

**A STUDY OF CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS OF THE MEETINGS AND
CONFERENCES INDUSTRY IN THAILAND**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the increasing revenue from the MICE industry has had a significant role in helping to boost the Thai economy. Statistics compiled by the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) (2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018a) show that, from 2014 to 2017, the revenue from the MICE industry had fluctuated. However, it peaked at 86,188 million Baht (approximately 1,998 million GBP) in 2017. Because of the size of income generated, Thailand strives to promote the MICE sector in order to increase revenues and establish Thailand as Asia's business events hub. Therefore, Thailand should be able to attract and retain both current and potential MICE customers. The aim of this research is to ascertain destination images of Thailand for meetings/conferences purposes from current MICE customers based in Thailand and to explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers based in the United Kingdom. In terms of data collection, a mixed methods approach has been adopted. For the first stage of the research qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured interviews were used to obtain grounded knowledge of experiences and attitudes of current host organisers in relation to for example, reasons for selecting Thailand for meetings/conferences, attitude and views after organising meetings/conferences in Thailand. Next, quantitative data was collected through questionnaires in order to measure the perceptions of potential MICE organisers from international companies whose offices are located in the North West of England. They have never used Thailand for MICE purposes. Three main findings from the research are as follows: 1. The destination image components of Thailand are divided into general destination image characteristics and MICE-specific destination image characteristics, 2. The perceptions of potential international companies includes two sub-sections: Thailand's destination attractiveness attributes and Thailand's MICE industry attributes, and 3. The similarities and differences between the images of Thailand held internally to the country and the perceptions held overseas of the MICE in Thailand. As such, the findings are expected to contribute to theoretical and practical knowledge. In particular this study fills an identified gap regarding destination images, perceptions and the MICE industry in Thailand. It is therefore expected to be able to inform policy making, marketing and the funding of product and facilities development in Thailand.

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DECLARATIONS

I would like to declare my thesis that:

- This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the School of Sport Studies, Leisure and Nutrition at Liverpool John Moores University and it is entirely my own work.
- I have not submitted it for any other degree and other universities before.
- During the thesis presentation, some parts of thesis that were transferred to a poster, a paper and I have done were presented as following listed below:
 - A poster presentation was titled 'A Study of Customer Perception towards the Meetings and Conferences Industry in Thailand'. The poster was published in LJMU A celebration of Women's Research, for International Women's Day on 8 March 2018.
 - A stand-up presentation was titled 'An Investigation of Destination Images towards the MICE Industry in Thailand' that is the findings of semi-structured interviews data. The paper was published in the 1st International MICE Conference and Forum's conference proceedings (29-30 August 2018).

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my father and mother. Without them, it would have been possible for me to be what I am today. I share the honour of this work with them.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MICE	Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions
CEC	Commission of the European Communities
IAPCO	International Association of Professional Congress Organisers
TCEB	Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EEC	Eastern Economic Corridor
MECE	Meetings, Events, Conventions, and Exhibitions
MCE	Meetings, Conventions, and Exhibitions
CEMI	Conventions, Exhibitions, Meetings, and Incentives
UNWTO	United Nations World Tourism Organisation
ICCA	International Congress and Convention Association
SITE	Society for Incentive Travel Excellence
BTA	British Tourism Authority
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
TAT	Tourism Authority of Thailand
SRT	State Railway of Thailand
BTS	Bangkok Mass Transit System
MRT	Metropolitan Rapid Transit
ARL	Airport Rail Link
TICA	Thailand Incentive and Convention Association
QSNCC	Queen Sirikit National Convention Center
BITEC	Bangkok International Trade and Exhibition Centre
PEACH	Pattaya Exhibition and Convention Hall

PRs	Public Relations
TNZ	Tourism New Zealand
WTB	Wales Tourist Board
DMO	Destination Management Organisation
AMA	American Marketing Association
WEF	World Economic Forum
SAR	Special Administrative Region
IPA	Importance-Performance Analysis
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
CSFs	Critical Success Factors
DMC	Destination Management Company
EEC	Eastern Economic Corridor
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
DO	Domestic
IN	International
M	Mean
SD	Standard Deviation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis is a study of customer perceptions of the meetings and conferences industry in Thailand, especially Bangkok. Based on its acronym, the meetings and conferences industry is a part of the Meetings, Incentives, Conventions, and Exhibitions (MICE) industry (Commission of the European Communities and International Association of Professional Congress Organisers, 1992). A full explanation of what this incorporates will be explored in section 1.3. According to the Oxford Business Group (2018), countries and regions across the world have long understood the potential of the MICE segment of an economy as a vehicle to drive high-value tourism and further economic development. This chapter outlines the rationale for the study (Section 1.2). It will also give some background information and outline the case of Thailand, which is the focus of this thesis, address the research aim and objectives and provide an overall structure for the thesis.

1.2 Rationale for the study

The MICE industry has grown worldwide, it can generate a lot of money for a destination (Lee and Back, 2008). For this reason, it is competitive and lucrative industry in various regions such as North America, Europe, Asia Pacific, Africa, the Middle East.

In recent years, the increasing revenue from the MICE industry has had a significant role for helping to boost the Thai economy. Statistics compiled by the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau¹ (TCEB) (2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018a) show that, from 2014 to 2017, the revenue from the MICE industry had fluctuated, as seen in Figure 1.1.

¹ The Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB) is a public organisation established by royal decree in 2002 to promote Thailand as a destination for meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions.

However, it peaked at 86,188 million Baht² (approximately 1,998 million GBP) in 2017. Because of the size of income generated, Thailand strives to promote the MICE sector in order to increase revenues and establish Thailand as Asia’s business events hub. Among the popular destinations in Asia, Thailand has attempted to reach the targets and compete with other countries. Therefore, Thailand should be able to attract and retain both current and potential MICE customers.

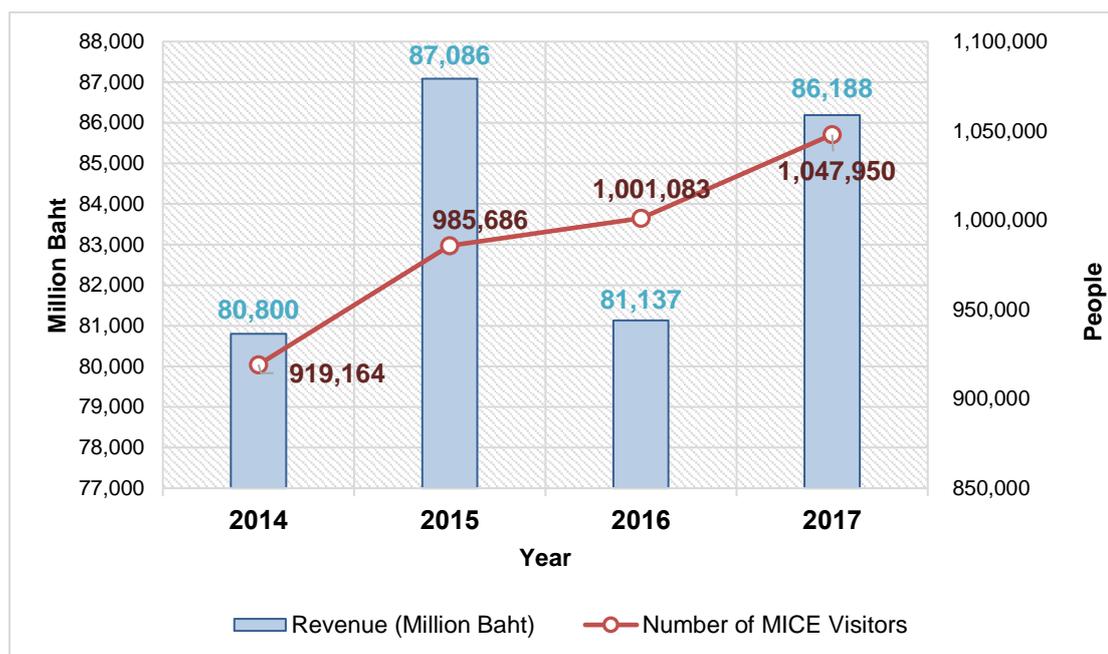


Figure 1.1 MICE Revenue and Number of MICE Visitors 2014-2017

Source: Adapted from TCEB (2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018a)

According to the five-year master plan (2017-2021), TCEB has set Thailand a MICE target of 2018 at 112,000³ million Baht (approximately 2,600 million GBP) in revenue earned from 30.19 million domestic and international MICE travellers (TCEB, 2017).

² £ 1,997,867,408.44 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

³ £ 2,596,198,423.74 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

By 2021, TCEB also aims to gain a ranking that places Thailand in the top five countries in Asia for being a MICE destination (TCEB, 2018a). In order to achieve these goals, TCEB's plan proceeded with the marketing communication campaign for 2018 "*THAILAND CONNECT Your Vibrant Journey to Business Success*" (Trade Show News Network, 2017).

This campaign focuses on three key pillars:

- 1) Fascinating Destination – Explore vibrant destinations brimming with captivating inspirations;
- 2) Business Empowerment – Resourceful Thailand offers essential collaborations for international opportunities; and
- 3) Professional Passion – Meet passionate professionals with a touch of Thai vibrancy.

As part of the campaign, TCEB aims to position Thailand as leading a "Bleisure" (business-leisure) destination in the region (TCEB, 2017).

In addition, TCEB has launched a brand-new campaign "*Thailand: Redefine Your Business Events*" as a marketing strategy for 2019 (PR Newswire, 2018a).



Figure 1.2 TCEB's campaign for 2019 "*Thailand: Redefine Your Business Events*"

Source: TCEB from www.businesseventsthailand.com

The campaign focuses on four areas:

1. To highlight Thailand's position as a hub of ASEAN MICE; a connecting point that provides market access to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations⁴ (ASEAN) and CLMV⁵ countries.
2. To encourage new MICE events through the growing possibilities from the national economic policies including Thailand 4.0⁶, the Eastern Economic Corridor⁷ (EEC), 10 S-Curve industries and New S-Curve Industries⁸.
3. To redefine the organisation's role from a mere supporter and marketer of business events hosted in Thailand to become a facilitator, developer, thought leader, as well as enabler of the business events industry.
4. To promote Thailand's MICE industry through a new brand communication campaign "*Thailand: Redefine Your Business Events*".

For the fiscal year 2019, TCEB estimated that Thailand will welcome 1,419,890 overseas business travelers generating 130,200 million Baht⁹ (approximately 3,018 million GBP) in revenue to the country (TCEB, 2018a).

⁴ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional intergovernmental organisation comprising ten Southeast Asian countries, which promotes intergovernmental cooperation and facilitates economic, political, security, military, educational, and sociocultural integration among its members and other Asian states.

⁵ CLMV countries namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam have a unique position in the regional value chains in Southeast Asia region.

⁶ Thailand 4.0 is an economic model that aims to unlock the country from several economic challenges resulting from past economic models which place emphasis on agriculture (Thailand 1.0), light industry (Thailand 2.0), and advanced industry (Thailand 3.0). These challenges include "a middle income trap", "an inequality trap", and "an imbalanced trap".

⁷ The Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) comes under the Thailand 4.0 banner, outlined in the Eastern Seaboard Economic Development Plan and supports the government's policy of building a center for economic development. Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) comprises of three provinces namely Chachoengsao, Chonburi and Rayong.

⁸ The 10 S-Curve industries and new S-Curve industries are as follows: Health Tourism, Biotechnology, Robotics, Smart Devices, Digital, Future Automotive, Food Processing, Aviation & Logistics, Biofuels & Bio-chemicals, and Integrated Medical Services.

⁹ £ 3,018,080,667.59 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

The forecast is based on TCEB's proactive marketing strategies, which are aimed at attracting more numbers of mega events and premium MICE groups. TCEB has also developed a series of supporting tools to enhance experiences for international delegates. Plus, funding programs are offered to attract new events and upgrade existing events such as *'Exhibiz in Market'* program to raise the sale of exhibition space, and *'ASEAN + 6 Privilege'* to boost show visitors from target countries (PR Newswire, 2018a).

Thus, Thailand needs to investigate its current position in order to understand what makes a good MICE image and how Thailand fulfils this. This purpose of this research is to ascertain destination images of Thailand for meetings/conferences purposes from current MICE customers based in Thailand and to explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers based in the United Kingdom. In terms of MICE customers, the research is concerned with current customers who are host organisers and who chose Thailand for organising meetings/conferences. That is to say they have already arranged meetings/conferences in Thailand and they are able to explain their relevant experiences in relation to, for example, reasons for selecting Thailand for meetings/conferences, attitude and views after organising meetings/conferences in Thailand. For potential MICE customers, they are international companies that have never used Thailand for MICE purposes. As noted earlier, the perceptions of potential customers can be used to understand the current position of Thailand as a MICE destination as well. The next section will present the terminology of MICE.

1.3 Definitions of MICE Industry

Owing to its acronym, the definition of "MICE" is explained by a number of related organisations and specialists. CEC and IAPCO (1992), for example, defines "MICE" in the following way "M = Meeting", "I = Incentive", "C = Convention or Conference", and "E = Exhibition". There are other similar terms utilised to describe the same industry such as MECE (Meetings, Events, Conventions, and Exhibitions), MCE (meetings, Conventions, and Exhibitions),

and CEMI (Conventions, Exhibitions, Meetings, and Incentives) (Weber and Chon, 2002 cited in Henaien and Sinha, 2014 p.7).

There are different terms for describing the industry, for instance, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) gave the term 'Business Tourism' to the Meeting Industry (UNWTO, 2017). The term 'meetings industry' is often used in European countries and it may not include exhibition and trade shows (Davidson and Cope, 2003). Whereas in North America, the Middle East and Asia it is generally known as the 'MICE sector' (Dwyer et al., 2007). In Australia it is referred to as 'business events' (Dwyer et al., 2007). According to the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) (2017), the term 'meetings industry' is increasingly used to avoid confusion with the term of 'MICE'.

Likewise, Dale (2005) defines this industry specifically by country such as the United Kingdom. For instance, "business meetings" are held on work premises as part of the working day. "Political conferences" are held each year by political parties. "Annual conferences" may be held by a single company to bring their employees together or they may be organised to bring interested professionals together to discuss industry issues. An example of such a conference is 'Travel Insight', which is an industry conference, aimed at travel marketers with a focus on the discussion of a number of key marketing topics. "Sales exhibition" has the aim of generating new sales and attracting potential customers such as 'the Travel Technology Show', 'the Holiday and Travel Show' in Glasgow and Manchester, and 'the Ideal Home Exhibition' (Dale, 2005).

As seen in Table 1.1, the terminology of 'MICE' is described by relevant organisations and specialists.

Table1.1 Definitions of MICE

<p>M (Meeting)</p>	<p>A meeting means the coming together of a group of people to discuss or exchange information. In some regions, meetings may be seen as a small-scale conference by others (TCEB, 2011). The term 'Meeting' is used widely to describe conferences, congresses, seminars and workshops that have been designed to bring people together at the same time and place in order to exchange information and update their knowledge (Campiranon and Arcodia, 2007). This term is also employed to discuss a symposium, colloquium, assembly, conclave, and summit; however, they may have slightly different meanings and organised in different procedures (Rogers, 2013). The meeting events can be held by firms, association or government sectors for facilitating communication with their employees, customers, shareholders and members (Davidson and Cope, 2003). Rogers (2003) also asserts that the meetings could have different purposes either commercial or non-commercial, and can be held with a minimum number of six to many hundreds of attendees, and from a few hours to a weeks' duration.</p>
<p>I (Incentive)</p>	<p>Incentive is a meeting event in which the participants are rewarded for a previous performance (ICCA, 2013). The Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE, 2013) defines incentive travel as a modern management tool used to achieve extraordinary goals by awarding participants a travel prize upon their attainment of their share of uncommon goals. It is better for companies to arrange incentive trips for employees, rather than give them money (Rogers, 2003). To support this point, Davidson and Cope (2003) states that it is more beneficial for companies, as it motivates employees to be more productive in achieving the companies' objectives. Incentive travels include leisure trips emphasising pleasure and excitement and which may appear to have little or no connection to business (TCEB, 2011).</p>

<p>C (Convention or Conference)</p>	<p>An event where the primary activity of the attendees is to attend educational sessions, participate in meetings/discussion, socialise, or attend other organised events (TCEB, 2011). This term also can be defined as ‘an event used by any organisation to meet and exchange views, convey a message, open a debate or give publicity to some areas of opinion on a specific issue (International Meetings Industry Glossary, 1993 cited in Rogers, 2003, p.17). Seekings (1991) cited in Weber and Chon (2002, p.103) defines a conference as “a large event with a hundred or thousand people, often lasting for several days and involving a social program and exhibition with an international and national scope”, while the British Tourism Authority (BTA) (1999) cited in Weber and Chon (2002, p.103) describes a conference as “an out of office meeting of at least six hours duration, involving a minimum of eight people”.</p>
<p>E (Exhibition)</p>	<p>Exhibition can generally be portrayed as ‘<i>presentations of products and services to an invited audience with the object of inducing a sale or informing the visitors</i>’ (TCEB, 2011). In practice, exhibitions usually occur within a cultural or educational setting such as a museum, art gallery, park, library, exhibition hall, or World’s fairs¹⁰. Exhibitions are held alongside conferences, as the exhibitions add value to a conference, by offering more things to see and to do than just attending conference session (Rogers, 2003). Davidson and Cope (2003) also notices that ‘E’ sometimes includes events.</p>

In Thailand and other ASEAN countries, the term ‘MICE’ is used to mean the four sectors of the industry. However, this research specifically concentrates upon the meetings and conferences industry of Thailand.

¹⁰ A world's fair, world fair, world expo, universal exposition, or international exposition (sometimes expo or Expo for short) is a large international exhibition designed to showcase achievements of nations. These exhibitions vary in character and are held in different parts of the world.

1.4 Background of the study

1.4.1 Thailand

Thailand, officially the Kingdom of Thailand and formerly known as Siam, is a country located in Southeast Asia (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2018a) as shown in Figure 1.3. Thailand covers a total area of approximately 513,000 square kilometers (198,000 square miles) and is the world's 50th largest country by total area and the 12th largest in Asia (Hafner, Keyes and Keyes, 2018). The capital and largest city is Bangkok, a special administrative area. In terms of population, Thailand was ranked in the 21st most populous country in the world. Its maritime boundaries include Vietnam in the Gulf of Thailand to the southeast, and Indonesia and India on the Andaman Sea to the southwest. Thailand is divided into six regions: North, Northeast, Central, South, East, and West composed of 76 provinces.



Figure 1.3 Thailand Map and South East Asia Map

Source: www.pinterest.com

1.4.1.1 Economics

Thailand is an emerging economy¹¹ and is considered a newly industrialised country¹². In 2017, Thailand's real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by around 3.9 per cent compared to the previous year (Statista, 2018). In 2017, Thailand was the second largest economy in Southeast Asia, after Indonesia (International Monetary Fund, 2018).

According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), Thailand has a mixed economy, which means the government can play a part in several economic activities while most activities are still run by private companies (TAT, 2018b). The main sectors in the country's GDP are as follows: agricultural sector, industrial sector and service sector (Bank of Thailand, 2018). Exporting farm products has been the most profitable industry in Thailand's history (TAT, 2018b). Thailand is now on the path to recovery after its economy grew at an average rate of 2.3% from 2014 to 2016 (World Bank Group, 2018). Economic growth reached 4.8% in the first quarter of 2018 (World Bank Group, 2018). In 2016, the government unveiled its newest economic initiative 'Thailand 4.0'. Thailand 4.0 is an economic model that aims to unlock the country from several economic challenges resulting from past economic models which place emphasis on agriculture (Thailand 1.0), light industry (Thailand 2.0) where the country utilised cheap labour with a focus on domestic productions, for example, stationery, garments, bags, beverages, accessories, food products, electric appliances; and advanced industry (Thailand 3.0).

¹¹ An emerging economy is a country that has some characteristics of a developed market, but does not satisfy standards to be termed a developed market. This includes countries that may become developed markets in the future or were in the past. The term "frontier market" is used for developing countries with slower economics than "emerging".

¹² The category of newly-industrialised country (NIC) is a socioeconomic classification applied to several countries around the world by political scientists and economists.

Advanced industry is focused on more complex industries to attract foreign investment making Thailand a production hub for exports, for example, steel, automobiles natural gas, cement (Thailand Board of Investment, 2017). These challenges include “a middle income trap”, “an inequality trap”, and “an imbalanced trap” (Royal Thai Embassy, Washington D.C., the U.S., 2018).

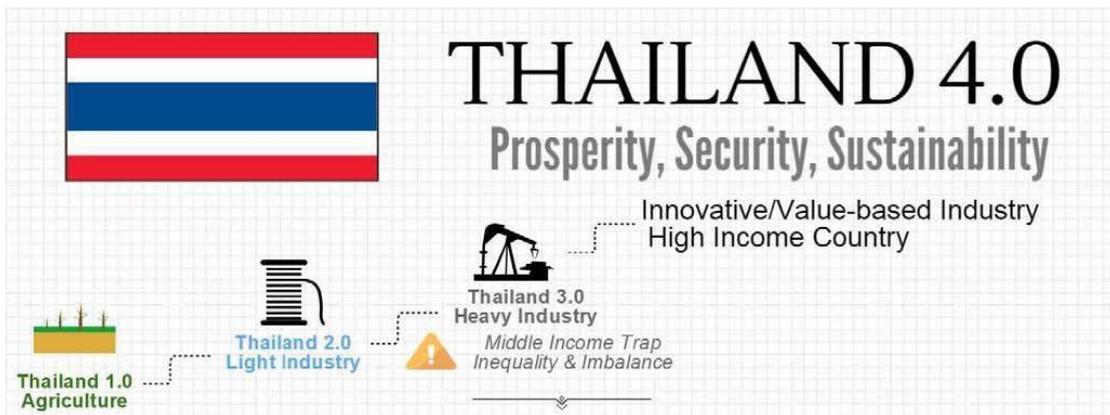


Figure 1.4 Thailand 4.0

Source: www.thaiembdc.org

1.4.1.2 Politics

The politics of Thailand is conducted within the framework of a constitutional monarchy¹³, whereby the Prime Minister is the head of government and the hereditary monarch¹⁴ is head of state. The judiciary is supposed to be independent of the executive and the legislative branches, although judicial rulings are suspected of being based on political considerations rather than on existing law (New Mandala, 2014).

¹³ A constitutional monarchy is a form of monarchy in which the sovereign exercises authority in accordance with a written or unwritten constitution. Constitutional monarchy differs from absolute monarchy, in that constitutional monarchs are bound to exercise their powers and authorities within the limits prescribed legal framework.

¹⁴ A hereditary monarchy is a form of government and succession of power in which the throne passes from one member of a royal family to another member of the same family. It represents an institutionalised form of nepotism.

However, since May 2014, Thailand has been ruled by a military junta¹⁵, the National Council for Peace and Order¹⁶.

1.4.1.3 Language

The official language of Thailand is Thai. It is the principle language of education and government and spoken throughout the country. The standard is based on the dialect of the central Thai people, and it is written in the Thai alphabet. However, many Thai people speak and understand English, though more so in Bangkok and the major tourist areas (TAT, 2018c).

1.4.1.4 Transportation

Transport in Thailand is varied, namely air transport, road transport, rail transport and water transport. For air transport, Thailand has 23 airports and 7 international airports as follows: Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, Phuket, Hat Yai, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and U-Tapao (Royal Thai Embassy, Ottawa, Canada, 2014). All except U-Tapao are operated by the Airports Authority of Thailand (Royal Thai Navy, 2018). Additionally, travelling around Thailand by air is relatively easy with the availability of several domestic routes operated by Thai Airways International, Bangkok Airways, Nok Air, Air Asia, Orient Thai and Thai Smile.

¹⁵ A military junta is a government led by a military leaders. The term *junta* comes from Spanish and Portuguese and means committee, specifically a board of directors. Sometimes it becomes a military dictatorship, though the terms are not synonymous.

¹⁶ The National Council for Peace and Order is the military junta that has ruled Thailand since its 2014 Thai coup d'état on 22 May 2014. On May 22 2014, the military had declared martial law nationwide in an attempt to stop the country's escalating political crisis, and to force the democratically elected government out.

There are various vehicles for travelling on the road around Thailand such as public buses, taxi, tuk tuk¹⁷ (or samlor), motorcycle taxi, songthaew¹⁸, and Bangkok BRT¹⁹.

In terms of rail transport, the State Railway of Thailand²⁰ (SRT) operates all of Thailand's national rail lines. Bangkok Railway Station²¹ (Hua Lamphong Station) is the main terminus of all routes. Phahonyothin and Lat Krabang²² are the main freight terminals (State Railway of Thailand, 2018).

¹⁷ A three-wheeled motorcycle which becomes a symbol of Thailand and can be found around Bangkok and in some provinces.

¹⁸ A songthaew is a passenger vehicle in Thailand and Laos adapted from a pick-up or a larger truck and used as a shared taxi or bus.

¹⁹ The Bangkok BRT is a bus rapid transit system in Bangkok. Of five routes that were originally planned, only one line has been operating since 2010. The 16 kilometres (9.9 mi) route has twelve stations in the centre of the road that give at-grade access to the right-hand side of the buses. Both terminals connect to the Silom Line of the BTS Skytrain; at Chong Nonsi (S3) and Talat Phlu (S10). The buses used are all Sunlong SLK6125CNG buses.

²⁰ The State Railway of Thailand (SRT) is the state-owned rail operator under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transport in Thailand.

²¹ Bangkok Railway Station, unofficially known as Hua Lamphong Station, is the main railway station in Bangkok, Thailand. It is in the centre of the city in the Pathum Wan District, and is operated by the State Railway of Thailand (SRT).

²² Lat Krabang is one of the eastern district of Bangkok.

Because of Bangkok's traffic jams, there are three rapid transit rail systems in Bangkok in order to solve them: Bangkok Skytrain²³ or Bangkok Mass Transit System (BTS), Subway or Metropolitan Rapid Transit²⁴ (MRT) and Suvarnabhumi Airport Link or Airport Rail Link²⁵ (ARL).

Regarding water transport, Thailand has two long coastlines – the Gulf of Thailand²⁶ and the Andaman Sea²⁷ which are provided sea transport services (TAT, 2018d). Also, there are many rivers and canals in Thailand including in Bangkok. In Bangkok, the Chao Phraya River²⁸ is a major transportation artery, with ferries, water taxis (the Chao Phraya Express Boat²⁹) and long-tailed boats.

²³ The Bangkok Mass Transit System, commonly known as the BTS or the Skytrain, is an elevated rapid transit system in Bangkok, Thailand. It is operated by Bangkok Mass Transit System PCL (BTSC), a subsidiary of BTS Group Holdings, under a concession granted by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA).

²⁴ The Metropolitan Rapid Transit or MRT is a rapid transit system serving the Bangkok Metropolitan Region in Thailand. The first section of the Blue Line between Hua Lamphong and Bang Sue opened in 2004 as Bangkok's second public transit system, while the MRT Purple Line opened in August 2016. The MRT is operated by the Bangkok Expressway and Metro Public Company Limited (BEM) under a concession granted by the Mass Rapid Transit Authority of Thailand (MRTA). Along with the BTS Skytrain and the Airport Rail Link, the MRT is part of Bangkok's rail transportation infrastructure.

²⁵ The Airport Rail Link (ARL) is an express and commuter rail in Bangkok, Thailand. The line provides an airport rail link from Suvarnabhumi Airport, via Makkasan Station, to Phaya Thai station in central Bangkok. It is owned by State Railway of Thailand (SRT) and operated by SRT subsidiary SRT Electrified Train (SRTET).

²⁶ The Gulf of Thailand, also known as the Gulf of Siam, is a shallow inlet in the western part of the South China Sea, a marginal body of water in the western Pacific Ocean.

²⁷ The Andaman Sea (historically also known as the Burma Sea) is a marginal sea of the eastern Indian Ocean separated from the Bay of Bengal (to its west) by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and touching Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and the Malay Peninsula. Its southernmost end is defined by Breueh Island, an island just north of Sumatra.

²⁸ Chao Phraya River is the major river in Thailand, with its low alluvial plain forming the centre of the country. It flows through Bangkok and then into the Gulf of Thailand.

²⁹ The Chao Phraya Express Boat is a transportation service in Thailand operating on the Chao Phraya River. It provides riverine express transportation between stops in the capital city of Bangkok and to Nonthaburi, the province immediately to the north. Along with BTS Skytrain and Bangkok MRT, using the boats allows commuters to avoid traffic jams during the peak hours on weekdays.

There is also the Khlong Saen Saeb boat³⁰ service, which provides fast, inexpensive transport in central Bangkok.

1.4.2 Reason for selecting Thailand as a case study

Having addressed the general profile of Thailand, the country is classified as a developing country according to the International Monetary Fund's³¹ World Economic Outlook Database, April 2018 (International Monetary Fund, 2018). Additionally, Thailand's goal is to become a 'developed' country within 20 years according to the National Economic and Social Development Board (The Nation, 2017).

In other words, the Thai economy is targeted to expand by 4-5 per cent per annum in a period of 20 to 30 years based on the 20-year national strategic framework (2017-2036). If the economy grows in line with the target, Thailand will be upgraded to the group of high-income countries, for example, Singapore (The Nation, 2017). As noted earlier (Section 1.2), Thailand is going to develop the MICE sector in order to compete with other countries and increase revenues. It therefore seems to be timely to identify crucial factors for the MICE industry of Thailand. Hence, this research aims to assist Thailand's economy by focusing on the Meetings and Conferences industry. The next section will tell about the current issue of Thailand's MICE industry.

³⁰ Khlong Saen Saeb is a canal (*khlong*) in central Thailand, connecting the Chao Phraya River to Prachinburi Province and Chachoengsao Province. A portion of the canal is used for public transport by an express boat service in Bangkok.

³¹ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is an organisation of 189 countries, working to foster global monetary cooperation, secure financial stability, facilitate international trade, promote high employment and sustainable economic growth, and reduce poverty around the world.

1.5 MICE Industry in Thailand

With respect to the development of Thailand's MICE industry, Thailand Incentive and Convention Association (TICA) was established in 1984 (Thailand Incentive and Convention Association, 2016). This association is a non-profit organisation that was coordinated between the government (Tourism Authority of Thailand and Thai Airways International) and the private sector in order to help the growth of Thailand as a preferred destination for MICE (Thailand Incentive and Convention Association, 2016).

During the 1990s, several convention venues were built to respond to the increasing demand of the MICE market in Thailand. The Queen Sirikit National Convention Center (QSNCC) that was recognised as the first national and world-class convention centre was officially opened by His Majesty the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, the queen consort of the late King Rama IX, on 29 August 1991 (Queen Sirikit National Convention Center, 2018). Since its inauguration in 1997, the Bangkok International Trade and Exhibition Centre (BITEC) has become an internationally recognised venue for MICE events (Bangkok International Trade and Exhibition Centre, 2018). In the same year, the Pattaya Exhibition and Convention Hall (PEACH) was opened in Pattaya, in the eastern region (approximately 75 minutes from Bangkok Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Pattaya Exhibition and Convention Hall, 2012). The IMPACT Exhibition and Convention Center that was established in 1999 is one of Asia's largest and most modern exhibition and convention centers with a usable indoor space over 140,000 square meters (IMPACT Exhibition and Convention Center, 2018). In 2006, the Royal Paragon Hall opened to serve as one of Asia's most modern halls. It is located on the 5th floor of the Siam Paragon Shopping Center, in the heart of Bangkok (Royal Paragon Hall, 2012).

In 2002, the Royal Thai Government set up TCEB under the Office of the Prime Minister, and it began operating in 2004. This bureau was established to promote, develop, regulate and facilitate MICE so as to develop Thailand's MICE industry into a competitive and viable industry internationally (Royal Thai Embassy, Singapore, 2010). TCEB's core vision is to increase the contribution

of the Thai service industry to corporate events in the economy of Thailand and to lay a solid foundation on the basis of which the Thai corporate event service sector will be able to compete effectively and successfully in the world market (TCEB, 2018b).

According to the TCEB report (TCEB, 2018a) giving an overview of the MICE industry, it continued to expand between 2004 and 2015 at an average growth rate of 13%. This industry has generated revenue over the past decade. That is to say the MICE industry has a significant role to play, as a mechanism to deliver revenue of 1 billion Baht annually (TCEB, 2018a). Additionally, it can help boost the economy of Thailand especially at times when Thai exports slowdown (Ministry of Commerce, 2013). A report by the Ministry of Commerce (2013) showed that Thai exports from January to August 2013 expanded by only one per cent. The slower-than-expected global economic recovery is the main reason for the export slowdown. In addition, a report by the World Bank (2013) revealed that the global impacts of the economic crises shrunk Thailand's exports in the first half of 2013, expanding by only 1.2 per cent. Statistics compiled by TCEB (TCEB, 2018a) show that the MICE industry generated revenue of 86,188 million Baht³² (approximately 1,998 million GBP) in 2017.

For the year 2017 Thailand welcomed 1,047,950 international MICE visitors. Of the total, meetings delivered 259,901 visitors and created revenue of 24,478 million Baht³³ (about 567million GBP); 271,793 incentive travelers with earnings of 16,696 million Baht³⁴ (around 387 million GBP); conventions attracted 300,273 delegates and generated 26,145 million Baht³⁵ (approximately 606 million GBP); and 215,992 exhibition participants earning 18,869 million Baht³⁶ (about 437 million GBP).

³² £ 1,997,867,408.44 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

³³ £ 567,408,437.64 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

³⁴ £ 387,019,007.88 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

³⁵ £ 606,050,069.54 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

³⁶ £ 437,389,893.37 equivalent. Exchange rate on 30 October, 2018, £ 1 = 43.14 Baht

The total average growth rate for all sectors was 6.23%. Because of the size of income generated, Thailand strives to promote the MICE industry in order to increase revenue and establish Thailand's position as a hub of ASEAN MICE based on TCEB's campaign for 2019 (TCEB, 2018a). In order to understand the needs of the market that the TCEB is aiming for there is a need to ascertain its current images for MICE purposes from existing customers and to discover the perceptions of potential customers in order to retain and attract both groups of customers. This is the overall aim of this research which will be explored in more depth in the next section.

1.6 Aim and Objectives of the study

The main aim of this research is to investigate the destination image of Thailand, but particularly Bangkok, for MICE purposes and to explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers. In terms of MICE customers, the research is concerned with current customers who are host organisers and selected Thailand for arranging meetings and/or conferences. That is to say they have already organised meetings and/or conferences in Thailand and they are able to describe about their relevant experiences in relation to for example, reasons for selecting Thailand for meetings/conferences, attitude and views after organising meetings/conferences in Thailand.

Some organisations or companies are based in Thailand and some of them are not based in the country. For potential MICE customers, they are international companies that have never used Thailand for MICE purposes.

The research objectives are as follows:

i. To examine how current MICE customers (host organisers) understand the image of the MICE industry in Thailand.

ii. To assess the perceptions of potential international companies/organisations towards the MICE industry in Thailand and determine their types of businesses with 'positive' or 'negative' attitudes.

iii. To ascertain the differences between the images and perceptions held of the MICE industry in Thailand.

Objective one explores the images of Thailand as a meetings and conferences venue between the years 2013 and 2014 from current host organisers who have already experienced arranging meetings and/or conferences in Thailand.

Objective two measures the perceptions of potential international companies whose offices are located in the North West of England based on the North West Business Directory's record 2017 (Begum, 2016; Begum, 2017; Roue, 2017; Vlemmiks, Begum and Roue 2017). These companies have not previously used Thailand as a Meeting and Conference destination. In addition, this objective differentiates between their types of businesses and their 'positive' or 'negative' views about Thailand, for example, the service quality, the value for money organising meetings/conferences, numerous attractions, the political stability, the ease of access to Thailand, language barriers, epidemic disease issues, the lack of safety, etc.

Finally, objective three compares the results obtained from the first and second enquiries by investigating whether the destination images of Thailand towards the MICE industry differ from the perceptions of potential international MICE customers.

With respect to previous studies in the MICE industry, the specific research gap is the dearth of research studies on the relationship between the destination images, perceptions and MICE customers. Current research about ASEAN countries is scant. Consequently, this research study will fill a gap by providing understanding of the relationship between destination images and the perceptions of Thailand as a MICE destination from both existing customers and potential international customers. Additionally, it will determine the differences between the images and the perceptions held of the MICE industry in Thailand and those in the England, thereby extending the knowledge of destination image and perceptions of place.

Previous research studies that have focused on Thailand have investigated other issues relating to MICE. For instance an evaluation of the potential of Thailand as a MICE Industry hub for the international Convention industry in Asia (Akkhaphin, 2016); an overview and identification of barriers affecting the Meeting and Convention Industry in Thailand (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009); and

an assessment of convention and exhibition centers in Bangkok (Tansakul, 2007). However, there is limited research that has been conducted to explore the relationships between MICE destination image and Thailand, although TCEB had assigned the Custom Asia Co., Ltd, a member of Global Market Research Association, to conduct a market survey on Thailand's brand image as a destination for MICE (TCEB, 2018c). The TCEB's market survey sought to study key factors that influence the destination choice, evaluate Thailand MICE destination image, and measure the competitiveness of Thailand when compared to other MICE destinations. The survey participants comprised of four segments which are 1) MICE organisers, 2) business travellers, 3) MICE visitors and 4) association and organisation related to MICE (PR Newswire, 2018b). This thesis targeted a different group of respondents those who are current MICE customers (host organisers) for understanding what image they have of Thailand as a MICE destination and international companies in the North West of England as potential MICE customers for discovering their perceptions about Thailand. In particular, the focus is to address the gap between the image of Thailand held internally to the country and the perceptions held overseas of the MICE industry in Thailand.

1.7 Structure of Thesis

This thesis comprises of eight chapters as illustrated in Figure 1.5. A description of each chapter follows:

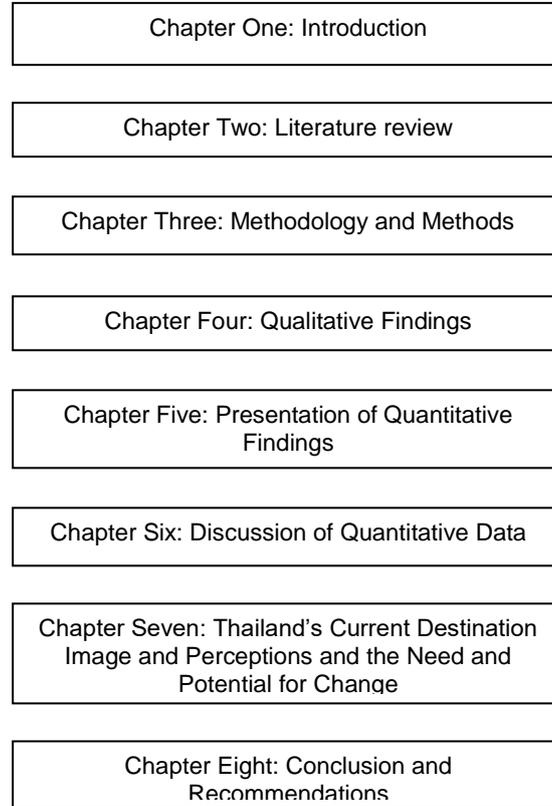


Figure 1.5 Outline of the thesis

Chapter one provides an introduction and the background of the study. It also addresses several issues including the rationale for the study, definitions of the MICE Industry, some background information of the study, some issues about the MICE industry in Thailand, and the research aim and objectives. It provides the outline of the thesis.

Chapter two contains an extensive review of the literature related to destination image, consumer perception, and the MICE industry in order to fully understand the relevant issues. It also links theories of destination image and consumer perception to the MICE industry. This chapter identifies the research direction intended to achieve the aim and objectives of the study.

Chapter three presents the research methodology and methods. It is also describes the three dominant research approaches: the qualitative, the quantitative and the mixed research approach. Before explaining the research framework, the research strategy is discussed. In addition, the selected methods, population and sampling, pilot study, data collection and data analysis are detailed in the research framework.

Chapter four discusses the results of the analyses of data derived from semi-structured interviews. These data were collected in Thailand over approximately three months. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data. The discussions link to the literature reviews in order to answer the first objective of the research. The themes that emerge from the qualitative data analysis are divided into two main sections namely general destination image of Thailand and MICE-specific destination image of Thailand.

Chapter five presents the findings from the quantitative data in the form of tables and graphs (pie charts) and provides a short description of the findings. Findings were analysed using SPSS and Excel for answering the second objective of the research. The process of analysis included descriptive statistics, a correlation analysis, and inferential statistics (chi-square tests). These findings explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers based in the United Kingdom.

Chapter six provides a more detailed discussion of the quantitative data, which were first presented in Chapter five. The second objective of the research will be achieved in this chapter.

Chapter seven covers a broad discussion of the qualitative data and the quantitative data in order to compare the gaps of the current destination images and the perceptions held of the MICE industry in Thailand. These are the results for the third objective of the research.

Chapter eight provides an overview of the whole study, presents a summary of the research findings, highlights the study's contribution to knowledge of the MICE industry, explains the limitations of the study and finally, outlines the research recommendations and suggests areas of further research.

1.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the study in terms of the rationale, aim and objectives and located the case study. In addition, it has provided the structure of the thesis. The next chapter goes on to discuss literature relevant used to develop the ideas and concepts used within the research. The literature relates to image, perception and previous studies of the MICE industry.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the relevant literature in line with this thesis namely destination image, customer perception, and the MICE industry. It is divided into four main sections. The first, Section 2.2 discusses the literature relating to destination image. The second, Section 2.3 discusses the literature relating to consumer perception. Sections 2.2 and 2.3 comprise the theoretical background and discuss previous studies about destination image and customer perception in terms of tourism and the MICE industry. Section 2.4 discusses the literature that focuses on the MICE industry in various countries. Finally, Section 2.5 investigates the existing evidence for the selection of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination, including studies that have focused on destination image and those that have investigated substantive questions such as MICE tourism readiness and availability of infrastructure. The chapter will end with a summary of the main issues resulting from the literature review and point the way forward to the next chapter.

2.2 Destination Image

2.2.1 Definition of image

One definition of 'image' describes it as an idea, especially a mental picture, of what something or someone is like (Featherstone, 2010). Image is also defined as people's feelings as they relate to anything of which they are aware (Boulding, 1956). One of the most prevalent definitions of the word 'image' in relation to tourism is that by Crompton (1979), who defined it as the sum of beliefs, ideas, impressions and perceptions that a person has of a destination. Dubois (2000, p.79) also argued that, "an image is made up of all the precepts (that is, the outcomes of the perceptual process, often called perception) that a consumer holds in relation to a product, company, person or idea".

Additionally, the definition of image as it relates to a business is explained in the general idea that the public has of a product, brand, or company (Christensen and Askegaard, 2001). Another term, that of product image, is

employed within the business sector and describes a photograph or diagram that depicts goods being offered for sale. These product images are used in businesses to market their goods through posters, online advertising and e-commerce websites to attract customer interest and purchases (Sirgy, 2015). Next, the term 'brand image' can be understood as the impression in the consumers' minds of a brand's total personality (real and imaginary qualities, as well as shortcomings). Brand image is developed over time through advertising campaigns with a consistent theme, and is authenticated through consumers' direct experiences (Nandan, 2005).

2.2.2 Place image and destination image

With respect to the term, 'place image', Rein et al. (1994, p.3) wrote that "place images are the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions people have toward a certain place". On the other hand, Shields (1991, p.60) regarded place images as "the various discrete meanings associated with real places or regions regardless of their character in reality". In addition, the Place Brand Observer (2018) mentioned that place images are further shaped by culture, history and locality as indicated in for example the work of Relph (1976); Florek and Insch, (2008) and Murphy (2010), and, as Dinnie (2008) notes, even famous citizens.

Place images are related to place branding because both are elements of place marketing (Stachow and Hart, 2010). However, place images and place branding play different roles in the marketing effort. Many authors, for example Hankinson (2004), Kavartzis and Ashworth (2005), and Iversen and Hem (2008), have also noted that the fundamental objective of place branding is to develop and communicate a place image for consumers, based on its positive values and perceptions. Building upon the above discussion, this thesis aims to probe place images of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination in order to determine its current positioning and construct a positive brand image for Thailand.

A 'destination' may be distinct from a 'place'. One author, who conducted an extensive investigation of 'place image', noted that tourism destination image was only one part of the place image (Elliot, Papadopoulos and Kim, 2011).

Place image, more generally, was made up of broader perceptions such as product origin image and general image of a given destination, for example its political image. Thus, tourism image occurs only within the context of a single type of interaction with the location. Furthermore, destination image is predominantly an image perception held by outsiders, while place image is also held by those who live in a place (Stylidis, Shani and Belhassen, 2017). (However, insiders and outsiders are likely to have different place image perceptions.) Thus, place image and destination image are frequently conflated. This means it is worth considering both phenomena.

Concerning the question of 'destination image', Baud-Bovy and Lawson (1977) defined the term as the expression of all knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imaginations and emotional thoughts an individual or group has of a specific object or place. Cooper et al. (2008) also stated that a destination image, in combination with motivation and behaviour provides consumers (or tourists) with a pull factor which can increase the level of demand. Significantly, destination image has been regarded as one of the key areas of tourism study in over four decades (Svetlana and Juline, 2010).

While destination image has largely the same definition in MICE tourism, there are some nuances to the definition. First, destination image in MICE tourism has two layers – the conference planner (who selects the destination) and the attendees (who have their own destination image) (Mody et al., 2016). One of the implications of this is that there may be two (or more) different sets of image perceptions at play. Furthermore, the MICE destination image depends, in part, on availability of MICE-specific services, for example specialised tour guiding services for MICE visitors (Rátz, 2017). Another important observation is that an existing MICE sector in a given region can actually enhance the destination image of the location for MICE visitors (Marais, du Plessis and Saayman, 2017). The implication of this is that one of the pull factors for MICE events is, by definition, a successful MICE sector. Thus, destination image for MICE tourism, while similar to general tourism, has different elements and may have different effects.

2.2.3 The importance of destination image

With reference to tourism studies, Hunt (1975) demonstrated that the importance of destination images is to increase the number of tourists visiting destinations. Selby (2004) also stated that destination images are important and influence an individual's decision-making processes when they are searching for and evaluating a destination. In addition, within both the study of tourism and the study of marketing much focus is given to the representation of products to determine customers' purchase decisions and perceptions (Oppermann, 1996; Svetlana and Juline, 2010). Thus, the destination image of a specific location has a strong influence on how successful a tourist destination will be. This also raises the question of whether different kinds of tourists value different aspects of the destination image. This study, which examines Thailand and the MICE sector, is positioned to address this need for more specific information.

Other authors such as Ingram and Grieve (2013) and McCartney, Bulter and Bennett (2009) also point out the significance of destination images. For example, McCartney, Bulter and Bennett (2009) argued that positive tourism images and perceptions are critical to attract travellers. Ingram and Grieve (2013) also suggested that consumers consciously and subconsciously create mental images of destinations and tourism products from a variety of sources. These images play a crucial role in tourists' purchasing behaviour with a strong relationship existing between a positive destination image and destination choice. It is evident therefore that creating a good image is essential as an attraction strategy for destinations. Moreover, Jenkins (1999) cited in Selby (2004, p.67) states that "destination images influence both the decision-making behaviour of potential tourists and levels of satisfaction upon experiencing the destination". Similarly, Goodall (1990) cited in Kozak and Baloglu (2011, p.141) argued that the image of one destination can leave actual tourists satisfied with the destination.

2.2.4 The formation of destination image

According to Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) the three main influences on destination formation are as follows: 1. promotional material, 2. secondary experiences (e.g. the opinions of others), and 3. the media and social media (e.g. travel magazines, television shows, websites). The role of movies in shaping place image is also discussed in the work of Butler (1990), Riley, Baker and Van Doren (1998), and Busby and Klung (2001). In addition, Ingram and Grieve (2013) explained that destination image is created based on a few impressions chosen from a flood of information.

2.2.5 Destination image and destination branding

To establish destination branding, some marketers utilise public relations (PRs) as a promotional tool (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004)). For instance, the Tourism New Zealand (TNZ) brand managers used PR that linked to New Zealand's overall branding strategy in order to promote this destination. The strategy employed the power of the international media. The international media included reporting on, for example, special events and films (such as *The Lord of the Rings*) via the Internet, which are able to showcase New Zealand's landscapes, people, cultures and tourism activities to create strong destination brand relationships (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004)). According to TNZ (2002), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy which was released between 2001 and 2003 highlighted the links between New Zealand and the stunning locations. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy established connections between the country's breathtaking scenery and adventure in the minds of consumers. TNZ's International Media Programme team worked hard to bring over media (e.g. newspapers and magazines) throughout 2001 in the lead-up to the release of the *Fellowship of the Ring* (the first instalment in the trilogy) in December of that year (Tourism New Zealand, 2002).

Another good illustration of using PR is "Wales, Golf as It Should Be". The Wales Tourist Board (WTB) was tasked with creating a communication strategy for promoting Wales as a world-class golf destination (Morgan, Pritchard and

Pride (2004). Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) also clarified that a significant part of the marketing plan that was created by the WTB is media communication for example, the use of television.

These two examples from New Zealand and Wales illustrate that destination branding is of interest to many tourism marketers in different countries. As noted in Chapter1, Thailand has paid attention to establishing a good brand image for MICE purposes. This thesis, therefore, aims to delve into current images of Thailand as a MICE destination in order to understand its positioning. The discussion will continue with a focus on the theories of destination.

2.2.6 Evaluating destination image

Morrison (2013) suggested 'The 10 As' as a useful set of attributes for judging the success of tourism destinations. The 10 As are presented, along with a short explanation of each in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 The 10 As of successful tourism destinations and their explanations

10 A's Attributes	Explanation
Awareness	This attribute is related to tourists' level of knowledge about the destination and is influenced by the amount and nature of the information they receive.
Attractiveness	The number and geographic scope of the appeal of the destination's attractions comprise this attribute.
Availability	This attribute is determined by the ease with which bookings and reservations can be made for the destination, and the number of booking and reservation channels available.
Access	The convenience of getting to and from the destination, as well as moving around within the destination, constitutes this attribute.
Appearance	This attribute measures the impression that the destination makes on tourists, both when they first arrive and throughout their stays in the destination.
Activities	The extent of the array of activities available to tourists within the destination is the determinant of this attribute.
Assurance	This attribute relates to the safety and security of the destination for tourists.
Appreciation	The feeling of the levels of welcome and hospitality contribute to this attribute.
Action	The availability of a long-term tourism plan and a marketing plan for tourism are some of the required actions.
Accountability	This attribute is about the evaluation of performance by the destination management organisation (DMO).

Source: Adapted from Morrison (2013)

These 10 attributes of successful tourism destinations (Morrison, 2013) can be applied to other service industries including the MICE industry, because this industry is usually considered part of business tourism (Law, 1987). Some attributes of the 10 As, for example, Attractiveness, Access, Appearance, Activities, Assurance, and Appreciation can be adapted to the findings of this thesis. As will become apparent in Chapter 4, current MICE customers (host organisers) recognised numerous positive images of Thailand for MICE purposes. Although the 10 As are useful as a prototype for discussing the results, all attributes were created for tourism destinations. For MICE destinations, some attributes are applicable, whilst others are less so.

In respect of 'Appreciation', this attribute relates to hospitality. Hospitality is defined as the action of a household in meeting the basic needs of a non-member or non-members (Symons, 2013). Telfer (1996, p. 83) as cited in Symons (2013, p.250) also defines hospitality as "the giving of food, drink and sometimes accommodation to people who are not regular members of a household". Therefore, it can be said that hospitality means good service from hosts to their customers. The next section will discuss previous research relating to place image/destination image.

2.2.7 Studying destination image

In terms of place image and destination image, various studies are linked to 'customer perceptions'. For instance, the study by McCartney, Bulter and Bennett (2009) examined and identified Macao's image among visitors originating from Beijing. The research was conducted with Chinese travellers at Beijing International Airport regarding their perceptions of Macao's destination image. The airport had an advantage over site-specific interviews in that it offered conditions for the respondent to answer questions in more depth and at ease while waiting for their plane to depart. The researchers argued that the richest data in destination image research can be revealed by a study including both the perceptions of actual visitors and the perceptions of potential visitors. The results, based on questionnaire surveys, indicated that Chinese respondents held several highly rated image perceptions of Macao, although some of these were not the actual image attributes used as destination decision attributes. Respondents were therefore questioned regarding the attributes that affected their decision to travel to a destination. Thus, this study verified that the enhancement and portrayal of positive tourism image perceptions and expectations are crucial in attracting travellers. In summary, the relevance of this previous study (McCartney, Bulter and Bennett (2009) in relation to this thesis lies in the investigation of a significant gap between real destination images and potential customer perceptions. The same data collection method of both was used in order to ascertain images and perceptions.

2.2.8 Previous research on destination image

Other research that studied destination images such as Crompton (1979); Selby and Morgan (1996); Awuah and Reinert (2011); Kim, Holland and Han (2013); Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli (2013); Yeung, Kim and Schuckert (2016) and De Nisco, Papadopouls and Elliot (2017) focused on particular places. Notably, empirical examinations of tourism destination images have been conducted for more than three decades. De Nisco, Papadopouls and Elliot (2017) aimed to extend international marketing theory by examining Italy's image effects simultaneously from the perspectives of product-country image, tourism destination image, and general country image. International tourists from multiple countries were approached at the end of a tourism trip (at the main airports of Rome and Naples) and interviewed in-person using a structured questionnaire, resulting in 498 usable responses for data analysis. The study uncovered a number of cross-effects between the country as a destination and as a producer. It establishes that tourism satisfaction is a core construct that is relevant to both the tourism and product facets of destination images. In a similar way, this thesis explores the destination image of Thailand for MICE purposes in relation to the concepts of tourism destination image and product-country image.

Although Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli (2013) and Awuah and Reinert (2011) utilised the same country to explore destination images, they targeted different user groups as participants in their research. Both studies examined the image of Brazil as a tourism destination. Awuah and Reinert (2011) investigated how Brazil is seen by potential tourists from Europe. The research highlighted six categories, according to which tourists' perceptions of Brazil are formed namely, the hospitality of the population, sexuality, tourism infrastructure, the environment, the economy, protection and safety. The results showed that the image held by the studied target group depicted it as an exotic country with a friendly population of an exuberant nature; the main identity icons are football and carnival events. Entertainment and fun were some other positive attributes mentioned by the respondents. Violence and fragile security were their main concerns. Therefore, Awuah and Reinert (2011) confirmed that tourists' images of tourism destinations, especially a country, can influence the decision to

choose a destination. Another study by Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli (2013) evaluated the image of Brazil as a tourism destination as perceived by travel agents and tourism experts in the United States by employing a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews. The study investigated the opinions and perceptions of Brazil held by American tourists before and after their trip. The findings revealed that images of Brazil have been converging in terms of diversity and ambiguity based on previous studies by Anholt (2000), (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004), Nadeau et al. (2008), Pike (2008) and Giraldi, Giraldi and Scaduto (2011). Both positive (natural beauty and hospitality) and negative (violence, poverty, and environmental degradation) elements directly affected how the image of the country was formed through a holistic process (Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000). Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli (2013) also concluded that the destination image is important because it is the first consideration in the purchasing decision of a tourist. Consequently, the findings of both pieces of research (Awuah and Reinert, 2011; Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli, 2013) were similar and different. Employing the two pieces of research about the different sampling subjects mentioned above, this thesis concentrated upon host organisers as current MICE customers. As noted in Chapter 1, TCEB conducted research on Thailand's brand image as a destination for MICE tourism (TCEB, 2018c), however its targeted respondents were 1) MICE organisers, 2) business travellers, 3) MICE visitors and 4) associations and organisations related to MICE (PR Newswire, 2018b). Certainly, the findings of each study are different. It is evident that the image of a country affects the decision-making process of tourists because a tourists' decision to make a purchase to visit a destination is based on a mental construction of places and on the set of attributes formed from beliefs, ideas, and impressions (Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli, 2013).

A study by Lai (2018) aimed to provide a better understanding of the influence of destination image by focusing on the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a case study. Results showed that the event image of the Beijing Olympic Games positively influenced Beijing's destination image, although there were some differences in how strong the effect was. The event image had stronger effects on the destination image compared to traditional factors such as news

representation. At the same time, the destination image also appeared to influence the event image. Lai (2018) suggested that mega-events could have a significantly stronger influence on destination image than other types of events. From the findings, it could be stated that when tourists hold a positive perception of event image, they are inclined to perceive destination image positively, and vice versa.

2.2.9 The destination image of Thailand as a general tourism destination

With regard to Thailand, Tapachai and Waryszak (2000) conducted a study about beneficial image characteristics of Thailand and grouped the results according to the consumption model. The findings indicated that respondents are impressed with all beneficial characteristics, including fascinating cheap shopping, exotic food, friendly people, historical sites, unspoiled countryside, and beautiful scenery. Additionally, Thailand is perceived to be a destination that possesses a rich and unique culture and climate that is quite different from Australia. Participants also viewed Thailand as a country from which they are able to seek satisfaction from the experience of differing culture and climate. Likewise, Thailand has been perceived as an appealing destination in terms of its traditional culture, friendly people, and tourist safety (Calantone et al., 1989). This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Another research study by the Tourism Authority of Thailand and Siam University aimed to assess the current image of Thailand in 2001, to identify its strengths and weaknesses as an international travel destination, and to determine opportunities to change any negative images and highlight positive ones (Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001). The results revealed that the respondents gave high marks to many of Thailand's attributes, for example, beautiful architecture and buildings, interesting customs and culture, and a wide range of cultural and historical attractions. The participants also agreed that a trip to Thailand offered value for money, that the people were friendly, and that access was easy. However, they reported negative experiences involving crowds in big cities, traffic jams, heavy pollution, and the numerous massage

parlours, bars, night clubs, and prostitutes. Some attributes for example, few language barriers, high standards for sanitation and cleanliness, a pleasant climate, and good golf courses did not make a deep impression on respondents.

Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and Chulalongkorn University also carried out their own survey of people outside Thailand disclosing that Thailand was one of the world's most popular vacation destinations (Changsorn, 2003). This study also showed that Thailand ranked high in its food image, but ranked very low in its fashion image, and participants of the survey characterised Thai fashion as being cheap, unoriginal, and of low quality, with an emphasis on fake designer products (Changsorn, 2003). Concerning its food image, the study discovered that the best qualities of Thai food were its taste, ingredients and affordability, with about 60% of the respondents describing Thai food as spicy and hot (Maesincee et al., 2003). However, the study also found that negative images such as prostitutes, traffic and pollution came to people's minds as well as the image of low quality or imitation shopping items when thinking about Thailand.

Henkel et al. (2006) also compared the perceptions of international visitors and Thai residents about the image of Thailand as a tourist destination. Both groups were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the image of Thailand. Some results of the study found that Thai residents and international visitors felt that cultural sightseeing, friendly people and food were important when thinking of Thailand as a tourist destination, while international visitors attributed greater importance to nightlife and entertainment than Thai residents.

Similarly, a research paper by Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake (2015) examined the perceived destination images of Thailand and Singapore by international tourists. The results found that Thailand scored the highest for price, friendliness of the people and shopping. Thailand is a destination that offers value for money. Visitors to Thailand are able to find practically everything in terms of shopping, dining, and entertainment. Thailand attracts tourists from all around the world who come into the country to shop, especially in Bangkok. With more than 100 shopping malls and street markets, visitors consider

Thailand a favourable destination and shopping paradise that has value for money.

While Thailand has many positive qualities that enhance its image some potential travellers associate the nation with political instability and sex tourism, which has negative impacts on its reputation as a destination for both leisure and business travellers. Sex tourism can be defined, according to Oppermann (1999), as the travel for the sole purpose of having paid sex with strangers. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has been very successful in increasing the number of tourists visiting Thailand over the past few decades. However, as the government worked to promote Thailand as an exotic destination, the erotic and exotic aspects of its image became intertwined in the minds of many travellers (Prideau et al., 2004). The tendency to link Thailand with sex tourism has been particularly harmful because many people find prostitution morally repellant (Günther, 1998).

A survey conducted in 1995 found that 70% of respondents who had used prostitute services in the past had visited destinations such as Thailand, the Philippines, Kenya, or Brazil primarily for sex tourism, though a much smaller percentage actually defined themselves as sex tourists (Oppermann, 1999). This indicates sensitivity to the stigma attached with sex tourism, as travellers do not want to be associated with this activity. Another survey conducted by Henkel et al. (2006) found that 26.29% of international tourists cited sex tourism among Thailand's top three destination image attributes. However, respondents in this study were more likely to identify other national features such as cultural sites, food, and beaches as top attributes, indicating that sex tourism is only one aspect of the nation's image, and not the most important one for most travellers. Interestingly, Thai residents were far less likely than international travellers to cite sex tourism among the nation's top destination attributes. They were also less likely to rate freedom from prostitution as an important consideration in destination choice for international travellers. These findings indicate a disconnection between self-perceived national image and the image of Thailand in the minds of some international travellers. However, it is possible that many Thais avoid referring to sex tourism when contemplating

Thailand's destination image because they do not want to identify their nation with anything undesirable.

Despite Thailand's reputation as a sex tourism destination, not all sex tourists travel there primarily to have sex with strangers. Tourists may travel for multiple purposes, which run the spectrum from business to pleasure to cultural to sexual. A traveller whose primary purpose is business also engages in cultural tourism when visiting heritage sites after a convention, and a vacationer who has come to enjoy the local scenery may also engage in sex tourism (Oppermann, 1999). Therefore, sex tourism opportunities could make a destination more attractive to a MICE traveller who is interested in sex with strangers, though it could also deter those travelling for MICE events if they find prostitution abhorrent.

Sex tourism tends to arise in places where there is a significant economic imbalance between local residents and visitors (Günther, 1998). Many women who live in impoverished rural areas migrate to cities where they can make a living providing prostitution services to sex tourists (Oppermann, 1999; Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Thus, Thailand's sex tourism problem may be inextricably linked with the fact that a substantial proportion of the population lives in poverty.

Surveys have shown that some travellers equate Thailand with both poverty and sex tourism, which in turn creates a destination image of unwholesomeness, impoverishment, disease, and cruelty, particularly toward women (Nuttavuthisit, 2007). For example, one respondent in Nuttavuthisit's (2007) survey described Thailand as a place of 'beaches, beggars, sex' while another said 'Thailand's reputation as a holiday destination has been sullied by the many articles and television reports of Thailand's sex trade, the growing AIDs epidemic, and the treatment of orphans, especially girls' (Nuttavuthisit, 2007, p.23). In addition to a growing distaste for economic exploitation in general, women's rights movements in places such as Japan have increased public concern about the exploitation of women, making destinations associated with prostitution less appealing (Leheny, 1995). Thus, the problem

of sex tourism as a stain on Thailand's image might be remedied by reducing poverty and raising the status of women. However, the problem of human trafficking must also be addressed, as many of those providing sex tourism services in Thailand are victims of human trafficking (Opanovych, 2016).

Concerned about Thailand's image, the TAT has shifted its focus from tourist quantity to quality by emphasising Thailand's more wholesome features in its marketing campaigns. Promotions now focus on the nation's history, culture, scenery, cuisine, spas, and recreation opportunities as well as sustainable tourism that do not negatively impact local people or the environment (McDowall and Choi, 2010). The TAT aggressively promotes all nonsexual forms of tourism, working to brand Thailand as a top destination for adventure, sport, education, medical treatment, wellness, ecotourism, and cultural tourism (Sharafuddin, 2015), as well as collaborating with the Tourist Police to enforce anti-prostitution laws (Prideau et al., 2004).

The TAT's attempts to shift perceptions of Thailand's image have been somewhat successful, as indicated by awards such as Best International Family Destination, which Thailand received in 2008 (McDowall and Choi, 2010). However, media stories that sensationalise sex tourism in Thailand have done lasting harm to Thailand's reputation (Prideau et al., 2004), and studies have shown that the nation's image as a sex tourism destination persists in the minds of some travellers (Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; McDowall and Choi, 2010).

The findings of destination image research presented in the literature suggest that continuing to promote Thailand's nonsexual attributes will likely be the most effective strategy for overcoming the stigma of sex tourism. For example, Nuttavuthisit's (2007) study investigated the ongoing negative influence of sex tourism and how to overcome it. The study confirmed that Thailand has positive features, such as friendly people, good food, local cuisine, beautiful countryside and temples. The author recommended place branding strategies that are proposed to correct the negative image by placing emphasis on positive

characteristics in order to suppress negative perceptions. This point is one of the key issues to be discussed in Chapter 4.

In terms of Thailand's political crisis, some studies, such as those by Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip (2013) and Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018) explore the relationship between political instability, destination image and perception of Thailand. The study by Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip (2013) was influenced by negative publicity in 2010 and 2011 regarding political uncertainty and protests in Thailand. For instance, some UK newspapers in 2010 warned tourists against travelling to Thailand because of the worsening violent political instability which saw more than 20 dead and 1000 injured. Similarly, foreign embassies in 2010 advised against all travel to Thailand. The findings revealed that perceptions of Thailand by people who had and had not visited Thailand, despite the negative media reporting, were favourable. In addition, those who had visited Thailand had a more positive view than those who had not visited the country and reported that political instability has a lesser impact on their views of the country compared to those who had not visited. Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip's (2013) study also affirmed the power of destination image that impacts on consumer behaviour.

Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018) studied the causal relationships between the destination image and international tourist behaviour as well as the destination loyalty of Thai tourism customers during the Thai political crises from October 2008 to May 2009. The results of the research revealed that regardless of whatever crisis had occurred in Thailand, the social atmosphere of 'Thainess' remained the most important destination image of Thai tourism. However prices have been found to be increasingly important following the political crises. Additionally, changes in destination image due to political crises do have an influence on international tourists' satisfaction and on individual tourism activities, but the impact on the overall satisfaction and destination loyalty has been found to be fairly small. The impact of the political crises on destination image for Thai tourism is more of a short term nature. Finally, the researchers suggested that in the short term there is no necessity to urgently improve

destination image, but rather that it is necessary to create confidence and restore the social atmosphere of Thainess.

Throughout all of the studies reviewed above (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat et al., 2001; Changsorn, 2003, Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018), the positive images of Thailand to emerge were related to culture, nature, food, history, friendly people and ideas of the exotic. By contrast, the negative images included low-quality products, traffic jams, pollutions and language barriers. This thesis utilises qualitative and quantitative data to investigate similar issues, as will be discussed in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7.

Regarding the image of Thailand for MICE purposes, Rittichainuwat (2010) identified differences in the image of Thailand as perceived by convention attendees to determine what, if any, repercussions were experienced following episodes of political instability and the impact these may have had on the image of Thailand as an international convention and exhibition destination before and after political instability. The results found that the image of Thailand as a safe destination decreased significantly after following the period of political unrest. Rittichainuwat (2010) also explained that once a crisis occurred, it was unavoidable that the crisis-hit destination would be perceived negatively by both show owners and convention attendees. Consequently, it is difficult to position Thailand as a leading convention and exhibition destination in Southeast Asia when political instability still exists (Rittichainuwat, 2010). The researcher suggested that the best strategy in destination marketing is to prevent a pre-crisis to develop into a crisis.

Hence, this thesis refers to the findings of the study relating to the discussion of qualitative data as shown in Chapter 4. Although the above study (Rittichainuwat, 2010) and this thesis aimed to ascertain the image of Thailand for MICE purposes, the targeted participants of both are different. Rittichainuwat's (2010) study focused on show owners and convention

attendees, whereas this thesis focuses on host organisers as current MICE customers. The next section is a review of the literature regarding perception.

2.3 Perception

2.3.1 Definition of perception

Perception is defined as a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem (Norwich, 1991). According to the American Marketing Association (AMA) (AMA, 2017), perception is defined as “the cognitive impression that is formed of ‘reality’ which in turn influences the individual’s actions and behaviour toward that object based on prior attitudes, beliefs, needs, stimulus factors, and situational determinants”. In terms of marketing, customer perception, as it relates to a business, is explained as marketing that encompasses a customer’s impression, awareness and/or consciousness about a company or its offerings. Customer perception is typically affected by advertising, reviews, public relations, social media, personal experiences and other channels (Thiruvengatraj and Vetrivel, 2017).

Perception is related to a sensation that refers to the immediate response of sensory receptors (eyes, ears, noses, tongues, fingers) to basic stimuli such as light, colour, taste, odour, and texture (Soloman, 2011). Soloman et al. (2013), Wozniak, Hanna and Hanna (2013) and Armstrong and Kolter (2015) all take the view that perception is the process by which people select, organise, and interpret these stimuli. Thus, each individual perceives differently because of her or his own experiences, needs, and unique biases. Moreover, Armstrong and Kolter (2015) stated that there are three perceptual processes according to which people can organise different perceptions of the same stimulus as follows: selective attention, selective distortion, and selective retention. Selection attention is the tendency of people to screen out most of the information to which they are exposed (Kolter, Armstrong and Opresnik, 2018). These authors also described selective distortion that the tendency of people to interpret information in a way that will support what they already believe. Selective retention holds that consumers are likely to remember good points

made about a brand they favour and forget good points made about competing brands. Therefore, marketers must work hard to get their messages through.

In addition, Wozniak, Hanna and Hanna (2013, p.75) argued that “not only may different people perceive the same stimulus differently, but the same person may also perceive a given object or situation differently at various times or under different circumstances”. A good example of this is that the distinction between Asian consumer behaviour and that of Western consumer behaviour as the latter is influenced by different cultures and associated values (Schutte and Ciarlante, 1998). The authors explained that both Asian culture and values inevitably affect Asian consumer behaviour which shows conspicuous consumption habits. Thus, many Asian customers believe in symbolic associations with, for example, colours, shapes, animals, and numbers. For instance, in many countries in Asia purple is associated with luxury and expense, while it is associated with cheapness in the USA (Schutte and Ciarlante, 1998). Another illustration is that for many people in the West an unlucky number is 13. This is not the case in Asia. However, in some Asian countries, such as Japan and China the number 4 means death. These different associations inform cultural practices, for example the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Macau has a thirteenth floor, but neither a fourth nor fourteenth floor.

Moreover, Schiffman and Wisenblit (2015) stated that consumers’ perceptions are important for marketers, because they relate to consumers’ buying habits. Dubois (2000) also mentioned that perception is a pervasive factor in buying and consumption behaviour. Marketers are also interested in which media channels customers use and which they receive marketing messages from (Baines, Fill and Rosengen, 2017).

The aim of this thesis is to explore customer perceptions of the MICE industry in Thailand. After ascertaining destination images of Thailand for MICE purposes by employing the qualitative approach with current customers, the second phase was to conduct questionnaire surveys for measuring perceptions of potential MICE customers. The findings will become apparent in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. The next section continues to consider the importance of consumer perception in decision-making.

2.3.2 The importance of consumer perception in decision-making

Numerous studies (e.g. Tung, 2003; Widemann, Hennigs and Siebels, 2007; Khan and Ahmad, 2012; Stolz et al., 2013) have emphasised the importance of customer/consumer perceptions because of the particular significance they hold for businesses. “Consumer perception is important to businesses since it can influence consumer behaviour, which ultimately affects the profitability of a business” (Thiruvengkraj and Vetrivel, 2017, p.126). Thiruvengkraj and Vetrivel (2017) also illustrated that the success or failure of a business is greatly influenced by consumer perception. Therefore, customer perception can be related to customer satisfaction, which is the expectation of the customer in relation to the services and products. Hutt (2018) argued that customer satisfaction comes down to the customer’s perception of their experience with a company.

To understand customer/consumer perception in various areas, researchers carried out their studies by employing quantitative and qualitative approaches. The first group of research showed that using a survey is suitable for exploring customer/consumer perceptions. A study by Murmura and Bravi (2018) explored the knowledge and perceptions of Italian customers regarding companies’ quality management. They found that different groups had different concerns, including product quantity, product quality, environmental concern, ethics and health and safety. Thus, demographics such as age could influence customer perceptions.

Research by Saqib, Farooq and Zafar (2016) aimed to analyse the impact of Shariah compliance perception on customer satisfaction in the Islamic Banking sector of Pakistan. The findings of this study are significant moderating effects of Shariah compliance perception on the relation between service quality and customer satisfaction in the Islamic banking sector of Pakistan. Therefore, it concluded that customer perceptions directly impact on customer satisfaction.

Similarly, another piece of research (Riquelme, Roman and Iacobucciet, 2016) examined the effects of customers’ perceptions of retailers’ deceptive practices on their evaluation of online and offline retailers. Findings investigated the influence of customers’ perceptions of retailers’ deceptive practices on

customers' satisfaction with the product, satisfaction with the retailer, and subsequently word-of-mouth, with a particular focus on the different effects associated with online or in-store shopping.

Stolz et al. (2013) investigated German and Spanish consumers' perceptions of environmental retail performance. The researchers found that German consumers are more supportive of the three items namely, 1. 'Sustainable products are visible in the retail store shelves', 2. 'Many retail stores offer sustainable products', and 3. 'Retail stores offer a wider range of sustainable products' than Spanish consumers. The study found that the perception affects the image of brands and firms and their financial performance (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006). Additionally, consumer perceptions influence consumer behaviour (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007).

Another study by Khan and Ahmad (2012) assessed the perceptions of customers regarding price and quality aspects of Chinese and non-Chinese products. In order to compare the relative effectiveness of price and quality, the concepts of perceived life and perceived value were used. The study revealed that Chinese products are perceived as price effective but the area of product quality requires immediate attention because Chinese products are perceived as being of low quality. The researchers also suggested that Chinese manufacturers have to pay more attention to improving the quality of their products in order to maintain domination in the market. The implication of this study is that consumer perception plays an important role for manufacturers and impacts on an increase of sales.

Swar (2012) conducted an investigation into on customer perceptions and expectations of service delivery in public, private and foreign banks in Odisha, India. The researcher conducted questionnaire surveys with bank customers of six banks in Odisha. The study demonstrated that banks can assess diverse dimensions of service delivery to determine the level of services provided and to decide which dimensions need improvement. It is obvious that the customers' perceptions of the service delivery process quality play the most important role in satisfaction levels followed by service quality (Mohammad Al-Hawari, 2008).

Additionally, Andreassen and Olsen (2008) examined the impact of customers' perceptions of customer service on customer satisfaction, perceived relative attractiveness, and commitment, which are determinants of revenue. The data was collected through a survey with bank customers who consisted of those who had experienced good or bad customer service. The results of the study demonstrated that customers experiencing bad customer service tend to consider more thoroughly all aspects of the service; the relationships between the variables were stronger and the explained variance of each construct higher, than in the group of customers experiencing good customer service. It showed the relationship between customers' perceptions, customers' experiences, and customers' satisfaction.

Lastly, Tung (2003)'s research about customer needs, in relation to the "All-You-Can-Eat Chinese Buffet" allowed the suppliers of such services to respond to customers' desires. The research revealed significant factors regarding the demographic nature of the target market as well as their perceived perceptions of the selected Chinese buffet. The results of the study also showed that three factors, namely 1. 'Price/Value', 2. 'Quality of food', and 3. 'Variety of food selection', were significantly related to the idea of repeat visits.

Not only are quantitative methods appropriate tools in order to explore customer/consumer perceptions, but so too are qualitative methods. For instance, a study by Nguyen and Klaus (2013) based on customer perspectives, discovered that consumers' perceptions of retail fairness. The findings indicated that it is imperative that rather than looking at prices, all aspects of these tactics, including customer relationship management, loyalty and bonus programmes are researched and implemented properly, reflecting consumers' perceptions of fairness.

In the work of Rijswik and Frewer (2008), consumers' interviews were held in four European countries (Germany, France, Italy and Spain) in order to understand consumers' perceptions of the concepts of food quality and safety. The results of this work indicated that most consumers believe both food safety and quality are important to food in general, but that they pay more attention to

food quality when purchasing a product compared to food safety or other factors.

The studies above demonstrate that both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been employed for researching consumer perceptions. However, this thesis is concerned specifically with consumer perceptions as they relate to the MICE sector of the tourism industry. This sector is different because, while the studies above relate to individual consumer decisions, in the MICE sector, decisions about meeting and event planning are made in a centralised way for large groups of people (Locke, 2010). Therefore, there was a need to consider the importance of consumer decisions specifically from the perspective of the tourism industry, and if possible from within the MICE sector.

2.3.3 The importance of perception in the tourism industry

With a focus on understanding customer perceptions within the tourism and hospitality industry, a study by Su, Hsu and Swanson (2017) concentrated upon domestic tourists' perceptions. These tourists visited the Wuyi Mountain National Park, a mixed World Heritage site located on the eastern coast of China. The study investigated the relationship between three important visitor perceptions (i.e. service fairness, destination image and service quality) and tourism destination loyalty (i.e. positive word-of-mouth referrals and revisit intention) through overall destination satisfaction and trust of destination service providers. The structural equation modelling findings generally supported the conceptual model and indicated that service fairness and service quality have a significant and positive impact on overall destination satisfaction and trust of destination service providers, although destination image has a significant effect on overall destination satisfaction but not on the trust of destination service providers.

Next, another study concerning manguji (a heritage museum in Indonesia) investigated the perception of visitors, the location and the development strategy of the museum had an effect on customer trust with the visitor's interest (Purwanto, Haryono and Hasihilan, 2016). The results showed that the museum development strategy had the most significant and positive effect on the interest

of visitors compared to the perception variable of visitors and location. The analysis also showed that location and museum development strategy influenced visitor trust and interest in the site.

Similarly, Chen, Chen and Lee (2011) explored the interrelationships between tourist perceptions, service performance, customer satisfaction and sustainable tourism at Kinmen, Taiwan. This research found that all attributes were perceived as “positive” pre- and post-visit, indicating that a large percentage of respondents had a good impression of the destination resources of Kinmen Island prior to their visit and were also satisfied with these attributes after they visited.

Researchers have also investigated the service quality perceptions among customers, managers and employees in four-star and five-star hotels in Antalya (Turkey) (Dedeoglu and Demirer, 2015). The findings revealed that different stakeholders had different perceptions of integrated service quality performance. The researchers also found differences in customer-employee and customer-manager service quality perceptions to be statistically significant. Because high levels of service quality has many benefits such as providing a competitive advantage to a business, establishing customer satisfaction and customer loyalty and contributing to its image (Ghobadian, Speller and Jones, 1994; Bloemer, Ruyter and Peeters, 1998), the service quality perception among different stakeholders is vital for hotel enterprises. Likewise, Wang and Hung (2015) explored the critical success factors for guest houses in China based on customer perceptions. The authors indicated that customer perception is significant for the business of guest houses because it related to customer buying behaviour. The study revealed that the critical success factors for guest houses in China include room facilities, cleanliness, service, location, home atmosphere, and value for money. Hence, it has been noted that investigating perceptions is important for doing businesses.

Regarding innovation in the tourism value chain, an article by Anamaria and Maria-Cristina (2013) determined how consumers of tourist services perceive innovation in the various segments of the tourism value chain. Results showed that the importance attributed to innovation in the various sectors of the tourism

value chain is higher than customers' perceptions of innovation intensity in these sectors. The aim of investigating customers' perceptions is to examine actual customers' satisfaction about tourism products. Additionally, their perception is connected with the purchase decision of tourism products.

In short, the relevance of the above studies and this thesis lies in their investigation of consumer perceptions. Even though this thesis adds to the existing body by focusing on potential and international customers in the MICE industry, there is a lack of research into the importance of perceptions in the MICE industry. There is also the possibility that tourists' perceptions could vary depending on the destination image. Therefore, the literature was also reviewed to evaluate general tourism perceptions of Thailand.

2.3.4 Tourist perceptions of Thailand

Concerning the relationship between customer perceptions, tourism and Thailand, a study by Kongprasert and Virutamasen (2015) explored tourist perceptions of Thai cultural identity, and employed an emotional design approach to find out how products may fulfill customer perceptions and requirements using a questionnaire. Emotional design and product identity were used in the study to evaluate how Thai cultural identity was perceived (Kongprasert and Virutamasen, 2015). This research focused on the perception of tourists that were travelling or have travelled in Thailand. Their analysis identified the perceptions, sensation and preference of tourists. The researchers found that the relationship between customer perception and Thai cultural identity, can be used to guide entrepreneur decision making to create new products or services according to the Thai cultural identity and meeting the perceptions of customers.

Although previous research studied tourists' perceptions of Thailand, the present thesis is different in that it examined targeted participants-that are potential international MICE customers. It is noted that the thesis discovered the novelty between customer perceptions and the MICE industry. Thus, review of the previous literature that related to consumer perceptions and the MICE

sector is required, even though only a few of these studies touched specifically on Thailand as a tourism destination.

2.3.5 Consumer perception and the MICE sector

In relation to the MICE industry specifically Uzunboylu (2016), the aim of the study is to define the service quality of an international conference and use it as a measure of how well the service that was delivered matched the participants' expectations. The findings showed that the service quality was linked to the individuals' expectations and perceptions, which resulted from a comparison of their past experiences or word-of-mouth recommendations and the actual service they experienced within the conference. Therefore, it is important to explore customers' perceptions because the author insisted that they are considered as their reality (Uzunboylu, 2016). Zeithami, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) also noticed that companies need to assess their customers' perceptions for maintaining their success in the market place.

Several studies (e.g. Robinson and Callan, 2001, 2005) were interested in the conference and meeting industry in the United Kingdom. The first study (Robinson and Callan, 2001) aimed to determine whether gaps exist in the attributes employed to assess the quality and desirability of the United Kingdom's conference venues – firstly between conference organisers and conference delegates and secondly between their perceptions and the characteristics of the product provided (Robinson and Callan, 2001). Next, Robinson and Callan's research (2005) aimed to explore conference delegates' perceptions of service quality attributes in the conference venue. The results of this study revealed conference delegates' perceptions of service quality attributes such as location and image, price/value, competence, access, additional services, or tangibles-bedrooms, leisure facilities, service providers, and meeting room tangibles.

In addition, Pandza and Vignali (2010) focused on analysing the differences between venue's provider perception of consumers' expectation and consumers' perception relating to United Kingdom's conference and meeting

industry. The results of this research concluded that meeting customers were not satisfied with services as venues' providers think. The authors remarked that offering the service consistent to consumer perception and expectations can lead to a higher level of customer satisfaction, business expansion, a bigger market share, and higher profitability.

In Thailand for MICE purposes, Rittichinuwat and Mair (2012) discovered the perceptions of convention attendees regarding green meetings. The researchers explained that green meetings have been taken to mean those with sustainable practices and/or facilities. Attendees were divided into various convention participant roles namely delegates, organisers, exhibitors and sponsors. The findings demonstrated that attendees are positive about being green or sustainable, especially attending meetings and staying in the same hotel; eating local food; and recycling notepaper from previous conferences. However, participants were less positive about paying more for green meetings.

So far, most of the discussions have focused on generalities of tourism destinations and customer perception. Given that there are differences between the MICE tourism sector and leisure or individual business travel (Locke, 2010), it is now important to review the MICE sector and consider how these differences could influence the outcomes. The next section will focus specifically on the MICE industry.

2.4 The MICE Tourism Sector

2.4.1 Relationship between MICE and Tourism

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 1.3, the definition of "MICE" is concerned with *meetings, incentive travel, conventions and exhibitions* (or events) (Chon and Weber, 2014). In other words, MICE tourism is the tourism sector that is concerned with mass travel for business purposes. This can be compared to the mass leisure tourism sector, which includes activities such as leisure conventions and events and package holidays and resorts (Inkson and Minnaert, 2012). While MICE tourism events do involve individual travel, they are typically planned as a group activity, with a specific destination and time for

the event in question planned by a central planner or planning team (Chon and Weber, 2014).

MICE tourism can include meetings of many different sizes, ranging from small business meetings with internal and/or external stakeholders to industry trade fairs that draw attendees from around the globe (Whitfield et al., 2014). One of the implications of this varied size requirement is that while MICE tourism does draw on general tourism infrastructure such as transportation networks and the hospitality sector, it also requires specialised tourism infrastructure designed for large groups (Smagina, 2017). For example, for a destination to be considered as a serious choice for MICE tourism, it requires at least one or more conventions or exhibition centres, in which large meetings of various sizes can be held (Locke, 2010). Typically, MICE tourism also has a high demand for advanced physical infrastructure; for example, large-scale exhibitions and conventions require modern communication and electricity infrastructure (Smagina, 2017). These special requirements for the MICE sector imply that even a popular general tourism destination may not be suitable for MICE tourism.

In addition to a demand for special infrastructure, there is also a need for the destination to have not just adequate meeting or convention facilities, but also additional incentives to draw visitors; for example, Macao and Las Vegas, which are world-leading MICE tourism destinations, are popular in part because of their casino industries, which are a significant incentive for visitors (McCartney, 2008; Yang and Gu, 2012; Whitfield et al., 2014). Thus, while MICE tourism destinations do have special requirements for the MICE sector, they also are typically popular tourism destinations with their own tourism draws (Chon and Weber, 2014). This may be particularly true for the incentive travel sector, which is a form of travel typically offered as a perk or benefit for higher-level employees and which may be more oriented toward leisure activities than business meetings (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2012).

In summary, MICE tourism can be defined as a form of business-related tourism, focusing on events arranged mostly (though not entirely) business purposes. MICE tourism relies both on general tourism infrastructure and

attractions and on MICE-specific infrastructure like conference and exhibition venues and advanced communications infrastructure. While the precise nature of the requirements will vary depending on the type of event being planned, this means that the characteristics of a MICE destination are to some extent distinct from that of a general leisure tourism destination.

2.4.2 The role of destination image in MICE tourism

There is some research that concentrates on the role of destination image in the MICE industry, with studies focusing on different events or on different destinations. For example, the study by Lai (2018) investigated the role of destination image in the Beijing Olympic Games. The findings showed that the event image of the Beijing Games positively influenced the city's destination image and the event image had a stronger effect on the destination image. The implication of this study is that managing destination image through mega-events is important because this could affect word-of-mouth of the host and future (re)visitation.

In the same way, another study by Erfurt and Johnsen (2003) focused on the destination of Davos, Switzerland and the convention "Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF)", which is hosted there annually. The purpose of this research study was to examine how hosting an event influences the image of a destination. The results showed that an event has an influence on travellers' image of the destination, most notably for travellers living close to the destination. It is also shown that the image of those travellers who have had a prior experience with the destination are less affected by the event.

Houdement, Santos and Serra (2017) also investigated the choice of business travel destinations, comparing in this case Vilamoura (Portugal) and Marbella (Spain). The authors found that the destination image of both locations was the main factor that decided the choice of locations. There were other factors that also played a role in the choice of locations, including transportation and accommodation, accessibility, value for money, quality, leisure tourism opportunities, and appropriate meeting venues, as well as previous experiences and word of mouth. However, while the destination image was the

dominant factor for most possible event venues, the other factors varied depending on the location and sector (Houdement, Santos and Serra, 2017). The implication of this study is that while, of course, there are many factors that play a role in the choice of destination, it cannot be avoided that destination image will influence the selection of an event's location.

In conclusion, the aforementioned studies demonstrated that mega-events, for example, the Olympic Games, the World Expo, the FIFA World Cup, and the World Economic Forum, can affect the image of their host destinations. In contrast to previous studies, this thesis examines the relationship between the destination images, perceptions and MICE customers by utilising Thailand as a MICE destination.

2.4.3 Changing the destination image for MICE tourism

One of the implied consequences of the different demands of MICE tourism compared to general tourism, as discussed in Section 2.4.1, is that the existing destination image of a tourism destination may be unsuitable for MICE tourism planners, and therefore may not have the intended effect. There have been several studies that have addressed how a destination's image can be changed in order to reposition them in the MICE market, which offer useful information for this thesis.

Several studies have addressed the repositioning of Macao, a special administrative region (SAR) of China, as a MICE tourism destination. As McCartney (2008) explained in his strategic assessment of the destination branding project, by 2006 Macau was one of the world's leading gambling destinations, but did not yet have a substantial MICE sector. This was considered important to develop because Macau, a small island with limited access, depends on high-yield tourism sectors rather than mass tourism. In 2008, the Venetian, one of the leading gambling venues, opened an exhibition centre, which began the development of Macau as a MICE tourism destination. However, this was not straightforward to develop, since Macau's neighbour Hong Kong is also a global MICE market leading destination. Macau also faced a challenge in repositioning because it was well-known as a gambling

destination, but was not known for (and in fact did not at the time have) the infrastructure and resources required for MICE tourism. Furthermore, the casinos, which controlled much of the hospitality resources of the island, did not fully accept the need to develop MICE tourism. Therefore, even though Macau's central government established a tourism development strategy for MICE tourism, this was a significant effort in terms of both internal support and external rebranding (McCartney, 2008).

A follow-up study explained that Macau has not been fully successful at repositioning itself as a MICE tourism destination, despite the growing dominance of its casino tourism sector (McCartney, 2008). This study explained that the rapidly growing gaming market meant that existing casino hotel operators were not supporting the MICE sector, and were instead prioritising the casino sector. While there was government support for expansion of the MICE sector, limitations such as infrastructure, land and accessibility of the location, as well as the continued dominance of Macau's casino sector in its destination image, meant that the MICE sector was only likely to grow very slowly (McCartney, 2008).

Whitfield et al. (2014) also pointed to another problem with rebranding Macau as a MICE destination. In particular, there were several different levels at which delegates were assessing Macau as a business location. These authors used an importance-performance analysis (IPA), with a survey of convention delegates assessing Macau's actual suitability as a MICE destination. They found that the MICE facilities, including dimensions like reputation, atmosphere, service standards and safety and security, were viewed as underperforming despite their high importance to visitors. Availability, standards of service, cost, and safety and security at the accommodation was also rated poorly in terms of performance compared to importance. Accessibility (distance, cost and travel formalities) was also rated higher in importance than performance. Destination attributes like local infrastructure, safety and security, reputation, attractiveness, and friendliness were similar in importance and performance. The only area where Macau outperformed compared to expectations was recreational activities like entertainment, shopping, and sightseeing. Thus, above and beyond the problems associated with repositioning Macau as a

MICE destination in light of its overwhelming destination image as a gaming tourism spot, there was also the problem that Macau was in fact not performing up to delegate expectations for MICE tourism.

Macau has also faced other problems with MICE tourism development. One of these challenges is inadequate human resources, especially skills like event planning and multilingualism (Sou, Leng and McCartney, 2015). Another problem is the perceived isolation of the tourism industry from local culture and lack of acceptance within the community (Greenwood and Dwyer, 2017). Greenwood and Dwyer (2017) also noted that there is a problem with China's overarching influence in Macau, as it means that the country is perceived as politically unstable and subject to outside influence. Furthermore, Macau has been specifically noted to be deficient in adequate MICE tourism infrastructure like meeting venues, although its traditional tourism infrastructure is generally considered very good (Lai, 2009). These factors have a significant effect on the perceived suitability of Macau as a MICE tourism destination because they introduce risk factors such as political risk and communication risk.

The case study of Macau highlights two problems that may occur when attempting to reposition a destination for MICE tourism. One of these problems is that the tourism destination does require specific infrastructure and services, some of which will not be in place if the destination is a general tourism destination (McCartney 2008, 2014; Whitfield et al, 2014). (Exactly what infrastructure, services and other features are sought by MICE tourism planners are summarised in Section 2.4.5, as this has been a frequent area of study.) Perhaps the more pressing problem is that, as shown by McCartney's (2008, 2014) research, the existing destination image of the location, and the investment of stakeholders such as hotel operators, can crowd out attempts to reposition to serve a new tourism segment. This is an important point for further investigation in Chapter 7, which takes up the task of whether Thailand's destination image for MICE tourism can be changed.

2.4.4 Other factors selection of MICE tourism destinations

It is not only the general tourism destination image, or even the destination image of a location as suitable for MICE tourism, that determines the choice of a specific location for MICE tourism.

In relation to the MICE industry specifically in Asia, the studies of Abdullah (2011) and Altareri (2016) used the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as a case study. The similarity of both studies was to utilise MICE delegates as sample subjects. However, while Abdullah (2011) conducted a feasibility analysis for Saudi Arabia as a conference destination from a tourism services and logistics perspective, Altareri (2016) compared cross-cultural perceptions of the country as a destination. As Abdullah (2011) found, the practical capacity of the country to host international conferences and the socio-political context that were explored might impact on the development. The findings indicated that, although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the practical capacity to host international conferences, the effects of an ambivalent attitude towards opening up to the outside world – expressed through a number of factors embedded in the KSA's socio-political situation – has led to an impasse which is blocking development.

Altareri (2016) also investigated and compared the cultural differences between Muslims and non-Muslims with regard to MICE tourism to the KSA. Three important dimensions of destination decision making were motivation, perception and attitude. Destination image formed by perceptions and its influence on attitude are important in determining behavioural intentions (Altareri, 2016). The results of the study provided useful insights into the demographic profile of MICE tourists (Muslims and non-Muslims). Additionally, it was found that motivation is the most important driver of the MICE destination decision making process when compared with perceptions and attitudes. However, perceptions and attitudes of the respondents were found to be favourable towards the country. These results also indicated that strategies to heighten the motivation, perceptions and attitudes of potential tourists can translate to an increase in MICE tourism to the KSA.

The study by Park (2016) indicated that MICE tourism was a highly competitive global market. The author explored the current situation of MICE tourism in Japan in general and Kyushu in particular analysing the potential for and challenges faced in introducing further improvements. The results demonstrated that MICE tourism in Japan with case studies from Kyushu has high potential in destination development, but Japan lacks competitive advantages in some factors compared to other countries that have clear objectives and marketing and promotion.

Another study by Yusoff, Ismail and Rahman (2015) focused on Malaysia because the country intended to become a popular destination for international MICE events. The authors determined the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) for organising MICE events in Malaysia. This study found six CSFs that were responsible for making a MICE event a success. Those factors are clear objectives, location of venue, financial resources, code of conduct, marketing and promotion and lastly, sponsorship of events. From the findings, the author expected that the MICE event managers could improve and organise their events more efficiently.

Leng (2012) aimed to understand customers' satisfaction with the current image of Macau for MICE purposes. The study evaluated which dimension should be maintained and receive more attention. The findings of this study provided key indications to Macao for developing a brighter future for the industry and achieving a higher satisfaction level from MICE attendees.

Donaldson (2013) investigated individual-level factors in the choice of business tourism destination among delegates to international conventions. The study was an effort to explore the characteristics of business travellers in South Africa, who had not been studied in detail. The author found that destination factors including perceived safety and security, quality, value for money and non-business tourism experiences all influenced the attractiveness of business tourism in South Africa (Donaldson, 2013).

In addition to the studies above, other authors have identified a range of cultural factors that influence the choice of a MICE tourism destination. One study, which investigated the choice of Qatar by MICE travellers (Abulibdeh and

Zaidan, 2017) used a self-administered survey of MICE travellers to Doha, Qatar, involving Arabic, Chinese and English speaking travellers. The authors found that there were significant differences between cultures that influenced the choice of Doha as a tourism destination, including differences between travel search behaviour and perceived cultural distance (Abulibdeh and Zaidan, 2017). A study of Bali, which also used a survey of MICE event visitors, showed that positive perceptions of the host culture could also serve to influence the choice of a destination (Arcana, 2017). These studies imply that the culture of both the host country and the event organiser's or visitor's home country – and perhaps the distance between them – could affect the choice of a destination.

To summarise, several studies as indicated above aimed to assist their countries to become the popular MICE destinations. Factors identified in MICE destination image in these studies range widely, with different aspects including everything from culture to language to cost and other factors. However, the studies discussed in Sections 2.4 and 2.5 clearly indicate that destination image is the predominant factor in the initial choice of destination. The main aim of this research is therefore to illustrate the destination image of Thailand, but particularly Bangkok, for MICE purposes and to explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers. The main aim of this research is therefore to illustrate the destination image of Thailand, but particularly Bangkok, for MICE purposes and to explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers. However, the research is also concerned with the process by which MICE event planners select their destinations. Therefore, a review was also conducted on how MICE tourism planners select locations and what kinds of criteria they use, moving beyond the basic destination image and into the functional requirements such as infrastructure and accommodation.

2.4.5 MICE tourism location selection

Although some research suggested that the destination image is a dominant factor in the choice of MICE tourism destination, other studies suggested that this is not the case – and in fact, that there are complex criteria sets that MICE tourism planners use to select a destination. Given the size and complexity of

MICE tourism planning, it is inadequate to only investigate the question of destination image. Thus, previous studies on site selection have been reviewed in order to evaluate what criteria exist and, to some extent, how they have changed over time as the MICE sector has changed.

On the subject of between the MICE industry and destination selection criteria, numerous researchers (e.g. Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996; 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaïen and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014) paid attention to studying this point. Tables 2.2 and 2.3 show a summary of meeting/convention site selection factors in the 20th century and the 21st century.

Table 2.2 A Summary of Meeting/Convention Site Selection Factors (the 20th century)

Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault (1976)	American Society of Association Executives (1992)	Edelstein and Benini (1994)	Oppermann (1996, 1998)	Crouch and Ritchie (1997)	Go and Zhang (1997)	Go and Govers (1999)
Hotel services	Service quality	Availability of facilities	Meeting rooms/facilities	Accessibility	Accessibility	Meeting room and hotel facilities
Air access	Meeting room facilities	Access to location	Hotel service quality	Local support	Attractiveness	Accessibility
Hotel rooms	Affordability	Transport costs	Hotel room availability	Extra-conference opportunities	Equipment availability	Service
Conference rooms	Hotel facilities	Distance from attendants	Clean/attractive location	Accommodation facilities	Entertainment	Affordability
Price levels	Location image	Climate	Safety/security	Meeting facilities	Accommodation	Location image
Local hospitality	Dining/Entertainment	Recreational facilities	Air transportation access	Information	Meeting facility	Climate
Restaurant facilities	Air transportation	Tourist attractions	Food and lodging costs	Site environment	Climate	Entertainment
Personal safety	Exhibition facilities	Location image	Overall affordability	Other criteria	Hotel/conference centre service	Tourist attractions
Local interest	Highway accessibility	Mandated by by-laws	City image		Local hospitality	
Geographic location	Geographic location		Transportation costs		Transportation	
Hotel info/assistance	Recreational facilities		Restaurants		City image	
Local availability	Climate		Exhibition facilities		Food & Beverage service	
Tourism features			Restaurant facilities		Costs	
Transport facilities			Exhibition facilities		Tourist attractions/Sightseeing	
Previous experience			Scenery/sightseeing opportunities			
			Tourist attractions			
			Climate			
			Nightlife			

Source: Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999

Table 2.3 A Summary of Meeting/Convention Site Selection Factors (the 21st century)

Chacko and Fenich (2000)	Qu, Li and Chu (2000)	Baloglu and Love (2001)	Chen (2006)	Crouch and Louviere (2007)	Huo (2014)
Availability of air service	Availability and modern hotel facilities	Meeting facilities	Meeting space availability	Frequency and convenience of flight schedules and connections	Meeting facilities
Cost of air service	Hotel services	Safety and security of destination	Choice of meeting and housing properties	Quality of the general infrastructure	City accessibility
Convenience of local transportation	Hotel rates	Affordability of transportation to destination	Suitability of convention facilities	Accommodation rate for conference delegates	Country (city) image
Destination services	Convention facilities	Accessibility of destination	Quality of food and break	Venue cost relative to international average	Accommodation facilities
Promotional appeal of city	Accessibility	Ease of local transportation	Expense of transportation	Break-out/session rooms	Costs (Hotel, Airfare, Meeting room rental, Food, Technological equipment rental, Local transportation)
Hotel room availability	Safety and hygiene	Equipment availability	Expense of hotel	Possibility	Government support
Hotel room rates	Infrastructure system	Quality of hotel services	Expense of food	Range and availability of audio/visual systems/facilities	Quality of industry personnel
Helpfulness of service people	Image (Political and economy)	Hotel facility	Commodity prices	Plenary room capacity	Efficiency of industry personnel
Meeting space availability	Professional meeting planners	Affordability of F&B facilities	City image	Opportunities for professional networking	Helpfulness of service people
Cost of food and beverage	Climate and environment	Convention and Visitor Bureau (CVB) services and sponsorship	Site accessibility	Ambience and layout of facility	Extra-conference opportunities
Friendliness of local people	Travel assistance	City reputation	Suitability and standard of local infrastructure	Inbound travel barriers and formalities	Safety of attendees
Safety of attendees	Cost of transportation	Appeal of local attractions	Government support		Friendliness of local people
	Attractions and entertainment	Entertainment	Quality of industry personnel		Communication skill of employees
		Climate	Efficiency of industry personnel		Extra-conference opportunities
			Climate		
			Outside entertainment		
			Sightseeing and cultural attractions		

Source: Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Huo, 2014

According to Krungman and Wright (2007), destinations can be assessed by the criteria shown in Table 2.4.

Table 2.4 Destination Criteria

Destination Criteria
➤ Does the city (region) have a good range of conference hotels and facilities?
➤ Are there adequate direct flights from major gateways and a choice of airlines?
➤ Is the location easily accessible from an international airport?
➤ Is the area politically stable and compatible?
➤ Are climate and seasonal factors favourable?
➤ Is there broad appeal to the attendees?
➤ Are there adequate ground transportation and support services?
➤ Does the destination enhance the objectives of the conference?
➤ Will attendees be attracted by the destination's assets?
➤ Is there a compatible host organisation in a related field?
➤ Do customs and immigration facilitate foreign travellers?
➤ Are overseas liaison offices established in major cities?
➤ Does the destination offer a variety of cultural and recreational attractions?
➤ Are restrictions imposed by the attendees' governments because of the destination?
➤ Are there any significant safety and security concerns?

Source: Adapted from Krungman and Wright (2007)

Krungman and Wright (2007) suggest that these criteria are useful for host organisers in selecting an appropriate site. Additionally, a site-inspection trip is essential, and this is best arranged through the national tourist office or convention bureau or a destination management company (DMC) with a good reputation. Facility criteria have also been created to evaluate hotel and conference venues as illustrated in Tables 2.5 and 2.6.

Table2.5 Facility Criteria (Hotel Sites)

Facility Criteria (Hotel Sites)

- Does the hotel have adequate room capacity on the dates required?
- Are there sufficient meeting rooms for the program on the dates scheduled? Are they adequate in size, number, and appointments?
- Is there hotel of a quality consistent with attendees' expectations?
- Are room rates within the organisation's budget range?
- Are management and staff trained to handle international conferences (e.g., key staff members multilingual and trained for convention service)?
- Is the hotel readily accessible from the airport?
- Can the hotel meet technical requirements in terms of computers, simultaneous interpretation, audio-visual equipment, tables, platforms, and related meeting room needs?
- Are food and beverage policies and facilities suited to meeting groups?
- Will there be other meetings that may conflict?
- Does the hotel have a suitable emergency life safety plan and qualified security staff?

Source: Adapted from Krungman and Wright (2007)

Table2.6 Facility Criteria (Halls and Auditoriums)

Facility Criteria (Halls and Auditoriums)

- Is the facility convenient to headquarters hotels?
- Are key staff well trained and permanent? Multilingual?
- Are facilities adequate in capacity, size, number, and appointments?
- Are there adequate provisions for lighting, sound, and technical support?
- Will outside contractors be required for specialised services?
- Does the secretariat office have suitable communications, computer, and office equipment?
- Are translation booths and systems provided?
- Does staging fit the needs of the program? Is the stage fully lighted and draped?
- Are catering facilities available at the site?
- Are medical, security, and other emergency facilities and trained staff available?

Source: Adapted from Krungman and Wright (2007)

Hagen and Joraandstad (2012) identified conference destination factors for the corporate sector. The factors are accessibility, affordability, facilities, quality of service, attractions and entertainment, safety and security.

Another study by Henaien and Sinha (2014) indicated the top site selection criteria for international meetings from the organisers', delegates' and suppliers' perspective (Table 2.7).

Table 2.7 Top Site Selection Criteria

<p>Organisers' Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Major world city - Accessibility to the destination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sufficient hotel availability - Interesting conference venues ➤ Touristic and business potential ➤ City located in Europe, Asia-Pacific or the Americas ➤ Active Convention and Visitor Bureau (CVB) and available programs to help conference organisers (ex. site inspections) ➤ Good business connections in the city (ex. free conference venue from university, chamber of commerce, etc.) ➤ Active support from the city to the buyer's industry sector and access to that particular local industry (ex. funding and venue contribution from the city's innovation community for an innovation conference)
<p>Delegates' Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reasonable travel time ➤ Accessibility to the destination ➤ Hotel availability close to the conference centre ➤ Touristic and business potential ➤ Good conference venue ➤ Good cuisine ➤ Good conference program (i.e. activities after meeting and time to relax)
<p>Suppliers' Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Accessibility to the destination ➤ Safety ➤ Prices/rates of hotels and venues ➤ Destination image/city appeal ➤ City logistics ➤ Standard of the particular local industry that corresponds to the conference topic ➤ Meeting and city infrastructure ➤ Hotel offers ➤ Warm weather

Source: Adapted from Henaien and Sinha (2014)

Henaien and Sinha (2014) also showed the significance of the destination image in the site selection process as demonstrated in Table 2.8.

Table 2.8 Importance of City Image

<p>Organisers' Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advantageous to hold international conferences in attractive cities as it results in increased number of attendees ➤ Cities known to be insecure or too expensive get reduced number of attendees ➤ Hosting conferences in lesser-known cities is also interesting, as people are curious and like to experience new cities too
<p>Delegates' Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Variety of activities for the attendees is important ➤ Local cuisine ➤ Unique factors at the destination, conference venues, and hotels ➤ A positive city image results in future leisure trips ➤ Expensive, insecure or unclean reputation results in low delegate turnout
<p>Suppliers' Perspective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Of high importance as it attracts many delegates (however, being too attractive can lead to delegates engaging in leisure activities, instead of focusing on the conference) ➤ Bad weather has resulted in buyers turning down destinations

Source: Adapted from Henaien and Sinha (2014)

In conclusion, the above studies (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996; 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014) about destination selection factors in the MICE industry are relevant to this thesis; this is because these studies move beyond the question of destination image and address the practical criteria that MICE tourism planners have for their events. These practical criteria include, for example, requirements like accommodation and infrastructure, accessibility and location, conference venues and other appropriate locations, and non-conference concerns like the attractiveness of the destination, uniqueness of local culture, and so on. In order to discuss the findings of the qualitative and quantitative data from the research for this thesis the literature that considers the practicalities of destination selection has also been considered in this chapter. This thesis has employed the findings from this literature - such as facilities for meetings/conferences, a

variety of venues for meetings/conferences, the preparedness of venues, the standard of four-star and five-star hotels, easy access, value for money, security, etc. – to help to interpret the data. This is explored in greater detail in chapters 4, 6 and 7.

2.5 MICE Tourism in Thailand

There have been several several studies that have investigated MICE tourism in Thailand. These studies have mainly focused on the selection criteria and perceptions of tourism planners, although there has been some research into questions such as the MICE-oriented destination image of Thailand.

Regarding the image of Thailand for MICE purposes, Rittichainuwat (2010) explored the image of Thailand before and after political situation. The incidents that perceived as indications of political instability of the country are as follows, the disruption of the 14th ASEAN leaders' summit at PEACH convention centre, Thailand on April 11, 2009, and the closures of Thailand's international airports in 2008. Respondents of the study are show owners and convention attendees who participated in four international conferences such as the convention and Expo Summit 2009 in Hong Kong, the ApacCHRIE conference in Singapore in May 2009 and the other two conferences were held in Thailand by the Pacific Asia Travel Association in June 2009 and by the Association of Asia Convention and Visitor Bureaus in Bangkok in October 2009 (Rittichainuwat, 2010). The findings revealed that before the political instability, Thailand was perceived as a leading international convention and exhibition destination in terms of safety and security. However, after the incidents of political unrest, Thailand got the lowest score on safety and security due to perceived risk associated with the political instability. Therefore, Rittichainuwat (2010) suggested that it is necessary to first boost attendees' confidence in destination safety than use price to lure them because people do not travel if the destination is unsafe (Henderson 1999, Sönmez 1998; Sönmez and Grafe 1998; Rittichainuwat and Chakarborty 2009). Safety is the primary consideration of any international convention site selection criteria (Rittichainuwat, 2010). Hence, this thesis

refers to the findings of the study relating to the discussion of qualitative data as shown in Chapter 4. Although the above study (Rittichainuwat, 2010) and this thesis aimed to ascertain the image of Thailand for MICE purposes, the targeted participants of both are different. These are show owners and convention attendees for the study of Rittichainuwat (2010) and host organisers as current MICE customers for this thesis.

While Rittichainuwat (2010) is the only author that has specifically taken on the question of Thailand's MICE tourism destination image, other studies have investigated other aspects of MICE tourism in Thailand. These studies, although they have not focused on the destination image concept as such, do offer useful insights into Thailand's MICE tourism readiness, problems that remain, and positive and negative aspects of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination.

As an illustration, the TCEB's research on Thailand's brand image as a destination for MICE (TCEB, 2018c) determined the relationships between MICE destination image and Thailand. However, the participants in the TCEB research are different from those targeted in this thesis. The TCEB's market survey conducted 20 countries/regions, focused on global MICE professionals and their outlooks on Thailand's MICE brand. There were four groups of survey participants namely, 1) MICE players, 2) business travellers, 3) MICE visitors and 4) MICE associations (PR Newswire, 2018b). This research targeted a different group of respondents - those who are current MICE customers (host organisers) and potential MICE customers. Especially, the differences between the images of Thailand perceived by host organisers who have already arranged meetings and/or conferences in the country and the perceptions of international companies/organisations in the North West of England about Thailand for MICE purposes.

Akkhaphin (2016) who examined the factors which influence the decisions of delegates to participate in international conventions, as well as criteria that influencing organising committees and planners. The research also investigated the potential of Thailand as a MICE destination, and the positioning

of Thailand as a hub for the international conference and convention industry in Asia. The data obtained from the delegates, convention organising committees and planners and through the qualitative and quantitative methods. In order to complement the weakness of one approach with the strengths of another, these data was also triangulated (Akkhaphin, 2016). However, the difference between Akkhaphin's (2016) study and the research for this thesis is the selection of the people forming the sample population. This thesis focused on host organisers and potential MICE customers by employing the qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire surveys) methods for gaining a wider knowledge of the MICE industry in Thailand. The results of the questionnaire survey revealed that 86% of the respondents agreed that Thailand has the potential to become a major MICE destination and a hub for the international convention industry in Asia. This is because it was thought that Thailand offers a number of advantages as a destination (Akkhaphin, 2016). These included, for example, service quality; affordability and value for money; tourism activities; the attractiveness of destination; intervening opportunities; destination image factor; safety and security issues; the standardisation of hotels and accommodation; the quality of the facilities, and standardisation of the conference venue; and the quality and sufficiency of food and beverages. However, the weaknesses of Thailand as a MICE destination were identified as other opportunities; long haul flights or travelling distances from Africa, the Americas and Europe and political instability.

Another piece of research (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009) focusing on Thailand also identified major barriers. These included, for example, the availability of industry information, industry infrastructure (e.g. convention venues and transportation), human resources, industry co-operation, and political instability.

Other research that has also focused on Thailand has investigated other issues relating to MICE. Concerning human resources, work by Mongkhonvanit and Chattiwong (2017) examined issues relating to personnel, etc. This research revealed that the opinions of entrepreneurs of present personnel were overall high, especially in terms of honesty, readiness and willingness to serve. The most required job positions in the MICE industry are sales personnel, who truly

understand the MICE industry and are skillful in sales and negotiation. They must also be able to communicate well in English and possess good social skills. Therefore, the guideline for developing attributes of personnel in the MICE industry should focus on training in foreign languages, service minded development and technological skills.

Another study by Suraphee and Pimonsompong (2013) aimed to study employees' core competencies (e.g. attributes, skills, and knowledge), functional competencies for the position of sale and customer service coordinator and project coordinator and to suggest guidelines to develop employees' competencies. The findings showed the top requirements of entrepreneurs as the following: 1) core competencies were attributes averaging 4.61 with the focus on service mind, 2) functional competencies for Sale and Customer Service Coordinator positions were skills averaging 4.52 with the focus on negotiation, 3) functional competencies for Project Coordinator positions are skills averaging 4.62 with the focus on leadership and 4) guidelines to develop the personnel with the focus on providing foreign language training course averaging 4.27.

Previous studies (Mongkhonvanit and Chattiwong, 2017; Suraphee and Pimonsompong, 2013) have looked at personnel and employees' competencies. Mongkhonvanit and Chattiwong's (2017) study identified that key areas of training are languages and negotiation. The focus of service mindedness was the most important attribute for the position of Sale and Customer Service Coordinator and Project Coordinator (Suraphee and Pimonsompong, 2013). Although these studies did not aim to investigate destination image or perceptions of MICE customers, they showed that the current situation of MICE tourism and the attention it has received in Thailand. Therefore, this thesis ascertains the destination images of the country and perceptions of potential customers for MICE purposes in order to contribute to understandings of the subject.

As stated previously in Chapter 1, Section 1.5, the growth of the MICE industry in Thailand increased continuously between 2004 and 2015 (TCEB, 2018a). This industry has generated revenue over the past decade. In other words, the

MICE industry has an important role to play, as a mechanism to deliver revenue of 1 billion Baht annually (TCEB, 2018a). Several earlier studies concentrated on MICE tourism and explored its relevance to the business sector. In respect of hotel businesses, Research by Janthana (2015) entitled *The Attitude of Foreign Business Travellers (MICE) on services of hotels in Bangkok* was a survey research. The results were as follows: 1) the foreign business travellers, who participated in activities of MICE industry in hotels in Bangkok were mostly females, aged 31-40 years, had undergraduate education, company employees with monthly income 20001-30000 dollars, married, working in private companies domiciled in Asia; 2) the MICE activities that participated in included conference/seminars, parties of the company's supervisors or administrator. All the activities were carried out by the hotel. The frequency of events shown that 1-3 times per year. The aim of the event included the MICE tourism situation and exhibition. The reason that MICE activities were conducted there was because it is in the heart of the city and convenient; 3) the foreign business travellers' satisfaction with services of the hotels in Bangkok, overall was high, especially the satisfaction with marketing promotion, service, and price, which can be ranked from high to low; and 4) the foreign business travellers with different personal demographics had the difference of satisfaction level in the services of hotels in Bangkok. The investigation of Janthana's (2015) study has value for MICE hotels, marketers and policy makers for the purposes of MICE promotion, which would help Thailand further to be established as a regional MICE hub (TCEB, 2017).

Tosadorn and Choibamroong (2016) aimed to develop guidelines for securing business alliances in the MICE sector for hotel enterprises in Pattaya City, Thailand. The research found that 74.5% of the test subjects had high knowledge level of MICE, 22.4% had medium knowledge level and 3.1% had low knowledge level. The study also revealed that the highest demands are Material followed by Man Mean ($X= 4.62$) while Money Mean ($X= 4.49$) is the lowest rate. Additionally, factors that significantly affected the results are business factors such as Type of Business, Term of Business, Number of Rooms, Room Rates, Number of Meeting Rooms, Size of Meeting Room and Level of Hotel Rating for hotel enterprises in Pattaya Area. Pattaya City is

located in Chonburi Province. The province is one of three provinces that have been designated for the development of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). According to Thailand 4.0 (as noted in Chapter 1, Section 1.4.1.1), the government has launched measures to support and accelerate the economic growth in the EEC, for example, measures to develop public utilities, transportation systems, logistics, human resources, and investor's facilitation in the form of a One-Stop Service Centre (Royal Thai Embassy, Washington D.C., the U.S., 2018).

A study by Chaobanpho, Angsukanjanakul and Somkiettikul (2017) addressed the competitiveness in the MICE industry for the EEC. The author revealed that the EEC has competitiveness in the MICE industry, the most in the incentive travel sector, followed by meetings, exhibitions, and conferences, respectively. Key success factors that have contributed to the destination image of the EEC have included a comprehensive destination marketing campaign, a clear and concrete development policy, and the public and private sector support to accommodating the growth and increasing demand for businesses (Chaobanpho, Angsukanjanakul and Somkiettikul, 2017). Key strategies implemented for developing the competitiveness of the MICE industry included strategic management, the integrative framework of cohesion, facilities, and infrastructure improvements, potential development of partners and personnel in the MICE industry, and logistics system improvement.

The TCEB's strategic tourism master plan included the delegation of five major MICE cities namely: Bangkok, Phuket, Khon Kaen, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai (TCEB, 2013). There are various studies that emphasised MICE cities. For instance, Sethasathien (2017) aimed to study readiness and to explore the infrastructures of Chiang Mai which are important for supporting MICE tourists. The results revealed that Chiang Mai was ready in terms of the facilities for MICE in eight aspects; quality of the venue, accessibility of the venue, infrastructure of the venue, support from the government, potential and readiness of Chiang Mai for MICE, readiness of infrastructure, transportation and logistics. These aspects were able to connect with Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries and countries in South Asia to which Thailand could

expand its MICE market. Although the aforementioned readiness of Chiang Mai was advantageous, this province should further develop and improve other aspects, for example, mass transportation to and from the convention centre and tourist places in Chiang Mai, English language skills of MICE and tourism staff, a wide range of tourist attractions and alternative activities.

Saenjai and Mongkolsrisawat (2015) also pointed to another province that is Khon Kaen for promoting MICE tourism. The authors found that Khon Kaen has the capacity to promote MICE tourism in most, but not all, of the following areas: 1) Access: the province is the regional center for the Northeast with multiple transportation links. However, flights to the province only serve a limited number of cities and are only domestic; 2) Meeting facilities: the province has numerous convention sites to accommodate MICE tourists; 3) Hotel/accommodations: the province has adequate hotels at a range of prices; 4) Dining and souvenirs: Most of the restaurants in the province feature local cuisine, and there is a limited number of outlets for souvenirs; 5) Recreational tourism: There are few sites for eco-tourism and natural attractions; 6) Tourism business: Businesses to cater to tourism are increasing in anticipation of the expansion of MICE tourism in the province; 7) Safety: the province has a high level of safety and security at sites which would be the focus of indoor MICE tourism events. However, outdoor venues pose a security challenge; and 8) Support from the public and private sector: There is still limited collaboration among the two sectors in this area. This province is going to develop itself based on the TCEB's strategic master plan (TCEB, 2013). The TCEB (TCEB, 2019) has provided marketing support as a part of its plan to improve competitiveness of Khon Kaen at the same standard as more popular MICE destinations. As an illustration, the event 'Khon Kaen Smart City & MICE City Expo' held in October 2019 (National News Bureau of Thailand, 2019). In addition, TCEB aims to enhance the province as an ASEAN hub of international conventions and exhibitions (TCEB, 2019).

To sum up, the purpose of the studies about Thailand were to evaluate the potential of the country as a MICE Industry hub for the international Convention industry in Asia, and to identify barriers affecting the MICE industry in Thailand,

these did not specifically address the issues of the image of Thailand or how it is perceived as a MICE destination. Only a single study (Rittichainuwat, 2010) specifically addressed the question of Thailand's destination image in the context of MICE tourism, although as noted in Section 2.3, there have been many studies that have evaluated Thailand's general tourism destination image. The remainder of the previous studies above emphasised other issues in the MICE industry.

Therefore, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Section 1.6, the specific research gap is the scarcity of research studies on the relationship between the destination images, perceptions and MICE customers and their choice of Thailand as a MICE destination. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to discover the relationships between these concepts, which will help to provide useful academic and practical information for further development of Thailand as a MICE destination. This thesis investigates the image of Thailand, focusing on Bangkok, for MICE purposes, and, also, explores the perceptions of Thailand for potential MICE customers.

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has undertaken a review of the literature in relation to image, perception and the MICE industry. In addition, it has also examined the existing literature relating to the MICE industry and Thailand. In Section 2.2, the importance of the destination image was evaluated. The destination image, or the totality of impressions and knowledge of the potential tourist toward the destination, is known to be a significant determining factor in the destination choice of individual tourists. The evidence about consumer perception (Section 2.3) shows that perceptions, like value for money and safety and security, can also influence the choice of destination. Section 2.4 made a more detailed investigation of MICE tourism and factors that influence the choice of locations. While there is less evidence for the importance of destination image for MICE tourism, there have also been studies that have shown that destination image is a significant factor in the choice of locations for MICE tourism as well. However, there are many problems that can occur in a MICE tourism destination image formation and use. As the case of Macau shows, the

destination has to have the required infrastructure and supports demanded by MICE tourism, which are not the same as traditional types of tourism (though they do overlap). However, the existing destination image may also affect the formation of a destination image for MICE tourism. Furthermore, there is evidence that while destination image is a predominant factor in destination choice for MICE tourism, it is not the only factor. In fact, there have been several studies that have detailed the complex criteria of MICE destination selection, which go well beyond the basic destination image. Finally, the previous studies of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination were reviewed in Section 2.5. These studies demonstrated that Thailand is considered a viable MICE destination, even though there are concerns like, for example, safety and security and political instability. However, since many of these studies are now rather dated in relation to when the research was undertaken, there is the question of whether these factors are still in play.

There has been little research in recent years into MICE tourism in Thailand, despite its growing impact (as detailed in Chapter 1). Thus, there are some significant research gaps remaining, including the role of destination image and the effect of factors like MICE venue development. This raises several opportunities for the current research to contribute to the literature on this subject.

The next chapter goes on to give a detailed account of the research philosophy, and methods used to collect data for this thesis. It will also outline the tools used to analyse the data and the triangulation approach between the qualitative and quantitative findings.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined relevant literature, showing that there is a need for research that provides an improved understanding of the relationship between destination images, perceptions and MICE customers. This chapter discusses the methodological approach and methods adopted for this research and which was used to collect data in Thailand and the United Kingdom. The aim of this research is to investigate the popular images and perceptions of Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination. The first section of this chapter is a general discussion of the different approaches to research based on the different paradigms. The second section discusses the research strategy that was employed for this thesis. Section 3.4 is the Research Framework. This section is separated into three sub-sections, each of which deals separately with the methods adopted for each objective. Section 3.4.1 describes the use of qualitative methods for research objective 1; section 3.4.2 explains the use of quantitative methods for research objective 2, and section 3.4.3 discusses the method for comparing results between qualitative and quantitative data in order to achieve research objective 3. Every sub-section considers the population and sampling, pilot study, data collection and data analysis. Finally, a brief summary is provided in section 3.5.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This section considers a general discussion of the underlying principles that govern the choice of paradigm and therefore ultimately the data collection instruments selected for this research. According to Kuhn (1962, p.23), a paradigm can be defined as an accepted model or pattern. The author also explained that it is a set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed (Kuhn, 1962, 1970).

Guba (1990) stated that research paradigms can be characterised as the ontological, the epistemological, and the methodological questions. Guba

suggested broad questions for each: the ontology – what is reality; the epistemology – what and how can researchers know reality or knowledge; and the methodology – what procedure can researchers use to acquire knowledge? The ontology and the epistemology create a holistic view of how knowledge is viewed and how researchers can see themselves in relation to this knowledge, and researchers use methodological strategies to discover knowledge as well. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002) indicate that research philosophy is very useful and important for the following reasons: 1. It can help to clarify the research design; 2. It can help the researcher to recognise the suitable design for the research; and 3. It can help the researcher to identify and create designs that may be outside researcher past experience.

A research philosophy involves the assumptions about how the researcher will learn and what they will learn in their study (Creswell, 2014). These assumptions will underpin the research strategy and the methods that researchers choose (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012). More specifically, the philosophy of research could affect the overall arrangements of research activity, as it helps the researcher to identify a suitable research design with regard to the subject or knowledge structures (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). The researcher took these considerations into account when deciding on this thesis's methodology.

There are two main research paradigms or philosophies which are positivist and phenomenological (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002; Collis and Hussey, 2009). It is noted that authors may use other terms. Other terms used to describe the approach taken are deductive and inductive. Deductive is related to positivism and inductive is linked with interpretivism or phenomenology (Ishmela, 2010).

In this study, the research philosophy comprises of 'Positivism', 'Interpretivism' and 'Pragmatism' because this study is focused on quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. Thus, this research adopts a positivist approach (deductive reasoning), an interpretivist approach (inductive reasoning) and a pragmatists approach. The next section will discuss advantages and disadvantages of each of the three approaches.

3.2.1 Positivism

Positivism is a philosophical theory that is concerned with knowledge regarding matters of fact (Macionis and Gerber, 2010). Macionis and Gerber (2010) explained that the realm of fact is that of pure logic and pure mathematics. According to Collis and Hussey (2003), positivist paradigms utilise quantitative, objective, scientific, experimentalist and traditionalist approaches. A positivist approach is explained by Bryman and Bell (2015, p.28) as “An epistemological position that advocates the application of research methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond”. In contrast, the phenomenological paradigm utilises qualitative, subjectivist, humanistic and interpretivist approaches.

Sarantakos (1998) stated some of the standards that constitute the theoretical principles of the quantitative approach as follows: (i) it perceives reality as a sum of measured or measurable attributes and its main purpose is to quantify and measure social events; (ii) it gives more consideration to the methods used for collecting and analysing data; (iii) it attempts to neutralise the researchers or to reduce, or eliminate, as much as possible their influence on the researched phenomena; and (iv) it endeavours to achieve objectivity which is considered as one of the most important properties of social research.

Thus, the studies using a positivist approach are interested in finding the facts or causes of social phenomena with little regard to the subjective state of the individual (Collis and Hussey, 2009). It has been argued that the main advantages of quantitative approaches are that they can provide wide coverage of a range of situations; they can be fast and economical especially in cases where statistics are aggregated from large samples (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2008). Similarly, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.19) discussed a number of advantages that are relevant to a quantitative research approach. These include the following: (i) testing and validating already constructed theories about how (and to a lesser degree, why) phenomena occur; (ii) testing hypotheses that are constructed before the data are collected. This can generalise research findings when the data are based on random samples of sufficient size; (iii) it can generalise a research finding when it has

been replicated on many different populations and subpopulations; (iv) it is useful for obtaining data that allow quantitative predictions to be made; (v) the researcher may construct a situation that eliminates the confounding influence of many variables, allowing one to more credibly assess cause-and-effect relationships; (vi) data collection using some quantitative methods is relatively quick; (vii) it provides precise, quantitative, numerical data; (viii) Data analysis is relatively less time consuming; and (ix) it is useful for studying a large number of people.

Based on the benefits of adopting a positivist approach the research for this thesis utilised a quantitative approach in order to collect data from international companies whose offices are located in the North West of England based on the North West Business Directory's record 2017 (Begum, 2016; Begum, 2017; Roue, 2017; Vlemmiks, Begum and Roue, 2017). This is because the use of questionnaires allows a large sample to be collected and facilitates a higher response in terms of questionnaires being less time consuming than interviews.

However, the quantitative approach has some shortcomings. For example, Dudovskiy (2016) stated some disadvantages that include (i) positivism relies on experience as a valid source of knowledge. Nevertheless, a wide range of basic and important concepts such as cause, time and space are not based on experience; (ii) positivism assumes that all types of processes can be perceived as a certain variation of actions of individual or relationships between individuals; and (iii) adoption of positivism in business studies can be criticised for reliance on the status quo. In other words, research findings in positivism-based studies are only descriptive, thus they lack insight into in-depth issues. Pham (2018) indicated that the quantitative approach has persistent limitations for social research studies. For instance, it is considered impossible to measure phenomena related to intention, attitudes, thoughts of a human because these concepts may not explicitly be observed or measured with sense experience or without evidence (Hammersley, 2013). The next point relates to the fundamental theoretical perspective imposed by positivism in conducting research. Individuals whose understanding and interpretation related to any events, phenomena or issues can reveal a lot of truth about reality may be

neglected, because positivism aims to generalise the results of the research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This thesis has addressed these concerns by adopting a phenomenological approach to add further depth to the research.

3.2.2 Interpretivism

The phenomenological or interpretivist paradigm developed as a result of criticism of the positivism paradigm (Ishmela, 2010). In addition to the criticisms outlined above, there were concerns that researchers may miss out on phenomena because of the focus on theory or hypothesis testing rather than on theory or hypothesis generation.

The position of interpretivism in relation to ontology and epistemology is that interpretivists believe that reality is multiple and relative (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Interpretivists avoid the rigid structural frameworks found in positivist research and adopt a more personal and flexible research structure (Carson et al., 2001) that is receptive to capturing meanings in human interaction (Black, 2006) and makes sense of what is perceived as reality (Carson et al., 2001). Hudson and Ozanne (1988) believe that the researcher and her/his research participants are interdependent and mutually interactive. Edirisingha (2012) suggests that the interpretivist researcher opens new knowledge throughout the study and lets it develop with the help of those taking part in the research.

As a result, the goal of interpretivist research is to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour rather than generalise and predict causes and effects (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000). In the same way, Hammersley (2013) explained that since multiple interpretations are developed among humans' relationships, interpretivist researchers should try to understand the diverse ways of seeing and experiencing the world through different contexts and cultures, and try to avoid bias in studying the events and people through their own interpretations. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) also supported the view that interpretivism studies usually focus on meaning and may employ multiple methods in order to reflect different aspects of the same issue.

According to Bryman (2016), the major distinctive differences between quantitative and qualitative methods are as follows: 1. Qualitative research strategy focuses on the words rather than quantification of the data in the analysis, 2. Qualitative research contains less codification in the process of research progression compared to quantitative methods, and 3. Qualitative research is usually suitable for research that seeks to obtain a rounded and in-depth understanding of groups or organisations.

Regarding the benefits of adopting interpretivism, Wellington and Szczerbinski (2007) argued that interpretivist researchers can explore in depth an interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, views, feelings and perspectives because the key method of the interactive interview allows researchers to follow up answers to questions with further enquiries. The second advantage is that interpretivist researchers can not only describe objects, humans or events, but can also deeply understand them in their social context (Tuli, 2010). Interpretivist approaches are also used in natural settings using key methodologies, for example grounded theory, ethnography, a case study approach or life history to gain an insider's insights about that which is being researched and which allows participants to express their ideas in their own language.

Despite its strengths, there are some disadvantages to the use of interpretivism. One drawback is that the findings cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty as quantitative results (Atieno, 2009). This is because the findings of the research are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance. The second criticism of interpretivism is that it rarely addresses political and ideological impacts on knowledge and social reality (Pham, 2018). Thirdly, this paradigm aims at understanding current and specific phenomena rather than generalising these results to other people and other contexts. Mack (2010) discussed that the ontological view of interpretivism tends to be subjective rather than objective. Therefore, research outcomes are unquestionably affected by the researcher's own interpretation, own belief system, ways of thinking or cultural preferences that cause bias.

In this study, interpretivism was chosen as the research paradigm in order to explore the images of Thailand as a meetings and conferences venue between the years 2013 and 2014. It covers current host organisers who have already experienced arranging meetings and/or conferences in Thailand. This is because this phase of the study focuses on ascertaining the experiences and attitudes of current MICE customers (host organisers). Each individual may express different feelings and experiences with regard to the image of the MICE industry in Thailand, and therefore only using a quantitative method would make it difficult to generate the in-depth and varied understanding of current MICE customers' attitudes. To be more precise, this phase makes it possible to achieve objective one of this research.

3.2.3 Pragmatism

Moving to the next paradigm, pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that began in the United States around 1870 (Bacon, 2012). The philosophy of pragmatism emphasises the practical application of ideas by acting on them to actually test them in human experiences. Morgan (2014) argued that pragmatism is a paradigm for mixed methods research because this approach concentrates on realism and constructivism as two alternate ways to understand the world and what it would mean to have knowledge of the world.

According to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007, p. 123), mixed methods research is "the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration". It involves the intentional collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, with the combination of the strengths of each used to answer the research questions and to overcome the weaknesses of each single method (Creswell, 2014). In addition, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) explained that mixed methods should be used when research problems are those in which a quantitative approach or a qualitative approach, by itself, is inadequate to develop multiple perspectives and to gain a complete

understanding about a research problem or question. These would be situations when researchers need to view problems from multiple perspectives to enhance and enrich the meaning of a specific perspective, and when they need to take a macro picture of a system and add information from individuals. It has been noted that mixed methods, as the third research paradigm, can help bridge the schism between quantitative and qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005).

As recognised by mixed methods research, both quantitative and qualitative research are important and useful. The goal of mixed methods research is not to replace either of these approaches but rather to draw from the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of both in a single research study and across studies. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007) also identify a number of reasons for conducting this kind of research, for example, to enhance description of the investigated phenomena, to validate and explicate findings from another approach and to produce more comprehensive, internally consistent, and valid findings, and to provide a fuller picture and deeper understanding compared to that derived from positivistic approaches.

The use of mixed methods provides a number of advantages (Chow, Quine and Li, 2010; FoodRisc Resource Centre, 2016; Rodrigues, Correia and Kozak, 2016; Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2018), namely: (i) it provides strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research; (ii) it provides a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the research problem than either quantitative or qualitative approaches alone; (iii) it provides an approach for developing better, more context specific instruments; and (iv) it helps to explain findings or how causal processes work.

However, mixed methods research has some disadvantages and limitations (Chow, Quine and Li, 2010; FoodRisc Resource Centre, 2016; Rodrigues, Correia and Kozak, 2016; Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2018), namely: (i) the research design of mixed methods can be very complex; (ii) it takes much more time and resources to plan and implement this type of research; (iii) it may be difficult to plan and implement one method by drawing

on the findings of another; and (iv) it may be unclear how to resolve discrepancies that arise in the interpretation of the findings.

In this research, it was important to use mixed methods to capture both the individual understanding of current MICE customers and the perceptions of potential international MICE customers. This is because the qualitative research method is appropriate in seeking the detailed experiences and attitudes of current MICE customers. Using a quantitative approach also enables an exploration of the perceptions of potential MICE customers who have never used Thailand as a MICE destination.

3.3 Research Strategy

In terms of a research strategy, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) suggested that this is not only associated with philosophies, research design and objectives, but is also related to time, sampling, data collection and data analysis. In general, there are many research strategies to employ in any investigative work, such as experiments, surveys, archival research, case studies, ethnography, action research, grounded theory and narrative inquiry. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), a mixed methods approach seeks to elaborate on, or expand the findings, of one method with another method. A sequential strategy could involve beginning with a qualitative method for exploratory purposes and following this up with a quantitative method with a large sample so that the research could generalise results to a population. It could also begin with a quantitative method to test concepts, and then follow this with a qualitative method to get a greater depth of understanding of a few cases or individuals (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, in order to explore the destination images and the perceptions of Thailand for MICE purposes, qualitative and quantitative data was collected. The researcher employed the exploratory sequential design (Creswell, 2014). The data were first collected in the qualitative stage via semi-structured interviews with current customers who are host organisers and who selected Thailand for arranging meetings and/or conferences. That is to say they have

already organised meetings and/or conferences in Thailand and were able to describe their relevant experiences in relation to for example, reasons for selecting Thailand for meetings/conferences, attitudes and views after organising meetings/conferences in Thailand. Results from this phase of data collection were used to develop a follow-up questionnaire in the second phase of data collection to investigate perceptions of non-visitors to Thailand for MICE purposes.

The quantitative data was collected through questionnaires in order to measure the perceptions of potential MICE organisers from international companies whose offices are located in the North West of England. These companies who have never used Thailand for MICE purposes, were recorded in the North West Business Directory's record 2017 (Begum, 2016; Begum, 2017; Roue, 2017; Vlemmiks, Begum and Roue, 2017).

Thus, mixed methods are a valuable strategy for validating the accuracy of the findings. The use of an alternative methodology allows findings discovered by one type of method to be compared with findings from another method. These are also the most appropriate methods for answering the research objectives, such as ascertaining popular destination images from interviews, while potential customers' types of businesses and their 'positive' or 'negative' views about Thailand would be found out from questionnaires.

In brief, this research has adopted a mixed methods approach. The findings of both qualitative and quantitative data were needed for achieving the third objective of this research.

3.4 Research Framework

A research framework (Figure 3.1) was created in order to guide the entire process of the study. In addition, the researcher utilised it as a road map of the territory being investigated for all three research objectives.

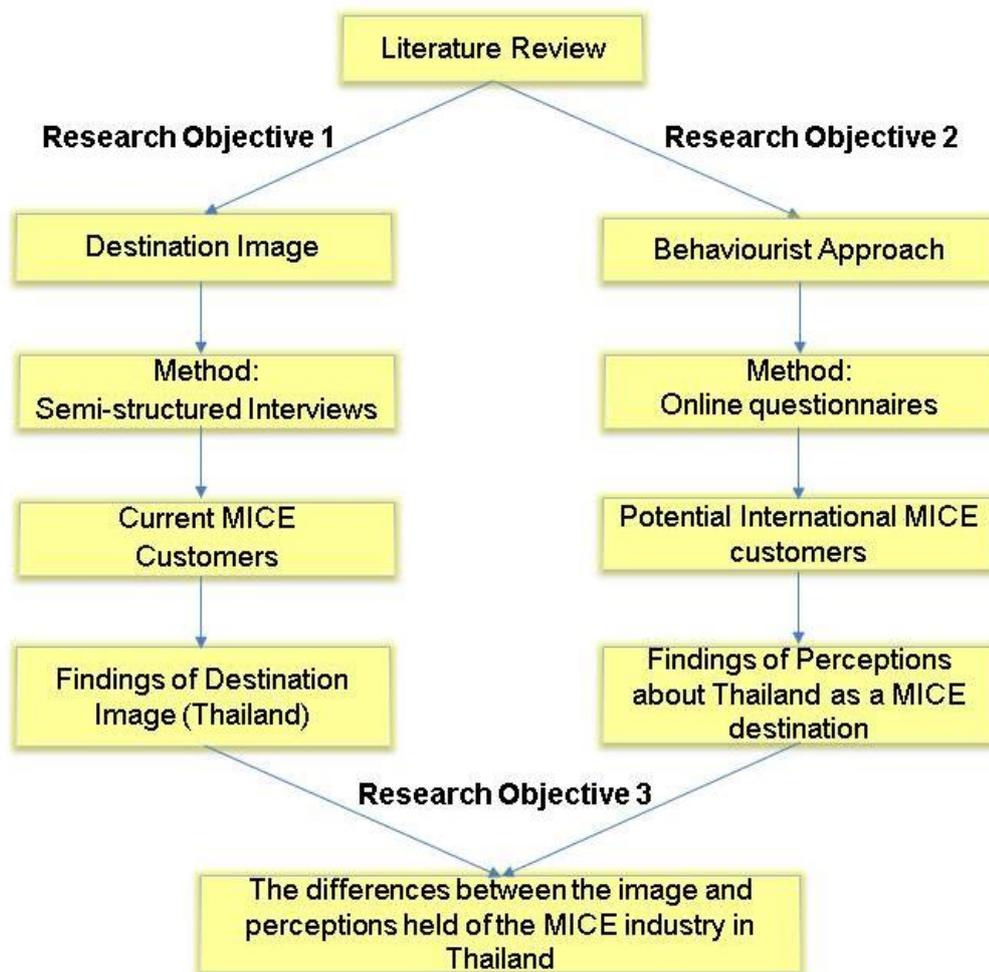


Figure 3.1 Research Framework

As stated in Chapter one, the overall aim of this research is to investigate the destination images and the perceptions of Thailand as a MICE destination. The next section will explain the research methods, population and sampling, pilot study, data collection and data analysis that were used for each objective.

3.4.1 Research Objective 1:

The first objective of this research is: to examine how current MICE customers (host organisers) understand the image of the Meetings/Conferences industry in Thailand.

3.4.1.1 Qualitative Methods

As stated earlier, this research used an interpretivist paradigm in order to investigate the destination image of Thailand for MICE purposes. Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey (2016) argued that qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant. The techniques of this method include small-group discussion for exploring beliefs, attitudes and concepts of normative behaviour; semi-structured interviews to investigate views on a focused topic or, with key informants, for background information or an institutional perspective; and in-depth interviews to understand a condition, experience, or event from a personal perspective (Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey, 2016). Hussey and Hussey (1997) also claimed that this method is able to examine and reflect on perceptions so as to gain an understanding of social and human beliefs.

Several studies (e.g. Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli, 2013) demonstrate that qualitative approaches have been employed for ascertaining the perceived images of destinations. Nuttavuthisit's (2007) study, utilising focus groups and in-depth interviews in the United States and 1000 online surveys of consumers in 30 countries, focused on correcting the negative image of Thailand as a sex tourism destination confirming that Thailand has positive features, such as friendly people, good food, local cuisine, beautiful countryside and temples. Another study by Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli (2013) evaluated the image of Brazil as a tourism destination as perceived by travel agents and tourism experts in the United States by employing a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews. The study investigated their opinions and perceptions of Brazil held by American tourists before and after their trip. The findings revealed that images of Brazil have been converging in terms of diversity and ambiguity based on previous studies by Anholt (2000), Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004), Nadeau et al. (2008), Pike (2008) and Giraldi, Giraldi and Scaduto (2011). Both positive (natural beauty, hospitality) and negative (violence, poverty, environmental degradation) elements directly affected how the image of the country was formed through a holistic process (Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000). Mariutti, Giraldi and Crescitelli (2013) also concluded that the perceived

image of the destination is important because it is the first consideration in the purchasing decision of a tourist.

Hence, qualitative methods were utilised in this study in order to seek in-depth insights from individuals who are host organisers and in charge of choosing destinations for organising meetings/conferences. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are an appropriate instrument because they not only allow informants the freedom to express their views, but also allow the interviewer to be prepared and appear competent during the interview (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). The next section discusses the population and sampling for the qualitative method.

3.4.1.2 Population and Sampling

For this research, the sample selecting technique was purposive sampling because informants were selected based on their having experienced Thailand as a MICE destination. According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012), purposive sampling enables researchers to use their judgement to select cases that will allow them to answer the research questions and achieve the research objective. Additionally, Patton (2002) suggests that for purposive sampling all of the selected samples should be rich in information related to the research questions and objectives.

As a result, the sample for the semi-structured interviews had to be representatives of companies or organisations who arranged meetings/conferences in Thailand in order to examine the image of the MICE industry in Thailand from the depth of their experiences. In order to identify a suitable sample, the Annual Report 2013 of the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau (TCEB, 2013) and the Annual Report 2014 of TCEB (TCEB, 2014) were consulted. The companies and organisations that have previous experience of being MICE customers were recorded in the Annual Report 2013 of the TCEB (TCEB, 2013) and the Annual Report 2014 of TCEB (TCEB, 2014). The researcher therefore utilised these reports to access participants' contact details and an email was sent to the addresses listed. The companies or

organisations with prior experience of arranging meetings/conferences in Thailand, but were not recorded in both the Annual Report 2013 of TCEB (TCEB, 2013) and the Annual Report 2014 of TCEB (TCEB, 2014), were excluded from the interviews.

Although there is much debate (e.g. Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998; and Morse, 1994) about what constitutes a suitable sample size in qualitative research, Bertaux (1981) attests that the smallest acceptable size is 15 informants. Therefore, the number of participants needed was between 15-20 representatives of companies or organisations.

3.4.1.3 Pilot Study

In social science research, van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) argued that pilot studies are crucial elements of a good study design. Frankland and Bloor (1999, p.154) claimed that piloting provides the qualitative researcher with a clear definition of the focus of the study, which, in turn, helps the researcher to concentrate data collection on a narrow spectrum of projected analytical topics.

The pilot study for the qualitative data collection in this research involved semi-structured interviews with five respondents who work within the MICE industry. Interview questions were originally written in English and then translated into Thai. According to Cristea (2000) cited in Stiegelbauer, Schwarz and Husar (2016, p.52), the translation processes used to transfer the meaning of a source language statement to the target language are classified into two categories: direct and indirect. Therefore, the translation process needed to pay attention to some additional concerns such as misunderstandings of respondents, in order to prevent and avoid any mistranslation of the words and concepts that were used in the construction of the questions. In regard to this issue, two steps were taken when constructing the Thai version (i) the interview questions were firstly translated by the researcher and then discussed in detail with MICE staff in Thailand while being translated and during the pilot study; and (ii) the Thai copy, along with its English version, was given to an expert translator for comments and amendments where necessary.

Based on the feedback from the pilot study, a very few modifications were made to the questions in order to improve the clarity of some of the questions. After considering all essential procedures, the final version of the interview questions was ready for the main study (as shown in Appendix A).

3.4.1.4 Data Collection

From the various qualitative research techniques available --- participant observation, interviews, focus groups --- this research conducted semi-structured interviews as the most suitable tool because this technique allowed the researcher to gather a rich and detailed set of data. Noor (2008) explains that semi-structured interviews should be employed more than structured interviews because they allow sufficient flexibility whilst maintaining some structure which enables the interviewer to keep control of the conversation. At the same time the informant can give rich, detailed answers in their own language. Additionally, Bryman (2016) claimed that there is much greater interest in the interviewee's viewpoint in qualitative interviewing compared to quantitative research. For quantitative research, the interview reflects the researcher's concerns.

The research aimed to recruit between 15-20 representatives of companies or organisations. In fact, it was possible to exceed the minimum requirement and interview 38 current host organisers. This is because opportunities arose as a result of the recommendations of interviewees which enabled snowball sampling through which other respondents were contracted. Bryman (2016) explained that snowball sampling is a form of convenience sample. Some benefits for using a snowball sampling technique are to help researchers access hidden populations and data is gathered to be useful for research (Sharma, 2017).

The 38 interviewees are representatives of both domestic and international organisations/companies whose offices are located in Bangkok, Thailand. Additionally, they had to have already arranged meetings/conferences in Thailand and they were asked about their relevant experiences in relation to,

for example, reasons for selecting Thailand for meetings/conferences, attitudes and views after organising meetings/conferences in Thailand.

All interviews were audio-recorded. On average, each interview lasted 30 minutes. The researcher recorded (with permission and the appropriate ethical considerations) the interviews electronically allowing the interviewer to simultaneously take notes. The interviews were conducted over a period of approximately three months in Bangkok.

3.4.1.5 Data Analysis

In this study, the qualitative data were analysed by the use of thematic analysis, which is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research (Guest, 2012) and emphasises pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method enables the data set to be simply organised and described in detail, as well as enabling the various aspects of the research theme to be interpreted (Boyatzis, 1998). The justification for using thematic analysis is because this analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed account of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p.16 - 22) there are six phases of thematic analysis that are as follows:

Phase 1: familiarising yourself with your data

This phase requires the researcher to be fully immersed and actively engaged in the data by firstly transcribing the interactions and then reading (and re-reading) the transcripts and/or listening to the recordings. Initial ideas should be noted down. It is important that the researcher has a comprehensive understanding of the content of the interaction and has familiarised herself/himself with all aspects of the data. This phase provides the foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Phase 2: generating initial codes

Once familiar with the data, then the researcher has to start identifying preliminary codes, which are the features of the data that appear interesting and meaningful. These codes are more numerous and specific than themes, but provide an indication of the context of the conversation.

Phase 3: searching for themes

The third step in the process is the start of the interpretive analysis of the collated codes. Relevant data extracts are sorted (combined or split) according to overarching themes. The researcher's thought processes should allude to the relationship between codes, subthemes, and themes.

Phase 4: reviewing themes

A deeper review of identified themes follows where the researcher needs to question whether to combine, refine, separate, or discard initial themes. Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes. This is usually done over two phases, where the themes need to be checked in relation to the coded extracts (phase 1), and then for the overall data set (phase 2). A thematic map can be generated from this step.

Phase 5: defining and naming themes

This step involves refining and defining the themes and potential subthemes within the data. Ongoing analysis is required to further enhance the identified themes. The researcher needs to provide theme names and clear working definitions that capture the essence of each theme in a concise and punchy manner. At this point, a unified story of the data needs to emerge from the themes.

Phase 6: producing the report

Finally, the researcher needs to transform her/his analysis into an interpretable piece of writing by using vivid and compelling extract examples that relate to the themes, research questions, and literature. The report has to relay the results of the analysis in a way that convinces the reader of its merit and validity.

It must go beyond a mere description of the themes and portray an analysis supported with empirical evidence that addresses the research question.

This research followed the above six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke, 2006. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2004), thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants and generating unanticipated insights.

As mentioned in section 3.4.1.4, all of the qualitative data were audio-recorded interviews in the Thai language. Initially, the researcher transcribed conversations into textual data in order to create a summary of the individual's interviews and verbatim transcripts as part of the analysis process. It was necessary to organise the data into easily retrievable sections. Therefore, each interview was numbered so that interviewees were referred to and any unit of textual data could be traced back to its original context by their code numbers. All of interviewees are anonymous in the transcripts. Eventually, the interview data were translated into English. Before generating initial codes, the transcripts from the interviews were read several times. They were coded manually by using highlighters, coloured pens, and Post-it notes to take notes on the text. After all data had been coded, data that was identified by the same code could be collated. Next, the researcher examined the codes and some of them clearly fitted together into a theme. At the end of this step the codes were organised into broader themes that answered the research question. The researcher then reviewed, modified and developed the preliminary themes that were identified in the previous step. The data associated with each theme was colour-coded and was considered carefully. The selected themes were further refined to ensure that they were specific enough, and that no themes overlapped or repeated aspects of other themes, and that they were broad enough to summarise a set of ideas in several text segments (Attride-Stirling, 2001). When these themes emerge, they have to be operationalised to support the new and existing text segments.

In relation to with data presentation, Cohen and Crabtree (2006) stated that the findings of qualitative data can be displayed by selecting key quotes, building tables or matrices, or using diagrams to visually display theories or models.

Additionally, highlighting direct quotes or excerpts from interviews is a widely used method for describing themes. As a result, using direct quotes enables the readers to understand the findings of the analysis, and to evaluate the credibility or validity of the researcher's claims. This will be seen in Chapter 4 in the discussion of the data from the interviews. In addition, the findings of qualitative data not only answered the first research objective, but also assisted with creating questionnaires in the next stage of this study.

3.4.2 Research Objective 2:

The second research objective is: to assess the perceptions of potential international companies/organisations towards the Meetings/Conferences industry in Thailand and determine their types of businesses with 'positive' or 'negative' attitudes.

3.4.2.1 Quantitative Methods

As noted above, this study utilised a quantitative approach in order to collect data from international companies whose offices are located in the North West of England, based on the North West Business Directory's record 2017 (Begum, 2016; Begum, 2017; Roue, 2017; Vlemmiks, Begum and Roue, 2017). According to Bryman and Bell (2007, p.154), quantitative research develops and uses mathematical models, theories and hypotheses to describe relevant natural phenomena and to study the quantitative properties and phenomena and their relationships. This provides a way to establish, develop, strengthen and review the existing theory. In order to justify employing a quantitative method, previous studies (Tung, 2003; Andreassen and Olsen, 2008; Chen, Chen and Lee, 2011; Khan and Ahmad, 2012; Swar, 2012; Anamaria and Maria – Cristina, 2013; Stolz et al., 2013; Dedeoglu and Demirer, 2015; Wang and Hung, 2015; Altareri, 2016; Purwanto et al., 2016; Riquelme, Roman and Iacobucciet, 2016; Saqib, Farooq and Zafar, 2016; Su, Hsu and Swanson, 2017; Murmura and Bravi, 2018) have shown an extensive use of quantitative methods to measure perceptions, attitudes and levels of satisfaction. For instance, a study by Su, Hsu and Swanson (2017) concentrated on domestic tourists' perceptions. The study investigated the relationship between three

important visitor perceptions (i.e. service fairness, destination image and service quality) and tourism destination loyalty (i.e. positive word-of-mouth referrals and intention to revisit) through overall destination satisfaction and trust in destination service providers. In the same way, Chen, Chen and Lee (2011) explored the interrelationships between tourist perceptions, service performance, customer satisfaction and sustainable tourism. The researchers conducted 1623 surveys at Kinmen, Taiwan. This research found that all attributes were perceived as “positive” pre- and post-visit, indicating that a large percentage of respondents had a good impression of the destination facilities of Kinmen Island prior to their visit and were also satisfied with these attributes after they visited.

Bryman and Bell (2015) asserted that a quantitative method could be used when the data is measurable and quantifiable. One of the advantages of using the quantitative research approach is the use of statistical data as an instrument for saving time and resources (Bryman, 2016). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2008) also mentioned that quantitative studies tend to be highly structured, so that the researcher specifies the main features of the design before getting a single datum.

It has been argued that utilising a questionnaire is a good way to obtain data about the opinions and behaviours of a large number of people (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). Additionally, Oppenheim (1992) claimed that questionnaires are an important and efficient tool for collecting primary data when the researcher knows exactly what information is required and how to measure the variables of interest. Moreover, the use of questionnaires is acceptable in a great deal of research about customers' perceptions, such as Robinson and Callan (2001, 2005), Pandza and Vignali (2010), Rittichinuwat and Mair (2012), Kongprasert and Virutamasen (2015), Uzunboylu (2016). As an illustration, Rittichinuwat and Mair (2012) discovered the perceptions of convention attendees regarding green meetings. The researchers explained that green meetings have been taken to mean those with sustainable practices and/or facilities. A self-administered questionnaire was conducted with attendees at four large conventions in Thailand. Attendees were divided into

various convention participant roles, namely delegates, organisers, exhibitors and sponsors. The findings demonstrated that attendees were positive about being green or sustainable, especially attending meetings and staying in the same hotel; eating local food; and recycling notepaper from previous conferences. However, participants were less positive about paying more for green meetings. Therefore, the perceptions and views of potential international MICE customers were investigated by using the quantitative method.

3.4.2.2 Questionnaire design

According to Collis and Hussey (2003, p. 173), “a questionnaire is a list of carefully designed questions, chosen after considerable testing, with a view to eliciting reliable responses from chosen sample”. The authors also argued that questionnaires are related to both positivistic and phenomenological approaches.

For this research, a self-completion questionnaire was selected because of its advantages (Sekaran, 2003) namely (i) The researcher can collect all the completed responses within a short period of time; (ii) The personally administered questionnaire affords the opportunity to introduce the research topic and motivate the respondents to offer their frank answer to a researcher; (iii) Administering questionnaires to a large number of individuals at the same time is less expensive and consumes less time than interviewing; and (iv) It does not require as many skills to administer the questionnaire as conducting interviews. Nevertheless, there is a disadvantage of the personally administered questionnaire, in that the respondents are often unable, or disinclined, to allow time at work to be spent on data collection.

In this study, a web-based survey was designed as one of the means of distributing the survey. The website used was ‘Google Docs’. Several studies of Couper (2000), Dillman (2000), Fricker and Schonlau (2002), Schonlau, Fricker and Elliott (2002), and Tuten, Urban and Bosnjak (2002) claimed that Internet-based surveys have a lot of benefits, for instance, (i) they are much cheaper to conduct; (ii) they are faster; and (iii) when combined with other

survey modes, they yield higher response rates than conventional survey modes by themselves.

Based on the works by Calantone et al. (1989), Tapachai and Waryszak (2000), Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown (2001), Changsorn (2003), Maesincee et al. (2003), Henkel et al. (2006), Nuttavuthisit (2007), Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip (2013), Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake (2015), and Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018), the positive images of Thailand to emerge were related to culture, nature, food, history, friendly people and ideas of the exotic. By contrast, the negative images included low-quality products, traffic jams, pollutions and language barriers. Thus, the first draft of the questionnaire was created and developed from the findings of the qualitative data and the aforementioned studies (e.g. Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Changsorn, 2003; Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake (2015); Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). The questions in the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. The findings of the quantitative data will be presented in Chapter 5.

Pilot testing the questionnaire also helped with clarifying the wording of the questions, as well as the validity and reliability of the questionnaire (Field, 2009). In terms of validity and reliability, Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted in order to test the questionnaire's coefficient of reliability for measuring each question. The result of 0.861 clearly indicated that the questionnaire set is adequately reliable because according to Rosenthal and Rosnow (2008), Bryman and Bell (2003), and Field (2005) suggested that a result of 0.70 is an acceptable level with the preferable amount being 0.80 or above. In the case of this thesis the result of 0.80 was exceeded.

In order to ensure that only potential MICE customers who have never organised meetings/conferences in Thailand answer the questions, the first question was a filter to exclude those organisations/companies who have already experienced Thailand for MICE purposes. Closed questions were used in this study because as Collis and Hussey (2003) and Moore (2006) claimed, closed questions are helpful for collecting certain types of data and are simple

for the respondent to complete and easy to analyse, since the range of answers is limited. The first part of the questionnaire focused on the background information of respondents, including the type of business, the duration of establishment, the actual types of meetings/conferences. In other parts the participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements in the form of a four level Likert scale. The levels of measurement are: strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias's (2000) study verified that the Likert scale is a method which can reliably measure people's attitudes. Question types on perceptions about Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination employed the four level Likert scale starting with 1 strongly disagree to 4 strongly agree. Ten statements were listed with regard to 1. availability of venues; 2. service quality; 3. culture; 4. good value for money; 5. tourist attractions; 6. political stability; 7. ease of access; 8. safety; 9. friendliness; and 10. quality of MICE facilities. In terms of barriers, six statements were focused on 1. language barriers, 2. remote distance, 3. too expensive for organising meetings/conferences, 4. unstable political environment, 5. epidemic disease issues, and 6. lack of safety. The last open-ended question was designed to elicit from the sample thoughts concerning Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination (see Appendix B).

3.4.2.3 Population and Sampling

The sample was selected using systematic random sampling (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2012). This technique is to reduce the potential for human bias in the selection of cases to be included in the sample and it allows researchers to make statistical conclusions from the data collected that will be considered to be valid (Lund Research, 2012).

In this study, the total number of international companies is about 1,000, so, using Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1967; Israel, 2013) as shown in Figure 3.2, with a level of certainty of 95%, the sample size for the quantitative questionnaire should be around 286.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

e = 0.05 at 95% level of certainty

N= 1000

n = sample size

Figure 3.2 Yamane's formula. Adapted from Yamane (1967), p. 886.

3.4.2.4 Pilot Study

A pilot study is a small-scale research project conducted before the final full-scale study (Ismail, Kinchin and Edwards, 2018). According to works by van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) and Crossman (2019), pilot studies for quantitative data collection help researchers to prevent the waste of financial resources by using inappropriate instruments in the final study.

The purpose of the pre-test for a quantitative approach is to double check whether the questions are well understood by the participants. The reason for piloting as explained by Fisher (2007) is to ensure that flaws within questions are identified and respondent reactions can be tested. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) also pointed out that the pilot study enables some assessment of the questions' validity and likely reliability of the data that will be gathered. Comments from the participants in the pilot study may be used to improve the main study (Borg and Gall, 1989).

For the pilot study, online questionnaires were distributed to 50 international companies. There were ten (20%) completed questionnaires. Some respondents provided a few comments on some statements about barriers to not choosing Thailand as a meeting/conferences destination, for example, political environment and lack of safety. They commented that these questions were unclear. Consequently, these questions were amended; more details were added after consulting with the research supervision team. The final version of the questionnaire (Appendix B) was then ready for distribution.

3.4.2.5 Data Collection

Based on the studies of Collis and Hussey (2003), Creswell (2003), Sekaran (2003) and Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2000), a questionnaire survey has been one of the most widely used methods for collecting primary data in business and management research. It is cheaper and less time-consuming than conducting interviews and a very large sample can be taken (Collis and Hussey, 2003).

In this study, the researcher conducted online surveys (Google Docs) with different targeted participants, namely the 1000 biggest companies in the world, 1000 UK companies, and local companies in Liverpool, but the response rate was lower than the number required to make the results meaningful. The methods for accomplishing the required number of responses consisted of:

1. 1000 biggest companies of the world based on 2016 Forbes Ranking. After sending online questionnaires to 1000 world's biggest companies, the researcher waited for their response for three months but obtained only 12 responses. Next, a follow-up request was sent but the outcome remained the same.
2. 1000 UK companies based on the London Stock Exchange Group in the year of 2016/17, only one company who completed the online questionnaire but the response showed that they had already arranged meetings/conferences in Thailand, which meant it was invalid because this research focuses on international companies who have never organised meetings/conferences in Thailand.
3. The third step was to focus on only Liverpool based companies but only 4 out of a possible 4000 responses were received.

Finally, the researcher selected a sample based on the North West Business Directory's record 2017 as listed in a number of sources (Begum, 2016; Begum, 2017; Roue, 2017; Vlemmiks, Begum and Roue, 2017) to ensure a random sample. 1000 companies are located in the North West of England. To resolve the previous problems, in order to complete the number (286) of respondents

needed, the researcher changed the approach from email to contacting companies by telephone and arranging face-to-face meetings to distribute the survey. Therefore, data collection for the survey took approximately 1 year and 8 months, which was longer than anticipated.

3.4.2.6 Data Analysis

The common software application, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 4, was selected and used to analyse the quantitative data for this research.

Generally, there are a variety of statistical techniques and methods for analysing quantitative data. For the purpose of achieving the second objective of this research, several techniques were adopted. These included Cronbach's Alpha, Descriptive statistics technique, Inferential statistics technique (Non-parametric test technique) i.e. the Chi-Square test.

Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient: For this study, Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used in order to test the questionnaire's coefficient of reliability for measuring each question. According to Pallant (2007), Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient is one of the most commonly used indicators of internal consistency.

Descriptive statistics techniques: Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p.258) state that "Descriptive statistics are the procedures for summarising data with the intention of discovering trends and patterns, and summarising results to facilitate understanding and communication. The outcome of descriptive statistics includes a frequency table, means, and correlations". Thus, descriptive statistics were used in this study to describe the characteristics of the participants, because these statistics are suitable for finding basic descriptive statistics. For example, their type of business, the duration of establishment, their actual types of meetings/conferences.

Inferential statistics techniques: Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, p.258) explained that "Inferential techniques are typically generated after the descriptive results have been examined. They are normally used to test hypotheses, or obtain descriptive results". Field (2009) identified that there are

two main methods used when undertaking statistical data analysis: parametric and non-parametric testing.

Based on the work by Hoskin (n.d.), **Parametric statistical procedures** rely on assumptions about the shape of the distribution (i.e. assume a normal distribution) in the underlying population and about the form or parameters (i.e. means and standard deviations) of the assumed distribution.

For **Non-parametric procedures**, Hoskin (n.d.) stated that these procedures rely on no or few assumptions about the shape or parameters of the population distribution from which the sample was drawn. Some examples of inferential statistical methods include the Cross tabulations and the Chi-Square test. Cross tabulations are utilised in bivariate analysis to reveal relationships between two variables and to display the number of cases that have the corresponding combination of values. The Chi-Square (χ^2) is used to determine whether there is a statistically significant relationship between two variables. The test provided information on the relation of variables based on the null hypothesis (H_0) (there was no relationship between variables), and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) (there was a relationship between variables). The significance level (the p-value) was at a starting value of 0.05.

Hence, this research used inferential statistics to analyse the perceptions of potential international companies/organisations towards the Meetings/Conferences industry in Thailand and to determine their types of businesses with 'positive' or 'negative' attitudes. The statistical method was also further utilised to describe the Chi-Square test with regard to the area of the study (see more details in chapters 5 and 6). The hypothesis of this research includes the null hypothesis (H_0): There is no relationship between respondents' business type and their attitudes/perceptions about Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination, and the alternative hypothesis (H_1): There is a relationship between respondents' business type and their attitudes/perceptions about Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination.

3.4.3 Research Objective 3:

The third objective of this research is: to ascertain the differences between the images and perceptions held of the Meetings/Conferences industry in Thailand.

3.4.3.1 Mixed Methods

According to Creswell (2009), mixed methods involves combining or integrating qualitative and quantitative research and data in a research study.

There are six types of mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2014):

1. **Sequential Explanatory Design:** This method is a two phase design where the quantitative data is collected first followed by qualitative data collection. The purpose is to use the qualitative results to further explain and interpret the findings from the quantitative phase.
2. **Sequential Exploratory Design:** This method also has a two phase design. The qualitative data is collected first, followed by the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The purpose of this design is to develop an instrument (such as a survey), to develop a classification for testing, or to identify variables.
3. **Sequential Transformative Design:** This type of design also has two phases, but allows the theoretical perspective of the researcher to guide the study and determine the order of data collection. The results from both methods are integrated at the end of the study during the interpretation phase.
4. **Concurrent Triangulation Design:** In this design, qualitative and quantitative data are collected concurrently in one phase. The data is analysed separately and then compared and/or combined. This method is used to confirm, cross-validate or corroborate findings. It is often used to overcome a weakness in one method with the strengths of another. It can also be useful in expanding quantitative data through collection of open-ended qualitative data.
5. **Concurrent Nested (Embedded) Design:** This design includes one phase of data collection in which priority is given to one approach that guides the project, while the other approach is embedded or nested into the

project and provides a supporting role. The embedded approach is often addressing a different question from the primary research question.

6. Concurrent Transformative Design: This method involves concurrent data collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. This perspective guides all methodological choices and the purpose is to evaluate that perspective at different level of analysis.

As stated in section 3.3, this research used the sequential exploratory design. This involved beginning with the qualitative research approach to investigate what the typical images of Thailand as a meetings and conferences venue were between 2013 and 2014 by the current host organisers with experience of arranging meetings and/or conferences in Thailand. These findings were subsequently used to develop the questionnaires to explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers in the United Kingdom. The potential MICE customers who formed the target sample for the questionnaire were international companies. These companies have not previously used Thailand as a Meeting and Conference destination. In addition, the outcomes of the questionnaire data demonstrated a correlation between their respondent's type of business and their 'positive' or 'negative' views about Thailand. Finally, the results obtained from the qualitative and quantitative data collection have been compared by assessing whether the destination images of Thailand towards the MICE industry are different from the perceptions of potential international MICE customers.

3.4.3.2 Data Analysis

Based on work by Olsen (2004), triangulation is defined as the mixing of data or methods in social science in order to check the results of one and the same subject. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) defined triangulation as an "attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint". Likewise, Altrichter et al. (2008) contended that triangulation gives a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation.

There are four basic types of triangulation (Denzin, 1978):

1. Data triangulation: using different sources of data. This includes different times for data collection, different places from which to collect the data, and different people who could be involved in the research study.
2. Investigator triangulation: using numerous people (or at least more than one) in the data gathering and data analysis processes.
3. Theory triangulation: approaching the data with multiple theories.
4. Methodological triangulation: using more than one method to gather data such as interviews, observations, questionnaires and documents.

This study adopts methodological triangulation due to the strengths of mixed methods to allow the limitations from each method to be transcended by comparing findings from different objectives (Williamson, 2005), to achieve more accurate data (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007), and to gain a wider knowledge of the MICE industry in Thailand through mixed methods because of the dearth of research studies on the relationship between the destination's images, perceptions and MICE customers.

Although triangulation is regarded as a means to add richness and depth to a research inquiry, there are some criticisms of the use of triangulation in research (Heale and Forbes, 2013). For instance, triangulation assumes that the data from two distinct research methods are comparable and may or may not be of equal weight in the research inquiry. Additionally, when two or more data sets have convergent findings, there must be caution in interpretation since it may simply mean that each of the data sets is flawed.

According to Heale and Forbes (2013), triangulation is often used to describe research where two or more methods are used, known as mixed methods. Combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to answer a specific question may result in one of the following three outcomes (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003):

1. The results may converge and lead to the same conclusion;

2. The results may relate to different objects or phenomena but may be complementary to each other and used to supplement the individual results; and
3. The results may be divergent or contradictory.

In detail, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) explained that converging results intend to increase validity through verification; complementary results emphasise different aspects of the phenomena or illustrate different phenomena; and divergent results can generate new and better explanations for the phenomena under investigation. Thus, this research compared results from quantitative data with qualitative data by employing triangulation in order to investigate three outcomes.

3.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter a detailed account of the research philosophy, strategy and methods that were used for this research has been presented. Additionally, the selected tools used for the analysis of findings have been described.

The paradigm of this research is mixed methods, and an exploratory sequential design and a methodological triangulation were adopted. These were selected in order to develop an appropriate survey to administer to a larger sample. This research utilises both qualitative and quantitative methods as a means to maintain the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of using both approaches in a single research study. In this case, the qualitative and quantitative data collection was performed sequentially, occurring during different phases of the research. The method of research is designed for the purpose of triangulation. The data analysis of the qualitative research was completed prior to the quantitative research. The data collection process involved two methods: semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey.

The sample selecting technique for the qualitative research approach was purposive sampling because informants were selected based on their having experienced Thailand as a MICE destination. Therefore, the sample had to be made up of representatives of companies, or organisations, who arranged meetings/conferences in Thailand and were recorded in the Annual Report

2013 of the TCEB (TCEB, 2013) and the Annual Report 2014 of TCEB (TCEB, 2014). In terms of qualitative strategies, the data was analysed by using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and other previous studies that are discussed in Chapter 2. The results of the qualitative findings will be presented and discussed in Chapter 4.

For the quantitative method, the type of research sampling used was systematic random sampling. There are three channels used to contribute to the questionnaires, the web-based survey uploaded to the website (Google Docs), telephone and face-to-face interviews. With regard to validity and reliability, the Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.861 indicated the coefficient of reliability for the questionnaire set because numerous scholars (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1991; Bryman and Bell, 2003; and Field, 2005) claimed that 0.70 is an acceptable level with the preferable amount being 0.80 or above. Concerning quantitative strategies, the data were analysed, described and presented by descriptive and inferential statistics. The results will be displayed and discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

In Chapter 7, the differences between current popular destination images and perceptions of the destination are discussed by triangulating the findings of the thesis, including the qualitative and quantitative findings, in order to achieve objective three.

This chapter has discussed the methods employed for the research. The next chapter (Chapter 4) will discuss the qualitative findings in relation to objective one.

Chapter 4: Qualitative Findings

4.1 Introduction

The first objective of this research was to investigate the destination image of Thailand among event organisers who had arranged MICE events in Thailand. This objective was achieved through a series of interviews with event organisers at domestic and international organisations in Bangkok, who had previously hosted one or more events in Thailand. Data was then analysed using a thematic analysis approach to identify key themes in Thailand's image as a MICE destination.

The purpose of this chapter is to report on the findings of the qualitative research. The findings are presented with a combination of narration and discussion of each of the themes and further critical analysis using the literature explored in Chapter 2 as a source of information. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the interviews and an introduction to the research participants in Section 4.2. It then moves to investigate the destination image components of Thailand, which are divided into general destination image characteristics (Section 4.3) and MICE-specific destination image characteristics (Section 4.4). The chapter closes with a summary of the chapter which integrates the findings and sets the stage for the quantitative findings presented in Chapter 5.

4.2 Overview of the Interviews and Introduction to the Participants

This study was conducted at the level of individual organisations, with participants drawn from leadership and supporting roles that were responsible for events management or events planning within the agency or company. The minimum sample size was 15 to 20 participants, as explained in Chapter 3. This was based on a general recommendation that the minimum sample size for a larger qualitative study designed to develop theories should be at least 15 members (Bertaux, 1981). However, the researcher did not in fact specify a maximum sample size prior to the research. Instead, a theoretical saturation approach was used (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Using this sampling approach, the researcher continues to recruit participants and conduct interviews until

there is no new knowledge that can be extracted from the interviews (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

In practice, the researcher was able to recruit a total of 38 organisation/company employees, which exceeded the minimum sample of 15 to 20 employees. As each participant represents an individual organisation/company, the total number of organisations/companies represented in the sample was also 38. Each participant was given a code which indicates whether the participant was from a domestic (DO) or international (IN) organisation, combined with a sequence number. For example, DO1 was the respondent in the first domestic interview conducted.

The participants came from a variety of sectors (as shown in Appendix C). A total of 11 respondents (28.9% of the sample) were from international diplomatic and intergovernmental organisations, trade and industry federations, and private industry sectors including the coffee, insurance, certification, and healthcare industries. 27 participants (71.1% of the sample) were from domestic organisations, including government agencies, industry associations, and business sectors including construction, education, insurance, and hospitality, as well as one multi-sector corporation. Therefore, there are different sectoral perspectives, including non-profit, industry, and business. However, there are some sectors including finance that are missing, and domestic government is heavily overrepresented.

The participants were drawn from a range of levels within an organisation. While the majority of respondents were operational staff (for example project/product managers and administrative assistant), there were also many participants at the middle management level (for example Director of Department/Division) and a small number of upper management (for example Director and General Manager). Thus, the interviewees represent a range of different organisational perspectives on the choice of a MICE tourism destination and levels of responsibility for destination choice.

4.3 General Destination Image of Thailand

The first set of themes relating to the destination image of Thailand is the themes that relate to the general tourism destination image. In other words, these are the aspects of Thailand's tourism destination image that appeal to MICE tourists, but which have mainly developed in the mass tourism sector and are also highly relevant to leisure tourists. These dimensions of the destination image include Thai culture and food, hospitality of Thai tourism organisations and service providers, the friendliness of Thai people, and the availability and variety of tourist attractions and activities. The importance of these themes was relatively equal to participants, although the hospitality and friendliness themes were mentioned by fewer interviewees than Thai culture and food and tourist activities and attractions.

4.3.1 Thai Culture and Food

One of the shared aspects of the destination image of Thailand was a highly positive view of Thai culture. Many of the respondents had a strongly positive view of Thai culture, with participants often stating that Thai culture itself attracted attendees (DO1, DO12, DO23, IN7). Furthermore, Thai culture was a frequent aspect of program planning, with performances and pre-event or post-event tourism trips centred on Thai culture. Some of the remarks about this included:

“[Thai culture was] an important item on our international symposium, which included [program items like] Thai classical dance performances in welcome and farewell parties.” (DO1)

“Our Association selected Thailand in part because of Thai culture... We prepared Thai dances and long drum parades for our attendees.” (DO12)

“Our department provided cultural trips and visits such as to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (or Wat Phra Kaew) and Ayutthaya Province after the end of our international meetings and conferences.” (DO23)

“Thai culture is diverse and interesting for delegates... We provide cultural tours and visits for them.” (IN7)

In response to the cultural activities and performances, participants stated that their attendees were “satisfied and happy” (IN7). Therefore, the overall effect of Thai culture is that it is a reason for planners to select Thailand as a location, a factor in the event planning itself, and a positive draw for attendees. Furthermore, effectively presenting Thai culture during the program could lead to feelings of satisfaction and happiness among attendees.

Many previous studies have highlighted the uniqueness and attractiveness of Thai culture as one of the key aspects of the country’s destination image (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). These studies often have identified Thai culture as one of the main attractions of Thailand. For example, Henkel et al. (2006) noted that cultural sightseeing was one of the main activities of tourists to the country. In another study, the religious culture, for example temples that serve as tourist destinations (Nuttavuthisit, 2007) was identified as a significant draw for tourists. Other studies noted that Thai culture remained a positive aspect of Thailand’s destination image, even as it was overrun with negative aspects like political instability and violence (Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). Thus, this study is consistent with the findings of previous research which have highlighted Thai culture as a significant general destination image. It also extends the current research by showing that it is a distinct characteristic of Thailand that is integrated into conference and meeting planning in order to attract and encourage participation.

In addition to the generally positive view of Thai culture, there were two aspects that stood out for respondents. These included Thai food (Section 4.3.1.1) and Thai fruit specifically (Section 4.3.1.2).

4.3.1.1 Thai food

Thai food was a central aspect of Thailand’s culture in many of the interviews. One of the interviewees noted that the quality and desirability of the local food was a factor in planning an international meeting (IN8). Many of the other

participants seemed to agree that this aspect of Thai culture was one of its strengths. Participants frequently mentioned that Thai food was a specific aspect of Thai culture that drew international attention. A sample of the remarks on Thai food from interviewees was:

“I think that most foreign attendees like [Thai food].” (IN1)

“I think that Thai food is one of the charms of Thailand [for foreign visitors].” (DO12)

Some of the specific aspects of Thai food that were impressive to respondents were the food quality and food freshness. Some of the statements on this topic included:

“There are a variety of menus and food is typically of good quality and tastes good... [This makes] our foreign attendees feel satisfied and gratified.” (IN6)

“According to our delegates, Thai cuisine, traditional Thai food and fresh seafood are impressive.” (IN7)

“The majority of participants are fond of Thai food, especially its deliciousness and variety.” (IN8)

Despite the popularity of Thai food, there were some concerns about quality and especially about meeting standards. For example, respondents stated:

“Sometimes [the food quality] is not good enough, depending on the hotel that my association selects.” (DO7)

“The quality of food varies between hotels, so that is a concern [for planning]. I want every hotel to be on the same basis for good standards.” (IN1)

In the case of one organisation, there was a strategy to deal with this problem, which was keeping a list of hotels that have been used before, including notes about characteristics like food quality (IN1). This helped the organisation select hotels that were known to have good food, as well as other characteristics.

In summary, Thai food was seen as one of the main advantages by attendees and in response, organisers did tend to place it on their itineraries. Overall it was viewed as very positively by attendees. There are quality differences between hotels, but this can be managed by strategies like keeping notes.

Thai food has also long been known to be one of the attractive aspects of Thailand's destination image (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Changsorn, 2003; Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007). Furthermore, earlier studies have shown that Thai food is not perceived as just being spicy, despite the stereotypes in other countries (Maesincee et al., 2003). Instead, it is perceived as fresh, tasty, and good quality for money. Thus, this dimension is also consistent with previous research, which has also found that food is an important part of the tourism destination image of Thailand in general. This research does extend previous findings by showing that MICE event planners specifically incorporate Thai food into their itineraries and planning, in order to suit guest preferences and provide a culinary experience for attendees.

4.3.1.2 Thai fruits

One of the surprising aspects of Thai food and culture that emerged from the interviews was the position of Thai fruits. One interviewee noted that Thai fruit, which featured on their conference menus, was well-received and viewed positively by respondents (DO12). Another participant explained that the mangosteen played a central role in their organisation's conference activities:

“Participants also are impressed by...tropical Thai fruits, especially mangosteen. We use mangosteen in an activity with our foreign participants, for example, to teach them how to open the thick dark red rind with a sharp knife or by hands... In my opinion, although this activity is only a small point, it can create a good relationship between international participants.” (IN7)

Thus, even though it is not obvious, Thai fruit is one of the aspects of Thai culture that is viewed positively by event attendees. At least some event

organisers have recognised this and have integrated Thai fruit into their activities, offering positive results.

The relatively high importance of Thai fruit, rather than its cuisine, as one of the aspects of Thai culture that attract tourists appears to be unique to this study. Even though many studies mentioned food (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Changsorn, 2003; Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007), they were generally concerned with prepared food and Thai cuisine rather than fresh foods. However, in at least some cases the novelty and exoticness of fruit like the mangosteen played a part in the activities of the conference itself. This is an interesting aspect of the destination image of Thailand that may not be as common in other areas.

4.3.2 Hospitality of Organisations and Service Providers

Another aspect of Thailand's destination image was that of hospitality, which was identified by several of the respondents. One participant identified hospitality generally as a factor that contributed to Thailand's destination attractiveness (IN1). Other respondents offered more detailed information about the nature of Thai hospitality and its importance:

“In my view, Thai hospitality is better than other countries and Thai staff are willing to serve.” (DO12)

“Whatever makes our delegates feel very glad and pleased, we will provide it...” (DO21)

“Our staff of the department takes good care of international participants, for example we provide a pick-up service from the airport to the hotel when participants arrive. This makes them feel very impressed and delighted.” (DO23)

“... Thai hospitality is excellent, because staff members are service-minded, good in spirits and smiling. The speed of service also is very

good... I think that service in Thailand is faster than many countries in Southeast Asia.” (IN1)

The outcome of this high level of hospitality is that attendees feel welcome and are satisfied with their experience:

“After [the meeting]... all relevant parties appreciated the country in many aspects, especially hospitality and abundant food.” (DO13)

Thus, it can be stated that the hospitality provided at the organisational level, including the services offered and the positive attitude of service providers, are part of the destination image of Thailand for event planners. Hospitality and service quality also influenced the perception of attendees and their level of satisfaction. Thus, the hospitality provided by Thai service providers can be stated to be one of the characteristics that affect the destination image of Thailand.

Hospitality is one of the basic characteristics of a destination image in general (Morrison, 2013). A few previous studies have found that Thai hospitality is an important aspect of Thailand’s destination image (Calantone et al., 1989; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). However, the position of hospitality within these studies has been mixed. While Calantone et al. (1989) merely remarked on the perception of hospitality as a characteristic of Thailand, Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018) argued that it was part of an essential Thai-ness of Thailand that continued to attract visitors despite the continued political unrest. Thus, this research furthers the existing literature by showing the perceived importance of hospitality as one of the dimensions of Thailand’s destination image.

Another way in which it contributes is by identifying hospitality as a factor in the site selection process. The degree of hospitality expected at a destination is used in many of the site selection rubrics or models that were reviewed in the literature (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014). Thus, it was already expected that this would be a factor in the site planners’ choice. What

was less clear was whether Thailand would be viewed as having high levels of hospitality compared to other destinations or whether this would be important for planning purposes. This research showed that in general, conference planners *do* consider that Thai event venues have high levels of hospitality and that they do feel welcome within these venues. Thus, this study suggests that hospitality is one of the aspects of Thailand's general destination image that is also important for the MICE tourism industry.

4.3.3 Friendliness of Thai People

While hospitality (Section 4.3.2) was concerned with the organisational hospitality and service provision, there is also another dimension of welcoming people, which is the individual friendliness of Thai people. Several of the interviewees identified the friendliness of Thai people as a characteristic that influenced the choice of Thailand as a destination:

“In my opinion, strength of organising meetings and conferences in Thailand is Thai people who are friendly and helpful. Thai people like to welcome visitors and they are always willing to assist attendees.” (DO3)

Participants including DO1 and DO4 also stated that the friendliness of Thai people was part of the benefit of organising events in Thailand. Others noted that conference attendees had a highly positive response to the friendliness they encountered:

“... our delegates felt impressed by the friendliness of Thai people, including beaming smiles.” (DO1)

Thus, it is clear that personal friendliness of Thai people does influence the perception of event planners about Thailand as a suitable destination for MICE tourism. It is also reported to influence the experience of visitors, who appreciated the level of friendliness they encountered.

The friendliness of Thai people is one of the main themes to have emerged in previous studies of Thailand's destination image, occurring in almost every study that investigated the question (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and

Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). However, this perception cannot be taken at face value, because of the “Land of Smiles” destination marketing campaign that was conducted by Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) in major markets in recent years. This marketing campaign set expectations that visitors to Thailand would encounter friendly people. In response to this expectation, customer perceptions could influence the extent to which they actually saw friendliness. The process of perception is not just a process of objective information processing, but is instead a process of information prioritisation, selection and inference based on what the individual already knows (or believes she knows) (Solomon, 2011; Solomon et al., 2013; Wozniak, Hanna and Hanna, 2013; Armstrong and Kotler, 2015). Other studies on destination marketing and destination image have shown that the destination marketing campaign can create powerful expectations for the destination (TNZ, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2004). Previous studies have also shown that destination images have a strong influence on destination choice and response within the destination (Oppermann, 1996; Svetlana and Juline, 2010). Thus, in brief, the perception of Thai people as being very friendly *is* likely to be true, but it is *also* likely that the expectation that Thai people would be friendly and the perception of a friendly welcome has been influenced by destination marketing campaigns. The information contained within these campaigns may have influenced the perception of how friendly Thai people are, which could have informed the importance of friendliness of Thai people for both organisers and attendees. Thus, even though this is a very important aspect of the destination image, it does not stand on its own.

4.3.4 Activities and Attractions

One of the benefits of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination is that, because it is a popular mass tourism destination, it has a wide range of activities and attractions that MICE tourists can participate in before, during and after their

events. Some of the tourist activities and attractions that were identified by interviewees included:

“mountains, seas and Buddhist temples...” (DO12)

“Ayutthaya province and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok (or Wat Phra Kaew) including shopping places.” (DO23)

“Buddhist temples, Ayutthaya province, Sukhothai province, hills, mountains, forests in Northern provinces, seas, beaches in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Coast.” (IN7)

Thus, the opportunities and attractions that were available for visitors included cultural and religious sites of interests, natural beauty and outdoors spots, and modern sites like shopping areas. There was also the opportunity for conference planners to arrange specialist trips to meet visitor interests. For example, one participant who was responsible for arranging an event for geologists noted that there were many places to visit that were unique to their attendees’ interests in geology and rocks (DO23).

Some conference planners included these activities and attractions in the event itself, planning tours and experiences for event attendees either before or after the main event (DO12, DO23, IN7). However, as DO13 noted, participants could also choose to visit tourist attractions and partake in activities like shopping on their own during the event timeline.

“... the delegates gave positive feedback about various activities for leisure time such as tourist places and shopping areas.” (DO13)

“All of the activities made [attendees] impressed and were enjoyable.”
(DO23)

Interviewees indicated that the quality and availability of tourist activities and attractions were viewed positively by attendees. Some of the statements in this regard included:

“Our delegates also are impressed by day trips such as cultural tours or visits because of a wide range of attractions...” (IN7)

In summary, the ready availability and diversity of tourism activities and attractions is one of the reasons why Thailand makes a good MICE tourism destination. Attendees can visit these attractions before, during and after the event, either on their own or as part of the conference's formally planned activities. They can also be general tourism activities or those that are tailored to the tastes of conference attendees. The activities and attractions are viewed positively by conference attendees.

The importance of tourism activities and attractions is part of the basic destination image of any destination (Morrison, 2013). Studies in Thailand have confirmed that the diversity of tourism activities and attractions are relevant to both general tourists and to MICE tourists (Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007). These studies have all confirmed that Thailand is perceived as having a widely varied set of natural, cultural, and urban tourist attractions, which do influence visitor satisfaction and outcomes. In fact, the lack of such attractions can limit the potential for MICE growth. For example, a study of MICE tourism in Khon Kaen Province showed that the relatively small number of recreational tourism sites was a barrier to full implementation of a MICE tourism strategy (Saenjai and Mongkolsrisawat, 2015). Therefore, it is consistent with the existing research that tourism activities and attractions were so important.

The opportunity for sightseeing and tourist attractions are also part of the criteria for destination choice in many standard destination selection guides (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014). These destination selection guidelines prioritise sightseeing and tourist attractions because conference attendees do not spend all (or even necessarily most) of their time involved in the conference activities (Henaien and Sinha, 2014). Instead, they will be present in the destination before, during, and after the conference, and therefore opportunities for exploration of the area as leisure tourists are important. In fact, as the interviews in this research noted, the periods before and after the conference are

important to event organisers, who may organise field trips or supplementary experiences that draw on these attractions and tourist activities. Thus, even though tourism activities and attractions may seem to be an aspect of the general destination image, they are also important aspects of the MICE destination image.

4.4 MICE-Specific Destination Image of Thailand

In addition to the general destination image dimensions discussed above, there are several dimensions of the destination image that can be considered MICE-specific. These dimensions may be less important or even irrelevant to non-MICE business tourism and leisure tourism, but are highly relevant for the suitability of Thailand as a MICE destination. The MICE-specific destination images that were identified in the thematic analysis included the variety and preparedness of meeting and conference venues, suitability and quality of facilities for meetings and venues, value for money, ease of access, safety and security, accommodation standards, and professional and service-minded hospitality staff. Of these, meeting and conference venues, facilities, value for money and ease of access could be considered major themes, with many of the participants offering insight into these areas. The remaining three themes (safety and security, accommodation standards, and service-minded hospitality staff) were concerns of only a small number of participants, and can be considered minor themes.

4.4.1 Venues for Meetings and Conferences

One of the characteristics of MICE tourism that sets it apart from other forms of tourism is the requirement for venues or locations for meetings, conferences and exhibitions (Incentive travel, which may be in small groups and leisure-oriented, is less dependent on venue suitability). Thus, it is not surprising that the interview participants were highly concerned with venues. There are two different sub-themes that can be identified here, including venue variety and venue preparedness.

4.4.1.1 Venue variety

Several of the interviewees identified the variety of venues available for meetings and conferences as one of the benefits of holding these events in Bangkok and around Thailand. Some of the statements that supported this included:

“I think that Thailand has various kinds of venues for meetings, which are located in Bangkok and around the area such as the Impact Exhibition and Convention Center in Nonthaburi. The capacity of venues is suitable for our participants that are approximately 1,000 – 1,200 in number.” (DO17)

“Bangkok is not only a convenient travelling hub for our delegates, but also it has diverse venues for MICE purposes such as hotels and convention centres.” (IN4)

“Thailand has several choices of venues in almost every province. Although our company has held international meetings and conferences in Bangkok previously, we would be able to change to other provinces for future events. I think that not all countries are like Thailand in terms of various meeting and conference places.” (IN7)

Thus, participants felt that Bangkok and other areas of Thailand not only had suitable venues, but that these venues varied in terms of size and format (both hotels and convention centres). This indicates that participants view Thailand as a location that could meet a range of needs for meetings of various sizes.

Another insight that participants offered is that Thailand offers not just size variety, but a range of *interesting* venues. One of the clearest statements about this came from DO4, who noted:

“In recent years, our association has changed venues for meetings. From the beginning, we selected hotels for our members’ meetings. But now we have altered the concept of our meetings to ‘wherever we can arrange meetings’. So, we organised the meetings in several places, for example, temples, restaurants, pubs and hospitals, etc. These relate to

the content that we desire to present to our members. Additionally, we want them to gain new experience and knowledge from our meetings for progressing and upgrading their businesses.” (DO4)

“... The committee often selected meeting rooms of the government house, ministry meeting rooms, or meeting rooms of five-star hotels as a meeting place.” (DO18)

Thus, the venues available in Thailand allow the organisation to be flexible and innovative in terms of the venues they select and what they can do during the meeting. This offers an enhanced experience for attendees, allowing meeting organisers to align the meeting venue to the topic of the meeting rather than simply using generic or multipurpose venues like hotels and conference centres.

4.4.1.2 Venue Preparedness

It is not only the variety of venues that respondents were concerned with, but also the preparedness of venues for meetings, especially international meetings. For example, venue preparedness could include adequate staffing (DO11), availability of facilities and services like catering services for the event (IN1) and prior experience of events of similar size and nature (for example, showing evidence that the venue had hosted previous conferences of the same size) (DO23). The preparedness, as well as size and feature suitability was one of the factors that planners evaluated prior to selecting a venue:

Other respondents explained that the process of selecting a venue included evaluation of the venue and assurance that it would meet their requirements, indicating that it would need to pass multiple sets of evaluations prior to selection. This could include aspects like site selection and managerial agreement:

“When organising meetings and conferences, our department has to inspect a site before the director makes the decision. This is a process involved in selecting a meeting and conference place.” (DO16)

It was also common for organisations to take into account the feedback of previous event attendees with the venue when they considered whether to use the venue again:

“We collect feedback from delegates after every event, and one of the things we asked about was the venue.” (DO13)

The participants who reported on this feedback indicated that attendees were satisfied with the venues:

“Our attendees also like venues as shown in their feedback.” (DO13)

“According to our evaluation forms, delegates gave feedback about meeting rooms in ‘very good’ scale. They told us that our venues are appropriate and well-prepared.” (IN5)

In summary, the attendees were generally satisfied with the readiness of venues for events in Thailand, and did view this as part of the key aspects of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. This view is summarised by one respondent:

“Concerning the preparedness of venues in Thailand, I think that [venues] are able to compete with other countries, from my past experience.” (DO12)

4.4.1.3 Discussion

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the availability and readiness of suitable venues is a deciding factor in every one of the site selection guidelines that were reviewed for this study (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014). The authors (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and

Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014) did formulate the requirements for venues slightly differently, and surprisingly none of the authors identified something like unique or unusual venues as a factor. Given that at least some organisations chose locations like, for example, temples as unique venues, it is possible that this may be a new trend in events that has not yet become commonplace. Nonetheless, the fact that organisers consider venue availability, quality, and readiness is not surprising.

This research has suggested that venue variety, quality and preparedness were adequate for the planners. However, it is not certain that this is true in the broader sense. There has been some previous research which has suggested that venue variety and quality is a relevant factor in MICE-specific destination image or destination choice for Thailand. For example, venue availability was cited as one of the reasons why Bangkok was chosen as an international MICE destination (Janthana, 2015). Another study, this time in Chiang Mai, cited that the quality, variety, and readiness of hotels and other conference venues was one of the factors that made the city a popular MICE tourism destination (Sethasathien, 2017). At the same time, previous research has also identified weaknesses of Thailand in this area; for example, one study noted that service quality and standardisation of venues needed to improve in order for Thailand to become a truly world-class MICE destination (Akkhaphin, 2016). A study of Khon Kaen Province also identified problems with venues; for example, even though there were an adequate number of venues available, the safety and security of outdoor venues was known to be an issue (Saenjai and Mongkolsrisawat, 2015). Thus, even though the participants in the interviews reported above are generally satisfied with the venue quality and variety, and to some extent the readiness, this does not mean that there are no improvements that could be made in this area. In fact, it is likely that there are many opportunities for improvement that have not been undertaken, especially outside Bangkok.

4.4.2 Facilities for Meetings and Conferences

While venues are important in terms of the flexibility of space they provide, another important factor according to attendees is the facilities – for example, technology, catering, and so on – that are available. Overall, the participants that addressed the question of facilities did indicate that venues are fully equipped and have the required facilities for their needs:

“Facilities for our meetings are foremost and perfectly prepared, for instance, LCD projector, audio equipment, viewing screen and microphones...” (DO18)

“For my university as an educational institution, we would like to show academic potential of venues like laboratories, classrooms, meeting rooms, and [other academic] buildings. Thus, benefits of organising international symposiums in educational institutions are the availability of meeting rooms, breakout rooms for small sessions, facilities and equipment for academic presentations.” (DO22)

The view of the available facilities was especially good compared to other countries in the area:

“My department selected five-star hotels in Thailand [for their events]. In my view, their facilities and equipment for meetings and conferences are fully prepared and ready to use. When compared with other countries in Southeast Asia, the facilities of five-star hotels in Thailand are better than them.” (IN1)

“I think that facilities and equipment for meetings and conferences of hotels in Thailand are better than other countries in Southeast Asia and their costs are less than them. For example, our organisation previously arranged a meeting in [another country in Southeast Asia]. The hotel did not provide necessary facilities such as backdrops or microphones for our meeting. This hotel informed us that our organisation had to pay more money [for these things].” (IN5)

Attendees also responded positively to the facilities and their availability:

“From the evaluation forms after organising international meetings and conferences in Thailand, our delegates gave ‘very good’ level about meeting and conference rooms, facilities for meeting and conference purposes, and food and transportation.” (IN5)

“Most participants feel impressed by meeting rooms of the hotels and facilities and equipment for meeting purposes such as over-head projectors, sound system, screens, Wi-Fi access, etc.” (IN8)

Although the facilities available were generally considered positive, there were a few problems that were encountered during meeting arrangements:

“... some hotels in local areas are not prepared with the necessary facilities such as LCD projectors, audio equipment, and viewing screens.” (DO14)

“We confronted some problems with facilities and equipment for scholars’ presentations and breakout room arrangements in some hotels.” (DO22)

Thus, the overall impression given by respondents is that the overall provision of facilities within the venues is very good, especially technology provision. However, some smaller venues such as hotels may not have adequate facilities, especially for technology-heavy events that require, for example, presentations to small audiences as in the case of DO22’s academic conferences.

There is no doubt that the availability of facilities and resources is a key aspect of a MICE tourism destination, as profiled within the formal site selection guidelines. However, the importance of technology may be a relatively new concern. The old models reviewed – Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault (1976), American Society of Association Executives (1992), Edelstein and Benini (1994), Oppermann (1996, 1998), Crouch and Ritchie (1997), Go and Zhang (1997), and Go and Govers (1999) – were not overly concerned with facilities like presentation technology. However, by the introduction of the Crouch and Louviere (2007) model, the availability of audio-visual systems had become

relevant. Krungman and Wright (2007) identified several technical facilities requirements, including audio-visual equipment, computers, presentation tools, simultaneous interpretation and so on, as well as special requirements such as lighting and staging for auditoriums. Thus, it would appear from the site selection guidelines that the importance of technical facilities in conference and meeting venues has been growing gradually over time. The respondents in the current study identified needs including projectors and screens, audio-visual systems and Wi-Fi for attendees as specific requirements. This is likely in addition to facilities that were not mentioned, such as tables and chairs, entrance and check-in desks and so on. Thus, the fact that the participants viewed Thailand's conference and meeting facilities as having adequate technology for their needs is meaningful, since it indicates that Thailand is keeping up with the technological requirements of international conferences. This finding also steps past the existing research into Thailand's MICE suitability, as few of these studies (if any) have addressed the availability of facilities and their technologically advanced state as part of Thailand's MICE destination or readiness. Thus, while it is not certain that perception of the availability and suitability of venue facilities would have an effect on site selection, it is very likely that it would have such an effect. Therefore, this factor is included in the overall model even though there is limited empirical support that it has been found important in the past (as after all this has become far more important in the last decade or two than it was previously).

4.4.3 Value for Money

Value for money was, in the eyes of some of the participants, absolutely critical both because of their own organisational budget constraints and the needs of their attendees:

“In choosing meeting and conference venues, our department considers the government budget to support the events.... Other important matters that we ponder next are for instance, an appropriate location for the meeting and conference venues and the convenience of location for our delegates.” (DO8)

“The budget is the first factor that our department took into consideration when selecting a meeting and conference place... If we gain sufficient budget, we are able to rent meeting rooms and halls in a five-star hotel. Similarly, if the budget is too tight we will not organise conferences. We will arrange other types of meetings such as focus groups and lunch meetings instead of conferences.”(IN1)

“The first factor that is considered in selecting a meeting and conference destination is budget, for the reason that the budget is related to renting meeting rooms, accommodation, and paying for event arrangements.” (IN7)

Therefore, whether a destination can fit into the budget of the conference, including not just the cost of the event but also the cost of accommodation and other arrangements, determines not just where the event is held but also whether it happens at all.

The importance of the budget raises the question of how well Thailand as a destination meets the value for money criteria of event planners. According to some of the respondents, Thailand can be considered to be very good value for money compared to other destinations:

“From my experience, it is worth the money to arrange international conferences in Thailand compared with other countries... I think that [if we select] Thailand we can afford supporting things for our delegates such as goods for shopping, food, Thai massage and spa.” (IN3)

“[Thailand] is really good value for money (e.g. accommodation, food, shopping merchandises and transportation). I think that these are not expensive, reasonably priced and diverse.” (IN6)

Therefore, it can be stated that – at least from the international organisation perspective – Thailand is considered to be very good value for money, which is one of the reasons that it is selected as an international conference destination. None of the domestic respondents identified Thailand as particularly good value for money, but this could be because international organisations have higher

budgets and differences in normal spending that could make Thailand seem to be better value than it is for domestic organisations.

The question of value for money is not unique to event planners in Thailand. Instead, it is a general concern of all of the site selection guidelines reviewed (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014). For instance, Crouch and Ritchie (1997) cited cost as a factor at all levels, including accessibility (cost of transport), cost of accommodation, and cost of the meeting space itself. Similarly, Krungman and Wright (2007) noted the importance of keeping the cost of the rooms and facilities within the budget for the organisation and its attendees. Hagen and Joraandstad (2012) and Henaien and Sinha (2014) both identified affordability for both planners and attendees as key criteria for site selection. Therefore, it is not surprising that the event planners were concerned with the event budget, including both the cost of the venue and the direct cost to attendees (for example accommodation and travel).

Previous studies on Thailand's MICE-specific tourism destination have shown that planners do view it as a destination that offers good value for money. For example, Akkhaphin's (2016) study revealed Thailand's good value for money as one of its main strengths as a potential international tourism destination. Similarly, the TCEB (TCEB, 2018c) also identified Thailand as being perceived as good value for money as a MICE destination, although this was more important to some of their segments than to others. Janthana (2015) showed that international event planners were satisfied with the cost of hotels in Bangkok, although it did not address the overall cost. Therefore, as with the finding that event planners were concerned with the value for money of Thailand as a tourism destination, the finding that Thailand is in fact perceived as being good value for money is consistent with prior research.

4.4.4 Easy Access

Ease of access, both from other countries and in and around Thailand, was also one of the characteristics identified by the interviewees. Several of the participants noted that Thailand was very easy to get to and around compared to other countries, especially for international delegates:

“Compared to my past experiences, having held international meetings and conferences in Thailand it is more convenient than other countries.”
(IN2)

“In my view, Bangkok is an important hub because there are a lot of direct flights from other foreign countries to Thailand. It has both domestic and international transportation that are convenient and easy to use. Some countries are more difficult to access than here and have to travel by using multiple flights.” (IN4)

“the access from abroad to Thailand is easy and domestic travel is convenient as well...” (IN6)

Bangkok, particularly, was noted as having convenient local transportation within the country, through the BTS and Skytrain facilities as well as the MRT, which made conferences very convenient to have there (DO21). These convenient transportation routes offered delegates the opportunity to explore the city themselves outside the conference period (IN5). Thus, overall, Thailand (especially, but not limited to Bangkok) was viewed as a very convenient and easy to access location for visitors.

Respondents also indicated that their attendees were satisfied with how easy it was to get to Thailand, as well as how easy it was to get around Bangkok:

“The organisation is satisfied and successful in having held meetings not only in Bangkok but other main provinces in Thailand, because attendees feel happy in the convenience and the ease of travelling.”
(DO19)

“Our university found that participants’ satisfaction levels are high... Many direct flights from abroad to here help participants save time and

money. When compared with Thailand, some countries are harder to access.” (DO22)

“[Ease of access] is one of the factors that makes delegates accept to join our international meetings and conferences by selecting Thailand as a site.” (IN2)

“From the evaluation forms completed following international meetings and conferences in Thailand, our delegates gave ‘very good’ ratings for domestic transportation in Bangkok.” (IN5)

“Our attendees also are impressed by the ease to access and travel in the country.” (IN6)

In summary, the ease of getting to Thailand and getting around the region is one of the major benefits of hosting a conference in Thailand, especially for international events. This is a factor for both conference planners and for attendees, who are more likely to visit and more likely to enjoy the visit if it is easy to get to Thailand and around.

The importance of ease of access of a MICE destination is inherent, as illustrated within the site selection models reviewed (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014). Unlike other aspects such as the importance of technological facilities, this has remained constant, with Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault (1976), the earliest site selection model available, specifying the destination for a MICE event should be easily accessible by air. For Crouch and Ritchie (1997), it is not just basic connections to the international air network that count, but also the cost, time, and convenience of travelling to the site, as well as travel barriers like stringent visa or customs regimes. Therefore, it was fully expected that the extent to which Thailand is easy to get to is one of the factors that could easily influence both site selection by event planners and the satisfaction with Thailand as a destination.

This finding was also supported by previous studies in Thailand that addressed its suitability as a MICE destination. For example, the central location and accessibility of Thailand and its connections to the ASEAN region particularly were an important advantage for its potential as a MICE destination (Akkhaphin, 2016). Sethasathien's (2017) study also showcased the ease of access to Thailand as one of the factors in its choice as a MICE destination. At the same time, some areas such as, for example, Khon Kaen (a province in the North East of Thailand), which are not as connected to international transport networks, are not considered as strong a possible destination (Saenjai and Mongkolsrisawat, 2015). Therefore, the finding that the ease of access for Thailand through international networks is important for both event planners and delegates is as expected from the literature. A new possible aspect found in this study is that the connection between Bangkok (or other major areas like Chiang Mai) and other areas in Thailand and surrounding countries may also be important.

4.4.5 Safety and Security

Another theme to emerge from the interviews was that of safety and security, both of attendees generally and of the conference venues and locations. Event planners have high expectations for venue security. For example, one participant stated that his organisation evaluated hotel safety arrangements, including equipment, personnel, and security systems, during the site selection process (DO21). Another respondent stated:

“When arranging meetings and conferences in the hotels, our company expects security systems... such as fire alarms, smoke detectors, fire exits, emergency lights and fire extinguishers.” (IN8)

Thus, venue safety and security is very much a concern of the organisers. Overall, the participants agreed that safety and security expectations were met by Thai organisations. For example, some statements included:

“Our association selected Thailand because of safety. I think that security systems in Thailand for our attendees and all parties involved are trustworthy.” (DO12)

“We are confident of security in Thailand and we are proud of submitting a bid to host for international events. The security makes our delegates respond to participate in the meetings and conferences easily.” (IN7)

However, perhaps surprisingly, many of the organisers were reluctant to discuss the issue of safety and security, and either did not provide a real answer to this question or stated that it was not part of their planning considerations. Another gap is that while interviewees did show some evidence that they were concerned about venue safety, there was little evidence that they were concerned about the personal safety of attendees. Thus, while Thailand is apparently perceived as a safe and secure MICE location in general, it is uncertain how far this extends to personal safety or whether there were other influences that prevented participants from being candid on this point.

The conference planners were mostly concerned with venue safety, which is certainly one of the concerns of standard site selection guidelines (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014). At the same time, convention and event site selection guidelines also identify personal safety as a factor in the site choice (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014) and others focus on political stability and security risks (Krungman and Wright, 2007). Thus, the singular focus on only the aspect of the venue’s safety is somewhat concerning.

This emphasis on venue safety is particularly problematic given Thailand’s general and MICE-specific tourism destination images, as discussed in previous studies. One of Thailand’s particular problems, both as a general tourism destination and as a MICE destination, is that it does have a fair amount of political instability, which can cause substantial (though typically short-lived)

negative changes in its perception as a risky or personally safe destination (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009; Rittichainuwat, 2010; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Akkhaphin, 2016; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). These studies suggest that if Thailand were to become politically unstable, this would be a serious concern for delegates and may discourage or even prevent visits. This may be of more importance for MICE event planners, who must be relatively conservative when it comes to safety because of the high cost of reorganising such events in different locations at short notice. Of course, it is possible that, as with other questions that addressed barriers or problems, the interviewees were less willing to discuss barriers such as political safety (as compared to the neutral question of venue safety). Given its importance for planners, however, both aspects were included in the quantitative research that is discussed in the next chapter.

4.4.6 Accommodation Standards

Another of the minor themes was that of accommodation standards, especially the availability and cost of upscale hotels (four and five-star hotels) but also including the general quality of accommodation. The availability of higher end accommodation and accommodation of good quality was a particular concern for international organisers, who were most of the respondents who commented on this theme.

A few of the respondents noted that affordable upmarket accommodation was an incentive for their delegates, who often travelled on limited budgets (IN3, IN6). Affordable upscale accommodation was also viewed as another of the general benefits that Thailand could offer their attendees, even if it did not change whether or not their delegates would attend (IN1, IN5). As two respondent's noted their organisations chose upmarket hotels for their conferences, specifically because of their perceived high standards:

“Our federation selected five-star hotels in Thailand for arranging international conferences and accommodating our delegates such as the Shangri-La Hotel, Chiang Mai, because we believed in their [quality] standards.” (IN3)

“The standard of four-star and five-star hotels is [one of the reasons] our company decided to select them..., because we consider the standard and professionalism of the hotels before deciding meeting and conference venues.” (IN10)

Overall, the participants that did report that they considered four or five-star hotels reported that they were satisfied with the outcome:

“Four-star and five-star hotels in Thailand that our company have chosen for international conferences are a key to our success. We can say that the selected hotels have a good reputation and have been recognised in terms of good standards. Our attendees also felt satisfied.” (IN7)

However, satisfaction with the quality of accommodation was not as good outside the Bangkok metropolitan area and in lower starred hotels. This had negative effects on the event itself, according to one participant:

“In some areas, the service standards of some hotels are not good. This has an effect on our business events. We hope that hotels would maintain good standards of service.” (DO14)

Thus, the availability of highly ranked accommodation was one of the benefits of holding events in Thailand, as it both provided an incentive for international visitors and offered good service for the conference's own reputation. If this were not provided, it could have a negative effect on the conference itself. However, this was far more of a concern for international event organisers than for domestic organisers.

It is possible that the availability of reasonably priced upscale accommodation for guests is one of the MICE characteristics that Thailand is particularly strong on. This is only a minor issue in standardised site selection guidelines. For example, Crouch and Ritchie (1997) suggested considering the capacity, cost, service and security of accommodation, but did not make a specific note of the importance of the ranking of the accommodation. Similarly, Krungman and Wright (2007) argue that the hotel should be consistent with visitor expectations, but do not specify a service level. Hagen and Joraandstad (2012) and Henaien and Sinha (2014) addressed affordability and convenience of the

accommodation but not its service levels. Furthermore, none of the previous studies on Thailand as a MICE destination have addressed the specific question of availability and cost of upscale lodgings. Thus, like Thai fruit, this is an aspect of Thailand's destination image that may be particular to the market itself, rather than being part of a general destination image model for a MICE destination.

Despite its relatively uncommon role in the literature, it is easy to see why upscale accommodation may play a role in the selection of Thailand as an event destination. One of the challenges of MICE events is providing enough benefits and incentives for delegates, who are otherwise travelling for work (Henaien and Sinha, 2014). Thus, holding events in attractive places and seeing to delegate comfort is an important aspect of the conference, and it could make the difference between success and failure for a conference. Thai four and five-star hotels, which are reasonably priced in comparison to other markets, offer value for money while also providing comfort and luxury for guests. That could also explain why it was more of a concern for international organisers than domestic organisers. Thus, this could be a significant differentiator of Thailand from other markets with otherwise similar MICE tourism offerings. The importance of upscale lodging for attendees has not been identified as a factor in the site selection literature, and therefore it represents one of the contributions of this research.

4.4.7 Professional and Service Minded Staff

Move away from commenting on how many to note that another aspect of Thailand as tourism destination for MICE tourism was the professional and service-minded staff that support the venues and the broader tourism industry. The professionalism and service minded nature of hospitality and meetings staff was mentioned by one of the respondents as a factor in their choice of Thailand as a meeting venue, along with the hospitality and service quality of tourism industry firms in general (IN6).

Overall, the level of satisfaction with the professionalism of event staff at Thai venues was high when it was expressed:

“Holding meetings in Thailand is successful because of professional and service-minded hotel staff. The staff members are able to solve immediate problems and impress our participants and make them feel happy.” (DO24)

Thus, for the interviewees who did mention this topic, it was clearly important. However, given that this is a seemingly important topic from the literature review, it is surprising that it was not more prevalent in terms of the weight given to Thailand as a MICE destination or in terms of Thailand’s MICE-specific destination image. It is possible that this was not highly important for several reasons; for example, participants could have taken professionalism of Thai events staff for granted or assumed it was similar to professionalism elsewhere, or they may not have been clear about what this means. Thus, it should not be concluded from this finding that professionalism is *not* important.

The lack of concern about the professionalism of venue and planning staff is concerning, given that on-site staff are a key aspect of just about every site selection guideline available (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaïen and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014). The availability of professional planning staff is critical for so many reasons, including that it ensures that the conference planning can be conducted effectively and that the on-site event planning and execution are strong. The fact that relatively few planners thought to mention this area does not necessarily mean that it was not considered or not important, however. Instead, previous research suggests that the quality and professionalism of on-site staff may be a barrier to choice, rather than a positive aspect. Suraphee and Pimonsompong (2013) investigated the core competencies of MICE project coordinators, finding some significant knowledge and skill gaps. A second

study, this time in Pattaya City showed that hotel enterprises were aware of the importance of the MICE sector for tourism, but struggled to get sufficiently skilled staff to meet the needs of conferences (Tosadorn and Choibamroong, 2016). Another study demonstrated that although hotel owners typically had sufficient knowledge about MICE tourism, they had a strong need for salespeople and planners with sufficient MICE industry knowledge and language skills to serve the industry (Mongkhonvanit and Chattiwong, 2017). Thus, it may be less that the professionalism of on-site staff is not a consideration for event planners than that it may not be something they were willing to speak positively about.

4.5 Summary and Evaluation of Thailand's Destination Images

In order to evaluate Thailand's destination images for MICE purposes, Morrison's (2013) Framework concerning the 10 A's Attributes of successful tourism destinations is used. This framework is demonstrated in Table 2.1 (Chapter 2, Section 2.2.6), and addresses ten aspects of the destination image, including awareness, attractiveness, availability, access, appearance, activities, assurance, appreciation, action and accountability (Morrison, 2013). Based on the MICE selection criteria (Chapter 2, Section 2.4.5), these criteria match the 10 A's framework (Morrison, 2013) as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Linkage among ‘the 10 A’s Attributes’, MICE Selection Criteria and Current Qualitative Findings

10 A’s Attributes	Explanation	Link to MICE (Qualitative Findings)	References (Meeting/Convention Site Selection Factors)
Awareness	This attribute is related to tourists’ level of knowledge about the destination and is influenced by the amount and nature of the information they	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Thai Culture and Food ➤ Hospitality of Organisations and Service Providers ➤ Friendliness of Thai People ➤ Tourism Activities and Attractions ➤ Variety and Quality of Venues ➤ Facilities for Meetings and Conferences ➤ Value for Money ➤ Easy Access ➤ Safety and Security ➤ Accommodation Standards ➤ Professional and Service Minded Staff 	Fortin et al. (1976) American Society of Association Executives (1992) Edelstein and Benini (1994) Oppermann (1996, 1998) Crouch and Ritchie (1997) Go and Zhang (1997) Go and Govers (1999) Chacko and Fenich (2000) Qu et al. (2000) Baloglu and Love (2001) Chen (2006) Crouch and Louviere (2007) Krungman and Wright (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Henaïen and Sinha (2014) Huo (2014)
Attractiveness	The number and geographic scope of the appeal of the destination’s attractions comprise this attribute.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Thai Culture and Food ➤ Tourism Activities and Attractions ➤ Value for Money 	Fortin et al. (1976) American Society of Association Executives (1992) Edelstein and Benini (1994) Oppermann (1996, 1998) Crouch and Ritchie (1997) Go and Zhang (1997) Go and Govers (1999) Qu et al. (2000) Baloglu and Love (2001) Chen (2006) Krungman and Wright (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Henaïen and Sinha (2014) Huo (2014)

10 A's Attributes	Explanation	Link to MICE (Qualitative Findings)	References (Meeting/Convention Site Selection Factors)
Availability	This attribute is determined by the ease with which bookings and reservations can be made for the destination, and the number of booking and reservation channels available.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Hospitality of Organisations and Service Providers ➤ Variety and Quality of Venues 	Fortin et al. (1976) American Society of Association Executives (1992) Oppermann (1996, 1998) Crouch and Ritchie (1997) Go and Zhang (1997) Go and Govers (1999) Qu et al. (2000) Baloglu and Love (2001) Krungman and Wright (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Huo (2014)
Access	The convenience of getting to and from the destination, as well as moving around within the destination, constitutes this attribute.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Easy Access 	Fortin et al. (1976) Oppermann (1996, 1998) Crouch and Ritchie (1997) Go and Zhang (1997) Go and Govers (1999) Qu et al. (2000) Krungman and Wright (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Henaïen and Sinha (2014) Huo (2014)
Appearance	This attribute measures the impression that the destination makes on tourists, both when they first arrive and throughout their stays in the destination.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tourism Activities and Attractions 	Fortin et al. (1976) Edelstein and Benini (1994) Oppermann (1996, 1998) Go and Zhang (1997) Go and Govers (1999) Qu et al. (2000) Chen (2006) Crouch and Louviere (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Henaïen and Sinha (2014)

10 A's Attributes	Explanation	Link to MICE (Qualitative Findings)	References (Meeting/Convention Site Selection Factors)
Activities	The extent of the array of activities available to tourists within the destination is the determinant of this attribute.	➤ Tourism Activities and Attractions	Fortin et al. (1976) Edelstein and Benini (1994) Oppermann (1996, 1998) Go and Zhang (1997) Go and Govers (1999) Qu et al. (2000) Chen (2006) Crouch and Louviere (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Henaïen and Sinha (2014)
Assurance	This attribute relates to the safety and security of the destination for tourists.	➤ Safety and Security	Oppermann (1996, 1998) Chacko and Fenich (2000) Qu et al. (2000) Krungman and Wright (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Henaïen and Sinha (2014) Huo (2014)
Appreciation	The feeling of the levels of welcome and hospitality contribute to this attribute.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Hospitality of Organisations and Service Providers ➤ Friendliness of Thai people 	Fortin et al. (1976) Oppermann (1996, 1998) Go and Zhang (1997) Go and Govers (1999) Chacko and Fenich (2000) Qu et al. (2000) Baloglu and Love (2001) Krungman and Wright (2007) Hagen and Jorandstad (2012) Huo (2014)
Action	The availability of a long-term tourism plan and a marketing plan for tourism are some of the required actions.	No link identified	
Accountability	This attribute is about the evaluation of performance by the destination management organisation (DMO).	No link identified	

Table 4.2 summarises the qualitative findings of this research in relation to the remaining eight dimensions of Morrison's (2013) evaluation framework. Additionally, it includes the ninth or the last attribute that emerged from these findings, which is 'Affordability'.

While the 10As framework served as an initial structure, it has been adapted based on the outcomes of the qualitative research. The 10As framework is a useful guide from the perspective of destination planners and marketers, including aspects such as action and accountability which are specific to the destination planning activity (Morrison, 2013). As a result, this framework was not fully adapted to the perceptions of the travel planners who responded to destination marketing activities. With this difference in mind, the destination image model derived from this research is adapted to a 9As model.

The nine attributes of the model include Awareness, Attractiveness, Availability, Accessibility, Appearance, Activities, Assurance, Appreciation and Affordability. Among these attributes the two attributes specific to destination marketing (Action and Accountability) are excluded, while a third attribute specific to MICE travel planners (Affordability) is included. Table 4.2 summarises these characteristics, along with the specific characteristics that Thailand is associated with. As the table shows, the MICE travel planners who were interviewed had some very strong views about Thailand, which did not always match perceptions reported in the existing academic literature. For example, Thailand was generally viewed as safe, in contrast to some other studies (Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018) that have found it is viewed as a destination that is risky to visit.

The introduction of the 9As model for MICE destination image from the travel planner perspective is one of the primary contributions to the literature on MICE destination image. Rather than, as much of the academic literature does, taking the view of the destination marketer, the framework represents destination image from the perspective of the marketing audience. These audience members do not see the Action and Accountability functions that go into destination marketing, but they do see issues such as Affordability, which influence the rational decision to hold meetings in Thailand. Thus, this model is

not just an elaboration of the 10As (Morrison, 2013), but a recasting of the theory from the perspective of the target audience. This is important in understanding not just what destination marketers hope to convey about Thailand, as in the 10As, but what these audiences actually perceive about the destination.

In summary, the outcome of the qualitative research is a 9As model, which is a recasting of the 10As model presented by Morrison (2013) from the perspective of the MICE tourism planner, rather than the destination marketer. The 9As model includes factors that are specific to Thailand, as well as those that can be applied to any destination similar to Thailand. The development of this model through quantitative research is discussed in the following sections.

Table 4.2 Summary of Thailand’s Images as a MICE destination

9 A’s Attributes	Thailand’s Images	Sections of Sources
Awareness	<p>Awareness of Thailand’s attributes and benefits is relatively high within the population of meeting/ conference organisers. These attributes are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thai Culture and Food • Hospitality of Organisations and Service Providers • Friendliness of Thai People • Activities and Attractions • Venues for Meetings and Conferences • Facilities for Meetings and Conferences • Value for Money • Easy Access • Safety and Security • Accommodation Standards • Professional and Service Minded Staff 	<p>4.3.1 4.3.2 4.3.3 4.3.4 4.4.1 4.4.2 4.4.3 4.4.4 4.4.5 4.4.6 4.4.7</p>
Attractiveness	<p>Thailand’s food and culture are well-known as tourist attractions and are important to attendees. Food, including Thai fruits, are viewed as highly attractive and exotic. Cultural performances and experiences like visits to temples and museums are widely available.</p>	4.3.1
Availability	<p>Thailand’s general tourism infrastructure, for example availability of hotels (including upscale four-star and five-star hotels), is very good. Thailand has a wide variety and quality of conference and meeting venues. These include traditional and non-traditional venues, with size ranging from small restaurants and hotels to international conference and exhibition venues. Quality of venues is generally viewed as good.</p>	4.4.1
Accessibility	<p>Bangkok is one of the best-connected cities in the world. It is easy to get to Bangkok on a direct flight. It is easy to travel in Bangkok, around Thailand and around the region.</p>	4.4.4
Appearance	<p>Thailand is viewed as visually appealing and beautiful.</p>	4.3.4

9 A's Attributes	Thailand's Images	Sections of Sources
Activities	Thailand has a wealth of tourism attractions and activities for conference attendees. These include the natural environment (e.g. seas, mountains), cultural activities and food, entertainment and nightlife, shopping, and many other.	4.3.4
Assurance	Thailand is viewed as a safe destination. Conference venues are viewed as safe and secure, with low personal safety risk.	4.4.5
Appreciation	The quality of Thai hospitality is deemed to be very high, including both perceived hospitality and hospitality infrastructure like upscale hotels. While service quality is viewed as generally high, there are some problems with individual hotels and venues. Thai people are perceived as friendly and welcoming.	4.3.2
Affordability	Thailand is viewed as good value for money by conference organisers and attendees. Costs are perceived as reasonable for international conferences.	4.4.3

The 9As evaluation framework is formulated into a theoretical framework of the model and its effect on the site selection of MICE destination planners as a final step in the development of the preliminary research model (Figure 4.1). The framework argues, in keeping with Morrison (2013) and the findings of the preliminary research, that dimensions of destination image from the perspective of the MICE tourism planner include Awareness, Attractiveness, Availability, Accessibility, Appearance, Activities, Assurance, Appreciation and Affordability (Exactly what is included in these dimensions for Thailand is summarised in Table 4.2, although this would vary depending on the destination). From here, the question becomes exactly what effect Destination Image has on the tourism planner.

Following the somewhat limited research on MICE tourism destination image, as well as the more extensive literature on destination image in leisure tourism (Chapter 2), two paths can be proposed. First, there may be a direct effect of destination image on the site selection for a MICE event. For leisure tourists, there has long been evidence that destination image influences the overall success of the destination, because it directly influences the likelihood that tourists will visit (Hunt, 1975; Selby, 2004). The second route found in studies of leisure tourists is an indirect route, in which the destination image influences the overall perception of the destination, therefore influencing whether the tourists will visit (Selby, 2004; McCartney, Butler and Bennett, 2009; Kozak and Baloglu, 2011). Previous studies on MICE tourism and destination image have

also upheld these relationships, although the evidence here is sparser (TCEB, 2018c). Thus, the integration of the 9As model of destination image with the destination choice for MICE events, either indirectly through perceptions of the destination or directly on the decision, is a step beyond the simple specification of the 9As model.

Finally, there will be external factors that influence the destination choice, regardless of the destination image. For example, this could include budget, management perception and preference, or other firm-specific or event-specific factors. These external factors are likely to be highly individualised, and could not be easily summarised in a single study. Thus, the additional factors may be considered something that is external to the model to some extent, but it should also be considered.

The purpose of this model is to conceptualise what the effects of the 9As of tourism destination image could be in terms of the MICE planners' choice of destination (shown in Figure 4.1). This is part of the work of the quantitative research, which is reported in the next chapter.

The 9As Framework of Destination Image and Effects on Decision Making

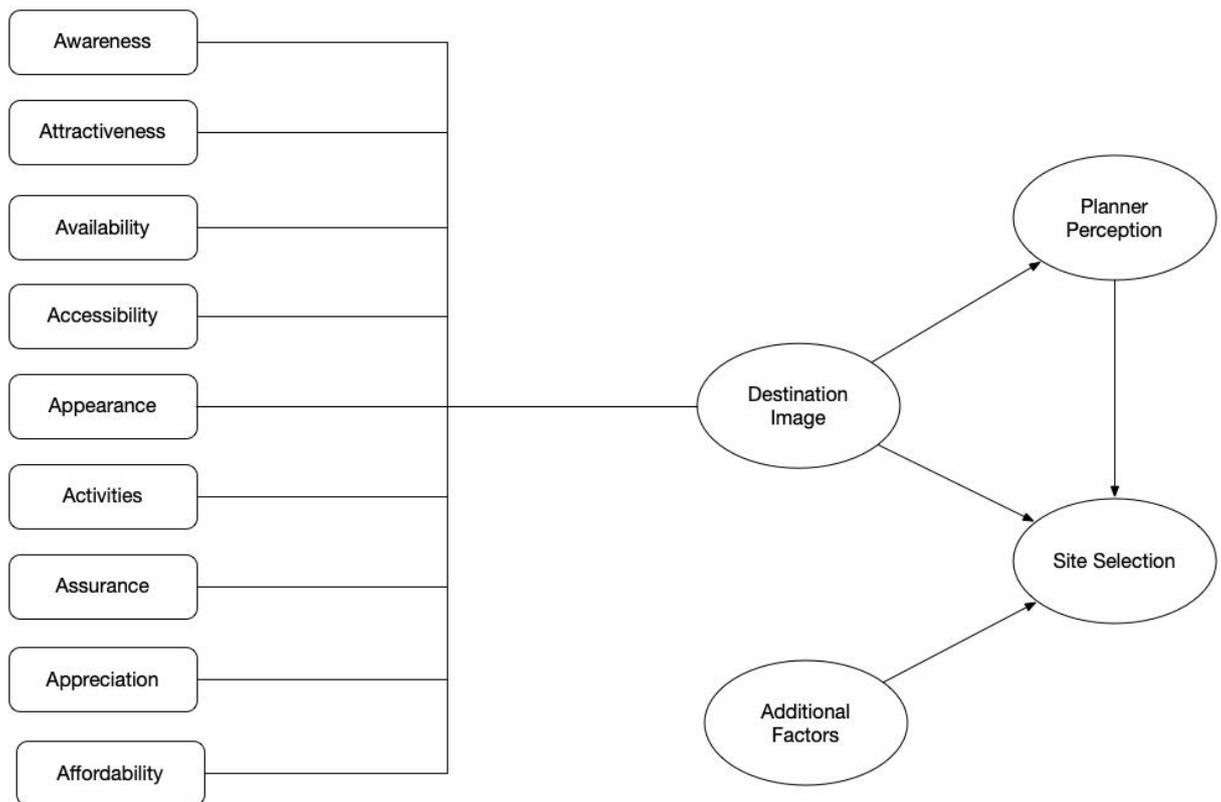


Figure 4.1 The 9As evaluation framework of destination image and its effects on MICE tourism destination selection

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the findings of qualitative research in relation to the existing literature. These findings were derived from a thematic analysis of interviews with international and domestic event planners in and around Bangkok. These interviews addressed questions like, for example, why the organisers chose Thailand as a destination and outcomes like, for instance, event attendee satisfaction. The analysis identified two clusters of factors that influenced MICE destination image – general destination image and MICE-specific destination image.

General destination image factors, including Thai culture and food, hospitality, friendliness of Thai people, and tourist attractions and activities, were those that were relevant to and developed mainly in mass tourism, but which also influenced MICE tourism. The role of Thai culture and food was particularly

prevalent. It was clear that Thai culture and food was viewed as an attractive feature, and that event planners incorporated Thai culture and food into their event planning in order to make sure that conference attendees got to experience it. This was highly popular among the conference attendees and was a source of satisfaction. Surprisingly, Thai fruits, which are unusual and considered exotic by many conference attendees, were even part of the event for some planners. Tourist attractions and activities were also highly important for the planners and the attendees. These attractions and activities could be experienced before, during, and after the conference, either as part of organised itineraries or independently. They were one of the factors that planners explained led to a high level of satisfaction among their guests. The importance of hospitality and friendliness of Thai people were also noted, although there was less emphasis in this area. The issue of friendliness, additionally, raises the question of how far the destination marketing campaigns that emphasised this characteristic had influenced the perception of friendliness. Overall, these four dimensions had a strong effect on the event attendees and were considered important by event planners.

There were seven dimensions of MICE-specific destination image, which are aspects of Thailand as a tourism destination that are very important to event planners and attendees but are not very relevant to general tourists. These dimensions included variety and preparedness of meeting and conference venues, suitability and quality of facilities for meetings and venues, value for money, ease of access, safety and security, accommodation standards, and professional and service-minded hospitality staff. In many cases, these were considered as factors in the destination and venue site selection, but there was less evidence for some of these factors in terms of attendee satisfaction. Factors including variety and preparedness of venues, facilities (especially technological facilities), value for money and ease of access were supported as strong influences both on the initial site selection of Thailand and on attendee satisfaction outcomes. However, the evidence for factors including safety and security, accommodation standards, and staff professionalism was much weaker. Thus, while these factors are included in further study, it is

acknowledged that they may not be as strong a factor in site selection or outcomes.

The purpose of the qualitative research in this study was to develop a model of MICE destination image and perceptions for Thailand which could then be tested in a broader quantitative research for validation as stated in research objective 2. In Chapter 5, the results of the quantitative findings are reported on. These findings offer insight into which of the aspects of the general and MICE-specific destination image can be supported and which cannot be supported based on the views of event planners who have less direct experience with planning events in Thailand (specifically, those in the United Kingdom) compared to the qualitative sample.

Chapter 5: Presentation of Quantitative Research Findings

5.1 Introduction

As was explained in the previous chapter, the primary research was conducted using a survey of global and British companies involved in destination event planning. The study was conducted at the individual company level which means the questionnaire was distributed to individual companies. The final sample size for the study was 289 companies.

The purpose of this chapter is to present and explain the quantitative findings that were generated from the study in relation to research objective 2: To assess the perceptions of potential international companies/organisations towards the Meetings/Conferences industry in Thailand and determine the types of businesses that have 'positive' or 'negative' attitudes.

Findings were analysed using SPSS and Excel. The process of analysis began with descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics included frequency distributions (for categorical items) and mean and standard deviation (for Likert scales). This analysis stage provided information on questions, such as for example who responded to the survey (the sample profile) and the general trends in the responses. This provides information about how respondents feel about Thailand as a MICE destination. These findings are discussed in the chapter, with tables and graphs in the Appendix as supporting data. Following this, inferential statistics (chi-square tests) were used to test the hypothesis of the research. This analysis identifies which industries are most likely to have a positive view of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. This information is important for targeting marketing campaigns at the industry level, as previously discussed in Chapter 3.

The first four sections of this chapter present the results of the descriptive analysis, which are then followed by chi-square tests. The descriptive statistics begin with a respondent profile in Section 5.2 that explains the characteristics of the sample companies and their behaviours. In Section 5.3, the positive perceptions of Thailand as a MICE destination are discussed. Section 5.3 includes two sub-sections: Thailand's destination attractiveness attributes and Thailand's MICE industry attributes. Section 5.4 does the same for negative

perceptions. Section 5.5 presents the hypothesis testing findings and discusses what relationships were found between the variables. The chapter closes with a summary of the key findings.

The first four sections of this chapter present the results of the descriptive analysis, which are then followed by correlation and chi-square tests. The descriptive statistics begin with a respondent profile in Section 5.2 that explains the characteristics of the sample companies and their behaviours. In Section 5.3, the positive perceptions of Thailand as a MICE destination are discussed. Section 5.3 includes two sub-sections: Thailand's destination attractiveness attributes and Thailand's MICE industry attributes. Section 5.4 does the same for negative perceptions. Section 5.5 addresses the correlations among the different variables. Section 5.6 presents the hypothesis testing findings and discusses what relationships were found between the variables. The chapter closes with a summary of the key findings.

5.2 Respondent Profile

As already explained in the introduction, the research was conducted at the level of individual companies. As a result, the respondent profile consists of company information, including the industry in which the company competes, the age of the company, and the types of meetings that are arranged on an annual basis. These company characteristics are presented in the following sections, beginning with the industry the sample companies compete within.

5.2.1 Industries the sample companies compete in

The companies in the sample were operating across a wide variety of industries (Figure 5.1).

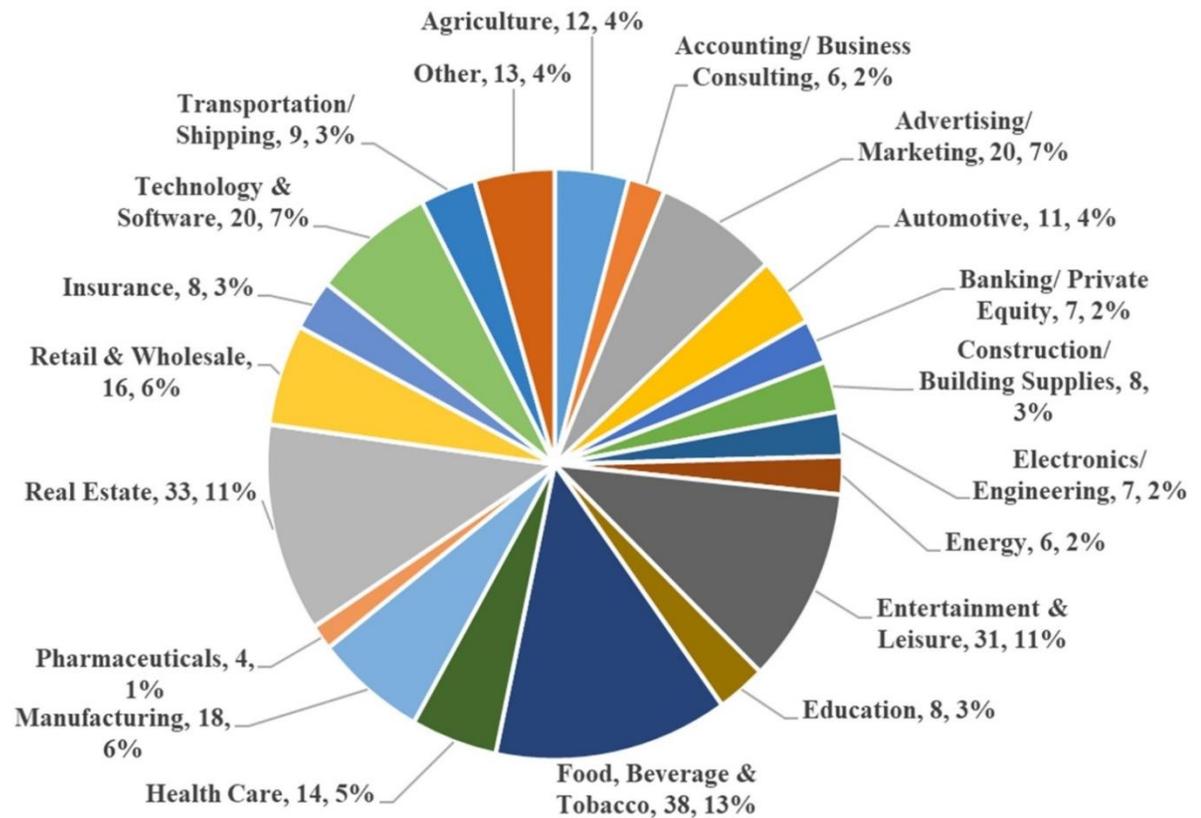


Figure 5.1 Industry of operation of the respondents

The largest of the industry groups, represented by 20 or more companies, were Food, Beverage and Tobacco ($n = 38$, 13%), Real Estate ($n = 33$, 11%), Entertainment and Leisure ($n = 31$, 11%), Technology and Software ($n = 20$, 7%), and Advertising and Marketing ($n = 20$, 7%). There were 142 companies belonging to these heavily represented industries (as indicated by the sample, rather than the industrial distribution), which accounted for 49.1% of the sample in total.

There was also a medium-sized range of industry groups with between 10 and 19 respondents, which included Manufacturing ($n = 18$, 6%), Retail and Wholesale ($n = 16$, 6%), Health Care ($n = 14$, 5%), Other industries ($n = 13$, 4%), Agriculture ($n = 12$, 4%), and Automotive ($n = 11$, 4%). There were 84 companies in this group, accounting for 29.1% of the full sample.

Finally, there was a smaller group of industries, which had fewer than 10 companies responding in the sample. These industries included Transportation

and Shipping (n = 9, 3%), Education (n = 8, 3%), Insurance (n = 8, 3%), Banking and Private Equity (n = 7, 2%), Construction and Building Supplies (n = 8, 3%), Electronics and Engineering (n = 7, 2%), Accounting, Business and Consulting (n = 6, 2%), Energy (n = 6, 2%) and Pharmaceuticals (n = 4, 1%). There was a total of 62 companies in the industries in this group, accounting for 21.5% of the sample.

It is noticeable that these firms are from slightly different industries compared to the firms in the qualitative research. In particular, the qualitative research drew on private industries including the coffee industry (a participant in the food, Beverage and Tobacco sector) and the hospitality and entertainment industries. However, the qualitative research was dominated by financial and healthcare industries as well as government agencies, which accounted for a relatively small proportion of the quantitative sample. While this is notable, it is not necessarily a threat to the validation of the findings or the model. Instead, this variance in distribution of the sample means that it is possible to determine whether the model derived from the qualitative findings and its limited industry pool apply more broadly.

In summary, the businesses responding to the survey classified their main areas of operation in 20 industries, including one catch-all “Other industries” group. About half of the sample classified themselves as part of a relatively large industry group based on the sample (20 plus businesses in the group), while about 30% classified themselves in the medium-range groups (10-19 companies in the group) and about 20% were in the smaller group that was made up of less than 10 organisations. Industries did range in size somewhat, with the smallest industry (Pharmaceuticals) including only four businesses and the largest (Food, Beverage and Tobacco) including 38 businesses. This type of variation was expected, since there is not an even distribution of companies across industries in general. For example, the pharmaceutical industry is very highly concentrated, with only a few large organisations, and therefore there are relatively fewer individual companies that are active in the market at any given time. None of the industries was noticeably more represented than others, but it is not clear that this can be interpreted to indicate that the sample is representative. This is because while it is likely that MICE events are more

popular in some industry sectors than others, there are no statistics about this popularity. Thus, the best that can be stated is that the sample has a good distribution across different industries.

5.2.2 Age of the companies

The second question was how old the company is in years (Figure 5.2).

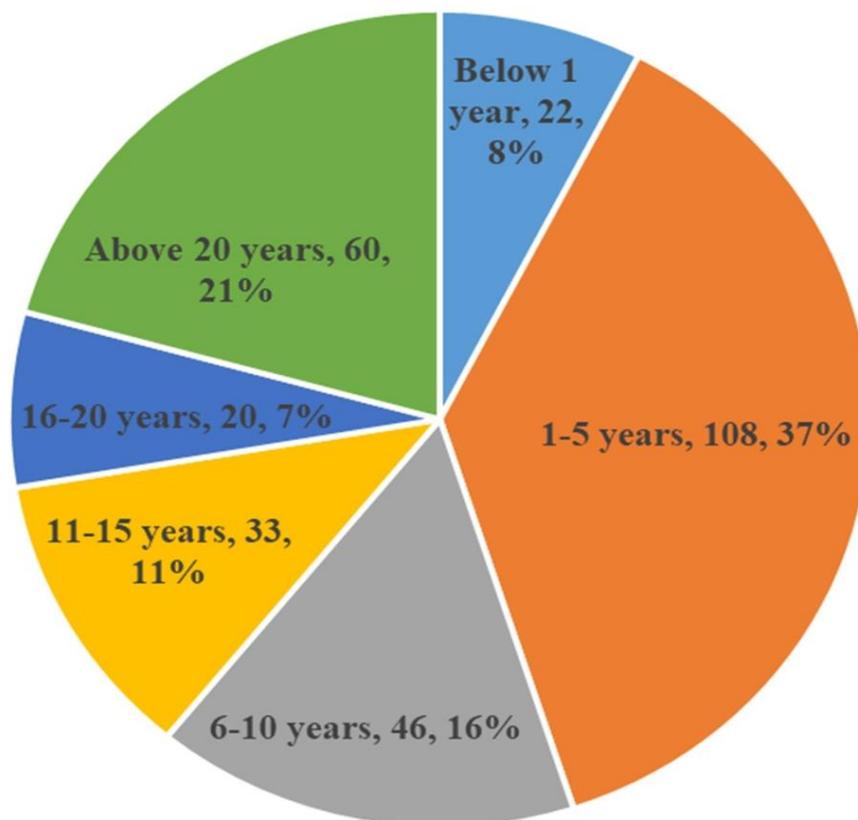


Figure 5.2 Age of the companies

The largest group was businesses aged between one and five years ($n = 108$, 37%), followed by above 20 years ($n = 60$, 21%), six to ten years ($n = 46$, 16%), 11 to 15 years ($n = 33$, 11%), below one year ($n = 22$, 8%) and 16 to 20 years ($n = 20$, 7%). Overall, businesses tended to be younger rather than older. A total of 176 businesses (60.1% of the sample) were not more than ten years

old. In contrast, a total of 113 businesses (39.1% of the sample) were eleven years or older. There is also a dip in distribution of the age of the businesses between 11 and 20 years. It is uncertain why this is the case, although it could be an example of survivorship bias or a non-representative sample. Survivorship bias refers to the problem that companies that perform poorly in the industry tend to cease operations, which means that companies within the sample can be over-represented in terms of either older companies (which have survived competition) or younger companies (which have not yet had time to fail) (Linnainmaa, 2013).

Overall, however, it can be stated that the businesses in the sample are likely to be relatively young, with about 61% of the sample under 10 years in operation. The age distribution of MICE businesses in Thailand is unknown, but this is consistent with a study on survival in tourism industries (this time in Spain), which demonstrated that there is a relatively high failure rate except in situations with very high demand (Lado-Sestayo, Vivel-Búa and Otero-González, 2016).

Overall, none of the characteristics of the companies are surprising given what is known about the company characteristics. However, it should be noted that the characteristics of companies arranging for MICE events in Thailand or who would consider doing so is not well understood and there has not been an organised study of it.

5.2.3 Types of meetings arranged

The final question was a behavioural question, about what kinds of meetings the company arranged on a regular basis (Figure 5.3). While some companies organised only one type of conference or meeting, others arranged multiple conferences and meetings over the course of a year.

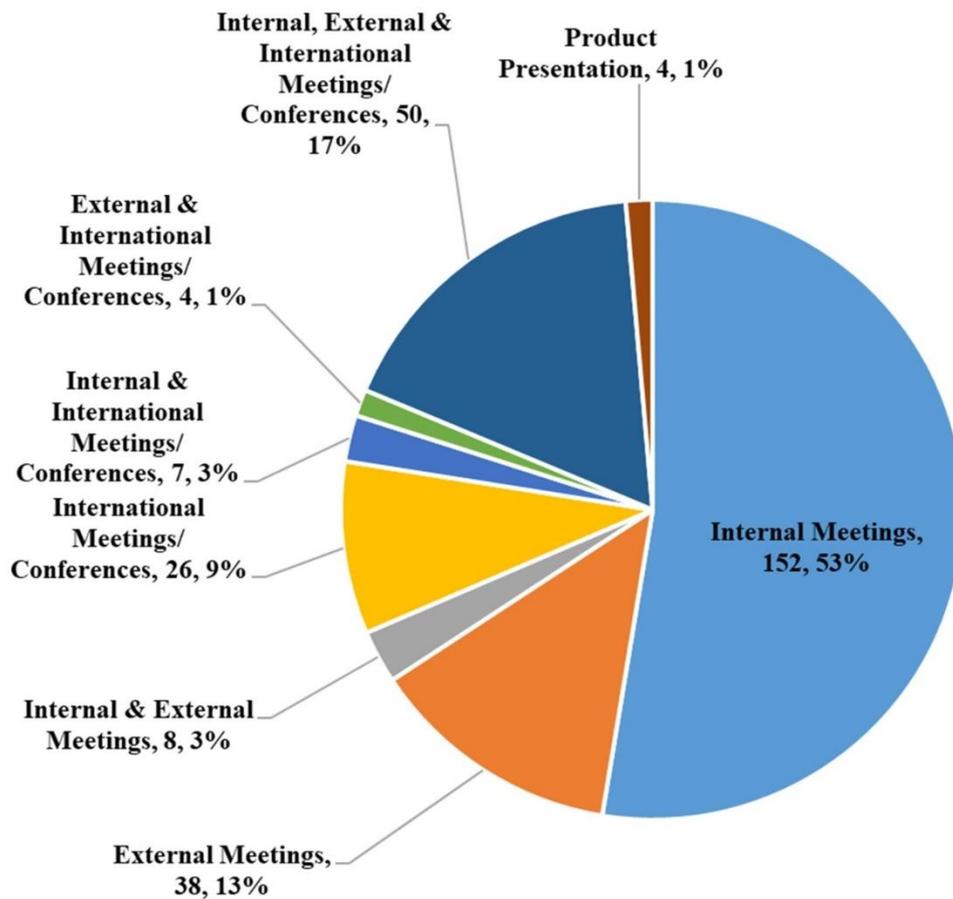


Figure 5.3 Types of meetings arranged on an annual basis

There were a total of 220 businesses (76.1% of the sample) that typically arranged only one type of meeting or conference on an international level. By far the most common type of meeting arranged on an annual basis was only internal meetings (with no other types of meetings arranged) (n = 152, 53%). Companies also were likely to arrange only external meetings (n = 38, 13%) and international meetings and conferences (n = 26, 9%). Companies were least likely to only arrange product presentations (n = 4, 1%).

69 companies (about 23.9% of the sample) also arranged multiple types of meeting and conferences on an annual basis. The largest group of these multiple conference arrangers, which included 50 respondents (17% of the sample) arranged internal, external, and international meetings and conferences (or in other words, most of the categories of meetings and conferences considered here). Companies may also choose to arrange internal and external meetings (n = 8, 3%), internal and international meetings and

conferences (n = 7, 3%), and external and international meetings and conferences (n = 4, 1%).

In summary, most of the companies that completed the survey arranged internal meetings, external meetings, or a combination of internal, external and international meetings and conferences on an annual basis. Companies were least likely to arrange product presentations or external and international meetings and conferences. This showed that there was a range of meeting arrangement behaviour, but that most meetings were internal. This is not surprising since it is known that the internal meeting segment is known to dominate MICE tourism market spending (Bhandalkar, 2018). Furthermore, it is consistent with the qualitative sample, where most of event arrangements were for internal meetings and events. However, while the qualitative participants were primarily domestic, there was slightly more international participation in the quantitative sample.

The investigation of meeting arrangement behaviour shows that the participants were active in this area. Thus, attention turns to investigating the perceptions of the respondents about Thailand as a potential meeting and conference destination. This is the subject of the proceeding discussion beginning with positive perceptions.

5.3 Positive Perceptions of Thailand's Tourism Industry and Suitability for the MICE Sector

The first set of descriptive statistics measures the positive perceptions of Thailand's tourism industry and its suitability for the MICE industry. These attributes were measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 point (strongly disagree) to 4 points (strongly agree). The data was analysed using mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). Additionally, an interpretation was developed using the original scale to explain what the trends in the data represented. The interpretation contained four class intervals, which were based on the original intervals of the scale. Using Sharma's (2012) classification schedule for definition of the intervals for opinion classification:

$$\text{Class interval width} = \frac{\text{Maximum Value} - \text{Minimum Value}}{\text{Class desired number (K)}} = \frac{4 - 1}{4} = .75$$

This analysis arrived at a class interval width of 0.75 points for interpretation of the mean. Therefore, the following mean interpretations are used:

- Mean 1.00 to 1.74: Strongly disagree
- Mean 1.75 to 2.49: Disagree
- Mean 2.50 to 3.24: Agree
- Mean 3.25 to 4.00: Strongly agree

These interpretations are not intended as statistical measures. Instead, they help to identify the general trends in the data and how respondents feel on the whole about the subject matter in the individual questions included in the scales.

The results are presented in two sections. Section 1 presents Thailand's general destination attractiveness attributes and section 2 presents Thailand's MICE industry specific attributes. The results show that respondents have a generally positive view of Thailand, both generally and as a MICE tourism destination, with especially positive views of Thailand's culture and people. However, there are some perceptions where there are slightly less positive views, including Thailand's political stability and ease of access and safety of planning a conference or meeting in Thailand. These areas represent potential focal points to improve destination marketing campaigns for meeting and conference planners to correct inaccurate perceptions about Thailand's political and safety situation and facilities for visitors. While it is not clear that these perceptions could be influenced, they could be addressed, for example, through provision of safety and security features of the event venue in marketing materials, to help mitigate risk perception. The next section continues with positive perceptions by considering the theme of Thailand's attractiveness.

5.3.1 Thailand's destination attractiveness attributes

There were seven items that measured Thailand's general destination attractiveness (Appendix D). These items were initially derived from the qualitative research. For example, the participants in the qualitative research identified Thai culture, including aspects like Thai food, as one of the most important aspects of the shared destination image. Respondents to the qualitative research also identified hospitality and service quality, accessibility, and friendliness of Thai people as part of the destination image of Thailand.

The highest mean for any of these items was for "Thailand has a unique culture" (M = 3.38, Strongly Agree). Respondents agreed on average to statements including "Thai people are friendly" (M = 3.18, Agree), "Thailand has numerous attractive attractions and can offer a wide range of activities" (M = 3.07, Agree), "Thailand is famous for service quality" (M = 2.98, Agree), "Thailand has a variety of venues for meetings and conferences" (M = 2.93, Agree), "It is easy to access Thailand for overseas visitors" (M = 2.69, Agree), and "Thailand has political stability" (M = 2.56, Agree). Therefore, respondents did not, on average, disagree with any of the positive statements about Thailand as a generally attractive destination. This is consistent with previous studies, which have shown that Thailand does generally have a good destination image (Lertputtarak, 2012; Tavitiyaman and Qu, 2013; Yiamjanya and Wongleedee, 2014).

The Likert item means indicate that respondents have a generally positive view of Thailand's culture, people, tourism attractions, service quality and a variety of meeting venues. This indicates that the respondents to the survey generally consider Thailand as an attractive destination, including both the general tourism characteristics and the features that are specifically required for MICE tourism such as, for example, service quality and venue choice. This is a positive indicator that Thailand is well regarded as a tourism destination that is suitable for MICE events. This is a more positive perception of Thailand compared to previous studies which have identified problems like political instability and inadequate tourism infrastructure as barriers to MICE tourism in

Thailand (Rittichainuwat, 2010). This does raise some questions which are addressed in Chapter 7.

It is noticeable that Thailand's political stability ranked much lower than most of the other factors in the scale. This is not surprising given that Thailand has been known in the past for some degree of political instability, and is currently under the rule of a military dictatorship, which many may not believe is stable (Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013). In fact, it was already known that this would be a problem area for Thailand's destination image perception, as its political instability and inconsistency in terms of destination risk has been noted in several previous studies (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009; Rittichainuwat, 2010; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Akkhaphin, 2016; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). Therefore, it is not surprising that this was ranked lower than the other items. In the qualitative research, the question of political safety was strongly associated with the question of attendee safety, particularly since relocation of events is expensive and the avoidance of an event can negatively affect both the success of an individual event and the overall destination image.

Another noticeable problem is "It is easy to access Thailand for overseas visitors", which while not having as low a mean as the question about political instability was still relatively low. Ease of access was one of the positive features in the qualitative research model, as respondents noted that it was easily accessible by air from different locations in the world. This raises the question of why it would be considered somewhat difficult to access in the quantitative study. This may be because potential visitors to Thailand may assume (incorrectly) that there would be language barriers and cultural differences that would affect their visit (Ngamvichakit and Beise-Zee, 2014) or because it is perceived as a low-developing country (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017). Because most of the participants in the qualitative research were from domestic firms or international firms with offices in Thailand, it is possible that they may have more awareness of how accessible the country is generally, e.g. how many people speak English. This could be one of the biggest problems of the theoretical model. It also calls back to the difference in *place image* (held by both insiders and outsiders) and *destination image* (held by outsiders) (Stylidis, et al., 2017). This difference between insider and outsider perceptions

may be not just a problem for the model proposed here, but a problem for any destination image model in a tourism economy that includes both outsider and insider perspectives.

In summary, these results show that Thailand is generally perceived positively as a MICE destination, with especially positive views of the culture, people, and service quality of the country. This indicates that the companies and destination planners included in this study have a generally positive view of what Thailand offers as a tourism destination. There is also a positive view of the country's venues for meetings and conferences, which is essential when selecting a MICE tourism destination since these venues are critical for holding meetings (Robinson and Callan, 2001). However, the slightly less positive perceptions of Thailand's political stability and ease of access do point to some areas where event planners may need additional information and support to improve their perceptions in this area. The next section addresses perceptions of MICE industry-specific attributes.

5.3.2 Thailand's MICE industry attributes

There were also questions asked specifically about Thailand's appropriateness for the MICE tourism sector. The results are presented in Appendix E.

Respondents generally agreed with statements 8, 9 and 10 (Appendix E). Of these, "Thailand is really good value for money to organise meetings and conferences" shows the highest level of agreement (M = 2.98, Agree), followed by "Thailand has good quality MICE facilities" (M = 2.95, Agree) and "It is safe to arrange meetings and conferences in Thailand" (M = 2.73, Agree). Overall, these results show a generally positive, though not highly positive, view of Thailand's MICE tourism potential. For example, respondents agree that the facilities are good quality and that Thailand is a good value for money destination, which means that it is fundamentally a good location for MICE tourism (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Crouch and Louviere, 2007;

Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014; Akkhaphin, 2016).

It is concerning that the safety of arranging meetings and conferences in Thailand had a lower mean agreement than the other items, especially since it is not possible to determine where this lower agreement stems from. For example, this could come from general destination image problems of Thailand as a relatively risky tourism destination (Tavitiyaman and Qu, 2013), from organiser's previous experience attempting to arrange MICE conferences in Thailand, or from information or rumours about issues like corruption. It should also be noted that MICE conference organisers may have a heightened sense of safety and risk due to the responsibility for the attendees, which poses a higher risk than for individual leisure tourists. For example, interviewees in the qualitative research discussed a relatively extensive safety and security assurance approach, including both physical safety and security of the venues (e.g. checking fire and safety systems). However, since only a few of the conference organisers were willing to discuss safety and security issues, it is difficult to extrapolate whether this is a serious concern for Thailand or not. Regardless of its source, this could represent a perceived barrier to selection of Thailand as a tourist destination, and should be investigated. The research for this thesis, was exploratory in nature, and not designed to identify where these attributes of destination image for the MICE tourism industry came from, and therefore it is not possible to determine, with any certainty, what influences them. This would be a useful avenue for future research as it appears to be a potentially serious barrier to planning events in Thailand. The problem of safety is discussed further in Chapter 7, while recommendations for future research are provided in the recommendation section (Chapter 8, Section 8.5). From this research, however, it is possible to conclude that conference and meeting planners may require additional support and information so that they understand that Thailand is a safe place for destination planning (Saenjai and Mongkolsrisawat, 2015).

5.4 Perceived Barriers of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination

In addition to the positive perceptions above, respondents were also asked about their perceived barriers for using Thailand specifically as a MICE tourism destination. The perceived barriers included six items, which addressed possible factors that may have a negative effect on the willingness to arrange meetings in Thailand. These items are presented in Appendix F. They have been interpreted using the same scale as that used for the perceived attractions of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination:

- Mean 1.00 to 1.74: Strongly disagree
- Mean 1.65 to 2.49: Disagree
- Mean 2.50 to 3.24: Agree
- Mean 3.25 to 4.00: Strongly agree

It can be stated that the view of Thailand's negative attributes for MICE tourism are mixed and not highly polarised in any direction. There were two items where respondents as a whole agreed that the factor represented a problem for MICE tourism in Thailand. These items included the remote distance from the business's headquarters or home location (M = 2.70, Agree) and language barriers (M= 2.67, Agree). The other four factors fell into the 'disagree' category. These items included unstable political environment (M = 2.44, Disagree), Thailand was too expensive to organise meetings and conferences (M = 2.26, Disagree), there was a lack of safety (M = 2.25, Disagree), and there were potential health epidemic issues (M = 1.94, Disagree). These perceived negative attributes are to some extent not resolvable; the distance from the United Kingdom (or other home countries) is fixed and cannot be changed, and language barriers could only be affected in the long term. However, it may be possible to influence the perceived barriers of cost, political environment and stability, and the possible lack of personal safety and health risks, which are not present. This possibility is discussed in Chapter 7, which takes up the question of improving the destination image.

These responses are generally consistent with the positive views described in the preceding section. For example, respondents agreed that Thailand offered good value for money for MICE tourism in the positive questions, and here they

disagreed that Thailand was too expensive for MICE tourism. The intersection of these two responses means that Thailand is not considered too expensive as a MICE tourism destination, indicating generally positive views.

Another interesting intersection is that respondents did not agree that there was a lack of personal safety in Thailand as a barrier to MICE tourism, even though the responses in the previous section indicate that respondents were slightly less likely to agree that arranging meetings in Thailand was safe. This suggests that the main barrier to perceived safety is not the personal safety of the attendees, but is instead organisational issues such as corruption or other operational risks. This provides information about where MICE tourism operations need to be improved (for example, stricter oversight of venue operators).

Some of the factors identified here as barriers to MICE tourism also relate to the perceptions of Thailand as a leisure tourism destination. For example, perceptions of language barriers and the long distance of Thailand from the United Kingdom could relate to the relatively low mean agreement that Thailand is accessible to visitors. Some of these factors cannot be changed in the short term, for example the distance, although this may become less important over time due to advances in transportation technology. However, destination marketers could emphasise the multilingual skills of Thais working in the tourism industry, which is very high compared to other markets, as a positive benefit of choosing Thailand as a MICE destination, since a lack of shared language is one of the barriers to international MICE tourism (Chon and Weber, 2014) and since Thailand has been noted as having a high level of English proficiency in its tourism and hospitality industry (Akkhaphin, 2016).

5.5 Hypothesis Results

The hypothesis of the research stated that:

H0: There is no relationship between respondents' business type and their attitudes/perceptions about Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination.

H1: There is a relationship between respondents' business type and their attitudes/perceptions about Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination.

This hypothesis was tested using chi-square tests (with results shown in Table 5.1) and a distribution table (shown in Table 5.2).

Table 5.1 Chi-square tests (Hypothesis testing)

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	609.305 ^a	171	.000
Likelihood Ratio	436.188	171	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.657	1	.418
N of Valid Cases	289		

a. 189 cells (94.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .06.

Table 5.2 Difference between industries (Hypothesis testing)

Business Types	Mean Score										
	1.00	1.33	1.67	2.00	2.33	2.67	3.00	3.33	3.67	4.00	Total
Agriculture	0	0	0	0	4	0	8	0	0	0	12
Accounting/ Business Consulting	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	6
Advertising/ Marketing	0	0	0	0	4	2	4	10	0	0	20
Automotive	0	0	0	0	6	0	5	0	0	0	11
Banking/ Private Equity	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	4	0	0	7
Construction/ Building Supplies	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	4	0	8
Electronics/ Engineering	0	0	0	4	0	0	3	0	0	0	7
Energy	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	6
Entertainment & Leisure	0	0	3	0	0	0	18	3	3	4	31
Education	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	8
Food, Beverage & Tobacco	0	5	0	0	0	0	22	0	3	8	38
Health Care	6	0	0	0	0	4	4	0	0	0	14
Manufacturing	0	0	0	0	2	3	5	4	4	0	18
Pharmaceuticals	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
Real Estate	0	0	0	1	0	4	28	0	0	0	33
Retail & Wholesale	4	2	0	0	2	0	2	6	0	0	16
Insurance	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	3	8
Technology & Software	0	0	0	0	0	4	16	0	0	0	20
Transportation/ Shipping	0	0	1	0	0	0	5	3	0	0	9
Other	4	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	4	13
Total	14	7	4	8	18	21	154	30	14	19	289

The Pearson chi-square test outcome ($\chi^2 = 609.305$, $df = 171$, $p < .001$) indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in distribution between variables (see Table 5.1). Table 5.1 shows that there are two clearly identified meaningful differences. These differences are highly positive mean views of Thailand in the entertainment and leisure and food, beverage and tobacco industries. These industries, taken together, account for some of the most positive views of Thailand as a tourism industry. However, these differences are relatively limited in size. They are also some of the largest industries that were surveyed, with 38 respondents in the food, beverage and tobacco industry

and 31 respondents in the entertainment and leisure industry. This means that these differences may not be because of actual variation in the mean perception of Thailand as a destination in the industry as a whole, but instead related to the size of the sample and how many respondents were included in each of the industries.

In summary, the chi-square test did technically indicate a significant relationship, so the hypothesis was accepted, but it was very weak. This finding is based on a relatively small positive difference in only two industries, which may be because these industries were among the largest included in the sample. This means that these industries may have a more positive view in the sample not because of a more positive view in general, but because there were more data points and therefore a greater spread of opinions between the highest and lowest extremes. Therefore, this result does not support a finding that could be used to target marketing activities. However, there could be individual differences based on factors that were not considered, for example geography or industry sector, that this research was not designed to identify. Thus, it should be considered that individual industries may have some significant differences based on other factors, which could influence how Thailand is perceived as a MICE destination.

The implication of these findings for the theory of MICE destination image as derived from the qualitative research is that there is not necessarily a significant difference in most aspects of the destination image perception between industries. The qualitative research did not explicitly investigate differences in industry-level perceptions. However, there were some differences that could be identified. For example, domestic firms in the qualitative sample, which tended to be smaller and more localised than international firms (though not universally), were more open to considering diversity of venues as a benefit of Thailand as a destination. The use of venues such as large restaurants and temples may not occur to an international firm, but these were an important aspect for domestic firms.

Overall, there could be many differences in the perception of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination, but they may not be based on differences such as

firm size or industry. Instead, they may be based on an insider versus outsider perspective, with domestic firms (insiders) having a different view of Thailand as a MICE destination than international firms (outsiders). The implication of this is that there may be some differences in the theoretical model and its accuracy between domestic firms and international firms. This is part of what is discussed in the next two chapters, where the results are first discussed and then triangulated between the qualitative and quantitative findings.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter reported on the quantitative results from a survey of international companies based in the United Kingdom that organise MICE events (n = 289). The survey was drawn from a range of sectors, the largest groups included were food, beverage and tobacco, real estate, entertainment and leisure, technology and software, and advertising and marketing. About 60% of the companies were ten years old or younger. However, there was also a relatively large group of companies over 20 years old (about 20% of the sample). Furthermore, the organisations involved showed a range of MICE event organisation behaviour, although most of the respondents organised only internal meetings. Thus, there was a range of companies included in the sample, both in terms of their characteristics and their organisational behaviour.

Respondents showed a generally positive perception of Thailand as a general tourist destination, with particularly positive perceptions of Thailand's culture, people, and attractions. However, respondents were somewhat less likely to agree that Thailand is politically stable and accessible to outsiders. In terms of MICE-specific factors, respondents were also generally positive, although they were slightly less likely to agree that Thailand was safe as a Meeting/Conference venue. There were some significant barriers, including the distance, language barriers, and Thailand's unstable political situation. Finally, there were some industry differences in the perception of Thailand as a tourism destination. However, these differences were relatively small, and occurred only in the largest groups of industries. In the next chapter, the meaning of these differences and their relationship to the existing literature (based on the

literature review (Chapter 2)) are presented and discussed, to interpret and understand the meaning of these findings and provide more detail and meaning for them.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Quantitative Data

6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, the findings from the primary study that relate to research objective 2 (To assess the perceptions of potential international companies/organisations towards the Meetings/Conferences industry in Thailand and determine the types of businesses that have 'positive' or 'negative' attitudes) were presented. These findings were derived from an individual company-level survey of 289 international companies that organised MICE travels for various purposes, such as internal meetings, external meetings, and conferences. The organisations came from a wide range of industries, and ranged in age from newly established (under one year) to over 20 years old. Thus, although it would be difficult to state that the sample was representative, it did show a wide range of different business characteristics. The survey evaluated positive perceptions of and perceived barriers to Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. Chi-square tests were then used to determine whether there were statistically significant relationships between the business characteristics and factors in the choice of Thailand. These factors included the tourist destination image of Thailand as well as MICE-specific features of its destination. This test was intended to determine whether there were any groups of businesses that had particular perceptions of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination, which would provide guidance for addressing Thailand's destination image.

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate and interpret the findings with reference to the literature review, which was presented in Chapter 2. The assessment includes the findings that were expected and those that were unexpected and the meaning or importance of these findings for MICE tourism in Thailand from the event planners' perspectives. It also reflects on the importance of these findings in terms of their academic implications and how Thailand's destination tourism marketing activities may have affected these perceptions given changes over time.

The chapter proceeds in the following way: First, the positive perceptions of Thailand as a general tourism destination (or in other words its general

destination attractiveness) and in terms of its suitability for MICE tourism are discussed. Second, the perceived barriers to MICE tourism in Thailand are assessed. The connections between business characteristics and the attractions, barriers, and MICE characteristics are then considered. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings and points the way forward to the proceeding discussion in the thesis.

6.2 Thailand's Destination Attractiveness

The first section of the survey evaluated the general destination attractiveness of Thailand, including diverse dimensions such as variety of meeting venues, service quality, unique culture, attractions and activities, political stability, ease of access, and friendly people (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1). Respondents strongly agreed that Thailand has a unique culture, and also had a general agreement that Thailand was characterised by friendly people, attractions and activities, service quality, varieties of venues, ease of access, and political stability. Ease of access ($M = 2.69$, Agree) and political stability ($M = 2.56$, Agree) had somewhat lower means than the mean agreements of other aspects (ranging from $M = 2.93$ to 3.38).

These findings are generally consistent with the findings of earlier research about MICE tourism in Thailand. For example, Akkhaphin (2016), who used a mixed methods approach to investigate the question of Thailand's tourism destination image, found a range of destination image factors that influenced the perceived suitability of Thailand for MICE tourism. These included service quality, tourism activities and attractions, and the variety of venues. Another study also identified political stability and suitability of conference and meeting venues as factors in the destination attractiveness of Thailand (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009). These authors investigated these factors as barriers rather than positive factors that contributed to tourism destination but this research positioned them as positive aspects of Thailand as a tourism destination, in recognition that the political environment and tourism sector has changed since Sangpikul and Kim (2009) conducted their survey. Because of the changes in the Thai tourism industry, it was thought that suitability of venues, for example,

would now be an advantage to the industry rather than a barrier as Sangpikul and Kim's work was more than a decade ago. There is also a deep history of studies that show that culture and friendliness of people in a destination have a positive effect on the attractiveness of a destination (Relph, 1976; Florek and Insch, 2008; Murphy, 2010; Stachow and Hart, 2010). These studies have shown in general that attractiveness of the destination culture and people of a destination are some of the most positive features of a destination and may be among the strongest influences on the choice of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. Culture and friendliness of the people are particularly important for Thailand as a good place to hold a business meeting, since these characteristics have long been recognised as properties that differentiate Thailand's destination image from the destination image of other countries (Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000). For example, Tapachai and Waryszak (2000, p. 42) identified the friendliness of local people as one of the strongest aspects of functional value for the beneficial image of Thailand, behind only "fascinating cheap shopping" and "exotic food". Thus, this is clearly one of the dimensions of Thailand's destination image.

One of the main differences of this research from other studies of Thai destination image (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Changsorn, 2003, Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018) is that this study focused on the destination image perceptions of professional event planners working for individual organisations. These perceptions were presented in Chapter 5 (Appendices D and F). This contrasts with most of the other studies on tourism destination image, which have evaluated the destination image perceptions from the point of view of individual tourists and the consequences of these perceptions in some cases. This was true of all the studies that were assessed that related to culture and friendliness of people (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Aung et al., 2015). As one previous study (TCEB, 2018c) that has compared the perceptions of MICE tourism planners to other stakeholder groups like

business travellers, MICE visitors, and tourism organisations showed, there are some significant differences between these groups about the destination image of Thailand. Therefore, it could not be concluded only from the literature that was reviewed for the study, as noted above, that these factors were important. Research for this thesis has confirmed that MICE tourism planners from companies based in the United Kingdom that organise meetings and events do have a positive destination image of Thailand. However, since the study did not compare the findings to other stakeholder groups, for example the MICE visitors (rather than planners) and MICE tourism service providers, it is possible that other stakeholder groups would have different perceptions. For example, the previous research which focused on individual tourists showed different perceptions, especially around questions like risk, safety and political instability (Rittichainuwat, 2010; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). This potential difference is one of the reasons why this research and others, such as Akkhaphin's (2016) study and the TCEB (2018c) research, are important for MICE tourism strategy planning, since they provide information specifically about this stakeholder group. However, since there have been so few studies and since there could be differences that have not been observed, for example national or industry-level studies, there could be some negative effects.

The importance of this general perception of Thailand as an attractive tourism destination (as illustrated in Chapter 5, Appendix D) is that it is a big part of the destination image that meeting and conference planners will have for Thailand. The destination image, which is the sum of knowledge, impressions, emotions, and thoughts that an individual has about a destination (Baud-Bovy and Lawson, 1977) (as discussed in Chapter 2) is important for tourism planners because it is one of the strongest pull factors that brings tourists to a certain destination (Cooper et al., 2008). However, tourism destination image does not include all possible information about a destination; instead, it comes from a few pieces of information that make the most impression on the potential tourist (Ingram and Grieve, 2013). While in this study most of the general impressions were positive (as summarised in Chapter 5, Appendix D) there is the potential that negative impressions (as summarised in Chapter 5, Appendix F) could

become dominant, especially if they stood out strongly against the backdrop of positive impressions. For example, previous studies have demonstrated that tourists may perceive Thailand as being riskier or unsafe compared to other tourist destinations (e.g. Tavitiyaman and Qu, 2013), and that political instability can exacerbate negative perceptions of the location by tourists (Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013). These effects may be mitigated in the case of conference and meeting planners, who may seek out more information than the general tourist because they have professional knowledge of the field (Akkhaphin, 2016). However, this cannot be relied on. The general point here is that while the current study found that there was a generally positive destination image of Thailand as a tourism destination, (Chapter 5, Appendix D) this positive impression may not override negative impressions (Chapter 5, Appendix F), especially those related to the specific needs of conference and tourism planning. This implies that destination marketers who are promoting Thai cities as MICE tourism destinations cannot rely on these generally positive perceptions of Thailand as a tourism destination. Instead, they need to also consider the effect of MICE-specific destination image and the perceived barriers, which are discussed below. This is because MICE tourism is not planned individually, but by MICE planners who take responsibility for large groups of tourists and who need to consider the suitability of the destination for these groups, rather than only the general attractiveness of the destination (McCartney, 2008). These factors are likely to be equally as important in destination choice (if not more so) (Houdement, Santos and Serra, 2017).

6.3 Thailand's Suitability as a MICE Tourism Destination

Next, the survey evaluated aspects of Thailand's destination image that directly related to its suitability for MICE tourism (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2). These factors are mainly relevant to MICE planners, although they may also have relevance to MICE delegates since they influence their conference experience. These MICE-specific factors included good value for money, safe to arrange meetings and conferences, and good quality MICE facilities. Respondents generally agreed that these aspects of destination suitability were important,

although the mean for safety of arranging meetings and conferences was slightly lower than the other two dimensions as illustrated in Appendix E. However, this difference was not strong enough to clearly differentiate it from the good value for money and good quality MICE facility perceptions.

Good value for money, the first and strongest perception that was measured, is a commonly identified destination image characteristic of Thailand, including both individual tourists and MICE tourism planners ($M = 2.98$, Agree) (Chapter 5, Appendix E). This was consistent with previous studies. For example, a study published in 2001 found that international travellers routinely considered Thailand to be good value for money (Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001). This aspect of destination image was still in place in 2014, when Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake (2015) surveyed international travellers in Thailand and Myanmar in order to examine the perceived destination image of Thailand and Singapore. However, there is limited evidence from previous studies that MICE tourism planners consider Thailand to be good value for money, especially since the cost of international conferences would be higher because of transport costs. Akkhaphin (2016), which was one of the few studies that have previously evaluated MICE tourism planners and their perceptions of Thailand, also found that Thailand was considered good value for money. The research for this thesis adds to the body of evidence that Thailand is good value for money for MICE tourism planners, adding to the findings of previous authors. This finding is important because it provides support for destination marketers to promote Thailand as a good value tourism destination. It is also consistent with previous findings that have shown that value for money is relevant to MICE tourism destinations because of the cost of overheads for planning large-scale event tourism (Locke, 2010; Donalson, 2013; Abeysinghe, 2016).

The mean value for safety ($M = 2.73$, Agree) was slightly lower than the mean for good value ($M = 2.98$, Agree) and conference venue quality ($M = 2.95$, Agree), although it was not low enough to indicate that participants believed Thailand was not safe. The finding in regard to Thailand being a safe place to organise a conference was also important, because as noted in the last chapter, there is a perception found in some studies that Thailand is a riskier tourism destination compared to others (Tavitiyaman and Qu, 2013). However, these

studies are mainly based on the perceptions of individual tourists. Thus, this destination image characteristic has the same problem as good value for money, which is that it has been mainly investigated in relation to individual tourists rather than companies seeking an overseas venue for a conference. Akkhaphin (2016), who conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of tourism destination image of Thailand specific to MICE tourism, did find that safety and security issues were one of the destination issues that MICE tourism planners perceived. In practice, MICE tourism safety is a priority in the tourism planning process, because of the need to ensure both visitor safety and overcome risk perceptions to ensure attendance (Whitfield et al., 2014). This has been addressed by venues in Thailand to some extent. For example, MICE tourism marketing and venue management in Khon Kaen Province prioritises venue and attendee safety and security (Saenjai and Mongkolsrisawat, 2015). This is effective in indoor venues, although outdoor venues do pose more of a security challenge for MICE planners. The implications of the importance of safety is that the perceptions of MICE planners in regard to safety and security of events are consistent with the actual safety and security situation for MICE events in Thailand. Thus, while this is a potential concern for MICE planners (as it should be for planners in any area), because of attendee and planner risk-aversion (Whitfield et al., 2014). It should not be considered a significant problem that would prevent MICE planners from choosing Thailand as a tourism destination. Instead, the findings from this thesis's research imply that MICE planners generally consider Thailand's safety situation to be adequate.

The final MICE-specific destination image aspect was that Thailand's MICE tourism venues, such as exhibition and conference centres, are good quality. Akkhaphin (2016) identified standardisation and quality of exhibition and conference centres as a significant factor in Thailand's MICE-specific destination image, although it was mainly a concern for MICE tourism planners and MICE marketing organisations, rather than the attendees of the conferences and meetings they organised. However, there is evidence that the attractiveness and quality of the conference venue is also important to conference delegates, as this does affect the experience of the event and attitudes toward attendance (Henaien and Sinha, 2014). The research for this

dissertation generally supports the importance of the venue quality for conference planners, adding to the evidence of its importance. The importance of this finding is that it will affect the ultimate selection of a specific tourism destination, including the location and the venue accessibility (for example by public transport) (Boo and Kim, 2019). Venue quality characteristics, like availability of exhibition space and meeting or breakout rooms and the quality of audio visual systems, along with capacity, ambience and layout, are also known to be a determining factor in the choice of venues by individual planners (Crouch and Louviere, 2007).

Taken together, these findings do show that MICE planners for companies in the United Kingdom that hold international events consider Thailand to have a good level of MICE-specific destination attributes, like good quality venues and safety and security. Furthermore, the findings also show that Thailand is considered good value for money, which is essential for the tourism industry. This is largely consistent with the general destination image perceptions which were discussed in Section 6.2 above, which also supported a positive destination image for Thailand. What is not clear, however, is how this positive destination image perceptions balance against the barriers to MICE tourism in Thailand. These perceived barriers, which are discussed in the next section, may be strong enough to discourage MICE planners from choosing Thailand as a destination, even though there is a generally positive destination image for Thailand both generally and as a MICE tourism destination.

6.4 Barriers to MICE Tourism in Thailand

This section discusses the third element of the survey which measured the perceived barriers to MICE tourism in Thailand (see Chapter 5, Section 5.4, Appendix F). The potential barriers that were identified included language barriers, remote distance from the organiser's home country, too expensive, unstable political environment, epidemic issues, and a lack of safety. Respondents generally agreed that there were language barriers and that Thailand was remotely located. However, they disagreed with four other

statements which highlighted negative aspects of Thailand as a potential tourism destination.

MICE planners did agree that there was a potential language barrier to holding conferences in Thailand ($M = 2.67$, Agree) This finding has also been identified in studies of individual tourists in information-intensive tourism segments like medical tourism, where tourists are highly concerned with communication with Thai service providers (Ngamvichaikit and Beise-Zee, 2014). However, it is not certain that this represents a true barrier or simply a perceived barrier, since in practice there is a relatively high level of English skill in Thai tourism industries. Thailand's hospitality industry benefits from the inclusion of English in the curriculum, which contributes to the wide use of spoken English, at least at a basic level. A previous study has found that tourists to Thailand actually do not experience a language barrier when visiting the country (Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001). At the same time, speakers of other languages may perceive language barriers as a problem, perhaps due to a lack of English skills on their part (Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Changsorn, 2003; Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006). This raises two related points. First, even if there is no true barrier for English speakers, there may be barriers for speakers of other languages. Second, even a perceived language barrier could inhibit the choice of Thailand as a destination. Thus, even though Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown (2001) suggests there is no actual language barrier for English speakers, even the perception of one could affect the tourism destination.

MICE planners in the study ($n = 289$) also agreed that the distance from the organiser's home country was a barrier to Thailand as a MICE tourism destination ($M = 2.70$, Agree). Given the cost of MICE tourism, it would be inappropriate to ignore this perceived barrier. Akkhaphin (2016), one of the few other studies that has addressed MICE tourism in Thailand, also supported the idea that Thailand's distance to African, European and North American countries may affect its perceived suitability for MICE tourism. Since time and distance to the conference venue is known to be one of the factors that influence MICE destination choice (Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Henaien and Sinha, 2014), this factor cannot be ignored, since it could influence the choice of Thailand as a destination. At the same time, this

barrier is not insurmountable, since Thailand was also perceived as good value for money as noted above in Section 6.3. Therefore, it is possible that MICE destination marketers could emphasise the value for money of Thailand as a factor that could overcome the problem of distance to the venue, since good value could offset the cost of transporting attendees. However, this would not overcome the implied problem of sustainability, which does influence MICE destination choice for at least some planners (Rittichinuwat and Mair, 2012; Khwanyuen, 2015). In particular, some MICE tourism planners have requirements for event sustainability imposed as part of the planning framework, either as an aspect of the company's internal sustainability policy or the event policy, which can affect the distance they are willing to travel (Rittichinuwat and Mair, 2012; Khwanyuen, 2015). For MICE planners that have sustainability preferences, good value for money may not overcome the environmental cost of transporting delegates to a remote destination. Therefore, there is a need to consider whether promoting MICE tourism would be more effective for planners in regional markets, including ASEAN countries, China and Japan, where there is a shorter distance to Thailand and therefore a lower financial and environmental cost associated with it.

The survey conducted for this thesis indicated that the companies did not consider Thailand to be too expensive ($M= 2.26$, Disagree), a significant safety risk ($M= 2.25$, Disagree), too politically unstable ($M= 2.44$, Disagree), or to have epidemics or other health issues that could influence a conference ($M= 1.94$, Disagree). These findings show that most of the potential perceived barriers that were identified from the literature were not actually viewed, by participants, as barriers. These perceptions are generally consistent with findings in other areas. For example, as discussed in Section 6.3, MICE planners viewed Thailand as being good value for money. Thus, it is consistent that they did not consider it to be expensive. This finding is important because conference planners tend to reject cities or locations that are considered to be too expensive or poor value for money (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Go and Zhang, 1997; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014). The finding on epidemics was not surprising, since although this may be a general safety issue

(Morrison, 2013), there have not been recent issues like this in Thailand. Concerns about political instability have been found in studies like those by Rittichainuwat (2010), Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip (2013) and Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018). These studies were conducted in the context of higher political instability at the time, including international warnings against travel to Thailand. At the time of writing, the political situation in Thailand is far more stable than it was during the late 2000s and early 2010s. However, the rapidly changing political environment and widespread media interest in Thai politics means that this finding may not remain stable. A downturn in political stability could have a very strong effect on destination image, since destination image coalesces from strong and recent impressions of a destination (Ingram and Grieve, 2013).

Taken together, the findings from this thesis's research show that MICE conference planners do not perceive very high barriers to choosing Thailand as a destination. However, these findings do need to be considered carefully, because many of them could change rapidly. For example, the outbreak of high political instability, security and safety risks like natural disasters, or an epidemic could change this evaluation and could introduce barriers to choose Thailand as a tourism destination. Factors including language barriers and distance between Thailand and the planner's home country could influence destination choice. However, there are ways to offset these factors through marketing communications, for example, emphasising the language skills of staff and the availability of translation and interpretation services, as well as promoting value for money. However, in the case of conference planners who emphasise sustainability, the problem of distance may not be possible to overcome. Thus, it may simply not be possible for Thailand to remove all the barriers to MICE destination choice. Instead, marketing strategies should focus on industries or market segments that will not be as sensitive to these barriers.

6.5 The Effect of Company Characteristics on Perceptions of Thailand as a MICE Tourism Destination

To evaluate how company characteristics influenced the perception of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination, chi-square tests (Chapter 5, Section 5.5) were conducted. The industry-level analysis was conducted using chi-square tests (Chapter 5, Table 5.1). This analysis showed that companies in the entertainment and leisure industry and the food, beverage and tobacco industry had a significantly higher perception of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination overall than other industries ($\chi^2 = 609.305$, $p < .001$).

The comparison of companies from different industries and with different characteristics was one of the differences between the research reported here and previous research conducted. Previously, as noted above (Section 6.3) most of the research on Thailand's destination image and attractiveness has been conducted with individual tourists, rather than MICE organisers. There have been some studies on MICE destination image, but most of these studies have addressed the planner perspective rather than the company perspective (e.g. Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996; 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Crouch and Louviere, 2007). As explained in the rationale this was one of the main reasons for conducting the study reported here. This research, by showing that companies that arrange different types of conferences and that are in different industries have different viewpoints on Thailand as a MICE conference destination, has offered a new insight into how MICE tourism planners choose Thailand as a destination and what kind of perceptions they have about it. This is a point that will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 8 (the conclusion and recommendations of the research), where a more extended reflection on the contribution of the research to knowledge is offered.

It seems to be a reasonable question to ask how Thailand is considered as a destination for companies that have different characteristics, such as industry or type of events arranged. This is because these companies may have

different needs for event planning. For example, companies that arrange primarily internal meetings, which made up nearly half of the sample in this research, may prefer not to select destinations that are very far away from their organisation members or headquarters. This does not mean that such events may not be held in distant locations; for example, large business meetings may be located in popular tourist destinations as a form of reward for delegates, which encourages the selection of far-away places or those considered exotic (Henaien and Sinha, 2014). At the same time, not all such meetings will be suitable for a remote location. For example, company-wide meetings or those that involve significant inter-organisational work may not be considered suitable for such remote locations. Thus, these findings support the common sense inference that not all types of MICE events will be considered suitable for long distance travel.

It is unclear why MICE organisers in companies in the entertainment and leisure and food, beverage and tobacco industries would have a more positive destination image for Thailand than those in other industries. This may be because there were more participants from these industries compared to the others. However, it could also be because of differences in event planning in these sectors compared to the other sectors. For example, food, beverage and tobacco and entertainment and leisure companies could make more extensive use of MICE tourism as incentives for employees, business partners and other stakeholders compared to industries like construction and building supplies and insurance. However, there has not been sufficient research into inter-industry differences in the use of MICE tourism, so it is difficult to state this with certainty. This is one area, as will be discussed in the thesis's final chapter, where more research would be useful to offer more insight to academics and destination planners.

Taken together, this thesis's findings do support the idea that company characteristics influence the destination image of Thailand, and by extension its suitability as a location for MICE tourism. While some of these differences are easily traceable to specific characteristics, others were not so clear. There were also other characteristics that were not considered in this research, for example size, profitability, headquarters' location, or concerns about

sustainability such as the environmental cost of long-haul air travel. Thus, while this finding is a contribution to the literature, it is also an area where there is room for much more research. Opportunities for additional research will be addressed in Chapter 8.

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the quantitative research presented in Chapter 5 in relation to the literature about consumers' perceptions examined in Chapter 2 to understand the implications of these findings and their contribution to the academic literature. The study's outcome was broadly consistent with the expectations based on the literature review, although there were a few new insights including the finding regarding the company characteristic effects on the tourism industry. The study also showed that although participants had a positive view of Thailand presently, some of the factors could be considered more negatively if conditions changed. Thus, the research conducted for this thesis supports Thailand as a destination for MICE tourism right now, but this could change. Furthermore, some barriers, such as a perceived language barrier, could be potentially overcome through marketing, but others, such as distance between Thailand and the home country, could not.

The findings from this chapter represent the initial integration of the quantitative findings into the literature review. However, this discussion is incomplete without also considering the qualitative findings (Chapter 4). In the next chapter (Chapter 7), attention turns to the triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative findings with the literature review. The triangulation process allows for a better understanding of the outcomes and, ultimately, a response to the research questions of the study.

Chapter 7: Thailand's Current Destination Image and Perceptions and the Need and Potential for Change

7.1 Introduction

The previous three chapters have presented and discussed the qualitative and quantitative findings from the research study. In Chapter 4, which addressed research objective 1, the findings of the qualitative research were presented and discussed. This chapter, which was based on interviews with representatives of domestic and international organisations/companies in Bangkok, identified themes including perceptions of Thailand as a general tourism destination and the suitability of Thailand as a MICE destination. In Chapter 5, which addressed research objective 2, the quantitative findings were presented alongside a short description. These findings, which were based on a survey of UK-based companies that plan international MICE events (though not necessarily in Thailand), identified the general tourism destination image of Thailand, including both positive and negative attributes, and identified some sector-level differences in these perceptions. In Chapter 6, the quantitative findings were discussed in more detail and compared to the existing literature, which provided some insights into the findings and their significance.

The goal of the current chapter is to address research objective 3 (to ascertain the differences between the images and perceptions held of the MICE industry in Thailand). In order to achieve this goal, a triangulation of qualitative findings (Chapter 4) and quantitative findings (Chapter 5) alongside further discussion of the existing literature (as outlined in Chapter 2) is used. The purpose of triangulation within mixed methods research such as this thesis's research is to synthesise new findings and insights from evaluation and comparison of qualitative and quantitative data (Flick, 2018). The combination of qualitative and quantitative data yields insights that could not be achieved from other. This research also incorporates the previous studies assessed in the literature review, which provides helpful theoretical and empirical support. Since there is a history of previous research into Thailand's destination image, the earlier research also provides guidance on how this may have changed over time. The discussion also focuses on two different perspectives on Thailand as a MICE

destination – the general destination image, which includes aspects of Thailand that all tourists may be aware of, and the MICE-specific destination image, which are aspects of Thailand as a destination that are mainly relevant to MICE organisers and visitors.

There are five parts to the triangulation and discussion in this chapter. The chapter begins with a synthesis of the findings about Thailand's general tourism destination image, including questions about culture, attractions, political stability, accessibility, and friendliness (Section 7.2). In Section 7.3, the MICE-specific destination attributes, which include variety and quality of conference venues, service quality, value for money, and safety, are addressed. In Section 7.4, there is special consideration given to the identified barriers to MICE tourism in Thailand, which included language barriers, inaccessibility or remoteness, cost and expense, political instability, epidemics or outbreaks, and personal safety risks. This discussion is broken out from the general discussion of tourism destination image and perceptions because if destination repositioning is needed, these areas may need to be included. Section 7.5 discusses the sectoral differences in image perceptions. Finally, Section 7.6 takes up the question of what Thailand's MICE-specific destination image currently is, whether it requires repositioning, and if so, how this repositioning could be accomplished.

7.2 Thailand's General Destination Image

There were six general aspects of Thailand's destination image that were relevant to both traditional tourism and potentially to MICE tourism. These included attributes of Thai culture, tourism infrastructure and hospitality, non-conference tourism attractions, political stability, accessibility, and the friendliness of Thai people. These six aspects were identified by both the research groups, although as will be discussed in the following six sections, the level of support was not consistent between the groups for all of the factors.

7.2.1 Thai Culture and Food

Thai culture was one of the dominant themes about Thailand's destination image to emerge from the qualitative research (Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1). Some of the attributes of Thai culture according to the interviewees included "outstanding and notable" (DO1) and "diverse and interesting" (IN7). One respondent stated, "Because our attendees love Thai culture so much, our association provides activities related to Thai culture every time at our international meetings and conferences" (DO12). The qualitative research also identified a range of cultural activities that the conference organisers prioritised, including cultural tours and trips, music and dance performances. Thai food was of particular concern to the respondents, with conference organisers stating that they arranged for Thai food to be served, which was considered to be a draw for participants (Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.1). The excellent taste and variety of Thai cuisine was stated by several of the organisers to be attractive to conference attendees. One participant (IN8) stated outright that "The variety of food and good taste are also factors that are considered when making a choice about a meeting and conference destination." A related aspect was Thailand's tropical fruit, which includes a wide variety of exotic fruits that often cannot be found in other countries (especially non-Asian countries) (Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.2). One respondent stated, "Participants are impressed by... Thai fruits, especially mangosteen" (IN7). Thus, Thai food – especially Thai fruit, which often cannot be found outside Thailand – is a particular treat. In the quantitative findings, "Thailand has a unique culture" was the highest mean statement with regard to Thailand's general destination image and attractiveness ($M = 3.38$, Strongly Agree) (see Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1, Appendix D). Therefore, it can be stated that Thai culture is both a general attribute of the destination image and one of the positive perceptions of conference planners.

It was already known from the literature that Thai culture and food were significant aspects of Thailand's general destination image. Earlier studies had shown that tourists had a highly positive perception of Thai culture and food, and that this did have an influence on the choice of the destination (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown,

2001; Changsorn, 2003; Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015; Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018). For example, Calantone et al. (1989), the earliest research that was identified, found that visitors from Australia perceived Thailand as having a unique culture that was very different from their own. Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018), the most recent study that could be identified, also noted that Thai culture and food was a strong feature of Thailand's destination image and that they were viewed positively. Changsorn (2003) found that tourists rated the food as one of the biggest strengths of Thailand as a destination. Thus, Thailand has historically, and continues to have, a strongly positive destination image related to its food and culture. This is not an aspect of Thailand that is unique in terms of destination image; in fact, place image is usually strongly influenced by culture and food, which can make certain locations much more attractive than others (Relph, 1976; Florek and Insch, 2008; Murphy 2010; Stachow and Hart, 2010). These previous studies highlight the fact that, as tourists do value the culture and food of their destination very highly, this is likely to influence the decision to visit.

Whilst this finding is obviously not ground-breaking in terms of the overall relevance of culture and food, it has still demonstrated that Thailand's culture and food is relevant not only to general tourists, but also to MICE organisers who take these factors into account when planning conferences. Furthermore, food and culture may be one of the most important factors in the choice of destination, as identified in some (though not all) site selection models (e.g. Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Henaien and Sinha, 2014). Food and culture also has broad appeal to guests, and were another reason to choose Thailand for MICE purposes (Krungman and Wright, 2007). The implication of this finding is that the food and culture of Thailand could play a central role in encouraging event planners to select Thailand as the destination for their event or conference, since it is widely appealing to visitors and will enhance the appeal of the conference and the visitor experience.

7.2.2 Tourism Infrastructure, Service Quality and Hospitality

Tourism infrastructure and hospitality is a second cluster of destination image attributes which were important to the qualitative respondents (Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2). Several of the participants agreed that attributes like service-mindedness and attitudes to hospitality, as well as efficient and well-performing hospitality venues, were an important aspect of choosing to host a conference in Thailand. Participants in the quantitative research were also agreed that "Thailand is famous for its service quality" ($M = 2.98$, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1, Appendix D). Therefore, general attributes of tourism infrastructure and service quality were shared between the two groups of respondents, including those who had experience in conference planning in Thailand (the qualitative group) and those that did not (the quantitative group).

The literature has shown that tourism infrastructure, service quality and hospitality are relevant. Perceptions of tourism infrastructure and service quality are a common aspect of the destination image of a given location (McCartney et al., 2009). These are also frequent inclusions in site selection models (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996; 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014, Huo, 2014). Therefore, the shared perceptions of service quality and tourism infrastructure between the experienced and inexperienced conference planners indicate that the general destination image is accurate when it comes to conference planning. It is important to recall that destination image is formed based on only a selected amount of the information available, from what can sometimes be an overwhelming number of images and pieces of information (Ingram and Grieve, 2013). For example, destination image may come from external stimuli such as promotional materials, opinions of others, and media (or social media) (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2004). Despite this partial formation of impressions, the accuracy of the destination image is still a factor in whether the tourist is satisfied with the visit to a given tourist site (Kozak and Baloglu, 2011).

The implication of the generally high perception of service quality and hospitality that is offered found in the qualitative research is that the perception that the planners formed during and after their experience was what they expected given their pre-experience destination image. Therefore, it could be stated that tourism planners who did have experience with Thailand as a MICE destination had had accurate destination image which was confirmed by that experience. Of course, this was not universal, as at least one respondent did point out service problems with local hotels that affected their event negatively (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.6). Thus, there is room for improvement, though whether this is a general problem or only the problem of one particular hotel is uncertain. The most important point is that conference planners did have certain expectations for tourism infrastructure and hospitality, and that it did appear that these expectations were met. This means that tourism infrastructure and hospitality aspects of the destination image could be supported within a marketing campaign to promote Thailand as a MICE destination.

7.2.3 Tourism Attractions and Activities

The qualitative research made it clear that the availability of tourism attractions and activities outside the conference venue was a factor in their choice of Thailand as a destination (Chapter 4, Section 4.3.4). Some of the activities that were cited included “mountains, seas and Buddhist temples” (DO12), “Buddhist temples, Ayutthaya province, Sukhothai Province, hills, mountains, forests in Northern provinces, seas, beaches in the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman coast” (IN7), and “Ayutthaya Province and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha [Wat Phra Kaew], including shopping places” (DO23). These attractions, and many more identified by the conference organisers, were clearly part of the attraction of Thailand as the conference destination, as they offered natural beauty, Thai cultural and historical experiences, special-interest trips (such as trips for geologists organised by DO23) and shopping and entertainment. The quantitative research also revealed agreement that “Thailand has numerous attractive attractions and can offer a wide range of activities” (M = 3.07, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1, Appendix D). Thus, it can be stated that both

qualitative and quantitative participants were in agreement that Thailand's tourist attractions and activities were part of the general destination image and also part of what made it appropriate for tourist activities.

The availability and quality of tourist attractions and activities is, self-evidently, one of the most important aspects of the destination image for all tourists (Morrison, 2013). This makes perfect sense, since tourists above all want to know what they will be able to see and do within a destination. Previous research into Thailand's destination image in general has also confirmed its relevance for leisure tourists. Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown (2001) found that visitors rated the country's tourism attractions very highly, and that they were a prominent part of the destination image. Henkel et al. (2006) found that both Thai residents and international visitors found that sightseeing, nightlife and entertainment were attractive aspects of Thailand, while Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake (2015) found that shopping and entertainment were major attractions. Other authors also identified tourist attractions and activities including temples, nature and outdoor activities, and social activities as leading factors in the positive perception of Thailand as a tourism destination (Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015; Untong and Kaosaard, 2018). Thus, it is clear that Thailand's tourism attractions and activities, ranging from its city entertainments to its beaches to its natural environment, are some of the leading impressions that make up the destination image of the country.

Where this research contributes to existing knowledge is the finding that this issue of the importance of attractions is not only relevant to leisure tourists, but also to MICE conference planners (both actual and potential). In practice, it is known that the tourist attractions and activities available in a location are used as site selection criteria (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014; Huo, 2014). Although not all such models consider this (Crouch and Louviere,

2007), the present research supports the idea that conference planners do consider this dimension of the location. This is particularly true from the perspective of the attendee of an international event or conference, since it may be a once in a lifetime opportunity to visit and experience Thailand. This finding and its support within the literature urges us to remember that the MICE tourist is not *only* engaged in business-related activities – instead, she/he is actively involved in tourism in the destination and will want an engaging, varied and interesting experience outside the walls of the conference venue.

7.2.4 Political Stability

The conference organisers in the qualitative research did not bring up the question of political stability as part of their destination image of Thailand or a factor in the decision to host conferences and events there (Chapter 4). The quantitative survey also revealed that “Thailand has political stability” (M = 2.56, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1, Appendix D). Therefore, both groups were seemingly unconcerned with the political stability of Thailand and considered it adequate for tourism planning. While the qualitative research findings on political stability could stem from the fact that interviewees typically lived in Thailand, and could be expected to be aware of the political situation, this was not the case for the survey respondents, who were in the United Kingdom. Thus, this was not simply a viewpoint that resulted from individuals living in Thailand.

The finding that neither potential nor actual conference planners were concerned about political instability in Thailand is a noticeable difference from the previous studies in the literature on Thailand’s general destination image (Calantone et al., 1989; Tapachai and Waryszak, 2000; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Changsorn, 2003; Maesincee et al., 2003; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Sangpikul and Kim, 2009; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015; Akkhaphin, 2016; Untong and Kaosa-arg, 2018). Rittichainuwat (2010) also found evidence that endorsed the idea that the MICE-related destination image of Thailand was negatively affected by political instability. It is not clear why participants in this study were not overly concerned with political instability,

but it is possible that it is because the situation in Thailand has been relatively stable (at least at the macro level) since the 2014 political coup. Since destination image and perceptions are influenced disproportionately by recent information (Cooper et al., 2008), this could have an effect on whether political stability was considered at any given time. This question is discussed in more detail in Section 7.4.4, since political instability perceptions were identified as a possible barrier to effective MICE tourism promotion.

7.2.5 Accessibility

Accessibility was a factor for many of the respondents in the qualitative part of the research. For example, IN6 stated that “access from abroad to Thailand is easy and domestic travel is convenient as well” (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.4). In Section 4.4.4, several of the participants stated that air access to Thailand was easy, that the BTS (Skytrain) and MRT (Subway) made it easy to get around Bangkok as well, and that Thailand was a conveniently central destination to the region. As one interviewee explained, “Bangkok... has both domestic and international transportation that is convenient... there are a lot of direct flights from other countries to Thailand.” Thus, the overall consensus of the participants was that Thailand was very accessible in terms of international and domestic travel, which was one of the benefits of choosing it as a tourism destination. In the qualitative research, respondents generally agreed that “It is easy to access Thailand for overseas visitors” (M = 2.69, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1, Appendix D). Therefore, there is agreement between the qualitative and quantitative participants that Thailand is easy to access and therefore suitable as a conference location in this respect.

It is uncontroversial that the accessibility of a location plays a role in destination image (Morrison, 2013). Accessibility is concerned not only with getting to a destination, but also getting around the destination, and the easier it is, the more likely tourists are to find the destination attractive (Morrison, 2013). Previous studies into the general perception of Thailand as a tourist destination did support that it was easy to access (e.g. Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001). Other research have also shown that accessibility is a benefit for

conference attendees (Robinson and Callan, 2005) and conference organisers (Robinson and Callan, 2001; Houdement, Santos and Serra, 2017). However, other popular tourism destinations in Asia like, for example, Macau have not been successful at building MICE tourism in part because of limited access (McCartney, 2008, 2014). Thus, the finding that Thailand is easy to access for attendees is both consistent with previous research and a positive indicator that the perception of Thailand is consistent with its destination image.

Whether or not delegates are concerned with accessibility, it is clear that this is a factor that conference planners will take into account. The question of accessibility is a common feature of the site selection process for MICE organisers (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014, Huo, 2014). Put simply, it is not feasible to hold international meetings in a location that is difficult for attendees to access. Thus, accessibility of a location is important both for the general tourism market and for the MICE market. Furthermore, Thailand fulfils all requirements for accessibility, as it is served by one of the largest airports in the world for passenger traffic. This clearly indicates that accessibility is a requirement for both general tourism and MICE tourism and that Thailand is perceived as meeting these requirements by potential and actual conference planners. Therefore, this is one area where the destination image of Thailand as a MICE destination is good to excellent, and an area that marketing strategies could emphasise more to ensure that conference planners are aware of it. Section 7.6, which takes up the question of which dimensions of the destination image are meeting conference organiser needs, analyses this question more fully or in greater depth.

7.2.6 Friendliness

Thailand has a reputation amongst tourists as “the land of smiles” (Williams 2019), and therefore it is not surprising that the friendliness of the locals was one of the attributes identified by several of the qualitative participants as a reason to choose Thailand (Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3). Respondent DO3 noted that “Thai people like to welcome visitors and they are always willing to assist attendees”, while DO1 stated “our delegates felt impressed by the friendliness of Thai people, including beaming smiles”. Respondents to the quantitative research also agreed with the statement that “Thai people are friendly” (M = 3.18, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1, Appendix D). Thus, it can be stated that there is a general impression of the friendliness of Thai people shared by both of the groups.

Friendliness as such has not been identified as a factor in MICE tourism perceptions or site selection, although one site selection model does include hospitality as a factor (Crouch and Ritchie, 1997). (This is reasonable since friendliness can be an aspect of hospitality, although hospitality itself is poorly defined within these models.) However, friendliness is a prominent factor in previous studies of Thailand’s general destination image. For example, Tapachai and Waryszak (2000) identified friendly people and welcoming atmosphere as one of the strongest perceptions of Thailand according to Australian tourists. Several other studies also confirmed the importance of friendliness as a destination attribute of Thailand (Calantone et al., 1989; Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Henkel et al., 2006; Nuttavuthisit, 2007; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015). Thus, the perception of Thai people as friendly and welcoming can be said to be one of the most common perceptions that is identified in the existing literature, as well as one of the strongest shared perceptions between the qualitative and quantitative research for this thesis. Thus, despite the fact that the general literature on site selection does not typically consider the question of local friendliness, there is a clear indication that this may be a unique aspect of Thailand that draws both general tourists and MICE visitors. As with the importance of attractions and activities (Section 7.2.3), these findings call to mind the fact that conference delegates are not simply engaged in work, but also in a leisure activity and cultural encounter that

they want to enjoy and will take with them. Thus, even though friendliness is not a common criterion for site selection, it is nevertheless important and is something that can make Thailand stand out from similar destinations.

7.3 Thailand's MICE-Specific Destination Image Attributes

In addition to the general destination attributes discussed in Section 7.3, there were five attributes that were identified that are specifically related to Thailand's image as a MICE destination. These include the variety and quality of venues, service quality, value for money (as a MICE destination), safety and security, and hospitality standards. These attributes are not necessarily related to the general destination image (although there are some shared perceptions), but are specifically concerned with the special needs of MICE tourism.

7.3.1 Variety and Quality of Venues

The qualitative participants noted that Thailand, especially Bangkok but also including the provinces, had a variety of venues for conferences and meetings of different sizes (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.1.1). These ranged from "hotels and convention centres" (IN4) to "temples, restaurants, pubs and hospitals... [places that] relate to the content that we desire to present to our members" (DO4). Thus, Thailand is viewed by conference organisers as having a range of both conventional and unconventional meeting facilities in most regions. There was also the question of whether venues were prepared for meetings and conferences (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.1.2). The respondents that touched on this question agreed that Thai venues were in general well-prepared and good quality, with one stating "I think they are able to compete with other countries" (DO12). However, several also stated that they did use site visits during venue selection to ensure venue quality as well. Overall, participants agreed that the facilities for meetings available in venues were good quality and advanced (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2). This included attributes like, for example, rooms and meeting/exhibition spaces, audio-visual equipment and infrastructure, and food and beverage provision at the conference centres. In the quantitative survey, participants agreed that "Thailand has a variety of venues for meetings and conferences" (M = 2.93, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section

5.3.1, Appendix D). They also agreed that “Thailand has a good quality of MICE facilities” (M = 2.95, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2, Appendix E). Thus, the qualitative and quantitative findings both agree that Thailand has the required variety and quality of both traditional and innovative venues for conferences.

It should not be surprising that the quality and variety of conference venues in a destination is one of the factors in destination selection models (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Henaien and Sinha, 2014), which was why this was initially identified as a possible factor. However, some of these site selection models were more concerned with the specific site, rather than a general destination. For example, Crouch and Ritchie (1997) noted that characteristics such as, for instance, the meeting facility capacity, layout, cost, ambience, service and security would affect the choice of a specific venue. In general, the venue quality is a significant concern for the site selection framework noted above, as it should be since it would affect the quality of the event in this researcher’s opinion. However, other models such as Krungman and Wright’s (2007) framework do include a variety and quality of conference venues as part of their selection criteria.

Thus, even though the conference planners in this study were generally agreed that variety and quality of conference venues were important, it is not clear that every conference planner considers a wide variety of venues when planning. Instead, it is important that the destination have the *right* conference venue, whether this is a global exhibition centre or a temple. The implication of this is that even if there is no specific intent of a conference planner to investigate the full breadth of conference venues in Thailand, having a wide variety of quality conference hotels and venues will still be beneficial for the MICE sector on the whole.

There are some cautionary studies that address venue quality, which are particularly important for this thesis. One of these studies was conducted by Pandza and Vignali (2010). Their research, which focused on the United

Kingdom events industry, found that customers were not as satisfied as venue managers may have thought with the quality of service provided by venues. Another problem, as shown in the case study of Macau (Chapter 2, Section 2.4.3) is that resistance from venue managers can inhibit the development of MICE tourism (McCartney, 2008). In Macau, existing casino operators, who could have developed event venues and services, resisted doing so, preferring instead to continue servicing their existing casino tourism base. The significance of these studies for the current findings is that it would not be wise to simply assume that because current perceptions are that Thailand has adequate variety and quality of event venues, this would automatically lead to satisfaction with the event space. Instead, it may be necessary to work with venues and event spaces to ensure that adequate quality is being maintained, especially as regards service quality and infrastructure.

7.3.2 Service Quality

Professional and service-minded staff were identified as one of the benefits of hosting meetings in Thailand in the interviews (Chapter 4, Sections 4.4.7). Quantitative participants also agreed that “Thailand is famous for service quality” (M = 2.98, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.1, Appendix D). Thus, it can be stated that although it was not a predominant consideration in the choice of Thailand, both conference organisers in Thailand and those outside Thailand do expect that service quality would be offered. However, service quality was not as prominent in the qualitative interviews as was expected given its relative frequency in the literature on MICE convention selection.

Previous studies in Thailand have demonstrated the importance of service quality in the industry and how it is measured. For example, studies have identified service-mindedness and customer service skills as required characteristics in the MICE industry (Suraphee and Pimonsompong, 2013; Mongkhonvanit and Chattiwong, 2017). Studies outside Thailand have also demonstrated that service quality is important, for example a study of the Wuyi Mountain National Park in China, which found that service fairness and service quality were associated with destination loyalty (Su, Hsu and Swanson, 2017).

Chen, Chen and Lee (2011) and Dedeoglu and Demirer (2015) also found that service quality influenced tourists' behaviour and choices in a similar way that tourism quality influenced choice and behaviour. Thus, it is not just MICE venues that have to ensure good service quality, but all tourism providers.

Site selection frameworks frequently identify service quality as one of the factors that planners need to take into account. For example, Crouch and Ritchie (1997) identify the service standards of the venue as one of the factors that organisers should consider. Krungman and Wright (2007) also identified several aspects of service quality that were relevant for different venues; for example, management and staff training in hotels and the availability of food and beverage services. Hagen and Joraandstand (2012) also identified service quality as one of the factors in their selection model. Thus, it is clear that service quality is one of the factors that event planners are looking for in a destination or venue and one of the factors that will decide whether a site is selected.

In summary, it is clear that service quality is both important to the selection of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination and that overall perceptions of service quality are high. This does not mean there are no problems with individual venues and service quality, which has been noted by some of the respondents. However, it appears that at present, Thai venues are capable of delivering the service quality expected by conference planners.

7.3.3 Value for Money

One of the predominant themes in the qualitative research was that Thailand offered good value for money for MICE tourism (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.3). Several participants noted that the budget for the meeting or conference was the determining factor in whether the meeting could be arranged and to what standard (DO8, IN1, IN7). Following this line of thought, several other participants noted that Thailand was very good value for money (IN3, IN6). Participants in the quantitative research also agreed that "Thailand is really good value for money to organise meetings/conferences" (M = 2.98, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2, Appendix E). Thus, the overall perception is that Thailand does deliver on the critically important aspect of value for money.

The findings of this thesis are supported by a history of studies that have shown that Thailand is perceived as good value for money, both from a general tourist perspective (Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001; Aung, Nge Nge and Hichitake, 2015) and from a MICE perspective (Akhaphin, 2016). Thus, this is not a novel finding, but instead supports the relevance of value for money in MICE tourism.

This finding has some significant implications for the viability of the tourism sector. Value for money is critically important for event planners, given the cost of planning events (especially large-scale events) (Locke, 2010; Donaldson, 2013; Abeysinghe, 2016). The importance of cost and value for money is reflected in the site selection frameworks that were reviewed. For example, Crouch and Ritchie (1997) identified several aspects of cost that were relevant to site selection, including cost of transportation and accommodation (which affects attendee outlays and cost of attendance) and cost of the meeting space (which affects the conference's outlay and ticket prices). Crouch and Louviere (2007) elaborated, noting that it is not absolute cost that is relevant, but the cost compared to international averages and comparator sites. In other words, if a site is less expensive than other alternatives, it may be considered good value for money. Krungman and Wright (2007) also identified similar cost factors in their decision criteria, for much the same reason. Hagen and Joraandstad (2012) took a slightly different approach, using affordability rather than raw cost. This acknowledges that cost is not an absolute, but will instead depend on factors like international exchange rates. Overall, however, it is clear that whether the location can deliver good value for money is one of the critical criteria for site selection.

The implication of this finding for the MICE tourism sector in Thailand is that its ability to deliver good value for money – in other words, good quality and variety of conference venues and, as discussed in section 7.3.1, high hospitality standards including a supply of reasonably priced upmarket hotels, at a price that is below comparable destinations – is a significant competitive advantage as a MICE destination. Thus, when considering how to adapt the destination image of Thailand for MICE tourism, this does need to be taken into consideration.

7.3.4 Safety and Security

Security of conference venues and delegates was a concern for the interviewees (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.5). In one case, it was stated that Thailand was chosen as the destination because of perceptions that it is a safe country (DO12). Another interviewee stated “We are confident of security in Thailand” (IN7). The quantitative findings also indicated that respondents agreed that “It is safe to arrange meetings/conferences in Thailand” (M = 2.73, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.2, Appendix E). Thus, it can be stated that Thailand is considered a safe location for conferences and that venues are considered secure.

Safety and security is one of the fundamental components of the destination image (Morrison, 2013). Studies in other countries, including Macau (Whitfield et al., 2014) and Donaldson (2013) showed that safety and security of meeting destinations influences both conference planning and willingness of attendees to visit. Therefore, it is quite important that Thailand is perceived as safe politically, as noted above (Section 7.2.4). Other studies have also shown that Thailand is generally perceived as a safe tourism destination (Rittichainuwat, 2010; Saenjaj and Mongkolsrisawat, 2015; Akkhaphin, 2016). Thus, it can be stated that Thailand is delivering the required level of perceived safety for its conference and meeting delegates.

There is no doubt that safety and security of venues and participants is a key criterion for site selection, as it has been included in several of the site selections that were reviewed for the study (Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaïen and Sinha, 2014, Huo, 2014).

These frameworks are concerned with safety and security at all levels, ranging from general safety (Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012) to safety in the hotels and conference venues (Crouch and Ritchie, 1997). Thus, it is clear that conference organisers will be considering safety and security at multiple levels when selecting the site for their conference.

Although the finding that safety and security is important for site selection of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination is surprising, it does have some important theoretical implications for the development of a model for MICE tourism destination image. In particular, safety and security may be even more important for MICE event planners compared to leisure tourists, who may have a higher appetite for risk. In contrast, MICE event planners need to be concerned with the safety and security of their delegates (Krungman and Wright, 2007), and therefore may be much more risk-averse.

7.3.5 Hospitality Standards

Some of the qualitative participants were concerned with hospitality standards, especially the availability of four-star and five-star hotels (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.6). In some cases, this was because these hotels served as the meeting venue itself (IN3, IN7, IN10), but also because of concern for the comfort of delegates (IN10). However, there was some disagreement about whether hospitality standards were adequate, with one interviewee noting that the service standards in some of these hotels was not as good as it could be. However, others felt that the quality of five-star hotels in Thailand was excellent. Since the researcher did not expect the availability of upmarket hotels to be a site selection factor, this question was not addressed in the quantitative research. However, this service standard could be a concern, especially if service quality does not meet expectations (as discussed in Section 7.2.2).

The importance of hospitality in general has been acknowledged within the academic literature. Morrison's (2013) model of destination image has one dimension, Appreciation, which includes a number of aspects one of which is hospitality. A range of hotels at different prices and service levels, and hotel service levels consistent with delegate expectations, is also one of the features that have been identified by Krungman and Wright (2007) as relevant to the choice of destination. However, there is nothing in the literature that specifically requires that conferences and other MICE tourism events are associated with unusually high demand for four-star and five-star hotels compared to other

types of tourism. This suggests that this is a new finding that has either emerged since previous studies or which was not identified by previous researchers.

Rather than being a general requirement, the prioritisation of high-end hotels may be particular to Thailand and its hotel market. Market research indicates that Thailand, particularly leading markets like Bangkok, is heavily supplied (potentially oversupplied) with luxury hotels (Colliers International, 2018). Even though demand is rising, it is not rising fast enough to increase occupancy or allow hoteliers to raise their rates. This means that the price of luxury hotels is relatively low compared to other markets in Asia, even though facilities and services are similar. Furthermore, the market continues to grow with new hotels entering the market every quarter, continuing to increase the cumulative supply of luxury hotel rooms (Colliers International, 2018).

Given this situation, especially since conference planners are very concerned with the question of value for money (as discussed in Section 7.3.3), it is reasonable that these planners would consider the ready supply of reasonably priced luxury hotel rooms to be one of the advantages of planning their conference(s) in Thailand. As with tourism attractions and activities and friendliness, this is one of the aspects of Thailand that is not just functional for conference planners, but also enhances the tourism experience of their attendees and could increase their satisfaction level and offer enjoyable experience. Thus, even though this is unique to Thailand, it should be considered one of the benefits of planning an event in Thailand.

7.4 Potential Barriers to MICE Tourism

There were several *potential* barriers to MICE tourism that other studies have found. These included language barriers, inaccessibility (or remoteness) of Thailand, cost and expense of Thailand, political instability, epidemics, and personal safety risk. However, it is not at all clear that these actually are barriers, at least at present, and some may only be barriers for some conference organisers.

7.4.1 Language Barriers

There was no indication in the qualitative research data (Chapter 4) that there were perceived language barriers for Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. In the quantitative research, however, this was one of the stronger concerns ($M = 2.67$, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.4, Appendix F). The Likert scale used for this question was from 1 to 5, meaning that under half of the participants felt that this was a problem, but it is still potentially high enough to be understood as a concern. Thus, there is a disagreement between the destination image from experienced MICE tourism planners in Thailand and those that might consider Thailand as a destination.

To some extent, this perception gap is not surprising given the different level of experience between the qualitative and quantitative respondents. The qualitative respondents operate within Thailand and therefore are aware of the level of English speaking, while the quantitative respondents were from the United Kingdom and may not have had direct experience with MICE planning in Thailand. However, this does not mean it is not an important gap, since the goal is to reposition Thailand as an international rather than domestic MICE destination.

Previous research clearly identifies language differences as a barrier to international MICE tourism (Chon and Weber, 2014). Krungman and Wright (2007) do suggest that staff of venues should be well-trained and multilingual, indicating that there is some consideration of the problem in event planning. The literature has also shown that potential visitors incorrectly perceive a language barrier (Ngamvichakit and Beise-Zee, 2014), even though Thailand has, in general, a high level of English proficiency in the tourism and hospitality industry (Akkhaphin, 2016). Thus, the perception that there may be a language barrier does need to be addressed in any attempt to reposition Thailand's destination image for MICE tourism from English speaking countries, even though no clear evidence of an actual language barrier was confirmed. However, the importance of multilingualism may be far higher for non-English conference organisers and delegates, since multilingualism in other languages

may be much less common. Thus, while this is not a barrier for English-based conferences, it may in fact be a barrier for conferences in other languages.

7.4.2 Inaccessibility and Remoteness

The biggest perceived barrier for the survey respondents in the quantitative research was the remoteness or distance from their home country (the United Kingdom) ($M = 2.70$, Agree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.4, Appendix F). This was somewhat inconsistent with the qualitative findings (Chapter 4). For example, respondents DO19, DO21, DO22, IN2, IN4, IN5 and IN6 specifically stated that Thailand was easy and convenient to access (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.4). It is also inconsistent with the position of Thailand as a regional transportation hub and a major international flight location, which makes it easy to travel to and around Thailand, as especially compared to other countries in the region (Airport Council, 2018). Thus, as with the perceived language barrier discussed above, the perceived remoteness or inaccessibility of Thailand – where it exists – is an inaccurate perception mainly held by those that have not used Thailand as a MICE tourism destination previously.

Even if Thailand is not actually inaccessible, the perception of inaccessibility could create resistance to considering it as a tourism destination. Ease of access by air to a destination is a key selection criterion for MICE tourism according to several models (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; American Society of Association Executives, 1992; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Go and Govers, 1999; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Henaïen and Sinha, 2014, Huo, 2014). Every one of these site selection models requires that the destination should be easily accessible by air, with some such as Hagen and Joraandstad's (2012) model requiring that it should be a major world city. Given the power of destination image for MICE tourism planners (Houdement, Santos and Serra, 2017), even the perception of inaccessibility should be addressed. Thus, though this is the majority viewpoint, it still needs to be investigated as to

whether it could be positively influenced. This possible avenue for future research is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

7.4.3 Cost and Expense

In comparison to language barriers and remoteness, the expense of organising meetings and conferences in Thailand was of low concern to the quantitative survey participants ($M = 2.26$, Disagree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.4, Appendix F). It also was not of significant concern to the participants in the qualitative research, who routinely described Thailand as good value for money compared to other destinations (Chapter 4, Section 4.4.3). Thus, there was agreement among both the experienced and inexperienced participants that the cost of planning an international event in Thailand was not a significant barrier, especially as compared to other destinations.

The perception that Thailand is good value for money in terms of MICE tourism has also been found by other researchers (Akkhaphin, 2016). It is a finding that is very relevant to MICE coordinators and marketers, since value for money is critical for MICE tourism (Locke, 2010; Donaldson, 2013; Abeysinghe, 2016) and is a criteria in all of the site selection models that were reviewed (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Edelstein and Benini, 1994; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Go and Zhang, 1997; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Chen, 2006; Crouch and Louviere, 2007; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Henaien and Sinha, 2014, Huo, 2014). Therefore, it is a good thing that the overall consensus is that the cost of organising a MICE event in Thailand is not viewed as too high.

7.4.4 Political Instability

The question of political instability was not brought up by the qualitative participants, who had experience in the country (Chapter 4). Quantitative survey respondents also were not seriously concerned with Thailand's political environment or perceived instability ($M = 2.44$, Disagree) (Chapter 5, Section

5.4, Appendix F). Thus, there is a general agreement between the two groups that political instability is not a significant barrier to MICE tourism in the country.

This finding is somewhat different from the previous studies that have been conducted in Thailand and other countries. For example, Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip (2013) found that the 2010-2011 political unrest did have a negative effect on the general destination image of Thailand, although overall perceptions of Thailand were still favourable. Sangpikul and Kim (2009), Rittichainuwat (2010), Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip (2013) and Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018) showed that political crises affected Thailand's destination image. Greenwood and Dwyer (2017) also found that perceived political instability resulting from the perception of Macau's susceptibility to Chinese influence was a barrier to MICE tourism. While not all site selection models consider political stability, it is a factor for Krungman and Wright (2007), indicating that at least some conference planners consider it.

This raises the question of why the gap between previous research and the current finding on political stability exists. One likely explanation is that destination image and location perceptions are based on recent information (Cooper et al., 2008). While older information may remain, it has less power than more recent information (Baud-Bovy and Lawson, 1977). Although Thailand has historically had a relatively high level of political instability, especially heading into the 21st century (Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013), at the time of writing the political situation was relatively stable and there had been few major incidents in recent years. Thus, it is possible that, rather than indicating that political instability *never* influences MICE tourism perceptions, it is not influencing these perceptions at the time of the research. Thus, this factor could change over time if Thailand's political situation changed.

7.4.5 Epidemics issues

Epidemic diseases have been raised as a potential threat to tourism (including MICE tourism) in previous studies (Fuchs and Reichel, 2011; Avraham, 2016). However, there was little sign of its importance in this study. The question of

epidemic risk was of least concern to the quantitative survey respondents ($M = 1.94$, Disagree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.4, Appendix F). Epidemic or disease risk was not even mentioned as a possible factor by the qualitative respondents (Chapter 4). It also was not identified as a major factor in Thailand's tourism destination image by any of the studies reviewed. Therefore, it can be stated that there is no serious consideration of Thailand's destination image or perception of suitability as including epidemic disease risk. Of course, this can change rapidly if an epidemic were to break out, especially an epidemic such as SARS for which there is no obvious cure. Thus, like political instability, this is a barrier that, while not significant now, could change quickly.

7.4.6 Personal Safety Risk

The qualitative findings (Chapter 4) did not identify any personal safety risk perceptions. Personal safety risk was also not of serious concern to the quantitative survey respondents ($M = 2.25$, Disagree) (Chapter 5, Section 5.4, Appendix F). Thus, there is an agreement between the qualitative and quantitative findings that the personal safety risk for attendees is not very strong. This is consistent with another study of Thailand's MICE tourism attributes, which showed that personal safety of tourists was one of Thailand's destination advantages (Akkhaphin, 2016). Therefore, this is not considered a significant barrier to MICE tourism.

This finding does not indicate that personal safety of attendees is not a consideration for event planners. In fact, it is one of the location selection criteria for all the selection models reviewed (Fortin, Ritchie and Arsenault, 1976; Oppermann, 1996, 1998; Crouch and Ritchie, 1997; Chacko and Fenich, 2000; Qu, Li and Chu, 2000; Baloglu and Love, 2001; Krungman and Wright, 2007; Hagen and Joraandstad, 2012; Henaien and Sinha, 2014, Huo, 2014). The implication of this is that even if event planners do not in general consider Thailand to be an unsafe place for their delegates on the personal level, it is important to emphasise that it is safe. Furthermore, while personal safety may not be as volatile as political instability or the threat of epidemics, it is also a

factor that could change in future. Thus, this is something to look out for in future, even if it is not a major concern at the time of writing.

7.5 Sectoral Differences in Perceptions

The quantitative analysis did show that there were some sectoral differences in perception of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. Specifically, it was found that the entertainment and leisure and food, beverage and tobacco sectors had more positive views on average of Thailand than the other sectors surveyed. The entertainment and leisure and food, beverage and tobacco sectors were among the largest included in the survey, although they were not *all* the largest, and therefore it is not likely that the findings are purely related to the relative size of the categories. The effect was very weak in these differences, but it is worth considering whether there are in fact sectoral differences in perceptions of Thailand and if so, what they could be related to.

The explanation for this finding is not clear from the literature, as no sources could be identified that had investigated industry sector-level differences in MICE destination image. This goes along with a general shortness of information on MICE-specific destination image, as only a relatively small number of authors have addressed this question (Erfurt and Johnsen, 2003; McCartney, 2008, 2014; Whitfield et al., 2014; Houdement, Santos and Serra, 2017), especially as compared to perceptions of the destination's other attributes (Lai 2009, Abdullah, 2011; Leng 2012; Donaldson, 2013; Sou, Leng and McCartney, 2015; Yusoff, Ismail and Rahman, 2015; Altareri, 2016; Park, 2016; Abdulibdeh and Zaidan, 2017; Arcana, 2017; Greenwood and Dwyer, 2017). None of these studies, whether focused on destination image or on destination perceptions and functional attributes, evaluated sector-level differences in their findings.

There are some possible explanations that could be proposed by evaluating what characteristics these industries have that others do not. One of these possible explanations is that different industries have different criteria for MICE tourism destinations, which may encourage positive (or negative) perceptions of Thailand compared to other destinations. For example, there is a history of

research into UK-based companies that have shown that the food, drink and tobacco industry is among the highest users of conference and incentive travel (although not typically the highest) (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2012). This is a question that needs more investigation, particularly since Swarbrooke and Horner's (2012) evidence is now somewhat out of date. Another possible explanation is that Thailand is considered a more suitable MICE destination in some industries compared to others, given its non-MICE tourism attractions as discussed above.

Overall, there is not a high level of evidence that there are meaningful sectoral differences in the perceptions of different British industrial sectors. There also is not much evidence that industry sector has been found significant in other studies. However, this is a question that could be addressed more in the course of other research, simply by collecting and analysing sector-level information during the course of their study. This recommendation is addressed in more detail in Chapter 8.

7.6 Thailand's MICE-specific Destination Image and the Potential for Change

The preceding discussion offers some insight into Thailand's current MICE-specific destination image – that is, its destination image that is specifically relevant to MICE tourism, including both general tourism dimensions and the factors that are relevant to MICE tourism. As only one previous author has specifically investigated Thailand's destination image in the MICE sector (Rittichainuwat, 2010), and it has not frequently been investigated for other markets either, this is one of the main contributions of this thesis. However, these discussions were focused on individual components and did not address the overall question of the MICE-specific image.

This section takes up this question by addressing three key questions. First, what is Thailand's MICE-specific destination image? (Section 7.6.1) Second, does Thailand's MICE-specific destination image need to be adapted in any way, for example repositioning or promotion of specific dimensions? (Section

7.6.2) Third, how could this repositioning be done and how feasible would it be? (Section 7.6.3)

7.6.1 Summary and Evaluation of Thailand's MICE-Specific Destination Image

In order to evaluate Thailand's MICE-specific destination image, Morrison's (2013) Destination Image Evaluation Framework is used. This framework is summarised in Table 2.1 (Chapter 2, Section 2.2.6), and addresses ten aspects of the destination image, including awareness, attractiveness, availability, access, appearance, activities, assurance, appreciation, action and accountability (Morrison, 2013). Not all of these aspects were investigated for Thailand as part of this thesis; in particular, the action and accountability dimensions are related to the role of tourism planning and marketing organisations, while this thesis has taken a market-oriented approach rather than a policy-oriented approach.

Table 7.1 summarises the findings of this research in relation to the remaining eight dimensions of Morrison's (2013) evaluation framework. This evaluation integrates elements of both the general and MICE-specific dimensions of Thailand's destination image, creating a single destination image of elements that are relevant to MICE conference planners and tourists. As the initial component notes, the overall awareness of Thailand's destination image attributes and potential benefits is high, even among conference planners who have not yet chosen Thailand as a destination. Although the sources of destination image information were not directly addressed in this research, this implies that the MICE tourism sector does have a high level of overall awareness of Thailand as a potential destination. As the summary table (Table 7.1) shows, there are also some apparently strong perceptions about Thailand both as a general destination and as an attractive location for MICE tourism.

Table 7.1 Summary of the characteristics of Thailand's MICE-specific destination image

Attribute	Thailand's Image	Sections of Discussion
Awareness	Awareness of Thailand's attributes and benefits is relatively high within the population of conference planners, and perceptions are mostly consistent.	7.2 7.3
Attractiveness	Thailand's food and culture are well-known as tourist attractions and are important to attendees. Food, including Thai fruits, are viewed as highly attractive and exotic.	7.2.1
	Cultural performances and experiences like visits to temples and museums are widely available.	7.2.3
	Thailand is viewed as good value for money by conference organisers and attendees. Costs are perceived as reasonable for international conferences.	7.3.3 7.4.3
Availability	Thailand's general tourism infrastructure, for example availability of hotels (including upscale four-star and five-star hotels) is very good.	7.2.2 7.3.5
	Thailand has a wide variety and quality of conference and meeting venues. These include traditional and non-traditional venues, with size ranging from small restaurants and hotels to international conference and exhibition venues. Quality of venues is generally viewed as good.	7.3.1
Access	Bangkok is one of the best-connected cities in the world. It is easy to get to Bangkok on a direct flight. It is easy to travel in Bangkok, around Thailand and around the region.	7.2.5 7.4.2
	Thailand is perceived as having language barriers, and may in fact have language barriers for non-English speakers.	7.4.1
Appearance	Thailand is viewed as visually appealing and beautiful.	7.2.3
Activities	Thailand has a wealth of tourism attractions and activities for conference attendees. These include the natural environment (e.g. seas, mountains), cultural activities and food, entertainment and nightlife, shopping, and many others.	7.2.3
Assurance	Thailand is viewed as politically stable.	7.2.4 7.4.4
	Thailand is viewed as a safe destination. Conference venues are viewed as safe and secure, with low personal safety risk.	7.3.4 7.4.6
	There is no perceived epidemic risk.	7.4.5
Appreciation	The quality of Thai hospitality is deemed to be very high, including both perceived hospitality and hospitality infrastructure like upscale hotels.	7.2.2 7.3.5
	While service quality is viewed as generally high, there are some problems with individual hotels and venues. Thai people are perceived as friendly and welcoming.	7.3.2 7.3.5 7.2.6
Action	Not addressed in this study	
Accountability	Not addressed in this study	

Source: Author, adapted from Morrison (2013)

7.6.2 Evaluation of the Need for Destination Image Change

Table 7.1, above, shows that research groups were generally positive about the destination image. Furthermore, the discussion of potential barriers to MICE tourism in Thailand (Section 7.4) did not identify many barriers, with inaccessibility and remoteness (Section 7.4.2), cost and expense (Section 7.4.3), political instability (Section 7.4.4), epidemics (Section 7.4.5) and personal safety risk (Section 7.4.6) not being viewed as serious barriers by participants. However, there was one aspect that was perceived as a potential barrier, which was language barriers (Section 7.4.1).

As this section explained, it was perceived that Thailand may have a language barrier for English speakers because of its native language. This is also likely to be the case for other languages, but this thesis's research drew on English-speaking samples. However, that there is a barrier is not in fact true for English, as Thai hospitality and tourism sector employees often have a high level of English skill. However, it is a problem that it is *perceived* as being the case, since this could inhibit the choice of Thailand as a destination. Furthermore, it might be even more of a barrier to non-English speaking conference organisers, since there may actually be a language barrier for some organisers (depending on their native language). Thus, if any of the characteristics of Thailand's current MICE-specific destination image were to be targeted for change, correcting the perceived language barriers for English speakers and removing actual barriers for non-English speakers should be selected for change. This is detailed in the Recommendations of the research in Chapter 8.

7.6.3 Enhancing the Destination Image

Above, it was noted that Thailand's MICE-specific destination image is generally positive (Section 7.6.1) but that there are some misperceptions such as perceived language barriers which could be corrected (Section 7.6.2). It is also possible that other aspects of the destination image could be changed, or may require change in future. For example, if Thailand were to experience recent political instability, previous studies have shown that this would affect the destination image (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009; Rittichainuwat, 2010; Ingram,

Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013; Akkhaphin, 2016; Untong and Kaosard, 2018). This means that it is important to consider how the destination image could be changed – or even if it could be changed – or at least to make sure that there is information available to counteract negative perceptions, such as marketing materials.

The case study of Macau offers some information about how destination image can be improved and updated as well as what kinds of challenges there are in changing it. Macau's transformation from a predominantly casino gambling destination to a MICE destination was complicated by the limited infrastructure and entrenched casino tourism sector, which created a lot of resistance to repositioning of Macau's destination image (McCartney, 2008, 2014; Whitfield et al., 2014). As a result, its repositioning as a MICE destination was very difficult. Thailand does not face anywhere near this level of difficulty with repositioning, since it does not have the infrastructure constraints that Macau faces (especially in terms of limited access). Furthermore, the repositioning of Thailand to address the perceived language barrier would not be against the interests of the predominant tourism sector (leisure and mass tourism). Thus, repositioning of Thailand's MICE-related destination image would not face as many barriers as it would in other markets. However, the nature of destination image formation, which draws on multiple sources of information that cannot always be predicted or controlled (Butler, 1990; Riley, Baker and Van Doren, 1998; Busby and Klung, 2001; Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2004; Ingram and Grieve, 2013), also needs to be considered. In summary, although repositioning of Thailand's MICE-related tourism destination image for current or future barriers may be possible, it would require a well-organised effort that addressed multiple information channels. Thus, it needs to be considered whether these factors represent a true barrier before implementing any strategies based on it.

7.7 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to triangulate the findings of this thesis, including the qualitative and quantitative findings, as well as objectives from the literature review, in order to address research objective 3 of the research of investigating differences in destination image and perceptions. To this end, the chapter evaluated the dimensions of Thailand's destination image, beginning with the general destination image and moving to the MICE-specific destination image and perceived barriers to choice of Thailand. The discussion showed that while the perception of current MICE organisers (represented by the qualitative research stream) and potential organisers of future events (represented by the quantitative research stream) were generally consistent, there were a few differences. The biggest difference was in relation to language barriers, which were viewed as important for potential organisers, but not by those that actually had experience in organising MICE. The final section of the chapter summarised and evaluated Thailand's current MICE-specific destination image and considered the need and potential for changing it. Although there were relatively minor problems now, future changes like increased political instability could require repositioning. However, this repositioning could prove a challenge, as the case of Macau shows. In the next chapter, the thesis is concluded with a final response to each of the research objectives.

Chapter 8 Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have presented different aspects of the research conducted for this dissertation. In Chapter 1, the reader was provided with the research background and rationale for the study, and objectives were set. Chapter 2 consisted of an extensive literature review on the research questions, while Chapter 3 set out the methodology used for the research. Chapter 4 presented the findings from the qualitative study of event planners who had experience in planning events in Thailand. Chapters 5 and 6 first presented, then discussed, the findings of the quantitative survey of British event planners, presenting a broader perspective compared to previous studies. Finally, Chapter 7 triangulated the results from the qualitative and quantitative findings, along with the literature review, to evaluate differences in perceptions and synthesise an understanding of Thailand's MICE-specific destination image.

The goal of this chapter is to conclude the study by bringing together the threads of discussion from these previous chapters. The chapter begins with a conclusion, in which the findings related to each of the research objectives are presented (Section 8.2). A critical evaluation of this thesis's contribution to knowledge is then presented (Section 8.3). This evaluation includes both areas where the dissertation supported the existing knowledge and where new theoretical or empirical insights were generated. Section 8.4 is the limitations of the study. The chapter then addresses the recommendations of the study, especially for academics and policy makers surrounding Thailand's MICE tourism sector (Section 8.5). The final section of the chapter address further research opportunities of the study (Section 8.6). These sections acknowledge that no study can fully encompass the entire field of interest, and that there are always questions that arise during the process of research that cannot be resolved or that were outside its scope.

8.2 Conclusion

This research began with observation of a problem in the literature on MICE tourism (Chapter 1). Even though MICE tourism is growing rapidly in Thailand, it is somewhat poorly understood, with only a few studies focusing on it despite the general popularity and importance of research on tourism in Thailand as a whole. As a result, there was a poor understanding of how Thailand was viewed internationally as a MICE destination today, and what factors may drive the choice of Thailand as a destination. Therefore, the aim of the research was to investigate the destination image of Thailand (particularly Bangkok) for MICE purposes and to explore the perceptions of potential MICE customers.

The research was based on a comprehensive review of the literature on destination image and tourist perceptions, especially as it related to MICE tourism (Chapter 2). The review of the literature and the market situation led to the establishment of three objectives for the research. These objectives were:

- i. To examine how current MICE customers (host organisers) understand the image of the MICE industry in Thailand.
- ii. To assess the perceptions of potential international companies and organisations toward the MICE industry in Thailand and determine types of businesses with 'positive' and 'negative' attitudes.
- iii. To ascertain differences between the images and perceptions held of the MICE industry in Thailand.

These objectives were accomplished through a qualitative-led, sequential mixed methods research design, as explained in Chapter 3. The qualitative research (Chapter 4), which was directed to achieving research objective (i), drew on interviews with 38 event coordinators and organisers from domestic and international organisations, who had previously planned MICE events in Thailand. The quantitative research (Chapters 5 and 6), which was designed to achieve research objective (ii), was a survey of event planners for domestic and international companies in the United Kingdom which organised international events, but had not organised events in Thailand ($n = 289$). In order to achieve research objective (iii) (Chapter 7), the qualitative and quantitative results were triangulated and analysed with the literature review.

In the sections below, the outcomes of research objective (i) (Section 8.2.1), research objective (ii) (Section 8.2.2), and research objective (iii) (Section 8.2.3) are presented, followed by an overall conclusion to the research (Section 8.2.4).

8.2.1 Image of Current MICE Customers (Research Objective (i))

Findings that related to research objective (i) are presented in Chapter 4. This chapter also includes a discussion of the findings with the literature, which helps to evaluate the importance of these findings. This objective was accomplished through interviews with organisers of events and meetings who had experience in planning MICE events in Thailand. The respondents were from a range of different industries, including international or diplomatic organisations, intergovernmental organisations, international federations, international businesses in a variety of industry sectors, along with domestic government bodies, associations, and businesses. Thus, the sample contributed a wide array of perspectives on MICE tourism in Thailand.

Analysis of the interview findings identified several strong dimensions of Thailand's image as a MICE tourism destination. Overall, these impressions were highly positive.

Many impressions were concerned with the general attractiveness of Thailand as a place to visit. Thai culture and Thai food were particularly strongly mentioned, with many participants stating that the opportunity for cultural experience and Thai cuisine were significant attractions of Thailand as a conference or event location. Thai hospitality – both the emotional quality of hospitality offered and hospitality infrastructure and service availability – was another positive impression of Thailand as an event destination. A related aspect was the friendliness of Thai people, which was noted as being different from other locations where participants had held events. Attractions and activities available for attendees was another consideration. The interviewees particularly noted that the breadth and diversity of tourist attractions and activities made it very easy to appeal to their attendees.

There were also several images that specifically related to Thailand's suitability as a MICE destination. Overall, the availability and quality of facilities and venues for meetings and conferences was thought to be high, although there

were a few negative comments in this area. Thailand was perceived as being good value for money, which was critically important for some planners who had to work within strict budgets. Thailand was viewed as being convenient and easy to access from most parts of the world, which was a definite advantage. Security and political stability did not appear to be a particular concern. Furthermore, Thailand was particularly noted as having a good standard of higher-end (four-star and five-star) hotels at reasonable prices for attendees. Professional staff and service quality were also mentioned. Although a few negative experiences were mentioned, there were no significant barriers identified by the interviewees that could make Thailand unsuitable as a MICE tourism destination.

The findings of research objective (i) can therefore be summarised as follows. Current MICE organisers who have experience in Thailand have several strong, highly positive images of Thailand as a MICE destination. Thai culture and food, hospitality and friendliness, and attractions and activities are generally attractive aspects. The quality and variety of facilities and venues, good value for money, good safety and security, and other characteristics like high hotel standards were also relevant to MICE planning. Thus, the current MICE organisers in Thailand had an overwhelmingly positive image of Thailand and its suitability as a MICE destination.

8.2.2 Perceptions of Potential MICE Customers (Research Objective (ii))

Research objective (ii) was concerned with perceptions of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. The findings related to potential MICE customers, which were derived from a quantitative survey (n = 289). The findings are presented in two chapters. In Chapter 5, the findings are presented and an initial interpretation is provided. In Chapter 6, the findings are discussed with the literature review. Following the qualitative research, the quantitative research addressed both perceptions of Thailand as a general tourist destination and MICE-specific factors, including 'positive' and 'negative' attributes. The analysis

included descriptive statistics and a chi-square test designed to identify differences in responses.

There were seven general attributes of destination attractiveness investigated, using a four-point Likert scale (Appendix D). Respondents were most likely to agree that Thai culture was unique ($M = 3.38$). This was followed by perceptions that Thai people are friendly ($M = 3.18$), that Thailand has good attractions and activities ($M = 3.07$) and is famous for service quality ($M = 2.98$). There was also agreement that Thailand has a variety of venues ($M = 2.93$). The weakest levels of agreement were that Thailand was easy for visitors to access ($M = 2.69$) and that it is politically stable ($M = 2.56$). Overall, however, participants agreed with these characteristics of Thailand as a general tourism destination.

There were three MICE industry attributes that were also investigated (Appendix E). Respondents were agreed that Thailand delivers good value for money to conference organisers ($M = 2.98$), that quality of conference venues and facilities is good ($M = 2.95$), and that it is safe to arrange meetings in Thailand ($M = 2.73$). Thus, like the qualitative research, participants were generally agreed that Thailand had positive MICE-specific facilities and attributes.

Six perceived barriers (or 'negative' attributes) of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination were also investigated (Appendix F). Overall, these were not perceived to be serious issues. Participants did agree that there could be problems including the remote distance (from the United Kingdom) ($M = 2.70$) and that there was a language barrier ($M = 2.67$), but disagreed that there were problems like an unstable political environment ($M = 2.44$), that it was too expensive ($M = 2.26$), that it was unsafe ($M = 2.25$), or that there were epidemic issues ($M = 1.94$). Thus, while there were some barriers perceived, these were not strongly identified on average.

Analysis then continued to investigate differences in different types of businesses. A chi-square analysis (Chapter 5, Section 5.5, Table 5.1) found that there were some differences in distribution of overall perception of Thailand as a tourism destination, with the entertainment and leisure and food, beverage

and tobacco sectors having positive perceptions of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination.

In summary, the overall perception of Thailand as a potential MICE tourism destination was positive. There were some barriers, including distance and language barriers, but these barriers were not very strong. This raised the question of how consistent these perceptions were.

8.2.3 Differences between Current and Potential MICE Customers (Research Objective (iii))

The third objective was concerned with the differences in destination image perceptions between current and potential MICE customers. This objective was achieved through triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative research, along with discussion of the literature review. These results, which were presented in Chapter 7, moved through each of the general and MICE-specific destination attributes from the qualitative and quantitative research. The analysis culminated in an integrated MICE-specific destination image for Thailand that incorporated the shared perspectives of the current and potential MICE customers. This chapter also took up the question of whether Thailand's MICE-specific destination image required change, and if so whether it would be feasible.

Overall, the triangulation analysis showed that the destination image of current MICE planners and the perceptions of potential MICE planners were highly consistent. In terms of general destination attributes, both groups were generally agreed on the importance and attractiveness of Thai culture and food (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.1), tourism infrastructure, service quality and hospitality (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.2), tourist attractions and activities (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.3), political stability (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.4), accessibility (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.5) and friendliness (Chapter 7, Section 7.2.6). Thus, it can be stated that the two groups held similar images of Thailand as a generally suitable destination.

There were also shared perceptions of the MICE-specific attributes. These included venue variety and quality (Chapter 7, Section 7.3.1), service quality (Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2), value for money (Chapter 7, Section 7.3.3), and safety and security (Chapter 7, Section 7.3.4). The question of hospitality standards was not included in the quantitative survey and so could not be compared.

Where there was some disagreement was in the perceived barriers to MICE tourism. Although survey respondents felt that language barriers and inaccessibility were potential barriers, the interviewees did not agree (Chapter 7, Sections 7.4.1 and 7.4.2). Cost and expense, political instability, epidemics and personal safety were not concerns of either group (Chapter 7, Sections 7.4.3 to 7.4.6 respectively). These differences could be attributed to the effect of experience, since the interviewees had actually planned meetings in Thailand and therefore were aware of the extent to which Thailand is accessible and where English is spoken.

The comparison of qualitative and quantitative findings allowed for the statement of an integrated MICE destination image for Thailand (Chapter 7, Section 7.6.1, Table 7.1). This integrated destination image used Morrison's (2013) evaluation framework to assess attributes including awareness, attractiveness, availability, access, appearance, activities, assurance and appreciation of the destination, including aspects that are relevant to the MICE planner as well as the general tourist. The final aspect of discussion, which was whether the destination image should (and could) be changed, concluded that the language barrier was the main current target for change. However, the complexity of destination image sources and information means that it may be difficult to change this directly.

In summary, the comparison of current and potential MICE planners in Thailand showed that the overall perception of Thailand as a MICE destination is similar. Furthermore, it is possible to see that participants hold a shared perception of Thailand as a tourism destination that incorporates aspects like friendliness, culture and food, and attractions as well as venue and facility quality and variety, safety and security and good value for money.

8.2.4 Conclusion to the Research

This research began with the aim of investigating Thailand as a MICE destination, including the perceptions of current MICE organisers and those that might choose Thailand as a destination in future. The research used the standard theory of destination image (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2004), extending this theory to incorporate not just the general tourism perceptions of the traditional destination image but also specific attributes that are relevant to MICE organisers. It also drew on theories of perception, evaluating the role of these perceptions as a factor in consumer decisions, and by extension MICE tourism planner decisions.

The research showed that both current and potential MICE organisers have positive perceptions of Thailand, both as a general tourism destination and as a MICE destination. The synthesis of these perspectives led to the assessment of the MICE-specific tourism destination image as presented in Chapter 7 (Section 7.6.1, Table 7.1). This destination image was generally positive and awareness of Thailand as a possible destination was high. There were several attractive attributes, including Thailand's food and culture, performances and museums, and good value for money. Availability and quality of tourism infrastructure, including big hotels, and meeting and conference venues was also deemed to be high. Bangkok is easily accessible from most areas of the world, although accessibility could be impaired by a perceived language barrier. Thailand is visually attractive and has a wide array of tourist attractions and activities for conference attendees. It is viewed as politically stable and safe. Last but not least, Thai hospitality, service quality and friendliness are viewed in a very positive way, and have been identified by some of the interviewees as reasons for choosing Thailand for holding the MICE.

In conclusion, this research has shown that Thailand does have a strong, positive MICE-specific destination image, in which most attributes are shared by actual and potential MICE tourism planners within the sample. This positive destination image could be a significant competitive advantage for Thailand in attracting the high-value MICE tourism market segment, especially for English-based events where there may not be as high a perceived language barrier.

However, the history of research into Thailand's destination image, both MICE-specific and general, requires caution about the extension of these findings. In particular, research that addressed political instability showed that the destination image of Thailand is very sensitive to recent events. The implication of this is that while negative impacts like the impact of political instability could occur quickly, positive impacts, like the impact of improved English skill in the hospitality and tourism workforce, may occur much more slowly. This means that care needs to be taken when using these findings. Nonetheless, it can be stated that Thailand does have a positive MICE-specific destination image. Furthermore, it is likely that this positive destination image is one of the factors in the continuing growth of the MICE industry. Thus, tourism policies (discussed in Section 8.5) are recommended to maintain and develop Thailand's destination image.

8.3 Contribution to Knowledge

As with any study, the research conducted for this thesis was intended not just to re-test existing knowledge, but also to expand this existing knowledge and make a substantive contribution to the area of study. Some of the findings of this research were consistent with the findings of previous studies, which has value in itself since it helps to validate previous research and to identify which attributes or phenomena may be stable and enduring over time. However, there were also some areas where contradictory findings were identified. Reflection on the findings identifies four main contributions, which centre on: language barriers (Section 8.3.1); political stability (Section 8.3.2); sector-level variation in destination image (Section 8.3.3); and MICE-specific destination image (Section 8.3.4).

8.3.1 Language Barriers and Perception Accuracy in Destination Image

The first contribution to the knowledge comes from the observation that there was a difference in perceived language barriers between the current and potential MICE planners. While potential MICE planners did perceive a language barrier, current MICE planners did not. What is not always clear from

the research on destination image is that it is based on perceptions that may or may not be accurate (Morrison, 2013). In this case, the perception of a language barrier for English speakers in Thailand is inaccurate – the tourism and hospitality industry workforce has a high level of multilingual competency, with English being a priority language. This becomes evident to those who engage in the process of planning MICE events. Thus, the contribution that this makes to the literature is the reminder that the pre-visit perceptions that are often encapsulated as destination image may not be accurate, and may be corrected following actual experience of the destination.

8.3.2 Political Instability and the Stability of Destination Image

One of the surprising findings of the research was that the participants did not consider political instability to be a major barrier to MICE tourism in Thailand, and that most considered Thailand to be politically stable. This contradicted the findings of several previous researchers, including Sangpikul and Kim (2009), Rittichainuwat (2010), Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip (2013) and Untong and Kaosa-ard (2018), which found that political instability did have a negative effect on destination image in Thailand. While this contradiction may not seem very important on the surface, consideration of its deeper significance brings to light an important insight that this research offers. The research conducted for this thesis was conducted in a time of relative political stability, and perhaps more importantly under a government that has tried to maintain the destination image of Thailand as stable and secure. This can be compared to the previous studies (Rittichainuwat, 2010; Ingram, Tabari and Watthanakhomprathip, 2013 and Untong and Kaosa-ard, 2018), which focused on periods immediately following various political incidents and unrest. The implication of this difference is that destination image is not stable – instead, it responds to recent events, while older events may be forgotten. This is important when considering how to manage Thailand's destination image, but it is also critical for academic research, since it suggests that there is a need to continue to monitor destination image and its effects, rather than assuming that it is in any way stable or fixed.

8.3.3 Sector-level Differences in Destination Image

One of the exploratory questions of this research was whether there were differences in Thailand's destination image based on the industry sector of participants. This question, which was investigated in the quantitative research, found that there was a weak effect of industry, with participants from the entertainment and leisure and food, beverage and tobacco sectors having an overall more positive perception of Thailand's destination image than other sectors. This was a weak effect, and as it was an exploratory question there is little evidence from the existing literature. Thus, this was a novel contribution to the research, but more investigation would be justified to consider whether this effect was from sampling error or another cause.

8.3.4 MICE-Specific Destination Image

The biggest contribution to the research that this study made was moving forward towards a definition of a MICE-specific destination image. This question has not been studied extensively in the literature, with only a few previous researchers applying the destination image concept to MICE tourism (Erfurt and Johnsen, 2003; McCartney, 2008, 2014; Whitfield et al., 2014; Houdement, Santos and Serra, 2017). The research both applied the destination image concept to MICE travel and extended the existing, generalised dimensions of destination image to incorporate aspects that are mainly of concern to the MICE organiser, for example venue quality and variety, value for money and so on. This extension of the destination image concept is based on the observation that MICE organisers, like other tourists, also work from perceptions of a given destination, and that this is relevant to their selection of Thailand as a destination. This extension of the destination image concept constitutes a major contribution to the academic research.

The main theoretical contribution of this research in this area is the formulation of the 9As destination image framework, which is presented in Chapter 4. This framework is a reorientation of Morrison's (2013) 10As destination image framework from the perspective of the audience rather than the marketer. Within this model, eight out of ten original dimensions remain in place, including

Awareness, Attractiveness, Availability, Accessibility, Appearance, Activities, Assurance and Appreciation. They are joined by another key perception that is critical to travel planners for MICE events, which is Affordability. However, two of the dimensions included by Morrison (2013) – Action and Accountability – have disappeared from the view. This is because these two dimensions, while of concern to destination marketers and strategy planners, are irrelevant or even invisible to the target audience of MICE tourism planners. This does not mean they are not important for effective destination marketing, but rather that they are not something that the audience of such marketing campaigns perceive as being relevant. This is a seemingly small change, but it is important for considering how MICE destination planners, such as corporate travel and event planners, actually prioritise factors in the destination image and how they make decisions about destination choices. This difference in perspective is also necessary for destination marketers to understand, since it could influence how they choose to prioritise different aspects of the destination image in MICE-oriented marketing. From a theoretical perspective, the 9As framework does not make Morrison's (2013) 10As framework redundant, but it does advance the framework by pointing out the differences in perception of destination image in different stakeholder groups. Thus, it paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of destination image and how it varies between stakeholder groups, which could have a significant effect on future theorisation of destination image, its causes and its effects.

The framework model of the 9As (Chapter 4, Section 4.5, Figure 4.1) is another contribution that is crucial to this area. This framework demonstrates how the different factors could influence perception and belief about Thailand, derived from the academic literature on destination image and the findings of the qualitative research. This study has been an initial test of this model, with more testing required. However, the framework model is advantageous over the earlier models in that it directly ties the perceptions of the destination to various outcomes such as positive attitudes toward Thailand and MICE destination choice.

8.4 Limitations of the study

There were several limitations to the scope and methodology of the study. These limitations do not infringe on the quality of the research, but they do affect the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other groups.

One of these limitations was inherent in the sampling methodology. Specifically, the research drew only on an English-speaking sample for both the qualitative and quantitative streams. This limitation was placed in the qualitative research to ensure that interviews could be compared (which was a key part of the analysis), but it arose as a consequence of focusing on the United Kingdom as the international market in the quantitative research. This limitation is important because, as discussed in Section 7.4.1 (Chapter 7), perceived language barriers were one of the biggest barriers to selection of Thailand as a MICE tourism destination. Since this research was conducted in English, which is widely spoken in Thailand, the implication of this limitation is that it may be even more extreme for organisers and organisations that use less commonly spoken languages. Thus, the effect of this limitation is that some of the negative aspects of Thailand as a destination may be understated compared to groups with other languages.

Another of the limitations was the cross-sectional nature of the research. This limitation is most evident in the participants' apparent lack of concern for political stability, which has been shown to have a negative effect on destination image in Thailand previously. This is attributable to the nature of destination image, which features recent information more strongly than older information (Ingram and Grieve, 2013). Thus, this finding is likely to be unstable, particularly if the political situation in Thailand changes rapidly, as does happen. Obviously, this is also a potential risk for epidemics, which were also not a concern in this study. As Thailand does have a modern medical system this is no more likely than any other country. However, this does highlight the difference between what may be perceived as risk by event planners and what may pose an actual risk to the general public, that is those not directly involved in event planning. In some cases Thailand has suffered, for example by being perceived as a more politically unstable, more remote, or personally dangerous destination

than it actually is. At the same time, this study's focus on planners' perceptions rather than objective risk means that it does not reflect objective risk to a great extent. Objective risk is defined as the relative variation of actual loss from expected loss (Hansson, 2010). It can be measurable and quantified. However, this research did not seek to identify how risk is understood and what factors generate risk. This is an important limitation when it comes to how the results of the study can be used in future research and policymaking. Therefore, this limitation should be considered by other scholars and MICE practitioners, because the findings of this study derived from MICE current and potential planners were collected during a limited time period.

There could also be other elements of the destination image which are unstable, but which change more slowly. For example, if hotels choose to exit the oversupplied upmarket hotel market (Colliers International, 2013) this would reduce the supply of four-star and five-star rooms and raise prices, but this would be a longer-term trend. There was no reasonable way to remove this restriction from the research. However, it could affect the long-term application of the findings, especially if rapid changes did occur. This instability could have a long-term effect on MICE tourism, as Thailand would need to transition away from its current destination image as a good value upmarket destination toward a different image (perhaps a premium or value destination). However, given the size of the MICE industry in Thailand and its needs, this does suggest that the industry should consider maintaining the hotel supply in order to continue to offer this advantage. This is particularly true since this also benefits Thailand's destination image as a leisure tourism destination.

Another limitation of the research was the limited consistency of the quantitative research with the research model. There are several reasons this could have occurred, including the influence of other factors on the destination choice and the individual differences in destination image that are inherent to the concept of destination image. For example, individuals forming destination image in one country may have a different perspective from those in another country. Another possible source of inconsistency is the difference between domestic MICE event planning (the main base of the qualitative research) and international MICE event planning (the main base of the quantitative research). For example,

planning a domestic MICE event is much less expensive than an international event, and factors like 'how difficult it is to get to' are less important. Thus, there are some rational reasons for the inconsistencies of the findings between the qualitative and quantitative research. However, these problems are not necessarily crucial to the quality of the research, because the primary purpose of this research was to derive a theoretical model of MICE destination image. This purpose was accomplished in the qualitative study, with the quantitative research being important for an initial test and validation of the qualitative model, but not crucial in terms of its outcomes. The quantitative research has done its task of pointing out possible problems in the qualitative model which could be filled to improve its performance. Thus, it has achieved its objective and contributed to the final development of this study, despite the inconsistent findings.

A final limitation was that the study was market-oriented, and therefore did not consider the policy perspective of MICE tourism in Thailand to a great extent. This limitation to the scope of the research was chosen deliberately, because of the need to control the number of perspectives and focus the research. However, it does mean that information like the destination marketing strategy and policy planning of Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) or local destination management bodies is not represented here. This limitation meant that the interaction of destination image with the planning and marketing of Thailand as a MICE destination could not be investigated

8.5 Recommendations of the study

Following the conclusion of the research, a critical reflection was made on what recommendations could be made to move forward with these findings. There are two sets of recommendations for action, one addressing academic researchers (Section 8.5.1) and the other addressing tourism policymakers in Thailand (Section 8.5.2).

8.5.1 Recommendations for Academics

There are some specific opportunities for future research presented below (Section 8.6). However, the work of this thesis also brings to mind a recommendation for more general theoretical work, especially on the concept of destination image. Surprisingly, given its long history and extensive use, the destination image concept is still poorly defined and ambiguous. As explained in Chapters 1 and 2, there is not even a strong consensus definition of the destination image concept, and it has not been well-researched in terms of dimensions. The process of destination image formation also continues to be something of a black box, with little attempt to understand this process at the social or cognitive level. To a great extent, this is understandable, since destination image is a complex topic and, like many other perceptions, may have various sources and may not even be consistent between individuals. However, this does not mean that no attempt could or should be made to develop a consensus definition and model of destination image, which includes aspects like attributes and process model for formation. Thus, the recommendation for academics is that an improved destination image model should be a priority.

8.5.2 Recommendations for Tourism Policymaking

This research was conducted from a consumer perspective, focusing on MICE event planners (the main consumer decision-makers) rather than policy. However, this does not mean that the results do not have policy implications. As Morrison's (2013) framework of destination image formation asserts, destination marketing organisations (DMOs) and other tourism policy and planning bodies do have responsibility for implementing and monitoring long-term plans for tourism marketing that affect the destination image. Therefore, this research does have two key recommendations for DMOs operating in Thailand.

One of these recommendations is that the marketing strategy for MICE tourism should specifically address the two perceived barriers that were identified in this research. These barriers include a perceived language barrier and a perceived

distance barrier. Although these were viewed as barriers by the potential customers, they were not perceived as such by the existing customers, which indicates that these are not in fact barriers. However, the fact that they are perceived as barriers means that they may still discourage or even prevent MICE organisers from considering Thailand. By focusing on these two aspects of the event planning – for example, emphasising the availability of English-speaking venue managers and event coordinators, or offering customised travel plans and itineraries from the organisation's home city to Thailand – the DMO could overcome the negative aspects of the destination image in time. As the case study of Macau (Chapter 2) showed (McCartney, 2008), this may not be easy, but it is worth doing if it improves Thailand's destination image.

The second recommendation is that implementing a venue quality certification would be helpful. While participants were positive about the quality of venues and facilities available, it should be noted that assessment of each individual venue may be very difficult. Given the wide range of venues available, it may be a practical benefit for MICE organisers to have a ratings system that helps identify exactly what kind of venue, service quality, and facilities are being offered. This could enhance the perception of the MICE-specific attributes of Thailand as a MICE destination, thereby improving its comparative advantage over similar locations that do not have such a program.

8.6 Further Research

Reflection on the findings and their place in the existing literature on MICE tourism and destinations offers some opportunities for further research. These opportunities come from a combination of questions raised during the course of the study and observed research gaps that fell outside the scope of this research.

One of these opportunities is further development of the concept of destination image as it relates to MICE tourism. This research illustrated that the image of a destination as it relates to MICE tourism is more complex than the traditional destination image, reflecting the concern that organisers and planners have to have with the functional attributes of the destination. To date, however,

relatively few scholars have employed the concept of destination image with regard to MICE tourism, and those that have done so have not expanded the theoretical idea of the destination image to account for this complexity. Thus, a new theoretical model of MICE-related destination image is one of the main areas this research identified for further investigation.

Another opportunity is the continuing analysis of Thailand's MICE sector, which is still under development. The case study of Macau (McCartney, 2008), presented in Section 2.4.3 (Chapter 2), is one of the clearest illustrations of how difficult it is to change the tourism destination image of a particular location to include MICE tourism, especially in the case of resistance from key stakeholders like hotel and venue owners or managers. Further investigation of Thailand's MICE sector could include, for example, examination of how different events influence the MICE destination image and how different components of the sector (for example, exhibitions versus incentive travel) respond to destination marketing. This type of research would fill one of the gaps left by the current study, which did not address the policy perspective as noted above.

Depending on the future environment, such research could also investigate the short-term and long-term effects of different occurrences on the destination image of Thailand for MICE tourism. For example, it is possible that future political events, pandemics or severe weather events could change the perception of Thailand as a suitable MICE tourism destination. However, it is not certain for how long these changes would persist. Given that MICE tourism events are routinely planned months or years in advance, it is possible that such events could remain as a destination image problem for longer than ideas held about destinations for leisure tourism purposes. Researchers who can conduct longitudinal research beginning at the time of crisis events and for a period after could identify exactly how persistent such events are in the MICE destination image.

A third opportunity for future research is investigation of industry sector and other factors in the perspective of MICE destinations (including Thailand). This research did have some findings that suggested that there may be differences in knowledge and positive viewpoints of different industry sectors on Thailand

as a MICE destination, but the source of these differences was unclear. This information would be particularly useful to policy and planning activities for destination marketing. Thus, the final suggestion for future research is that when investigating destination image of given locations, including Thailand, decomposition of the results by industry sector could yield important information.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Semi-structured Interviews Question

List of Interview Questions

1. I would like to begin by asking you about some background information to your company and your role in arranging meetings and conferences.

- How often does your company arrange meetings/conferences in every year?
- How many participants are there in each meetings/conferences?
- In your company, who is/are responsible for deciding to choose a meeting/conference destination?

2. Please would you describe the processes involved in selecting a meeting/conference destination?

3. Please explain what the factors are which you take into consideration when making a choice about a meeting/conference destination

4. I would like to know about your experiences of attending/organising meetings/conferences in Thailand.

Thank you very much

Appendix B: The Questionnaire

Title of Project: “A Study of Customer Perception of the Meetings and Conferences Industry in Thailand.”

Instructions: Please tick one box in the next section.

Have you arranged meetings/conferences in Thailand?

Yes, I have. (Please stop, you do not need to answer any more questions.

Thank you for your participation.)

No, I have not. (Please continue)

Section 1: About Your Company

1. What is your type of business? (Please tick the category which most closely matches your business purpose)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Food, Beverage & Tobacco |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accounting/ Business Consulting | <input type="checkbox"/> Health Care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Advertising/ Marketing | <input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Automotive | <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmaceuticals |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Banking/ Private Equity | <input type="checkbox"/> Real Estate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Construction/ Building Supplies | <input type="checkbox"/> Retail & Wholesale |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electronics/ Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Insurance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Energy | <input type="checkbox"/> Technology & Software |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment & Leisure | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation/ Shipping |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify..... |

2. How long has your business been established?

- Below 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- Above 20 years

3. What type of meetings/conferences does your company arrange on an annual basis? (Please tick the category which most closely matches your meetings/ conferences)

- Corporate meetings (Internal meetings for employees)
- Corporate meetings (External meetings for other stakeholders)
- Corporate meetings (Internal & External meetings for other stakeholders)
- International meetings/ conferences with external delegates
- Internal meetings & International meetings/ conferences
- External meetings & International meetings/ conferences
- Internal, External International meetings/ conferences
- Other, please specify.....

Section 2: Perceptions about Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination

2.1 Please tick the answer which most closely matches your opinion.

Statements on meetings/ conferences in Thailand	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Thailand has a variety of venues for meetings/ conferences.				
2. Thailand is famous for service quality.				
3. Thailand has a unique culture.				
4. Thailand is really good value for money to organise meetings/conferences.				
5. Thailand has numerous attractive attractions and can offer a wide range of activities.				
6. Thailand has a political stability.				
7. It is easy to access Thailand for overseas visitors.				
8. It is safe to arrange meetings/ conferences in Thailand.				
9. Thai people are friendly.				
10. Thailand has a good quality of MICE facilities.				

2.2 Please tick the answer which most closely matches your opinion.

Statements on barriers to not coming to Thailand	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Language barrier				
2. Remote distance				
3. Too expensive for organising meetings/ conferences				
4. Unstable Political Environment				
5. Epidemic issues (eg. SARS, EBOLA, MERS, Zika virus disease)				
6. Lack of safety (eg. crimes including snatch-and-grab, terrorism, gangsters, murders, etc.)				

2.3 Please provide any other information/thoughts you have about Thailand as a Meeting/Conference destination.

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Thank you for your cooperation

Appendix C: A Summary of interviewees

Interviewees No.	Types of Organisations/ Companies	Affiliation and Title	Gender	Code
1	International/ Diplomatic	Director of Department	Female	IN1
2	Intergovernmental Organisation	Project Manager	Female	IN2
3	International Federation	Deputy President	Male	IN3
4	International Federation	Administrative Assistant	Female	IN4
5	Intergovernmental Organisation	Administration Manager	Female	IN5
6	International/ Coffee Business	Director & General Manager	Male	IN6
7	International/ Insurance Business	Strategic Planning Manager	Female	IN7
8	International/ Certification Business	Technical Manager	Male	IN8
9	International/ Healthcare Business	Business Unit Manager	Female	IN9
10	International/ Healthcare Business	Product Manager	Female	IN10
11	International/ Healthcare Business	Product Manager	Female	IN11
12	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Male	DO1
13	Domestic/ Governmental	Division Director	Female	DO2
14	Domestic/ Governmental	Director of Department	Male	DO3
15	Domestic Association	Vice President of Association	Male	DO4
16	Domestic/ Various Business Sector	Corporate Director	Male	DO5
17	Domestic/ Construction Business	Senior Marketing	Male	DO6
18	Domestic Association	Project Manager	Female	DO7
19	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Female	DO8
20	Domestic Association	Secretary of Association President	Male	DO9
21	Domestic/ Education Business	Director of Center	Male	DO10
22	Domestic Association	Vice President of Association	Male	DO11
23	Domestic Association	Secretary of Association President	Male	DO12
24	Domestic/ Governmental	International Relations Specialist	Female	DO13
25	Domestic/ Insurance Business	Assistant Vice President (Market Management)	Male	DO14
26	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Male	DO15
27	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Female	DO16
28	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Female	DO17
29	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Female	DO18
30	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Female	DO19
31	Domestic Association	Committee Member	Male	DO20
32	Domestic/ Hotel Business	Director of Department	Male	DO21
33	Domestic/ Education Business	Project Manager	Male	DO22
34	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Female	DO23
35	Domestic/ Governmental	Project Manager	Female	DO24
36	Domestic Association	Project Manager	Female	DO25
37	Domestic Association	Project Manager	Female	DO26
38	Domestic Association	Project Manager	Female	DO27

Appendix D: Descriptive statistics (Thailand's destination attractiveness)

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Thailand has a variety of venues for meetings/conferences.	2.93	.679	Agree
2. Thailand is famous for service quality.	2.98	.724	Agree
3. Thailand has a unique culture.	3.38	.768	Strongly agree
4. Thailand has numerous attractive attractions and can offer a wide range of activities.	3.07	.745	Agree
5. Thailand has a political stability.	2.56	.988	Agree
6. It is easy to access Thailand for overseas visitors.	2.69	.811	Agree
7. Thai people are friendly.	3.18	.858	Agree

Appendix E: Descriptive statistics (Thailand's MICE industry attributes)

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
8. Thailand is really good value for money to organise meetings/ conferences.	2.98	.664	Agree
9. It is safe to arrange meetings/ conferences in Thailand.	2.73	.861	Agree
10. Thailand has a good quality of MICE facilities.	2.95	.708	Agree

Appendix F: Perceived barriers to Thailand as a MICE tourism destination

Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1. Language barrier	2.67	.671	Agree
2. Remote distance	2.70	.664	Agree
3. Too expensive for organising meetings/conferences	2.26	.629	Disagree
4. Unstable Political Environment	2.44	.784	Disagree
5. Epidemic issues (eg. SARS, EBOLA, MERS, Zika virus disease)	1.94	.627	Disagree
6. Lack of safety (eg. crimes including snatch-and-grab, terrorism, gangsters, murders, etc.)	2.25	.825	Disagree