

# MOVIE EFFECTS ON THE IMAGE OF THAILAND AMONG COLLEGE STUDENT TRAVELERS

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how selected college students perceive Thailand as a destination and to determine how viewing a movie, "The Beach," would affect their perceptions. An experiment was utilized to determine if perceptions were different between those who had seen the movie and those who had not seen the movie and if those perceptions changed over time. The results of this study indicated that the knowledge of Thailand was very limited among selected college students. Overall, college students agreed most that Thailand is a place with different food, architecture styles, culture, and lifestyles and where beautiful natural sceneries and good beaches could be found. Despite the positive perceptions college students had of Thailand, their likelihood to actually visit Thailand was low. The movie was found to be ineffective in inducing a visit to Thailand among the respondents. Nevertheless, it did help to enhance positive images but the effects faded away over time.

Keywords: Movie-induced tourism, student travel, destination image and experimental design.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Since the economic crisis in Thailand in 1997, the importance of tourism has increased dramatically due to its role in helping to maintain the flow of badly needed foreign exchange, creating jobs, and generating more income for people in countries with an evolving tourism economy. The Thai government (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2001) is now facilitating the production of movies, hoping to improve the image of the country,

induce tourism, and bring more revenue to the country. Part of their strategy is to attract more young adults, such as college-aged student travelers and convert them into loyal tourists.

Young adult, college-aged travelers have received less attention in the majority of existing market studies due to their lack of large amounts of discretionary spending for overseas travel. According to the Federation of International Youth Travel Organization (FIYTO), young people represent 20 percent of international tourism. In addition, the tourism statistics from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2001) indicates that the percentage of student travelers has increased every year from 1998 through 2002.

In order to effectively promote Thailand tourism products among the student travel market, it is necessary to know how they perceive Thailand and how the media can affect their perceptions. Although several studies found that movies help to increase tourism in countries such as Australia, Scotland, the U.S.A., and the U.K., previous research has not paid attention to the effect a movie can have on an image of a specific film destination over time. Since it is widely accepted that a destination's image plays a major role in the destination selection process (Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Mayo and Jarvis 1981; Goodrich 1978), a more in-depth study regarding the effects of movies on destination image over time will only support and strengthen the existing knowledge of movie-induced tourism and destination image. Furthermore, it will also provide meaningful destination marketing guidelines that will benefit Thailand's tourism in the future.

## 1.1 Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a movie on the image of Thailand among student travelers. The movie, "The Beach," was used in this study because, unlike others movies filmed in Thailand, this particular movie made a particularly unique and special visual statement to the audience (i.e., teens, young adults, youth and pop culture, college student travel markets).

The movie promoted the unusual and undiscovered beauty of the particular part of Thailand and a specific location—Phi Phi Island. The main characters in the movie were college-aged student travelers and the primary character, Leonardo DiCaprio, was also popular among the college-aged segment (18 to 24 year olds).

## 2.0 Review of Literature

Tourism researchers, industry practitioners, and destination marketers have paid increased attention to the concept of image since it differentiates tourist destinations from one another. The term “image” has a number of meanings. In the tourism literature, image is defined as “a set of expectations about a place or activity that exists, either voluntarily or through suggestions, before the actual experience” (Metelka 1981). A number of researchers offer other similar definitions of image: “the impression that people hold about a state in which they do not reside” (Hunt 1975); “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Crompton 1979); “the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, imaginations, and emotional thoughts that individuals have of a particular place” (Lawson and Baud-Bovy 1977); and “a mental construct developed by the consumer on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of total impressions that comes into being through a creative process in which selected impressions are elaborated, embellished, and ordered” (Reynolds 1985).

### 2.1 Movie Effects on Destination Image and Tourism

The results of one study (Brown and Singhal 1993) showed that entertainment is not the sole purpose of motion pictures. Movies can send political messages, correct historical facts, bring viewers to the realization of the moment and even allow the viewers to vicariously experience other cultures, locations or settings or even lifestyles. Consequently, movies do influence our attitudes on a variety of levels. Viewing a single movie or exposure to a specific media message may be sufficient to produce effects on people’s beliefs, thus forming a perception (Jeffers 1997). Jeffers (1997) stated that people are more influenced by media when they are in the early stages of decision-making and that media, including motion pictures, do influence the audience directly, but interpersonal influence is also important. Butler (1990)

argued that what is shown in video formats (television, movies and recorded media) will become even more important than print media in shaping images and visitation to places in the future.

Kim and Richardson (2002) found that the content of movie could be related to destination image formation. Some attributes of the destination image can be positively changed while other attributes might be negatively affected by the movie. From a marketing standpoint, it was implied that destination marketers are not likely to have control about the way a place is portrayed in the movie. Thus, destination marketers may need to develop or adjust their image management strategy depending on the way a place is depicted in a film.

### 2.2 Evidence of Movie-Induced Tourism

The influence of popular motion pictures (i.e., television film, movie) upon the formation of destination image has received some attention in the tourism literature. A number of empirical studies that have been reported in the tourism literature studied the effects of movies on increased visitation to places they depict (Kim and Richardson 2002; Beeton 2001; Riley, Baker, and Van Doren 1998; Tooke and Baker 1996; Cousin and Anereck 1993; Riley and Van Doren, 1992; Workman, Zeiger, and Caneday 1990.)

### 2.3 Research on Thailand’s Image

There have been a limited number of academic studies on the image of Thailand. Rittichainuwat, Qu, and Brown (2001) indicated that Thailand has a positive image as a rich cultural, natural, and historical travel destination. At the same time, however, they found that Thailand’s image is tarnished by pollution, prostitution, and the deterioration of some tourist attractions. Tapachai and Waryszak (2000) used unstructured techniques via open-ended questions to measure the image of Thailand. The results demonstrated that all beneficial characteristics of functional (shopping, food, friendliness of people, historical sites, beaches, and scenery), epistemic (experience of difference culture and climate), and conditional (proximity, price, and accessibility to other neighboring country) values are strong beneficial images as agreed on, or perceived, by a majority of respondents (visitors) of Thailand.

## 2.4 Filming in Thailand

Many foreign production companies have been using Thailand as a film location. Common locations that have been used for foreign films include rain forests, beaches, Chinatown, cities, mountains, seas, rivers, cultural and historical sites. According to the Government Public Relations Department, more than 200 filming occurrences were shot in Thailand between 1995 and 1998. (Thai Students Website 2002). Despite a large number of movies filmed in Thailand, only a few can be used to induce tourism since most of the movies did not make a specific reference to Thailand. "The Beach", the movie based on the top-selling novel published in 1996 by Alex Garland, was selected as the movie of interest in this study because the movie captured Thailand's beautiful beach locations and the contents in the movie were contemporary. The movie is about a backpacker named Richard who is traveling around Asia and gets to know the legend about a special place called "The Beach", a legendary tropical paradise free of conventional society's problems where people live in innocence and happiness (The Beach Website 2002). The Thai government approved the project in the hope the movie will help boost the country's image abroad, attract more tourists, and generate revenue for the country. Twentieth Century Fox agreed to promote Thai tourism in their marketing strategies by offering a free trip for two to Thailand at the official movie website (The Beach Website 2002).

## 3.0 Methods

Based on the destination image study conducted by Echtner and Ritchie (1993), a combination of structured and unstructured methods should be used to capture the components of destination image. Accordingly, the survey instrument of this study used both open-ended questions (unstructured) and Likert type statements (structured) to capture the image of Thailand.

### 3.1 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire used in this study comprised four parts: Part 1:—travel and movie profile, establishing past travel experience and intentions for future travel as well as movie viewing habits; Part 2:—destination image, capturing destination image by using both open-ended questions and pre-developed Likert statements regarding

tourism; Part 3:—movie-induced tourism, capturing the awareness of the phenomenon of movie-induced tourism; and Part 4:—socio-demographic information, age, gender, education, and ethnic group variables. The questionnaire was pre-tested among a small group of undergraduate and graduate students in a university setting and revisions made accordingly.

### 3.2 Data Collection Process

The data collection process for this study was divided into two phases: 1) an initial survey; and 2) a controlled study. In the first phase, a convenience sample was used. Questionnaires were administered during classes to undergraduate and graduate students at a land-grant research university in the Northeast United States during the spring semester of 2003. Since the purpose of this study was to measure the image of Thailand as perceived by student travelers who were considered to be a potential growth market for Thailand's tourism, the sample from a university set of students could reasonably serve as a convenient representation of college aged, student travelers. The class selection was based on the diversity of students. General education classes (that are required of the entire student population) were considered as the ideal sample due to the large number and the diversity of students in these types of classes. A sample from undergraduate general education classes were recruited who had seen the movie, "The Beach," within the previous three-year period (since the movie's release and were administered the survey. Students were also recruited to the controlled study from the general education classes who had never seen the movie. Incentives, free refreshments and participation in a voluntary manner were techniques employed. A simulated movie theatre setting was also used to increase participation. The initial survey sample and the controlled survey sample were balanced by size, gender and number.

Socio-demographic, traveler profile, movie-induced tourism awareness, and destination image of those who had seen "The Beach" (group 1) and those who had not seen the movie (group 2) were analyzed in the first phase. In order to get a deeper understanding of the movie effects on destination image among student travelers, a second phase of the study was then conducted. The second phase of the study focused on the change in perceptions after

viewing the movie. Accordingly, the study was conducted in a controlled environment. Those who participated in the second phase study were those who had not seen the movie before. A questionnaire similar to the one used in the first phase was used in the second phase. Subjects were asked to complete the questionnaire (pre-test) and after that were shown the movie. A post-test then was conducted (using the same questionnaire), to find out how the movie affected their perceptions about Thailand immediately after viewing the movie.

## 4.0 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was comprised of two parts: 1) analysis of opened-ended questions and analysis of attribute-based items; and 2) comparisons of pre-test versus post-test results of the effect of movie viewing of a country destination—Thailand. T-test analysis was applied to determine whether any significant differences existed between those who had seen the movie and those who had not seen the movie. In the examination of the relationships between the viewing period and its effect on destination image, the results gained from the people who had seen movie in the second phase (post-test result) were compared to those from the people who had seen the movie in the first phase. Since the movie was officially released in February 2000, the viewing period could have varied up to as much as 3 years. The results were then compared to identify whether the viewing period affected the students' perceptions of Thailand.

### 4.1 Hypotheses Testing

Based on the conceptual framework described in this study, the following hypotheses were considered:

Hypothesis 1: There is no difference in the mean attribute ratings of Thailand's features between Group 1 and Group 2.

Hypothesis 2: There is no difference in the mean attribute ratings of Thailand's features within the controlled group.

Hypothesis 3: Viewing a movie has no effect on the likelihood to visit Thailand.

Hypothesis 4: There is no difference in the mean attribute ratings among people who saw the movie in different periods.

Hypothesis 5: There is no difference in the likelihood to visit Thailand by gender.

Hypothesis 6: There is no difference in the mean attribute rating of Thailand's features by gender.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 2001) program was used to test the aforementioned hypotheses. The kind of tests used varied from independent-sample T-test, paired-sample T-test, or one-way ANOVA analysis, depending on each hypothesis.. All the tests were conducted using the 95 percent confidence level.

## 5.0 Results

The purpose of this study was to understand how college students perceive or understand images of the country of Thailand and to determine how of the viewing the movie, "The Beach" might affect their perceptions of this specific destination. For the purpose of this study, a movie called "The Beach" was selected because it was filmed in Thailand and captured the beautiful natural scenery of the country.

### 5.1 Background Information

During the data collection process, the survey respondents were recruited into two main groups to measure the perception of Thailand before and after viewing the movie – "The Beach." Accordingly, any differences in perceptions about Thailand found may be considered to be the result of the movie's impacts given the design of the study. The respondents who had already seen the movie were categorized as follows: Group 1- saw "The Beach"; and Group 2 - did not see "The Beach." Then, "Group 2" viewed the movie to measure the immediate impacts the movie on their perceptions of Thailand.

Data were collected from February 1 through 28, 2003, yielding a total number of 160 completed surveys. General education classes were selected for the survey due to the large number and the diversity of student class population in these classes. Subjects in Group 2, the controlled group, were from class surveys as well as those who volunteered to participate in the pre-arranged controlled environment from a recruitment process.

The results gained from Group 2 consisted of the pre-test and the post-test surveys. The data from the pre-test (before viewing the movie) were referred to as “Group 2B” data while those from the post-test (after viewing the movie) were referred to as “Group 2A” data (“B” for “before viewing” and “A” for “after viewing”).

## 5.2 Socio-Demographic Information

The survey respondents consisted of the equal number of males and females, totaling 160 respondents. Ages of the subjects ranged from 18-27. Subjects who were between 18-20 years old accounted for 51.3 percent and those who were between 21-25 years old accounted for 46.9 percent. Only 1.9 percent of the sample was over 25 years old. As for class standings, freshmen (first year of college study) accounted for 13.1 percent, sophomores (second year of college study) for 30.6 percent, juniors (third year of college study) for 22.5 percent, seniors (fourth year of college study) for 31.3 percent, and graduate students (advanced graduate study) for 2.5 percent.

## 5.3 Travel Behavior

Only 1.3 percent of the survey respondents did not travel for vacation purposes while 38.8 percent traveled once a year, 30.6 percent traveled twice a year, 16.3 percent traveled three times per year, and 13.1 percent traveled four or more times per year. More than half of the survey respondents traveled with family (58.8%). Traveling with friends or significant others accounted for 31.9 percent, while traveling alone or as part of a group accounted for 6.9 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively. As for trips to foreign countries, the median was one trip per year. Only 11.3 percent of the respondents traveled to an Asian country and 2.5 percent of them had visited Thailand in the past 5 years. The sources of information for travel destination used most often by the survey respondents were the internet (85%), followed by friends (56.3%), guidebooks (26.9%), travel agencies (18.2%), and other (2.5%). The survey respondents were found to be frequent movies viewers. The majority of the survey respondents watched movies four times or more in a month (71.3%). An analysis of the survey respondents by groups revealed no significant differences in demographics or travel behavior.

## 5.4 Attribute Ratings Analysis

The survey respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements on a seven-point Likert scale. The statements represented different tourist features of Thailand. In general, it could be concluded that the respondents' agreement levels were higher after they watched the movie. In addition, the mean ratings of those who just saw the movie were higher than those who saw the movie in the past. Thus, the differences in the mean ratings may be associated with time effects and will be examined more fully later in this study.

## 5.5 Hypotheses Testing

Statistical testing methods were undertaken to analyze whether significant differences existed in the mean ratings among different groups and gender. T-test and one-way ANOVA were performed according to the type of variables under consideration. Six hypotheses were developed and tested. Statements and statistical results are as follows.

Hypothesis 1 stated “*There is no difference in the mean attribute rating of Thailand's features between Group 1 and Group 2*”. To test this hypothesis, the results of mean ratings of Group 1 and Group 2 pre-test were compared. After running a T-test analysis, significant differences in 11 out of 18 attributes were found and Hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Before seeing the movie, Group 2 indicated higher levels of agreement on the following six attributes: interesting places, adventure, natural scenic beauty, shopping, and differences in food and architecture styles. As compared to people who had seen the movie from Group 1, Group 2 indicated lower levels of agreement on the following five attributes: pleasant weather, safety, good night life, friendliness of the locals, and the locals' ability to speak English.

This hypothesis test provided some knowledge of the pure perceptions (without being influenced by any medium) that college students had about Thailand and how viewing the movie affected their perceptions. Overall, the perceptions that Group 2 had about Thailand were positive (rated above 4) except for the

safety attribute that was the only attribute with a rating (3.74) lower than four (4) on the seven-point scale. The agreement levels were highest (rated higher than 5) on the following features: differences in lifestyles and custom, food, architecture styles, and natural scenic beauty (5.38, 5.25, 5.2, 5.01 respectively).

The movie seemed to help create positive differences. Significant increases in the mean ratings were found on the pleasant weather, friendly locals, good night life, English speaking, and safety attributes (significantly increased by 1.23, 1.13, 1.11, 1.1, and 0.64 points respectively). On the other hand, the movie also created negative differences on the adventure, interesting places, difference in food and architecture styles, shopping, and natural scenic beauty attributes (significantly decreased by 2.45, 2.43, 1.0, 0.95, 0.54, and 0.45 points respectively). For people who had seen the movie, their agreement levels were less strong, yet positive, on the natural scenic beauty, differences in food and architecture style attributes. Students who viewed the movie held negative images on the interesting places, adventure, and shopping attributes. It could be assumed that those who saw the movie found no major difference features in Thailand that would qualify it as neither a good shopping place nor an interesting and adventurous place. However, since Group 1 respondents were impacted more by having not seen the movie recently, their recall of any specific details may have been affected or clouded. Accordingly, hypothesis 2 was introduced to find out how these perceptions could change right after viewing the movie among a similar market.

The purpose of hypothesis 2 was to test that *“There is no difference in the mean attribute rating of Thailand’s features within the controlled group.”* In order to get the before-movie viewing perceptions, the subjects in the controlled study environment were asked to complete the pre-test survey. After that, they were asked to watch the movie and complete the post-test survey, which provided the after-movie viewing perceptions.

After performing a paired sample T-test, significant differences in the mean ratings of 13 out of 18 attributes were found. Consequently, Hypothesis 2 was rejected. The movie seemed to have an impact on almost all the

attributes except for the following five attributes: safety, tourist information, architecture styles, and the local’s friendliness and ability to speak English. Since the mean scores were taken from the same group of people, the differences in the mean scores were attributed to the movie contents.

Among all the attributes where significant differences were found, the movie created major positive differences on the following attributes: good beaches, pleasant weather, natural scenic beauty, low cost travel, and interesting places (with increases of 1.20, 1.17, 1.12, 1.06, and 1.02 points respectively). Minor increases were found on the nightlife, adventure, food, different and fascinating things, relaxing place, and different lifestyles attributes (with increases of 0.89, 0.75, 0.64, 0.50, 0.48, and 0.38 points respectively). Less significant differences were found on the shopping attribute with an increase of 0.41 points. The hotels and restaurants attribute was the only feature that received negative impact by the movie, with a decrease of -0.48 points. The movie held little references to hotels and only a few references to settings at bars and restaurants in Thailand.

One possible explanation for those attributes in which significant differences were not found could be that the movie did not provide a better or clearer picture of these attributes or perceptions, or these features had little or no impact. Nonetheless, although some scenes in the movie did portray unsafe and unfriendly features of the place, this did not cause the audience to give lower ratings on the same features. This may have meant that the respondents did not take what they saw on the movie literally and/or formed a stereotypical image of Thailand. As for those attributes with significant differences, in general, the respondents gave higher scores on most of the attributes except for the “quality restaurants and hotel” attribute. The movie did show the image of low quality and low-cost guesthouses that were popular among budget- concerned travelers. Unlike the negative features like hostile and unsafe conditions, this feature of low-quality accommodations did have an impact on the respondents’ perceptions. Since in real life situations, it was more realistic to come across some low quality accommodations and restaurants rather than some armed local drug dealers as portrayed in the movie, it made

sense that this feature, not the others, was more strongly taken into account.

Hypothesis 3 aimed to test that “*Viewing a movie has no effect on the likelihood to visit Thailand*”. The respondents were asked to state their likelihood to visit Thailand in the next 5 years on a five- point scale (1 = not at all likely to 5 = very likely). The majority of the respondents were not likely to visit Thailand as the mean of the three groups were all lower than three (2.1, 1.88, and 1.89 for Group 1, Group 2B, and Group 2A respectively). T-tests were used to determine whether significance differences in the means existed.

The first test was performed within Group 2, comparing the likelihood to visit Thailand before (1.88) and right after (1.89) the respondents in Group 2 viewed the movie. The t-test result indicated no significant difference ( $t = -.45$   $P = .658$ ). The second test was the comparison of likelihood between Group 2B (1.88) and Group 1 (2.10) who also had seen the movie but not as recently as Group 2A. Also, no significant difference was found in the second comparison ( $t = 1.15$   $P = .256$ ). These findings further confirmed that viewing the movie did not increase their likelihood to visit Thailand. Accordingly, hypothesis 3 was accepted.

Hypothesis 4, “*There is no difference in the mean attribute rating among people who saw the movie in different periods*”, aimed to test whether different periods of viewing the movie affected the respondents’ perceptions. It should be noted that, for testing hypothesis 4, the number of people who recently saw the movie and those who saw the movie last year were combined due to the small number of people in the former group (1.3%).

The survey respondents were put into 4 different groups in accordance with four different viewing periods (3 years ago, 2 years ago, 1 year ago, and currently viewed). All the respondents in Group 2 were put in the last currently viewed category. From the total number of 160 respondents, 15.61 percent saw the movie 3 years ago, 24.41 percent saw the movie 2 years ago, 10 percent saw the movie last year, and 50 percent saw the movie recently.

One-way ANOVA test was used to test the hypothesis. Significant differences were found in 10 out of 18 attributes. Generally, it was found that the more recent the respondents saw the movie, the higher they rated the features. Nevertheless, the “quality restaurants and hotels” attribute received the opposite rating, the more recent the respondents saw the movie, the lower they rated this feature because the movie portrayed the negative image of the low quality hotels. Most of the highest ratings of Thailand’s features could be found in the “currently viewed” group. The highest rated features within this group were natural scenic beauty, beaches, interesting places, pleasant weather, adventure, and low cost travel (with the mean scores of 6.13, 5.86, 5.55, 5.35, 5.30, and 5.28 respectively. Among all the attributes with significant differences, the most significant differences were found in the interesting places, natural scenic beauty, pleasant weather, and low cost travel features of Thailand. Since the majority of significant differences were found, hypothesis 4 was rejected.

Hypothesis 5, “*There is no difference in the likelihood to visit Thailand by gender*” aimed to test whether gender was an important factor that affected the mean ratings. To test the effect of the gender variable, t-test analyses were used to determine likelihood to visit Thailand.

The results showed that significant differences existed by gender. Females ( $n=80$ ) were found to have significantly higher likelihood scores (mean = 2.20) to visit Thailand in the next 5 years than males (mean = 1.79;  $t = -2.17$ , sign. level = 0.031); however, the scores also indicated that overall likelihood to visit is not high on the five-point scale with five being the highest likelihood rating. Males simply appear to be much more less likely to visit Thailand in the next 5 years than females.

Hypothesis 6, “*There is no difference in the mean attribute rating of Thailand’s features by gender*”, tested the effects of the gender on the mean ratings of Thailand’s attributes. A t-test found significant differences in only 3 out of 18 attributes when the gender variable was taken into account.

There were equal number of males and females in this study (80 each). Basically, the means of each attribute rated by male and female respondents were pretty similar except for the following three attributes—interesting places, adventure, and natural scenic beauty that received higher rating by females. Nevertheless, a few significant differences did exist; therefore, hypothesis 6 was only partially rejected.

## 5.6 Results Summary

The test results rejected all of the hypotheses aiming to prove that gender and different periods of viewing the movie would not affect the college students' perceptions of Thailand. However, the accepted hypothesis confirmed that the movie did not change the likelihood of students to visit Thailand. In other words, the movie, time periods, and gender were variables that had impacts of the college students' perceptions of Thailand; however, the movie itself was found to be ineffective in inducing a visit to Thailand.

## 6.0 Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest watching or seeing a movie about Thailand does not induce travel to the country. For this case of Thailand, this movie, "The Beach" was not effective in the tourism inducing purpose. While the sample surveyed in this study does travel, they were not highly likely to consider Thailand as a travel destination. College students do not appear to consider viewing a movie as an important factor that actually encourages them to visit the filmed location. This was well supported by the findings from the controlled study. The likelihood to visit Thailand of the controlled group did not change even after immediately watching the movie.

This study does support some of the findings of Kim and Richardson (2002). In their study of Vienna, they concluded that a movie did affect some destination image components but that a movie did not enhance the degree of familiarity with the destination. In this study of Thailand, the total effects of a single movie did affect the ratings of selected features or attributes of Thailand; however, it did not lead to an increased likelihood to visit the destination. This study's findings do appear to support the aspects of cognitive and affective image

change noted in Kim and Richardson's (2002) study. Consequently, the specific movie content does appear to affect the viewers' image and perceptions of a destination portrayed in a movie, but in both positive and negative ways. However, differences in terms of recall of places and features about a destination, such as Thailand did enhance the degree of familiarity (an important variable noted in the Kim and Richardson study); but, this level of familiarity appears to fade over time.

While tourist statistics (Tourism Authority of Thailand 2001) did show an increased number of visitors and an increased number of students of college age to the filmed location during the run of the movie, "The Beach", other causes rather than the movie should be considered. What might be some of those other causes? It was possible that the number of visitors increased because of Thailand's aggressive overall promotional campaigns at that time. People might visit the filmed location when they were already in Thailand for example. No evidence exists that conclusively suggests that travelers made a decision to come to Thailand just because of the movie. However, this study did not survey those who actually visited to determine if this movie or other movies or even a combination of movies or other reasons may have prompted or affected their visit intentions. The study was structured to determine if the movie would have an effect. Nevertheless, the movie was found to change perceptions about some of the features of Thailand. Consequently, selective visual aspects of the use of this medium do have an impact in changing perceptions of destination attributes.

The results from the pre-test survey indicated that most students did not know much about Thailand; thus, their perceptions were mainly neutral. This could be considered favorable to tourism promotion purposes. Although it implies harder work, putting an image in a neutral mind is much easier than correcting negative images and changing various stereotypes. Furthermore, it may be more worthwhile to target students in the research process who are more highly motivated to travel to Asian countries and focus their perceptions upon creating a positive image that encourages their travel to Thailand.

The movie medium itself, because in its true sense is not a controlled promotional tool, but rather one that simply might instill a positive or even a negative perception about a place does create challenges for tourism marketers. What is known is that college students are frequent movie viewers and this does hint at possible innovative promotion channel strategies. Add-in clips to DVDs and videos about the destination especially if the movie is destination specific may indeed have additional impact. These techniques combined with the movie as a promotional tool may work better and lead to higher levels of likelihood to visit the country, especially among budget-conscious college students. However, strategies such as these must be a part of a fully integrated marketing communication plan. It is unlikely that a sole movie promotional strategy targeting one specific market and destination would have a long-term impact. In the end, engaging the movie industry in tourism promotion appears to offer some possible benefits to select destinations, but the goal of the movie producers is to create high quality, profitable entertainment.

Accordingly, in the future, Thailand's promotional efforts should be aware of adverse effects a movie can create if it is not specifically made for tourism promotion purpose. The movie can positively change perceptions of Thailand but it does not necessarily make people go there. Travel decision-making is a complex process, thus, countries need to use multiple ways to influence people and to develop more highly refined and integrated marketing communication (IMC) plans. Targeting the right market and understanding consumer behavior are very important in the development of appropriate promotional and IMC strategies. To capture the student traveler market, Thailand's promotion agencies need to understand their travel behaviors and factors that motivate or affect their decision-making over the course of trip planning and decision-making. Nevertheless, movies may be utilized as a supplemental form of promotion strategy to instill or supplement desired perceptions into consumers' minds, as they do appear to influence perceptual changes of selected variables of a selected destination area.

Note: The statistical tables for this study are available from the authors at the University of Massachusetts.

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