

**IMAGE OF THAILAND AS AN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION AND EXHIBITION
DESTINATION**

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify differences in the image of Thailand as perceived by convention attendees to determine what, if any, repercussions they have had on the image of Thailand as an international convention and exhibition destination before and after political instability. The finding suggests that the image of Thailand as a safe destination decreases significantly after the political instability. Once a crisis occurs, it is avoidable that the destination is perceived negatively by both show owners and convention attendees. Consequently, it is difficult to position Thailand as a leading convention and exhibition destination in Southeast Asia when the political instability still exists. The best strategy in destination marketing is to prevent a pre-crisis to develop into a crisis.

Key words: destination image, political instability, convention, exhibition destination, Thailand.

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INTRODUCTION

Thailand is a desirable travel destination because of its pleasant weather and wide variety of entertainment and attractions (Yau and Chan, 1990). Likewise, as compared to other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand has been perceived as an appealing destination in terms of its traditional culture, friendly people, and tourist safety (Calantone, Benedetto, Hakanm, and Bojanic, 1989). According to the image study by Rittichainuwat, Qu, and Brown (2001), Thailand has a positive image as a good value for money destination with rich culture, beautiful nature, and historical attractions. Among these images, Thailand's image of good value for money carried the greatest weight on tourists' repeat visitation (Rittichainuwat, Qu, and Leong, 2003). Likewise, the image of Thailand as a good value for money destination in terms of food, shopping, and a variety of things to do, have motivated both first-time and repeat travelers to visit Thailand (Rittichainuwat, Qu, and Mongkhonvanit, 2007). Nonetheless, Thailand's image is discolored by pollution, prostitution, deterioration of some tourist attractions (Rittichainuwat et al. 2007), and political instability. More specifically, the disruption of the 14th ASEAN leaders' summit at PEACH convention center in Pattaya, Thailand on April 11, 2009 and the closures of Thailand's international airports in 2008 tarnished the image of Thailand as an international convention and exhibition destination. These kinds of incidents, perceived as

indications of political instability in Thailand, have caused a major obstacle to developing Thailand as a leading MICE destination in South East Asia. Hence, it is essential to identify differences in the image of Thailand as perceived by convention attendees to determine what, if any, repercussions they have had on the image of Thailand as an international convention and exhibition destination before and after the political instability. The main body of this paper is as follows. First, the literature review on destination image is presented in the next section, followed by methodology and an analysis of the results. The final section presents conclusions and management implications.

DESTINATION IMAGE

Destination image is a sum of attitudes, beliefs, emotions, feelings, and impressions which people possess towards a destination (Crompton, 1977). For the purposes of this study, destination image is defined as the mental picture someone has about a place as the result of the sum of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions that individual holds toward a certain destination. Such an image is derived before and after the visit to the destination. It can be either positive or negative.

Previous studies show that destination image affects the buying behaviors of potential travelers. At the local and international levels, destinations often compete on nothing more than the images held in the minds of potential travelers (Baloglu, and McCleary, 1999). Potential travelers' images of the destination relative to its competitors help marketers to identify strengths and weaknesses of destinations and improve and develop both image perceptions and positioning of their destinations (Calantone, et al, 1989). Therefore, great expense and effort are allocated to improve negative images and create positive ones. The more positive the image of destinations, the more likely that people will go to those places (Rittichainuwat et al.

2003). Due to geographic distance, non- travelers and potential travelers rely on media as their information source to keep them aware of occurrences in distance places and to minimize perceived risks associated with destinations (Castelltort and Mäder in press). However, news reports sometimes exaggerate the situation of a crisis-hit destination by creating an image of a worsen situation than reality (Milo and Yoder 1991; Huang and Min 2002). Such news frightens away potential travelers who do not thoroughly evaluate the message (Huang and Min 2002).

However, previous studies found that once individuals travel to a destination, their negative perception associated with the destination decreases (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). Similarly, previous travel experience with a particular destination also enhances feelings of safety (Pinhey & Inverson, 1994). For example, Chon (1987) found that American tourists change their image towards Korea after a visit. Similarly, Ahmed (1991) found a significant difference between the perceptions of visitors and non-visitors to Utah. In his study, those who had visited Utah were found to have a more favorable image of the state than those who had not.

In the convention context, Oppermann (1996) found that past experience with a destination affects meeting planners' perception in site selection process. For example, those meeting planners who have visited a place tend to have a better image of that destination than those without previous experience. However, Baloglu and Love (2005) argued that there is no relationship between past experiences with perceived destination image. While there is no consensus as to whether or not past experience influences image of convention destinations, a survey was conducted to unveil this query.

METHODOLOGY

The instrument of this study was a self-administered survey questionnaire. The questionnaire contained three sections: travel behavior, the image of Thailand as an international MICE destination, and demographic profiles. The first part of the questionnaire asked about the purpose of the trip and the number of times that the respondents had been to Thailand before and after the political instability. The second part of the questionnaire was questions regarding the image of Thailand as an international convention and exhibition destination. The respondents were asked to indicate the level of agreement with each of the 10 image attributes on a 5-point semantic differential scale that ranged from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).

The data collection took place in two stages. The first data collection occurred in July 2006 at the World University President Annual Conference in Bangkok, Thailand. Out of 300 distributed questionnaires, we received 162 completed questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 54 percent. The second data collection took place at four international conferences, two outside Thailand including the convention and Expo Summit 2009 in Hong Kong and the ApacCHRIE conference in Singapore in May 2009 (one month after the seizure of the venue hosting the ASEAN summit), and the other two conferences were held in Thailand by the Pacific Asia Travel Association in June 2009 and by the Association of Asia Convention and Visitor Bureaus in Bangkok in October 2009. A total of 172 completed questionnaires were returned during the second stage of the data collection.

Regarding the data analysis, first, descriptive statistics was run to report the frequency distribution. Then, Multivariate Analysis of Variance was used to identify differences in the image of Thailand attributes as perceived by show owners and convention attendees before and after the political situation.

RESULTS

The Multivariate Analysis of Variance found no significant difference on the destination image between the show owners and convention attendees. However, the Multivariate Analysis of Variance shows a significant difference on the respondents' perception towards the destination image before and after the political instability on all attributes of the destination image considered together (Wilk's Lambda = 0.58, F= 17.1, p-value < 0.01). As shown in table 1, respondents, who visited Thailand before the political instability, have more positive perceptions on all of the image attributes than those who have never been to Thailand after the political instability. The finding suggests that before the political instability, Thailand was perceived as a leading international convention and exhibition destination in terms of safety and security. This perception is in line with the study by Rittichainuwat et al (2001) reporting that Thailand has a positive image as a safe travel destination. Not surprisingly, however, after the incidents of political unrest, Thailand got the lowest score on safety and security due to perceived risk associated with the political instability. Similar responses can also be found on the market opportunity, support services for a successful convention, ease of access, venue facilities and customs procedure. This implies that the political instability results in a profound negative image in the minds of both show owners and convention attendees.

Table 1 *Perceived Image Before and After Political Instability*

Image attributes	Political Instability	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Thailand Safety and Security	before	4.17	0.72	162
	after	2.80	0.96	56
	Total	3.82	0.99	218
Thailand market opportunity	before	4.17	0.67	162
	after	3.55	0.97	56
	Total	4.01	0.81	218
Thailand Overall Affordability	before	4.15	0.74	162
	after	4.13	0.90	56
	Total	4.14	0.78	218
Thailand Availability of Support Services for a Successful Convention	before	4.20	0.71	162
	after	3.48	0.85	56
	Total	4.02	0.81	218
Thailand Ease of Air Access	before	4.04	0.86	162
	after	3.84	0.97	56
	Total	3.99	0.89	218
Thailand Ease of Local Transportation	before	3.87	0.86	162
	after	3.52	0.89	56
	Total	3.78	0.88	218
Thailand People's Foreign Language Skills	before	3.60	0.91	162
	after	3.43	0.91	56
	Total	3.56	0.91	218
Thailand Exhibition Facilities	before	4.16	0.70	162
	after	3.64	0.96	56
	Total	4.03	0.81	218
Thailand Meeting Room Facilities	before	4.23	0.68	162
	after	3.64	0.77	56
	Total	4.08	0.75	218
Thailand Customs Procedure	before	3.95	0.86	162
	after	3.45	0.97	56
	Total	3.82	0.92	218

Although Thailand has had a positive image in terms of overall affordability during pre and post political instability, most people would not trade off their safety with affordability. Therefore, it is necessary to first boost attendees' confidence in destination safety than use price to lure them because people do not travel if the destination is unsafe (Henderson 1999, Sönmez 1998; Sönmez and Grafe 1998; Rittichainuwat and Chakarborty 2009).

CONCLUSION

This study aims to identify differences in the image of Thailand as perceived by convention attendees to determine what, if any, repercussions they have had on the image of Thailand as an international convention and exhibition destination before and after political instability. The result shows no significant difference on destination image between show owners and convention attendees. This result is in accord with the study by Baloglu and Love (2005) indicating that past experience does not affect destination image.

However, the finding found a significant difference on destination image among respondents before and after the political instability. As can be seen in this study, the image of Thailand as a safe destination decreases significantly after the political instability. This finding suggests that once a crisis occurs, it is unavoidable that the crisis-hit destination is perceived negatively by both show owners and convention attendees. The best strategy in destination marketing is to prevent a pre-crisis to develop into a crisis. Consequently, it is difficult to position Thailand as a leading convention and exhibition destination in Southeast Asia when the political instability still exists. This is because a tarnished image caused by riots and a state of emergency result in reluctance of inexperienced attendees to attend a convention and exhibition at a crisis-hit MICE destinations. Likewise, safety-conscious

organizers cancel planned conventions even though the price may be very favorable, since safety and security are integral components of the MICE industry. Though giving incentives such as discounts and value-added extras were frequently used to stimulate demand for travel to recovering destinations (Henderson 1999; Pizam 2002), such incentives are unable to motivate convention attendees unless destinations are perceived as safe, because most people would not trade off their safety with discounts (Henderson 1999, Sönmez 1998; Sönmez and Grafe 1998; Rittichainuwat and Chakarborty 2009).

Obviously, it would be better if there were no incidents that create perceptions of political instability, since safety is the primary consideration of any international convention site selection criteria. In particular, chronic political instability has a more profound negative impact on convention and exhibition growth than natural disaster and financial crisis. While convention attendees perceive a natural disaster as an unavoidable “act of God” that might arise at anytime and anywhere, political instability accompanied by riots is perceived as a potential chronic crisis. Hence, it is more costly to boost MICE income during political instability, especially among first time attendees whose negative image tends to be formed by news reports and travel advisories.

Nevertheless, the crisis creates a short-term negative impact to a convention and exhibition destination. If the place does not experience another crisis, the negative images will soon fade out. In contrast, if there are other crises at the same convention and exhibition destination, such crises create a chronic negative image to the destination (Pizam 2002).

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