

Multivariate Examination of Tourist Decision Processes: Insights from Foreign Tourists

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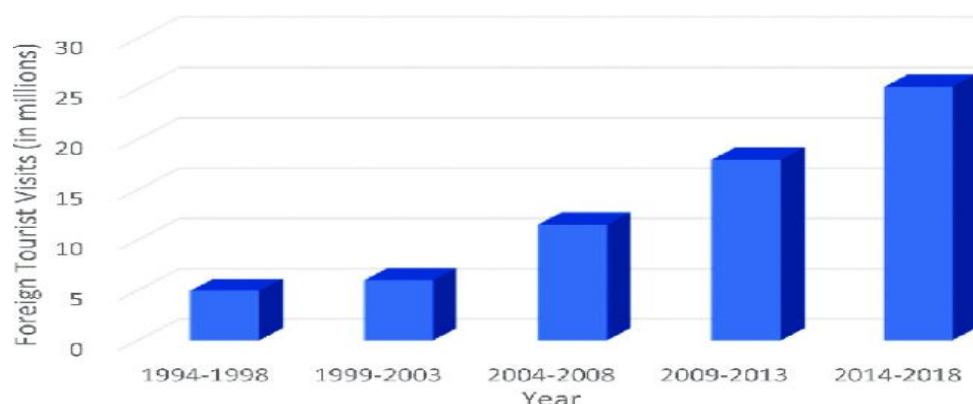
Abstract:

The objective of this study was to investigate the demographic characteristics of foreign tourists, their decision-making process when choosing tourist destinations, and their behavior during visits to destinations in Thailand. This research involved a sample of four hundred foreign tourists, and the primary research tool employed was self-administered questionnaires. The reliability and consistency of the measurement scale were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, resulting in a coefficient of 0.848. The collected data underwent analysis using both descriptive and inferential statistics. To examine the interaction between the main demographic variables of foreign tourists (gender and age) and the five stages of the decision-making process (need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation), a two-way multivariate analysis of variance was applied. The findings of the research indicated that a majority of the respondents rated all five stages of the decision-making process as "somewhat recognized/practiced." Furthermore, a statistically significant interaction effect was observed between gender and age concerning the combined dependent variables associated with the decision-making process.

Keywords: Decision-making process, Foreign tourists, Tourism destinations, Interaction effect

INTRODUCTION

In the span of the last sixty years, the discipline of tourism management has experienced significant expansion and diversification, establishing itself as one of the largest and fastest-growing sectors globally. In the year 2016, there was a notable growth in foreign visitor arrivals, with a 3.9% rise seen. This resulted in a global total of 1,235 million arrivals, indicating a significant increase of 46 million compared to the preceding year. An observable and consistent increase in international tourism demand has been noted, with the Asia-Pacific region taking the lead in growth during 2016, exhibiting a significant 9% rise in foreign visitors. The rapid growth of the tourist sector has resulted in the widespread emergence of various destinations across the globe, hence establishing tourism as a crucial driver for socioeconomic advancement. The aforementioned growth can be observed through the generation of employment opportunities, the formation of new businesses, the augmentation of export earnings, and the advancement of infrastructure. In light of these advancements, a contemporary tourist manager recognizes that conventional marketing strategies, which predominantly focus on product attributes and characteristics, are inadequate in the present context.



Efforts aimed at understanding the complex dynamics among tourists, tour operators, governments, and local populations have led to the development of models and comprehensive explanations of tourist behavior. Contemporary customers exhibit a need for immersive encounters that effectively activate their sensory faculties, establish a personal connection, evoke emotional responses, and foster cognitive engagement. The notion of the experience economy was established by Pine and Gilmore, who posited that consumers have a strong desire for impactful memories, sensory experiences, and symbolic elements that collectively contribute to the formation of comprehensive and lasting personal experiences. Consequently, the decision-making process regarding travel is undergoing changes, as multiple elements exert a substantial influence on visitors' selection of destinations. These aspects encompass issues pertaining to health, safety, time, expenses, and travel distance. The need for advancements in consumer behavior models, such as the "stages model" of the buying decision process, has been prompted by marketing scholars. This model delineates five significant stages, including problem detection, information search, appraisal of alternatives, purchase choice, and post-purchase behavior. A comprehensive comprehension of these stages is of utmost importance for enterprises operating within the tourism industry, as it enables them to efficiently cater to the wants of tourists. The efficacy of tourism marketing encompasses not only comprehending individuals' holiday activities but also their decision-making processes pertaining to leisure travel. Hence, the primary focus of the author's research lies in investigating the correlation between demographic information of international tourists visiting Thailand and their cognitive processes involved in decision-making. Thailand, commonly known as the "Kingdom of Thailand," remains a highly popular destination in Southeast Asia, drawing a larger number of tourists compared to other countries in the region. This may be attributed to its captivating combination of scenic landscapes, impressive temples, well-regarded hospitality, varied culinary offerings, and the historical ruins of illustrious past civilizations. Despite encountering a multitude of hurdles over the past two decades, including economic crises, floods, epidemics, tsunamis, and political uncertainty, Thailand has consistently witnessed a steady increase in the influx of tourists. In 2016, the number of international arrivals to Thailand surpassed 32.58 million, demonstrating a notable growth of 8.91% in comparison to the preceding year. In 2016, the whole revenue generated from tourism amounted to 2.51 trillion baht, exhibiting a notable growth of 10.93% which above the predetermined objective of 2.4 trillion baht.

The recognition of the substantial potential of the Thai tourism sector has prompted the need for research that explores the behavior and decision-making processes of international tourists. This research endeavor holds the promise of offering useful insights to the various players involved in the Thai tourism industry. This research has the potential to assist organizations in developing more effective marketing strategies that are customized to address the unique requirements of consumers, thereby promoting the long-term viability and durability of their enterprises.

Research Objectives:

1. **To assess the decision-making process of foreign tourists visiting Thailand:** The primary objective is to understand how foreign tourists go through the stages of decision-making, including need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions, and post-purchase evaluation when planning and experiencing their trips to Thailand.
2. **To measure the attitude and recognition of foreign tourists towards various aspects of their travel:** This involves examining the attitudes and recognition levels of foreign tourists regarding elements related to their travel experience in Thailand.
3. **To examine the influence of demographic factors (gender and age) on the decision-making process:** This objective seeks to determine if there is a statistically significant relationship between demographic factors, such as gender and age, and the decision-making process of foreign tourists.

Hypothesis:

Based on the research objectives, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

1. **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** There is a significant difference in the decision-making process among foreign tourists at different stages, including need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions, and post-purchase evaluation when visiting tourist destinations in Thailand.
2. **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Foreign tourists in Thailand have varying attitudes and recognition levels regarding different aspects of their travel experience.
3. **Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Demographic factors, specifically gender and age, significantly influence the decision-making process of foreign tourists in Thailand.

Research Framework:

The research framework can be summarized as follows:

- **Independent Variables:** Gender and age are the two independent variables in this study.
- **Dependent Variables:** The decision-making process of foreign tourists is represented by five dependent variables: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions, and post-purchase evaluation.
- **Data Collection:** Data is collected from 400 foreign tourists at Suwannabhumi Airport, Bangkok, Thailand, using a self-administered questionnaire based on the decision process research paper of Mesomboonpoonsuk, Jearajit, and Trivedi (2013). The questionnaire includes Likert scales to measure recognition and practice degrees.
- **Data Analysis:** Descriptive statistics, including percentage, mean, and standard deviation, are used to analyze the collected data. Additionally, a reliability analysis is performed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to ensure the consistency of the Likert scale measurements.
- **Statistical Analysis:** To test the hypotheses, a two-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) is applied. This analysis examines the interaction between the independent variables (gender and age) and the dependent variables (decision-making stages).
- **Significance Testing:** Significance testing is conducted using "Wilks' Lambda," a statistical measure appropriate for multivariate situations. It determines whether there are differences in the decision-making process among different groups of tourists and whether these differences are statistically significant.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographic Statistics: Out of the foreign tourists who participated in the survey, 58.00% were male, 72.60% fell within the 31-50 age group, 65.00% were Asian tourists, and 73.75% held a bachelor's degree.

Behavior of Foreign Tourists When Visiting Thailand Destinations: When questioned about the Thai destinations they had visited in the past 3 years, approximately 43.00% of respondents preferred nature destinations, such as beaches, waterfalls, lakes, islands, hot springs, mountains, caves, and floral gardens. Furthermore, 53.75% of respondents visited Thailand's tourist destinations only once, with 40.50% citing relaxation as their primary reason for visiting. Additionally, 49.25% of respondents indicated that their preferred travel period was between October and December. About 39.00% of respondents were influenced by their friends when deciding to visit Thailand, and 72.25% of them traveled as part of a group, while 27.75% preferred independent travel.

Tourist Decision-Making Process in Choosing Thailand Destinations: The respondents' opinions on the five stages of the decision-making process are summarized in the table below:

Table 1 The opinion of respondents towards five stages of the decision process

THE DECISION PROCESS	$\bar{X}$	SD	Degree of Recognition
I. NEED RECOGNITION			
1. Cultural, traditional and heritage: temples, museums, palaces, communities and local markets, etc.	3.27	0.865	somewhat recognize
2. Nature: beaches, waterfalls, lakes, islands, hot springs, mountains, caves and floral gardens, etc.	2.76	0.888	somewhat recognize
3. Entertainment and amusement: aquariums, zoos, amusement parks, theatres, public parks, camping and adventures, etc.	3.25	0.958	somewhat recognize
4. Shopping: flea markets, department stores, fashion malls, etc.	3.63	0.988	moderately recognize
5. Agricultural: vineyards, orchards, breweries, rice fields and farms, etc.	2.77	1.136	somewhat recognize
6. Education: meetings, seminars, conferences, events, education fair/exhibition, etc.	3.00	0.710	somewhat recognize
Average I	3.06	0.503	somewhat recognize
II. INFORMATION SEARCH			
	$\bar{X}$	SD	Degree of Practice
1. Seeking information from personal sources: family, friends, acquaintances, and neighbors, etc.	3.00	0.779	somewhat practice
2. Seeking information from professional and commercial sources: advertising, salespeople, dealers, agents, etc.	3.29	0.941	somewhat practice
3. Seeking information from public sources: restaurant reviews, editorials in the travel section, consumer-rating organizations, etc.	3.47	1.163	somewhat practice
4. Asking knowledge employees about competing services	3.07	0.934	somewhat practice
5. Using the Internet to compare service offerings	3.81	1.036	moderately practice
Average II	3.27	0.531	somewhat practice
III. EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVE			
	$\bar{X}$	SD	Degree of Practice
1. Popular, beautiful and attractive tourist destinations	2.87	0.792	somewhat practice
2. Accredited world heritage tourist destinations	2.91	0.827	somewhat practice
3. Good reputation of travel agents	2.98	0.952	somewhat practice
4. Discount package to tourist destinations	3.02	0.780	somewhat practice
5. Low cost airfare to tourist destinations	3.07	0.726	somewhat practice

The table above illustrates that the majority of respondents rated all five stages in the decision-making process—need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior—as somewhat recognized/practiced, with an overall rating of $x = 3.11$. Furthermore, each individual stage received similar ratings, with values of $x = 3.06, 3.27, 3.13, 2.99$, and 3.07 , respectively.

Hypothesis Testing: To test the hypotheses, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to examine how demographic variables, specifically gender and age, influenced the five stages of the tourist decision-making process. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Two-way multivariate analysis results

Effect	Wilks' Lambda	Value	F	df	Error df	Sig.
Intercept		.024	3150.419	5.000	387.000	.000
gender		.980	1.598	5.000	387.000	.160
age		.681	7.899	20.000	1284.484	.000
gender * age		.913	2.394	15.000	1068.738	.002

The table above indicates a statistically significant interaction effect between gender and age on the combined dependent variables ($F(15,1068.74) = 2.394$, $p = 0.002$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.913$). The details of this effect are provided in Table 3, concluding that age levels had an impact on the five stages of the tourist decision-making process. Notably, this effect varied between males and females.

Table 3 The different age levels of male and female that effect on the five stages of tourist decision making process

Five stages	Male	Female
1. need recognition	41-50 years	41 years and above
2. information search	41-50 years	31 years and above
3. evaluation of alternative	41-50 years	41 years and above
4. purchase decision	31-50 years	31-40 years
5. post-purchase evaluation	41 years and above	51 years and above

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Upon analyzing the research findings pertaining to the decision-making process of international tourists, it was seen that these tourists had a tendency to utilize all sub-elements to varying degrees. Their capacity to identify the decision-making process strongly corresponds with the buyer choice process model. Upon analyzing the manner in which international tourists identified their requirements, it became evident that they displayed a cognizance of diverse types of destinations. This observation aligns with Mountinho's notion that a destination's image is molded by tourists' subjective interpretation of reality. This explanation encompasses both cognitive and emotive elements, which influence purchase behavior by means of cognitive evaluation components. Consequently, the perception of foreign tourists regarding their requirements is shaped by the image they form, which then impacts their decision-making process in evaluating and choosing accommodations during the final stage.

Upon acknowledging their requirements, international travelers actively participate in thorough information retrieval, a crucial element within the realm of travel and tourism. The significance of this matter is particularly pronounced in the context of tourism products, as they possess unique characteristics and are situated in unfamiliar settings. Prospective travelers actively seek information in order to enhance the overall quality of their intended journeys and mitigate uncertainties associated with practical, financial, psychological, and social hazards. Furthermore, Mathieson and Wall underscored the importance of information in comprehending the process of selecting a place. Numerous scholarly investigations have examined the correlation between sources of knowledge and the subsequent process of choosing. Prospective tourists frequently possess limited familiarity regarding destinations they have not yet visited, relying on media outlets or their social networks for information. They often place considerable confidence in recommendations provided by friends and family. This reliance on word-of-mouth endorsements, particularly from individuals who have previously engaged with the tourism offering, has been emphasized by Senecal and Nantel as influential for experience-based goods. Prior studies have indicated that individuals place significant value on word of mouth recommendations from their social network, including friends and family, when making decisions related to travel.

Given the significance of information retrieval, international visitors actively engage in this stage prior to proceeding with the evaluation of their decision-making process. The study revealed that international tourists consider multiple aspects when assessing and making purchase decisions. These elements are influenced by individuals such as friends, relatives, family members, acquaintances, agents, and tour operators. These considerations align with the various factors discovered in the decision-making process related to visiting a certain place. These factors comprise both psychological characteristics, including attitude, motivation, beliefs, and intentions, as well as non-psychological aspects, such as time, pull factors, and the marketing mix.

Moreover, contemporary studies have undertaken a reassessment of the involvement of children in the process of making decisions within the context of family dynamics in the tourist sector. Historically, children have been assigned a more passive position in the context of tourism or visitation. However, there is a noticeable shift in this attitude, evident in the influence that children exert on the dynamics of a married couple, which varies depending on the stage of the family life cycle. According to a study conducted by Myers and Moncrief, it has been found that the involvement of both husbands and wives is evident in the decision-making process related to family travel. Additional research conducted by Bartos supports the notion that women who are employed are more inclined to participate in leisure travel activities. Mayo's proposition regarding shifts in gender roles suggests that there may be a decline in collaborative decision-making when it comes to arranging vacations. Specifically, it is posited that couples with lower incomes tend to be more inclined towards decision-making dominated by the woman, while families with moderate incomes tend to engage in joint discussions. On the other hand, families with higher incomes are more likely to exhibit decision-making dominated by the husband. Hence, the decision-making process throughout the phase of trip planning is subject to change and influenced by various aspects such as health, safety, time constraints, financial considerations, and travel distance. The research findings indicate that international tourists make their judgments based on a range of variables.

Lastly, with regards to post-purchase behavior, a significant proportion of international tourists actively participate in this period, predominantly by undertaking diverse activities and utilizing social media platforms. The experiences individuals have in tourist places play a significant role in shaping the overall perception of tourism. Numerous scholars agree on the influence of tourism imagery on individual behavior. The concept of tourism image, as described by several scholars, refers to an individual's holistic perspective or comprehensive collection of impressions regarding a certain destination. It is evident that this perception significantly impacts the behavior of tourists. According to Seyidov and Adomaitienė, the demographic characteristics of tourists have a substantial impact on consumer behavior. Gender has a significant role in influencing consumer purchasing behavior, as individuals of different genders exhibit distinct preferences that can be attributed to many factors such as upbringing, socialization, and other relevant influences. The research's hypothesis testing reveals the interaction between demographic data (gender and age) and the five stages of tourist decision-making, indicating that both genders display diverse decision-making behaviors at each stage. Therefore, it is recommended by this study that marketing endeavors within the tourism sector should prioritize the comprehensive targeting of all constituent components of the decision-making process in order to efficiently promote tourist destinations in Thailand. The primary recommendations highlight several elements of a place, such as its natural attractions, entertainment options, amusement facilities, and shopping opportunities. These characteristics can be more efficiently promoted through the utilization of websites, adverts in newspapers, as well as the distribution of brochures, pamphlets, and leaflets. It is imperative for tourism fairs and exhibitions to present a diverse array of destinations, while ensuring that tourism websites are consistently refreshed to offer up-to-date and credible information. It is advisable to engage computer specialists for the purpose of maintaining these websites, as well as providing training programs for staff members to ensure their knowledge and skills remain current in alignment with industry pros. The dissemination of tourism information should encompass a range of public sources, such as tourism periodicals, editorial material, and social media platforms. During periods of low demand, it is advisable to provide competitive pricing and enhanced accessibility to recognized world heritage places, with competitive lodging rates. It is recommended to develop promotional packages for hotels and tourist sites that offer competitive rates, catering to diverse age and income demographics of tourists. Additionally, adopting a focused approach to enhance service provision for segmented tourists would be advantageous in achieving greater effectiveness. The primary objective should be to provide optimal services in order to enhance tourist happiness, with a special emphasis on the hospitality sector, where the influence of "word of mouth" is substantial. Hotels and tour operators should provide professional hospitality services, while the hospitality business should undergo frequent assessments and receive guidance to enhance service quality.

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