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Backpacker perceptions of Thailand's image: Positives, problems and potential opportunities.

Backpacker travel is recognised as an important segment of the international tourism business. Within the competitive South East Asian market, Thailand is strongly challenged by its neighbours to hold and grow its market share of global backpackers. However, despite their importance, there is limited understanding concerning the image of Thailand as perceived by the backpacker population. This research note examines the perception of Thailand as a backpacking destination from the perspective of Australian citizens. The analysis is based on data collected via an online survey conducted in 2016. Several positive attributes of Thailand, as perceived by the Australian citizens, are found to be typically appealing to backpackers. However, some negative issues of Thailand are also exposed as ongoing in the minds of international visitors, and specifically the respondents of Australia. The paper discusses how the most problematic issues (sex and drugs) may be dealt. It suggests embracing problems rather than attempting to dispel them may be a way forward. This may resolve problems and differentiate Thailand from its competitors

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Introduction

Destination image is acknowledged as a crucial factor of a destination's promotional strategy (Atadil, Sirakaya-Turk & Decrop, 2017). For potential tourists, such images are pull factors that draw them towards (Chew & Jahari, 2014) or push factors that divert them away from a destination (Cavlek, 2002). For past visitors, the post-visit image of a particular destination helps to determine their intention to revisit and/or the nature of their recommendations to others (Ali, Ryu, & Hussain, 2016). Destination image, therefore, can significantly influence the success or failure of tourist destinations (Avraham, 2016).

Thailand, as a long-established international backpacker destination (Brzózka, 2012), acknowledges it is increasingly facing competition from other countries both within and outside of Asia. For a country like Thailand to hold, and grow, its market share of backpackers, particularly as traveller expectations and behaviour continually changes, it needs solid and contemporary data regarding how people perceive it as a holiday destination. Although studies on destination image are extensive, relatively few have examined backpacker tourism in the context of destination image. Those that have focused on backpackers are becoming rather dated and mostly focus on Australia and its image (i.e., Hanlan & Kelly, 2005; Murphy, 1999; Ross, 1993). Inversely, this research note assesses Thailand's image as a backpacking destination from the Australian perspective. Australia is the highest economic contributor among Thailand's international tourist market, including backpackers (Tourism Economic Review, 2015).

Despite the significance of backpacker tourism and its contribution to the economies of, among others, less developed countries (Hampton, 2013), Thailand's image as a backpacking destination has been largely overlooked by researchers. Though several studies investigated the image of Thailand in terms of its international tourism destination status (e.g. Rittichainuwat, Qu, & Brown, 2001; Hoang 2013; Nuttavuthisit 2007) these did not focus of

the backpacker population, despite its recognition as a distinct segment of the tourist population (Wattanacharoensil & Schuckert, 2016). This note, in part, seeks to close this gap by making Thailand the destination and Australian backpackers as the preceptors of its image. The findings can assist the Thai national tourism ministry, and their destination marketers, in designing independent marketing strategies to position Thailand, among its competitors, according to specific markets.

Methodology

The data on which this research note is based was collected via an online survey conducted in 2016. It included 19 standardized destination attributes, as shown in Table 1 (see Murphy, 1999; Henkel, Henkel, Agrusa, Agrusa & Tanner, 2006; Rittichainuwat, Qu & Brown, 2001; Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Participants aged 18 years and above were selected through the services of the panel provider (see Quintal, Lee & Soutar, 2010; Chen, Weiler & Young, 2015), Survey Sampling International (SSI). A total of 491 usable responses were used for analysis (Yamane, 1973).

About two-thirds of respondents were female (59.7%), aged between 26 and 35 years (44.0%), and with an undergraduate degree, or higher, as their highest education level (49.6%). Approximately one-third of respondents had previously visited Thailand while backpacking while the rest had never been in Thailand. Differences and similarities between these two populations have been discussed in Sroypetch, Caldicott, and Carr (2018).

Data analysis, results, and discussion

The findings represented in Table 1 show the image of Thailand perceived by the Australian sample. Overall, the results indicate that Thailand is positively perceived by the respondents. They perceive it as a cheap destination for travel that has a variety of natural and cultural attractions, nightlife entertainment, recreational and adventurous activities, and

provides good bargain shopping. Such findings support the studies of Henkel et al. (2006), and Tapachai and Waryszak (2000). These positively perceived attributes are typically pursued by backpackers (Elsrud, 2001). Conversely, Thailand is perceived most negatively on the attributes of accessibility to sexual services for tourists (sex tourism) and drugs, sanitation and cleanliness, safety, public language barriers, and public transport facilities. While the latter four are arguably unattractive to all tourists, the first two attributes are attractive to a not insignificant number of tourists, including at least some backpackers (Nguyen, 2010).

Table 1. Perceptions of Thailand as a backpacking destination

Perception of Thailand	Australian citizens (n=491)	
	Mean	**SD**
Cheap travel cost	4.08	.793
A variety of natural attractions	4.06	.736
A variety of nightlife entertainment	4.02	.879
A variety of cultural attractions	3.99	.790
A variety of recreational activities	3.98	.791
A variety of adventurous activities	3.97	.794
Good bargain shopping	3.97	.814
Interesting customs and culture	3.96	.730
A variety of historical attractions	3.87	.801
Friendly locals	3.82	.803
A variety of cuisines	3.75	.865
Good quality accommodations	3.53	.879
Simple immigration procedures	3.52	.834
Few language barriers	3.36	.910
Efficient public transportation	3.16	.939
A safe travel record	3.14	1.047
High standards for sanitation and cleanliness	3.04	1.074
A low availability of drugs	2.91	1.192
A low availability of sex tourism	2.68	1.207

Mean score calculated from a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 3=neutral, 5=strongly agree)

Thailand has marketed itself as a destination with abundant Buddhist temples, a unique culture, spectacular islands, exotic wildlife, a fascinating history, and friendly people (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2003-2016), and the standard argument is that the country

needs to eliminate all its negative images. Specifically, those regarding issues of drugs and sex (Hoang, 2013), standards of cleanliness, the ability of the locals to communicate in English (Nuttavuthisit, 2007), and tourists' safety (World Economic Forum, 2015). With respect to transport systems, a notable contradiction was recorded compared to the study by Buathong (2014). In Buathong's work, international visitors to Thailand had positive perceptions concerning its transportation system.

Conclusions

This note reveals the positive and negative perceptions of Thailand as a backpacking destination. The enhanced understanding of Australian visitors' perceptions, as revealed through this study, can aid attempts by the Thai Ministry to rectify misconceptions that Australian's may hold of the destination. Tailoring promotional imagery for specific target markets can reposition Thailand within the Australian market. At the same time, opportunities exist for industry marketers and governmental authorities to project further favourably perceived images of Thailand, particularly those considered as unique (among its competitors) selling features (Wang & Quyen, 2011). It may be suggested, that while partially an issue of perception and image, the results of this paper indicate, there are logistical issues that Thailand needs to deal with to help improve its backpacker tourism image. In particular, work is needed to improve sanitation and cleanliness, and public transport facilities, while at the same time reducing language barriers for international visitors.

With specific reference to sex and drugs, Thailand has long been associated with these value-laden issues (Carr, 2016; Cohen, 1972) in the minds of some international travellers (Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Taylor, 2017), a point reinforced in this study. Yet in the eyes of the conservative Thai society, these are anti-social vices (Chia, 2016; Windle, 2016). The

problem is that it is never easy to dispel such negative images that are often associated with the concept of deviant or anti-social behaviour (Critcher, Hughes, Petley & Rohloff, 2013).

Perhaps rather than attempting to fight an image that is perceived to be negative, Thailand should seek to embrace parts of its 'negative' image, recognising the popularity of sex and drugs amongst the international market. This is not to say that the Thai authorities should embrace the human rights abuses and welfare concerns that are associated with the provision of sex and drugs for sale. Rather, it is to suggest that by embracing these industries it may be possible to better regulate them and in the process mitigate against human rights abuses while at the same time benefiting from these industries. In effect, what is being suggested is that by embracing these 'negative' images we may turn them into positive realities and images, morphing deviant, dark leisure activities into socially acceptable ones. Evidence of the possibilities exists with New Zealand's legalisation of prostitution (Weitzer, 2010) and the legalisation of cannabis in Colorado, USA (See Keul & Eisenhauer, 2018). It is recognised though that such an approach is highly contentious (see Carr, 2016) concerning the issue of sex) but this should not, arguably, prevent possibilities from being explored, especially where other options have already been tried with limited success. If successful, such an approach has the potential to help to differentiate Thailand from its competitors in a socially acceptable manner.

This note contributes to the destination image literature through its engagement with backpackers' perceptions of a national destination. It highlights both the positive and negative perceptions of Thailand, a well-established backpacking destination. It also suggests how the Thai government, and potentially other public bodies and national governments faced with similar issues, may tackle the most problematic issues regarding the country's image from the perspective of international travellers in general and particularly Australian backpackers.

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