

Portrayal of Thailand by International News Media and Its
Impact on International Audiences' Travel Intention through
Perceived Country Image: A Case Study of the Thai Cave Rescue
อิทธิพลของการนำเสนอภาพประเทศไทยโดยสื่อด้านข่าวระดับนานาชาติต่อ
ความตั้งใจท่องเที่ยวของผู้รับสารนานาชาติผ่านตัวแปรด้านภาพลักษณ์
ประเทศ: กรณีศึกษาเรื่องปฏิบัติการกู้ภัยถ้ำหลวง

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Abstract

Most international media coverage of Thailand involve negative issues such as AIDS, prostitutes, and pollution. The successful rescue operation of the 12 lost boys and their young soccer coach in the Tham Luang Cave in Chiang Rai, the Northern Province of Thailand has become worldwide sensation. Using the “4D Model” of the country image as its theoretical framework, this study aims to investigate an overall image of Thailand framed by international news media, and to examine whether the impact of audiences' exposure to media portrayal of the Thai cave rescue on their intention to visit Thailand is mediated by their country image. A mixed research method – textual analysis and survey -- was used to answer both research questions.

In terms of textual analysis, 50 online news reports purposively selected from five international news media namely CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, News.com.au, and Channel News Asia between June 23 and August 20, 2018 were textually analyzed to identify the emerging themes of Thailand's country image in terms of its media portrayal. The Constant Comparative Method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) reveals that Thailand was portrayed by international news media as a country of efficient performance, impressive competences, aesthetic qualities, and people with Buddhist virtues and high spirit.

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As for the survey, an online survey was conducted with 369 foreigners to test three research hypotheses. A Stepwise Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses yielded that international audiences' exposure to the media coverage of the Thai cave rescue significantly influenced cognitive components of the country image, which in turn, influenced affective component of the country image, which ultimately affected their travel intention. Findings provide not only academic implications for communication scholars, but also managerial implications for government offices dealing with country image and tourism promotion such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

Keywords: *Thai Cave Rescue, Media Portrayal, Country Image, Travel Intention*

บทคัดย่อ

การนำเสนอข่าวเกี่ยวกับประเทศไทยของสื่อด้านข่าวระดับนานาชาติส่วนใหญ่มักเกี่ยวข้องกับประเด็นเชิงลบ เช่น โรครุมิคุ้มกันบกพร่อง (เอตส์) โสเภณี และมลภาวะ ความสำเร็จของปฏิบัติการกู้ภัยช่วยเหลือเด็กชาย 12 คนพร้อมผู้ฝึกสอนฟุตบอลที่สูญหายไปใถ้ำหลวง จ.เชียงราย ซึ่งเป็นหนึ่งในจังหวัดภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย กลายเป็นเรื่องที่ถูกคนทั่วโลกต่างเฝ้าดูด้วยใจจดจ่อ การวิจัยนี้ใช้แบบจำลองสมมติของภาพลักษณ์ประเทศเป็นกรอบแนวคิด โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาภาพลักษณ์โดยรวมของประเทศไทยที่นำเสนอโดยสื่อด้านข่าวระดับนานาชาติ และเพื่อศึกษาว่าอิทธิพลของการเปิดรับการนำเสนอข่าวเรื่องปฏิบัติการกู้ภัยใถ้ำหลวงของผู้รับสารส่งผลกระทบต่อความตั้งใจท่องเที่ยวประเทศไทยผ่านตัวแปรด้านภาพลักษณ์ประเทศหรือไม่ เพื่อตอบคำถามวิจัยทั้งสองข้อนี้ ผู้วิจัยใช้วิธีวิจัยแบบผสม คือ การวิเคราะห์หัตถ์บท และการวิจัยเชิงสำรวจ

ในส่วนของการวิเคราะห์หัตถ์บท ผู้วิจัยเจาะจงเลือกข่าวออนไลน์จำนวน 50 ข่าวจากสื่อด้านข่าวระดับนานาชาติ 5 สำนัก ได้แก่ ซีเอ็นเอ็น บีบีซี อัลจาซีรา นิวส์ดอทคอมดอทเอยู และแซนแนลนิวส์เอเชีย ที่ได้รับการเผยแพร่ระหว่างวันที่ 23 มิถุนายนถึง 20 สิงหาคม 2561 มาทำการวิเคราะห์หัตถ์บทในประเด็นของการนำเสนอภาพโดยสื่อ เพื่อค้นหาแนวคิดหลักด้านภาพลักษณ์ของประเทศไทย เมื่อใช้การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงเปรียบเทียบอย่างต่อเนื่องของ Strauss and Corbin (1990) พบว่า สื่อด้านข่าวระดับนานาชาตินำเสนอภาพของประเทศไทยออกมาเป็น 5 ลักษณะ ได้แก่ การดำเนินงานที่มีประสิทธิภาพ ความสามารถอันน่าประทับใจ คุณภาพเชิงสุนทรีย์ คุณธรรมตามหลักพุทธศาสนา และคุณลักษณะของบุคคลอันน่าทึ่ง

ในส่วนของการวิจัยเชิงสำรวจ ผู้วิจัยศึกษากลุ่มตัวอย่างที่เป็นชาวต่างชาติจำนวน 369 คน เพื่อทดสอบสมมติฐานการวิจัย ผลการวิเคราะห์การถดถอยพหุคูณแบบลำดับขั้น บ่งชี้ว่าการเปิดรับข่าวเรื่องปฏิบัติการกู้ภัยใถ้ำหลวงของผู้รับสารนานาชาติส่งผลอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติต่อองค์ประกอบด้านความคิดของภาพลักษณ์ประเทศ ซึ่งองค์ประกอบนี้ส่งผลกระทบต่อองค์ประกอบด้านอารมณ์ ซึ่งส่งผลต่อไปยังความตั้งใจท่องเที่ยวประเทศไทย ผลการวิจัยนี้ไม่เพียงแต่มีนัยสำคัญเชิงวิชาการด้านการสื่อสาร แต่มีนัยสำคัญเชิงบริหารจัดการแก่หน่วยงานภาครัฐที่กำกับดูแลภาพลักษณ์ประเทศและการส่งเสริมการท่องเที่ยว เช่น กระทรวงการท่องเที่ยวและกีฬา และการท่องเที่ยวแห่งประเทศไทย

คำสำคัญ: *ปฏิบัติการกู้ภัยใถ้ำหลวง การนำเสนอภาพโดยสื่อ ภาพลักษณ์ประเทศ ความตั้งใจท่องเที่ยว*

Introduction

The relationship between media portrayal and one nation's country image has always been a thriving academic pursuit (Avraham, 2000). In addition to the imbalanced coverage between developed and developing nations in the international news media (de Beer, 2010; Hagos, 2000), Thailand is among several developing nations which have often been negatively portrayed by international news media such as AIDS, prostitution, and pollution, (Rittichainuwat, Qu, & Brown, 2001). It takes years or decades to enhance a country image as shown in the example of Made-in-Japan (Fan, 2006). The extraordinary event of the Thai cave rescue provides Thailand with the best opportunity to be portrayed differently.

On June 23, 2018, twelve young boys who are members of the Wild Boars Academy (name of the soccer team) went exploring the Tham Luang Cave network underneath a mountain in Thailand's Chiang Rai province with their football coach and ended up trapped deep inside the cave. The full-blown search and rescue operation by the determined local authorities, cave diving experts, rescue workers and volunteers from around the world was run around the clock to beat the odds. After being trapped in the cave for 10 days, the boys and their coach were discovered by two British cave divers on July 2, 2018. This remarkable discovery catapulted the small Mae Sai district into the international spotlight. The rescue team faced very difficult conditions in order to extract 13 persons from a winding, flooded 4km-long stretch of caves due to its labyrinthine layout. Miraculously, rescuers took them out safe and sound in three batches. An unprecedented and arduous rescue operation was completed on July 10, 2018 (BBC, 2018).

Set against images of torrential rains, muddy water and deepening darkness, an epic drama of human fortitude and challenge overcome gripped the emotions of people everywhere (Blume, 2018). For 18 days, news media around the world including CNN, NBC, BBC, Al Jazeera, NHK extensively presented this virtual experience to millions of global audiences. Accordingly, this study was conducted to achieve two objectives. The first one is to investigate the kind of overall image of Thailand presented in the news reports by leading international news media organizations on the Thai cave rescue that was perceived by the international audiences. The second one is to examine whether international audiences' exposure to such media portrayal of Thailand's country image regarding this incident indirectly influenced their travel intention through perceived country image.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Media portrayal

Media portrayal is defined as the ways in which particular persons, groups, communities, experiences, ideas, or topics are portrayed by the mass media from a particular ideological perspective. From artistic performance, films, and poetry to news and debate, media portrayals have drawn on narratives, arguments, allusions, and reports to communicate various facets of the particular issue to the target audiences. Media content is constructed in the form of messages and interpreted within the context of those messages. Humans create, interpret and retain a sense of meaning in the media content. The content of the mass media can shape meaning or establish similar meanings among large audiences. Meaning resides within individuals and ones relate it with the media

content. According to the Meaning Theory of Media Portrayal (DeFleur & Plax, 1980), communication is a tool that is used to process meanings. This theory states how humans behave is a product of inner understandings. That understanding is formed based on how an audience constructs meanings for the semiotics that they perceive through media and this happens only when the audiences' culture lends their shared interpretations to the media portrayal. Meaning in communication refers to the link between receivers and messages (DeFleur & Plax, 1980). Similarly, in this paper, meaning of country image in news coverage refers to the link between audiences and international news organization. Through participation in a variety of communication process, meanings of Thailand's country image are shaped, reshaped and stabilized by international news media and audiences.

Country image

Country image means "the total of all descriptive, inferential and informational beliefs one has about a particular country" (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). Similarly, Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1993) suggested that country image is "the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places." Country image is analogous to corporate image in that: a) there is a so-called spontaneous image, formed in consumers' minds, and b) another part which can be heavily influenced by conscious communication. Thus, people's spontaneous evaluation of any given country might be shaped and controlled through an established country image concept accompanied by well-designed, targeted communication efforts (Jenes, 2007; Jenes & Simon, 2017).

According to Maher and Carter (2011), country image consists of two components (emotion and cognition) that are independent of one another and that have a causal impact upon country conations (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). The cognitive component captures the beliefs held of a country while the affective component captures the emotional reactions of consumers toward that particular country. In sum, country image is defined as "a stakeholder's attitude toward a nation and its state, comprising specific beliefs and general feelings in a functional, a normative, an aesthetic and an emotional dimension. While functional, normative and aesthetic judgments constitute the cognitive component, the emotional dimension constitutes the affective component of the country image" (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015a).

Based on the conceptual model by Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015b), country image is a multi-dimensional construct, which consists of four dimensions -- functional, normative, esthetic, and emotional dimensions. The *functional* dimension consists of specific judgments regarding the competences and competitiveness of a country, its political and economical effectiveness and performance. The *normative* dimension consists of specific judgments regarding the integrity of a country, its norms and values. The *aesthetic* dimension comprises specific judgments regarding the aesthetic qualities and the beauty/attractiveness of a country as a cultural and scenic place. Finally, the *emotional* dimension consists of general feelings of sympathy and fascination for a country.

Research Conceptual Framework

Research has shown that media influenced the audience perceptions through construction of reality (Brewer, Graf, & Willnat, 2003; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005; Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007). Most people are dependent on mass media for information on other countries and

international events and affairs (Brewer et al., 2003). Applying the “4D Model” of the country image (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015b), this study assesses how international audiences’ exposure to media portrayal of Thailand’s country image, which consists of four dimensions -- functional, normative, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions -- influences their travel intention.

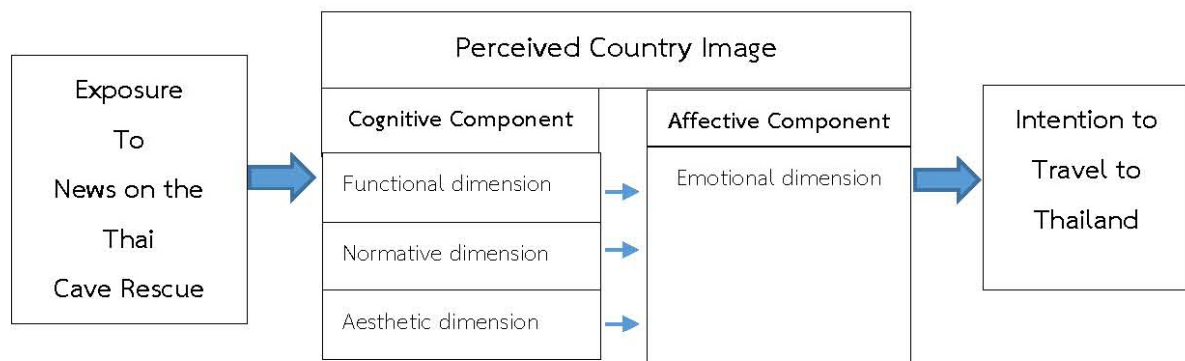


Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework

Hypotheses

Based on the above conceptual model, three research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Audiences’ cognitive component of the perceived country image influences their affective component.

H2: Among two components of perceived country image, audiences’ cognitive component exerts a stronger influence on their travel intention than affective component.

H3: Influence of audiences’ exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue on travel intention is mediated by their perceived country image.

Methodology

Population and sampling

This study used a mixed research method, a combination of textual analysis and survey research. As for the textual analysis, target population is news articles or videos on the Thai cave rescue presented during June 23

and August 20, 2018 by five leading media organizations in five continents, namely North America (CNN via <https://edition.cnn.com/world>), Europe (BBC via <https://www.bbc.com/news/world/asia>), Middle-East (Al Jazeera via <https://www.aljazeera.com/topics/regions/asia.html>), Australia (News.com.au via <https://www.news.com.au/world/asia>), and Asia (Channel News Asia via <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia>). While one media organization for each continent was selected based on its high amount of coverage on this phenomenon, the total of 50 news reports were purposively chosen as samples to represent all four different periods of the incident (see details in Table 1). Texts, pictures and videos of the sampled news on the Thai cave rescue were textually analyzed by the major investigator and the second coder. Emerging themes were identified to describe how international news media portray Thailand’s country image.

Table 1 Samples of News Reports on the Thai Cave Rescue

Continent and Media Organizations	News Reports of the Thai Cave Rescue on Four Periods				
	Missing	Found	Rescue	After-Rescue	Sub-Total
North America - CNN (N = 102)	1	2	3	4	10
Europe - BBC (N = 125)	1	2	2	5	10
Middle East – Al Jazeera (N = 30)	2	3	2	3	10
Australia - News.com.au (N = 99)	1	2	3	4	10
Asia - Channel News Asia (N = 114)	2	3	3	2	10
Total (N = 470)	7	12	13	18	50

As for the survey, target population constitutes international audiences without Thai citizenship who were exposed to international news coverage of the Thai cave rescue. An online survey was conducted with 369 respondents from 47 nations to test both of the research hypotheses.

Research Procedure

The study involves two phases. The first one involves textual analysis of the media portrayal of Thailand based on news coverage of the Thai cave rescue. An official website of each sampled news media organization was used to get an access to the relevant news articles or videos. Ten news articles or videos were chosen from each of the five news media organizations to represent all four different incidents – missing, found, rescued, and post-rescued. After reading both verbal and visual content of those news report, emerging themes of Thailand’s country image being portrayed by international news media were identified. To ensure the reliability of the coding, 30 percent of the sampled news reports (15 news reports) were coded by the second coder, who is a junior student majored in Broadcasting and Digital Journalism at a private university in Bangkok. His coding agreed with the

major investigator 85% of the time. Accordingly, the inter-coding reliability is quite high.

The second phase involves conducting a survey research. A self-administered questionnaire was reviewed by three communication scholars to ensure the content validity of its measurement. After adjusting the wordings, the questionnaire was pretested with 30 persons. Final version of the questionnaire was made to collect data online from the samples via Survey Monkey. The data were then analyzed by using both descriptive and inferential statistics to test the research hypotheses.

Measurement

In terms of the textual analysis, each of the sampled international news reports was read or viewed twice. The analysis method that was used is the “constant comparative method of analysis” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The first step in the analysis, *conceptualizing the data* (labeling phenomena), involves asking questions about the data, such as “What does each news report represent?,” and comparing news reports for similarities and differences between each news and other news so that similar phenomena can be given the same name.

Once particular phenomena in the data were identified, the second step, *categorizing the data*, was performed. This process involves grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena. The groups of concepts form *categories*. The phenomenon represented by a category is given a ‘conceptual’ name such as collaboration, gratitude, leadership. Then, categories were analytically developed in terms of their attributes and dimensions. Two analytic

procedures – the asking of questions and the making of comparisons – were used to reach the goals of conceptualizing and categorizing data through open coding process. Finally, emerging themes regarding the portrayal of Thailand’s country image by international news media were identified. Table 2 illustrates how various concepts presented in the international news reports were categorized.

Table 2 Concepts under Each of the Five Categories

Theme # 1 Performance	Theme # 2 Competences	Theme # 3 Aesthetic quality	Theme # 4 Buddhist virtues	Theme # 5 Personal qualities
strategic planning, problem solving, risk management, Medical services, and health care	cooperation, leadership, professionalism, positive thinking, and technical support	history and tradition, landscapes and scenery, and artistic talents	mindfulness, tolerance, apology, gratitude, forgiveness, and emotional support	determination, passion, hard work, heroism, courage, strength, resilience, solidarity, patience, selflessness, generosity, and caring

As for the survey, a self-administered online questionnaire was used as a research tool. It comprises of four sections:

- 1) *Demographic characteristics*: respondents were asked about their gender, age, occupation, education, and country of birth.
- 2) *News media consumption*: Four questions regarding respondents’ news media consumption were asked. The questions involve the communication channel from which the audiences generally receive international news (tradition channel, online channel, or both), an international

media organization they most frequently receive, their exposure to such media organization, and their exposure to news coverage of the Thai cave rescue regarding four different periods -- missing, found, rescue, and post-rescue. A five-point scale was used, ranging from 1 = short (less than 30 minutes/day), 2 = quite short (30 minutes – 1 hour/day), 3 = moderate (>1 hour – 2 hours/day), 4 = quite long (>2 – 3 hours/day), to 5 = long (>3 hours/day). Mean of the total scores from those four items was analyzed to indicate the respondents’ level of

exposure to the news on the Thai cave rescue. The score below 1.81 means short exposure whereas the score above 4.20 means long exposure.

- 3) *Perceived country image*: is measured by using respondents' degree of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding their perception of Thailand based on four dimensions of country image by using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). Mean of the total scores from those 24 items was calculated to indicate the respondents' perception of country image of Thailand. The score below 2.34 means negative image whereas the score above 3.66 means positive image.

Functional dimension is measured by using 12 indicators – country innovativeness, national products and services, competence of national businesses, national prosperity and wealth, economic strength of the country, labor markets, competences of political leadership, political stability, infrastructure, innovativeness of research, educational opportunities, and level of education.

Normative dimension is measured by using 5 indicators -- environmental protection, international social responsibility, respect for other nations, civil rights, and fairness of international economic and trade policy.

Aesthetic dimension is measured by using 4 indicators – cultural goods, culinary, history and tradition, landscapes and scenery.

Emotional dimension is measured by using 3 indicators – country fascination, sympathy of the country, and country attractiveness.

Cognitive component is composed of three dimensions -- functional, normative, and aesthetic dimension -- whereas affective component is composed of one dimension -- emotional dimension.

- 4) *Travel behaviors*: Respondents were asked three questions regarding their travel behaviors:

Thailand visit is measured by using the number of times the respondents visited Thailand on six different purposes -- tourism, business/investment, academic/training, medical treatment, religion/pilgrimage, and social bonding by a three-point scale (0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = more than once).

Satisfaction on past visit to Thailand the respondents were asked how satisfied they were with their past visit(s) to Thailand by using a three-point scale (1 = unsatisfied, 2 = neither unsatisfied nor satisfied, 3 = satisfied). For those who never visited Thailand, they can choose another answer (4 = cannot answer).

Intention to travel to Thailand is measured by using respondents' degree of agreement or disagreement with three statements regarding their intention to travel to Thailand within 12 months by using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). Mean of the total scores from those three items was calculated to indicate respondents'

level of travel intention. The score below 1.81 signifies low intention whereas the score above 4.20 signifies high intention.

Research Findings

The textual analysis of 50 news coverage of the Thai cave rescue sampled from five news media organizations reveal five emerging themes regarding the portrayal of Thailand's country image by international news media.

1) *Efficient performance*: The Thai authorities, especially the Navy seals, have an efficient management for the rescue operations. Searching for and rescuing the lost boys and a young coach was strategically planned. In terms of problem solving and risk management, multiple rescue options were considered and risks were calculated to identify perfect conditions for evacuation. In addition, standardized health care services inside and outside the cave were given by qualified health care providers and well-equipped local hospitals.

2) *Impressive competences*: The international news reports described Thailand's impressive competences including cooperation, leadership, professionalism, positive thinking, and technical support. In addition to specialized and adapted equipment and materials for rescue operations, the Thai authorities received an extraordinary collaboration from the locals, the US air force rescue specialists, and cave divers from the U.K., Belgium, Australia, Scandinavia, and many other countries. Determined Thai rescue workers and international volunteers worked together in a constructive way toward a common goal. The head of the rescue operations, Governor Narongsak Osotthanakorn, showed his high level of leadership and professionalism by marshaling resources for an impossibly complex operation

involving police, military, government ministries and volunteer organizations. With positive thinking, the rescue team never gave up and made a miraculously successful rescue effort.

3) *Aesthetic quality*: Thailand was portrayed as a country with aesthetic qualities, in terms of history and tradition, landscapes and scenery, and artistic talents. In addition to the usual fare of elephants and cultural festivals, beautiful scenery of Chiang Rai and its astonishing landscape of the Tham Luang cave were extensively covered in the international news reports. Tempting cuisine such as papaya salad, pad Thai, and Thai curry was also presented in the news regarding the local volunteers for food services. As for the long tradition regarding spirituality, there were coverages on stories of the boys' families who shouted for the boys' name and kept vigil for the cape spirit Nangnon at the mouth of the cave, and their classmates who held group prayers, sang songs of encouragement into the cave, folded paper cranes, and posted messages of hope on school noticeboards. The artistic talents were prominently presented by the local artists' huge mural honoring rescue heroes.

4) *Buddhist virtues*: Thailand was portrayed as a country strongly holding Buddhist virtues, which involves mindfulness, tolerance, apology, gratitude, forgiveness, and emotional support. The ability of the lost boys, the young coach, and divers to keep their minds clear certainly come from the practice of meditation as taught by Buddhism. As a former monk, the coach helped his young football players stay calm during their long wait in the cave. The divers probably used breathing exercises to steady their nerves for their long journeys through the labyrinthine and dark cave. As an expression of

apology and gratitude, the boys and their coach ordained to give thanks for their rescue. Being in a monkhood is believed by the Buddhists to bless their lives and cleanse them of an unfortunate experience. Forgiveness was clearly conveyed by parents of the boys, and wife and family of the late hero Lieutenant Commander Saman Gunan who died in the operation. Thailand is also shown as a high tolerant nation. Its borders with four nations in the far north are sometimes porous, immigrants often attend schools with native Thais and are given sanctuary in temples and communities. In terms of emotional support, Thai social media lit up with expressions of love and support, as shown in one BBC news report, “Jubilant crowds lined the streets leading to the hospital, cheering on the ambulances. Car horns blared incessantly in celebration.”

5) *Amazing personal qualities*: Thai people were viewed as possessing amazing characteristics including determination, passion, hard work, heroism, courage, strength, resilience, solidarity, patience, selflessness, generosity, and caring. The news articles portrayed the lost boys and their coach as persons with both physical and mental strength who miraculously survived amid the arduous situations. Their patience and resilience were admired by the worldwide audiences. Regardless of ethnicity, social class, wealth, or the possibility of commercial gain, ordinary Thais were presented as caring, selfless and generous persons. Volunteers from around the country dedicated their time and efforts to provide a variety of services (e.g., free food and drink, laundry, cleaning toilets, transportation) for the rescue team and relatives of the boys and their coach. Apart from rescue workers’

determination, passion and hard work, ordinary Thais’ strong show of solidarity and outpouring of goodwill impressed a global audience. There was no purer form of courage and heroism than Lieutenant Commander Saman Gunan who lost his life while preparing the tunnels for the boys’ evacuation. His personal sacrifice inspired not only the rescuers not to give up, but also the ordinary Thais to rally for a humanitarian cause.

As for the survey research, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the respondents’ demographic characteristics and news media consumption. The number of female respondents (55.6%) was slightly higher than that of male respondents (44.4%). The age range is very large, from 18 to 81. Their average age is 38 years old. The majority of them were born in the U.S. (23.8%), are professional (37.5%), and earned a Master’s degree (39.9%). Among three different media platforms, online channels (49.2%) were accessed the most, followed by both traditional and online channels (45.7%), and traditional channels (5.2%). The majority of the samples most frequently received international news from BBC (28.5%), CNN (28.2%), and others (17.6%), respectively. Their exposure to the mentioned news organization was quite short ($\bar{X} = 2.08$, S.D. = 1.02). The samples were foreigners from 47 countries from North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

In terms of the exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue, the samples had a short exposure ($\bar{X} = 1.69$, S.D. = 0.84). They had a positive country image of Thailand ($\bar{X} = 3.51$, S.D. = 0.40). Their emotional dimension ($\bar{X} = 4.20$, S.D. = 0.65) was slightly higher than the aesthetic dimension ($\bar{X} = 4.18$, S.D. = 0.59),

normative dimensions ($\bar{X} = 3.28$, S.D. = 0.57), and functional dimensions ($\bar{X} = 3.20$, S.D. = 0.47) respectively. The samples had a

high intention to travel to Thailand within the 12 months ($\bar{X} = 3.53$, S.D. = 1.11).

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of the Variables

Measurement	n	Mean	S.D.	No. of Item	Cronbach's Alpha
Exposure to news on the rescue	366	1.69	0.84	4	0.91
Missing	367	1.66	0.96	1	-
Found	369	1.78	0.97	1	-
Rescue	366	1.88	1.07	1	-
Post-rescue	367	1.43	0.77	1	-
Country image	354	3.51	0.40	24	0.87
Functional dimension	362	3.20	0.47	12	0.83
Normative dimension	366	3.28	0.57	5	0.77
Aesthetic dimension	364	4.18	0.59	4	0.76
Cognitive component	355	3.41	0.41	21	0.86
Affective component	368	4.20	0.65	3	0.83
Intention to travel to Thailand	369	3.53	1.11	3	0.88

Inferential statistics were used to test both research hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 suggested an impact of cognitive components of the country image on the respondents' affective component. A linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the prediction of affective component from cognitive components. This hypothesis was supported based on the result of the analysis using cognitive components as the predictor, $R^2 = 0.16$, $F(1, 352) = 66.92$, $p < 0.001$ with significant beta-values for affective component, $\beta = 0.40$, $t(352) = 8.18$, $p < 0.001$. In addition, Pearson correlation analysis yielded a consistent result, $r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$. As hypothesized, the respondents with positive perceived country image in terms of cognitive components tended

to have a positive perceived country image toward Thailand in terms of affective component.

Hypothesis 2 suggested a stronger impact of cognitive component of the country image on travel intention than their affective component. Based on the Regression Analysis result, the respondents' cognitive component of the country image ($\beta = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$) significantly influenced their travel intention to a larger extent than their affective component ($\beta = 0.174$, $p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis 3 suggested an impact of audiences' exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue on their travel intention mediated by their perceived country image. A Stepwise Hierarchical Regression Analysis was conducted

to evaluate the prediction of travel intention from exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue and country image. This hypothesis was also supported based on the result of the analysis using exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue and country image as the predictors, $R^2 = 0.12$, $F(2, 348) = 23.68$, $p < 0.001$ with significant beta-

values for travel intention, $\beta = 0.284$, $t(348) = 5.51$, $p < 0.001$. Interestingly, the respondents' perceived country image ($\beta = 0.284$, $p < 0.001$) significantly influenced their travel intention to a larger extent than their exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue ($\beta = 0.144$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 4 Results of the Stepwise Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis on Predictors of Travel Intention

	Predictors	B	S.E.	Beta (β)	p-value
Step 1	Perceived country image	.878	.141	.316	.000
Step 2	Perceived country image	.789	.143	.284	.000
	Exposure to news on the cave	.189	.068	.144	.006

$\Delta R^2 = 0.100$, $df = 349$ for Step 1 ($p < 0.001$); $\Delta R^2 = 0.120$, $df = 348$ for Step 2 ($p < 0.01$);

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Discussions

During the past decades, Thailand was mostly portrayed by international media, especially the Hollywood films, as an under-developed country notorious with sex tourism and illegal drugs (Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Based on the findings from the textual analysis of the international news coverage of the Thai cave rescue, Thailand's country image was presented in a new light as described by five emerging themes – efficient performance, impressive competences, aesthetic qualities, Buddhist virtues, and amazing personal qualities. After two decades of the Tourism Authority of Thailand's advertising campaigns, the "Amazing Thailand" slogan has finally been proven in the most vibrant and heroic terms. The relevance and credibility of Thailand's country image portrayed by the international news media regarding the Thai cave rescue truly resonate with the global audience.

Solidarity and collaboration among various groups including the Thai authorities, military officers, local people, and foreigners reflect Thailand's collectivist culture, which values the needs of a group or a community over the individual (Hofstede, 1991). Selflessness shown by ordinary Thais, which is considered the second nature to the Thai way of life, is clearly consistent with some core Buddhist values such as genuine care, concern for others, and generosity (Cozort & Shields, 2018).

The survey findings reveal that perceived country image acted as a significant mediator between respondents' exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue and their travel intention. This result provides additional insights into the previous research findings by Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015a; 2015b), who showed country image as a sole predictor of tourists' behavioral intentions. Interestingly, the

portrayal of Thailand by international news media is consistent with the country image of Thailand perceived by the samples. These findings reinforce previous research showing the influence of media on audience perceptions through the construction of reality (Brewer, Graf, & Willnat, 2003; Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005; Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007).

However, it should be noted that 71.5% of the samples visited Thailand at least once, and that 67.8% of them were satisfied with their past visit to Thailand. To compare samples without past visit to Thailand ($\bar{X} = 3.02$, S.D. = 1.17) and those with past visit to Thailand ($\bar{X} = 3.74$, S.D. = 1.01) in terms of travel intention, results of the Independent Sample t-test reveal that those with past visit had significantly higher intention to visit Thailand than those without past visit ($t = -5.56$, $df = 169.41$, $p < 0.001$). Interestingly, there was no significant difference in perceived country image among both groups ($t = 0.74$, $df = 188.39$, $p > 0.05$). Although the findings of this study support the significant impact of audiences' exposure to media portrayal of the Thai cave rescue on their intention to visit Thailand, it should be aware that majority of the samples had positive and direct experiences with Thailand, and this factor influenced their travel intention as well. Audiences' prior experiences with the country should be added in the conceptual model for further investigation. As tourists' satisfaction is considered a significant predictor of the success of tourism industry, those who involve with tourism businesses must ensure that tourists' experiences with Thailand are positive, and their satisfaction is met.

The analysis yielded rather low variances of the dependent variable as accounted for

by multiple independent variables (12%). This could be explained by the fact that several external variables exerted influences on a particular communication phenomenon of our interest. It is, therefore; normal to find that only one independent variable has a low ability to explain such a big communication phenomenon. However, 12% of variances being explained by one independent variable is considered quite a fair amount in social science.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, due to inclusion criteria -- only those news media organization which have a certain number of news reports in English on the Thai cave rescue were selected, while the news media organizations in China and non-English speaking nations were not selected as samples. Secondly, although both verbal (e.g., text) and non-verbal content (e.g., photos) of the news reports were concurrently analyzed, texts received stronger focus than photos. Thirdly, samples of survey research were drawn from the social networks of the investigator. Hence, there were very few respondents from the Middle East and Africa. Fourthly, the media exposure measurement was based on the respondents' self-report of their exposure to news on the Thai cave rescue. Different findings may be yielded if their actual exposure was measured.

Implications

This research provides both academic and managerial implications. As for the academic implications, this research testifies the positive correlations between media portrayal of a particular country and international audiences' cognition and affection in terms of perceived

country image. It also provides an additional empirical evidence that country image serves as a significant mediator between audiences' news media exposure and their behavioral intention. It must be fruitful to examine further how other forms of media such as entertainment media portray Thailand and whether their portrayal influence audiences' perceived country image. The findings indicate that the "4D Model" of the country image proposed by Buhmann and Ingenhoff (2015b) is suitable for application in communication research. Future research may explore whether and how audiences' cultural dimensions (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism or masculine vs. feminine culture) interact with their perceived country image. Due to the reliability of the perceived country image measurement, the scale used by this study can be applied in future research.

The findings of this study also benefit governmental offices dealing with country image and tourism such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Findings indicate that portrayal of Thailand by any forms of mass media should be taken into consideration. It is important that those governmental offices closely monitor Thailand's perceived country image presented by mass media such that any promotional messages targeted to foreigners must be consonant with those positive images portrayed by the media. In case of distorted or biased images, these offices must take speedy actions to correct them by placing emphasis on such positive characteristics as cultural heritage, beautiful scenery and local hospitality in order to suppress negative perceptions. As functional and normative dimension received lower scores than aesthetic and emotional dimensions,

Thailand's promotional campaigns should focus further on important issues regarding functional dimension (e.g., infrastructure, national products and services) and normative dimension (e.g., environmental protection, civil rights) so that the perceived country image is enhanced.

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