

Factors Affecting Chinese Tourists Choosing Thailand as the Destination in the Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This research aimed to study how social media, perceived value, and costs shape Chinese tourists' travel behaviors and destination choices, especially in the post-COVID-19 context. The sample consisted of 490 Chinese independent tourists with prior travel experience in Thailand. They were selected by a stratified sampling approach focusing on seven major regions in China, to gather diverse insights. The instrument for collecting data was Sojump (The questionnaire tool). Analysis of data by reliability and validity analysis confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling. The research results were found as follows: social media significantly influences tourists' perceptions and choices, with platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin (China TikTok) playing a central role. 2) The perceived value and costs were found to be crucial determinants in shaping travel decisions. 3) The study identified subjective norms, cultural familiarity, and value for money as influential factors in attracting Chinese tourists to Thailand.

Keywords: Chinese tourists; post-COVID-19 tourism; destination choice; social media; perceived value; travel behaviour

Introduction

The global tourism industry has undergone a profound transformation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Abbas et al., 2021). The pandemic reshaped international travel, influencing tourists' preferences and behaviors worldwide (Mirzaei et al., 2023). Among the key players in the tourism market are Chinese tourists, who, before the pandemic, represented the world's largest outbound tourism group. This rise in international travel was driven by China's rapid economic growth and improved living standards. Thailand, with its rich cultural heritage, scenic beauty, and warm hospitality, became a favored destination for Chinese tourists (Li et al., 2021). However, the pandemic introduced new uncertainties, necessitating a re-evaluation of the factors that influence Chinese tourists' choices in the post-COVID-19 era.

Chinese outbound tourism has evolved significantly since the 1980s, growing especially after China entered into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Liberalized policies facilitated international travel, leading to an impressive 154.63 million outbound tourists from China by 2019. Thailand has historically been a key destination for these travelers, thanks to its favorable climate, diverse cultural experiences, and well-developed infrastructure. Independent Chinese travelers, in particular, have become a crucial part of Thailand's tourism revenue. (Nyaupane et al., 2015).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global tourism. Strict travel restrictions in China and worldwide led to a dramatic drop in outbound tourism, significantly affecting Thailand's tourism industry. In response to these changes, this study aims to 1) identify the factors influencing Chinese tourists' post-pandemic travel decisions to Thailand, and 2) develop a structural equation model to explore the relationships between these factors. Understanding these dynamics will help tourism stakeholders in Thailand adapt their strategies to meet the changing preferences of Chinese tourists.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate and identify factors affecting Chinese tourists' travel behavior and destination choices, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context.
2. To construct and evaluate a structural equation model that explains the relationships among factors affecting choosing Thailand as a travel destination.

Scope of Research

Content of the study: Through the verification factor analysis and the establishment of a structural equation model for tourists who have travel experience in Thailand from 7 regions of China, to investigate how social media, perceived value, and costs shape Chinese tourists' travel behaviors and destination choices, especially in the post-COVID-19 context.

Population and Sample: 490 Chinese independent tourists with prior travel experience in Thailand on seven major regions in China

Area: Seven major regions in China

Time: October 2022 – December 2023

Literature Review

Theoretical Approach

Understanding the factors influencing Chinese tourists' post-COVID-19 choice of Thailand requires a blend of theoretical perspectives. Rational Action Theory suggests that behavior is driven by rational, profit-seeking motives, where attitudes, subjective norms, and intentions influence actions. Tourists assess the benefits of a destination and conform to social pressures, impacting their travel decisions. (Chang et al., 2022).

Perceived Value Theory emphasizes the cost-benefit analysis of a destination. Tourists evaluate emotional, economic, and utilitarian benefits, balancing perceived gains and losses to guide decision-making. (Mencarelli & Riviere, 2015). This theory highlights the importance of understanding how tourists perceive the value of travel experiences.

Cultivation Theory focuses on the influence of media in shaping tourists' perceptions. Social media platforms play a critical role in creating destination images, which can shape expectations and impact destination choices. Media exposure cultivates specific perceptions that influence tourists' decisions.

Finally, the Tourism Decision-Making Process Model integrates external stimuli like marketing, personal desires, and destination characteristics to explain how travelers choose destinations. This multi-staged process involves complex interactions between individual preferences and external factors. (McCabe et al., 2016).

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the key factors influencing Chinese tourists' destination choices in the post-pandemic era.

Hypothesis development

The role of social media in shaping consumer psychology is central to Cultivation Theory, which posits that media exposure gradually influences individuals' values and perceptions. (Zafar et al., 2021). In tourism, social media plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of destinations, making it a significant factor in the digital age. Social network activities enhance the visibility and value of tourism through user interaction and co-creation, influencing tourist participation. Therefore, the study proposes:

H1: Social media positively affects perceived value.

In line with Consumer Value Theory, social media also impacts perceived costs (Lin et al., 2020). Through social media, tourists gain tourism-related knowledge, which helps them minimize perceived costs, such as time and financial expenditures. Thus, social comparison on these platforms can improve awareness and reduce perceived costs. Therefore:

H2: Social media negatively affects perceived cost.

Social media further shapes tourists' destination choices, especially by influencing perceptions of travel risks and benefits. Previous studies show that social media can shape destination preferences by providing detailed information that reduces uncertainty (Liao, 2023). Therefore:

H3: Social media positively affects the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Consumer Value Theory emphasizes that perceived value is a key driver of tourism decision-making (Yang et al., 2021). When tourists perceive a high value in a destination, they are more likely to choose it. This relationship has been confirmed across different tourism markets, including religious tourism, where perceived value significantly influences destination choice. Hence:

H4: Perceived value positively affects the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Destination selection involves uncertainty, as tourists must assess whether a location can meet their needs without complete information. Decision-making theory suggests that perceived costs, including financial and psychological risks, negatively impact destination choices (Liu et al., 2016). Thus:

H5: Perceived cost negatively affects the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Path-target theory underscores the importance of destination image in shaping tourists' perceived value (Yu & Sheng, 2020). A positive destination image enhances the perceived value of the experience, as tourists associate the destination with knowledge enrichment and relaxation. Thus:

H6: The image of Thailand as a tourism destination positively affects perceived value.

Destination image also plays a role in reducing perceived costs. Tourists who hold a favorable image of a destination are less likely to perceive high costs related to travel, such as transportation and accommodation (Chebli et al., 2020). Therefore:

H7: The image of Thailand as a tourism destination negatively affects perceived cost.

A positive image of Thailand has been shown to directly influence tourists' decisions, with studies highlighting that the appeal of Thailand's natural and cultural attractions significantly impacts tourists' destination choice (Li et al., 2021). Hence:

H8: The image of Thailand as a tourism destination positively affects the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Rational Behavior Theory emphasizes the role of Subjective Norms—the influence of social groups—on individual decisions (Kashif et al., 2018). In tourism, travelers' choices are often influenced by their social environment, including recommendations from family, friends, and online communities. Hence:

H9: Subjective norms positively affect perceived value.

Subjective norms also influence perceived costs, as social pressure can affect how tourists perceive the expenses associated with a destination. For instance, social approval can reduce the perceived financial or psychological cost of travel (Cohen et al., 2014). Thus:

H10: Subjective norms negatively affect perceived cost.

Subjective norms also directly impact destination choices, as individuals tend to conform to the preferences of their social groups. This effect has been demonstrated in studies on both online travel bookings and revisiting destinations (Manosuthi et al., 2020). Therefore:

H11: Subjective norms positively affect the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Social media influences tourist behavior not only directly but also through perceived value. Tourists who perceive high value in a destination, based on social media content, are more likely to choose that destination (Sheth, 2020). Hence:

H12: Perceived value mediates the relationship between social media and the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Similarly, social media affects perceived costs, which in turn influence destination choice. Tourists who engage with social media may find cost-related information that helps them minimize travel expenses (Fan et al., 2019). Thus:

H13: Perceived cost mediates the relationship between social media and the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Destination image affects tourist decisions through perceived value. A favorable image can enhance tourists' perceived value of the destination, leading to a greater likelihood of choosing it (Chen et al., 2023). Therefore:

H14: Perceived value mediates the relationship between the image of Thailand as a tourism destination and the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Similarly, the image of a destination can influence perceived costs. Tourists with a positive perception of a destination are more willing to overlook potential costs, thus enhancing the likelihood of choosing that destination (Durán–Román et al., 2021). Hence:

H15: Perceived cost mediates the relationship between the image of Thailand as a tourism destination and the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Subjective norms also impact tourists' choices through perceived value. Tourists influenced by social norms may perceive greater value in a destination, thus increasing the likelihood of choosing it (Adongo et al., 2018). Therefore:

H16: Perceived value mediates the relationship between subjective norms and the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Finally, subjective norms affect perceived costs. Tourists who conform to social norms may perceive fewer costs associated with a destination, leading to a higher probability of choosing it (Palacios–Florencio et al., 2021). Thus:

H17: Perceived cost mediates the relationship between subjective norms and the choice of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Research Methodology

The research methodology of this study involved an online survey targeting Chinese tourists who had independently traveled to Thailand. The survey was distributed via WeChat, a popular social media platform, and aimed to collect data from over 800 participants. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that respondents had relevant travel experience, resulting in 490 valid responses.

The online questionnaire was based on well-established scales from previous tourism studies. To capture the range of respondents' attitudes and perceptions, the questionnaire employed a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 7 represented "strongly agree." This method allowed for a detailed measurement of respondents' views, contributing to more nuanced data analysis.

Building on the framework by Magno and Cassia (2018), the study examined five key dimensions of social media's impact on tourism. These included the trustworthiness of information about Thai tourism, the richness and quality of that information, the users' proficiency in using social media to gather information, the novelty of post-COVID-19 tourism content, and the role of social media in helping tourists acquire comprehensive travel information.

In addition, the study assessed the Image of Thailand as a Tourism Destination (ITTD). Based on a framework from Thaothampitak et al. (2023), the ITTD encapsulates eight attributes: Thailand's comfortable weather, natural beauty, historical and cultural landscapes, the quality of accommodations, local cuisine, nightlife, diverse tourism projects, and the friendliness of residents.

The concept of Subjective Norms was also examined, referring to the perceived social influence tourists receive from friends, family, and social media. This included aspects such as positive experiences shared by others, tourism promotion in online content, and alignment with peer opinions.

Perceived Value, based on the work of Meeprom and Silanoi (2020), was measured through eight dimensions, including opportunities for relaxation, nature experiences, and learning about Thai culture. Meanwhile, Perceived Cost, drawing on Boonsiritoromachai and Phonthanukitithaworn (2019), evaluated financial, psychological, and time-related expenses associated with travel to Thailand.

Finally, the study assessed the Choice of Thailand as a Tourism Destination (CTTD), examining factors like intent to travel, willingness to recommend Thailand, and enthusiasm for

sharing travel experiences. These were measured through five dimensions, influenced by perceived costs and value.

The data were analyzed using reliability and validity tests, confirmatory factor analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM) via SPSS and AMOS software, ensuring robust and reliable results.

Research Results

Objective 1. The results showed that the Reliability test was up to standard

Reliability refers to the consistency of the results obtained when the same object is repeatedly measured with the same method. The reliability coefficient of the total scale should be above 0.8, and 0.7–0.8 is acceptable. Table 1 shows that Cronbach's Alpha=0.981 (>0.9), and the total scale has excellent reliability.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.981	.981	41

Objective 2. The results showed that Confirmatory factor analysis was up to standard

This study used Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model, focusing on Combined Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to evaluate convergent validity. CR values above 0.70 and AVE values exceeding 0.50 are considered indicators of strong convergent validity. The results showed that the CR values for Social Media (SM), Image of Thailand as a Tourism Destination (ITTD), Subjective Norm (SN), Perceived Value (PV), Perceived Cost (PC), and Choosing Thailand as the Tourism Destination (CTTD) were all above 0.70, ranging from 0.879 to 0.919, confirming the model's strong construct reliability. Additionally, all AVE values surpassed 0.50, except for SN, which, despite this, still exhibited an acceptable level of reliability based on its CR score.

Discriminant validity was also assessed to ensure that each construct was distinct from the others. This was confirmed by comparing the square root of each construct's AVE to its correlations with other constructs. The results showed that the square root of AVE for all variables was greater

than the correlations, indicating good discriminant validity. This confirms that each construct is uniquely represented, reinforcing the robustness of the measurement model.

Table 2 Convergence Validity (After deleting the question)

Latent variables	Factor loading	CR	AVE
SM	0.757		
	0.771		
	0.795	0.890	0.617
	0.82		
	0.783		
ITTD	0.805		
	0.791		
	0.842		
	0.767	0.926	0.641
	0.812		
SN	0.828		
	0.753		
	0.759		
	0.813		
	0.794	0.897	0.592
PV	0.724		
	0.797		
	0.725		
	0.791		
	0.729		
PC	0.741		
	0.678	0.907	0.583
	0.787		
	0.808		
	0.8		
CTTD	0.757		
	0.823		
	0.758	0.897	0.593
	0.807		
	0.76		
	0.712		
	0.803		
	0.763		
	0.795	0.892	0.622
	0.762		
	0.819		

Table 3 Distinguish between validity tests (After deleting the question)

Latent variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
SM	0.785					
ITTD	0.527	0.801				
SN	0.568	0.494	0.769			
PV	0.571	0.583	0.628	0.764		
PC	0.485	0.613	0.543	0.549	0.770	
CTTD	0.624	0.616	0.632	0.740	0.640	0.789

Note: The diagonal line is the square root of the corresponding dimension AVE

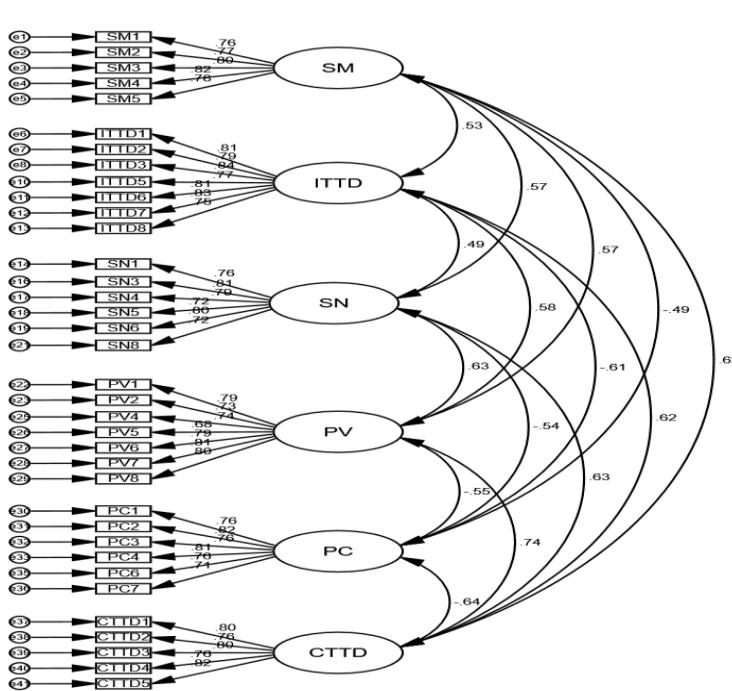


Figure 1. The revised confirmatory factor analysis diagram

The refinement of the confirmatory factor analysis model, as shown in Table 4, indicates improved fit indices after removing certain items. The revised model has a χ^2/df ratio of 1.861, well below the recommended threshold of 3, and an RMSEA value of 0.040, significantly lower than the 0.08 benchmark. Additionally, the AGFI stands at 0.887, exceeding the 0.85 standard. Other indices, such as GFI, NFI, TLI, and CFI, all surpass the 0.9 benchmark, indicating a better model fit. The AVE for Subjective Norm (SN) increased to 0.592, with the AVE range for all variables between

0.583 and 0.641, surpassing the 0.5 threshold. CR values between 0.890 and 0.926 confirm reliable convergent validity.

The discriminant validity analysis shows that the correlation coefficients between factors are less than the square root of their respective AVEs, affirming clear distinctions among the six factors. However, despite these improvements, some indices, such as RMSEA (0.054) and AGFI (0.838), still fall short of expectations. To address this, a review of the Modification Indices (MI) revealed high residual values, leading to the removal of five items (ITTD4, SN2, SN7, PV3, and PC5) to further optimize the model fit, as shown in Figure 1.

Table 3 Model fitting of confirmatory factor analysis

Index	χ^2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI
standards	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.85	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Results	Original	2.550	0.054	0.856	0.838	0.867	0.908
	Revised	1.861	0.040	0.902	0.887	0.918	0.960

Objective 3. The results showed that Structural equation model of this study has a high degree of fit

After the establishment of the structural equation model, through the model fitting calculation of the software, the estimated value of the detection path, the standardized path coefficient, the standard error S.E., C.R. value and the significance P value are obtained. In general, if the decision value C.R. is greater than 1.96, then the p value is less than 0.05, it can be considered that the path coefficient can pass the significance test within the 95% confidence interval, indicating that the corresponding path hypothesis of the preset model is valid; Otherwise, the hypothesis is untenable. The test results show that:

SM has a significant positive impact on PV ($\beta = 0.208$, $p < 0.001$)

ITTD has a significant positive impact on PV ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$)

SN has a significant positive impact on PV ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$)

SM has a significant negative impact on PC ($\beta = 0.107$, $p < 0.05$)

ITTD has a significant negative impact on PC ($\beta = 0.422$, $p < 0.001$)

SN has a significant negative impact on PC ($\beta = 0.279$, $p < 0.001$)

SM has a significant positive impact on CTTD ($\beta = 0.174$, $p < 0.001$)

ITTD has a significant positive impact on CTTD ($\beta = 0.108$, $p < 0.05$)

SN has a significant positive impact on CTTD ($\beta = 0.122$, $p < 0.05$)

PV has a significant positive impact on CTTD ($\beta = 0.386$, $p < 0.001$)

PC has a significant negative impact on CTTD ($\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$)

Table 4 Path analysis of structural equation model

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	β	S.E.	C.R.	P
H1	SM→PV	0.220	0.208	0.053	4.184	***
H2	ITTD→PV	0.285	0.296	0.044	6.413	***
H3	SN→PV	0.400	0.368	0.055	7.314	***
H4	SM→PC	-0.111	-0.107	0.053	-2.078	0.038
H5	ITTD→PC	-0.397	-0.422	0.048	-8.306	***
H6	SN→PC	-0.296	-0.279	0.055	-5.406	***
H7	SM→CTTD	0.180	0.174	0.047	3.843	***
H8	ITTD→CTTD	0.101	0.108	0.044	2.303	0.021
H9	SN→CTTD	0.128	0.122	0.051	2.511	0.012
H10	PV→CTTD	0.374	0.386	0.050	7.469	***
H11	PC→CTTD	-0.215	-0.217	0.046	-4.635	***

Table 5 A bootstrap test for the mediation effect

Indirect path	Effects	Std. E	Bias-Corrected	
			95%CI	
SM→PV→CTTD	0.080	0.023	0.041	0.132
SM→PC→CTTD	0.023	0.015	0.001	0.059
ITTD→PV→CTTD	0.114	0.025	0.071	0.169
ITTD→PC→CTTD	0.092	0.023	0.050	0.141
SN→PV→CTTD	0.142	0.028	0.092	0.203
SN→PC→CTTD	0.060	0.018	0.030	0.102

The mediation analysis results show significant mediation effects in multiple paths. For the "SM → PV → CTTD" path, the 95% confidence interval [0.041, 0.132] excludes 0, confirming that perceived value (PV) significantly mediates the relationship between social media (SM) and choosing Thailand as a tourism destination (CTTD), with an effect value of 0.08, supporting H12.

In the "SM → PC → CTTD" path, the 95% confidence interval [0.001, 0.059] also excludes 0, indicating that perceived cost (PC) significantly mediates this relationship, with an effect value of 0.023, supporting H13.

Similarly, in the "ITTD → PV → CTTD" path, the 95% confidence interval [0.071, 0.169] confirms PV's significant mediation effect between ITTD and CTTD, with an effect value of 0.114, supporting H14.

The "ITTD → PC → CTTD" path shows a 95% confidence interval of [0.050, 0.141], with an effect value of 0.092, supporting H15.

For the "SN → PV → CTTD" path, the 95% interval [0.092, 0.203] confirms PV's mediation with an effect value of 0.142, supporting H16.

Lastly, the "SN → PC → CTTD" path has a 95% interval [0.03, 0.102], supporting H17 with an effect value of 0.06. These analyses clarify the mediating roles of PV and PC in Chinese tourists' travel decisions post-COVID-19.

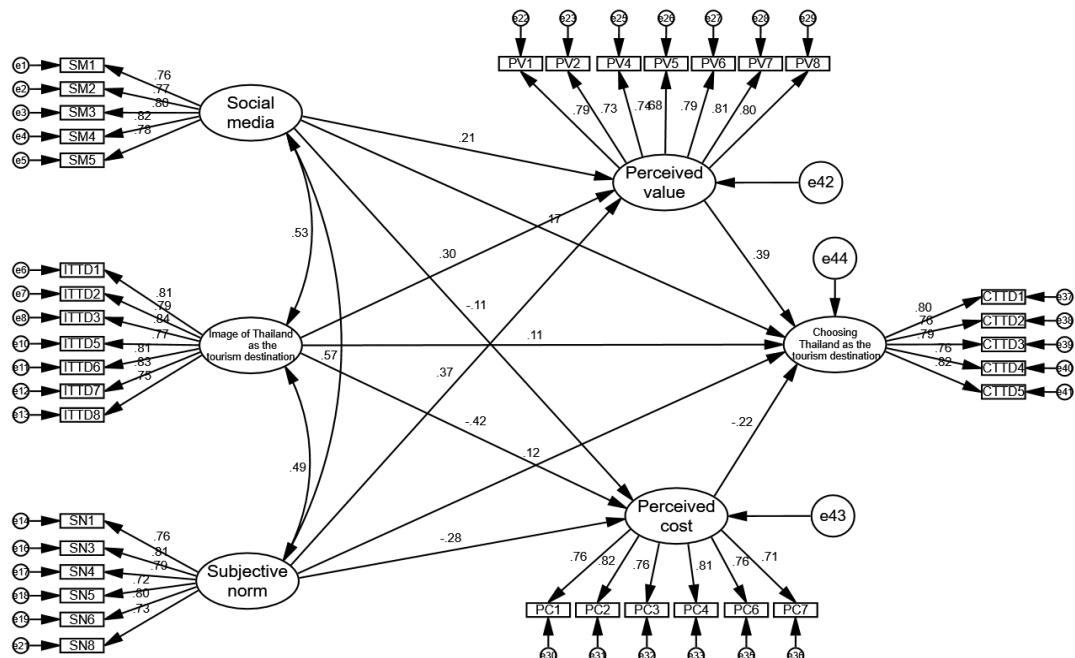


Figure 2 The structural equation model of Chinese tourists traveling to Thailand in the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study presents an intricate examination of the influences on Chinese tourists' decision-making processes for traveling to Thailand. It elucidates the significant positive impact of Social Media(SM), the Image of Thailand as a Tourism Destination (ITTD), and Subjective Norm (SN) on Perceived Value (PV), and their negative impact on Perceived Cost (PC). Notably, SM, ITTD, and SN positively influence Choosing Thailand as the Tourism Destination (CTTD), whereas PV and PC have a positive and negative impact on CTTD, respectively. The path analysis of the structural equation model demonstrates these relationships with significant β values and p-values, confirming the hypotheses (H1–H11).

The mediation effect analysis further reveals the indirect impacts between these variables. For instance, PV and PC mediate the relationship between SM and CTTD, ITTD and CTTD, and SN and CTTD, as shown by the significant effect values and the 95% confidence intervals excluding zero in the bootstrap test. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing Chinese tourists' travel decisions to Thailand.

Compared to previous studies (Cohen et al., 2014; Fan et al., 2023), this research advances the understanding of Chinese tourists' travel behavior by integrating diverse theoretical perspectives such as the rational behavior theory and consumption value theory within the context of tourism decision-making. The study innovates by quantitatively assessing the direct and mediating effects of SM, ITTD, SN, PV, and PC on CTTD, offering a more comprehensive model than traditionally seen in tourism research.

This research enriches the field by highlighting the critical role of social media in shaping tourist perceptions and decisions, a factor that has gained prominence in the digital era but has not been extensively quantified in prior studies. (Ahmad et al., 2023). Additionally, the study uniquely demonstrates the mediation roles of PV and PC, illustrating how perceived value and costs not only directly influence tourists' destination choices but also mediate the effects of social media, destination image, and subjective norms.

Practical Significance

The findings of this study offer valuable practical implications for tourism marketing strategies targeting Chinese travelers. Given the significant role of social media in influencing travel decisions,

Thai tourism operators should prioritize enhancing their presence on platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. Leveraging social media influencers and key opinion leaders (KOLs) can be an effective way to market Thailand as an appealing destination. As Chinese tourists are value-conscious, tourism products and services need to strike a balance between quality and affordability. Offering tailored packages that highlight Thailand's cultural experiences, such as visits to temples, beaches, and national parks, along with value-for-money promotions and discounts, can attract more visitors.

This research also underscores the influence of subjective norms on travel decisions. Emphasizing Thailand's safety, cleanliness, and cultural familiarity can resonate well with Chinese tourists. Tourism operators should enhance customer experiences through personalized services and by reducing perceived costs, such as visa fees and accommodation. Building online communities where tourists can share experiences can also foster a sense of connection and improve their overall satisfaction.

By addressing the key factors influencing travel choices, Thai tourism operators can enhance their competitive edge. Effective use of social media for destination marketing, along with value-driven tourism products, can help differentiate Thailand from other destinations. Lowering perceived costs, such as through visa facilitation and affordable transportation, can also make Thailand more attractive. Tapping into subjective norms by promoting positive testimonials and leveraging cultural similarities can further strengthen Thailand's appeal.

For policymakers, these insights can guide tourism development and promotion strategies. By analyzing social media engagement and understanding perceived value and costs, policies can be shaped to enhance Thailand's image as a culturally rich, safe, and sustainable destination. Sustainable tourism practices and strategic investments in infrastructure can further solidify Thailand's position as a leading destination for Chinese tourists.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the factors influencing Chinese tourists' decisions to travel to Thailand. It highlights the crucial role of social media platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin in shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviors. The research emphasizes that Chinese tourists prioritize value for money, cultural familiarity, safety, and unique experiences when choosing a

destination. Additionally, subjective norms, such as social approval and cultural similarities, significantly influence their travel decisions. These findings provide practical guidance for Thai tourism operators and policymakers to tailor their marketing strategies and offerings to meet the preferences of Chinese tourists.

However, the study has limitations. The sample was limited to Chinese tourists with independent travel experience in Thailand, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces potential biases. Future research should aim to expand the sample size, include more diverse groups of tourists, and consider objective data to mitigate biases. Exploring cultural differences and conducting comparative studies across Asian countries would provide a broader understanding of Chinese tourists' evolving preferences. Addressing these limitations will enhance the applicability of the findings and help refine tourism strategies in the future.

Suggestions

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations affect the generalizability and applicability of its findings. One key limitation is the sample size, which focuses on Chinese tourists with independent travel experience in Thailand. This selective sampling, limited to seven major regions in China, may not reflect the broader Chinese tourist population, particularly those who have not visited Thailand or engaged in different types of tourism. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which is susceptible to biases such as social desirability, potentially skewing the accuracy of participants' responses. Additionally, cultural differences between Chinese and Thai tourists could influence the perception and interaction with tourism products, which may not be fully captured in this study. The research also reflects a specific point in time, potentially missing the rapidly shifting nature of tourism trends driven by external factors.

Future research should broaden the sample to include a wider range of Chinese tourists, such as those who have not visited Thailand or who prefer other forms of tourism, to improve the representativeness of the findings. Incorporating objective data alongside self-reported responses could reduce bias and offer a more accurate view of tourist behaviors. Cross-cultural analyses would help explore how cultural differences between China and Thailand shape travel decisions, while longitudinal studies could track changes in tourist preferences over time. Comparative studies across

Asian countries would also provide a broader understanding of the regional tourism landscape and Thailand's competitive position.

New Knowledge

This study constructs an empirically validated and integrated framework to reveal the factors influencing Chinese tourists' decisions to visit Thailand in the post-COVID-19 era. The findings demonstrate that social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin significantly enhance perceived value while reducing perceived costs, ultimately promoting destination choice. Similarly, destination image plays a dual role in improving perceived value and alleviating travel-related concerns, such as time, financial, and psychological costs. Moreover, subjective norms, influenced by recommendations from family, friends, and online communities, strengthen perceived value and reduce perceived costs, further driving tourists' travel decisions.

The study also highlights the critical mediating mechanisms of perceived value and perceived costs. Perceived value serves as a positive mediator, amplifying the effects of social media, destination image, and subjective norms on destination choice, whereas perceived costs act as a negative mediator by diminishing tourists' likelihood of choosing Thailand. These interrelationships were quantified and validated through a structural equation model (SEM), as detailed in Table 6, which presents the path coefficients, significance levels, and overall effects of each relationship.

By integrating social and digital dynamics with traditional tourism behavior theories, this research advances the understanding of post-pandemic tourism decision-making. It underscores the importance of addressing perceived value and perceived costs as central mechanisms through which external factors influence destination selection. This comprehensive framework bridges critical gaps in the existing literature and provides actionable insights for tourism marketers and policymakers in Thailand to enhance marketing strategies, improve value-driven experiences, and address tourists' travel concerns in the post-pandemic context.

Table 6 Key Relationships and Contributions to New Knowledge in Post-Pandemic Tourism Decision-Making

Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	Significance (p-value)	Effect
Social Media → Perceived Value	0.208	*** (p < 0.001)	Enhances tourists' perceived value.
Social Media → Perceived Cost	-0.107	* (p < 0.05)	Reduces tourists' perceived costs.
Social Media → Destination Choice	0.174	*** (p < 0.001)	Promotes Thailand as a destination.
Destination Image → Perceived Value	0.296	*** (p < 0.001)	Improves perceived value.
Destination Image → Perceived Cost	-0.422	*** (p < 0.001)	Mitigates travel-related concerns.
Destination Image → Destination Choice	0.108	* (p < 0.05)	Directly enhances destination preference.
Subjective Norms → Perceived Value	0.368	*** (p < 0.001)	Strengthens perceived value.
Subjective Norms → Perceived Cost	-0.279	*** (p < 0.001)	Reduces perceived costs.
Subjective Norms → Destination Choice	0.122	* (p < 0.05)	Directly encourages destination choice.
Perceived Value → Destination Choice	0.386	*** (p < 0.001)	Strong positive influence on choice.
Perceived Cost → Destination Choice	-0.217	*** (p < 0.001)	Diminishes the likelihood of choice.

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