Destination Brand Alignment: Exploring Identity, Image and Personality of Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study investigates the alignment between the destination brand identity as envisioned by Thai tourism entrepreneurs and the destination brand image as perceived by foreign tourists visiting Thailand. The research makes a theoretical and practical contribution to the tourism field. The study theoretically expands on the notions of destination branding by evaluating the congruence of destination brands' identity, image, and personality dimensions simultaneously. The findings have key implications for developing a sustainable destination brand. Overall, the study's findings highlight three key points 1) the significance of maintaining the destination brand's consistency through the destination personality from a strategic perspective; 2) the need to narrow the gap between the destination brand's identity and image; and 3) the challenge of managing a positive and distinctive destination brand. The brand alignment assessment serves as an example of how marketers can design measurement approaches to analyze a brand's complexity and use as a benchmark for branding.

Keywords: Destination Brand Alignment, Brand Identity, Brand Image, Brand Personality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is indisputable that branding is a crucial tool for any successful firms. Similarly, creating a strong destination brand is an important aspect in successful tourism development. Just as goods and services are branded, destinations are also promoted through branding strategies (García, Gómez, and Molina, 2012). For the past decades, tourism literature has primarily studied destination image, while research based on identity of the tourism destination has gained little attention (Picazo and Moreno-Gil, 2019). On the other hand, various tourism scholars have highlighted the notion of understanding brand identity as a prerequisite to creating a strong destination brand (Pike and Page, 2014; Ruzzier and Chernatony, 2013). Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009) assert that to create a strong destination brand, the brand activities need to convey the essence or spirit of the destination—that is, there needs to be alignment between the projected image (brand identity) and perceived image (brand image).

Thailand has become a popular destination for international tourist worldwide. Nevertheless, past studies of Thailand as a travel destination have been limited to the image as perceived by local or international travelers (Changsom, 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; McDowall and Choi, 2010; Ngamsom, 2001; Nuttavuthisit, 2006; Vieregge et al. 2007); while studies of its brand identity have been neglected. Theoretically, there is a generally held view that the two perspectives, identity and image, should be aligned (Andreu, Bigne, and Cooper, 2000; Davies and Chun, 2002; Hatch and Schultz, 2001;

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Kotsi, Balakrishnan, Michael, and Ramsøy, 2018). In other words, any gaps between the two should be reduced in order to build a strong brand. Thus, it is essential that measurement of the gap between destination brand identity and image be undertaken in the context of Thailand. Nevertheless, to date, there is a lack of empirical study that investigates Thailand's brand, particularly Thailand's brand identity and image congruence, and this study has filled the research gap. The underlying concept is that congruency or alignment between destination brand image and destination brand identity can lead to a more successful brand (Davies and Chun, 2002). To achieve this, the destination brand as projected by destination marketers or tourism entrepreneurs, and the brand of Thailand as perceived by travelers, are measured and compared. Meanwhile, this study explores the dimensions of destination personality in assessing Thailand's destination brand at different stage of travel. Due to the paucity of empirical research on destination brand alignment, the current study attempts to fill this gap by concurrently exploring the interaction between identity, image, and personality dimensions. This approach enables marketers to develop measurements and offer insights regarding the complexity of a brand, with an emphasis on both supplier and consumer perspectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Thailand as a Tourist Destination

Travel to Thailand has a long history but tourism began to develop as an industry only in the late 1950s (Cohen, 1996). Developing countries like Thailand have relied a great deal on their tourist industries for economic growth since the country shifted from an agricultural base to a more industrialized and service-based economy (Kye-SungChon, Singh, and Mikula, 1993). Earnings from the tourism industry are one of the main sources of foreign exchange for Thailand which help to stimulate the country's economy, create jobs, encourage investments and raise the Thais' standard of living. In 2019, Thailand was ranked fourth in international tourism earnings by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), with earnings of US$61 billion, following USA (US$214 billion), Spain (US$80 billion) and France (US$64 billion). Today, Thailand is one of the most developed tourist destinations in Asia, with the number of tourist arrivals to Thailand increasing 106-fold in 40 years, from 81,340 in 1960 to 8.6 million in 1999 and almost 40 million in 2019.

Despite the success, however, the tourism industry in Thailand is not without problems and controversy. Thailand has experienced various negative factors affecting tourism industry, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in China and Hong Kong in 2003, the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, the political instability in the southern part of Thailand and the military coup in 2006, and the global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic starting year end of 2019. Furthermore, critics charge that tourism promotion in Thailand has aimed at quantity rather than quality (Kaosa-ard, 1994). The negative impacts pose challenges for destination marketers of Thailand to manage the destination to remain competitive, especially Thailand is considered a mature destination (Cohen, 1996).

2.2 Destination Image and Image Formation

Destination image plays an integral role in tourists' satisfaction as well as influencing tourists' choices (Kim and Chen, 2016). Destination image is defined as an attitudinal

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concept comprising the sum of beliefs, emotional thoughts, ideas, impressions, and prejudices that a tourist possesses of a destination (Crompton, 2016). Many researchers support the view that destination image is comprised of two primary dimensions: cognitive and affective (Dichter, 1985; Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal, 2006; Kotler, Haider, and Rein, 1993). The cognitive component can be interpreted as beliefs and knowledge about the physical attributes of a destination, while the affective component refers to the appraisal of the affective quality of feelings towards the attributes and the surrounding environments (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Similarly, some scholars classify images into functional images and symbolic images (Daye, 2010). Literally, a destination's functional image is typically more related to its cognitive image, while its symbolic image is closely associated with its affective image. The functional destination image refers to the tangible components of destination image, in other words, those associated with physical evidence such as shopping, nature, or historic architecture. The symbolic image of the destination refers to the intangible aspect of destinations such as atmosphere, mood of the place, or stereotypic personality of the destination.

Understanding how travelers form their perceived image is considered an essential step to managing a strong destination brand as many researchers agree that image is part of the brand building (Crompton, 2016; Govers, Go, and Kumar, 2007; Kim and Chen, 2016). Furthermore, tourist's experience at of the destination has significant impact on image formation (Martín-Santana, Beerli-Palacio, and Nazzareno, 2017; Zhang, Park, and Song, 2021), while image can evolve at different stages of travel, before, during and after the visit (Qu et al., 2011).

2.3 Destination Image versus Destination Identity

Destination image represents tourist side perspectives as it is perceptions about the place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory (Kim and Chen, 2016). On the other hand, destination identity represents supply side perspectives from tourism stakeholders such as residents, private sectors, and local authorities (Suna and Alvarez, 2021). Brand image is what customers believe or feel about the company or product from their experiences and observations (Bernstein, 1984), whereas brand identity is an answer to the questions 'who are we?' or 'how do we see ourselves?' (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Keller, 2003). Understanding destination brand image as perceived by tourists is critical and can help destination marketers develop marketing strategies (Pike and Page, 2014). Nonetheless, in order to provide clear and consistent images to multiple target groups, a destination brand should be based on a critical understanding and true essence of the destination's brand identity that distinguish it from other destinations (Ruzzier and Chernatony, 2013; Zouganeli et al., 2012). Building a brand requires a strong sense of destination identity. Branding a city means developing an identity for the city, it plays a key element in building a city's image in the tourism sector. (Chan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the images that tourists perceive may not always correspond to the images that suppliers or destination marketers project (Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). In this regard, many tourism academics have acknowledged that an examination of the branding concept from both the projected-image and perceived-image perspectives is necessary and should be linked where applicable (Bregoli, 2012; Chan et al., 2021; Henkel et al., 2006; Konecnik and Go, 2008; Pike, 2004).

2.4 Destination Personality as a Metaphor

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Destination personality has become a highly investigated topic in tourism literature in the past decade (Auemsuvarn and Ngamcharoenmongkol, 2022. Koc and Yazici, 2022, Kovačić et al, 2022, Pan et al, 2017, Souiden, Ladhari, and Chiadmi, 2017, Zhang et al., 2019.) Destination personality is the set of human characteristics associated with a destination (Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal, 2006). Destination personality is defined as emotional (symbolic) attributes of the destination described in human personality traits. With increasing competition faced by destinations, destination personality is seen as a key component of an effective brand to help a destination to build differentiation and craft unique identity (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006). In this sense, the destination personality which is associated with the affective image is closely related to the symbolic image of the destination, while cognitive image is associated with functional destination image or those associated with physical evidence and the tangible component of destinations.

Aaker (1997) is among the first to provide evidence for the validity of the brand personality construct through a scaling procedure. The brand personality scale as proposed by Aaker, comprising five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness, have been adopted by many tourism researchers to identify whether tourists ascribe personality traits to tourism destinations (Vinyals-Mirabenta, Kavaratzisb and Fernández-Cavia, 2019). d'Astous and Boujbel (2007) provide the reasons that a personality perspective is necessary in positioning a destination. Many scholars support that the personality perspective fits well with the self-image congruence theory which proposes that people are likely to prefer countries that they perceive as being psychologically similar to them (Bekk, Spörrle, and Kruse, 2016; Kressmann et al., 2006; Sirgy and Su, 2000).

2.5 The Concept of Destination Brand Alignment

There has been a general agreement among academics and practitioners that places can be branded in the same way as consumer goods and services (Caldwell and Freire, 2004). Thus, most of the branding concepts discussed are borrowed from corporate branding and marketing literatures. Similarly, in the tourism sector, a corporate brand is considered key intangible assets that have significant positive effects on a destination performance (Seraphin, Yallop, Capatîna, and Gowreesunkar, 2018).

The concept of alignment also termed fit, consistency or congruency has attracted considerable interest in the studies of organizational performance (Powell, 1992; Schroder and Mavondo, 1994; Venkatraman, 1990; Venkatraman and Prescott, 1990). The theoretical position of these studies is that brand alignment represents a desirable property for organizations due to its important performance implications. This research adopts the concept of brand alignment by examining the congruency (or lack of) between destination brand identity and image of Thailand. Although it is generally agreed by scholars that brand can be viewed from two perspectives: brand identity and brand image (Balmer, 2001; de Chernatony, 1999), most tourism studies have been confined to investigating the brand image and have overlooked the brand identity viewpoint. Gaps between a brand identity and brand image can arise from a lack of congruence between identity components, through inconsistent presentation of the identity and through the intervention of environmental factors, such as accidents, tampering and media reporting (Harris, 2001). Most importantly, any gaps between internal and external perceptions are viewed as a negative in a service business where employee and customer interface is crucial (Davies and Miles, 1998). Ultimately, destination marketers should strive to close (or minimize) the gap between brand identity and brand image. The closer the alignment between the two, the more successful the brand will be (García et al., 2012; Vincente,

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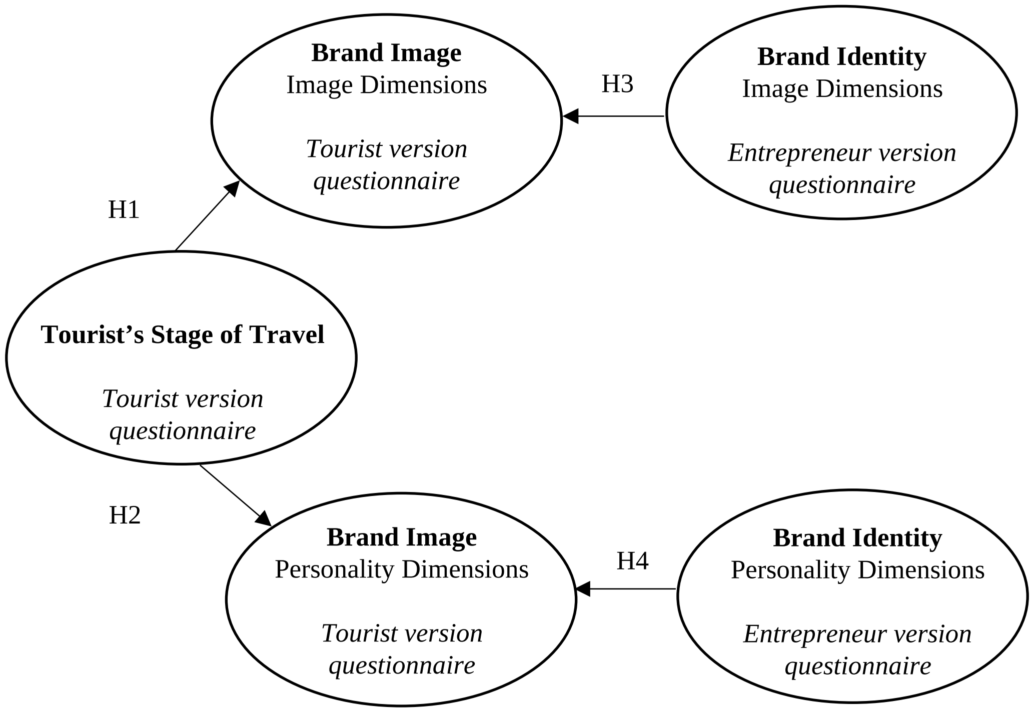
2004). Additionally, it should be pointed out that although this study conceptualizes both destination image and destination personality dimensions as part of the destination brand, the two components were distinguished as two different constructs. As a result, they were measured and statistically tested separately. The reason for distinguishing between destination image and destination personality dimensions was due to the past studies recognize them as different constructs, although their interrelationship is also acknowledged (Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal, 2006). Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework of this paper.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



Based on the literature review discussed above, Hypotheses 1, 2, 3 and 4 were developed as follows:

H1. Traveler's stage of travel has significant influence on destination image dimensions.
H2. Traveler's stage of travel has significant influence on destination personality dimensions.
H3. There are significant differences between brand identity and brand image on destination image dimensions.
H4. There are significant differences between brand identity and brand image on destination personality dimensions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is a cross-sectional study using a self-administered questionnaire as an instrument. A total of 400 questionnaires were completed and included in the analysis, yielding 67% response rate (587 questionnaires were distributed both onsite and online). This is in line with Hair et al. (2010) who suggest that a sample size between 200 and 400 is appropriate for quantitative research. Hence, two comparable versions of a questionnaire were developed to compare between destination brand image and identity.

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The first version of the questionnaire was designed to gauge the perceptions that travelers (n = 200) held of the destination brand image and personality of Thailand. The second version of the questionnaire was designed for tourism entrepreneurs (n = 200) to assess destination brand identity of Thailand, in other words, the destination brand image and personality of Thailand they seek to project. In examining the alignment between destination brand image and brand identity of Thailand, respondents were drawn from international travelers (image) and tourism entrepreneurs (identity). To measure and compare the perceptions of different target groups, in this study, tourist responses to the survey questionnaire were classified as four distinct groups as follows: international travelers who were about to travel to Thailand were referred to as “Group A: pre-visit travelers”; international travelers who were travelling in Thailand were referred to as “Group B: during-visit travelers”; international travelers who were exiting Thailand were referred to as “Group C: post-visit traveler”; and international travelers who had never visited Thailand and were in transit to other destinations, were referred to as “Group D: non-traveler”. For tourism entrepreneurs including hotel managers, restaurant managers, travel agencies at touristic destinations, as well as destination marketers, they were referred to as “Group E: tourism entrepreneurs”.

Data collection took place at various tourist destinations in Bangkok, Thailand, using convenience sampling to acquire respondents from each of the five groups stated above. The scale instruments used to capture destination image and personality dimensions in this study were obtained from existing scales. Destination Image dimensions were adapted from the work of Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal (2006), while destination personality dimensions were influenced by Aaker's brand personality scale (1997). In addition, self-created items were added as a result of a pretest study that was conducted as part of a research project investigating Thailand as a destination for international tourists. As Pike (2017) suggests that when conducting research in tourism, researchers usually develop their own set of destination attributes for testing to ensure that the self-created items were specific to the current context and increase the content validity of the questionnaire.

4. FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the profile of the respondents. In total, there were 400 respondents in the survey. Among these, there was an almost equal split between males (51.5%) and females (48.5%). Most of the respondents were 20 to 29 years old (45.7%), followed by 30 to 39 years old (22.2%) and 40 to 49 years old (14.8%). Most of the respondents reported having income ranging from $ 25,001 to $75,000 (39.3%), followed by $75,001 - 150,000 (17.7%) and $6,001 – 25,000 (14%).

Table 1. Profiles of International Travelers (n = 200)

Variable	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gender		
Male	103	51.5
Female	97	48.5
Age		
Below 20	7	3.5
20 – 29	91	45.7
30 – 39	44	22.2
40 – 49	30	14.8
50 – 59	19	9.25
60 and above	9	4.6

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Income		
$ 0 - 6,000	28	14.0
$ 6,001 - 25,000	24	12.0
$ 25,001 - 75,000	79	39.3
$ 75,001 - 150,000	35	17.7
Over $ 150,000	13	6.5
First Visit/Revisit to Thailand		
First Visit	101	50.7
Revisit	99	49.3
Length of Stay/Days		
1 – 7	60	29.7
8 – 14	91	45.7
15 – 21	31	15.8
22 – 30	13	6.5
Over 30	5	2.3
Age First Visited Thailand		
Below 20	26	13
20 – 29	77	38.3
30 – 39	46	22.8
40 – 49	29	14.6
50 – 59	21	10.4
60 and above	1	0.05

The proportion of respondents who were first-time visitors to Thailand was slightly higher (50.7%) compared to repeat visitors (49.3%). The majority of respondents stayed in Thailand between 8 and 14 days (45.7%) and between 1 and 7 days (29.7%). The highest age group when they first visited Thailand was 20 to 29 years old (38.3%), followed by 30 to 39 years old (22.8%) and 40 to 49 years old (14.6%).

H1. Traveler's stage of travel has significant influence on destination image dimensions.

Table 2 shows the major findings of the ANOVA test for all the destination image dimensions across different groups of travelers (Groups A, B and C). Group B, "during-visit travelers", reported significantly more positive perceptions of Thailand than respondents in Group A "pre-visit" travelers, on 10 out of 18 destination image dimensions, namely "Fun Nightlife and Entertainment", "Rich Nature, Wildlife and Parks", "Friendly People", "Adventurous Sports Activities", "An Exotic Destination", "A Budget Vacation", "Good Food", "Spa Tourism", "Medical Tourism" and "A Safe Tourist Destination". On the other hand, Group B, "during-visit travelers", reported significantly more positive perceptions of Thailand than respondents in Group C, "post-visit" travelers, on 5 out of 18 destination image dimensions, namely "Rich Nature, Wildlife and Parks", "Friendly People", "Adventurous Sports Activities", "An Exotic Destination" and "A Safe Tourist Destination".

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Table 2. Brand Image Dimensions: Image Differences by Stages of Travel

Destination Image Dimensions	**Group A (n = 50)**		**Group B (n = 50)**		**Group C (n = 50)**		**F**	**Sig.**	**Mean Diff.**
	$\bar{x}$	**SD**	**$\bar{x}$**	**SD**	**$\bar{x}$**	**SD**			
Fun Nightlife and Entertainment	5.23	1.45	5.69	1.23	5.44	1.33	2.94	0.05*	B>A
Rich Nature, Wildlife and Parks	4.89	1.37	5.68	1.15	5.13	1.45	8.90	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Friendly People	5.73	1.34	6.30	1.11	5.90	1.25	5.66	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Adventurous Sport Activities	4.34	1.53	5.21	1.37	4.64	1.46	8.98	0.00*	B>A; B>C
An Exotic Destination	5.41	1.36	5.89	1.07	5.56	1.42	3.41	0.03*	B>A; B>C
A Budget Vacation	5.33	1.52	5.90	1.12	5.61	1.32	4.39	0.01*	B>A
Good Food	5.65	1.40	6.20	1.08	5.92	1.28	4.69	0.01*	B>A
Historic Architecture	5.04	1.52	5.21	1.49	5.19	1.62	0.37	0.69	-
Sex Tourism	4.28	1.97	4.70	1.66	4.40	2.00	1.25	0.29	-
Scenic Hiking	4.31	1.39	4.57	1.48	4.31	1.38	1.16	0.31	-
Spa Tourism	4.21	1.52	4.96	1.58	4.59	1.51	5.94	0.00*	B>A
Medical Tourism	3.50	1.44	4.10	1.48	3.73	1.44	4.35	0.01*	B>A
Volunteer Tourism	3.68	1.52	4.07	1.46	3.79	1.36	1.97	0.14	-
A Safe Tourist Destination	4.77	1.33	5.76	1.19	5.18	1.35	14.4	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Good Golf Courses	3.86	1.48	4.19	1.31	4.14	1.42	1.61	0.20	-
Cultural Sightseeing	5.90	1.29	5.77	1.17	5.98	1.07	0.84	0.43	-
Good Bargain Shopping	5.74	1.52	6.01	1.07	5.83	1.36	1.09	0.34	-
Beautiful Beaches	5.45	1.51	5.90	1.12	5.56	1.45	2.81	0.06	-

Group A: pre-visit travelers
Group B: during-visit travelers
Group C: post-visit travelers

H2. Traveler's stage of travel has significant influence on destination personality dimensions.

Table 3 shows the major findings of ANOVA for all the destination personality dimensions across different groups of travelers (Groups A, B and C). Group B, "during-visit travelers", reported significantly more positive perceptions of Thailand than respondents in Group A, "pre-visit" travelers, on 16 out of 17 personality dimensions, namely Exciting", "Cool", "Unique", "Upper Class", "Glamorous", "Charming", "Rugged", "Sincere", "Chic", "Fun", "Flexible", "Fulfilling", "Relaxed", "Family-oriented", "Real" and "Friendly". On the other hand, Group B, "during-visit travelers", reported significantly more positive perceptions of Thailand than respondents in Group C, "post-visit" travelers, on 7 out of 17 destination personality dimensions, namely "Family-oriented", "Friendly", "Glamorous", "Charming", "Rugged", "Chic" and "Relaxed". While Group C, "post-visit" travelers, reported significantly more positive perceptions of Thailand than respondents in Group A, "pre-visit" travelers, on one personality dimension, "Unique".

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Table 3. Brand Personality Dimensions: Image Differences by Stages of Travel

Destination Personality Dimensions	**Group A (n = 50)**		**Group B (n = 50)**		**Group C (n = 50)**		**F**	**Sig.**	**Mean Difference**
	$\bar{x}$	**SD**	**$\bar{x}$**	**SD**	**$\bar{x}$**	**SD**			
Exciting	5.25	1.21	5.69	1.17	5.42	1.10	5.61	0.00*	B>A
Cool	4.71	1.21	5.20	1.33	4.97	1.30	3.81	0.01*	B>A
Unique	4.92	1.36	5.59	1.21	5.39	1.35	3.79	0.01*	B>A; C>A
Upper Class	3.92	1.28	4.22	1.47	3.65	1.40	2.46	0.05*	B>A
Glamorous	4.21	1.31	4.55	1.44	3.94	1.31	3.34	0.01*	B>C
Charming	4.95	1.32	5.43	1.17	5.21	1.39	8.91	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Rugged	4.19	1.25	4.79	1.41	4.25	1.33	4.03	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Sincere	4.85	1.36	5.50	1.21	4.84	1.49	7.48	0.00*	B>A
Chic	4.16	1.26	4.68	1.32	4.06	1.42	3.68	0.01*	B>A; B>C
Fun	5.43	1.19	6.10	0.88	5.55	1.20	7.66	0.00*	B>A
Flexible	5.07	1.25	5.74	1.06	5.41	1.27	5.83	0.00*	B>A
Fulfilling	5.23	1.25	5.88	1.14	5.58	1.04	7.19	0.00*	B>A
Relaxed	5.68	1.29	6.46	0.78	6.04	1.11	6.85	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Family-oriented	4.88	1.33	5.77	1.10	5.02	1.34	8.77	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Real	5.17	1.15	5.72	1.19	5.35	1.16	6.54	0.00*	B>A
Friendly	5.66	1.18	6.27	0.89	5.84	1.19	10.01	0.00*	B>A; B>C
Trendy	4.69	1.25	4.99	1.26	4.72	1.20	1.80	0.17	-

Group A: pre-visit travelers
Group B: during-visit travelers
Group C: post-visit travelers

H3. There are significant differences between brand identity and brand image on destination image dimensions.

In this respect, the brand identity—representing the supply-side perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs was examined using data from Group E, "tourism entrepreneurs". The brand image—representing the demand-side of international travelers was examined using data from Group A, "pre-visit travelers", Group B, "during-visit travelers", Group C, "Post-visit travelers" and Group D, "Non-traveler". Figure 2 presents a gap analysis of destination identity and image on 18 image dimensions. When comparing between destination image dimensions, identity was more positive than image on 5 out of 18 dimensions, including "Beautiful Beaches", "Friendly People", "Good Food", "Medical Tourism" and "Good Golf Course". On the other hand, image was more positive than identity on 3 out of 18 dimensions, "An Exotic Destination", "A Budget Vacation" and "Sex Tourism", however, it should be noted that "Sex Tourism" is a negative dimension.

Thus, overall, there were lack of brand alignment between brand identity, as projected by tourism entrepreneurs (Group E) and brand Image, as perceived by travelers (Group A, B, C) and non-travelers (Group D) on most dimensions. Meanwhile, when examined into the specific groups, it was found that there were certain areas of brand alignment between identity and image. These were "Cultural Sightseeing" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by post-visit travelers (E=C); "Fun Nightlife & Entertainment" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by during-visit travelers (E=B); "Rich Nature, Wildlife & Parks" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by non-travelers (E=D); "Adventurous Sport Activities" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by post-visit travelers (E=C); "Historic Architecture" (E=A) where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by pre-visit travelers; "Scenic Hiking" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by non-

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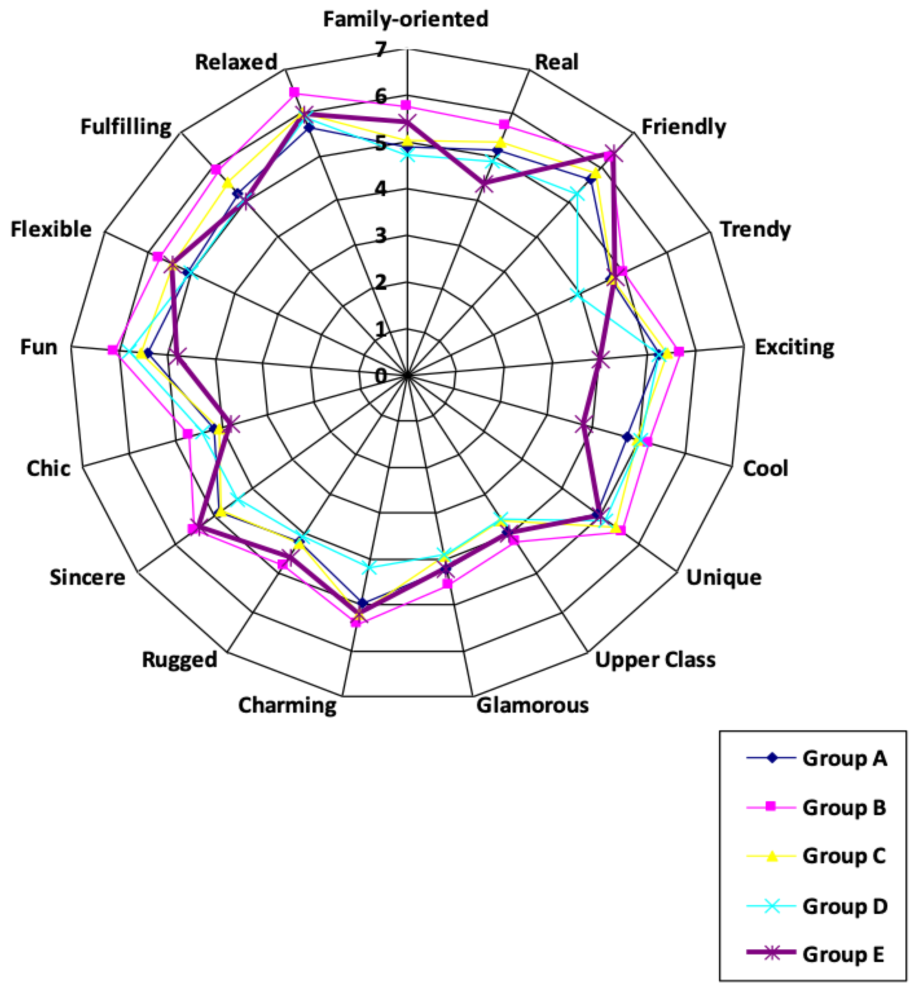
travelers (E=D). On the other hand, the largest gap, as illustrated in Figure 2, was on the "Sex Tourism" dimension, indicating that there was large discrepancy between the projected and perceived one. The smallest gaps were found on "Scenic Hiking" and "Good Bargain Shopping", indicating that the projected and perceived image were congruent.

Figure 2. Image and Identity on Destination Image Dimensions



H4. There are significant differences between brand identity and brand image on destination personality dimensions.

Figure 3 presents a gap analysis using the 17 items. When comparing between destination personality dimensions, image was superior to identity on 5 out of 17 dimensions, including "Real", "Exciting", "Cool", "Chic" and "Fun". On the other hand, it was found that there were many areas of brand alignment between identity and image in terms of destination personality dimensions**.** These included "Friendly" where identity closely aligns with image as perceived by during-visit (E=B)**;** "Trendy" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by pre-visit and after-visit travelers (E=A&C)**;** "Unique" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by pre-visit travelers (E=A); "Upper class" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by pre-visit travelers (E=A); "Glamourous" (E=A) where identity closely aligned with image as

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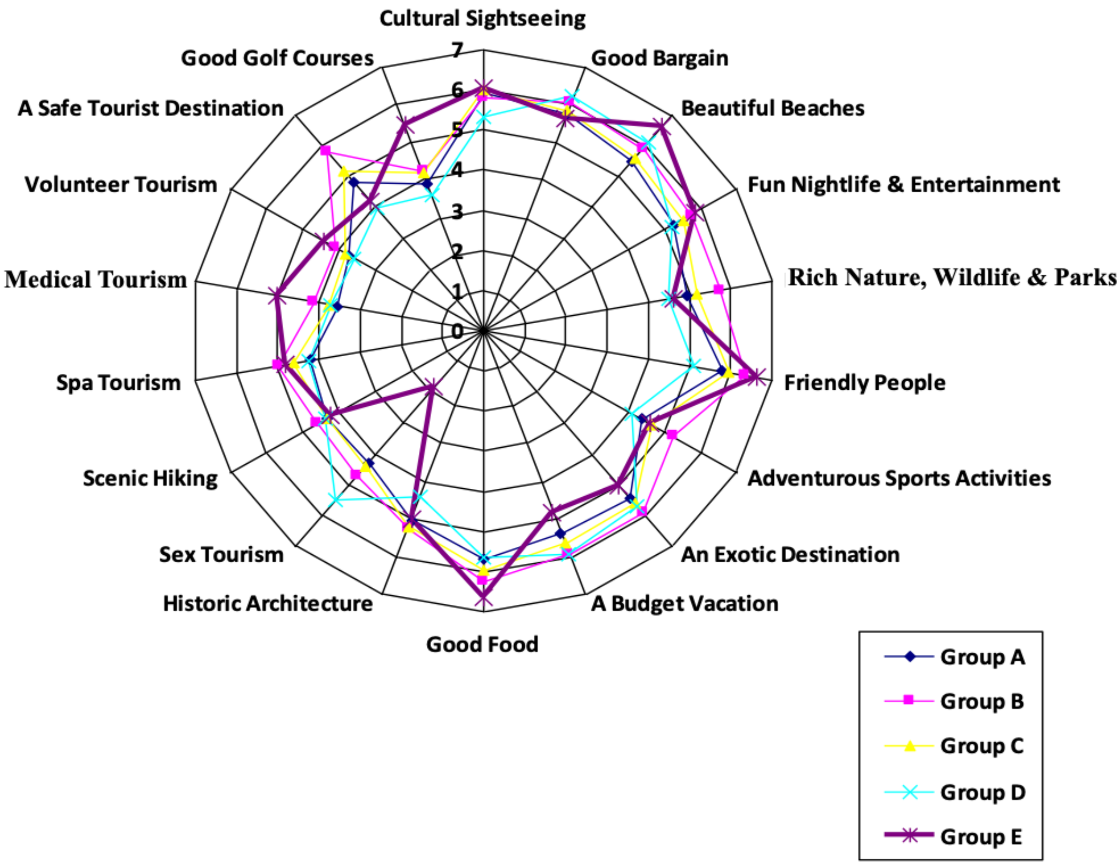
perceived by pre-visit travelers; "Charming" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by post-visit travelers (E=C). "Sincere" where identity closely aligns with image as perceived by during-visit (E=B); "Flexible" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by post-visit travelers (E=C); "Fulfilling" (E=D) where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by non-travelers; "Relaxed" where identity closely aligned with image as perceived by post-visit travelers and non-travelers (E=C&D).

Overall, it was noticeable that image was superior to identity on all destination personality dimensions. In addition, 10 out of 17 dimensions showed to be aligned between projected and perceived brand personality, indicating rather strong brand alignment on destination personality dimensions.

Figure 3. Image and Identity on Destination Personality Dimensions



5. DISCUSSION

The main objectives of the research are to examine the brand identity, representing the supply-side perceptions of tourism entrepreneurs, and the brand image, representing the demand-side of international travelers, as well as the alignment between the two. The key findings reveal that while Thai tourism entrepreneurs did not recognize that "Sex Tourism" constituted a negative image of Thailand, the majority of travelers who had never visited the country believed it contributed to the country's unfavorable reputation. Many scholars (Bernstein and Shih, 2014; Cohen, 1996; Nuttavuthisit, 2007) claim that the negative press surrounding prostitution and sex tourism in Thailand has contributed to the country's unfavorable reputation, which has harmed Thailand's tourism industry

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and worsened the issue. Despite the fact that the Thai government and destination marketers recognized the negative perception associated with sex tourism (Rittichainuwat, 2001), they may choose to only portray the positive images and disregard the negative ones. Furthermore, the results could be implied that foreign visitors who had never been to Thailand might possess a negative impression of the country after hearing unfavorable news or publicity about it in their own countries and decide not to visit. Thus, in order to draw more visitors to Thailand, it is imperative that destination marketers actively reverse the negative portrayal of the country in the international media.

Using gap analysis, the underlying concept is that any gaps between brand image and brand identity indicate the destination brand needs improvement on its brand positioning. The results demonstrate that travelers who had visited Thailand expressed more favorable opinions of Thailand's personality traits than travelers who had never been. This suggests that Thailand's distinctive personality may be overlooked by Thai tourism entrepreneurs or the supply side of the tourism industry while promoting the destination. Furthermore, stressing multiple images and inconsistent image projection may weaken the destination's core identity. The basic idea is that any discrepancies between brand image and brand identity show that the destination brand positioning must be improved. It is essential that destination promoters place emphasis on the dominant destination image and personality that can truly capture the essence of the destination and differentiate the destination from other competing destinations. The key to a successful tourist-destination interaction is a combination of destination images and distinctive destination personality traits (Chen and Phou, 2013). Thus, it is essential that tourism entrepreneurs who are supply side of destination stakeholders should give special attention in consistently projecting a set of unique and dominant destination image and personality, which may best capture the spirit of the destination and set it apart from rival destinations. In addition, tourists who are demand side of the stakeholders should be encouraged by the brand to maintain a high degree of engagement as there is positive impact on customer participation and customer engagement on brand loyalty (Lu et al., 2023).

6. CONCLUSION

In creating a strong and sustainable destination image, all tourism stakeholders must work in harmony to reflect the destination's identity or project the desired image in the same direction. The findings provide theoretical and practical implications for destination marketers. From a theoretical standpoint, the research expands on what has been previously studied in the destination branding literature by examining destination image and destination personality simultaneously. From a practical standpoint, the findings offer important implications for the development of destination marketing strategies. Successful brand development requires branding practitioners to constantly compare and contrast the images the branding entity desires to project with the images actually held in the minds of the target audience. Tourism is a service industry which cannot be consumed prior to visiting the destination, thus projecting strong and positive images of the destination is vital to the successful promotion of a destination. It is crucial that destination marketers investigate how personality and image dimensions align with a destination brand. The study further supports that personality dimensions are powerful determinants of a destination brand. Destination marketers should concentrate on designing tourism products and services and continually projecting the desirable images based on distinctive destination personality.

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Nevertheless, it is appropriate to indicate the limitations of this research. First, some methodological problems are inherent as the data collections were taken place at touristic places in Bangkok. This limits the survey to the groups of international travelers who traveled to Bangkok only. Second, the study findings are culturally specific and may not be representative of other tourist populations. Third, even though data were comprehensive potentially covering image formation of tourists at different stages of travel, the nature of cross-sectional data limit causal inferences.

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