Tourist Perceptions to Cultural Identity: The Case of Thai Experience

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Abstract

Tourism is seen as one of the main drivers of socio-economic progress in both developed and developing regions. Many developing countries perceive tourism as a fast track to economic growth. Thailand tourism’s industry contributes significantly to the Thai economy, which receives around 7% of its GDP from international tourism revenue. Thailand is often viewed as a wondrous kingdom, featuring temples, wildlife and tropical islands. Visitors are also attracted by its history, culture, modern capital city and reputation as the “land of smiles”. Entrepreneurs in Thailand try to capitalize on these characteristics to create products or services to serve tourists. However, good design and good quality are not enough to survive in a competitive market. The make up of customers is constantly evolving and they are becoming more discerning and demanding. Thus, it is important to work closely with customers to make sure that products and services fulfill their needs and requirements, and to understand customers through study of their behaviors and preferences. This study explored customer perceptions of Thai cultural identity, and employed an emotional design approach to find out how products may fulfill customer perceptions and requirements. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire then statistically analyzed using the principal component analysis (PCA) approach. Results illustrate the relationship between customer perception and Thai cultural identity, and can be used to guide entrepreneur decision making to create new products or services following the Thai cultural identity and meeting of perceptions of customers.

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1. Introduction

Thailand is often viewed as a wondrous kingdom, featuring Buddhist temples, exotic wildlife, and tropical islands. Along with a fascinating history and a unique culture that includes delectable Thai food and massage, Thailand features a modern capital city, and friendly people who epitomize Thailand’s “land of smiles” reputation. Then, Thailand is one of the first players in Asia to capitalize on this then-new trend.

Thailand tourism’s industry has also grown significantly in the past decade. It contributes significantly to the Thai economy, which receives around 7% of its GDP from international tourism revenue. Asian tourists primarily visit Thailand for Bangkok and the historical, natural, and cultural sights in its vicinity. Western tourists not only visit Bangkok and surroundings, but in addition many travel to the southern beaches and islands.

Entrepreneurs in Thailand try to capitalize on these characteristics to create products or services to serve tourists. They face a wonderful challenge from the increasing requirement of variety by tourists. Good design, good quality and good service are not enough to survive in a competitive market. They have to continually do to make the difference among competitors. Then, Entrepreneurs need to deal carefully with possible interaction problem between customers and product interfaces. The novelty for the XXIst century is that they mainly ask for personalized products and services (Koren, 2010). This trend leads to force design method to think a new partnership between designers and customers when designing or thinking. The place of customers in the design process is being rethought from design for customers to collaborative design with customers and sometimes to design by customers. Thus, it is important to work closely with customers to make sure that the products will fulfill their needs and requirements (Kongprasert, 2012).

To succeed in a competitive market, it is necessary to adopt the strategy coping with meeting of needs and requirements of tourists. This study is to explore tourist perceptions of Thai cultural identity, and employ an emotional design approach to find out how products may fulfill tourist perceptions and requirements. Data is collected by means of a questionnaire then statistically analyzed using the principal component analysis (PCA) approach. Results illustrate the relationship between customer perception and Thai cultural identity, and can be used to guide entrepreneur decision making to create new products or services following the Thai cultural identity and meeting of perceptions of customers. This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review. Section 3 describes the method. The results are discussed in Section 4. Conclusion is drawn in Section 5.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Emotional Design

In Emotion is crucial for everyday decision making (Norman, 2004). It is the complex psychophysiological experience of an individual’s state of mind as interacting with biochemical and environmental influences. Emotion fundamentally involves physiological arousal, expressive behaviors, and conscious experience (Myers, 2004). Emotion is associated with mood, temperament, personality and disposition, and motivation. Customer’s satisfaction is an affective behavior of customer. It relies on desires more than needs which desires are mainly depending on aesthetic, semantic and symbolic aspects of cognitive response to design (Crilly et al., 2004). This means that the customer purchases a product based on more subjective terms such as manufacturer image, brand image, reputation, design, impression, etc., although the products seem to be equal. A large number of manufacturers have started development activities to consider such subjective properties so that the product expresses the company image. This demand triggers the introduction of a new research field dealing with the collection of customers’ hidden subjective needs and their translation into concrete products. Thus, it is important to work closely with customers to make sure that the products will fulfill the needs and requirements of customers.

Emotional design is relationship between the emotional responses and design appearance that focused on the user’s need and experience. It is not only communicated through the style of design, function, form and usability, but also built up experience for the user on their needs and demands. There are three levels of information processing
according to the situation and response: visceral, behavioral, and reflective. Visceral design concerns itself with appearances. Behavioral design has to do with the pleasure and effectiveness of use. Reflective design considers the rationalization and intellectualization of a product. They are integrated through any design (Norman, 2004). Thus, emotional design is product design targeted to satisfy customer’s needs or requirements. By controlling certain design factors, customer’s emotion can be evaluated, designed, and satisfied (Crilly et al., 2004).

Emotional design is a common research field involving both designers and human factors. It is focuses on the evaluation and decision-making phase in the design process. It is a technique to identify correspondences and gap between customer’s perception and designer’s intention, see Fig. 1. The correspondence is used to guide designers for designing the new product. The gap is removed or modified to be relevant to customer’s perception (Kongprasert, 2015). The advantage of emotional design is that the product designed responses the needs or requirements of customers.

Practically, emotional design is performed with the questionnaire that new product or concept is evaluated by the customers. It works with the semantic differential, Likert scale and principal component analysis to explore the customer’s needs or requirements in the information phase. In Europe, initially, the researchers had only to do with semantic analysis (Smets and Overbeeke, 1995; Pasman and Stappers, 2000; Battarbee and Mattelmaki, 2003; Petiot and Yannou, 2004). Today, they tend to integrate explicitly the emotional analysis with the semantic one (Bouchard et al., 2005; Bouchard et al., 2009).

Fig. 1. Main Emotional Design principle.

2.2. Brand Identity

A brand is not the name of a product. It is the vision that drives the creation of products and services under that name. That vision, the key belief of the brands and its core values is called identity. Warell et al. (2006) transfer identity to the domain product design. First, they define identity as an attribute of a thing, which is shared with something else (i.e., ‘similarity’); on the second, identity is seem as a unique attribute of a thing (i.e., ‘dissimilarity’). Identity expresses the brand’s tangible and intangible characteristics and draws upon the brand’s roots and heritage (Kapferer, 2008). Brand identity involves the key identity attributes of the company in a “condensed” form. It expresses the values of the brand with their form. The purpose of brand identity is to specify the brand’s meaning, aim and self-image and is to foster recognition (Karjalainen, 2003).

Kapferer (2008) describes that brand identity is made of physique and personality. First, a brand has physical specificities and qualities – its ‘physique’. It is made of a combination of either salient objective features (which immediately come to mind when the brand is quoted in a survey) or emerging ones. Physique is both the brand’s backbone and its tangible added value. The physical also comprises the brand’s prototype: the flagship product that is representative of the brand’s qualities. Second, a brand has a personality. By communicating, it gradually builds up character. The way in which it speaks of its products or services shows what kind of person it would be if it were human. Then, brand identity illustrates the unique attribute that differs from the competitor and is to foster
recognition while it is used to illustrate the unique attribute to share something, to transfer to next generation and to create the heritage.

Many studies have followed a brand identity approach. Warell et al. (2006) studied about how producers and consumers create meaningful identity references through product visual form that it aims to understand the designer’s perception and customer’s perception to visual product identity. Karjalainen and his colleagues approached on how to analyze the brand, identity and visual form design of various car brands and transform the brand-specific design elements to design a wholly different product category (Karjalainen, 2003; Karjalainen, 2007; Karjalainen and Warell, 2005; Karjalainen et al., 2006). Kim and Lim (2003) studied about how to integrate corporate identity through product design. McCormack et al., (2004) developed a shape grammar to capture the brand essence. It is important to build or maintain a strong brand that fulfills the brand identity and appeals to the customers. Kongprasert and his colleague proposed how to design and process brand identity through an integrated innovative approach (Kongprasert et al, 2008). He also applied this methodology to design various products, e.g. pillow, handbag and chair (Kongprasert, 2012; Kongprasert, 2012; Kongprasert, 2014).

3. Methodology

This study focused on the analysis of tourist’ perception to Thai cultural identity. It was based on a questionnaire. Emotional design and product identity were used in this study to evaluate how Thai cultural identity was perceived. Results from semantic analysis have been applied for translating the perceptions, sensation and preferences of the tourists. This approach followed the following steps:

3.1. Definition of Thai cultural identity:

The experiment focused on Thai cultural identity. Ten photos were used to represent Thai cultural identities that were selected by expert designers, see Fig. 2. They are beach, elephant, food, Khon, market, massage, boxing, grand palace, people and Buddhism.

![Fig. 2. Thai cultural identity.](image)

3.2. Definition of semantic words

Semantics is often used in ordinary language to denote a problem of understanding that comes down to word connotation. It is used to describe the characteristics of the product from the customer’s point of view. It is composed of two opposite semantic words and a five level scale. The semantic words were collected from magazines and websites. Five pairs of the opposite semantic words that are related to card personality were selected by linguistic experts and designers. They were “Antique – Modern”, “Basic - Unique”, “Urban – Traditional”, “Casual – Elegant” and “Delicate – Functional”.

3.3. Definition of the questionnaire

The questionnaire is to provide designers with a fine understanding of tourist’s perceptions. It supports the exploration of the tourist’s perception of photo visuals. It was created to help the designer interview the targeted tourist. It was used to interpret the tourist’s perception of photo visual forms. It both measure semantics and examine the links between semantics and photo, see Fig. 3. Likert scale is a psychometric scale commonly used in questionnaires, and is the most widely used scale in survey research, such that the term is often used interchangeably with rating scale even though the two are not synonymous (Likert, 1932). The scale uses for evaluation was a five degree Likert scale (-2, -1, 0, 1, 2). The questionnaire was pointed on website from interviews tourists.

![Fig. 3. The example of questionnaire.](image)

3.4. Definition of the people sample

This research focused on perception of tourists that were traveling or have been traveled in Thailand. One hundred sixty eight tourists were interviewed.

3.5. Data analysis

This step was the interpretation data from the questionnaire and data analysis by using STATBOX software. First, the data from interviews were interpreted to explore the range and average semantic values of each photo. The average semantic value of each photo can be calculated as follows (Equation 1).

\[
S_{\text{photo aver}} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{n} S_{\text{photo}(i)}}{n}
\]

Where

\[ S_{\text{photo aver}} = \text{the average semantic value of a photo} \]
\[ S_{\text{photo}(i)} = \text{the semantic value of the photo for tourist } i \]
\[ n = \text{number of data (number of tourists’ forms)} \]

Table 1 only summarized the values of the semantics for all photos. This data was created to prepare data before clustering the photos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. 1</td>
<td>0.0045</td>
<td>1.5432</td>
<td>0.0134</td>
<td>-1.0319</td>
<td>0.0546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 2</td>
<td>-1.5654</td>
<td>1.8967</td>
<td>1.5012</td>
<td>-0.5872</td>
<td>0.0278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 3</td>
<td>0.1099</td>
<td>1.9802</td>
<td>1.0345</td>
<td>-0.5892</td>
<td>-1.5043</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, the clustering of visuals based on the tourist’ perceptions is done with the principal component analysis (PCA) technique. PCA is mostly used as a tool in exploratory data analysis and for making predictive models. It is closely related to factor analysis. PCA and factor analysis differ in the communality estimates that are used. Simplistically, factor analysis derives a mathematical model from which factors are estimated, whereas principal component analysis merely decomposes the original data into a set of linear variates. As such, only factor analysis can estimate the underlying factors and it relies on various consumptions for these estimates to be accurate. Principal component analysis is concern only with establishing which linear components exist within the data and how a particular variable might contribute to that component (Field, 2005). This study used STATBOX as statistical tool that enables to process a statistical analysis with PCA tools. The result from STATBOX enables to visualize through a PCA mapping.

3.6. Results of PCA

The result shown all photos that acted on with semantic words, see Fig. 4. It was interpreted and clustered to extract perception form tourists. Interpretation and discussion of this result will be detailed in section 4.
4. Discussion

The result presented in part 3 is discussed and summarized to be guidelines for creating product or service. The tourist perceptions illustrated in terms of the relationship between semantic words and Thai cultural identity. It was clustered in four groups.

G1, it illustrated “Thai Traditional” that was composed of boxing, elephant, people and market, see Fig. 5. It means that boxing, elephant, people and market are Thai cultural identity which is related with Thai traditional.

G2, it illustrated “Thai Antique” that was composed of Khon, Grand palace and Buddhism, see Fig. 6. It means that Khon, Grand palace and Buddhism are Thai cultural identity which is related with Thai Antique. Thai Antique is delicate art that illustrated “Elegant” value.

G3, it illustrated “Thai Relax” that was composed of massage, beach and foods, see Fig. 7. It means that massage, beach and foods are Thai cultural identity which is related with relaxation. This group is the main objective of tourists to travel in Thailand. They come to taste Thai food, lay down on the beach and take traditional Thai massage.

The last group, it is “Thai Unique that it was integrated G1 and G2. They are “Unique” identities of Thailand. Each groups illustrated the relationship between semantic words and Thai cultural identity, and what Thai cultural identity made of? These results can be used to guide designers creating product or service following Thai cultural identity and meeting of requirements and perceptions of customers.
5. Conclusion

The objectives of this study were to explore tourist perceptions of Thai cultural identity, and employed an emotional design approach to find out how products may fulfill their perceptions and requirements. It was based on the questionnaire. It integrated emotional design and brand identity to explore the tourists’ perception to Thai cultural identity. PCA was used to extract the relationship between tourist perception and Thai cultural identity. This study did not focus on the deviation of the information that got from an interview of the tourists. We assumed that the information from the interview tourists had more reliability. Future research should be based on the information that has more reliability and precise. It should be coupled statistical techniques that could prove the reliability of the information.

References