

DESTINATION IMAGE AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Of Tourism in China, India, and Thailand

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ABSTRACT

China, India, and Thailand have the highest number of tourist arrivals in their respective sub-regions of Asia. Many people have formulated images about these countries without any first-hand experience. With social media on the rise, potential travelers are exposed to destination imagery from personal and industry sources. This research assesses the positive and negative perceptions among Connecticut college students about traveling to these three countries. A survey utilizing Likert Scale and open-ended questions was administered to 111 students in 2018. Results indicate that perceptions of friendly locals and high-quality transportation were correlated with strong tourism demand amongst the students sampled. Of the three countries, Thailand had the most positive overall image, as college students in Connecticut associated it with the beach and a distinctive culture. India's cultural and experiential amenities were also positively viewed. China was more negatively perceived, linked with overpopulation and unsafe conditions. It still had appeal, however, as a global destination with a blend of heritage and modern culture. Overall, students interested in a specific destination were drawn by cultural heritage and natural attractions, showing that these attributes should be marketed as part of each country's brand. One strong variation worth additional research was that males surveyed were less interested in traveling to India and Thailand than their female counterparts. Language, cost, flight time, and distance were commonly identified barriers to travel. Tourism professionals targeting college students should consider how to market these countries in ways that reduces these concerns or eliminate the barriers themselves.

Keywords: Tourism Geography, Destination Image, Asia, Tourism Demand

Introduction

Asia has been among the fastest growing international destination regions since the start of this millennium (UNWTO/GTERC 2017). At the forefront of this trend, China was the leading international tourism generator in 2019 and among the top five destinations, receiving 66 million international tourists (UNWTO 2021). Yet, circumstances may change in the aftermath of a global pandemic that originated in Asia and brought international travel to a standstill in 2020 (Gössling et al. 2020). As rising vaccination levels foretell a likely return of large-scale international tourism, it is necessary to consider not only what has made Asia an attractive destination, but also what barriers predate pandemic-related concerns.

This study investigates how a sample of college students at a regional university in Connecticut perceive traveling to China, India, and Thailand, the most visited destinations in each of Asia's three World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) sub-regions: North-East, South-East, and South (see Table 1). The goal of the study is to discover the similarities, differences, and general perceptions that students have about traveling to Asia's most visited countries.

North-East			South-East		South	
1	China	65.7	Thailand	39.8	India	17.9
2	Japan	32.2	Malaysia	26.1	Iran	9.1
3	Hong Kong	23.8	Vietnam	18	Sri Lanka	1.9
4	Macao	18.6	Indonesia	15.5	Maldives	1.7
5	South Korea	17.5	Singapore	15.1	Nepal	1.2

Table 1. International Tourist Arrivals by Asian Sub-Region in 2019 (in millions of visitors)
Source: World Tourism Organization 2021

Tourism demand, the interest of people in engaging in tourism, is shaped by multi-scalar factors, including motivation, leisure time, discretionary income, culture, and life stage. Specific considerations for college students include available financial resources (Carr 2005) and institutional opportunities for travel (Rodriguez et al. 2012). A crucial component of demand is place perception (Cho 2010; Skinner and Theodossopoulos 2011); in tourism studies, referred to as "destination image" (Pike 2002). Tourism is driven, in part, by people's imaginations about places, culminating in a desire to experience them firsthand (Salazar 2012).

Destination image is subject to a range of influencing factors, including personal experiences, spatial proximity, societal factors, news, and popular media (Tasci 2007). The initial image formation stage is the most influential in the destination selection process (Baloglu and McCleary 1999) and perceptions may be difficult to change once ingrained for potential travelers. Rather than considering the destination's specific characteristics, the overall image is often what most influences tourists (Tapachi and Waryszak 2000). Destination image is interconnected with tourism marketing. Those involved with destination development attempt to create a desirable image through a process termed "branding" (Morgan et al. 2007). For

example, Las Vegas' familiar refrain of "what happens in Vegas..." is an effective marketing ploy to draw tourists looking for an exciting place to vacation. Such slogans do not happen by accident; tourism marketing agencies perform extensive research in formulating their brands (Morgan et al. 2003). Destinations may focus on positive imagery and ensure that their realities match peoples' perceptions or attempt to remedy negatives (Almeyda-Ibanez and George 2017).

Destination images may also hinder potential tourist demand. Negative perceptions of some regions are partially rooted in the era of European colonization (Bandyopadhyay and Morais 2005) and the West's view of other cultures as exotic and inferior – as famously highlighted in Said's (1978) landmark research on Orientalism – still manifests. Studies have also found, for example, that associations with terrorism and other forms of risk reduce tourist interest (Arana and Leon 2008).

This research focuses on college students as they are often more educated, youthful, and open-minded than the general tourist population, providing an ideal sample for discussing international destinations. Many types of tourism cater to the young and affluent (Field 1999; Barron and Arcodia 2002; Sakakida, Cole, and Card 2004). Additionally, the current generation of American college students grew up in an age of social media and convenience, making them the first young adults to have their travel perceptions and experiences shaped primarily by these things. As a cohort inclined to adventure and risk taking (Kim et al. 2007; Lesjak et al. 2015), they also promise to be among the first to travel internationally again in the aftermath of the pandemic. Insight into the attitudes of college students may thus be important to destinations seeking to attract the wider U.S. tourist market. For example, perceived barriers identified by college students may be exacerbated for those in older, more risk averse, demographics.

While research has been conducted on various Asian destinations (e.g., Choi, Chan and Wu 1999; Mercille 2005; Yusuf 2014; Hader, 2017), investigation into the most visited countries in three of the UNWTO's sub-regions of Asia is lacking, specifically as it relates to college students. This research seeks to fill two gaps: expanding tourism geography research on China, Thailand and India; and studying perceptions of travel to those countries by a sub-set of American college students.

Influences on Destination Image

Consideration of the interactions between peoples and places has long been a central theme in geography. People develop a "sense" shaped by their interactions with a place (Tuan 1977; Relph 2009); these may be especially nuanced for the places where people live. Due to the processes of time-space compression, sense of place is ever more global (Massey 2008). Reflecting these complexities, tourists perceive and interact with places in distinct ways (Hughes 1992). Urry and Larson (2011) refer to this perspective as the "tourist gaze." This section considers the literature focused on influences on destination image.

"Destination image" is defined by Lopes (2011, 307) as "a subjective interpretation of reality by the tourist." Destination images traditionally consist of related components: product, behavior, and environment (Milman and Pizam 1995). Ideally, destinations aim to

make tourists' experiences coincide with a positive destination image. This consistency creates relationships and encourages positive feedback, revisitation, and giving of recommendations (Chavelier and Mayzlin 2006; Chen and Tsai 2007; Jacobs, Portgeiter, and Geldenhuys 2016). Several recurring concepts may be detected in the literature on destination image. First, many authors attempt to define "destination image" (i.e., Milman and Pizam 1995; Ryan and Cave 2005; Nadeau et al. 2007). Second, destination image formation has been analyzed with widespread recognition that the information gathering process, consciously or subconsciously, plays a role in how a traveler chooses a destination (Gartner 1994; Kim and Richardson 2003; Frias, Rodriguez, and Castaneda, 2008). A third theme is destination images' impact on tourism considerations such as marketing and visitor arrivals (Milman and Pizam 1995; Chen and Tsai 2007).

Formation of destination image is based on knowledge and familiarity. Travel experience has a significant impact on destination image (Beerli and Martin 2004). Two main sets of perceptions are combined, the "organic" and the "induced." Organic images often develop first, from the exposure to information in daily life; perception then evolves into an induced image with contributions from advertising and other pitched material (Milman and Pizam 1995). Though the organic image is always present, to reach the induced image, the consumer must seek out information regarding the destination because they are motivated to travel. With more research by the traveler, their destination image becomes more nuanced.

Destination image is influenced by many social processes, including culture, history, and politics. These factors have been considered by a range of literature (i.e., Beerli and Martin 2004; Ooi 2004). Such considerations also fall within the wider realm of geographic imagination (Gregory 1994). Perceptions of places are shaped by discourses of marginality, identity, and exclusion (Shields 1991; Sibley 1995, Price 2004; Massey 2005). As Said (1978) illustrated, geographic imagination is complex in its creation and the associated ideas often long enduring. Contemporary geopolitics also affects destination image (Rowen 2016). For example, perceived risk has been repeatedly linked with lessened tourist demand (Saint Akadiri et al. 2020; Lee, Olasehinde-Williams, and Saint Akadiri 2021).

Tourism marketing has been researched for decades (Coltman 1989; Lumsdon 1997; Jamrozy 2007; Kolter, Bowen, and Makens 2009). Branding is used to create a "personality" for a destination, which shapes both how an attraction is perceived and the expectations and behavior of tourists. As technology has evolved, so too have the most common tourism marketing mediums. The internet has made information available at the traveler's fingertips (Olmeda and Sheldon 2002; So and Morrison 2004; Lin and Huang 2007), including websites offered by attractions and destinations, social media, and word of mouth platforms such as TripAdvisor (Choi, Lehto, and Morrison 2007; Nielson 2013). Other common sources include personal experience, peer conversations, travel books (Echtner and Ritchie 1991), television, and movies (Chalip, Green, and Hill 2003; Govers, Go, and Kumar 2007).

Destinations often cater specifically to college students since they are a diverse group, comprised of all types of Cohen's (1974) travelers, from those craving novel experiences to those seeking familiarity in their destination. They travel in high numbers, enabled by short-term

and semester-long study abroad programs (Kim et al. 2007; Rodriguez et al. 2012). Students comprise an important cohort for the industry, fostering their travel fever early and maintaining it throughout their lives. They have also been more exposed to different lifestyles, cultures, and people than high school students; making them a prime candidate for studies on destination image (Sirakaya and McLellan 1997; Gibson, Qi, and Zhang 2008; Wang and Hsu 2010).

Destination Image and Asia

Researchers have studied how the Asia Pacific region compares to other regions and competition within the region itself (Enright and Newton 2005). Asia has been considered collectively (Mak and White 1992; Winter 2007; Singh 2009) and on a country-by-country basis (Peleggi 1996; Lew 2003; Chon et al. 2003; Jackson 2006; Crooks 2011). Asia has also been a dynamic focus in the literature regarding destination images of developing nations (Lee et al. 2005). Researchers have yet to compare the countries with the top arrivals based on sub-region – China, India, and Thailand – making this research especially pertinent as a juxtaposition of Asia's three largest sub-regional tourism players.

After the active exclusion of most foreigners during the era of Mao Zedong, the Chinese government first embraced tourism as an integral part of their development vision in the 1980s (Xiao 2006). Tourism was further designated as a growth point of the national economy in the late 1990s (Lew et al. 2003) and China's government has subsequently used tourism to generate revenue and promote positive images to travelers. One of the focuses of China's tourism development has been designation of sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List, an approach that is also tied into the government's geopolitical agenda (Li et al. 2008). Much of the literature on China's destination image centers on the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing (i.e., Gibson, Qi, and Zhang 2008). Overall, destination images of China tend to be positive (Tasci and Gartner 2007; Choi, Chan, and Wu 1999, Xiao and Mair 2006), with both strengths and weaknesses considered by tourists (Shani et al. 2009). However, the complex geopolitical relationship between the U.S. and China – as well as lingering attitudes from the Cold War – may also exert influence on the perceptions of American college students (Yee and Storey 2004; Ambrosio, Schram, and Heopfner 2020).

Tourism in India has grown recently with interest in sites including the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort, and the city of Mumbai. After improvement to other sectors, such as agriculture, housing, and water (Kaur and Johari 2011), India began dedicating resources to uplifting their economy with tourism in the 1990s (Taqi et al. 2018). Relatively little research has been done regarding India's destination image. Based on the literature, potential travelers deem India's culture as exotic and their food, arts, and language as intriguing, but express concerns about overcrowding and safety (Kale and Weir 1986; Ahmed and Krohn 1992; Chaudhary 2000; Crooks 2011).

Thailand made a concerted effort at growing their tourism sector in the 1990s to increase foreign export earnings (McDowall and Wang 2009) and is now one of Asia's top destinations. Following the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Thailand was associated with sex tourism, with demand shifting from GIs on leave to the wider tourist market (Garrick 2005). Though

prostitution is illegal, sex tourism remains a primary lure for many visitors. To expand their market, Thailand has purposefully focused on cultural, gastro, and medical tourism. To date, there has not been extensive research on Thailand's destination image, with studies focused on the aforementioned products (e.g., Wilson 2011; Pullphothong and Sopha 2012) and the influence of films (Law, Bunnell, and Ong 2007; Mostafanezhad and Promburum 2018).

Methods

This research focuses on how destination-related perceptions impacts college students' choices about traveling to Asia. To better understand any connection, we surveyed college students at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), a regional comprehensive public university, regarding their perceptions and willingness to travel to the most visited countries in the three Asian sub-regions: China in North-East Asia; Thailand in South-East Asia; and India in South Asia. Overall, we sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) What positive or negative perceptions do Connecticut college students (who have never been to China, India or Thailand) have about these countries?
- 2) Does knowing someone who has traveled to one of the subject countries influence their own perceptions?
- 3) Is there stronger demand to travel to one of the countries? Does gender influence travel demand?

Survey Design

Surveys are commonly used in tourism geography research. The literature related to destination image and visitation numbers have ascertained results based on surveys (Chen and Tsai 2006; Chi and Qu 2007; Chen and Phou 2013). In research on destination image and visitation to China, Gibson, Qi, and Zhang (2008) surveyed college students to assess their travel experience, travel intentions, and perceptions of risk, among other factors. They primarily used a Likert Scale survey, giving participants a five-point scale to express how strongly they agree or disagree with certain statements. As the Likert Scale survey was effective for their research questions, which are comparable to ours, we sought to emulate their methodology to assess students' destination knowledge, access to promotional images, and plans to travel. The survey administered for this research had four main sections:

- a) *Respondent Background*: Respondents were asked their age, gender, if they knew anyone who had been to China, India or Thailand and, if so, if that person's experience was positive.
- b) *Likert Scale Questions*: Questions assessed the likelihood, interest, or agreeability with certain statements (1 to 5 Scale). Early questions assessed interest in traveling internationally and to Asia. The remaining 11 question sets were then asked specific to each country (thus each question was answered three times; once per country). Effectively, upon completion of this section, students had submitted 35 Likert responses (first 2 plus 11x3).

- c) *Open Response*: Open questions sought to identify common perceptions by asking students to provide three keywords that come to mind to describe each country and then identify the biggest appeals and barriers for traveling to each country.
- d) *Ranking of Travel Media Information*: The final section sought a ranking of the importance and reliability of travel information sources. Due to confusion from this section's design, response approaches were inconsistent and conflicting. Thus, no results were discernible, and this survey section is omitted from the research.

Survey Administration

Since the research relates to college students' perceptions, the survey was explicitly targeted to "traditional" college students (those attending shortly after high school, aged 18-25), since they are a desired market for tourism research due to study abroad, break travel, and long-term travel plans. The other prerequisite was that participants had not visited any of the three countries, as our research intended to capture preconceptions. To understand variations by gender, we sought a roughly even split between male and female respondents. Besides age, gender split, and whether someone had visited a subject country, no other individual characteristics were used to filter or identify survey respondents. Through random canvassing on campus and administering the survey in two general education courses, we sought a diversity of ethnic backgrounds and fields of study; however, we did not explicitly ask for respondents to identify such characteristics. The survey was administered in 2018 at Central Connecticut State University's main campus in New Britain, CT. Students confirmed to be in the target sample group were asked to complete the survey. Ultimately, 111 CCSU students anonymously completed the survey and provided consent to include their responses.

Data Preparation & Analysis

The first analysis step generated descriptive statistics to compare countries and see how perceptions impact the willingness to travel to each country. The next analysis stage compared subset respondent populations using t-Tests: first comparing male and female respondents to see if gender impacts perceptions or travel intentions and, second, comparing respondents who knew someone that had been to one of the countries to the population that did not. A final group of t-Tests compared how perceptions of a country impact one's interest in traveling there. For this analysis, those interested in traveling to a specific country (indicated by a 4 or 5 response) were one population compared to those NOT interested in traveling to (indicated by a 1 or 2 response). Any neutral respondent (reporting a 3 for that country) was omitted from those t-Tests. Open-ended responses were reviewed to identify common replies. Keywords were grouped by whether they were positive, negative, neutral, or miscellaneous. Research analysis ultimately focused on the positive and negative keywords to shed light on polarized destination imagery.

Field	Count	Percent
Total Respondents	111	
Male	34	30.6%
Female	77	69.4%
Respondents' Age		
Average Age	20.5	
Minimum	18	
Maximum	25	
Knows someone who has traveled to China, India or Thailand	63	56.8%
If knows someone, number who had positive experience	61	97% (of 63)

Table 2. General Information about the Survey Respondents

specifically to Asia, there was markedly less interest (mean 3.77; mode 5; See Table 3). Since the mode was still 5, however, it appears that what is reflected is not an overall decrease in interest but rather much lower interest level among those not finding Asia to be an appealing region to visit. Interest in traveling to the three subject countries varied from country to country, but all three generated lower interest by respondents than the “traveling to Asia” question, potentially indicating interest in traveling to a different country than one of these three. Thailand scored the highest (mean 3.70; mode 4), China was second (mean 3.49; mode 4) and India was lowest (mean 3.13; mode 3).

The idea that travelers were likely to encounter overcrowding in China (mean 4.55) and India (mean 4.39) were quite high (modes for both countries were 5’s). Thailand’s perceived overcrowding was lower (mean 3.68; mode 4). There were strong perceptions of poverty in India (mean 4.21) and Thailand (3.95) with “5” as the most frequent response. China’s poverty was perceived to be lesser (mean 3.66; mode 3). Oppositely, however, China was expected to have higher pollution (mean 4.29; mode 5) while Thailand was thought to have the lowest pollution among the three (mean 3.58; mode 3).

Respondents did not think the culture of the subject countries were similar to the United States (means ranging from 2.19 to 2.60). When asked about cultural heritage, responses show that China (mean 3.95) has a higher rate of cultural heritage appeal than India (mean 3.69) or Thailand (3.82) but both China and India had 5’s as their most common response. The questions regarding the appeal of the subject countries’ natural environments showed that Thailand is perceived to have an attractive natural environment (mean 4.03; mode 5) among surveyed college students, especially compared to India and China (mode 3 for both). Thailand and China were both perceived to be more welcoming to tourists than India (medians and

Results

The survey was completed by 111 students: 77 were females and 63 people (56.8 percent) knew someone who had traveled to one of the countries (See Table 2). Of those 63 people, 61 (97 percent) reported that their acquaintance’s experience was positive.

General Results of Likert Scale Survey Responses

Of the 111 respondents, interest in traveling internationally was strong (mean 4.75; mode 5) but when asked about traveling

modes of 4 compared to India's 3's). Despite these variations in perceived welcomeness, all three countries scored closely on the level of difficulty to interact while in each country (means ranging from 3.48 to 3.55). Regarding perceptions of safety, the modes and medians for all three countries were right in the middle at 3; however, China's average (3.50) was slightly higher than India (3.09) and Thailand (3.19) and therefore perceived to be safer by many respondents.

<i>Likert Question</i>	<i>Mean Median Mode</i>			<i>Mean Median Mode</i>			<i>Mean Median Mode</i>		
How interested are you in traveling:	Internationally						to Asia		
	4.75	5	5				3.77	4	5
How interested are you in traveling:	to China			to India			to Thailand		
	3.49	4	4	3.13	3	3	3.7	4	4
Likelihood to encounter overcrowding:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	4.55	5	5	4.39	5	5	3.68	4	4
Likelihood to encounter visible poverty:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	3.66	4	3	4.21	4	5	3.95	4	5
Likelihood to encounter pollution:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	4.29	5	5	4.02	4	5	3.58	3	3
Perceive US culture to be similar to:	China			India			Thailand		
	2.60	3	3	2.21	2	2	2.19	2	2
How tourist-friendly is transportation:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	3.49	4	4	3.01	3	3	3.24	3	3
How welcoming to tourists are they:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	3.56	4	4	3.37	3	3	3.75	4	4
How difficult will it be to interact:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	3.55	4	3	3.51	4	4	3.48	4	4
How appealing is the cultural heritage:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	3.95	4	5	3.69	4	5	3.82	4	4
How appealing is the natural environment:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	3.64	4	3	3.58	4	3	4.03	4	5
How safe for tourists is it:	in China			in India			in Thailand		
	3.50	3	3	3.09	3	3	3.19	3	3

Table 3: Select Summary Statistics of Likert Scale Survey Responses

Results of t-Tests Part 1: Influence of Gender on Destination Perception

To understand how gender influences perceptions and preferences, a series of t-Tests were performed comparing male (n=34) survey responses to those by females (n=77). Of the 35 t-tests, 29 had no significant difference between male and female responses. With respect to perceptions of poverty, pollution, difficulty of interactions, and safety for tourists, there were no significant differences between how men and women perceived all three countries. Similarly,

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there were no differences between female and male respondents about comparison to U.S. culture, receptiveness to tourists, or ease of transportation for tourists.

Generally, both genders had similar responses about interest in traveling internationally, traveling to Asia, and to China. Regarding travel to India and Thailand, however, women were significantly more interested in visiting those countries than men (See Table 4). Women found the cultural heritage more appealing than men did for both countries as well. In addition, Thailand was perceived by women to be overcrowded but yet to offer an appealing natural environment. There were no significant differences in women's and men's responses about China's cultural heritage or overcrowding or the natural environment in India and China.

Nature of Question	Country	Pop. A Mean	Pop. B Mean	Mean Diff.	t Stat	Two-tail P-value	Lower Conf. Interval	Upper Conf. Interval
		<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>					
Interest in Traveling to	India	2.76	3.29	-0.52	2.10	0.04	-0.03	-1.01
Interest in Traveling to	Thailand	3.24	3.91	-0.67	2.92	0.00	-0.22	-1.13
Perceived Overcrowding in	Thailand	3.33	3.83	-0.50	2.56	0.01	-0.11	-0.88
Appeal of Cultural Heritage in	India	3.29	3.87	-0.57	2.46	0.02	-0.11	-1.04
Appeal of Cultural Heritage in	Thailand	3.38	4.01	-0.63	2.94	0.00	-0.21	-1.06
Appeal of Natural Environment	Thailand	3.71	4.17	-0.47	2.28	0.02	-0.06	-0.87
		<i>Does NOT Know Anyone</i>		<i>Knows Someone ...</i>				
Interest in Traveling to	Internationally	4.57	4.88	-0.30	2.57	0.01	-0.07	-0.53
Interest in Traveling to	India	2.85	3.33	-0.48	2.06	0.04	-0.02	-0.94
How Difficult to Interact in	China	3.81	3.35	0.46	2.16	0.03	0.04	0.88
How Difficult to Interact in	India	3.81	3.29	0.52	2.57	0.01	0.12	0.93
How Difficult to Interact in	Thailand	3.79	3.25	0.53	2.58	0.01	0.12	0.94
Appeal of Natural Environment	Thailand	3.76	4.22	-0.46	2.40	0.02	-0.08	-0.84
Interest in Traveling to	China	<i>Low Interest</i>	<i>High Interest</i>					
Tourist-Friendly Transport in	China	3.00	3.69	-0.69	-2.64	0.01	-1.17	-0.22
How Welcoming to Tourists in	China	3.22	3.83	-0.61	-3.37	0.00	-1.02	-0.20
Appeal of Cultural Heritage in	China	3.04	4.42	-1.38	-5.32	0.00	-1.82	-0.94
Appeal of Natural Environment	China	2.83	4.00	-1.17	-4.86	0.00	-1.65	-0.70
Interest in Traveling to	India	<i>Low Interest</i>	<i>High Interest</i>					
Tourist-Friendly Transport in	India	2.62	3.05	-0.43	-2.06	0.04	-0.84	-0.01
How Welcoming to Tourists in	India	3.03	3.52	-0.49	-2.53	0.01	-0.87	-0.12
Appeal of Cultural Heritage in	India	2.71	4.36	-1.66	-7.52	0.00	-2.09	-1.22
Appeal of Natural Environment	India	3.20	3.95	-0.75	-3.36	0.00	-1.20	-0.31
Interest in Traveling to	Thailand	<i>Low Interest</i>	<i>High Interest</i>					
Appeal of Cultural Heritage in	Thailand	2.88	4.19	-1.30	-4.29	0.00	-1.83	-0.78
Appeal of Natural Environment	Thailand	3.12	4.37	-1.25	-4.81	0.00	-1.72	-0.79

Table 4. Results of Significant t-Tests

Results of t-Tests Part 2: Influence of Knowing Someone who has been to the Country

Another factor tested was whether respondents who know someone that has been to one of the countries (n=64) have different perceptions and preferences compared to someone who does not have such “word-of-mouth” knowledge on these places (n=47). Interestingly, as with gender, there was no significant difference on 29 of the 35 survey question responses. The six questions that were significantly different between the two tested populations differed from the six for the gender-based t-Tests, however. Firstly, people who knew someone who had been to one of these three countries were significantly more interested in traveling internationally and going to India specifically (no significant variation was present for travel to Asia, China, or Thailand). Respondents who knew someone also had a higher view of Thailand’s natural environment. Across the board, respondents who did not know anyone that had been to these countries were significantly more likely to perceive it to be difficult to interact in all three countries. Conversely, those who did know someone had a better idea about interactions in that country and were less likely to perceive that to be an issue. Interestingly, there were no other significant variations between people that knew someone and those that did not for the range of questions on pollution, culture, safety, and other factors.

Results of t-Tests Part 3: Influence of Interest in Traveling to a Specific Country

The final set of t-Tests were to understand how an interest in traveling to one of the countries relates to perceptions about that country. For all three countries, those expressing high interest in visiting had significantly higher views of both the natural environment and cultural heritage of that country. In other words, a positive view of culture and nature is associated with a higher interest level, whereas those without such positive perceptions are significantly less likely to want to visit. Those interested in visiting China or India perceived those countries to be much more welcoming to tourists and have easier-to-use transportation than their fellow respondents with low or no interest in visiting those countries.

Results of Open-Ended Questions: Destination Image Keywords

As part of the survey, students were asked to record three keywords that come to mind when thinking about the destination image of the three subject countries. China’s destination image among this sample is overwhelmingly negative. Overall, there were 59 distinct keywords; the most common response was that China is too populated (n=34) or overcrowded (n=24). Being “busy” (n=15) and polluted (n=18) were also frequent associations. Common positive responses include “culture” (n=15) and “interesting” (n=10). Overall, India had 78 distinct keywords. While India also had common negative keywords (e.g., overpopulated, n=23, and crowded, n=21), there were generally more positive associations. India’s culture (n=30) and food (n=13) were frequent responses, as well as descriptors like beautiful (n=9), colorful (n=8), and interesting (n=4). Thailand generated a range of 84 distinct keywords. Perceptions were largely positive with keywords like beautiful (n=24), culture (n=18), and beaches (n=14)

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dominating the responses. Populated (n=8) and different (n=8) were also common responses, but otherwise the keywords were wide-ranging from cheap alcohol and prostitution to meditation and waterfalls.

Results of Open-Ended Questions: Appeals for Visiting

When asked specifically about the appeals for traveling to the three countries, culture and food were the most common draws for students. For China, food (n=31) and culture (n=36) were the strongest, with historic places (n=13) also appealing (especially as it relates to The Great Wall, n=28). Food (n=23) and culture (n=11) were the most frequent responses for India, with all the other appeals only mentioned by one or two respondents. The range of appeals for India was everything from low cost and beauty to religion and traditions. Like China and India, culture (n=30) and food (n=17) were the most favored aspects of traveling to Thailand. In addition, there was a strong appeal of Thailand's natural landscapes (n=12) and environment (n=9).

Results of Open-Ended Questions: Barriers to Visiting

When asked about barriers to traveling to these countries, language and the different aspects of getting to the countries were by far the biggest perceived challenges. Language was the most frequently reported barriers for all three (China n=45, India n=31, and Thailand n=32). The cost of travel was perceived to be just as much a barrier in China (n=45), while less so in India (n=19) and Thailand (n=20); however, India and Thailand had many more respondents citing the distance (Thailand n=15) or the flight (India n=11). China split that with 9 respondents each reporting the flights or distance as issues.

Barriers unique to each country were cultural differences (China n=9), overcrowding (India n=12), and general safety (Thailand n=6). Variations of political concerns also evidenced themselves in China with government (n=7) as a common response.

Full Survey & t-Tests Results

Since the outcomes from t-Tests and the lists of keywords are lengthy, full results are not able to be included here but are available from the authors upon request.

Analysis

With college students as a major source of would-be travelers, it is critical to understand what shapes their perceptions and willingness to travel. We found a strong demand among surveyed college students to travel internationally and to travel to Asia, specifically. Students were less interested in traveling to China, India, or Thailand than they were to Asia overall, so it is possible students were more interested in other Asian countries. While demand was strong to travel internationally, the perceived barriers of going to one of the three subject countries are clearly hampering their appeal to college students in Connecticut. Concerns about language barriers, different cultures, and political differences are all considerations when it comes to

whether they would like to visit these countries or not. Analysis of survey results will be framed by the three core research questions:

- 1) What positive or negative perceptions do Connecticut college students (who have never been to China, India or Thailand) have about these countries?
- 2) Does knowing someone who has traveled to one of the subject countries influence their own perceptions?
- 3) Is there stronger demand to travel to one of the countries? Does gender influence travel demand?

What Perceptions do Connecticut College Students have about China, India, and Thailand?

While Connecticut college student perceptions vary across the three countries, there are several pervasive images common across all three. Most students identified the countries as having cultures that are very different from American culture. This cultural difference, however, creates a surprising split: some seeing distinct cultures as a major appeal, and others seeing this as a barrier and possible cause of anxiety. So, while distinct cultures may be a specific appeal to bring some students, this very attribute may also serve to deter others altogether. All three countries were also perceived to be overcrowded by many of the respondents.

Whether culture was appealing or not, many surveyed students saw all three countries as offering a variety of natural amenities. Students indicating a desire to visit a specific country often seemed attracted to the combination of distinct cultural and natural offerings. The surveyed college students who knew someone that had been to Asia were drawn by Thailand's natural scenery. Thailand has marketed its natural environment extensively in recent years, often showing off stunning islands. Based on this survey, Thailand has been doing an excellent job, as those who heard any word of mouth about Asia were excited by the country's landscape. As culture, and specifically food, were frequently offered as appealing attributes about a country, it raises questions about student knowledge of these countries and if there is any connection to or limitation from eating frequently at Chinese, Indian or Thai restaurants in the United States.

For all three countries, the cost of the trip and the flight itself hampered the demand to visit. The challenge of long flights is not something easily overcome, especially for college students, who are limited by university breaks. Even in a scenario where travel costs to Europe are comparable, shorter travel distances will allow more sightseeing time in Europe than in Asia, particularly during a tight schedule. Therefore, Asian tourism agencies may be better served to market themselves as winter and summer break or travel abroad destinations to allow for longer trips. It may behoove countries to work collaboratively rather than competitively in marketing themselves to American students so that the time and money spent on flights could include multiple stops in Asia over a several week span.

Due to the prevalence of China in American news and politics, there was some confusion about whether Americans are welcome in China and, once there, whether you can use technology (phone/internet) or not. It is evident from our research that the geopolitical relationship between the U.S. and China is impacting student perceptions, though not to what

extent. India's opportunities include needing to better market its cultural sites, as many students strongly saw cultural heritage as a draw, but only the Taj Mahal was specifically mentioned as a key site to visit. Strong appeal related to culture, religion, and history suggest there is room to build upon these by marketing additional landmarks and places that combine these strengths. In addition, despite having beautiful beaches and coastlines, India seems to be losing out to Thailand on being perceived as a beach destination. Indeed, India could market itself as a combination of history, culture, and beach relaxation.

Are Perceptions Influenced by Knowing Someone who has been to China, India or Thailand?

Receiving firsthand information about a country from a friend or family member can play a huge role in one's perceptions and willingness to travel. In comparing perceptions and interest, those who knew someone that had been to one of the countries were significantly more interested in visiting as well. These students perceived the country to be more welcoming to tourists, easier to navigate, and having more appealing attractions. Oppositely, those who had not received firsthand knowledge from an acquaintance were significantly more negative in their perceptions and less likely to want to visit; indicating concerns about communicating and the ability to interact in those countries.

Is There Stronger Demand to Travel to One of the Countries? Does it Vary by Gender?

Generally, China and Thailand were more appealing to these college students than India. When looking at women respondents, however, India and Thailand were seen as more attractive to visit. Thailand had the biggest variation by gender and, based on some of the key words reported, seems tied to female perceptions of Thailand as a place of beaches and relaxation with good food, spas, and an eclectic night life. This situation creates an interesting question for Thai tourism officials: are they missing out on the college male demographic, or should they play up these perceptions in marketing directed to college women? Just as Central Florida appeals to families and Las Vegas markets itself as a playground for adults, there is the possibility that Thailand could build a niche market as well.

Those expressing interest in visiting China, India, and Thailand had significantly better views of both the cultural heritage and natural environments of those countries. In other words, a positive perception of culture and nature seems to be associated with demand. Those with demand for China or India also perceived those countries to be much more welcoming to tourists and have easier-to-use transportation than their counterparts with low or no interest in visiting. This finding represents an opportunity for marketing to students: if you can increase students' understanding of cultural/natural offerings and accessibility, you could significantly shift students' willingness to visit these places.

Conclusion

China, India and Thailand are the dominant tourist destinations in their respective sub-regions of Asia. Despite this, research on the three countries is limited regarding tourism geography and destination image, especially for Thailand and India. This paper builds on existing research in focusing on a group of college students' perceptions and preferences for traveling to these countries. Many types of tourism cater to young people since they are often more flexible in their ability to travel and potentially more open to it (Field 1999; Barron and Arcodia 2002; Sakakida, Cole, and Card 2004). Therefore, understanding how they perceive certain places can inform industry specialists about building on positive imagery and overcoming negative perceptions; especially when considering the role of social media in current times.

A primary finding of our research as it relates to international travel, and particularly to countries in Asia, is that the influence of knowing people who have been to those locations is significant. College students, such as those surveyed, are typically more open to new experiences and to traveling (Kim et al. 2007; Lesjak et al. 2015). Therefore, American college students may serve as a "canary in the coal mine" for international destinations seeking to attract American tourist dollars. Places viewed as unwelcoming or difficult to navigate by college-aged Americans would potentially be even less attractive to those traveling in later life stages with families or health considerations. Therefore, one might expect an even more significant dichotomy among other would-be travelers in later life stages regarding the impact of knowing someone who has been to that country or not.

A major piece within the purview of the tourism industry is whether to specialize in serving a targeted population or to instead appeal to a broader market. Based on our research, Thailand exhibits more attraction to women than men. Hence, Thailand may consider more targeted marketing towards men or, alternatively, playing-up their identity as a premier destination for a "girls' getaway." Similarly, if immersion into an authentic culture is a major draw for American students to visit China, India, or Thailand, commodifying the culture could ultimately push the culture-seekers to visit other places instead. Building on the reality that knowing someone who has visited can make-or-break demand, Asian countries may want to consider marketing campaigns that include first person testimonials or encouraging visitors to share their experiences via social media or other mediums with friends and family.

This research identified many common perceptions, appeals, and deterrents for college students in Connecticut to visit China, India, and Thailand. A limitation of this research is that it surveyed only students at one university. It created, however, an easily replicated survey that can be administered at college campuses throughout the United States. Since the "Travel Media Information" section of our survey caused confusion amongst respondents, this section needs to be revised. Future research could also directly explore the role of geopolitics in informing American college student perceptions of the leading Asian destinations. As knowing someone who had visited Asia is clearly impactful, the survey could be expanded to achieve more detailed responses on the topic. For example, is social media a major avenue of information? And, to what degree does it matter if the person who has visited is a close friend or distant acquaintance?

Also, is this pattern of knowing someone more influential as it relates to Asian countries only or do comparable trends emerge for other international destinations or even domestic sites? If college-aged potential travelers are getting most of their information from peers on social media, the tourism industry would be well-served to ramp up imagery of their country via social media platforms. If, however, the main conduit of information is indeed word-of-mouth diffusion from trusted friends and family, it is unclear how the tourism industry could overcome this limitation.

Consistent with prior studies (Kale and Weir 1986; Ahmed and Krohn 1992; Chaudhary 2000; Crooks 2011), participants in our survey expressed anxiety about traveling to China and India due to overcrowding. Taken together, China and India's destination images particularly seem to suffer from negative preconceptions. These country-specific impediments may be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with dense populations and poverty viewed as contributing factors to outbreaks. As this research was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be pertinent to do a follow-up survey to see how the pandemic has impacted travel preferences. In the meantime, the negative perceptions identified in this research can be a guide to tourism officials on how to improve access to information and generate positive destination images in their respective countries.

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