



Lessons from COVID-19 for the future: destination image revival for crisis management

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of the destination image revival through the Sandbox Program for crisis management of Phuket's image as a tourist destination in light of the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global tourism. A data analysis was conducted based on responses from 296 Chinese visitors obtained via online questionnaires. The analysis included exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, and paired-sample T-tests. The findings of the study indicate that there were significant changes in individuals' perceptions on many criteria, including accessibility, cost/price, personal safety, food and entertainment, and risk of infection, both before and during implementation of the program. In contrast, ratings of natural attractions, climate, hospitality, and crowding decreased. In addition to its empirical contribution, this study expands our understanding of destination image management in the dynamic tourism scene by drawing lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The study has implications for government agencies, destination management organizations, and stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality sector. It provides valuable information for these entities in terms of preparation and response strategies for future disruptions that may impact global travel.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the global tourism landscape (Boto-García and Mayor, 2022), and Phuket, one of Thailand's most famous tourist destinations, has been severely affected. Before the

pandemic, Phuket attracted millions of visitors annually, with the Chinese market being particularly important and accounting for a significant proportion of international arrivals (Liu et al., 2018). However, the pandemic-related travel restrictions led to a sharp decline in tourist numbers, resulting in economic hardship and a tarnished image

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of the destination (Anguera-Torrell et al., 2021). Phuket, once celebrated for its stunning beaches, vibrant culture and lively nightlife, became associated with health risks and insecurity (Phucharoen et al., 2020) — a shift in perception that required urgent strategic action.

In response to this challenge, the Thai government introduced the Phuket Sandbox Program in July 2021, an innovative crisis management initiative designed to promote tourism recovery. This program allowed fully vaccinated international tourists to visit Phuket without quarantine, provided they stayed on the island for at least seven days and adhered to strict health protocols such as regular COVID-19 testing, according to Tourism Authority of Thailand (2021). The sandbox was not just a logistical solution, but a strategic attempt to restore confidence in the safety of Phuket and position the island as a safe and desirable destination during the pandemic. For the Chinese tourist market, which was the backbone of Phuket's tourism economy in the past, the sandbox was an important step in restoring pre-pandemic visitor numbers (Thaicharoen et al., 2022).

The Phuket Sandbox program is a pioneering effort in tourism recovery, but its effectiveness in reshaping the image of the destination, particularly among Chinese tourists, requires further investigation. As the tourism landscape evolves, understanding the implications of health crises on destination image will be critical to developing effective recovery strategies. Understanding how the Chinese tourist market perceives the Sandbox program is critical to evaluating its effectiveness, as Chinese tourists accounted for approximately 25 percent of Phuket's foreign tourism revenue before the pandemic (Ming, 2018). This market remains vital, especially given its economic significance and the growing demand for safer, well-managed travel experiences. Research shows that the image of a destination plays a central role in tourists' decision-making, particularly after crises, and that a positive image can mitigate risk perception and encourage travel (Matiza, 2020). As the pandemic has heightened concerns about health and safety, the success of the Sandbox program in communicating a safe travel environment is key to Phuket's long-term recovery.

Chinese tourists contributed significantly to Phuket's tourism revenue before the pandemic (Kaewklub & Phetvaroon, 2023). This market is particularly important as Chinese visitors spend a lot of money on accommodation, restaurants and leisure activities. Therefore, understanding how the Chinese tourist market perceives the Phuket Sandbox program is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of the program. Recent research shows that the image of a destination plays

a crucial role in tourists' decision-making, especially after crises (Rasoolimanesh, 2021). A positive image of a destination can mitigate risk perception and increase tourists' intention to visit (Soonsan and Somkai, 2021), highlighting the importance of restoring Phuket's image in the Chinese market.

Research on tourism crisis suggests that tourists' perception of safety plays a central role in destination image recovery efforts (Liu et al., 2022). By focusing on safety measures, the Phuket Sandbox program sought to alleviate concerns about COVID-19 risks, a crucial factor for Chinese tourists who had become increasingly cautious about international travel (Phucharoen et al., 2020). Furthermore, integrating elements of Phuket's cultural authenticity and natural beauty into the program's promotional strategies helped to reinforce the destination's core attributes, which had been overshadowed by the pandemic.

Despite these efforts, few studies have examined how government-led initiatives such as the Sandbox restore the image of destinations, particularly in the context of international tourism markets such as China (Hassan & Soliman, 2021). While some studies have examined the general impact of the pandemic on tourism perceptions, a gap remains in understanding how specific government measures influence destination image recovery (Boonkaew et al., 2023). This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how the Phuket Sandbox program has affected the image of Phuket in the perceptions of Chinese tourists. By exploring Chinese travelers' perceptions and preferences regarding the Phuket Sandbox, this study contributes to the broader discourse on tourism recovery strategies and the role of government interventions in reshaping the image of destinations during a crisis. Furthermore, the findings of this study provide valuable lessons and insights on how such programs can be used not only to regain lost market share, but also to strengthen a destination's image in an increasingly competitive post-pandemic tourism landscape.

Literature Review

Destination Image

The concept of destination image is a critical factor that influences tourists' attitudes, behaviors, preferences and overall satisfaction (Crompton, 1979). It plays a central role in shaping travelers' expectations and their decision-making process, especially in competitive

tourism markets (Cai, 2002; Morais & Lin, 2010). The introduction of the Phuket Sandbox program to revitalize the tourism sector in Phuket amidst the COVID-19 pandemic presents a timely opportunity to examine how this initiative affects the perceived image of the destination, especially among Chinese tourists who represent an important market (Duan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023).

Destination image has been extensively researched through various dimensions. One widely used approach emphasizes the cognitive and affective components (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gartner, 1994). The cognitive dimension encompasses tourists' beliefs and perceptions regarding tangible attributes of a destination, such as accessibility and natural attractions. In contrast, the affective dimension refers to emotional reactions, including feelings of safety, excitement and relaxation (Čorak et al., 2020; Ramírez et al., 2021). During crises such as the pandemic, both dimensions are crucial as destinations work to reshape their image. The Phuket Sandbox program, for example, targeted the cognitive dimension by ensuring accessibility and implementing strict safety protocols that reassured tourists about infection risks (Ho, 2021). Similarly, the affective dimension was addressed through an increased sense of safety, which is vital for crisis recovery (Lu & Atadil, 2021; Zhu et al., 2022).

COVID-19 crisis, risk perception and its impact on Phuket's image

The COVID-19 crisis has fundamentally altered how destinations manage and restore their image. Traditionally, tourism recovery efforts have focused on crises such as natural disasters or terrorism, but the pandemic presents a unique set of challenges. Research indicates that the image of destinations often suffers in times of crisis, as pandemic concerns such as risk of infection and overcrowding dominate tourists' evaluations (Yeh, 2020; Sampaio et al., 2022). The Sandbox initiative has significantly improved perceptions of accessibility and safety, which are critical to tourists' decision-making in uncertain times (Granville et al., 2016). Health crises have not only changed tourists' perceptions of risk, but have also reshaped the cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image. The Phuket Sandbox program serves as a unique case study to understand how health-related crises affect both dimensions of image recovery (Vong et al., 2021).

Although the Phuket Sandbox program targets international tourists, there is little research on how

Chinese tourists have responded to these health measures and how they have influenced their perceptions. The Chinese market has been a significant contributor to Phuket's tourism industry in the past, with tourists coming to the island for its leisure and cultural offerings. However, the pandemic has shifted priorities and safety and health concerns now play a central role in destination choice (Backer & Ritchie, 2017; Matiza, 2020). Understanding these shifts will be critical to Phuket's long-term post-pandemic recovery as safety and risk perception become increasingly important to tourists' behavior (Volgger et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2022).

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

Employing a quantitative approach, this study investigates potential Chinese tourists' perceptions of destination image and its association with the effects of the Phuket Sandbox Program initiative. China represents the largest tourism market for Phuket. Consequently, the number of Chinese tourists with the financial means to travel internationally has grown substantially. Phuket's allure lies in its stunning beaches, vibrant nightlife, and rich cultural heritage, making it a highly sought-after destination for Chinese travelers. Furthermore, the island's international airport, combined with direct flights from major Chinese cities, has enhanced its accessibility for Chinese tourists, contributing significantly to its popularity. This study focuses on Chinese who were currently residing in China with intentions to visit Phuket, which is a pivotal group for understanding the impact of the Phuket Sandbox program on destination perceptions. Considering the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, which rendered Chinese tourists unable to go abroad as of February 2022 (Huang et al., 2023), the non-probability convenience sampling technique was deemed more practical for this study. To collect data from the target population, an online survey link was distributed through WeChat messages and various other social media platforms. In total, there were 296 Chinese who participated voluntarily in the study. The demographic profile of Chinese respondents was equal between female and male (50:50). The tourists were aged 31 – 40 years (29.0%). A total of 51.0 percent had more than 10,001 Yuan average monthly income. Overall, 33.4 percent presented divorced of marital status. Almost 22.0 percent was company employee.

Table 1 Continued

Factor	Communalities	Component									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Phuket has minimal air pollution	.688										.822
The sunny weather in Phuket is good for travelling and enjoying outdoor activities	.560										.715
Eigen value		3.477	3.295	2.772	2.571	2.454	2.326	1.996	1.903	1.871	1.857
% of Variance		8.280	7.846	6.599	6.122	5.844	5.538	4.752	4.532	4.455	4.422
α		0.82	0.84	0.77	0.80	0.77	0.73	0.75	0.70	0.79	0.70

The CFA result showed that all factor loadings comfortably exceeded the stipulated threshold of 0.50, underscoring the robustness of the measurement model in capturing latent constructs, as supported by Hair et al. (2020) (Table 2). The composite reliability (CR) substantially exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, endorsing the reliability and internal consistency of the latent constructs. While it is noteworthy that seven out of ten constructs exhibited average variance extracted (AVE) scores below the prescribed threshold of 0.50 (Jöreskog, 1970; Fornell & Larcker, 1981),

it is imperative to contextualize this outcome within the guidance provided by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Their pivotal work posits that while an AVE exceeding 0.50 is ideal, in cases where the CR surpasses 0.60, an AVE exceeding 0.40 can be considered suitable. This nuance augments the overall evaluative framework, suggesting that the constructs, despite minor deviations from conventional AVE benchmarks, still manifest a strong level of convergent validity within the overarching measurement model.

Table 2 Result of confirmatory factor analysis

Factor	Standard Loading
Food and entertainment (AVE = 0.43, CR = 0.84)	
There are many places to enjoy nightlife in Phuket	0.637
There are a lot of show and entertainment venues in Phuket that I can enjoy	0.633
There are many local foods in Phuket I want to try	0.697
There are a lot of fresh fruits for me to try in Phuket	0.653
I want to visit manmade attraction in Phuket	0.662
I can enjoy many festivals in Phuket	0.659
There are many night markets in Phuket for me to enjoy	0.655
Outdoor activities (AVE = 0.46, CR = 0.84)	
There are many outdoor activities in Phuket that I can enjoy	0.726
Scuba diving, snorkeling and other outdoor activities in Phuket are/will be enjoyable	0.685
Visiting elephant sanctuary and other animal park in Phuket will be a good outdoor activity	0.667
I can enjoy many water activities such as swimming, jet skiing, banana boat, and more in Phuket	0.607
I can enjoy golf in Phuket	0.726
I want to visit a water park in Phuket	0.645
Cost/price (AVE = 0.43, CR = 0.79)	
It is easy for me to find affordable accommodation in Phuket	0.692
Food cost in Phuket is reasonable	0.633
I can buy local fruits at very affordable prices compared to my country	0.673
It is affordable for me to pay for entertainment and activities in Phuket	0.659
Overall cost of traveling in Phuket is reasonable	0.636
Hospitality/friendliness (AVE = 0.50, CR = 0.80)	
Local people in Phuket are very friendly and welcoming to Chinese tourist	0.727
Hospitality in Phuket is of exceptional standard	0.699
People working in tourism industry in Phuket can speak Chinese	0.673
Phuket is a good place to make new friends	0.734
Natural attractions (AVE = 0.45, CR = 0.77)	
There is a lot of beautiful scenery in Phuket	0.632
There are a lot of beautiful beaches and islands in Phuket	0.697

Table 2 Continued

Factor	Standard Loading
Sunset in Phuket is very beautiful	0.688
The nature of Phuket is unspoiled	0.678
Accessibility (AVE = 0.41, CR = 0.73)	
It is relatively easy to travel to Phuket	0.565
There are many flights from China to Phuket	0.699
There is a flight directly from my city to Phuket	0.594
It is easy to apply for Thai visa	0.679
Infection risk (AVE = 0.51, CR = 0.76)	
Phuket has low infection rate during COVID-19 outbreak in Thailand	0.700
Phuket has good disease control	0.755
Vaccination rate in Phuket is high	0.683
Personal safety (AVE = 0.43, CR = 0.70)	
It is safe to travel in Phuket and surrounding islets	0.687
I can travel with ease in Phuket knowing that my personal safety is secured	0.612
Crime rate in Phuket is low	0.657
Crowdedness (AVE = 0.53, CR = 0.77)	
There is less traffic problem in Phuket	0.696
Phuket is not overly crowded by tourist	0.773
There is no need to wait in a long line to go to a restaurant, visit tourist attraction, or obtain other services in Phuket.	0.710
Climate (AVE = 0.41, CR = 0.70)	
Phuket is a good place to enjoy nice climate	0.674
Phuket has minimal air pollution	0.679
The sunny weather in Phuket is good for travelling and enjoying outdoor activities	0.573

Using descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests, a comprehensive investigation of the comparative dynamics of tourists' perceptions of the destination's image before and after the carrying out of the Phuket Sandbox program was undertaken (Table 3). The statistical analyses conducted, including the Shapiro-Wilk test, confirmed the normal distribution of the data in our study. This is a fundamental assumption for the validity of the paired samples t-test, ensuring the reliability and significance of the findings. The p-value associated with the test was found to be higher than the significance level ($p > .05$), suggesting that the data are not significantly non-normal (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965). Obviously, a significant increase was observed in the mean score for

accessibility, which changed from the situation before the implementation of Phuket Sandbox (mean = 2.76, $SD = 0.48$) to the situation after the implementation (mean = 3.96, $SD = 0.45$). This remarkable increase, confirmed by the paired samples t-test ($t = 102.655$, $p < .000$), underscores the substantial progress in improving destination image perceptions triggered by the Phuket Sandbox program.

Careful analysis further reveals notable changes in tourists' perceptions of food and entertainment, cost/price, personal safety, and risk of infection. Remarkably, the mean score for cost/price increased from the baseline prior to Phuket Sandbox implementation (mean = 3.15, $SD = 0.48$) to the post-implementation period (mean = 3.21,

Table 3 Result of t-test differences in destination image perception between before COVID -19 and after COVID -19

	Before		After		Mean Difference	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Accessibility	2.76	.48	3.96	.45	1.19848	102.655	.000
Climate	3.70	.47	3.53	.49	-.16216	-13.126	.000
Natural attractions	3.83	.51	3.73	.51	-.09797	-11.786	.000
Hospitality	3.64	.56	3.31	.54	-.32770	-24.827	.000
Food and entertainment	3.40	.43	3.64	.43	.24180	24.035	.000
Cost/price	3.15	.48	3.21	.48	.05676	9.609	.000
Personal safety	3.60	.49	3.74	.48	.14527	12.828	.000
Outdoor activities	3.53	.50	3.44	.50	-.09459	-1.623	.106
Infection risk	2.97	.52	3.86	.53	.89077	86.566	.000
Crowdedness	3.61	.47	3.20	.60	-.40541	-22.112	.000

$SD = 0.48$), indicating a significant change after the Phuket Sandbox initiative was operationalized ($t = 9.609$, $p < .000$). Accordingly, the mean score for perceptions of food and entertainment showed an upward trend from the pre-implementation situation (mean = 3.40, $SD = 0.43$) to the post-implementation situation (mean = 3.64, $SD = 0.43$), a trend confirmed by the paired samples t-test ($t = 24.035$, $p < .000$).

In contrast, after the introduction of the Phuket Sandbox, there was a significant decrease in dimensions such as natural attractions, climate, hospitality, and crowdedness post the Phuket Sandbox's implementation. Specifically, the mean score for natural attractions decreased from its pre-implementation level (mean = 3.83, $SD = 0.51$) to its post-implementation level (mean = 3.73, $SD = 0.51$), indicating decreased perceptions after the program began ($t = -11.786$, $p < .000$). Similarly, the climate dimension shrank from the pre-implementation norm (mean = 3.70, $SD = 0.47$) to the post-implementation condition (mean = 3.21, $SD = 0.48$), supported by the paired samples t-test ($t = -13.126$, $p < .000$). Parallel trends of lower perceptions were observed for aspects such as hospitality (pre-implementation mean = 3.64, $SD = 0.56$; post-implementation mean = 3.31, $SD = 0.54$; $t = -24.827$, $p < .000$) and crowdedness (pre-implementation mean = 3.61, $SD = 0.47$; post-implementation mean = 3.20, $SD = 0.60$; $t = -22.112$, $p < .000$).

In addition, perceptions of outdoor activities showed negligible variation between pre-Covid-19 ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.50$) and post-Covid-19 ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.50$) epochs, as indicated by a non-significant paired-samples t-test ($t = -1.623$, $p = .106$).

Conclusion and Discussion

The Phuket Sandbox program has been a game-changer for the island's tourism landscape, bringing with it a mix of significant benefits and notable challenges. This initiative has led to significant improvements in tourists' perceptions of various aspects, particularly in terms of accessibility, food and entertainment options, personal safety and infection risk concerns. Overall, these improvements have helped to create a more attractive image for Phuket, especially during the pandemic when health and safety measures were of paramount importance. The program's focus on strict health protocols has been instrumental in boosting travelers' confidence and reassuring them about their safety during their stay on the island.

One of the outstanding successes of the program was the significant improvement in accessibility. The significant increase in perceptions of how easy Phuket is to get to not only improves the island's reputation, but is also consistent with broader research indicating that accessibility is a key factor in attracting international tourists. As Chiu et al. (2016) found, improved accessibility is particularly important in attracting visitors from markets such as China, where ease of travel is a key driver of destination choice. The success of the Phuket Sandbox program in improving the island's accessibility sends a strong positive message to potential Chinese travelers and positions Phuket as a more convenient and attractive vacation destination.

In addition, the program has effectively addressed the personal safety and infection risk concerns that have become critical factors in travelers' decision-making. Jung (2022) points out that increased awareness of health risks plays an important role in tourists' decision-making and destinations that prioritize and clearly communicate their health measures are perceived as safer. The strict health protocols introduced as part of the Phuket Sandbox program resonate with this trend, contributing to a more favorable perception of safety and ultimately influencing tourists' decisions. This aligns with the findings of Singh et al. (2022), who suggest that destinations that are perceived to be safer are more likely to attract visitors during health crises, reinforcing Phuket's image as a safe travel option.

Another notable outcome of the program is the positive change in perception regarding costs, prices and the quality of food and entertainment. These improvements are particularly important as Chinese tourists are often price-sensitive and value affordability and variety when choosing a destination (Dichter et al., 2018). According to Lunkam (2021), the attractive prices offered by many hotels during the pandemic have likely played a role in enhancing Phuket's reputation as an affordable destination. This affordability is crucial to appeal to Chinese travelers, especially as the program aims to revitalize Phuket's hospitality industry through value-for-money offerings. This observation is supported by Melubo and Kisasembe (2022), who emphasize the importance of affordability in increasing the attractiveness of destinations, especially in the post-pandemic recovery phase.

Despite these positive developments, the program has also revealed some challenges. In particular, perceptions of natural attractions, climate, hospitality and overcrowding have declined. The decline in perceived quality of natural attractions and climate can be linked to ongoing environmental concerns and perceived risks associated with airborne transmission of COVID-19,

as suggested by Ford et al (2022). These findings are particularly relevant for the Chinese market, where scenic beauty and favorable weather conditions are essential components of the travel experience (Moon & Han, 2018). A decline in these areas could have a negative impact on overall visitor satisfaction and indicate a need for effective environmental management strategies to maintain Phuket's appeal as a natural paradise.

The decline in hospitality perceptions is particularly concerning as Chinese visitors place a high value on friendly service (Dichter et al., 2018; Moon & Han, 2018). This decline in service quality may be attributed to the significant labor challenges faced by the tourism industry during the pandemic. The hospitality industry, which suffered from job losses and downsizing, may have struggled to maintain pre-pandemic service standards (Klinsrisuk & Pechdin, 2022; Chuenniran, 2023). This suggests that while the program has succeeded in restoring certain aspects of the tourist experience, issues related to staffing and service quality remain problematic and need to be addressed in order to fully restore the Phuket tourism brand.

Furthermore, the decline in perceived overcrowding, although possibly seen as positive in terms of reducing tourist numbers, may have unintended consequences. Fewer tourists may affect the atmosphere of popular attractions, which could reduce the overall appeal for some visitors. This situation could reflect an imbalance between efforts to manage visitor numbers and the need to maintain the vibrant, bustling environment that many tourists seek in a destination.

In summary, while the Phuket Sandbox program has significantly improved accessibility, safety, affordability and the overall tourist experience, it has also exposed weaknesses in areas such as natural attractions, hospitality and overcrowding. To maintain Phuket's long-term appeal, these challenges must be addressed by revitalizing the workforce, managing the environment and improving service quality. Furthermore, the program has not only revitalized Phuket's tourism sector but also served as a model for other regions in Thailand, demonstrating the effectiveness of a controlled reopening strategy. The positive economic outcomes underscore the importance of balancing health safety with economic recovery in tourism-dependent regions.

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