Does COVID-free Matter in the Post COVID-19 Era? The Tourist's Perspective on Thailand's Wellness Tourism Destination Brand: A Structural Equation Model Study

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บทคัดย่อ

อุตสาหกรรมการท่องเที่ยวของประเทศไทยได้รับผลกระทบอย่างหนักจากการแพร่ระบาดของเชื้อโคโรน่าไวรัสหรือที่เรียกกันว่า โควิด-19 ส่งผลให้ผลิตภัณฑ์มวลรวมของไทยมีมูลค่าลดลง และมีอัตราการว่างงานภายในประเทศที่พุ่งสูงขึ้น เพื่อกระตุ้นเศรษฐกิจเมื่อพ้นภาวะวิกฤตของการแพร่ระบาด ผู้วิจัยเล็งเห็นถึงโอกาสจากความนิยมที่เพิ่มสูงขึ้นของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพ (Wellness Tourism) ซึ่งสอดคล้องกับศักยภาพที่โดดเด่นในอุตสาหกรรมเชิงสุขภาพของไทย จึงเป็นที่มาของงานวิจัย "ความสำคัญของการสื่อสารเกี่ยวกับสถานการณ์ปลอดโควิด ในช่วงหลังการแพร่ระบาดของโควิด-19 ผ่านการศึกษามุมมองของนักท่องเที่ยวที่มีต่อตราสถานที่ท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพของประเทศไทยด้วยการวิเคราะห์สมการโครงสร้าง" ชิ้นนี้ ทั้งนี้ งานวิจัยนี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ โดยการสำรวจนักท่องเที่ยวต่างชาติจำนวน 408 คนที่มาเที่ยวประเทศไทยด้วยวัตถุประสงค์เชิงสุขภาพ และวิเคราะห์ด้วยแบบจำลองสมการโครงสร้างเพื่อตรวจสอบปัจจัยต่าง ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพในประเทศไทย ซึ่งรวมถึงการรับรู้ตราสถานที่ท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพ ทัศนคติ

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ต่อตราสถานที่ท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพของไทย ปัจจัยที่เกี่ยวข้องกับโควิด-19 และการเลือกประเทศไทยเป็นจุดหมายปลายทางของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพ ผลการศึกษาพบว่าในปัจจุบันนักท่องเที่ยวมีทัศนคติต่อประเทศไทยระดับดีเยี่ยมในมิติการสะท้อน (Reflection) อัตลักษณ์ตนเอง (Self-Image) และวัฒนธรรม (Culture) และยังมีส่วนที่ควรปรับปรุงในด้านกายภาพ (Physique) บุคลิกภาพ (Personality) และความสัมพันธ์ (Relationship) เพื่อตอบสนองความคาดหวังของนักท่องเที่ยว และเพิ่มขีดความสามารถในการแข่งขันในตลาดการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพ

นอกจากนี้ งานวิจัยยังพบว่า ในการสื่อสารหลังภาวะวิกฤตสำหรับวิกฤตการณ์โควิด-19 การเน้นย้ำเกี่ยวกับการแพร่ระบาดและการคลี่คลายของสถานการณ์ไม่ส่งผลต่อการเลือกประเทศไทยเป็นสถานที่ท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพ ดังนั้น การเน้นย้ำความโดดเด่นในด้านวัฒนธรรมและบริการอื่น ๆ ที่สร้างประสบการณ์ด้านการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพที่ครอบคลุมน่าจะตอบสนองความต้องการและดึงดูดนักท่องเที่ยวได้มากกว่า

คำสำคัญ หลังวิกฤตการณ์โควิด-19, การสื่อสารหลังภาวะวิกฤต, การท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพ, การสร้างตราสถานที่, ประเทศไทย

Abstract

Thailand’s tourism industry, which was growing constantly before the hit of COVID-19 pandemic, suffered a significant downturn resulting in the contraction in GDP and a rise in unemployment. However, with the risen popularity in wellness tourism and the country’s strengths in wellness industry, this current research entitled “Does COVID-free Matter in the Post COVID-19 Era? The Tourist’s Perspective on Thailand’s Wellness Tourism Destination Brand: A Structural Equation Model Study” investigated the communication message for Thailand’s wellness tourism destination branding in the context of the post-COVID-19 era. The research utilized quantitative method, surveyed 408 international tourists who visited Thailand with wellness purpose, and analyzed with a structural equation model to examine various factors related to wellness tourism in Thailand, including the perception of the wellness tourism destination brand, attitude towards Thailand’s wellness tourism brand, COVID-19 related factors, and the selection of Thailand as a wellness destination. The study found that Thailand performed exceptionally well in the reflection, self-image, and culture facets, indicating strong potential in these areas due to its rich cultural heritage and local wisdom that resonated well with tourists. However, improvements are needed in the physique, personality, and relationship facets to meet tourists’ expectations and enhance competitiveness in the wellness tourism market.

Regarding post-crisis communication, explicitly mentioning the COVID-19 crisis may not be necessary. Instead, focusing on the cultural and other aspects to meet tourists' expectations is crucial to restore Thailand's reputation as a wellness tourism destination.

Keywords: Post-COVID-19, Post-crisis communication, Wellness Tourism, Destination Branding, Thailand

Introduction

Over the last decade, the world has encountered several major health crises designated as Public Health Emergencies of International Concern (PHIEC). Notably, the spreading of coronavirus, as known as the COVID-19 pandemic, stands out as the most critical global health calamity of the century, posing unprecedented challenges to humankind since the Second World War and bringing the entire world to a standstill (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, has had far-reaching impacts on various sectors, with the tourism industry being one of the hardest hits. As the pandemic prompted governments worldwide to implement strict measures to prevent the airborne illness's spread, including closely monitoring and halting transportation and closing international borders to visitors and tourists, national lockdown policies were adopted in almost every country, particularly among nations with high COVID-19 case numbers such as the United States, Italy, and France. These measures led to a significant decline in international travel and tourism (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Colmekcioglu et al., 2022).

The United Nations World Tourism Organization reported that in the second quarter of 2020, 100 percent of global destinations introduced travel restrictions for the first time ever (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2020; Simon, 2020). This widespread impact of COVID-19 significantly jeopardized the tourism sector, which is a major source of earnings and employment in many developed and developing countries, including Thailand which known for its vibrant tourism industry. According to the pandemic, Thailand experienced a severe blow to its economy as tourism declined. Before the hit, Thailand's tourism sector was thriving, with record-breaking tourist arrivals in 2019, reaching 39.3 million and generating THB 1.93 trillion in revenue (Languepin, 2020). Tourism had become a vital lifeline for the country's economy, and the decline caused a dramatic contraction in GDP and an increase in the country's unemployment rate.

In 2020 – 2021 with an effort to revive the economy and stimulate domestic tourism, the Thai government implemented the "Rao Tiew Duay Kan", or Travel Together, campaign, providing subsidies for domestic travelers (Post Reporters, 2020). However, despite these efforts, the situation for tourism-related businesses had not fully recovered, as new waves of COVID-19 continued to impact the country. Later, with the development and distribution of vaccines, travel restrictions were eased, and many borders were reopened for both business and leisure purposes. The research from McKinsey and Company suggested that the COVID-19 situation would eventually end with the majority of the population vaccinated and herd immunity achieved (Charumilind et al., 2020). As the world slowly transitioned towards a post-COVID-19 era, destinations like Thailand needed to prepare strategic plans to mount a quick comeback and attract international tourists once the global situation fully recovered. Regarding the country's strength, wellness tourism has presented a significant opportunity for Thailand's tourism industry to revive and recover in the post-COVID-19 era. Before the pandemic, Thailand's medical and wellness tourism had been growing steadily, attracting international wellness tourists, particularly from China, Malaysia, South Korea, Japan, and Laos. The ability to offer high-quality services at more reasonable costs compared to competitors in other countries, coupled with the international reputation of attentive and world-class medical facilities, contributed to the phenomenal growth of Thailand's wellness tourism (Thailand Medical Hub of Department of Health Service Support, 2019). Also, as the world transitions into the post-COVID-19 era, wellness tourism holds even greater potential as travelers increasingly prioritize health and well-being.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of health prevention has become more critical for travelers. Wellness tourism, which covers the concept of pursuing holistic health, has the potential to align with the changing preferences of tourists seeking emotional relaxation and overall well-being, rather than solely physical benefits (Hashemi et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2004; Weiler & Hall, 1992). Given the significance of wellness tourism in Thailand, research by Kongtaveesawas et al. (2022) has explored the fundamental attributes of the wellness tourism experience framework within the Thailand context. Their findings indicate that the mental and environmental dimensions (ME) are the dominant determinants of experiential outcomes, and these dimensions work together dynamically within the Thailand context. This suggests that tourists visiting Thailand for wellness experiences are particularly influenced by mental well-being and the environmental aspects of

their stay. With its established reputation and wide range of wellness offerings, Thailand is well-positioned to capitalize on this opportunity.

However, the post-COVID-19 era will likely see a shift in tourists' behavior and preferences due to the pandemic's impact on their perceptions and attitudes towards travel. Research have shown that tourists will prioritize health and safety, seek reassurances from destinations and travel providers, opt for less crowded destinations, and become more conscious of environmental concerns (Balakrishnan Nair & Sinha, 2020; Chebli & Foued, 2020; Colmekcioglu et al., 2022). To cater to these changing preferences, destination branding becomes vital in differentiating a destination, enhancing its image, and influencing tourists' behavior. As destination branding involves conveying a consistent set of messages to target audiences, achieved through various communication channels, including advertising, public relations, and digital marketing, Thailand, like many other competitive destinations worldwide, must effectively plan the strong message to communicate its destination brand to stand out and attract tourists.

As Thailand endeavors to revive its tourism sector and establish itself as a sought-after destination in the post-COVID-19 era, comprehending the massage design to communicate effectively in this new landscape becomes paramount. While various research studies have explored tourists' changes in behaviors and preferences (Balakrishnan Nair & Sinha, 2020; Chebli & Foued, 2020; Colmekcioglu et al., 2022), there is a noticeable gap in research concerning the aspect of post-crisis communication. This study aims to fill this gap and delve into the communication message for Thailand's wellness destination branding, taking into account the changes in tourists' perceptions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study are expected to contribute valuable insights that can inform destination brand communication in the new normal of post-COVID-19 tourism.

Research Questions

1. What should be the post COVID-19 wellness tourism destination Branding Message for attracting prospective tourists to choose Thailand as the destination?

2. Does the massage on COVID-19 should be addressed in post-COVID-19 communication?

Literature Review

Destination Brand Identity Concept

One widely used model in destination branding analysis is Kapferer's brand identity prism, which consists of six facets that need to be identified to develop a brand identity for a product or service. Kapferer (2008) argues that a strong brand identity can lead to loyal consumers and advocacy. Berrozpe et al. (2017) adapted Kapferer's brand identity prism for use in destination branding. The six facets in the destination brand identity prism are as follows:

Physique: This facet represents the prominent characteristics of the destination. It includes tangible aspects such as tourist infrastructures, natural resources, activities, and recreational services. Physique is what sets the destination apart from others with similar physical attributes.

Personality: The personality facet describes the particular characteristics that configure the destination's brand. It is the way the brand builds a character by interacting with its customers. Using a known individual as the spokesperson of the brand can help create a differentiating character for the destination in comparison to its competitors.

Relationship: The relationship facet details how the brand acts towards its target market. It represents the way the brand contributes to the consumer's emotions and experiences. The potential connection established with the tourist destination is influenced by the tourist experiences inspired by the place.

Culture: The culture of a brand represents the values it stands for and the ethos it embodies. In the context of tourist destinations, this facet includes the destination's values, symbolic concepts, human, cultural, and historical heritage. Elements such as local history, myths, legends, archeological remains, monuments, folklore, and customs are considered.

Reflection: This facet represents the way the target market wishes to be perceived. It is not necessarily how they are but how they want to be seen. The reflection is the image that the brand portrays in its communications, such as advertisements. For a destination brand, it is essential to identify the desired "tourist type" representation, considering sociodemographic characteristics, as well as psychographic, motivational, and behavioral attributes.

Self-image: The self-image facet characterizes the inner mirror of the target audience, indicating how the brand makes them think about themselves. In the context of destination branding, self-image refers to the image that tourists have of

themselves when visiting the destination. It involves exploring whether the self-representation of tourists visiting the destination differs from that of tourists choosing other destinations.

This research employed the destination brand identity prism as a tool for analyzing and developing Thailand's wellness tourism destination brand. It provided a comprehensive framework to understand & communicate the unique characteristics, values, and relationships associated with the destination, which are crucial for effective destination branding efforts. (Berrozpe et al., 2017; Kapferer, 2008).

Post-Crisis Communication Concept

Post-crisis communication in the tourism industry has been a critical aspect in managing the effects of various crises, such as terrorist attacks, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters. Henderson (2007) highlights the interconnectedness of health and tourism, with health being a major concern in destination choice and visitor satisfaction. During health crises, tourists are likely to avoid destinations perceived as risky. Crises in tourism have been categorized into various domains, and dealing with health crises requires specific recovery strategies.

Campiranon (2009) identifies five key stages of crisis management: identification of threats, crisis management planning, crisis response, crisis recovery, and learning from the crisis. Recovery, in particular, becomes a crucial aspect after a health pandemic. Efforts in educating internal organizations and tourists about health-safety are essential, with customers being fully informed and advised to take precautions and purchase travel insurance. Collaboration between medical workers, health educators, and the travel trade is important in delivering advice and guidelines through travel agents. However, the industry sometimes hesitates to provide health warnings due to fear of scaring away customers. Effective communication strategies play a vital role in crisis management, not only during the emergency but also in the recovery stage to inform the public and other industry sectors about safety matters.

To recover reputation after a crisis, Griffin (2014) emphasizes the importance of proving that performance is once again meeting expectations. Avraham (2006) suggests two sets of strategies to deal with a destination's negative image: those that focus on changing the objective reality and those that focus on symbolic changes. Strategies to change objective reality include tackling the issue, staging events to give visitors a chance to experience the destination personally, hosting

special events, fostering local pride, and acknowledging the negative image. On the other hand, strategies dealing with symbolic changes rely on public relations and advertising, such as employing a counter-messages offensive, changing a destination's name, or creating a new logo or slogan.

Overall, post-crisis communication in the tourism industry is a complex and crucial process that requires careful planning and consideration of various strategies. Effective communication can aid in repairing destination reputations, regaining trust, and attracting tourists back after a crisis. Selecting the appropriate strategies depends on the degree of transformation needed and the consensus among relevant organizations Avraham and Ketter (2017). The successful implementation of post-crisis communication efforts can play a significant role in the recovery and revitalization of the tourism industry.

Research Methodology

The present research utilized a quantitative approach, employing surveys to assess international tourists' perceptions of wellness tourism destinations, their attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness tourism destination, their consideration of COVID-19 related factors, and their destination selection preferences.

Research Population and Sampling

The research focused on international tourists who embarked on wellness trips after the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and travel limitations related to the pandemic. The sample was specifically limited to international tourists who visited Thailand in October 2022, coinciding with the reopening of borders for leisure tourism.

To determine the appropriate sample size, the study considered the number of observed variables in the hypothetical model, which was 14. This number was then multiplied by a factor of 10-20, resulting in a recommended sample size of 210-420 individuals. A sample size of 280 (20 times the number of observed variables) was ultimately chosen for this study, with the condition that the participants must be international tourists traveling for wellness purposes.

However, during the field survey, a total of 408 questionnaires were collected, surpassing the initially intended sample size.

Research Instrument

The research data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire, focusing on international tourists who undertook wellness trips after the easing of

COVID-19 restrictions and travel limitations. The study included two parts in each questionnaire: the screening questionnaire and the main questionnaire.

The screening questionnaire aimed to ascertain the respondents' intention to travel for wellness purposes after the COVID-19 pandemic and their understanding of wellness tourism as a preventive health trip. It was essential to ensure that respondents were not confusing wellness tourism with medical tourism found in previous studies.

After the screening process, the main questionnaire was divided into five sub-parts as follows.

• Part one gathered demographic information about the respondents, including gender, age, highest educational level, occupation, monthly income, and country of origin, based on the U.S.'s Standard Occupational Classification.

• Part two consisted of questions about the respondents' perceptions towards wellness tourism destination brand attributes, including physique, personality, culture, relationship, self-image, and reflection. Five-point Likert scales were used to measure the level of agreement on each statement.

• Similarly, Part three included questions about the respondents' attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness tourism destination, rooted in the statements from the perception in part two. Five-point Likert scales were used for measurement.

• Part four focused on COVID-19 related factors that might influence the intention to travel to Thailand after the pandemic. Five-point Likert scales were used for measurement.

• Lastly, Part five surveyed the respondents' intention to select Thailand as a wellness tourism destination after the ease of COVID-19 restrictions. Five-point Likert scales were used for measurement.

Instrument validity and reliability

To ensure the research instrument's validity, 4 experts, comprising academic experts and professionals, were invited to validate the questionnaire's language use and content. The experts evaluated each question's consistency with the respective variable using the Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC). The IOC was calculated by summing the scores given by the experts for each question and dividing it by the total number of experts. The validity of the questionnaire was found to be between 0.60 and 1.00, indicating that the questionnaire effectively measures the studied variables.

To assess the reliability of the research instrument, a pre-test was conducted among 30 wellness international tourists who were similar to the research sample but not part of it. The data obtained from the pre-test was then analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha to determine the reliability values of each section in the questionnaire.

The results showed that section two, measuring perceptions towards attributes in wellness tourism destination brand, had a reliability value of 0.864. Section three, measuring attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness tourism destination, had a reliability value of 0.889. Section four, measuring COVID-19 related factors, had a reliability value of 0.784, while section five, measuring the likelihood of selecting Thailand as a wellness tourism destination, had a reliability value of 0.799. The overall questionnaire demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.932.

The reliability values of each section were considered acceptable to good, with values ranging from 0.784 to 0.889. A Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.7 or higher is generally deemed acceptable for research purposes, indicating the reliability and consistency of the items in measuring the intended constructs.

The total reliability value of 0.932 for the entire questionnaire further confirms its high reliability and consistency in measuring the constructs of interest. This validates the questionnaire as a reliable tool for drawing meaningful conclusions and making informed decisions based on the research results. Additionally, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to ensure construct validity while constructing the structural equation model and validating both observed and latent variables.

Research Data Analysis

The research data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics with the help of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for Windows. For descriptive analysis, frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviation were utilized to examine and describe the demographic data, perceptions towards wellness tourism destination brand, attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness tourism destination, COVID-19 related factors, and the potential to choose Thailand as a wellness tourism destination. Moreover, inferential statistics were employed to explore the relationships between independent and dependent variables. Pearson's product-moment correlation and multiple regression analysis were utilized to

identify correlations between different variables. The significance level for inferential statistics was set at $p < 0.05$.

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) was applied using the AMOS program, a statistical software. SEM was chosen because it enables the examination of both direct and indirect influences of external latent variables, internal latent variables, and observed variables. The statistical significance level was set at $p < 0.05$, and the reliability value was set at 95%. To assess the congruence of the model, the researcher used the congruence index based on the work of Ngudgratoke (2019). Acceptable fit indices were considered as in Table 1. These fit indices were used to evaluate the adequacy of the structural equation model and determine its appropriateness for explaining the relationships among variables.

Table 1 Evaluation of model fit: Goodness-of-fit Indices

Index	Range	Cutoff criterion
Chi-square	>=0	P >.05
Chi-square/df	>=0	<5
GFI	0-1	>.95
AGFI	0-1	>.95
CFI	0-1	>.95
TLI	0-1	>.95
RMR	>0	
SRMR	>0	<.08
RMSEA	0-1	<.06

Source: Ngudgratoke (2019)

Research Findings

Demographic Data

This study comprised a sample of 408 international tourists, consisting of 214 (52.5%) male, 188 (46.1%) female, and 6 (1.5%) respondents who chose not to disclose their gender. Among the participants, the largest age group was between 21 and 30 years old, accounting for 175 respondents (42.9%), followed by those aged 31 to 40 years with 122 respondents (29.9%), 41 to 50 years with 39 respondents

(9.6%), 51 to 60 years with 29 respondents (7.1%), 18 to 20 years with 25 respondents, and those above 61 years with 18 respondents (4.4%).

Regarding education, the majority of respondents (226, 55.4%) held a college or university degree, while 111 respondents (27.2%) had a graduate school or higher education, 65 respondents (15.9%) completed senior high school, and 6 respondents (1.5%) had junior high school or lower education.

In terms of employment sectors, the largest group was employed in management, business, or finance, comprising 98 respondents (24.0%), followed by education, law, community services, arts, and media with 83 respondents (20.3%), and computer, engineering, and science with 58 respondents (14.2%).

Regarding personal monthly income, the majority of respondents (127, 31.1%) reported having an income exceeding 2,451 USD. The respondents hailed from various countries, with 35 respondents (8.6%) from Russia, 30 respondents (7.4%) from India, and 26 respondents (6.4%) from the UK, among others.

Opinion towards attributes in wellness tourism destination branding

According to the research findings, the participants considered Personality, Culture, Relationship, and Physique as crucial attributes for a wellness destination, with mean scores and standard deviations of 3.79/.75, 3.76/.77, 3.76/.78, and 3.71/.77, respectively. Reflection and Self-Image were perceived at a moderate level, with mean scores of 3.40 and 3.30, and standard deviations of .86 and .87, respectively. Regarding their attitude towards Thailand's wellness destination brand, the tourists displayed a positive perception, with the highest mean score recorded for Culture (3.81/.83). The mean and standard deviation for other attributes were as follows: Reflection (3.79/.83), Self-Image (3.71/.82), Personality (3.64/.73), Physique (3.60/.72), and Relationship (3.57/1.02).

Furthermore, the respondents were well-informed about Thailand's COVID-19 situation and the safety measures implemented, exhibiting a high level of trust with a mean score of 3.74 and a standard deviation of .86.

Lastly, the tourists demonstrated a strong intention to visit and revisit Thailand for wellness purposes, with a high mean score of 3.81 and a standard deviation of .94.

Correlation Coefficient of Manifest Variables

The research revealed that all the observed variables had positive correlations with the relationship size, ranging from .284 to .711, and these correlations were

statistically significant at a level below 0.001. The variables "attitudes towards Thai culture" (ACUL) and "Thai personality" (APER) displayed the strongest correlation with a high coefficient of .711, whereas the weakest correlation was observed between "attitudes towards Thai relationships" (AREL) and "perception of wellness tourism destination reflection" (PREF), with a low coefficient of .284.

Multiple Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Perception as Independent Variable and Attitude as Dependent Variable

The study conducted multiple regression analyses to examine the relationship between perceptions and attitudes towards various attributes of Thailand as a wellness tourism destination, including physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, self-image, and overall wellness brand identity.

The results showed that perceptions towards certain attributes significantly influenced attitudes towards them. For instance, perceptions of physique and self-image attributes had a significant impact on attitudes towards Thailand's physique as a wellness destination. Similarly, perceptions of personality, culture, and self-image attributes significantly influenced attitudes towards Thailand's personality as a wellness destination.

Perceptions towards culture and self-image attributes also had a significant impact on attitudes towards Thailand's relationship as a wellness destination. Moreover, perceptions of reflection attribute significantly influenced attitudes towards Thailand's reflection as a wellness destination.

Furthermore, perceptions of culture and self-image attributes had a strong relationship with attitudes towards Thailand's overall wellness brand identity. Perceptions of physique and personality attributes also had a relationship with attitudes towards the overall wellness brand identity, although to a lesser extent.

In summary, the study demonstrated that various perceptions played a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards different attributes of Thailand as a wellness tourism destination. Perceptions of self-image attribute, in particular, emerged as the most influential predictor across multiple attributes and the overall wellness brand identity. The findings indicated that the perceptions had a positive relationship with attitudes, meaning that as perceptions improved, so did the attitudes towards the wellness tourism destination. These perceptions collectively explained up to 41% of the variance in attitudes towards the overall brand identity.

Multiple Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Perception and Attitude as Independent Variables and COVID-19 Factors as Dependent Variable

The results of a multiple regression analysis examining the relationship between international tourist's perceptions and attitudes towards various aspects of Thailand's COVID-19 response showed that there are four factors that have a significant impact. The most important factor is people's attitude towards the cultural aspect of Thailand as a wellness tourism destination, which had a strong positive influence on COVID-19 related factors (as indicated by a significant level of less than .001 and a beta coefficient score of .283). Additionally, people's attitudes towards Thailand's physique and self-image as a wellness tourism destination also had a positive relationship with COVID-19 related factors, though to a lesser degree (significant level less than .01). However, there was one factor that had a negative impact, which was people's perception of self-image facet in wellness tourism destination brand, with a significant level of less than .05.

Multiple Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Perception, Attitude and COVID-19 Factors as Independent Variables and Destination Selection as Dependent Variable

The results of a multiple regression analysis of tourists' perception, attitude, and COVID-19 related factors towards their selection of Thailand as a wellness destination. The analysis found that there were four variables that had a significant impact on the tourists' decision to choose Thailand as a destination, including their attitude towards the physique attribute of Thailand's wellness tourism destination, attitude towards the relationship attribute of Thailand's wellness tourism destination, attitude towards the self-image attribute of Thailand's wellness tourism destination, and COVID-19 related factors.

Out of these variables, the tourists' attitude towards the physique attribute of Thailand's wellness tourism destination was found to be the strongest predictor of the destination selection, with a significant level of less than .001 and a standard coefficient beta score of .226. Additionally, their attitude towards the relationship and self-image attributes of Thailand's wellness tourism destination also had a significant relationship with the destination selection at a level of less than .001, while COVID-19 related factors had a relationship with destination selection at a significant level of less than 0.01. All of these variables showed a positive value of prediction towards destination selection.

The Analysis of Structural Equation Model

The study used used a structural equation model to analyze the "Perception of Wellness Tourism Destination Brand," "Attitude towards Thailand's Wellness Tourism Destination Brand," "COVID-19 Related Factors," and "Selecting Thailand as Wellness Destination." The study found that the factor loading of all variables in the two models was higher than 0.30, meaning they were significant. The statistical indices (Chi-square, GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI, and RMSEA) showed that the structural equation model is consistent with empirical data. All of the indices met the cutoff criteria (p-value > .05, Chi-square/df < 3, GFI, AGFI, CFI, TLI > .95, and RMSEA < .06), indicating that the model fits the data well.

The analysis of the causal relationships and path coefficients in the structural equation model revealed the results as Table 2.

Table 2 Casual Relationship Patterns and Statistical Values of Latent Variables in the Structural Equation Model

Casual Relationship Pattern	Path Coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	Interpretation
Perception -> Attitude	.728	.057	11.828***	Positive Effect
Perception -> COVID-19	.052	.098	.780	Positive Effect
Perception -> Destination Selection	-.075	.101	-1.181	No Effect
Attitude -> COVID-19	.649	.115	9.003***	Positive Effect
Attitude -> Destination Selection	.767	.143	9.311***	Positive Effect
COVID-19 -> Destination Selection	.053	.056	1.021	Positive Effect

Note: *** At the .001 statistical significance level

R2 value of variables in the model were Attitude = .530, COVID-19 = .474, Destination Selection = .565

The structural equation model analysis revealed several causal relationships and path coefficients between latent variables. It was observed that "Perception of Wellness Tourism Destination Brand" did not significantly impact "Selecting Thailand as Wellness Destination" (path coefficients = -.075, S.E. = .101, and C.R. = -1.181). However, "Perception of Wellness Tourism Destination Brand" directly and significantly impacted "Attitude towards Thailand's Wellness Tourism Destination Brand" (path coefficients = .728, S.E. = .057, and C.R. = 11.828)

Furthermore, "Attitude towards Thailand's Wellness Tourism Destination Brand" had a direct positive effect on "COVID-19 Related Factors" (path coefficients = .649, S.E. = .115, and C.R. = 9.003) and "Selecting Thailand as Wellness Destination" (path coefficients = .767, S.E. = .143, and C.R. = 9.311).

These results indicate that perceptions of the wellness tourism destination brand play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness destination. Moreover, attitudes towards Thailand's wellness brand have a substantial impact on both COVID-19 related factors and the decision to choose Thailand as a wellness tourism destination.

The Developed Structural Equation Model

The results of the structural equation model analysis show the relationships between several latent variables, including "Perception of Wellness Tourism Destination Brand," "Attitude towards Thailand's Wellness Tourism Destination Brand," "COVID-19 Related Factors," and "Selecting Thailand as Wellness Destination" as in Figure 1. From Table 2 and Figure 1, the structural equations can be developed by the following standard values of the model.

Attitude = .728Perception, R2 = .530 ...(1)
(.057)
11.828***

COVID-19 = .052Perception +.649Attitude, R2 = .474 ...(2)
(.098) (.115)
.780 9.003***

Destination Selection = -.075Perception + .767Attitude + .053COVID-19, R2 = .565 ...(3)
(.101) (.143) (.056)
-1.181 9.311*** 1.021

***At the .001 statistical significance level

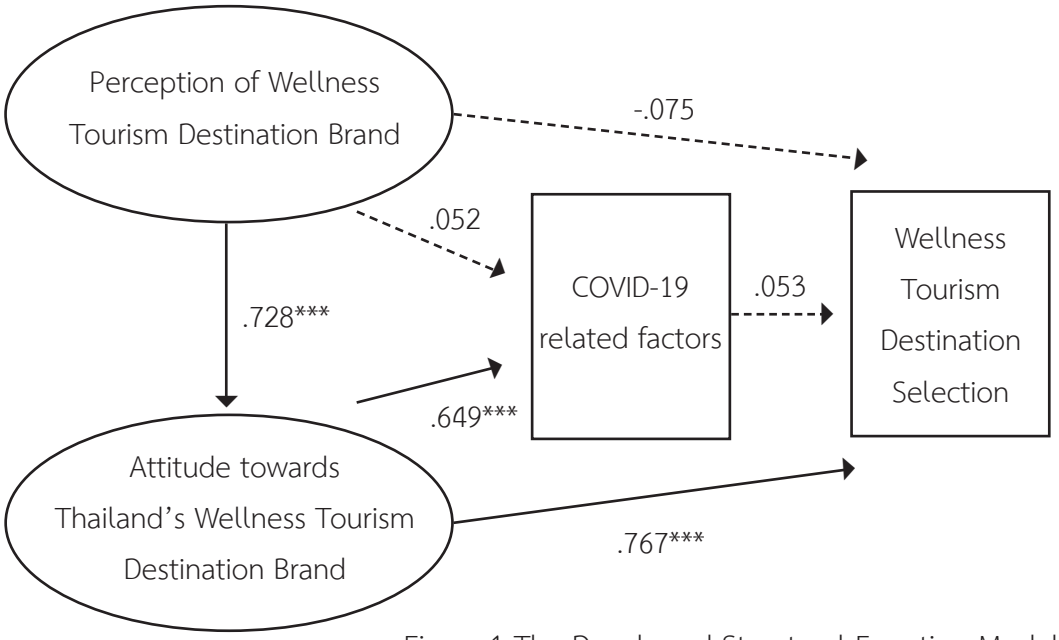


Figure 1 The Developed Structural Equation Model

Note: ——— Statistically Significant at .001, ---------No Statistical Significance

The first equation shows that the perception of wellness tourism destination brand is positively related to attitude towards Thailand's wellness tourism destination brand, and it can explain about 53% of the variation of the latter variable. This means that a one standard deviation increase in perception of the brand leads to a 0.728 standard deviation increase in attitude towards the brand.

The second equation shows that both perception and attitude have a positive effect on COVID-19 related factors, but only attitude has a statistically significant impact. The perception of the brand and attitude explain about 47.4% of the variation of COVID-19 related factors, and a one standard deviation increase in either perception or attitude leads to a corresponding increase in COVID-19 related factors.

The third equation indicates that perception of wellness tourism destination brand does not affect the selection of Thailand as a wellness destination, but attitude towards the brand and COVID-19 related factors do. Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in attitude towards the brand leads to a 0.767 standard deviation increase in destination selection, and a one standard deviation increase in COVID-19 related factors leads to a 0.053 standard deviation increase in destination selection. Overall, the model explains 56.5% of the variation in destination selection.

Discussion and Conclusion

Thailand's Post COVID-19 Wellness Tourism Destination Branding Message

The research findings provide valuable insights into the relationship between tourists' perceptions of wellness tourism destination attributes and their attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness destination. These insights can help destination marketing organizations and stakeholders in the tourism industry to better understand tourists' preferences and expectations, and consequently, devise more effective strategies for branding and promoting wellness tourism in Thailand.

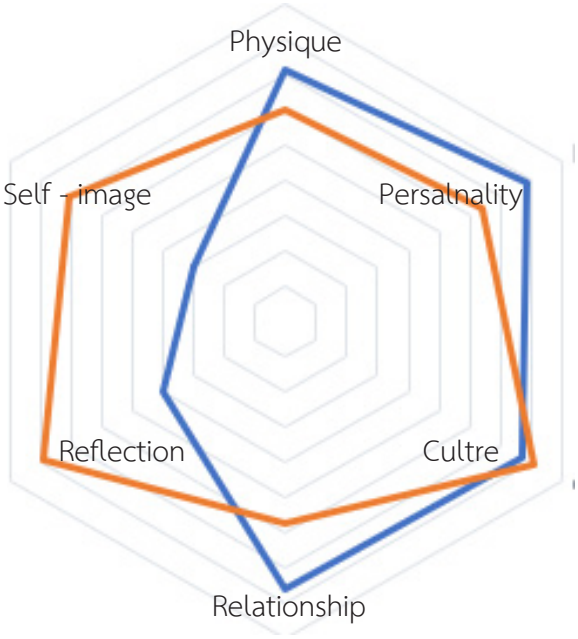


Figure 2 The Comparison Between Perceptions and Attitudes Attribute

Note:

Perceptions towards attributes in wellness tourism destination brand

Attitudes Towards Thailand as Wellness Tourism Destination

One of the key takeaways from the research is the positive correlation between tourists' perceptions of attributes in the wellness tourism destination brand and their attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness destination. This indicates that how tourists perceive the various facets of a wellness destination brand directly influences their overall attitude towards Thailand as a preferred wellness tourism destination. This finding underscores the importance of effectively communicating the unique features and experiences that Thailand can offer in the wellness tourism context. However, the comparison between each attribute revealed some interesting insights, as in figure 2.

The figure 2 indicated that Thailand's performance in the reflection, self-image, and culture facets was found to exceed tourists' expectations, which is highly encouraging. These aspects of Thailand's wellness destination branding were considered highly important by the tourists surveyed. The concept of prestige and luxurious fulfilled the fourth level of needs, which was esteem need, in Maslow's

hierarchy of needs as applied to travel demand (Mokhtarian et al., 2015). Some of the wellness tourists may travel to be perceived as higher status and prestige enhancement. While this component was commonly associated with high-quality and expensive products and services, this current research defined prestigious and luxurious experience based on Li and Cai (2012) and Kim et al. (2017) that it also pertained to the attainment of personal satisfaction, emotional benefits, and happiness. In the context of wellness tourism destination brand positioning, the aspect of luxury had been portrayed through its services, accommodations, and personalized wellness packages, reflecting the social and psychological state that drives individuals to travel. The reflection facet, which involves contemplation of personal well-being and growth during wellness activities in Thailand, resonated well with the respondents, and it aligned with the concept of luxury and prestige in the post-COVID-19 era.

Cultural uniqueness emerged as a standout attribute in the perceptions of wellness tourism destinations among the respondents. This result aligned with Berrozpe et al. (2017) concept which found that every destination offered unique cultural values and they distinguished the country from other destinations. These cultural values can help to attract visitors who are interested in experiencing them and connecting with the destination's culture. Considered the culture facet in the attitude towards Thailand as wellness tourism destination, the research found that this attribute had high impact with the mean score at 3.81, which was the highest mean score among the attributes. This indicated that Thailand had a very high potential in this part. According to Hongjanya (2019), international tourists felt positive towards image of Thailand, especially for cultural uniqueness. The research even defined this as "Thainess," which encompassed a wide range of aspects, including social norms, traditions, beliefs, values, and behaviors that are deeply ingrained in Thai society. The findings inclined with Prommahaa (2015) stated that the image of "Thainess" could be a prominent brand for wellness tourism. The study found that Thailand had significant advantages over other wellness tourism destinations due to its unique cultural characteristics, local wisdom, and superior facilities. Thailand's rich cultural heritage, traditions, and local wisdom offered a distinct value proposition to wellness tourists. This finding highlights the importance of emphasizing Thailand's cultural identity in destination branding efforts, as it aligns with the tourists' preferences for explicit cultural elements and the desire to share their experiences on social media.

While Thailand performed well in certain attributes, there were areas where improvement was needed. The physique, personality, and relationship facets were perceived at a lower level compared to the other attributes, indicating that there is room for enhancement in these areas. Although they were still considered important aspects by the respondents, Thailand should work on strengthening its offerings and experiences related to these facets to meet tourists' expectations and boost its competitiveness in the wellness tourism market.

Focused on the physique facet, even though Kongtaveesawas et al. (2022) suggested that, among PMSE attributes, mental experience played a more important role in wellness tourism experience than physical, spiritual, and environmental experiences, this current research found that the international tourists surveyed had a high level of agreement, with mean score of 3.71, when it came to their perceptions of wellness tourism destinations in relation to the physique facet. This suggests that tourists consider this aspect to be an important factor when evaluating wellness tourism destinations. However, in the section of attitudes towards Thailand as wellness tourism destination, the study also found that while tourists agreed with the physique facet of Thailand as a wellness tourism destination at a high level of agreement, with mean score of 3.60, this score did not reach the level that tourists expected from a wellness tourism destination. In other words, while tourists agreed that the physique aspect was present in Thailand as a wellness destination, it was not as strong as they would have liked it to be. Hence, the study suggests that the physique facet is an important factor in the branding of wellness tourism destinations, but that destinations need to work on strengthening this aspect to meet tourists' expectations.

Regarding the personality facet, according to the research findings, international tourists placed a high level of importance on personality attributes when it came to wellness tourism destinations, giving it a mean score of 3.79. This suggested that tourists believe that the personality of the destination, such as competent, with a reputation for expertise in wellness activities, sincere, with a focus on friendly and welcoming service staff, excited, providing opportunities for daring and adventurous experiences, sophisticated, offering a sense of luxury and glamour to their guests, and hygienic, taking appropriate measures to ensure the highest level of health and safety for their guests, played a significant role in shaping their experience of wellness tourism. Nonetheless, the research found that international tourists believed that Thailand's performance in this area was also high but did not meet their expectations.

While evaluating the attitudes towards Thailand wellness tourism destination brand, tourists rated Thailand's performance in this facet as high, with a mean score of 3.64. This implied that although Thailand performed well in terms of personality attributes, it still had room for improvement in order to meet the expectations of international tourists and maintain its competitiveness as a wellness tourism destination.

Concerning the relationship facet, the research results revealed that international tourists considered the relationship aspect to be highly important, as indicated by a mean score of 3.76. This suggested that they agree with the notion put forth by Mokhtarian et al. (2015), and Kim et al. (2017) that wellness tourists were motivated to improve their physical and mental health, seek to enhance their well-being and renew themselves, and tended to choose destinations based on previous experiences, such as recommendations from friends or online reviews. However, the findings also indicated that even though the tourists believed that Thailand's performance in this area was also high, it did not fully meet their expectations. When evaluating Thailand's wellness tourism destination brand, tourists rated its performance in the relationship aspect as high, with a mean score of 3.57. The findings suggested that improving the relationship aspect of Thailand's wellness tourism could help to enhance the overall wellness tourism experience for international tourists.

Overall, it can be concluded that Thailand was able to meet tourists' expectations in two out of three areas related to wellness destination branding: reflection and self-image. However, these two facets were only considered moderately important in terms of perception. On the other hand, the culture facet exceeded expectations and was regarded as a highly important attribute. While the attitudes towards Thailand's physique, personality, and relationship facets were lower compared to these in the perceptions towards wellness tourism destination, these three facets had been ranked as high level of implication in both the perceptions towards wellness tourism destination and attitudes towards Thailand wellness destination brand.

Based on the research result, the post COVID-19 wellness tourism destination brand positioning should focus on promoting its cultural facet as a unique and outstanding attribute of its wellness tourism destination brand. This aspect of Thailand's wellness tourism was not only the highest-rated in terms of meeting tourists' expectations but was also considered a highly important attribute.

Yet, research found that Thailand's DMOs tend to emphasize implicit cultural characteristics, but the target audience for wellness tourism places a high value on explicit cultural elements, such as the ability to share experiences on social media. Thus, in order to effectively communicate with this audience, it is recommended that DMOs incorporate visible, vivid, obvious, and fashionable Thai cultural elements in their promotional messaging. This may include showcasing cultural practices and traditions in a modern and appealing way that resonates with the target audience's desire for unique and shareable experiences. By doing so, Thailand could leverage its cultural heritage and promote it as a significant part of its wellness tourism offerings to attract more tourists post-COVID-19.

Also, Thailand has the potential to accentuate the opportunity for tourists to reflect on their well-being and personal development while taking part in wellness activities. The country can highlight its ability to provide high-quality and personalized wellness services, accommodations, and packages, while also emphasizing the value for money and affordability of such experiences. Thailand's brand positioning as a wellness destination should be focused on portraying it as a place where tourists can envision themselves as healthy individuals with a lavish lifestyle that is aesthetically pleasing.

The research also shed light on the significance of the relationship between perception and attitude towards various wellness destination attributes. The perception of wellness tourism destination attributes had a direct effect on attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness destination. Notably, the self-image attribute emerged as a strong predictor, indicating that positioning Thailand as a destination where tourists can envision themselves as healthy individuals with a lavish lifestyle is particularly effective in shaping positive attitudes.

In conclusion, the research underscores the importance of aligning tourists' perceptions of wellness destination attributes with their attitudes towards Thailand as a wellness tourism destination. Thailand has shown promising performance in certain facets, such as reflection, self-image, and culture, but there is still room for improvement in other areas, such as physique, personality, and relationship. By effectively positioning itself as a luxurious and culturally unique wellness destination, Thailand can attract more tourists and enhance its appeal in the highly competitive wellness tourism market, especially in the post-COVID-19 era.

The address on COVID-19 in post-crisis communication

According to the results of this study, during global pandemics like COVID-19, explicit mention of the crisis may not be necessary in post-crisis communication efforts. The research utilized a structural equation model to explore factors related to wellness tourism in Thailand, including the perception of the wellness tourism destination brand, the attitude towards Thailand's wellness tourism brand, COVID-19 related factors, and the selection of Thailand as a wellness destination.

The analysis showed that all variables had significant factor loadings, indicating their statistical importance and contribution to the measured latent variables. The model's statistical indices demonstrated a good fit with the data, indicating accurate representation of the relationships between the latent variables.

In terms of causal relationships and path coefficients, it was observed that the perception of the wellness tourism destination brand did not directly influence the selection of Thailand as a wellness destination. However, it did have a positive impact on COVID-19 related factors, though not statistically significant. This suggests that while the perception of the brand may not directly affect destination selection, it could still play a role in other aspects of wellness tourism. Additionally, a positive perception of the brand directly influenced a more favorable attitude towards Thailand's wellness tourism brand.

Both the attitude towards the brand and COVID-19 related factors had a positive effect on the selection of Thailand as a wellness destination. However, the impact of COVID-19 related factors on destination selection did not reach statistical significance based on the study's criteria. This finding contradicts Henderson's (2007) recommendation that destinations should communicate their management and policies regarding communicable diseases during the recovery stage of a crisis to reassure potential visitors and promote a safe and healthy tourism environment.

Given the context of the prolonged and globally impactful COVID-19 pandemic, the research aligns with Griffin's (2014) idea that rebuilding a damaged reputation requires demonstrating that performance meets expectations. The findings suggest that while hygiene and safety remain important considerations for tourists, they are not solely seeking COVID-19-free destinations. As people have adjusted to living with the pandemic and effective vaccines are available, the perception of the disease's severity has lessened. People are now more focused on returning to their pre-pandemic normal lives. Therefore, for Thailand to restore its reputation as a wellness tourism destination affected by the pandemic, it is crucial to emphasize

the implementation of measures ensuring cleanliness, safety, and meeting tourists' expectations rather than solely promoting the country as COVID-19 free.

Based on these research findings, post-COVID-19 communication efforts in Thailand's wellness tourism industry should concentrate on promoting the cultural and self-image aspects of the brand identity. This may involve highlighting the unique aspects of Thai culture related to wellness tourism and showcasing the luxurious, healthy, and visually appealing lifestyle associated with it.

Limitation of Research

The research sample was limited to international tourists who came to Thailand for wellness purposes. Due to the ongoing pandemic and uncertainty, the population was gathered from a convenient sampling method with only international tourists who visited Thailand for wellness purposes from August to October 2022 in the number that was enough for a statistical analysis. As they had already flown to Thailand, they seemed to know and had a positive attitude towards all aspects of the current Thailand's wellness destination brand and may not accurately represent the broader population of international visitors to Thailand.

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