as friendly as a result of the conflicts over the politics in the country. Particularly, the study points out that change in the image of Thai hospitality is now more obvious and many people no longer view Thailand as a hospitality destination which is contradictory to the findings of Custom Asia (2008). As one informant reported:

“They said it is unbelievable that Thailand and Thai people have changed so much since the political crisis. They feel that we are no longer a land of smile. Where is Thai hospitality? It seems our culture has changed so much. There is no unity in Thai culture. Everything is now separated by the colors, red or yellow.”

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The study provides further empirical evidence to support that destination images measured at one point tend to differ after the occurrence of major incidents in the destinations. Clearly, following the political incidents like the closure of Suvarnabhumi Airport in 2008 and the political riots in 2010, the image of Thailand as a MICE destination has changed in many perspectives, particularly in the aspect of safety. Now, Thailand is now perceived to be a politically unstable destination largely shaped by several incidents particularly the politically-related events. The organizers now question the country’ political stability and may opt to wait for further affirmation that there would be no major problem before selecting Thailand as the final choice. Provided that Thailand was selected, the organizers would wait to ensure that no major incident would occur before making the deposit. Hence, it is important that TCEB and Thai government should continue to convey a message of Thailand and Bangkok being stable and back on business to restore and portray more favorable image of the country.

The study also highlights that political instability has affected the image of the whole country beyond the locality where major crisis took place. This is in line with to



theHollier's 'neighboring effect' (1991) when tourists often form their risk perceptions to one area to the whole region. Thus, it is very imperative that TCEB and other relevant organizations are aware of this and take appropriate actions to rectify these problems as continual negative image may lead to the stereotyping of a destination which would be very difficult to change (Avraham, 2004).

On a positive side, the study also gave insights into the current positive positioning of Thailand as a MICE destination after time of many crises which indicate the strengths of Thailand. The hospitality of people, professionalism of service, and being a destination that can offer a variety of activities are among positive destination image attributes of Thailand. This further supports that the effects of negative incidents on the destination image may be short-lived given that appropriate marketing actions are carried out.

Although the study has highlighted key noticeable changes of the image of Thailand as a MICE destination, there is much more that needs further research. Firstly, as the study focused exclusively on the perceptions of organizers and hotels, future research may focus on examining the image of the country from the perspectives of other stakeholders, particularly those of attendees. In addition, different approach may test the relationship between effects of crisis on the perceived destination images.

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