

Research Paper

Destination Image from Domestic Tourists' Perspective During COVID-19: A Case Study of Phuket, Thailand

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Abstract: The overreliance on international tourism highlighted the fact that Phuket needs to pay more attention to the domestic market, especially during and after COVID-19. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the travel behaviour of domestic tourists who travel to Phuket and to compare all attributes of destination image in the timeframes of pre-pandemic and during the recent pandemic. This quantitative research was conducted using an online survey. Satisfactory research data was obtained from 403 respondents and used for data analysis. Destination attributes were analysed using a paired sample t-test. The findings indicate that Phuket's image in different attributes varied, when compared between the normal time (before COVID-19) and during the pandemic. These attributes include natural resources and environment, cultural history and arts, general infrastructure, social environment, tourist infrastructure, political and economic factors, safety and security as well as COVID-related risk perception. The key findings are significant and useful for policymakers to consider when formulating marketing strategies to boost domestic demand and strengthen the destination image of Phuket.

Keywords: Destination image, Phuket tourism, domestic tourists, COVID-19, destination attributes

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Introduction

Phuket is a province in Thailand which is recognised as a leading world tourist destination (“TripAdvisor names”, 2021). According to the Thailand Tourism and Sports Ministry, tourist arrivals in Phuket in 2019 reached around 13.8 million people; of which, 3.7 million were Thai and 10.1 million were foreign tourists. Therefore, there were approximately 3 times more international tourists than Thai. For decades, international tourism receipts in Phuket have been substantial. Historically, Phuket had received 80% of its tourism income from international tourists, whilst another 10–20% came from domestic tourists (Tourism Authority of Thailand [TAT], n.d.). When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, Thailand became one of the first countries with transmission cases. Phuket was significantly impacted, due to its high dependency on the tourism industry, especially from the Chinese market. According to a COVID-19 socioeconomic impact assessment report, the estimated economic loss from February to July 2020, was 190,043 million baht in revenue, due to decreased number of visitors, which declined by 83% from previous years (Phetvaroon et al., 2020). The short-run impact (Feb–Jul, 2020) related to Phuket, was a loss of 49,436 million baht in the accommodation sector and 38,175 million baht in the food and beverage sector. The assessment also reported that from March to May 2020, sales in all businesses decreased by 98% compared to the same period of time the year before. Official employment decreased by 17% compared to before the pandemic. Workers suffered reduced incomes in the following sectors: tour operators (–58%), accommodation (–51%), transportation (–40%) and food and beverage service (–14%). Moreover, 50% of all companies either closed down or operated partially, which left only 50% fully operating. Additionally, 79% of enterprises focusing on foreigners were permanently closed (Phetvaroon et al. 2020).

The losses incurred during the pandemic clearly demonstrate that domestic tourism is paramount and that solely relying on international tourists is economically risky. Therefore “a deep understanding of the characteristics of domestic travellers and the volatility of their demand, could be a valuable tool for a destination to evaluate the potential of a strategy of reliance on domestic tourism” (Arbulú et al., 2021). In fact, focusing on the domestic market can develop the tourism sector and Phuket’s economy as a whole (Chatikavanij, 2021). Additionally, the pandemic presented the global tourism sector a chance to contemplate changes to be more aligned with sustainable development goals (Gössling et al., 2020). The common perception is that revitalising tourism by boosting domestic tourism is key to the survival of many of Phuket’s businesses, whilst waiting for the pandemic to end. In this respect, Phuket can potentially reposition its tourism marketing.

During the pandemic, government had implemented tailor-made campaigns to attract domestic tourists in order to rejuvenate Phuket’s economy. *Travel Together* was one of the most notable projects which successfully compensated for some of the lost

income in some provinces. However, for main tourist destinations such as Phuket, Chiang Mai, Bangkok and Chonburi, this strategy was still insufficient (Ruentip & Laosamrit, 2020). The government's campaign alone was not enough to reinvigorate Phuket's economy fully, because there was such a large disparity between the incomes from international and domestic markets to compensate for. This fact is in line with the study done by Walters and Mair (2012), who contended that short-term discounting is the least effective marketing message in terms of delivering post-disaster recovery.

In the tourism industry, destination image is widely accepted as a critical factor in destination marketing; therefore for destination marketers, understanding this factor is essential in distinguishing and promoting their destinations (Yilmaz et al., 2009). Tourists are highly influenced by destination image. Studies by Pearce (1988), as well as Woodside and Lysonski (1989) illustrate that there is a positive correlation between positive destination images and tourist's decision to visit a location. Even when the perceptions obtained are not through personal experience, they can still significantly influence a tourist's decision making. Conversely, a negative destination image, even if unfounded, can lead to tourists not selecting that particular destination (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998).

The main tourism segment of Phuket has been the international market. As a consequence, most studies on Phuket as a tourist destination have either focused on international tourists' perceptions or specific markets whilst neglecting the overall destination image from the domestic perspective. Therefore, this research aims to examine the view of domestic tourists towards Phuket's destination image in the pre-pandemic period compared to during the pandemic. The findings offer insights into all aspects that contribute economically to Phuket and which have not been identified before. These findings help explicate Thai tourists' view on Phuket's image and can be a valuable tool in formulating potential strategies for the domestic market, that is key to revitalising Phuket's economy. Additionally, it should be noted that efforts to promote domestic tourism is the ultimate goal for post-crisis recovery of destinations.

Literature Review

Destination Image and its Formation

The definition of image has been ambiguous for a considerable period of time (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). For instance, "Impressions of a place" depends on an individual's perception of a particular area (Myers & Alpert, 1968). Another simple meaning of image is a group of ideas, beliefs, and impressions towards a destination from an individual (Crompton, 1979). The overall perception of a product that is formed by processing information from different sources over time produces an image perception. The term "image" also describes an overall mental picture

linked with stereotypes about a particular place or destination (Pearce, 1988). In another example, Dichter (1985) sees image as a total impression resulting from the consideration of individual elements, combined with cognitive and emotional content. In the field of psychology, image formation is part of the imagery. Fundamentally, “imagery processing” is defined as mental picturing as a whole which includes all senses such as smell, taste, sight, sound and touch. This is in contradiction to “discursive processing” which is defined as attributes arising from the stimulus. Therefore, products of destination image in this essence are perceived both in terms of individual attributes and holistic impressions (McInnis & Price, 1987).

On the other hand, Gallarza et al. (2002) proved that the creation of a destination picture is a highly complicated process, owing to the construct’s numerous, complex, relativistic, and dynamic characters. Destination images in existing empirical studies are multidimensional, according to Baloglu and McCleary (1999). Likewise, del Bosque and Martín (2008) confirmed that destination images are multidimensional and need to be processed from both aspects, cognitive and affective. To elaborate, image formation occurs in two stages. Firstly, the cognitive image, which refers to the belief or knowledge about something in this context, is the factor that leads to the affective image, which is the emotion one has towards that specific knowledge. Gartner argued that the formation of destination image takes place in three stages: cognitive, defined as how tourists perceive a destination; affective, defined as a feeling towards the destination and behavioural, defined as how the cognitive and affective images influence and predict tourist buying behaviour (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Researchers have come to agreement that cognitive images drive affective images because affective images are subjective responses from cognitive images given by destinations. Additionally, it is also claimed that image is an interpretation of the choices made by tourists and it is challenging for them to obtain a clear image of a destination before visiting it (Govers & Go, 2003). Frias et al. (2008) added that a cognitive and affective image is generated in the tourist’s mind before visiting a destination, as a result of the information sourced through different channels.

According to Beach and Mitchell (1987), the image theory is part of the schema theory, where knowledge about mental and physical matters, present in an individual’s mind, are combined with the intention to make decisions. The projected image in particular, is to convey the notion that it depicts the expected future. If one adopts a certain strategy or keeps acting in the same way, one may predict what will happen (events and states). A number of studies confirmed the relationship between role of image and decision making. According to Andreu et al. (2000), the underlining significance of satisfaction is a decisive factor in destination evaluation and one that influences future selections. In addition, the level of satisfaction derived as a consequence of an evaluation procedure might strengthen the destination’s

image (Chon, 1990; Ryan, 1995). Furthermore, the image of a place has a direct and indirect impact on the behaviour of tourists in the future (Lee, 2019). For example, the more positive the image of a destination, the more likely tourists are susceptible in the decision-making process (Hsu et al., 2016). Destination image experiences have a positive effect on the quality of perception and satisfaction, and a higher level of favourable images will lead to higher visitor satisfaction (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). A recent study supported the idea that a more realistic impression is created when one physically visits a destination (Michael et al., 2018).

Destination Attributes

In an empirical assessment of destination image by Echtner and Ritchie (1993), they defined the physical attributes as tourist activities, national parks, historic sites, beaches, exhibitions, natural attraction, entertainment, shopping, tour operation, sports facilities, local infrastructure/transportation, cities, accommodation/restaurants, architecture/buildings, cost/price levels and climate. The spectrum of abstract attributes included crowd, cleanliness, degree of urbanisation, commercialisation, economic affluence, political stability, personal safety, ease of communication, culture, cuisine, hospitality/friendliness/receptiveness, atmosphere, opportunity for adventure, opportunity to increase knowledge, family-friendly, reputation and quality of service (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). According to Gallarza et al. (2002), destination image often combines cognitive and affective images, such as activities, climate, landscape, nature, relaxation, accommodation, shopping facilities, transportation, residents' receptiveness, price, cultural attractions, gastronomy, originality, entertainment, accessibility, information availability, sports facilities, safety, social interaction, and service quality.

Apart from the catastrophic economic losses, the COVID-19 pandemic also triggered substantial behavioural changes in worldwide destinations (Atsa'am & Wario, 2021). Within the context of the world pandemic (COVID-19), risk perception is now emphasised as one of the negative features that is inevitably considered a destination image attribute (Perpiña et al. 2017). This corresponds with several studies which confirmed that these risks may be inherent in the cognitive evaluation of a destination (Avraham, 2004; Chew & Jahari, 2014). Empirical evidence in recent studies on COVID-19 revealed that unexpected incidents, hospitality, infrastructure, environment, safety, and unethical business practices affect negative emotions as a result of negative memorable tourism experiences (Kim, 2020). Recently, a study on new normal travelling amongst Thai tourists revealed that hygiene and health measures related to COVID-19, which is considered a safety factor, have the most substantial impact on choosing a destination (Tangtenglam & Pongpanich, 2021). Moreover, Zhu and Mehri (2022) confirmed that travel intention during the COVID-19 crisis is affected by perceived issues and risks.

Tourists also evaluate a destination's competitiveness based on its ability to maintain its appeal over rival places (Reisinger et al., 2019) and in this regard, Phuket has been driven to encourage domestic tourism and adhere to best practices in order to recover its competitiveness. Therefore, attributes related to vaccination, travel incentives and safety protocols are now included in the evaluation of a destination image as a consequence of the pandemic (Zaman et al., 2021).

Tourism scholars have classified destination attributes into several factors based on countries and their characteristics. Phuket is not only renowned for its beautiful beaches, but also its unique culture and its variety (TAT, n.d.). With a long history of multiculturalism, Phuket joined the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in 2015 in recognition its strategic assets for city development (UNESCO, 2022). Also, Phuket's cuisine has long been a big attraction to both Thai and international tourists (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2019). The allure of Phuket is not only for its beauty of nature especially as a sea, sun and sand destination, but also for its unique culture (Poltanee & Boonphetkaew, 2020). Moreover, the popularity of its hospitality is directly related to local people. According to Kozak (2007), the receptiveness of locals is essential for a destination to be perceived positively and it has been shown, beyond a doubt, to play an important role as a promoter of a destination's cultural values and meaning (Tung et al., 2021).

A similarity of destination attributes was found among neighbouring countries and island destinations. For instance, a study in Taiwan found related attributes in memorable tourism experiences were local culture, activities & special events, hospitality, infrastructure, destination management, accessibility, quality of service, physiography, place attachment, superstructure and unique architectures/cuisines (Kim, 2013). Nhu et al. (2013) attested that the image of a destination is essential for tourists to be attracted to visit a place. These factors include natural environment, culture, travel infrastructure, cuisine, socioeconomic environment, natural resources, language and atmosphere of the destination (Giao et al., 2020). Similarly, variety seeking, infrastructure, environment, price, local food, leisure and entertainment, accessibility and atmosphere confirmed an increase in domestic tourist revisit intention (Giao et al., 2020).

Moreover, a study of destination image in Gökçeada, Turkey shared some characteristics of island destinations such as safety, weather, food, hygiene and cleanliness, cultural events, historical places, and natural beauty (Bil et al., 2021). Another study in Jeju Island in Korea found that visit intention is influenced by the environment (beach, food, safety, infrastructure); attractions (historical site, nightlife, scenery, friendly people); as well as value for money and climate (Park & Njite, 2010). Regionally, tourists in Thailand share some common characteristics

regardless of their residence. For instance, the main travel purpose of Thai tourists is to relax and escape from routine life, to reward themselves and to build memories and experiences. The travel motivation among Thais is to spend quality time with their families because the Thai culture leans towards collectivism which is family-oriented. Thai people like to take photos during trips and use personal cars to travel. Further, food is one of the most common tourism products that is purchased during trips (TAT, 2021).

Methodology

A minimum sample size of 400 was identified for the study. The quantitative research conducted an online survey from September to December 2021, in which a questionnaire was distributed through social media channels such as Facebook, LINE groups, Instagram, LinkedIn, Blockdit and Pantip (Thai discussion forum). Respondents were required to complete three screening questions first (yes/no) to meet the following study criteria: 1) Thai resident over 18 years old, 2) Currently living in Thailand and have travelled out of their area of residence at least once a year, 3) Have been to Phuket, both before the pandemic and during the pandemic. Finally, 403 completed questionnaires were gathered and validated for further analysis.

Prior to data collection, the drafted questionnaire was reviewed by three experts, who are professors in the hospitality and tourism faculty, for validity reassurance. These experts checked Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). Additionally, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process was carried out. Each construct/factor used in this study is based on a dimension of perceived destination image (Beerli & Martin, 2004). These factors included natural resources and environment, tourist infrastructure, general infrastructure, social environment, political and economic factors, culture history and arts, as well as safety and security factors (Kim, 2020). Chebli and Said (2020) uncovered attributes that impact traveller's behaviour amid the pandemic, which are related to the destination image (Khasawneh & Alfandi, 2019), including COVID-related risk perception. Additionally, the items under each factor were adjusted according to Phuket's context combined with the feedback from the IOC process as well as the literature review (Echtner & Ritchie; 1993, Baloglu & McCleary 1997; Phetvaroon, 2007; Jong-Hyeong Kim, 2014; Moon & Han, 2018; Singh & Singh, 2019; TAT, 2020; Zaman et al., 2021).

For the validity and reliability test, the summary score of IOC was 0.99 which is considered acceptable. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 40 tourists before the actual launch of the survey. The Cronbach test was implemented to test the reliability of the destination attributes which consisted of 37 items. The alpha coefficient was greater than 0.7 which is deemed acceptable (see Table 1).

Results

Demographic Profile

Of the total 403 respondents, the majority were females (65.3%), while male respondents accounted for the balance (34.7%). In terms of age, the majority of respondents were 36–41 years old (29.3%) and 30–35 years old (22.1%). Most respondents had a bachelor's degree (70.7%). In terms of marital status, nearly half of the respondents were married and had children (40.2%). The majority of the respondents were either company employees (32.5%) or owned businesses (21.1%). Those with a monthly income of 25,001–45,000 baht formed the biggest group of respondents (38%). The majority resided in Central Thailand (26.3%), followed by Northeast (23.3%), South (17.1), Bangkok (14.6%), North (11.2%) and East (7.4%), respectively.

Travel Behaviour

In terms of travel behaviour, 20.8% travelled twice a year, 25.1% travelled 3 times a year, while 32% travelled 4–9 times per year and 13.8% travelled more than 10 times a year. Most of them travelled with family (44.9%). The majority of respondents travelled on convenient days (37.7%) and weekends or public holidays (31.8%). With regard to visiting Phuket, 48.3% of respondents have been to Phuket 2–5 times, 21.3% — 6–9 times and 30.4% — more than 10 times. The purpose of travel to Phuket was for leisure (68%), visiting friends and relatives (26.3%), and for business contact and work (20.3%). On the other hand, the motivation for travel to Phuket during the pandemic was to use discounts and promotion during the COVID-19 period (29.5%) and to take advantage of government travel campaigns (15.6%).

Paired Sample t-test of Phuket Destination Image Before and During COVID-19

A paired sample t-test was conducted to evaluate the differences in perception of destination attributes before and during the pandemic. The test results shown in Table 1 demonstrate that 31 out of 37 attributes were statistically significant ($p < .005$). A negative t-value indicates that the mean perception of the attribute increased during COVID-19 compared to before COVID-19 while a positive t-value indicates the opposite. The results can be interpreted as follows:

For **natural resources and environment**, all attributes showed notable and statistically significant increases, when compared during and before COVID-19: *Phuket has beautiful seas and beaches* at $t(402) = -11.29$, $p < .001$, *Phuket has peaceful beaches and less crowds* at $t(402) = -14.89$, $p < .001$, *Phuket has beautiful viewpoints worth visiting* at $t(402) = -7.53$, $p < .001$, *Phuket has nice weather, no pollution* at

$t(402) = -10.09, p < .001$ and *Overall, Phuket is a clean place* at $t(402) = -10.82, p < .001$. This factor was found to display the biggest changes in t-value compared with other factors, which indicates a high discrepancy in the attribute between the two periods of time.

In terms of **culture, history and arts**, attributes mostly showed statistically significant increases when compared during COVID-19 and before COVID-19. For this factor, attributes included *Phuket has been recognised as the City of Gastronomy by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)* at $t(402) = -2.95, p < .001$, *Phuket old town has Sino Portuguese architecture, local shopping, cafes and restaurants, places for taking pictures* at $t(402) = -4.33, p < .001$ and *Phuket has beautiful street art that reflects the story on the buildings, houses and walls* at $t(402) = -4.03, p < .001$, respectively. However, *Phuket has a unique culture and traditions, such as vegetarian festivals was not statistically significant* with $t(402) = -0.67, p = .510$, which suggests that regardless of the pandemic, the perception of tourists did not change for this particular attribute.

For **general infrastructure**, all attributes showed statistically significant increases during COVID-19 compared with before COVID-19, including attributes *Phuket is a "Smart city* at $t(402) = -4.21, p < .001$, *Travelling in Phuket is convenient* at $t(402) = -4.19, p < .001$, and *Phuket has a variety of public transportation systems* at $t(402) = -2.17, p = .003$.

In terms of **social environment**, attributes mostly showed statistically significant increases during COVID-19 compared to before COVID-19 and included attributes such as, *Phuket people are friendly* at $t(402) = -4.75, p < .001$, *The service providers are welcoming Thai tourists very well* at $t(402) = -7.74, p < .001$ and *The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism* at $t(402) = -7.37, p < .001$, respectively. However, *The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well* was not statistically significant at $t(402) = -1.33, p = .180$.

For **tourist infrastructure**, attributes with statistically significant increases during COVID-19, compared to before COVID-19, included attributes *Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions* at $t(402) = -2.64, p < .001$, *Phuket has spas and massage parlours of a high standard and quality* at $t(402) = -2.47, p < .001$, *Phuket has hygienic and safe restaurants* at $t(402) = -2.60, p < .001$, *Attractions provide sufficient information to educate the tourists* at $t(402) = -3.28, p < .001$ and *Phuket offers a wide range of quality accommodation* at $t(402) = -3.57, p < .001$, respectively. However, two attributes were not statistically significant, namely *Phuket offers a variety of activities for the whole family* at $t(402) = -1.06, p = .291$ and *Phuket has all kinds of entertainment* at $t(402) = 1.41, p = .160$.

For **political and economic factors**, some attributes showed a statistically significant increase during COVID-19 compared to before COVID-19 such as *Phuket is an ideal city for relaxation and long-term stay* at $t(402) = -7.33, p < .001$,

Phuket is a place worth spending money in at $t(402) = -8.25, p < .001$, whereas two other attributes were not statistically significant, *Phuket has a high cost of living* at $t(402) = -0.39, p = .695$ and *Most Phuket people have a good quality of life* at $t(402) = -0.92, p = .360$.

In terms of **safety and security**, all attributes showed statistically significant increases during COVID-19 compared to before COVID-19 and included attributes *Phuket is safe from natural disasters* at $t(402) = -5.73, p < .001$, *Phuket is safe from various crimes* at $t(402) = -3.61, p < .001$, *Phuket is safe from trafficking or abuse of animals for tourism* at $t(402) = -2.82, p = .005$, *Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents* at $t(402) = -6.26, p < .001$ and *Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips* at $t(402) = -3.86, p < .001$, respectively.

For **COVID-related risk perception**, all attributes displayed statistically significant increases during COVID-19 compared with before COVID-19, including attributes such as, *Many places in Phuket are safe from germs* at $t(402) = -2.16, p = .032$, *Phuket has strict disease prevention and control measures, such as safety hygienic standards (SHA)* at $t(402) = -7.55, p < .001$, *Service providers in Phuket offer flexible and free amendment of flight and accommodation bookings* at $t(402) = -5.86, p < .001$ and *A high percentage of people in Phuket are vaccinated, inspiring confidence in tourists from other provinces* at $t(402) = -3.17, p < .001$, respectively.

Table 1. Paired sample t-test results of Phuket destination image before and during COVID-19

Attributes	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Time	M	S.D.	df	t	p
Natural resources and environment	.840						
Phuket has beautiful seas and beaches		Before	3.48	1.16	402	-11.29	.000
		During	4.08	0.97			
Phuket has peaceful beaches and less crowds		Before	2.82	0.97	402	-14.89	.000
		During	3.91	1.24			
Phuket has beautiful viewpoints worth visiting		Before	3.67	1.24	402	-7.53	.000
		During	4.03	1.04			
Phuket has nice weather, no pollution		Before	3.29	1.04	402	-10.09	.000
		During	3.84	1.11			
Overall, Phuket is a clean place		Before	3.25	1.11	402	-10.82	.000
		During	3.80	0.94			
Culture history and arts	.900						
Phuket has a unique culture and traditions, such as vegetarian festivals		Before	3.73	0.94	402	-0.67	.056
		During	3.77	1.07			

Table 1. (cont')

Attributes	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Time	M	S.D.	df	t	p																																																																																																																																												
Phuket has been recognised the City of Gastronomy by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)		Before	3.58	1.07	402	-2.95	.003																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.70	0.96				Phuket old town has Sino Portuguese architecture, local shopping, cafes and restaurants, places for taking pictures		Before	3.74	0.96	402	-4.33	.000	During	3.94	1.11	Phuket has beautiful street art that reflects the story on the buildings, houses and walls		Before	3.70	1.11	402	-4.03	.000	During	3.88	0.92	General Infrastructure	.887							Phuket is a "Smart city"		Before	3.23	0.92	402	-4.21	.000	During	3.42	1.12	Travelling in Phuket is convenient		Before	3.15	1.12	402	-4.19	.000	During	3.35	0.97	Phuket has a variety of public transportation systems		Before	3.07	0.97	402	-2.17	.031	During	3.17	1.10	Social Environment	.810							Phuket people are friendly		Before	3.56	1.10	402	-4.75	.000	During	3.76	0.96	The service providers are welcoming Thai tourists very well		Before	3.49	0.96	402	-7.74	.000	During	3.87	1.11	The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well		Before	3.87	1.11	402	-1.33	.184	During	3.93	0.95	The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000	During	3.67	0.92	Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402
Phuket old town has Sino Portuguese architecture, local shopping, cafes and restaurants, places for taking pictures		Before	3.74	0.96	402	-4.33	.000																																																																																																																																												
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General Infrastructure	.887																																																																																																																																																		
Phuket is a "Smart city"		Before	3.23	0.92	402	-4.21	.000																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.42	1.12				Travelling in Phuket is convenient		Before	3.15	1.12	402	-4.19	.000	During	3.35	0.97	Phuket has a variety of public transportation systems		Before	3.07	0.97	402	-2.17	.031	During	3.17	1.10	Social Environment	.810							Phuket people are friendly		Before	3.56	1.10	402	-4.75	.000	During	3.76	0.96	The service providers are welcoming Thai tourists very well		Before	3.49	0.96	402	-7.74	.000	During	3.87	1.11	The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well		Before	3.87	1.11	402	-1.33	.184	During	3.93	0.95	The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000	During	3.67	0.92	Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																				
Travelling in Phuket is convenient		Before	3.15	1.12	402	-4.19	.000																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.35	0.97				Phuket has a variety of public transportation systems		Before	3.07	0.97	402	-2.17	.031	During	3.17	1.10	Social Environment	.810							Phuket people are friendly		Before	3.56	1.10	402	-4.75	.000	During	3.76	0.96	The service providers are welcoming Thai tourists very well		Before	3.49	0.96	402	-7.74	.000	During	3.87	1.11	The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well		Before	3.87	1.11	402	-1.33	.184	During	3.93	0.95	The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000	During	3.67	0.92	Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																															
Phuket has a variety of public transportation systems		Before	3.07	0.97	402	-2.17	.031																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.17	1.10				Social Environment	.810							Phuket people are friendly		Before	3.56	1.10	402	-4.75	.000	During	3.76	0.96	The service providers are welcoming Thai tourists very well		Before	3.49	0.96	402	-7.74	.000	During	3.87	1.11	The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well		Before	3.87	1.11	402	-1.33	.184	During	3.93	0.95	The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000	During	3.67	0.92	Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																																										
Social Environment	.810																																																																																																																																																		
Phuket people are friendly		Before	3.56	1.10	402	-4.75	.000																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.76	0.96				The service providers are welcoming Thai tourists very well		Before	3.49	0.96	402	-7.74	.000	During	3.87	1.11	The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well		Before	3.87	1.11	402	-1.33	.184	During	3.93	0.95	The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000	During	3.67	0.92	Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																																																													
The service providers are welcoming Thai tourists very well		Before	3.49	0.96	402	-7.74	.000																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.87	1.11				The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well		Before	3.87	1.11	402	-1.33	.184	During	3.93	0.95	The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000	During	3.67	0.92	Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																																																																								
The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well		Before	3.87	1.11	402	-1.33	.184																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.93	0.95				The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000	During	3.67	0.92	Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																																																																																			
The places in Phuket are less crowded, making it attractive for tourism		Before	3.25	1.05	402	-7.37	.000																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.67	0.92				Tourist Infrastructure	.920							Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009	During	3.88	1.12	Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																																																																																														
Tourist Infrastructure	.920																																																																																																																																																		
Phuket has a wide variety of tourist attractions		Before	3.77	0.92	402	-2.64	.009																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.88	1.12				Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014	During	3.84	1.01																																																																																																																																	
Phuket has spas and massage parlours of high standard and quality		Before	3.73	1.12	402	-2.47	.014																																																																																																																																												
		During	3.84	1.01																																																																																																																																															

Table 1. (cont)

Attributes	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Time	M	S.D.	df	t	p																																																																																																																																																								
Phuket has hygienic and safe restaurants	.748	Before	3.78	1.01	402	-2.60	.010																																																																																																																																																								
		During	3.89	1.20				Attractions provide sufficient information to educate the tourists	Before	3.59	1.06	402	-3.28	.001	During	3.73	0.92	Phuket offers a wide range of quality accommodation	Before	3.83	0.95	402	-3.57	.000	During	3.98	1.06	Phuket offers a variety of activities for the whole family	Before	3.73	0.92	402	-1.06	.291	During	3.78	1.06	Phuket has all kinds of entertainment	Before	3.73	1.08	402	1.41	.160	During	3.66	0.92	Political and Economic Factors	.883							Phuket is an ideal city for relaxation and long-term stay	Before	3.45	1.24	402	-7.33	.000	During	3.77	1.18	Transportation fares are reasonable for the distance	Before	2.96	1.18	402	-4.52	.000	During	3.17	1.06	Phuket has a high cost of living	Before	3.97	1.15	402	0.39	.695	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86
Attractions provide sufficient information to educate the tourists		Before	3.59	1.06	402	-3.28	.001																																																																																																																																																								
		During	3.73	0.92				Phuket offers a wide range of quality accommodation	Before	3.83	0.95	402	-3.57	.000	During	3.98	1.06	Phuket offers a variety of activities for the whole family	Before	3.73	0.92	402	-1.06	.291	During	3.78	1.06	Phuket has all kinds of entertainment	Before	3.73	1.08	402	1.41	.160	During	3.66	0.92	Political and Economic Factors	.883							Phuket is an ideal city for relaxation and long-term stay	Before	3.45	1.24	402	-7.33	.000	During	3.77	1.18	Transportation fares are reasonable for the distance	Before	2.96	1.18	402	-4.52	.000	During	3.17	1.06	Phuket has a high cost of living	Before	3.97	1.15	402	0.39	.695	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91						
Phuket offers a wide range of quality accommodation		Before	3.83	0.95	402	-3.57	.000																																																																																																																																																								
		During	3.98	1.06				Phuket offers a variety of activities for the whole family	Before	3.73	0.92	402	-1.06	.291	During	3.78	1.06	Phuket has all kinds of entertainment	Before	3.73	1.08	402	1.41	.160	During	3.66	0.92	Political and Economic Factors	.883							Phuket is an ideal city for relaxation and long-term stay	Before	3.45	1.24	402	-7.33	.000	During	3.77	1.18	Transportation fares are reasonable for the distance	Before	2.96	1.18	402	-4.52	.000	During	3.17	1.06	Phuket has a high cost of living	Before	3.97	1.15	402	0.39	.695	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																
Phuket offers a variety of activities for the whole family		Before	3.73	0.92	402	-1.06	.291																																																																																																																																																								
		During	3.78	1.06				Phuket has all kinds of entertainment	Before	3.73	1.08	402	1.41	.160	During	3.66	0.92	Political and Economic Factors	.883							Phuket is an ideal city for relaxation and long-term stay	Before	3.45	1.24	402	-7.33	.000	During	3.77	1.18	Transportation fares are reasonable for the distance	Before	2.96	1.18	402	-4.52	.000	During	3.17	1.06	Phuket has a high cost of living	Before	3.97	1.15	402	0.39	.695	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																										
Phuket has all kinds of entertainment		Before	3.73	1.08	402	1.41	.160																																																																																																																																																								
		During	3.66	0.92				Political and Economic Factors	.883							Phuket is an ideal city for relaxation and long-term stay	Before	3.45	1.24	402	-7.33	.000	During	3.77	1.18	Transportation fares are reasonable for the distance	Before	2.96	1.18	402	-4.52	.000	During	3.17	1.06	Phuket has a high cost of living	Before	3.97	1.15	402	0.39	.695	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																				
Political and Economic Factors		.883																																																																																																																																																													
Phuket is an ideal city for relaxation and long-term stay		Before	3.45	1.24	402	-7.33	.000																																																																																																																																																								
		During	3.77	1.18				Transportation fares are reasonable for the distance	Before	2.96	1.18	402	-4.52	.000	During	3.17	1.06	Phuket has a high cost of living	Before	3.97	1.15	402	0.39	.695	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																						
Transportation fares are reasonable for the distance		Before	2.96	1.18	402	-4.52	.000																																																																																																																																																								
	During	3.17	1.06	Phuket has a high cost of living				Before	3.97	1.15	402	0.39	.695	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																	
Phuket has a high cost of living	Before	3.97	1.15		402	0.39	.695																																																																																																																																																								
	During	3.95	1.24	Phuket is a place worth spending money in				Before	3.36	1.20	402	-8.25	.000	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																											
Phuket is a place worth spending money in	Before	3.36	1.20		402	-8.25	.000																																																																																																																																																								
	During	3.76	1.15	Most Phuket people have a good quality of life				Before	3.59	1.06	402	0.92	.360	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security	.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																																					
Most Phuket people have a good quality of life	Before	3.59	1.06		402	0.92	.360																																																																																																																																																								
	During	3.55	0.94	Safety and Security				.883							Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000	During	3.64	1.11	Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																																															
Safety and Security	.883																																																																																																																																																														
Phuket is safe from natural disasters	Before	3.40	0.91	402	-5.73	.000																																																																																																																																																									
	During	3.64	1.11				Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000	During	3.37	0.92	Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																																																																	
Phuket is safe from various crimes	Before	3.22	1.11	402	-3.61	.000																																																																																																																																																									
	During	3.37	0.92				Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005	During	3.43	1.00	Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																																																																											
Phuket is safe from animal trafficking or abuse for tourism	Before	3.31	0.92	402	-2.82	.005																																																																																																																																																									
	During	3.43	1.00				Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000	During	3.43	0.96	Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																																																																																					
Road trips in Phuket are safe from accidents	Before	3.16	1.00	402	-6.26	.000																																																																																																																																																									
	During	3.43	0.96				Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000	During	3.72	0.91																																																																																																																																															
Phuket offers safe marine activities such as water sports, boat trips	Before	3.55	1.06	402	-3.86	.000																																																																																																																																																									
	During	3.72	0.91																																																																																																																																																												

Table 1. (cont)

Attributes	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Time	M	S.D.	df	t	p
COVID-related Risk Perception	.833						
Many places in Phuket are safe from germs		Before	3.29	0.96	402	-2.16	.032
		During	3.39	1.08			
Phuket has strict disease prevention and control measures, such as safety hygienic standards (SHA)		Before	3.40	0.94	402	-7.55	.000
		During	3.75	1.05			
Service providers in Phuket offer flexible and free amendment of flight and accommodation bookings		Before	3.25	0.92	402	-5.86	.000
		During	3.54	1.03			
A high percentage of people in Phuket are vaccinated, inspiring confidence in tourists from other provinces		Before	3.31	1.03	402	-3.17	.000
		During	3.55	0.91			

Discussion and Conclusion

Like elsewhere in the world, COVID-19 was one of the most disastrous events in history for the Phuket tourism industry. A broad spectrum of the destination image attributes of Phuket are essential factors in the decision-making process, especially among Thai tourists who are key players in driving Phuket's economy not only during the pandemic, but also in the future. The Thai tourist segment could be developed as a much bigger source of revenue for Phuket. Tourism products in Phuket could also better serve the needs of the domestic market. In comparing the destination image perceived by Thai tourists before and during COVID-19, the present study revealed that the Thai tourists' point of view did vary, depending on the attribute.

Favourable Image during COVID-19

The results indicate that during the pandemic, Thai tourists perceived that many of the attributes have improved or were more favourable compared to the time before COVID-19. For the natural resources and environmental factor, lesser crowds as well as cleaner and less polluted beaches and seas are direct consequences of lower tourist numbers. Prior to COVID-19, there was an excessive number of tourists who contributed widespread damage to the marine environment. Tourist attractions such as beaches, islands, walking streets, temples and markets in Phuket, received a

lot of negative comments due to overcrowding and excessive litter (Taecharungroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). This finding is also congruent with Fuchs and Sincharoenkul (2021) who revealed that littering is viewed negatively and affected Phuket's destination image and the scale of the problem decreased during COVID-19 due to the small number of tourists (Fuchs, 2021). Additionally, Rogowski (2022) confirmed that national parks were regarded as safe havens amid all other accessible tourist locations and as a way to spend time in a natural setting whilst following a set of safety precautions during the pandemic.

The results also show that tourists perceive that Phuket's general infrastructure has changed during COVID-19. Phuket, for decades, had a poor public transportation system that was identified as an area for improvement as pointed out by Sakolnakorn et al. (2013). For instance, according to Howard (2009), one of the most unpleasant experiences for tourists was using Phuket's taxi service. However, during the pandemic, the Phuket local government, stakeholders and private sectors in tourism took advantage of the crisis time to collaborate and work on tourism-related problems to revive the economy. As a consequence, issues like problematic taxi services and poor infrastructure were improved. For instance, private companies and stakeholders developed applications for taxi services which offer more options to tourists. Thus, alleviating one of the pain points of Phuket's negative destination image.

Moreover, during the pandemic, tourist arrivals decreased dramatically resulting in lower tourist demand and job losses forcing many economic migrants to relocate back to their hometowns. As a result, there was less traffic congestion and less demand for public transportation which led to a favourable perception amongst tourists regarding travel in Phuket is convenient during COVID-19 than before. In addition, several innovative digital systems were implemented such as the Smart Gates system which integrates tourist identification and vaccination information upon arrival, as well as other examples of technological advancements (Chaitrong, n.d.). As a result, the attribute *Phuket is a SMART city*, has been rated higher because tourists feel like more technological innovations have been adopted successfully for COVID-19 prevention.

In terms of social environment, tourists also perceive Phuket people as friendlier, service providers are more welcoming and the crowd ambience, in general, has improved. In the past, stereotyping service providers and residents in Phuket were viewed negatively for favouring Western tourists, whilst Thai tourists received less privileged services (Pantip, 2020). Moreover, rapid tourism development and large tourist numbers may have caused feelings of annoyance among residents (Jordan et al, 2019). The unpredictable pandemic duration and the severe reduction of foreign tourists brought a feeling of uncertainty and hopelessness in all sectors related to tourism in Phuket. Therefore, providing better service and hospitality to Thai tourists was the only realistic choice for tourism operators and may have resulted in the

overall improved perception of Phuket amongst the domestic tourists. Nevertheless, for long-term sustainability, all service sectors need to be educated and encouraged to improve their approach and mindset in their provision of service.

With regard to tourist infrastructure, during the closure of Thailand to all foreign visitors at the peak of the pandemic, many tourism-related businesses were closed or operated partially, including some hotels, clubs, recreation sites, massage parlours and restaurants. However, the perception of Thai tourists improved during this period as these factors were not considered important for their visit to Phuket. To elaborate, Phuket's highlights are natural attractions such as beaches, seas and scenic viewpoints. Thai tourists also tend to prefer visiting these natural attractions as well as temples, markets, cafes (TAT, 2020). Thus, regardless of the pandemic, these attractions remained the same, unlike other tourist activities or services such as water sports, cultural shows, and nightlife, which are usually more popular among foreign tourists.

In terms of cultural history and arts, gastronomy, architecture, local shopping, cafes and restaurants and best photo spots were perceived more favourably during the pandemic than before. Likewise with tourist attractions, smaller crowds and lesser human presence enabled the beauty of these places to flourish more and enjoyed better (Kaufmann et al., 2020).

Historically, Phuket is perceived as an expensive destination (Kalnavakul & Promsivapallop, 2022). Political and economic attributes such as *Phuket is an ideal city for long-term stay*, *it is worth spending money in* and *reasonable transport fares* attained positive feedback during the pandemic as well. To recoup losses from international travel bans, the Thai government promoted a tourism campaign called *Travel Together* to encourage Thai tourists to travel domestically with 40% discounts on flight, accommodation and food and beverage. This could have attributed to Phuket being viewed as a more affordable destination during the pandemic.

Safety and security attributes like *Phuket is safe from natural disasters, crimes, accidents, animal trafficking* and *safe to do marine activities* also showed an improved perception. This positive perception during COVID-19 could be a result of decreased number of tourists, and thus lowered demand for tourism products. The negative view of tourism impact was also consequently diminished.

With regard to COVID-related risk perception, despite only emerging and regarded during the pandemic period specifically, Thai tourists still perceived this factor as better than "before". These attributes include *Many places in Phuket are safe from germs*; *Phuket has strict disease prevention and control measures, such as safety hygienic standards (SHA)*; and *A high percentage of people in Phuket are vaccinated, inspiring confidence in tourists from other provinces*. This could be attributable to the assurance and confidence towards Phuket, because it has been selected and promoted as a model city for efficient COVID-19 control measures and hygiene standards.

This finding concurs with Wongmonta (2021) who contended that measures such as effective vaccination programmes are essential to leveraging a destination's appeal during the pandemic. Further, according to Rudyanto et al. (2021), risk perception and risk avoidance behaviour are adversely associated, that is, danger perceptions in tourism travel are mostly influenced by awareness of pandemic risks. Moreover, many scholars who studied tourist behaviour during COVID-19 found that risk perception is an important attribute in their decision making (Chebli et al., 2020). The perception for the attribute *Service providers in Phuket offer flexible and free amendment of flight and accommodation bookings* improved because during the pandemic, the health crisis led to a fear of going to public places and resulted in loss of income and economic security, which in turn, negatively influenced tourist's confidence and ability to spend money on travel. Similarly, in the study by McKercher and Pine (2006), they referred to SARS as a subset of social crisis, not just a medical crisis. Fear of SARS led to an economic slowdown as citizens decided not to dine in restaurants or visit other public spaces. As a result, privation developed and this lack of economic security made people less confident to travel during that outbreak.

Non-critical Destination Attributes

Six attributes were found not statistically significantly different from tourist perception, between the periods before or during the pandemic. The unchanged perception in the attribute *Phuket has a unique culture and traditions, such as vegetarian festivals* can be possibly attributed to the fact that Phuket residents have devoutly followed certain customs and traditions such as the vegetarian festival, for many years. These events fulfil the needs of the local population and were not created as activities for tourists. Subsequently, they became tourist attractions and were promoted as such. The attribute *The service providers are welcoming international tourists very well* also displayed no difference in the perception of Thai tourists before and during the pandemic. This indicates that Thai tourists feel that service providers have always treated foreign tourists optimally before COVID and continue to do so during the pandemic. Additionally, they perceived that Phuket service providers will maintain a high quality of service to satisfy the international demand.

The perception for *Phuket offers a variety of activities for the whole family* and *Phuket has all kinds of entertainment* also did not change between the two periods compared. This could be possibly because family activities and entertainment for locals were not closed down compared to services/activities aimed at the international market, because Thai tourists could still travel to Phuket. Also, local entertainment was more likely to be natural attractions such as beaches or temples, which were not closed. The unchanged perception for *Most Phuket people have a good quality of life* suggests that regardless of the state of economy or difficulties faced by individuals and businesses as a result of COVID-19, tourists did not perceive any difference in

the quality of life. This could very well be because tourists (even if they are Thai) do not have the inside knowledge about the locals' way of life. As such, this perception is considered a strength and reflects that Phuket has been performing well and continues to do so despite the pandemic. When considering the attribute *Phuket has a high cost of living*, tourists perceive that things are still as expensive as they were before the pandemic and nothing has changed. However, although tourists perceive Phuket as a costly destination, it should be noted that they also believe that *Phuket is worth spending money in*.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

The present study discovered that the new destination attribute that emerged from the recent pandemic, COVID-related risk perception, plays an important role in the cognitive perception of destination image, apart from other risk attributes that the tourist may encounter in their planning process or during visits to a destination.

Managerial Implications

Based on to the results, COVID-related risk perception attributes such as germ-free environment, flexible and amendable services as well as vaccination rates are very important for a positive destination image. This corroborates with Chaulagain et al. (2019) who asserted that safety and security are essential for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) to include in their risk prevention, minimisation and mitigation strategies. These attributes have also been highlighted as critical factors in post-crisis recovery to ameliorate future strategies and recover the competitive advantage of a destination (Dwyer et al., 2006). Therefore, restoring confidence in tourists during and after the pandemic is one of the most important factors in building competitiveness in crisis recovery (Goh, 2021; Xu et al. 2021; Zaman et al. 2021).

This study also highlighted the importance of preserving natural resources as one of the key factors in driving sustainable tourism. The "less quantity, more quality" concept can be applied in selecting "conscious tourists" who are willing to spend more for premium tourism products. Thus, to promote such a market and to attract environmentally conscious tourists, measures such as limitations on visitor numbers, recycling initiatives, as well as awareness and education for locals are necessary. In addition, The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has advocated these measures as valuable indicators for sustainable tourism since 1996. Studies have shown that education is important and tourists should be given a code of conduct, which is a form of persuasive messaging (soft intervention) and considered the most influential approach (Marion & Farrell, 1998). Additionally, service providers in Phuket can

also benefit from education and awareness programmes. Local service providers who lack skills and expertise on sustainable tourism and environmental management can be assisted through training, potentially provided by private sector organisations such as hotel establishments or national or local environmental organisations.

Given the existing supply of tourism products and infrastructure in Phuket, there is a great potential in developing the domestic tourism market to contribute a larger share of Phuket's income. Although Goh (2021) doubted that the quality of Asian tourists is capable of replacing high-value long-haul tourists, Bangkok metropolitan and Thais from adjacent provinces do have relatively higher incomes compared to other provinces in Thailand (NSO, 2022) and these higher income segments fall into the high-end market, which is targeted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) in promoting tourism strategies (TAT, 2021).

Essentially, the key to creating an destination image is not to invest in a new product for an existing market; but rather, to change consumers' perceptions so that they are consistent with actual products in the market (Ries & Trout, 2001). Due to its success as a model city during pandemic, Phuket can actively promote this image to boost its attractiveness as an ideal destination. Mass media communication has evolved into mass self-communication (Valkenburg et al., 2016) and as proven empirically in tourism literature, user-generated content (UGC) can be a powerful tool for promoting a destination (Ana & Istudor, 2013; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014). UGC also can substantially influence the image of travel organisations and destination marketing organisations (Marine-Roig, 2016; Önder et al., 2019; Taecharungroj & Mathayomchan, 2019). It has been established that when travellers actively participate in online communities or discussion forums related to travel (Ben-Shaul & Reichel, 2017; Bilro et al., 2018) by sharing positive experiences and beautiful photos of Phuket, this can encourage potential tourists to visit the city (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015). While it is important to create a positive total image of Phuket, it is also highly critical to ensure that the reality of the destination matches its image. Thus, general and tourist infrastructure as well as the natural and social environment including safety and health aspects should be well managed and effectively maintained.

Moreover, it is essential to not overlook current global trends. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably accelerated the realisation of the importance of sustainable development by addressing the negative aspects of tourism, such as environmental degradation, congestion, and social exploitation (Niewiadomski, 2020). Weaver and Lawton (2006) also suggested that sustainable practices in tourism are worthwhile due to the widespread trend of green tourism and the fact that many new travellers today carry strong ethical convictions when making consumption decisions. In this regard, policy makers need to take into account all aspects in their planning strategies and engage educators as well as all related stakeholders to develop a tourism industry with same direction, objectives and goals. As such,

tourism industry players such as accommodation providers and SME businesses are responsible in complying with and supporting these strategies.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the current study and suggested future research directions can be treated as an opportunity to expand on the current findings and enrich the destination image literature. It is beyond the scope of this study to address the question of whether online surveys are effective in reaching sophisticated tourists, who are not as active on the internet and if such surveys keep respondents fully engaged. Furthermore, future perceptions may change as a consequence of the divergence of policies, practices, promotion and marketing. Dissimilar situations over a period of time can change the perception of a tourist or the image of a destination; therefore, it is highly recommended by the author to conduct cross-sectional study at any point in time of crises to truly validate the current findings on destination image.

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