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DESTINATION IMAGE AND POSSIBILITIES OF ITS FORMATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMAGE OF THAILAND AS A TOURIST DESTINATION PERCEIVED BY SLOVAKS

Kvetoslava MATLOVIČOVÁ

Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences, Department of Geography and Regional
Development, University of Presov, Slovakia, E-mail: kveta.matlovicova@gmail.com

Jana KOLESÁROVÁ

PhD-student, Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences, Department of Geography and Regional
Development, University of Presov, Slovakia, E-mail: jkolesarova@yahoo.com

Abstract: Nowadays, planning of the activities leading to the formation of desirable image held by potential investors, tourists, residents, and others contributing to the territory development is an important part of development plans for territories of various scales. One of the most widely accepted research fields of the image, in terms of its relevance and importance for the subsequent application in practice, is a destination image or place image researched from the perspective of its use for tourism.

This study highlights the importance of destination image for the development of territories and offers a brief historical overview of opinions on the destination image principles and possibilities of its formation. The main objective is to analyze results of the survey focused on the identification of Thailand's destination image attributes in terms of their nature as suggested by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993, and 2003). Attention is paid to the analysis of the external image of this tourist destination and detection of a range of possible associations held by interviewed Slovak respondents. We focused primarily on associations that Slovak respondents have with Thailand as a potential place of their holiday. Consequently we reviewed those associations from the point of their utilization in establishing or optimisation of potential development strategies for tourism destination.

Keywords: image, destination image, semantic differential, beneficial image, Thailand image

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INTRODUCTION

These days, we are literally overloaded with a huge amount of information, which we are trying to handle. Despite the enormous efforts, however, we do not even catch the majority of them. We process a complex and more complicated reality unconsciously every day. Regardless of the original object or phenomenon, we modify and transform reflections of the reality into the form which is intelligible to us (Vysekalová, 2009). Thus, we use simplified substitutes for the reality, i.e. images representing an easily understandable and identifiable message about the meaning to us. Accordingly, in this context, image can be understood as an essential means facilitating the orientation. Even if the important information is unavailable

or vague, an image facilitates decision-making in the process of selection through the formation of subjective opinions, attitudes, and ideas.

The beginnings of making conscious effort to shape the image held by potential customers can be found in business companies' practices. Here they came into being as the reaction to the increasing product competition. The concept of image was gradually shaped into a broad-based and commercially almost universally applicable approach used wherever the commercial rivalry have appeared. At the present time, image is researched by a wide range of subjects but also each professionals (marketers, psychologists, sociologists, urbanists, geographers and others) enrich the existing professional discourse by different dimension of image perception from the perspective of their own science.

Application of the concept of image to a place was related to the post-Fordist processes of marketing, broadening in the so-called *entrepreneurial city* period during the 1970s (however, in the field of urban planning we have come across with the application of this concept since the 1950s). Planning activities leading to the formation of a desirable image held by potential investors, tourists, residents and others contributing to the territory development has thus become an important part of the development plans of areas of various scales. The image that people have of a place significantly affects the way people think about that place, the way they behave towards it, and the way they respond to everything that is made or done there (Anholt, 2007), consequently people directly or indirectly affect prosperity of that place. In case a considerable attention is paid to the image, it can become an important factor which affects the competitiveness of the territories.

THE IMAGE AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR THE TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT

Attractiveness of the image research has increased more significantly in recent years, especially in the context of the economic recession. It has been revealed that many generally positively perceived territories with a strong and distinctive image have a higher resistance to unexpected shocks and that such territories can deal with unexpected situations better than the others. Hence, their price is increasing in the marketplace. The explanation of this situation has to be sought in the principles of creating the images of places as their possible virtually-pseudo realistic forms based on an individual foundation. Created psychological reality reflects the existing reality only partly, or sometimes even not at all (Vysekalová, 2009). It means that if the place image is strong enough, a man has a tendency to overlook or even to ignore certain information (both negative and positive), which do not correspond with already created idea or stereotype. In such situation we can use prejudices as a certain form of protection against unforeseen shocks. In relation to a strong positive image prejudices have an ability to mitigate the impact of these shocks and offer the prospect for rapid territory revitalization. The French metropolis serves as a good example of this situation. In late 2005, Paris was facing a wave of two weeks long unrests which were spreading to the suburbs of the city. The intensity of the unrests was so high that a state of emergency was declared in the country. Although, these events have repeated themselves in the following years, they have touched the vibrant urban tourism only slightly and just for a short time. A strong positive image of Paris built on multiculturalism, tolerance, and creativity has undoubtedly helped the city to dispel the notion of potential tourists' risk associated with travelling to this destination.

Indeed, in the opposite case, i.e. when there is a strong negative image, prejudices embody a major obstacle. Overcoming these prejudices requires a long process, and changing a negative image of places poses a great challenge. This issue can be illustrated by the example of the American city Chicago which is well known for infamous gangsters in the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, there were tens of gangs in the city (Avraham, 2004) and their

conflicts with the “law” have become a rewarding topic for Hollywood film-makers. They have put the city in the minds of people around the world together with organised crime through the film and absorbing stories of mafia bosses such as Al Capone. Although Chicago has one of the lowest crime rates among major American cities during these days, it is still perceived to be a dangerous city for many people (Avraham, 2004). Thus, it appears that even the reality has changed; the stereotype has survived despite the enormous effort of the local leaders for the long period of eighty years. A similar example is shown by Burgess (1982) who describes the problems that Scotland is struggling with while overcoming the prejudices concerning the residents’ way of life and which have lasted since the nineteenth century.

A man is naturally making both conscious and subconscious decisions influenced by prejudices against the place of origin of different products. Actually, we do not mean a common shopping in the supermarket, when we are trying to choose between tomatoes planted in Poland and Spain, or if we buy microwave manufactured in Germany or another one from China. The image of the place affects us also in many other situations. For example, while choosing between a private dental clinic of a dental professional coming from Ukraine and the other one from Germany; or when choosing foreign university where we want our child to study; when deciding between a less known college in London and Belarus state University in Minsk, etc. All of the above examples show that the image of the place is important in the process of their development. Popularity of this concept has led some authors (e.g. Morgan and Pritchard, 1988) to the opinion, that the concept of the image is a central to the post-modern theories and that this concept is even more important than the reality of the place itself.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE DESTINATION IMAGE PRINCIPLES AND POSSIBILITIES OF ITS FORMATION

Around the year 1960, the implementation of marketing into the system of economic sciences, as one of the world-recognised scientific disciplines with a sophisticated methodology and tool system, became an important step in making the ideas about the way of place image formation more precise (Matlovičová, 2007). The recast and gradual transfer of numerous elements of product marketing are considered a significant advance at the beginnings of creating the concept of place image. In the field of product marketing, a considerable attention was paid also to the image of the product and the brand.

In terms of place image relevance and importance for further application in practice, perhaps the most widely accepted field of the place image research is a destination image from the perspective of its use in tourism.

Academic interest rate in the issue of destination image as an explicitly formulated phenomenon increased during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hence, the mentioned period is considered to be a beginning of the systematic research of image impact on the rising place attractiveness from the point of view of attracting potential tourists (e.g. Telisman-Kosuta, 1989; Gallarza et al., 2002). The initial interest was focused on the external target audience and on the research of tourist potential of places. Already in the late 1970s, in the literature there appeared the first definitions describing the observed phenomenon in a relatively complex way. For example, according to Lawson and Bond-Bovy (1977), the image is “*the expression of knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual might have of a particular object or place*” or Crompton (1979) states that image might be defined as “*the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination*”.

Dyslexia of the essence of image creation has been reflected in inconsistent views on its nature. Besides the belief that it is primarily about the uni-personal perception of the place (Crompton 1979; Hunt, 1971; Lawson and Bond-Bovy, 1977; Markin, 1974), there are also views highlighting its collective nature (Hunt, 1975; Lawson and Bond-Bovy, 1977). In such case it is stressed that image can also have the nature of group idea, which is created by diverse subjects at the same time. Thereby, in this stage of concept development, even though only indirectly, they refer to its major attribute, i.e. to its complexity. Essential to this period was a consensus on the major impact of destination image on tourists' behaviour, which says that destinations with a strong and positive image are going to have a better chance to be chosen by potential tourists as their potential destination (Goodrich, 1978; Hunt, 1975; Schmoll, 1977).

The next period (the late 1970s and early 1980s) brought numerous empirical studies, which highlighted a major contribution of the strong and positive place image to the tourism development. However, conceptual place image definition emphasising a synthesis dates back at first to the late 1980s (Telisman-Kosuta, 1989).

Despite the attempts to conceptualise place image, and despite the strong emphasis on synthesis at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a criticism of the lack of an adequate theoretical framework of the existing numerous studies, which would have an empirical and not a theoretical nature (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). At the beginning of the 1990s, there were also works describing possible theoretical approaches to conceptualisation of the place image in more details (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Heath and Wall, 1992; Kotler et al., 1993; Parenteau, 1995). The complex nature and multidimensionality of the place image have been highlighted most often in connection with the issue of its conceptualisation (Smith, 1994). A multifarious nature of components forming the identity of destination image gave rise to the need for multidisciplinary research focus on its character and also on the process of its formation (Baloglu, 1997; Bramwell and Rawding, 1996).

Definitions of that period have emphasized the aspect of generalisation of the huge amount of stimuli into to the form of a simplified substitute for reality. For example, one of them says that: *"image is a mental construct developed by a potential tourist on the basis of a few selected impressions among the flood of the total impression"* (Fakeye and Crompton, 1991). This aspect of the image formation mechanism can be considered a certain reflection of views concerning product marketing during the previous period (that of Reynolds' (1965) and others mentioned above). Gartner (1993, 1996) describes that destination image is *"formed by three distinctly different but hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and conative."* Similar approach reflects also Chon (1990) since he defines image as a *"result of the interaction of a person's beliefs, ideas, feelings, expectations and impressions about an object."*

In the field of destination image during the 1980s, attention was paid to the image as if an objective factor in terms of competitive identity. From the point of view of successful promotion of the target place, a need for better effectiveness of positioning was stressed so the places could differentiate themselves from the competing destinations in the minds of potential customers. In this regard, Calantone et al. (1989) suggest the need for the establishment and consequent formation of various positive perceptions. A strong and positive image is considered to be a key component of the place competitiveness. In this partial field of the science during the late 1980s, Gunn (1988) (later also Ganter in 1996 and others) presented a theoretical model of tourist destination image formation. His concept describes seven phases, through which a tourist passes while forming own image about a certain destination: (1) accumulation of mental images about certain destination; (2) modification of those images by further information; (3) decision to take a vacation trip; (4) travel to the destination; (5) participation at the destination; (6) return home; (7)

modification of images based on the vacation experience. Generally, it is a model of active place image formation, in which there identify not only affective but also conative and cognitive components. In addition a significant impact of the primary and secondary information resources is stressed. Most of the theories of this period accept that image formation is influenced by so-called organic (books, media, teachers, friends, family, traditions etc.) and induced components (which are the results of the special purpose promotion).

Typical of the last decade is a continuous intensive competitiveness between places of different scales, which is likely to be fostered by the increasing globalisation. Thus, many of the places in an effort to differentiate themselves from their competitors almost constantly try to change their “*package*” through which they attempt to present their attractive image. They are convinced that by doing so, they will succeed in competition for international prestige, which could help them in attracting tourists, businessmen, investors, business headquarters, congresses, sports events, industry or global capital (Kotler et al., 2002). However, they are worried about the treat of the loss of a positive image, since a negative image is considered a very serious obstacle to success. Moreover, the greater frustrations are caused by situations in which the negative image is of no true reason because the real situation consequently does not correspond with a public opinion (Avraham, 2004). Removing the bias appears to be a serious, time consuming and too much money demanding problem.

Taking into account the above views on the place image and its fundamentals, place image can be seen as a certain simplified mental construct of the reality, which has unstable interpersonal nature. This arises as the result of interactions of the most diverse external stimuli (real, mediated, conscious or unconscious) and existing personal views, beliefs, acceptable values, feelings or expectations, which tend to occur based on no rational relationship to the place.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THE STUDY OF THE DESTINATION IMAGE

In many existing empirical studies there are several possible approaches to the destination image evaluation.

Semantic differential

One of the most widely used tools for destination image research is a semantic differential based on different partial scales of the Likert’s scale. This technique, developed in 1956 by Osgoodom, Sucimom, and Tannenbaumom (Diesman, 2007, p. 160), is considered to be a technique of bipolar adjectives, which serve as anchors at both ends of the scale. The resulting image is then determined by averaging the results and analysing the deviations from the average. Such an approach enables us to assess the strength of the image and its character, however, just in terms of definiteness, i.e. in case of small deviations it is still about definite image; otherwise it is a rather diffused one. This technique was also applied, for example, by Matlovičová and Sovičová (2010). Even though it could be expected that the effort of destinations will be oriented towards the achievement of definiteness in this case, it is usually not like that in practice. Many places prefer a diffused image (Kotler, 2001, p. 544-546). Diversity of opinions and place perceptions offer to the image a scope to apply a non-differential or differential segmentation strategy rather than a concentration strategy.

Such a research allows us studying both the primary (formed by personal experience with destination) and the secondary (formed by secondary information about a destination) image of tourist destination. In general, prepared questionnaires most often include closed

questions offering more options, which express a degree of adherence of assessment of image attributes separately at every single respondent.

Identification of beneficial image of destination

Many empirical studies developing the concept of marketing destination image (already mentioned above) have shown that image influences the decision-making of tourists when selecting a tourist destination. If we consider a base of destination image as a certain form of tourist's belief that a selection of certain destination will ensure him a higher value (he expects more benefits) than the selection of others, subsequently from the point of view of increasing competitiveness, it is important to identify those attributes, which in the customer's mind have decisive influence on the final choice.

There are many works showing that the importance of individual attributes in the process of decision-making is not the same (e.g. Crompton, 1979; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2011) and that some of them does not influence the choice at all. In such a case the effort is concentrated on the detection of those destination image attributes which influence a tourists' decision-making process. According to the model of consumption values, designed by Sheth, Newman and Gross in 1991, the process of marketing decision has a multidimensional character (Sheth et al., 1991), and tourists perceive its single attributes according to the nature of potential benefits. In this regard there are five different consumption values influencing consumer choice behaviour. These are functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional values. Functional values are connected with physical characteristics of the destination as a product. On the basis of these characteristics, a tourist assesses the utility of destination. Social values of the destination are determined by a subjective perception of stereotypes (i.e. associations with positively or negatively stereotyped demographic, socio-economic and cultural-ethnic groups); emotional values are represented by feelings and reflect the selection of those alternatives, which are capable of eliciting a desirable emotional response; cognitive values embody the ability of destinations to arouse curiosity, provide novelty and/or satisfy a desire for knowledge (desire for something that is new, different or fashioned); conditional values are associated with a specific context in terms of which the expected result is evaluated in relation to an usually unusual situation which a potential tourist is confronted with when choosing a destination.

The concept of the destination image components identification by Echtner and Ritchie

The works of Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993, and 2003) might be considered a significant enrichment of the discourse on the conceptualisation of the destination image. According to these authors, the concept of the image is comprised of six diverse groups of components. These were placed on the counterparts of three mutually intersecting axes (Figure 1): (1) axis of functional and psychological characteristics, (2) axis of common and unique components and (3) axis of holistic components and of those based on individually perceived attributes. According to the authors, however, it is not possible to set a firm boundary between individual groups since they mutually overlap. In other words, holistic feelings are based on combination and interaction of attributes as well as the perceptions of individual attributes may be influenced by overall impressions and feelings. As Echtner and Ritchie further state, particularly very ambiguous is a dividing line set between the functional and psychological image characteristics.

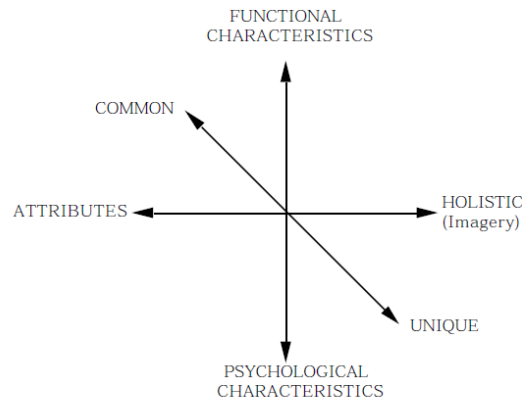


Figure 1 Components of the destination image
Source: Echtner and Ritchie (2003)

CASE STUDY OF THAILAND

We focused our survey on the identification of the destination image attributes of Thailand in terms of their nature as it was suggested in the works of Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993, and 2003). We especially paid attention to the analysis of the external image of Thailand as a tourist destination. The aim of the study was to identify a range of possible associations held by interviewed Slovak respondents who viewed Thailand as their potential holiday destination. Gained associations were further studied in terms of their utility at establishment and optimisation of marketing strategy of tourist destination.

Survey methodology and survey sample characteristics

For the objectification of the gained data analysis, it is necessary to consider a broader society-wide context in which respondents live and which undoubtedly impact the perception of a destination as as far Thailand is.

78% of respondents experienced a period of so-called “Socialist reality”, which was among others associated with significant mobility restrictions. Opening of the borders after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, gradual disposable incomes growth of Slovaks, improving the language skills and other fundamental changes in Slovak people’s lifestyle became important impulses for travelling to the more distant tourist destinations. Listed changes resulted in regular annual increase in the number of Slovak tourists. While in 1992 tours of Slovaks to foreign destinations outside Europe comprised of only 2.7% of all organized tours, this ratio had increased to as much as 29.5 in 2008% (SÚ SR, 2010). Changes in transport, namely its higher speed, spatial and financial accessibility have changed a perception of space. Time-space compression has caused a gradual reduction in the distance importance in the decision-making process and in the choice of tourist destinations by the Slovak tourists. Thanks to the rapid expansion of budget airlines, flying has become more accessible even for the less solvent social classes which could not afford this means of transport before its boost. The formation of the individual country image attributes is significantly influenced by changes in the communication with the outside world, which is nowadays faster, more reliable, and certainly even more comfortable. However, a global

awareness in relation to the image of the country can alternatively become a hindrance. In case of Thailand, the SARS epidemics (2003), the devastating Tsunami (2004) or even the political unrest (2009) are events about which a world was informed almost immediately and which had a major impact on the decreasing number of tourists. In addition, these situations undermined the image of the country, which was previously perceived as a safe and enjoyable tourist destination (more attention to this issue was paid in Matlovičová and Kolesárová, 2011).

For obtaining a primary data we used an on-line survey. It was carried out in March 2010 and attended by the total of 337 respondents from Slovakia (Table 1). Besides the identification questions (dealing with the respondents' gender, age, education and place of residence), combined types of questions were also used (both open and closed ones). The facts about the respondents' socio-economic situation, especially where they spend their vacation (at home or abroad) and how often they go on vacation in their country or outside Europe were investigated by the closed questions. In terms of the identification of the type of image (primary versus secondary image), important was a question finding out whether the respondents have already been to Thailand. Other closed questions were dealing with a perception of Thailand as a potential tourist destination. We were finding out opinions on the perception of security of the country and its attractions, but also opinions on the factors which on the contrary discourage tourists to take holiday in this country. We were also interested in an overall assessment of the respondents' attitude to Thailand as a potential place for holiday (i.e. whether they would recommend this country to their friends and relatives as a holiday destination, and which places should be visited or respectively what should be experienced in Thailand). Very important was the open question asking about the first associations coming to the respondents' mind when hearing the word *Thailand*. This question was analysed in depth also in relation to other questions in the questionnaire.

Table 1 Composition of the survey sample

Gender	Female: 52.8 %	Male: 47.2 %		
Age	15-18: 20.8 %	19-24: 38.6 %	25-39: 27.0 %	40 years and over : 13.6 %
Education	Primary: 19.9 %	Secondary: 46.2 %	Bachelor degree: 18.4 %	Master degree: 15.4 %

Data source: own empirical research

Approximately half of the survey sample (52%) consists of respondents who usually spend their holiday at home. Their ratio in our sample increases with the higher age and the respondents who are older than 40 years represent the most numerous group of respondents who spend their holiday at home. With respect to the education, rising interest rates in foreign destination were observed in the case of respondents with university education. We assume that the level of education probably influences the intensity and frequency of foreign holidays because respondents with lower education more often reported that they spent their holiday at home, respectively that they have never been to any seaside destinations. Of course, broader generalisation of such a statement requires verification by the specific research.

Position of Thailand as a tourist destination in Slovakia

Thailand is one of those exotic countries the interest rates in which have increased in Slovakia in the recent years. According to the statistical data, the number of trips to Thailand organised by travel agencies in 1999 did not reach even one tenth of the total percentage

(0.07%). In 2008 that ratio was raised on the level of almost 0.3%, which indicated an increase of more than 250% (ŠÚ SR, 2010) (Figure 2).

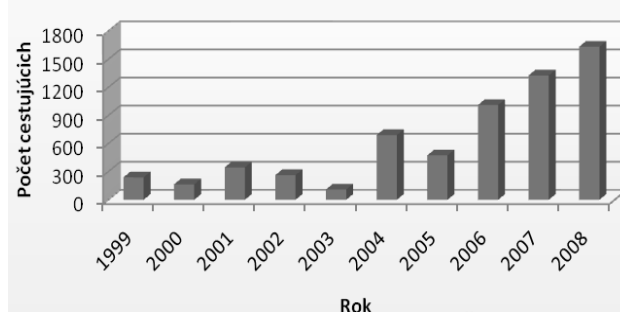


Figure 2 The number of Slovak tourists in Thailand (1999-2008)
(Rok – year, Počet cestujúcich – number of tourist)
Data source: ŠÚ SR (2010)

The growing interest in this exotic tourist destination was also positively influenced, inter alia, by intensive promoting activities of Thailand in our country. These activities included not only promotion through a variety of printed materials, but also through other media, exhibitions, and numerous study tours for travel agents and media representatives (for more see Matlovičová and Kolesárová, 2011). Figure 2 suggests that the growing interest as well as the absolute number of tourists (over 7 000) during the past ten years created a sufficient group of potential respondents who have first-hand experience with this destination. This fact enables us to compare differences between the primary and secondary image of Thailand. Under the so called primary image we understand an image which is created on the basis of own personal experience with a country and the secondary image results from the secondary information from various secondary sources. Respondents who have not been to Thailand reported 17% in our obtained survey sample. These were largely respondents with university degree and just 2% of them were so-called business tourists. The next paragraph will go into more details about other potential differences concerning this group.

Components of the destination image of Thailand as they were perceived by Slovak tourists

As we have already indicated in the introductory theoretical part, one of the approaches to the evaluation of destination image is through the identification of its attributes in terms of their character. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993, 2003), consumers perceive a destination as a product not only through the individual attributes of destination, but also through the overall impression, i.e. by the application of the holistic approach. Therefore, in the process of decision-making of potential tourist, not only general but also symbolic (image-forming) information is presented. By the assessment of individual attributes, the customer reduces the possible alternatives of his choice to the smallest number of destinations meeting his wishes. A holistic approach based on comparison of symbolic attributes of destination can be applied in order to make a definitive choice between them. However, as Echtner and Ritchie (2003) say, the reverse approach is also possible. They suggest distinguishing between functional (tangible) and psychological (intangible) characteristics of the destination image while assessing the possible attributes. Whereas functional characteristics are directly recognizable or measurable (e.g. prices, building footprint, etc.), psychological characteristics are those which can not be quantified (e.g. friendly atmosphere, various feelings). At the same time Echtner and Ritchie (2003) emphasize, that both types of components play a critical role and determine the destination

image. Formerly mentioned pairs of components are placed on mutually intersected axes as counterparts dividing the whole spectrum of possible alternatives of the perception of tourist destination into four quadrants (Figure 3). As we have already indicated in the introduction, it is possible to add a third axis to the model of image. Echtner and Ritchie (2003) perceive this third axis as a third dimension dividing components into common and unique ones according to their nature (since the representation of the third axis is problematic in this case, we will consider this pair separately).

Our survey concerning the image of Thailand has demonstrated the existence of the following perceived components at the surveyed Slovak respondents (Figure 3):

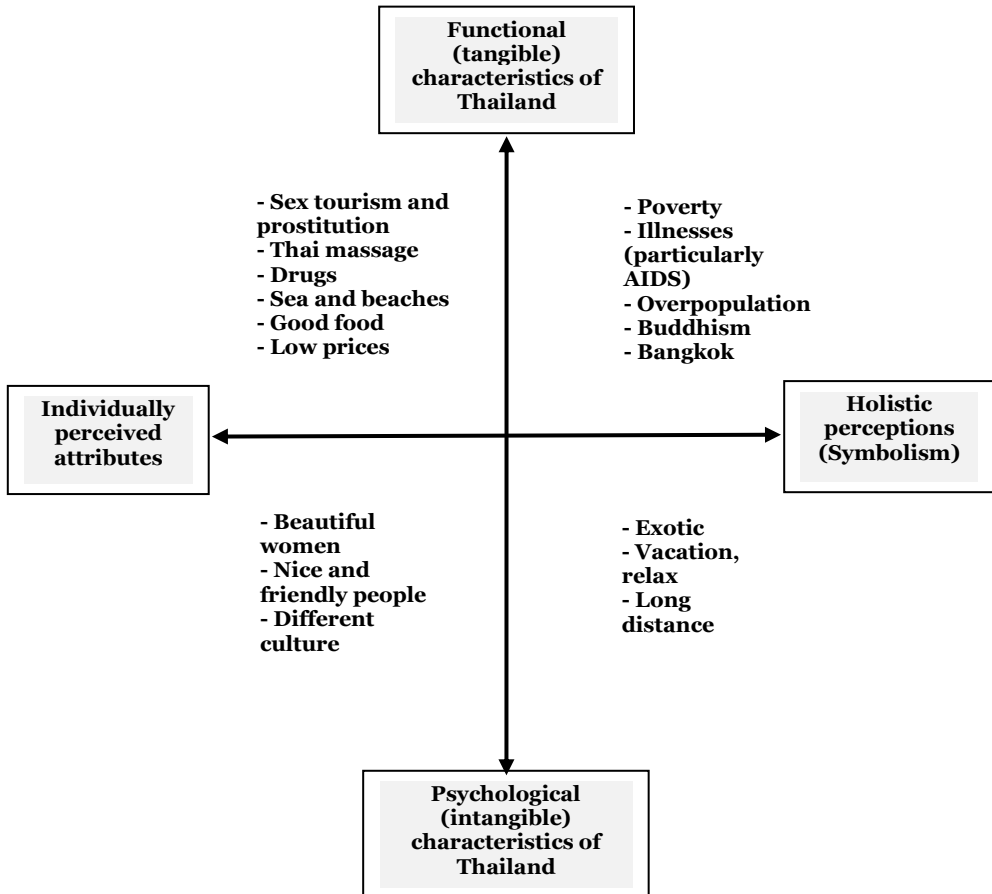


Figure 3 Perceived components of destination image of Thailand

Figure 3 demonstrates that there is a problem to set a dividing line between the individual groups of components (especially between the functional and psychological ones). We are confronted with the same problem while assessing the nature of attributes of the image of Thailand in terms of whether they are common or unique. Nowadays, technological progress makes it possible to imitate these elements of the environment which until recently

belonged to the inimitable. In this regard, the following attributes reported by respondents can be considered as unique: Bangkok (including its individual attractions), Thai massages, and general tolerance of gay tourism, high concentration of transvestites.

From the perspective of developing the tourism destination brand, one of the other options to assess the attributes of the image of Thailand is the assessment in terms of whether the elements are positive or negative. The results of our survey were placed again on mutually intersected axes representing possible counterparts of perception of *positive* versus *negative* or *tangible* versus *intangible* attributes. We tried to indicate the “*position*” and “*strength*” of attributes. The *strength* is represented by the frequency of the respondents (the size of the ellipse in Figure 4 reflects the frequency of respondents).

Figure 4 depicts the very first associations which came to the respondents’ minds when hearing the word *Thailand*. As Figure 4 indicates, the most reported and positively perceived imaginary notion related to Thailand were the ideas of Thailand as an *exotic country* (30%) and a *beautiful sea and beaches* (27%). The most frequently cited negative associations included *prostitution* and also *sex tourism* (20%), which was negatively perceived by most of the respondents. 32% of the respondents recorded at least one negative association. Actually, many of the respondents recorded combinations of both positive and negative associations. For instance, while thinking about Thailand, the following were stated by the respondents:

- man, 19-24 years: *vacation, Thai massage, different culture*
- woman, 25-39 year: *exotic, beautiful beaches, kind people, prostitution;*
- man, 25-39 years: *exotic, sex tourism, good food, pretty women;*
- woman, 40 and over: *prostitution, drugs, street children, poverty.*

Associations recorded by the respondents who have already been to Thailand (primary image) appear to be more specific, describing cultural difference and traditions of the country. Moreover, it dominates a cognitive component of the image in their descriptions, i.e. they more often stated specific tourist attractions. Affective components of primary image of Thailand represented mainly (overall 93%) positive emotions at the surveyed respondents, which were raised by the idea of the journey undertaken. Here are some examples of the above explained combinations of associations:

- woman, 25-39 years: *Phuket, honeymoons, our destroyed canoe, tasty food;*
- man, 40 and over: *vacation, scuba diving in turquoise sea, sex tourism, chilli;*
- woman, 19-24 years: *eating insets, elephant show, transvestites, shopping;*
- woman, 25-39 years: *friendly and optimistic people, Bangkok, shopping, Damnoen Saduak floating market.*

Taking into account the 9/11 era, a very sensitive perception of safety of the tourist destination has become one of the most important attributes. In this regard in case of Thailand, there were many other already mentioned negative key situations (SARS - 2003, devastating Tsunami - 2004, or political unrest - 2009), about which the world knew almost immediately. However, thanks to the successful crisis management and also intensive post crisis marketing campaigns (for more see Matlovičová and Kolesárová, 2011), Thailand has succeed to eliminate their devastating impact on the overall image of the country as a safe tourist destination.

The overall evaluation of our survey confirmed that the majority of surveyed respondents share about Thailand the opinion of the safe tourist destination (almost 70% consider Thailand to be a *completely safe* or *rather safe* country). In this regard, however, there is a significant difference in the image of Thailand created on the basis of primary experience and secondary resources. All surveyed respondents having a personal experience with the country consider Thailand a *completely safe* destination (42%) or *rather safe* (58%).

Thailand as a *dangerous* or *rather dangerous* country is considered by up to 30% of surveyed Slovaks; however none of them have ever been to Thailand. Presented fact demonstrates a negative impact of second-hand information on general image of the country. Criminality related to drugs and poverty (recorded by 18% of respondents) was the most frequently recorded problem of the safety.

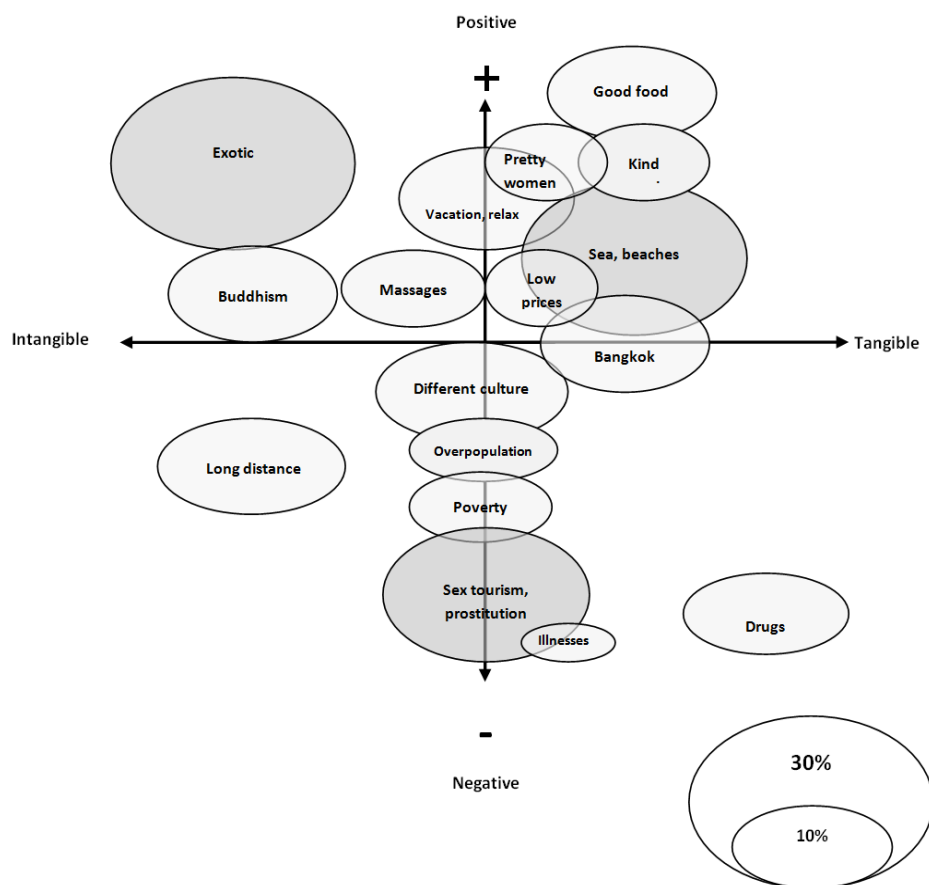


Figure 4 Perceived components of destination image of Thailand in terms of the strength and rate of positivity to overall image of the country

The personal view of safety is closely related to the willingness to recommend this tourist destination to friends and relatives. Therefore, it is of no surprise that most of the respondents who view the country as safe, provide also positive references to the potential tourists. In a way, it is surprising, that more than half of the respondents, who considered the country as dangerous (56%), would recommend it as a good place for holiday.

Positive references made to this destination are considered to be the key ones in shaping the positive image of the country. In this respect, therefore, we were searching for cognitive components of the image which dominated at surveyed Slovaks. We were asking the respondents about the places in Thailand which Slovak tourist should visit in their opinion.

Among the recommended suggestions the *sea and isles with white beaches* dominated clearly which were recommended by 30% of respondents. The sea and its other close characteristics connected with a leisure form of coastal tourism “sea” and “sand”, also known as 3S, seems to be the biggest attraction, i.e. what the Slovaks are interested in the most in terms of outbound tourism. Recommended suggestions of the respondents who have never been to Thailand were as following: *islands and beaches of Thailand* (30%), *Bangkok* (24%), *traditional way of life* (18%), *natural attractions* (15%), *Thai massages* (7%), *Go-go bars* (3%), and *sex tourism* (3%). While comparing the structures of preferences (i.e. responses of people who have personal experience with Thailand versus those who have any experience with Thailand), we found an essential difference in the option referring to the Thai beautiful nature. This option was recommended by almost 30% of the respondents who have personal experience with Thailand and only by 15% of the respondents who have any personal experience with this country.

One of the reasons discouraging Slovak tourists from travelling to Thailand, which can be only hardly removed, is the *high costs of the trip* (cited by 51%) which is caused mainly by the long distance from Slovakia (a substantial part of the costs for a trip are the costs of transportation). Other reasons were accounted as less important factors because of their frequency (although, the most frequently cited were *drugs, prostitution, cultural difference*, or comments on *long distance and lack of leisure time*, etc.). However, a positive message concerning building the brand of Thailand as a tourist destination is that up to 20% of surveyed respondents have not specified any particular reasons discouraging them from visiting Thailand.

CONCLUSION

Our empirical study also shows that the complexity, heterogeneity and subjectivity of perception of the identified attributes encounter a problem when trying to accomplish some classification or segmentation. The problem is to set a dividing line between the groups of components, for example between functional and psychological components, unique and common ones, or the problem might occur while assessing a positivity since it might be interpersonally judged very differently. Despite all the difficulties, the research of the image is still a required type of research, offering some guiding lines for the establishment and optimisation of development strategies for tourist destinations around the world. According to an assessment of travel agencies, Slovak people prefer to enjoy their vacation in the southern part of Europe or in the northern part of Africa. Moreover, agencies agree upon the fact that demand for more distant and exotic destinations is growing. Portfolio with offered exotic trips is getting more diverse year by year. New direct flights from nearby airports in Vienna, Brno, Ostrava, and Prague to distant destinations have significantly reduced total costs for trips. Thus, these exotic tours are becoming more affordable.

Tours to Thailand, but also to nearby Sri Lanka and the Maldives, were negatively influenced by the earthquake and subsequent Tsunami in late 2004 which in fact together with the current political instability have caused a decline of interest in Thailand. One of the options how to restore the previous position of Thailand on the Slovak market, i.e. when Thailand dominated in the demand for winter exotic tours, is that by intensifying the marketing communication and strengthening the positive image of the country. In this respect, our research confirms that Slovak people hold a rather positive image of Thailand, the main attributes of which are the following: beautiful sea, beaches and nature, exotic culture, and tasty food. Attributes perceived as negative include criminality, drugs, and prostitutions.

While considering the nature of perceived attributes, the main functional characteristics of Thailand are: sex tourism and prostitution, Thai massages, drugs, sea and beaches, tasty food, and low prices. The second group of functional attributes, however, perceived rather in a holistic way, consists of the following: poverty, illnesses (particularly AIDS) overpopulation, Buddhism, and Bangkok. Psychological (abstract) attributes were also divided according to Echtner and Ritchie (2003) into individually perceived (pretty women, nice and friendly people, different culture) attributes and those perceived in a holistic way (exotic, vacation, relax, long distance).

We can summarize that the surveyed group of Slovak respondents perceive Thailand as a country of “*exotic and erotic*”. This perception reflects in its essence a certain ambivalence of the country’s image in the spirit of dualism presented everywhere. Thailand embodies for Slovaks an exotic country with a very different culture determined by Buddhism which encourages to self-denial and humiliation. On the other hand, there are luxury resorts and a wide range of secular pleasures that are in sharp contrast with each other. Thus, the image of Thailand is perceived by Slovak respondents as dual and is represented principally by negatively perceived erotically-oriented tourism (respectively prostitution) and, on the contrary, by very positively perceived beautiful nature and valuable cultural monuments.

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