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"Local & Global Sustainability: Meeting the Challenges & Sharing the Solutions"

Travel Motivations of Thai Tourists Travelling Abroad with a Tour Operator

Narudome Oksue¹, Assistant Professor Dr. Raweewan Proyrungroj²,
 Watcharin Anantapong³, Arphaporn Jirakoonwat⁴

^{1,3,4}Student in Master of Arts in Tourism and Hospitality Management,
 Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University

²Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University

Abstract

This research investigated the motivations that drove Thai tourists to travel abroad with a tour operator and the experiences they gained. An interpretive paradigm utilizing qualitative data collection methods (semi-structured interviews and participant observation) was employed. The informants included twenty-four Thai tourists, selected by purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The collected data were analyzed with thematic analysis. The findings of the research revealed that the motivations and on-site experiences of these tourists were multidimensional. Three main motivational themes were identified: (1) a desire for convenience and comfort in travelling; (2) factors related to the tourists' budget; and (3) factors related to a tour operator. The first two factors were push motivational factors, whereas the last one was a pull factor.

Keywords: Motivations / Thai tourists / Travelling abroad / Tour operator / Push factors / Pull factors

Introduction

Tourists are a very significant element of the tourism industry because they represent demand that generates revenue for the industry. Without tourists, the tourism industry would not exist. The behavior of tourists are very complex and diverse which means that its nature is very difficult to understand and it could change over time. Therefore, the continuous study of tourist behavior is very important for the tour operators and other tourism-related entrepreneurs so that they can gain an understanding of what the tourists want and expect and use such knowledge to plan and create tourism products that can satisfy these needs perfectly.

The study on tourist motivation is very pivotal because tourist motivation is significant in its own right. It serves as the initial point of understanding tourist behavior as a whole (Pearce and Lee, 2005). Crompton (1979) points out that although motivation is only



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one factor among many contributing factors that can explain the complex nature of tourist behaviour, it is accepted by many authors (e.g. Crompton, 1979; Holden, 2006; Sharpley, 2006) that motivation is a powerful driving force behind the behaviour of tourists. Specifically, motivation is claimed to be 'tourism's starting gun' (Sharpley, 2006, p.32).

In terms of marketing, understanding of tourist motivation can provide valuable insights for tour operators and other tourism-related businesses such as airlines, hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions on the travel patterns of tourists, which could help them plan and tailor their tourism products to appropriately meet with the needs and wants of their target groups.

At present, there are a large number of Thai tourists deciding to travel abroad by buying an inclusive package tour from a tour operator. However, there have been an increase in the number of Thai tourists travelling abroad on their own. This means that the outbound tour operators not only face competition from other tour operators offering similar overseas package tours, but they also have to encounter with the situation that there are Thai tourists who prefer not to buy their package tours and travel on their own. With this reason, more studies on the motivations of Thai tourists preferring to buy an inclusive package tour from a tour operator are needed.

Objective of the research

This research aimed to examine push motivational factors that initiate Thai tourists to travel abroad with a tour operator and pull motivational factors that attract them to make a final decision.

Scopes of the research

1. The scope in terms of research population: this study aimed to focus on a group of Thai tourists who resided and worked in Bangkok who chose to travel abroad with a tour operator.
2. The scope in terms of the topic being investigated: this study focused on the understanding of travel motivations or main reasons that drove Thai tourists to travel abroad with a tour operator. It used the push/pull motivation concept of Dann (1977;1981) as a conceptual framework to investigate and explain the motivations of the tourists. Specifically, it aimed to study both the inner needs that initiate them to choose to travel with a tour operator, and attributes of external factors that pull them to make a final decision.



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Moreover, this study also viewed tourists' expectations on the overseas trip as part of their motivations as well.

Conceptual framework of the research

This research employed a qualitative research methodology. It aimed to examine the motivations of Thai tourists choosing to travel abroad with a tour operator by utilizing Dann's (1977, 1981) concept of push and pull motivational factors in the understanding of the role of motivation in the tourism demand process. According to Dann, push motivational factors are internal to individuals. In other words, they are inner needs that initiate tourists' desire to travel in the first place. These needs determine the type of holiday he/she wants. The examples of push factors include a desire to relax, a desire to meet and make new friends, a desire to do new things, and a desire to gain new experiences etc. Once tourists make a decision to take a particular type of holiday, they are generally influenced by pull motivational factors which are the destination-specific attributes. These pull motivational factors determine their choice of destination. Normally, tourists are intimately aware of their inner needs before making a final decision about the destination. The examples of pull motivational factors include popularity and beauty of tourist destination, reputation of a tour company and or other tourism-related businesses such as hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions. The relationship and influence of push motivational factors and pull motivational factors is shown in figure 1.

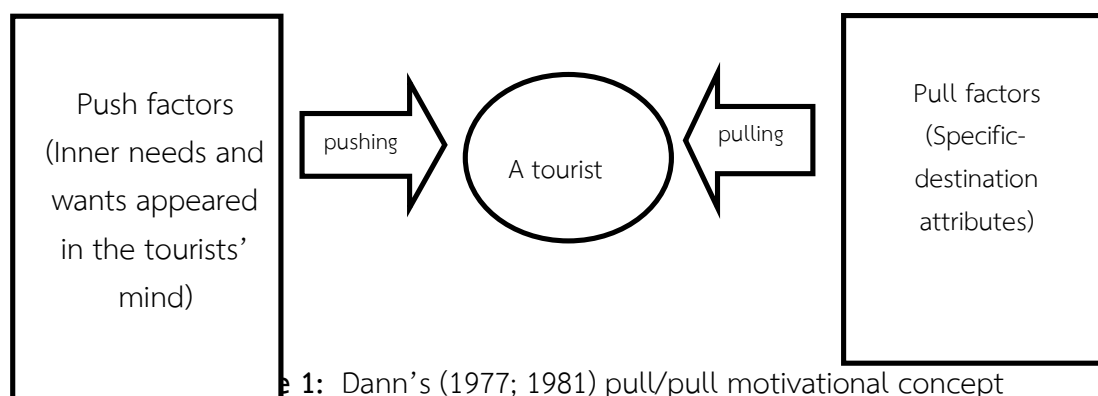


Figure 1: Dann's (1977; 1981) pull/pull motivational concept

Research methodology

This research employed an interpretive paradigm as a framework in conducting a study. This is because the main aim of this research was to gain rich, in-depth, and holistic understanding of travel motivations that push and pull Thai tourists to travel abroad by buying an inclusive package tour from a tour operator, instead of travelling on their own.



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Apart from this, this study is primarily based on the researchers' understanding of the Thai tourists' interpretation of their motivations and their encounters with the tourists. Given the nature of this study, an interpretive approach as opposed to a positivist paradigm is considered the most appropriate.

This study was informed by a qualitative methodological approach because it is consistent with the interpretive paradigm. This approach enabled the researchers to achieve the research objectives which was to gain rich, in-depth, holistic, and meaningful insights of the topic being studied. The researchers hold that travel motivations are complex and dynamic in nature and cannot be conveyed via numerical and statistical representations. Apart from that, this research did not aim to identify cause-effect relationship between certain factors and tourist motivations. With this reason, a qualitative approach was employed.

This research used a combination of qualitative data collection methods to collect the data. These methods included semi-structured interviews and participant observations. This approach not only allowed the researchers to gain a more complete picture of the topic being studied, but also enabled them to use a triangulation technique to cross-check the data.

The informants of the research included twenty-four Thai tourists who resided and worked in Bangkok and chose to travel abroad with a tour operator. They were selected via purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The criteria for selecting these informants were (1) must be Thai citizens; (2) must be 18 years and above for ethical reasons; and (3) having experiences of travelling abroad with a tour operator at least 5 times during the past 2 years. The total number of the informants was determined by data saturation and redundancy which means that the researchers stop collecting the data when there was not new categories or themes stop emerging from the data.

The respondents in this study consisted on 22 Thai tourists: 14 female and 10 male tourists. The ages ranged from 19 to 62 years and their career varied including an undergraduate students, working in a private company, being a freelance worker, having own business, working for a government agency. In terms of their educational background, it ranged from bachelor's degree to doctoral degree.

The collected data were analyzed with the use of thematic analysis. This analysis approach is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.' According to Braun and Clarke, the thematic data analysis process consists of 6 phases: (1) become familiar with the data; (2) generating



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initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report.

Research findings

Based on the data analysis, three main motivational themes driving the Thai tourists to buy an inclusive package tour offered by a tour operator to travel abroad were identified: (1) a desire for convenience and comfort in travelling; (2) factors related to the tourists' budget; and (3) factors related to a tour operator. The first two factors were push motivational factors, whereas the last one was a pull factor. These motivations are discussed in details and showed in figure 2.

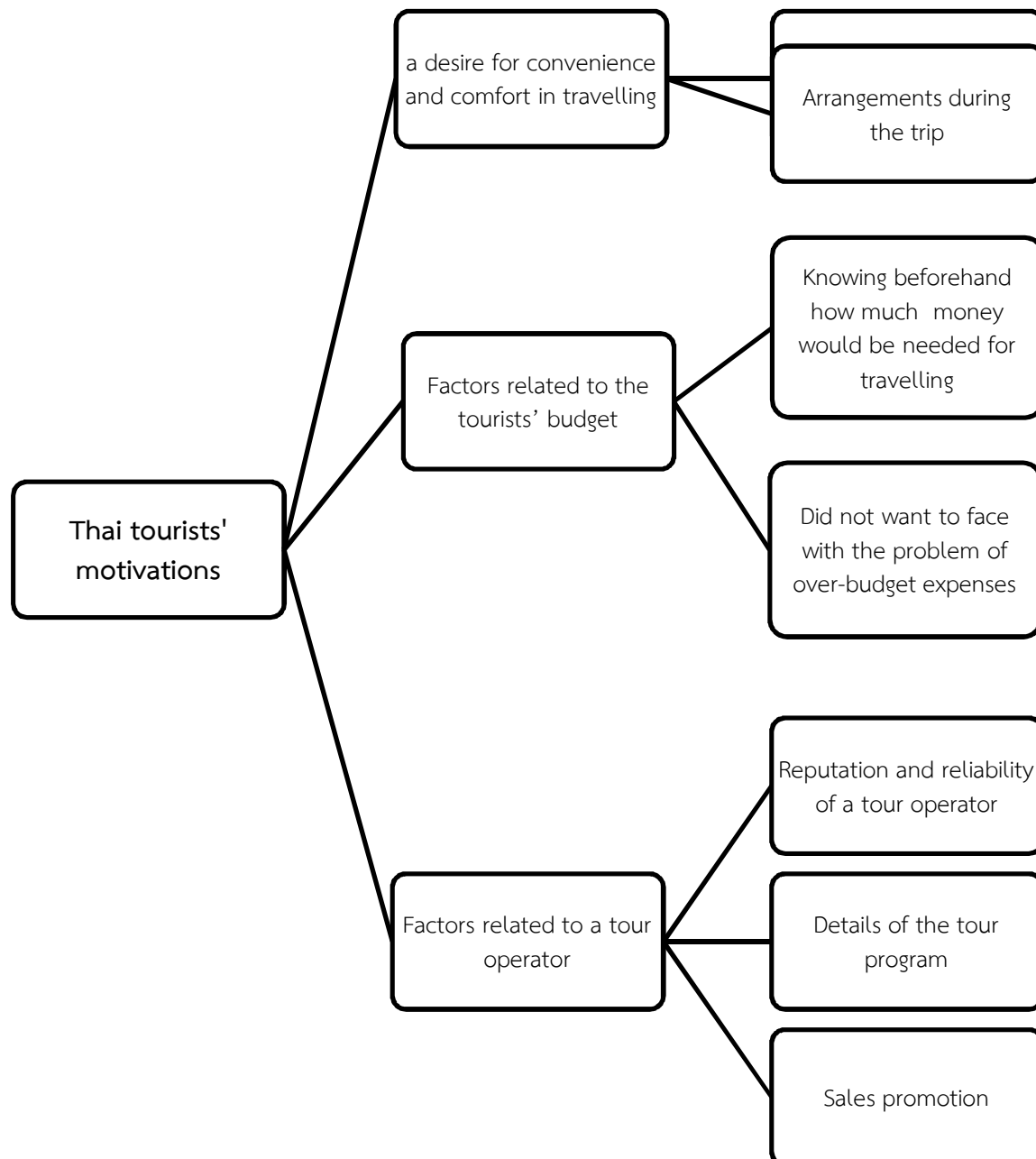


Figure 2: Push and pull motivational factors of the Thai tourists travelling abroad with a tour operator



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(1) A desire for convenience and comfort in travelling: This motivation represents a push motivational factor because it is an inner needs of the respondents. It was predominantly cited by most of the respondents. Based on the respondents, their desire for convenience and comfort in travelling included travel arrangements provided by a tour operator before travelling and during the trip. These pre-trip travel arrangements sought by the Thai tourists included an arrangement of travel documents (i.e. a passport, visa, immigration document), currency exchange service, and an advice on how to prepare themselves for travelling abroad (i.e. how to prepare clothes and accessories, medication, equipment).

The arrangements during the trip needed by the tourists included arrangements and services related to planning, reserving, and using the tourism-related services (i.e. hotels, food and beverage, transportation, tourist attractions etc.) during travelling oversea. Many respondents stated that this factor was the main reason making them choose to travel abroad with a tour company. They stated that they did not want to worry about all of these arrangements and wanted to leave these burdens in the hands of the professionals. Some said that they did not have any knowledge on how to plan a trip or how to book a hotel or an airplane ticket. Doing all of these things on their own appeared to be a problem for them and travelling with a tour operator meant that they would be free from such problem and could be totally fun with travelling.

(2) Factors related to the tourists' budget: This factor is another pull factor driving Thai tourists to use a service from a tour operator. In the view of the respondents, they believed that travelling with a tour operator allowed them to manage and control their travelling budget because generally all the expenses were included in the tour price. Tourists said that if they travelled with a tour operator, they would know exactly how much they needed to pay for the trip before travelling. In contrast, if they travelled on their own, they might have to face with the problem of over-budget expenses.

(3) Factors related to a tour operator: This factor represents a pull motivational factor because it involves the attributes of a tour operator. Tourists mentioned that the reputation and reliability of a tour operator served as important factors making them to decide to buy a package tour. Normally, their decision to buy a package tour with a tour operator was based on positive recommendations or good words-of-mouth from friends and/or other people and their own previous experiences. Many tourists stated that travelling abroad was a big issue for them because it involved a lot of money and time. Therefore, for them, it was a risky activity. The best choice for them to reduce a feeling of risk was to use a



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service of a high reputation tour operator. Many tourists mentioned that they believed that these tour operators were professionals in planning and arranging an overseas trip.

Furthermore, the details of the package tours and sales promotions offered by a tour operator also attracted the respondents to travel abroad with a tour operator. Tourists stated that they decided to travel abroad for the first time and continued to use travelling service from the same company because they were attracted by the details of the tour program that included famous tourist attractions, hotels, and airlines which were of their interest. Some tourists said that they often bought a package tour when travelling abroad because of promotions offered by a tour operator which were generally much cheaper than a standard price. Such sales promotions induced them to make a sudden decision to travel abroad with a tour operator even though they didn't plan to travel before.

Suggestions

The findings from this study not only fill in the literature gap on tourist motivation, especially in the context of Thai tourists travelling abroad, but also provide a valuable insight for tourism marketers, outbound tour operators, and other tourism-related businesses on the motivations or the main reasons of Thai tourists travelling abroad with a tour operator. Specifically, the findings of this research could serve as a knowledge for them to tailor their tourism products to appropriate satisfy the needs of the target groups.

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