

TRAVEL MOTIVATIONS OF THAI TOURISTS DURING ECONOMIC RECESSION

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Abstract

This study aims to segment Thai tourists based on their travel motivations. The following sections present, first, a conceptual framework on market segmentation and travel motivation. Following that, research methodology and results are presented. Finally, conclusions and management implications are discussed. Understanding Thai tourist motivation would be useful in designing tourist products to better attract and serve their needs. This study provides valuable information for destination management organizations and tourism suppliers interested in promoting their destinations to Thai tourists.

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อจัดกลุ่มนักท่องเที่ยวชาวไทยตามแรงจูงใจในการเดินทาง โดยใช้แบบสอบถามในการเก็บข้อมูลนักท่องเที่ยว จำนวน 728 คน พบว่า นักท่องเที่ยวชาวไทยที่เดินทางในช่วงวันหยุดยาวในฤดูร้อน สามารถจำแนกได้เป็น 3 กลุ่มได้แก่ 1) Discount seekers, 2) Resort holiday seekers, 3) Novelty seekers โดยนักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มที่ 1 เดินทางเพราะการลดราคาบัตรโดยสารเครื่องบิน ที่พัก และรายการทัวร์ ในขณะที่นักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มที่ 2 เดินทางไปสถานที่ใกล้บ้านที่มองว่าปลอดภัย และสามารถทำกิจกรรมได้ อาทิ ซอปปิ้ง สปา และกิจกรรมทางน้ำ และกิจกรรมกลางแจ้ง ส่วนนักท่องเที่ยวกลุ่มที่ 3 ท่องเที่ยวเพื่อค้นหาประสบการณ์แปลกใหม่

1. Introduction

Thailand has been renowned as one of the most popular tourist destinations in Asia for several decades in terms of beauty of nature, richness of culture, friendliness of the local people, and good value for money (Chon, Singh, and Mikula 1993). Moreover, it was ranked highest as a good value for money destination in the world in 2008 (CBI 2008). Nonetheless, the economic recession which emerged during the second half of 2008 and intensified in 2009 resulted in 780,000 reported unemployed in the first quarter of this year according to the deputy secretary-general of the National Economic and Social Development Board (Thailand). Meanwhile, an estimate of 1 to 2 million unemployed people did not register in the social security system (Bangkok Post 2009). Moreover, the recent political instability, has resulted in a lack of international tourist confidence in traveling in Thailand. Hence, the Thai government has encouraged Thai people to travel within Thailand to generate tourism income to help heal the country's economic crisis.

This study aims to segment Thai tourists based on their travel motivations. The following sections present, first, a conceptual framework on market segmentation and travel motivation. Following that, research methodology and results are presented. Finally, conclusions and management implications are discussed. Understanding Thai tourist motivation would be useful in designing tourist products to better attract and serve their needs. This study provides valuable information for destination management organizations and tourism suppliers interested in promoting their destinations to Thai tourists.

2. Literature Review

Travel motivation is defined as a driving force pushing people to search for holiday experience to satisfy human needs for escape, for change of pace, and for relaxation, social relationship, and enhance individual self-development (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981, Leiper, 2004; Pearce and Lee, 2005), whereas the attractiveness of destinations pull people to visit a particular place (Turnbull and Uysal, 1995; Yuan, and McDonald, 1990; Klenoshy, 2002). The push travel motivations cause tourists to search for signs in objects, situations, and events that contain the promise of satisfy particular prevalent drives (Rittichainuwat, Qu, and Mongkhonvanit 2007). In contrast, pull travel motivations refer to the attractiveness of the destination, which motivate people to travel once the decision has been made (Dann 1981), such as scenic beaches, shopping, and entertainment (Rittichainuwat 2008).

Among the travel motivations used to segment tourists, novelty is frequently found in the literature. Novelty refers to a search for a degree of contrast between present perception and past experience (Hsieh and Chang 2006) which varies upon a continuum between familiarity and degrees of contrast between the tourist's culture as compared to other cultures (Keng and Cheng 1999). For instance, some novelty seekers who search for novelty (Hirschman 1984; Lee, Kim, Seock and Cho 2009) travel to remote areas to acclimate themselves with local culture, whereas others may isolate themselves from the local people in remote area where they can easily become crime victims. However, novelty does not always mean an adventurous experience. According to Crompton (1979) and Faison (1977), novel is defined as a search for new and unfamiliar experience. Moreover, the degree of novelty seeking varies according to the individual (Lee and Crompton 1992). Some tourists may desire a high level of novelty, whereas others may prefer a lower level of novelty (Hirschman 1984). For example, Feng and Jang (2004) classified continuous repeaters as lower novelty seeking travelers but continuous switchers as higher novelty seekers. Likewise, a cultural visit to a well-known heritage site at an overseas destination to broaden cultural knowledge is also considered novelty seeking (Calantone and Johar 1984). Similarly, a taste of local cuisine and a stay at a typical local accommodation with few amenities also satisfies a need for novelty and culture for average tourists. Therefore, the degree of novelty between individual and mass tourists may not be as great as that found in

allocentrics (Plog 2001), drifters and explorers (Cohen 1982; Smith 1990). Hence, this study defines novelty as a desire for new experience, not necessarily an adventurous experience. Likewise, novelty seekers are defined as tourists who look for novelty, no matter whether their need for novelty is great or small.

Moreover, although price discount is not a favorable strategy in boosting income due to lean profit margin (Blattberg, Briesch, and Fox 1995), it is widely used to increase customer purchasing motivation, sales volume, and market share (Moon and Voss 2009; Reynolds, Gilkeson, and Niedrich, 2009; Teng 2009). It removes monetary constraint, which may deter consumers from purchasing a certain product with supreme quality and services (Raghubir, Inman and Grade 2004; Teng 2009). Moreover, price discounts have been proved as efficient marketing tools in boosting tourist demand and customer satisfaction during and after crises (Orkin 1990). In particular, during financial crisis, price discounts are frequently used to stimulate tourist arrivals among domestic and international customers who are more demanding than during a normal business situation.

In addition, short distance destination is a popular travel option because it provides tourists with ease of access, affordability, and variety of things to do (Nicolau and Más 2006). For example, domestic tourists can travel more often and spend more time at short distance destinations close to their residence than tourists living in more distant communities (Dadgostar and Isotalo 1992). Likewise, short distance destinations have been shown to be the best travel option during financial crisis when people are prudent in spending money to travel (Smeral 2009). Furthermore, after a crisis, domestic short distance destinations become a substitute to overseas travel because of tourist concerns regarding safety (Goodrich 1991).

Also, spa, golfing, diving, shopping and nightlife entertainment, allow tourists to relax at the end of a working day (Chon and Singh 1995; Davison 2008). In addition, golfing and nightlife activities are major motivators of golfers and business tourists while traveling on business trips (Tassiopoulous and Hayclam, 2008). Meanwhile, relaxing in a spa resort has become another recreational activity for health conscious tourists who prefer to seclude themselves in order to energize their minds and bodies (Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride 2002). Although resort recreation may not act as a primary motivator for tourists in choosing a specific destination, it is a basic hygiene factor (Correia, Oom do Valle, and Maço 2007). Its presence serves as a motivator, but its absence can contribute to tourist dissatisfaction (Bansal and Eiselt 2004).

3. Methodology

The instrument of this study is a self-administered survey questionnaire. The questionnaire contained three sections: travel behavior, travel motivation to travel during summer holiday on a domestic trip during the financial crisis and demographic profile. The first part of the questionnaire asked about the plan of tourists to travel during summer holiday on a domestic trip during the financial crisis. The second part of the questionnaire addressed travel motivation attributes during the financial crisis. The last part of the

questionnaire contained questions to establish a demographic profile. The respondents were asked to indicate the level of agreement with each of the 22 travel motivation attributes on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Later, a panel of experts -- faculty members in the hospitality and marketing fields -- evaluated the content validity of the questionnaire.

A self-administered questionnaire survey was conducted from April 3-7, 2009 (during a long weekend). The target population was Thai tourists who were waiting for departure at Suwannabhum International Airport. The sample size is 1,000 Thai tourists who traveled during summer holiday on a domestic trip during the global financial crisis in 2009. A pilot test was conducted at Hua Lampong train station, and North, South, and East bus terminals from Bangkok to major tourist destinations such as Chiang Mai, Pattaya, Khon Kaen, Phuket, and Kanchanaburi where research assistants, who were taking a tourism marketing research class, traveled as passengers. Although Thai passengers who were waiting for departure at the bus and train stations were included in this pilot test, their number was very limited. Only 32 passengers were eligible to participate in the survey because the research assistants asked for their travel purpose to exclude passengers who returned home or those residents from the analysis. Moreover, only one eligible person in the travel party was surveyed. The purpose of the pilot test is to examine the wordings and clarity of the questionnaire survey and also to suggest additional questionnaire items to be included in the subsequent survey with passengers at the airport. Then, the responses were coded and analyzed, first using descriptive statistics to determine frequency distribution, means, and standard deviations of the variables. Second, an exploratory factor analysis with oblique rotation was carried out on 22 travel motivation attributes to determine underlying dimensions. Third, a confirmatory factor analysis was run to confirm the goodness of fit. Fourth, a hierarchical cluster analysis was used to segment factor cluster analysis of the Thai tourists as determined by their travel motivations. Sixth, ANOVA was employed to determine any significant difference among the factor cluster analysis segments. A total of 728 completed questionnaires were included for the analysis. Please note that this paper was previously published in the proceeding of the association of private higher education institution of Thailand.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of Respondents

A total of 728 completed questionnaires were included for the analysis. As for gender, 64% were female and 36% were male. Regarding age distribution, 44% were between 20-39 years old, followed by 25% between 30-39 years old, and 13% between 40-49 years old. As for marital status, 64% were single, and the rest were married. All of the respondents were Thai. Concerning occupation, 24% worked in private companies, 23% were students, 17% were self-employed, 8% were entrepreneurs, 9% were state officials, 7%

worked in state enterprises, and 3% were lecturers. In education, most of the tourists were highly educated with undergraduate or graduate degrees, followed by 19% with high school diplomas. Regarding monthly income, about 26% earned 20,001-30,000 baht per month, followed by those who earned 15,001-20,000 baht, and 8,000-15,000 baht respectively. Almost 50% of the respondents traveled more than 5 times per year, followed by 35% traveling 2-3 times per year. Only 2.6% said that this was their first trip. About 68% of the respondents were leisure tourists, almost 26% were business tourists, and 5.8% were on meeting, convention, and training trips (This last group will subsequently be referred to as MICE tourists).

4.2 Underlying Dimensions of Travel Motivations

Principal Component Factor Analysis was used to determine the underlying dimensions of the travel motivations of Thai tourists to travel during the financial crisis. The Bartlett test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy indicated the appropriateness of using an exploratory factor analysis for the set of the travel motivation variables. The Bartlett test of Sphericity shows a significance level of 0.000, indicating that a non-zero correlation exists among variables. The Measure of Sampling Adequacy of 0.89 exceeds the necessary threshold of sampling adequacy, which requires a minimum of 0.50 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black 1998). This indicates that the set of travel motivation variables used in the study meets the fundamental requirements for an exploratory factor analysis (Hair et al., 1998). A Principal Component Factor Analysis with oblique rotation was employed because of the dimensions of travel motivations likely to be correlated. Using the scree plot criteria, a six factor solution was selected. The six factors represented 66.1% of the total variance explained. These six factors were: 1) resort recreation, 2) history and culture, 3) discounts, 4) safe and short distance destinations, 5) summer holidays, and 6) novelty seeking.

4.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A six-factor confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run using AMOS to verify the underlying dimensional patterns found via the exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The CFA model was specified to reflect the loadings structure of the 22 items and six factors reported in the EFA results. The six factors were specified to be correlated with each other. The goodness of fit Chi-square for the CFA model was 1132.9, with 194 degrees of freedom and p -value ≤ 0.01 . This is hardly surprising given the large sample size in our study. More importantly, all of the loadings of the items on the factors, as well as the covariances among the factors were statistically significant (p -value ≤ 0.01), validating the factor structure found in the exploratory factor analysis. Most importantly, the RMSEA was 0.082, suggesting a reasonable fit for the correlated 6-factors measurement model. Reliability analysis of the items for each of the six factors also showed

acceptable results (The Cronbach's alphas were as follows: resort recreation 0.81, history and culture 0.82, discounts 0.84, safe and short distance destination 0.76, summer holidays 0.77, novelty 0.58). For all subsequent analysis, summated indicators were formed for each of these six constructs.

4.4. Cluster Analysis

Later, a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method was run to classify the Thai tourists into segments based on their travel motivations. By looking at the percent increase in the agglomeration coefficient, a 3-cluster solution was chosen. The first cluster was composed of 279 observations (38%), the second cluster has 116 observations (16%), and the third cluster has 333 observations (46%). Then, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with the 6 factors as dependent variables and the cluster membership as independent variables was run to identify any significance among the three cluster membership. ANOVA showed significant differences on all of the travel motivations across the three cluster membership, including resort recreation ($F= 87.16, p\text{-value} \leq 0.01$), history and culture ($F= 7.9, p\text{-value} \leq 0.01$), discounts ($F= 174.15, p\text{-value} \leq 0.01$), safe and short distance destination ($F= 7.71, p\text{-value} \leq 0.01$), summer holiday ($F= 20.45, p\text{-value} \leq 0.01$), and novelty ($F= 52.85, p\text{-value} \leq 0.01$) respectively. Then, the demographic profile of each cluster was identified using cross-tabulation analysis with chi-square statistics. A significant difference among the three cluster groups on occupation was found.

Table 1
Cluster Profiles (Travel Motivations and Demographics)

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3: Novelty Seekers
Discounts Seekers	Resort holiday seekers	
Safe and Short Distance Destinations (4.43 ^b)	Safe and Short Distance Destinations (4.31 ^{a,b})	Safe and Short Distance Destinations (4.24 ^a)
Summer Holidays (4.07 ^c)	Summer Holidays (4.50 ^b)	Summer Holidays (4.23 ^a)
Novelty (4.01 ^a)	Novelty (3.32 ^b)	Novelty (4.02 ^a)
History and Culture (3.77 ^b)	History and Culture (3.99 ^a)	History and Culture (3.98 ^a)
Resort recreation (3.24 ^c)	Resort recreation (4.21 ^b)	Resort recreation (3.76 ^a)
Discounts (4.59 ^c)	Discounts (4.24 ^b)	Discounts (3.65 ^a)
Demographic Profile^d	Demographic Profile^d	Demographic Profile^d
Female	Female	Female
20-29	30-39	20-29

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3: Novelty Seekers
Discounts Seekers	Resort holiday seekers	
Single	Single and Married	Single
College	College	College
Students, educators housewives, retirees	Self-employed/entrepreneur	Students, educators
Income : 15,001-20,000	Income:15,001-20,000 and 20,001-30,000	Income: 8,000-15,000

Note:

1. Means with different superscripts for each travel motivation are significantly different from each other across the clusters.^{abc}
2. Modes were used to report the demographic profile.^d

As shown in table 1, Cluster 1 was called “discount seekers” because they show the highest average motivations on discounts (as compared to other two clusters). Likewise, they have a higher motivation on safe and short distance destination (as compared to cluster 3). As can be expected, they show the lowest motivation to travel during summer holidays. This is not surprising because discounts are usually not available during holidays. In addition, the discount seekers show the lowest motivation on history and culture and resort recreation. However, as compared to Cluster 2, the discount seekers have a higher motivation on novelty. Regarding the demographic profile, this segment was mostly comprised of tourists between 20-29 years of age. Almost 74% of this cluster was single. Most of them were students, educators, housewives, and retirees. The income range of this segment was 15,001-20,000 baht.

Cluster 2 was labeled “resort holiday seekers” because their motivations on summer holidays and resort recreation are the highest as compared to the other two clusters. Not surprisingly, these resort holiday seekers have the lowest motivation on novelty. They also show a higher motivation on history and culture than discount seekers. Moreover, their motivation on discounts is higher than that of Cluster 3. However, although the members in this group have high motivation on safe and short distance destinations, this factor is not significantly different from the other two groups. As for the demographic profiles, the age of this segment was between 30-39 years old. Moreover, the proportion of single (55%) and married (45%) was quite equal. Most in this segment were either self-employed or entrepreneurs. The income range of this segment falls between a 15,001-20,000 and 20,001-30,000 baht range.

Cluster 3 was labeled “novelty seekers” because the average of novelty motivation for this group is the highest among the three clusters. Other distinguishing features of this cluster are moderately high values of summer holidays and history and culture (as compared to discount seekers), low value of resort recreation (as compared to resort holiday seekers), and lowest value of discounts as compared to the other two clusters. In terms of demographic profiles, most of the tourists in this segment have an age range of between 20-29 years old. About 61% were single tourists. This group has the greatest number of students, and educators. Most people in this segment had an income range between 8,000-15,000 baht.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are of both theoretical and practical importance. They help explain motivations of tourists who travel in summer during financial crisis. The most important travel motivations of the three clusters to travel during the financial crisis were summer holidays, discounts, and safe and short distance destinations, as can be seen from an overlap of the three factors among the three clusters. This is not surprising, due to the fact that during financial crisis, people become more prudent in spending money. Hence, a short distance destination becomes a popular travel alternative because it saves time, effort, and travel costs. Hence, marketers must integrate these three travel motivations into their tourist products when communicating their marketing message to their target markets in order to motivate them to travel during financial crisis. This study also segments Thai tourists based on their travel motivations in summer. Three market segments of tourists who travel during financial crisis are discount seekers, resort holiday seekers, and novelty seekers.

5.1 Discount Seekers

Discount seekers show the highest motivations on discounts, and safe and short distance destinations. However, they are the least motivated by resort recreation. Although the average mean on summer holidays among discount seekers was the lowest as compared to the other two clusters, their rating on this factor is still relatively high. This indicates that discount seekers are interested in traveling during summer holidays. However, the restrictions on promotional fare, which is usually not available during the black out period, might not permit them to do so. Whereas the discount seekers have a similar degree of motivation on novelty as the novelty seekers, the former show higher concerns on safe and short distance destinations. Nonetheless, their demographic profile is not markedly different from that of the novelty seekers. Surprisingly, whereas novelty seekers have a lower monthly income than that of the discount seekers, the former are less price-sensitive than the latter.

5.2 Resort Holiday Seekers

As for resort holiday seekers, their travel motivation and demographic profile clearly distinguishes them from the other two clusters. For example, most of the members in this cluster are self-employed and entrepreneurs, whereas the other two clusters are mainly students, educators, housewives, and retirees. The resort holiday seekers have the highest motivation to engage in resort recreational activities such as spa, shopping, golfing, diving, and nightlife entertainment while at their destinations. However, they are wise spenders by carefully managing their time and money while traveling. For example, they show the highest motivation to travel during summer holidays when public and private sectors are temporarily closed. In addition, their preference on travel during holidays also shows that they value the balance between work and leisure time. Meanwhile, they carefully spend money by looking for travel discounts. Their travel behavior suggests their preference for short travel holidays to relax and participate in recreational activities rather than exploring and sightseeing the local attractions. Hence, marketing communication targeting this group must focus on a short resort holiday package, which includes air ticket and room rate, with one-stop shopping for various recreational activities so that guests do not have to leave the resorts.

5.3 Novelty Seekers

Novelty seekers in this study looked for safe and short distance destinations but to a lesser extent than other segments. This may be due to financial constraints that influenced their travel style. Their interest on culture may also reflect a new travel trend among younger Thais who imitate the travel style of Western backpackers. According to the editor of a Thai women's magazine given out at Thailand Travel Mart in June 2009, it is currently popular among Thai female office personnel and teenagers to save money in order to take a trip to Pai, a local village in the north of Thailand, simply to sip a cup of coffee, take pictures at a local eatery and send a postcard to their friends. This may explain why novelty seekers in this study, whose income level is the lowest as compared to the other two segments, show the highest interest in culture.

5.4 Discount: A Classic Promotion

Similar to the study of inbound tourists who traveled in Thailand during the Asian financial crisis from 1997 to 2000 (Rittichainuwat, Beck, and Qu 2002; Rittichainuwat, Qu, and Mongkolvanit 2008), this study found that discounts motivated the three market segments to travel during the global financial crisis in 2009. It also confirms previous studies indicating that price discounts, package deals, and blitz advertising are efficient marketing tools in boosting tourist demand (Chien and Law 2003). Moreover, this study also shows that affordable low cost airfares increase demand among middle-income tourists to spend their leisure time at domestic destinations within an hour flight radius of their residency. Therefore, airlines must closely

work with resorts and regional tourist bureaus in promoting affordable packages to short distance destinations to motivate domestic tourists to spend more time at destinations within a close proximity to their homes.

5.5 Safety Is Important.

While it is not surprising that the beauty of nature is the highest ranking travel motivation, as Thailand is well-known as a beach paradise (Cohen 1982), it is interesting to note that though Thailand is renowned as “the land of smiles,” there are safety concerns even among domestic tourists. Although Thailand has been perceived as a safe international travel destination (Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown 2001), the recent terrorism in its three southern provinces, the closures of the two international airports in 2008, and political instability have decreased tourists confidence regarding safety in Thailand (Rittichainuwat and Chakarborty 2009). Similar to a natural disaster, disease, and terrorism, economic downturn results in a short term impact of Thai travel industry (Rittichainuwat 2012; Rittichainuwat 2011a, 2011b; Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty 2011). Although a destination has a lot of things to offer tourists, it cannot attract and retain tourists unless it is perceived as a safe destination. This is because safety is a basic hygiene factor for all types of tourists, regardless of their travel lifestyles and socio-economic differences. As suggested by Wang (2009), as compared to natural disaster, terrorism, and disease, financial crisis has a small impact on tourism demand because it does not threaten tourists’ safety concerns of injury or loss of life. Moreover, it takes a longer time to boost tourist’ confidence once it is destroyed by political turmoil. Hence, both the public and private sectors must immediately reestablish tourist’ confidence by raising public awareness of their social responsibility to create safe travel environments in Thailand. The results of this study also reinforce the results of previous studies indicating that safety is now a global tourism concern, not only among Western tourists but also among middle-income Thai tourists, who have become an emerging market of interest in the international tourism community. Specifically, Thai tourists still travel and look for discounted travel packages at travel shows (Rittichainuwat and Mair 2011).

Limitation and Future Research

Our study interviewed only passengers who were traveling by plane. Hence, the results may not be generalized to tourists who were traveling by train, by bus nor by car. Nonetheless, the results shed some light on the travel behavior of Thai tourists, who increasingly travel more often as a result of low cost airfare. Future research on other travel modes would be of interest in order to understand the behavior of Thai tourists in other research settings. As Hatzinger and Mazanec (2007) noted, future marketing research should focus more on the role of transportation mode in destination selection.

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