

Online information search, familiarity, hotel expectation, perceived safety, and destination image of Thailand: a comparison between Asian and Western tourists

Lu Lu¹

¹ Temple University, School of Sport, Tourism, and Hospitality Management, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Corresponding Author's E-mail: lu.lu0001@temple.edu

Received: January 5, 2019

Accepted for publication: March 29, 2019

Published: March 31, 2019

Abstract

This study examines the effect of tourists' online information search and familiarity on destination hotel expectation, perceived safety, and destination image of Thailand between Asian and Western tourists. A theoretical model was proposed and tested via a structural equation modeling approach. For both Asian and Western tourists, findings suggest that online information search positively affects hotel expectation, tourists' perceived familiarity positively affects perceived destination safety, and hotel expectation is positively associated with perceived safety. For Asian tourists, hotel expectation positively affects destination image, while for Western tourists, destination safety is positively associated with destination image. A culture difference is demonstrated.

Keywords: Online information; Familiarity; Image; Safety; Hotel expectation

1. Introduction

With the prevalence of the internet and online techniques, there is an explosive growth of online information search for trip planning. In Addition, the emergence of eMediaries (e.g., www.tripadvisor.com; www.irtualtourist.com; www.epinions.com) provides the opportunity to meet tourists' demand for unbiased travel information through browsing online reviews. Consumers can easily post and exchange their opinions with other consumers, which is a well-known channel to generate electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler (2004) demonstrate the influential role of eWOM in affecting future consumers' behavior and the firm's reputation. Tourism is amongst the leading sectors of the service industry, which has the most consumption of online transaction (Werthner & Ricci 2005). At least two-thirds of U.S. internet users plan their travel online (Ramsey 2007). Therefore, the prevalence of the online channels largely influences tourists' perception of destination, which may further influence tourists' behavior and destination choice. For hotel industry, online information sharing also plays a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions towards a hotel and their decision making (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009). Previous literature extensively investigates the influence of online information search in both hospitality and tourism industry (Frías, Rodriguez, & Castañeda, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009; Ye, Law,

& Gu, 2009). However, little research has been done investigating how online information search affects both hotel and destination perceptions in the same model and context.

Information search helps the consumer to build prior knowledge before visiting a hotel and destination. Familiarity with a target object, as a result of information accumulation, serves as an essential aspect to reflect prior knowledge on a destination. Investigations of tourist familiarity and its influence on destination image as well as hotel expectation are rarely reported in the same theoretical framework. Besides, perceived safety serves as one of the primary attributes determining consumers' decision making for choosing tourism destination (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Woodside & King, 2001). Previous studies suggest that perceived risks could be reduced by increasing exposure to various information sources (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006). Therefore, this study includes safety as an important factor and investigates how online information search and familiarity affect consumer perceived destination safety. Considering the international background of tourists that visit Thailand, an examination of cultural impact will contribute to a deeper understanding of tourists' pre-visit knowledge and destination perceptions.

Therefore, the current study aims to 1) investigate the influences of online information search and familiarity on destination hotel expectation, perceived safety, and destination image; 2) propose a conceptual model to demonstrate the interrelationships among those constructs; 3) identify the impact of cultural difference (Asian vs. Western traveler) in the proposed interrelationships.

2. Literature Review

Information search is closely associated with tourists' decision-making, which has been well demonstrated by previous studies (e.g., Jun, Vogt, & MacKay, 2007; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Consumers either resort to internal or external information search to actively obtain information to reduce potential risks associated with a deliberate decision. Consumers tend to conduct external information search using a variety of sources when their internal memories cannot provide enough information (Petrick, Li & Park, 2007). The emergence of the internet has fundamentally changed tourist's information search behavior and shaped the fashion people design their travel plans (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Given the vast amount of information available on online, information search becomes a prevalent mode for the traveler to make travel plans (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The Internet provides multiple sources that act as a communication, distribution, and exchange channel and offer both commercial and non-commercial (i.e., consumer-generated) information (Peterson, Balasubramanian & Bronnenberg, 1997). The amount of information provided online largely outweighs that of traditional information search channels such that a significant number of tourists adopt internet as their primary trip-planning tool (Beldona, 2007, Li, Pan, Zhang, & Smith, 2009). According to the Travel Industry Association of America, 64% of online travelers use search engines to design their travel (TIA, 2005). The explosion of social media, representing the consumer-generated content websites such as personal blogs, virtual communities, wikis, social networks, collaborative tagging, and shared video files (e.g., YouTube and Flickr) also play an crucial role in helping tourists to obtain travel information (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crofts, 2007; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

According to Collie (2014), the Internet has led travel behavior such that 65% of leisure travelers use online sources to select a travel destination, and most travel plans are influenced by travel review websites. Research also suggests that the vast majority of travelers visit TripAdvisor before making travel purchases (TripAdvisor, 2018). Although it is widely accepted that the Internet has fundamentally transformed the way travelers consume and plan for travel (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), research on the influence of online information search on consumers' perceptions of destination hotels and expectations of their service attributes is still limited. Previous studies introduce the concepts of consumers' awareness sets, and consideration sets to evaluate the influence of

positive and negative online reviews on consumer awareness and attitudes (e.g., Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). This stream of research demonstrates that exposure to online reviews increases hotel awareness regardless of the nature of reviews being positive or negative especially for less-known hotel brands. In the context of Thailand, international tourists are more likely to be exposed to the local brands, which may significantly increase the awareness of the local hotels after online information search.

Furthermore, research shows that positive online reviews improve consumers' hotel consideration, and negative reviews do not necessarily impair hotel consideration (e.g., Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). This could be attributed to the fact that negative reviews positively increase the awareness but negatively affect attitudes towards the hotel, the concurrence of both effects balance each other out. Overall, the exposure of online reviews is highly likely to increase hotel considerations because there is no detrimental effect of negative reviews. Once consumers seriously consider the hotel, they may generate high expectations. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H1: The more tourists use online information search, the more likely they generate favorable expectations of a destination hotel.

With the globalization of tourism market, more and more tourism destinations are well-known among travelers. The safety issue associated with each tourism destination is a significant concern for most tourists. A previous study suggests that tourism, especially international tourism, is highly susceptible to the perception of destination safety (Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996; Seabra, Dolnicar, Abrantes, & Kastenzholz, 2013). In this sense, tourists' behavior is likely to change with their safety concerns (Coshall, 2003; Dimanch & Leptic, 1999; Pizam & Mansfeld, 1996). It is well accepted that safety concerns largely impact tourists' decision-making (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Woodside & King, 2001). If tourists are exposed to the potential risk and threats of a destination, they are very likely to generate undesirable perceptions of the destination, which negatively influences destination image. The negative image resulting from travel safety concerns could be detrimental to destination tourism development. Creating a safe travel environment is one of the most fundamental requirements for developing the tourism industry (Fletcher & Morakabati, 2008; Goodrich, 2002). Huan and Beaman (2004) suggest that creating a safe environment of destination before and during the trip is essential for the success of international tourism marketing. There is a growing body of research on risk and safety perception and their impact on tourism (e.g., Fuchs & Reichel, 2006), which encourages researchers to include safety as an aspect to assess destination image. As a result, a safe destination may form a favorable image and tourists prefer a safer destination as opposed to a destination with evident risks (Mansfeld, 1996, Seabra et al., 2013). To enhance tourists' perception of destination safety and reduce perceived risks, previous research proposes some effective strategies such as searching for information from the internet and online forums, tourism organizations and travel agents, friends and relatives and consulting with prior visitors (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006; 2011). Among them, consulting with prior visitors is ranked as the most used strategy. Byzalov and Shachar (2004) find that even exposure to commercials could reduce consumer perceived uncertainty and risks of purchasing due to the accumulated information. Online information has a great potential to provide sufficient destination knowledge, past tourists' experience, and customer reviews. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H2: Tourists' online information search positively affects perceived safety of Thailand

H3: Tourists' perceived destination safety positively affects destination image.

Research on destination image starts to emerge following Hunt's (1975) work. The destination image is considered as an attitudinal concept, which includes a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions generated by tourists (Crompton, 1979). The significance of destination image is well accepted among tourism scholars since it

influences tourists' subjective perception, subsequent behavior, and destination decision making (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Castro, Armario, & Ruiz, 2007; Chon, 1990, 1992; Milman & Pizam, 1995).

The destination image is often evaluated from multiple dimensions including both cognitive/perceptive and affective aspects, which was discussed in previous literature (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou, & Kaplanidou, 2015; San Martín, & Del Bosque, 2008). The perceptual/cognitive image is derived from the knowledge of destination attributes (do Valle, Mendes & Guerreiro, 2012). Pike and Ryan (2004) argue cognitive image is primarily associated with tangible attributes, resources, and attractions of a destination. Those attractions are perceived as the destination environment and experiences related to the cognitive structure of the destination image (Wang & Hsu, 2010). Different from the cognitive image, affective image refers to the tourists' appreciation and feelings toward the destination attributes and environment (Baloglu & McCleary 1999). Alternatively, destination image is also described with regard to destination attributes and holistic assessments (Echtner & Ritchie 1991). These attributes or destination features (e.g., cuisine, environment, and safety) are considered the cognitive image, while the holistic components are the combination of cognitive and affective images (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Li, Pan, Zhang, and Smith, (2009) provide evidence suggesting that online information search could improve destination image both cognitively and affectively. Cognitive components can directly lead to affective image in previous studies (e.g., Fu, Ye, & Xiang, 2016). The proliferation of online multimedia can meet every facet of tourists' information demands, and thus the destination image is more susceptible to change (Li et al., 2009). Therefore, the vividness and elaboration of online review may help tourists develop the affective image as well. As suggested in previous research, affective image components explain vast variance in overall destination evaluation, which is fundamental to predicting behavioral intentions (e.g., Papadimitriou et al., 2015). This study uses affective components to evaluate the destination image and investigate the interrelationships among the five proposed constructs. This research also speculates that tourists' expectations of the local hotel may exert influence on destination image. Tourists' lodging experience is integral to their travel experience and thus is closely related to destination evaluation. In this concern, perceptions of local hotels may exert a significant influence on tourists' perception of the destination. Hence, tourists' hotel expectations of local hotels are likely to contribute to their assessment of destination image. Therefore, it is proposed:

H₄: Online information search positively affects the destination image of Thailand.

H₅: Hotel expectation positively affects the destination image of Thailand.

Familiarity with a product or tourism destination serves as another important determinant in consumer decision-making (Park & Lessing, 1981; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Since the consumers' perceived familiarity with a destination may not exactly correspond to their actual knowledge, researchers argue that familiarity is a result of consumers' subjective understanding (Park, Mothersbaugh, and Feick, 1994; Rao & Sieben, 1992). In this study, I investigate how tourists' familiarity with a destination influences their safety and risk perception and the image of Thailand. Previous findings indicate several strategies used by tourists to reduce their risk concerns with destination, such as consulting with prior visitors, reading relevant researches on destination, being loyal to the hotel they stayed before, and gaining information from friends and relatives (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006). These strategies help tourists to become familiar with their intended destination and thus improve their perception of destination safety and reduce concerns. Therefore, I propose that:

H₆: Tourists' familiarity with Thailand positively influences their perception of destination safety.

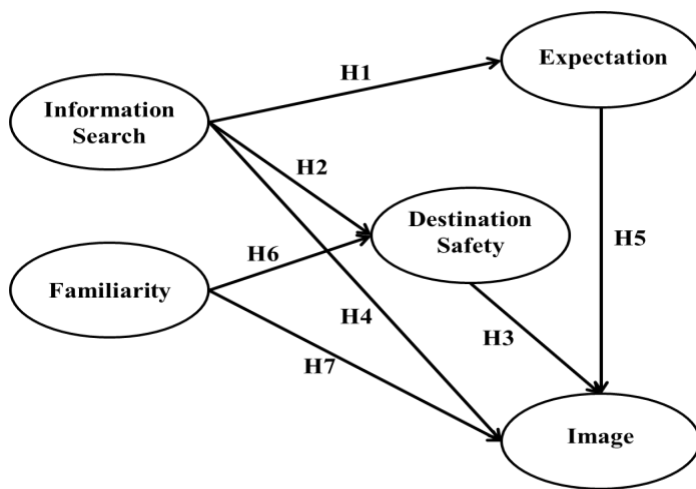
Familiarity with a destination is also recognized as an influential factor of the destination image. Previous studies conduct longitudinal research by modifying tourists' pre- and after-trip destination image (Dann, 1996;

Pearce, 1982; Phelps, 1986), while other studies investigate the difference of destination image between visitors and non-visitors (Ahmed, 1991; Chon, 1991; Fridgen, 1987; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Hu & Ritchie, 1993; Milman & Pizam, 1995). Most of these studies agree that familiarity (prior knowledge and actual visitation) with the destination has a positive relationship with tourists' perceived image. Therefore, I postulate that destination image is likely to be improved with increased familiarity:

H₇: Tourists' familiarity with Thailand positively affects destination image.

In this study, I propose a conceptual model (Figure 1) and use structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the interrelationship among five constructs. The proposed model is applied to Asian and Western tourists separately, and the group differences are examined. Previous studies identified culture and nationality as one of the internal factors that significantly determines risk perceptions (Kastenholz, 2010; Kozak et al., 2007; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006). However, Seabra et al., (2013) find nationality is not a sufficient predictor of tourists' safety, and risk perception and more studies are still necessary for clarification. Safety and risk perceptions are inherently subjective (Seabra et al., 2013) such that people from different cultures may have the various evaluation of the effect of safety on destination image. In terms of Thailand, international travelers constitute a significant body of tourists, and the perceptual difference in destination safety between two international groups deserve to be examined.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

In this study, a random sampling approach was used to collect data among international tourists visiting Thailand. An on-site survey was conducted using a questionnaire to investigate tourists' perceptions of Thailand and hotel expectations of Bangkok. A total number of 400 valid observations were collected among which 200 were classified as Asian tourists and 200 were Western tourists. Asian and Western tourists were tested individually.

3.2 Method of Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized to test the relationships among the proposed constructs in two groups of international tourists, Asian and Western countries. The properties of the items measuring the

constructs in the proposed model and hypotheses were tested using LISREL 9.1 with maximum likelihood (ML) estimation. Initially, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to specify the relationships of the observed variables to the underlying constructs. The adequacy of the items was assessed by measuring validity, constructs reliability, and uni-dimensionality. A structural model was tested to examine the proposed hypotheses of two groups of international tourists. Finally, a multi-group analysis was conducted to compare the difference between Asian and Western tourists in the seven proposed hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement Model

A CFA was conducted to test the measurement model for both groups (Table 1). For Asian tourists, the measurement model has yielded a close model fit $\chi^2 = 92.08$, $df = 80$, $RMSEA = 0.028$, $NFI=0.92$, $CFI=0.99$, $GFI=0.95$, $AGFI=0.92$, $RMR=0.054$, $SRMR=0.049$. The construct reliabilities scores were all higher than 0.70, indicating substantial reliability. For Western tourists, the overall fit of the measurement model was also desirable $\chi^2 = 92.98$, $df = 80$, $RMSEA=0.028$, $NFI=0.921$, $CFI=0.992$, $GFI=0.95$, $AGFI=0.92$, $RMR=0.067$, $SRMR=0.049$. The construct reliabilities are all higher than 0.60, indicating reliable internal consistency. All item loadings were significant. All constructs presented good discriminant validity and acceptable convergent validity. Uni-dimensionality was tested by pairing up every two constructs and assessing their model fit, all pairs presented great model fit, and thus the unidimensionality was confirmed.

Table 1 Measurement Scale Properties

| Construct | Asian Tourists (N=200) | | Western Tourists (N=200) | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Standardized Loading | Construct Reliability | Standardized Loading | Construct Reliability |
| Safety | | 0.67 | | 0.71 |
| Safe destination/Not | 0.41 | | 0.64 | |
| Dangerous/ Not | 0.78 | | 0.70 | |
| Safe travel/Not | 0.68 | | 0.66 | |
| Hotel Expectation | | 0.81 | | 0.84 |
| Staff | 0.76 | | 0.77 | |
| Service efficiency | 0.84 | | 0.86 | |
| Timely service | 0.70 | | 0.76 | |
| Familiarity | | 0.87 | | 0.84 |
| Compare to average person | 0.87 | | 0.88 | |
| Compare to friends | 0.81 | | 0.75 | |
| Compare other travelers | 0.82 | | 0.76 | |
| Online Information search | | 0.73 | | 0.72 |
| Travel forum | 0.62 | | 0.58 | |
| Third party websites | 0.57 | | 0.77 | |
| Online search engines | 0.85 | | 0.69 | |
| Image | | 0.70 | | 0.64 |
| Not /delightful | 0.58 | | 0.50 | |
| Enjoyable/not | 0.72 | | 0.55 | |
| Pleasant/Not | 0.69 | | 0.77 | |

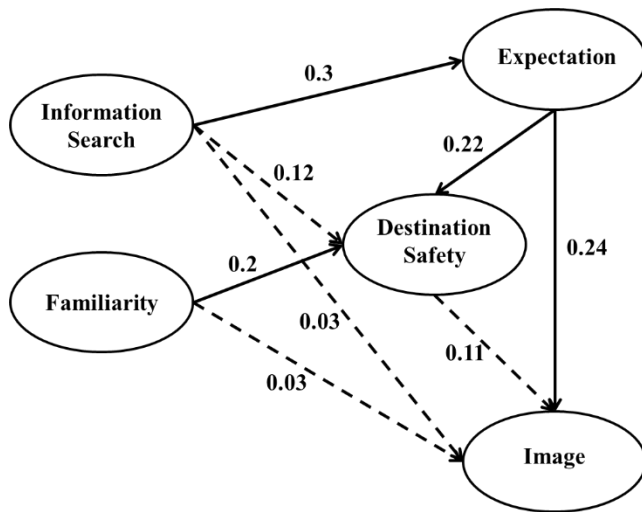
4.1 Structural Model

After accepting the measurement model, a structural model tested among Asian tourists has shown good model fit $\chi^2 = 97.72$, $df = 82$, $RMSEA=0.031$, $NFI=0.92$, $CFI=0.99$, $GFI=0.94$, $AGFI=0.92$, $RMR=0.057$, and $SRMR=0.057$. After examining the significance of path loadings, hypotheses 1, 2, 5, and 6 were supported. Therefore, online information search was positively associated with destination hotel expectation, but not with the image and destination safety. Familiarity positively affected safety but did not influence affective image. In line with the hypothesis, hotel expectation positively influences affective image. The modification indices were examined which indicated a positive relation between hotel expectation and destination safety. Previous literature indicate that safety is one of the top attributes for initial hotel selection, and safety is considered an important criterion to evaluate service quality (Hua, Chan, & Mao, 2009; Knutson, Stevens, Patton, and Thompson, 1992; Knutson, Stevens, Wullaert, Patton, & Yokoyama, 1991). Therefore, customers with a higher expectation of local hotel should also expect a higher safety, which may further extend to the safety perception of the local destination. Based on previous literature, a path was added from hotel expectation to safety and the model was tested again. The final model present suggested a close model fit $\chi^2 = 92.34$, $df = 81$, $RMSEA=0.026$. Other fit indices, such as $NFI=0.921$, $NNFI=0.995$, $CFI=0.996$, $IFI=0.997$, $GFI=0.947$, $AGFI=0.921$, $RMR=0.054$, $SRMR=0.040$, critical $N=268.674$, indicated an improved model fit after the modification. Therefore, a new path from hotel expectation to perceived safety (hypothesis 8) was added and verified. Thus, a new hypothesis was proposed:

H₈: Hotel expectation positively affects tourists' perceived safety of Thailand.

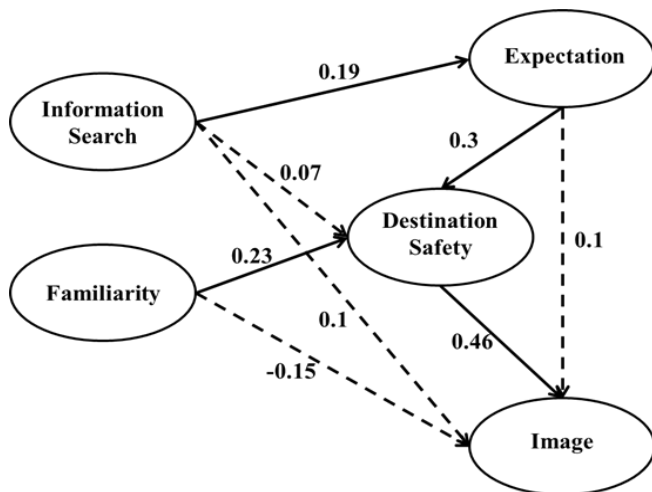
For Asian tourists, hypotheses 1, 5, 6, and 8 were supported (Figure 2). Identical analysis was performed to test the proposed framework among Western tourists. The fit indices of the structural model of Western tourists were considered satisfactory $\chi^2 = 93.03$, $df = 81$, $RMSEA=0.027$, $NFI=0.921$, $CFI=0.99$, $GFI=0.95$, $AGFI=0.92$, $RMR=0.067$, and $SRMR=0.049$. Different from Asian tourists, this study identified a significant path from safety to destination image among Western travelers, whereas the path from hotel expectation to destination image was not significant. Therefore, only hypotheses 1, 3, 6, and 8 were supported in the case of Western travelers (Figure 3).

Figure 2 Structural Model with Standardized Path Coefficients for Asian Tourists



*Solid lines represent significant paths ($p < 0.05$), while dotted lines represent non-significant paths

Figure 3 Structural Model with Standardized Path Coefficients for Western Tourists



*Solid lines represent significant paths ($p < 0.05$), while dotted lines represent non-significant paths

This study also examined the culture difference in the relationships between the five constructs. Therefore, a multi-group comparison was conducted for each valid path. A combined model of two groups was tested as a baseline. Results indicate a good model fit $\chi^2(162) = 184.91$ ($p = 0.105$) and RMSEA=0.027. Other fit indices, such as NFI=0.90, CFI=0.974, IFI=0.98, GFI=0.95, RMR=0.067, and SRMR=0.049, also indicated a good model fit. In order to test the individual path, item loadings of exogenous latent variable (LX), error variance of exogenous variable indicators (TD), item loadings of endogenous latent variables(LY), error variance of endogenous variable indicators (TE), variance-covariance of exogenous latent variable (PH), and variance-covariance of exogenous latent variable (PS) were constrained stepwise and compared with the baseline model.

The common paths shared by Asian tourist model and Western tourist model were tested to examine the difference between two groups. A series of Chi-Square difference tests were conducted. Findings indicate that the strength of the relationships between online information search and hotel expectation, familiarity and safety, and hotel expectation and safety were not significantly ($p < 0.01$) different between Asian tourists and western tourists.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates the impacts of online information search and destination familiarity on destination hotel expectation, safety, and image development in the context of Thailand. In this study, I propose a conceptual model and test it with two groups of international tourists (Asian vs. Western) using structural equation modeling approach. Seven hypotheses are proposed and tested. The modification process discovered a new path, which was added into the proposed model. Findings suggest the relationships among these five constructs are different between Asian and Western tourists, which indicates a culture influence on tourists' perceptions towards Thailand.

For Asian tourists, the more likely that tourists use online information search, the more likely they develop favorable expectations of a local destination hotel. The high expectation of destination hotel positively influences tourists' perceived safety as well as the image of Thailand. In addition, tourists' familiarity with Thailand is positively associated with destination safety, indicating that perceived destination safety could be improved by increasing tourists' familiarity. For western tourists, findings suggest that online information search positively influences tourists' expectation of hotels in Bangkok. Further, tourists' expectations of hotels are positively related to their perception of destination safety. Different from Asian tourists, there is no significant relationship between hotel expectations and image of Thailand for Western tourists. Since Western tourists tend to spend more on accommodations compared with tourists from other countries, their hotel expectations maybe generally high, which may not influence destination image.

This study also identifies the difference in safety perceptions on destination image between Asian and Western tourists. For Asian tourists, perceived destination safety does not influence their affective image, while Western travelers present a positive relationship between perceived safety and destination image. This difference could be explained by previous findings that perceived risks relying on the distinct nature of culture. According to Hofstede (2001), individuals from high uncertainty avoidance (UAI) national cultures tend to feel more threatened by the unknown risks associated with a destination, while individuals from a low UAI (risk tolerant) feel more comfortable with conditions involving uncertainty or risks (Kozak, Crofts, & Law, 2007). In fact, tourists from Western countries may be more exposed by a variety of threats, such as gun violence, influenza, crime, which is highly concerned by the U.S. residents after the September-11 attack and other gun violence crimes (Aizenman, 2017), than Asian tourists. Therefore, Western tourists may fall into the category of High-UAI cultures while Asian tourists are generally classified as Low-UAI cultures. Interestingly, familiarity with a destination does not necessarily influence the destination image. This may be due to a self-reported measurement of familiarity, which has been criticized by some scholars because this instrument only indicates tourists' subjective perception rather than actual knowledge (Park et al., 1994; Spotts & Stynes, 1985). Therefore, individuals who have the same level of actual familiarity with the destination may not perceive themselves have the same familiarity level (Baloglu, 2001). Tourists' perceptions of a destination are progressively modified based on their experience during travel. Therefore, the affective image is derived from tourists' cognitive perceptions towards a destination and is less likely to be altered by prior subjective knowledge.

5.1 Limitations

Although this study enriches the understanding of pre-visit knowledge (e.g., online information search and tourists familiarity) in influencing tourists' destination perception, it is not free of limitations. This study used a condensed scale for each construct to evaluate the structural model. Future research may include multi-dimensional constructs and more complicated measures to obtain a more comprehensive and objective evaluation of each construct. This study conducted a multi-group model comparing perception differences between Asian and western tourists as structural relationships. Future research may further examine the mean differences in each construct between the two groups of tourists, and possible mechanisms explaining such perception discrepancy.

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