The impact of destination values and tourist satisfaction on destination loyalty: A case study of Iranian tourists in Pattaya

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the primary reasons why Iranians choose Thailand as a tourist destination. Many scholars argue that the level of incentives plays a crucial role. To determine the perceptions of Iranian visitors regarding the image of Thailand, a survey will be conducted. In the tourism industry, the perceptions of a tourist destination are critical to its image. The image can be a mental image created by the marketing department or an associative image developed by the consumer. Therefore, tourism destinations must carefully manage their image to align with the way potential travelers perceive them. The study found that cultural sightseeing, friendly people, and food were significantly important to some Iranian visitors when considering Thailand as a tourist destination, while others were interested in the nightlife and entertainment. Additional research was conducted to propose guidelines for marketing promotion and service quality that align with the behavioral expectations and needs of Iranian tourists in Thailand. This research involved administering a questionnaire to gather data from Iranian tourists. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with representatives from the private local sector, the government-involved sector, and Iranian tourism communities in Thailand.

Keywords: Pattaya, Destination image, Iranian tourists, Perception, Satisfaction, loyalty, Incentives

Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's most profitable industries and plays a significant role in Thailand's economy. The related sectors are rapidly growing, creating jobs, and contributing to a flourishing economy. Tourism serves as a crucial source of income and brings in foreign exchange. It also provides economic development opportunities, even in areas that are challenging to develop (Glaesser, 2003).

Being the third-largest export sector globally, tourism is essential for job creation and the prosperity of communities worldwide (UNWTO, 2017).

In the highly competitive landscape of attracting tourists, especially among Southeast Asian countries, Thailand considers tourism a major economic contributor. It is one of the most important income-generating industries, encompassing various businesses that significantly

contribute to Thailand's economy. According to Lee-Anant, Choibamroong, and Srikhwan (2022), the tourism industry plays a fundamental role in the Kingdom of Thailand's economy, generating substantial income and helping distribute national income. However, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a significant decline in international tourist arrivals in Thailand, negatively impacting Thai tourism and the country's image (Bhaskara & Filimonau, 2021).

The COVID-19 restrictions led to a decrease in tourists, which had adverse effects on Thai tourism and the overall image of Thailand. To stimulate tourism and increase tourist arrivals in Thailand, the Thai government has implemented policies. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has positioned Thailand as a cultural, natural, and historical destination, emphasizing its unique attractions and diverse offerings (Rittichainuwat & Qu, 2000). Therefore, understanding the perceptions of tourism is crucial for effective tourism marketing.

Cultural and social impacts of tourism significantly influence the perceptions of both local communities and tourists, thereby shaping the image of a tourist destination (Henkel, 2006). Thailand also faces the challenges posed by the negative consequences of an influx of tourists, such as uncontrolled tourism in Phuket. As a result, the Thai government is taking steps to develop sustainable tourism. Protecting a country's tourism assets for future generations involves minimizing ecological, cultural, and social impacts while maximizing the benefits for environmental protection and local communities (UNEP, W.2005).

Understanding the perceptions of stakeholders and tourists is essential in defining the sustainability of a tourist destination and ensuring its competitiveness and long-term viability (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Jenkins, Dredge & Taplin, 2011; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Welford & Ytterhus, 2004).

Over the past twenty years, Thailand has emerged as a popular tourist destination for Iranians, attracting leisure tourists and medical tourists, particularly individuals seeking transgender surgery. Iranian tourists, in general, have been impressed by the hospitality offered in Thailand (Prebensen, 2007). Hence, this study aims to characterize Iranian tourists' perceptions of Thailand, including the characteristics of the Thai tourism industry, the extent to which it fulfills the needs of Iranian tourists, and the factors influencing Iranian travelers' decision-making process. The study analyzes the image of Thailand as a major tourist destination to sustain positive perceptions. Additionally, the study attempts to determine the demographic factors that influence Iranian tourists' perceptions.

Literature review:

In this section, the academic literature related to the concepts of destination image, tourist perceptions, and motivations will be reviewed. The review will also encompass the definition of tourism motivations, including an interpretation of the various explanations and the significant factors that influence destination choice.

The concept of destination image is a crucial aspect of understanding tourist behavior and decision-making. Destination image refers to the mental representations or impressions that individuals have of a particular destination. These mental images are shaped by various factors, including personal experiences, media portrayals, word-of-mouth, and marketing efforts (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Balaji and Roy (2019) emphasize that destination image refers to the mental representations or impressions individuals hold regarding a particular destination, which are shaped by various factors including personal experiences, media portrayals, word-of-mouth communication, and marketing efforts. Understanding the formation and influence

of destination image is essential for tourism marketers and policymakers in crafting effective strategies to attract and retain tourists.

Tourist perceptions play a vital role in shaping destination image. Perceptions are subjective evaluations and interpretations of tourists' experiences and encounters during their visit to a destination. These perceptions are influenced by a range of factors, such as the quality of services, hospitality, cultural experiences, safety, and attractiveness of the destination (Govers & Go, 2003; Kim, H. B., & Kim, W. G, 2012). Positive perceptions lead to favorable destination image, increased satisfaction, and likelihood of repeat visits, while negative perceptions can have the opposite effect.

Motivations are the underlying drivers that influence individuals' decisions to engage in tourism and select specific destinations. Tourism motivations can be categorized into different types, such as hedonic (seeking pleasure and enjoyment), utilitarian (seeking relaxation or escape), social (desiring social interactions), and cultural (seeking cultural immersion and learning) motivations (Mansfeld, 1992). Understanding tourists' motivations is crucial for destination marketers to tailor their offerings and experiences to meet tourists' needs and desires.

Destination choice is a complex decision-making process influenced by numerous factors. These factors can be categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivations are internally driven and include factors such as personal interests, preferences, and values. Extrinsic motivations, on the other hand, are externally driven and encompass factors like destination attributes, accessibility, costs, and marketing efforts (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006). The interplay of these motivations and factors shapes tourists' decisions in selecting a particular destination.

In conclusion, the review of the academic literature highlights the significance of destination image, tourist perceptions, and motivations in understanding tourists' decision-making process and destination choice. By comprehending these concepts and factors, tourism marketers can develop effective strategies to shape and enhance destination image, cater to tourists' motivations, and ultimately attract and satisfy tourists.

Thailand as a popular tourist destination:

Thailand is internationally renowned for its beautiful islands and beaches, attracting people from around the world. With its ancient temples, diverse food scene, tropical beauty, and vibrant nightlife, Thailand has a unique charm. Tourism plays a significant role in the Thai economy, contributing to economic activity and employment generation (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2016). However, it is important to acknowledge the longstanding association between tourism and issues such as prostitution, particularly in locations like Pattaya (Lines, 2015).

Thailand's popularity as a destination among Iranians is evident, with a reported 160,000 Iranians traveling to Thailand in 2011 (Entekhab, 2012). Iranian travelers to Thailand can be categorized into families and male groups. While families are primarily interested in shopping and nature, solo male travelers often visit Pattaya for its sex tourism industry. It is worth noting that many Iranian tourists are unaware that prostitution is illegal in Thailand, and the sex workers involved do not have hygiene cards to demonstrate their health status.

The restrictions imposed by United States sanctions on Iran have limited Iranian tourists from using international bank cards, forcing them to carry cash. This has made them vulnerable to theft, particularly in encounters with women they meet in Thailand, leading to cases of robbery

where bar girls have been known to drug and steal from Iranian men. Unfortunately, many of these incidents go unreported due to the victims' feelings of shame.

Perceived Destination Values:

Destination image is a significant area of study in tourism literature (Lopes, 2011). The evaluation of a destination experience and the feelings associated with it shape the image individuals have of the destination. Understanding the factors that influence image development is crucial for tourism professionals. The destination image can be perceived in two distinct ways: as a mental image created by marketing efforts or as an associative image developed by the consumer (Pereira, Gupta, & Hussain, 2022). It is essential for destinations to actively promote positive images to counter potential negative perceptions resulting from adverse media coverage or word of mouth from previous visitors (Huerta-Álvarez, Cambra-Fierro, & Fuentes-Blasco, 2020). Consumer research has demonstrated that the alignment of a product image with the consumer's own concept of the product influences their decision-making process (Sirgy & Su, 2000).

The performance of a destination can be assessed by examining tourists' perception of destination travel attributes, aiding market segmentation and promotion. Travel attributes refer to the set of characteristics that describe a travel destination (Heung & Qu, 2000). Various studies in tourism literature have explored the role of travel attributes in destination choice (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Kozak, 2002; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Alegre & Garau, 2010). These attributes can be functional or tangible, as well as psychological or abstract (Etchner & Ritchie, 2003). Given that tourists often have limited knowledge about a destination they have not visited, they rely on symbolic information acquired from media or social groups when making their choices (Abd Aziz, & Ariffin, 2009).

This study assumes that Iranian tourist groups can be segregated based on demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, and geographic origin. It examines the relationship between their perception of travel attributes and satisfaction. By understanding this relationship, the study aims to determine how the perception of destination travel attributes influences tourist satisfaction among different demographic groups.

Methodology:

The population for this study consists of Iranian travelers. Tourists' observations, criticisms, and recommendations are valuable sources of insight for improving service quality and innovation in any destination. The study aims to empirically verify models based on a literature review. Interviews and collected data are utilized to gather information. A questionnaire was designed to assess the satisfaction levels and perceptions of Iranian tourists in Thailand. The data were collected through this questionnaire, which was specifically created to identify the issues Iranian tourists face in Thailand and gauge their satisfaction levels.

Results and Discussion:

The research has successfully achieved its objectives; however, there are some limitations that need to be considered when discussing the findings. To enhance the study's depth, including interviews with Iranian tourists would have been beneficial. These interviews could have provided more insights from Iranian tourists about their experiences in Pattaya and allowed for more open discussions.

The study had limitations in terms of the number of surveyed participants and the limited time available for conducting the research. Additionally, economic factors played a role in reducing

the number of Iranian tourists during the period of 2018-2019. Economic influences, such as income and price, have a significant impact on tourist activity. The crisis of Iran's national currency and the economic sanctions imposed by Washington were the main reasons for the decline in the number of Iranian tourists during that time.

Despite these limitations, the findings of the study are robust and provide valuable insights for tourism management and marketers in Thailand, particularly in Pattaya.

Recommendation:

To attract more visitors from Iran, the Thai tourism industry needs to understand Iranian perceptions, as the Thai market is popular among Iranian tourists. Previous research has highlighted the importance of culture and understanding the perceptions and motivations of different nationalities. Further research on cultural dimensions, based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, can benefit the tourism industry, as cultural differences play a significant role in tourism studies.

The study focused on evaluating the relationship between the expectations and motivations of Iranian tourists in Pattaya, tour quality, tourist satisfaction, and loyalty. It emphasized the importance of attracting tourists to revisit and recommend the destination to others. The findings of this study provide new insights into tourists' satisfaction and offer recommendations for tourism managers.

Based on the study, the following suggestions are made:

Upgrade the city environment by addressing issues such as public amenities and cleanliness, as some respondents expressed dissatisfaction in these areas. Prioritize the urban environment, ecology, and healthcare, as cleanliness and effective healthcare are highly valued by tourists.

Encourage the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) to design value-for-money tour packages to attract visitors from lower-income groups.

Ensure that TAT and tourism operators have control over the pricing of products and services in Pattaya.

Thailand's unique and exotic tourist products do not necessarily need direct association with national tourism development, as large and well-established tourism businesses can thrive independently.

Improve Thai tourism's image by emphasizing characteristics such as advancement, manufacturability, and fissionability, which can help change the perception of sex tourism.

Ensure safety for all tourists, as feeling safe contributes to loyalty towards a destination. Thailand should provide enhanced safety measures to promote itself as a quiet, green, clean tourist destination with a caring and friendly population.

To address the issue of Iranian tourists carrying cash due to American sanctions, which makes them vulnerable to theft, offering a solution such as the "Visit Thailand Card" by Super Rich, which acts as a Thai Baht debit card, could attract more Iranian tourists.

Conduct further research to address the lack of studies on the impact of gender on the travel motivations of Iranian and Muslim women.

Give significant attention to cultural factors, as culture plays a crucial role in influencing tourists' behavior.

Based on the research and feedback from Iranian tourists, it is recommended that authorities focus on shaping a favorable image for Pattaya and improving tourists' perceptions of value and service quality to enhance destination satisfaction and loyalty.

Conclusion:

This section provides an overview and summary of the previous chapters in the research. It begins by presenting the background and key characteristics of Iranian tourists traveling to Pattaya. The literature review examines various aspects, such as destination image, tourism motivation, positive and negative perceptions, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. The review highlights the lack of previous studies on the motivations of Iranian tourists to visit Pattaya and the influence of their cultural background on their perceptions of the destination.

The research justifies the use of a combined method approach, involving both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. It emphasizes the importance of understanding tourists' motivations in effective tourism marketing and the significance of customer satisfaction in the competitive business environment.

The study's findings provide a clear understanding of Iranian tourists' perceptions of Pattaya and the motivations that drive them to visit. Factors such as freedom from Islamic roles, good value for money, Thailand's positive reputation among Iranian tourists, and the popularity of Thai beaches are identified as influential in motivating Iranian tourists. The study also highlights the preferences of different groups, such as single men, families, and elderly male tourists, and the impact of factors like personality, lifestyle, living conditions, age, and gender on tourists' behavior and perceptions.

Overall, the research focuses on Iranian tourists' perceptions and motivations, providing insights into their reasons for choosing Pattaya as a tourist destination.

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