


NEW NORMAL TOURISM BEHAVIOR OF FREE INDEPENDENT TRAVELERS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history:</p> <p>Received 14 November 2022</p> <p>Accepted 20 January 2023</p>	<p>Purpose: This research intended to investigate the motivation and behavior of free independent travelers (FITs) who traveled to Southern Thailand in the Covid-19 pandemic.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p> <p>Tourist Behavior; New Normal Tourism (NNT); COVID-19; Free Independent Travelers (FITs).</p>	<p>Theoretical framework: Studies on tourist motivation and behavior would provide more insightful implications and Covid-19 safeguards for tourism businesses especially in Southern Thailand – a dominant destination for domestic tourism demand.</p> <p>Design/methodology/approach: Data was collected from 400 domestic FITs using a questionnaire survey, processed in SPSS software, and analyzed with descriptive statistics, Chi-square, and One-way ANOVA.</p> <p>Findings: The highest level of overall pull and push motivations of domestic FITs while traveling to Southern Thailand. The highest level of pull motivation identified in this study was a promotional scheme, called “WE TRAVEL TOGETHER” the government-subsidized 40% of accommodation expenses to increase tourism demand.</p>
	<p>Research, Practical & Social implications: Comparative responses to SHA Plus standard between domestic and international tourists using both qualitative and quantitative data from all stakeholders involved would provide a variety of insightful and beneficial perspectives on NNT in the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Originality/value: CCSA should pay more attention on this particular behavior of tourists which might easily spread the disease to others. Everyone should be more aware of this risk and show their greater responsible practice in society.</p> <p>Doi: https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2023.v8i1.639</p>

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NOVO COMPORTAMENTO TURÍSTICO NORMAL DE VIAJANTES LIVRES E INDEPENDENTES NA PANDEMIA DA COVID-19

RESUMO

Objetivo: Esta pesquisa pretendeu investigar a motivação e o comportamento dos viajantes livres independentes (FITs) que viajaram para o sul da Tailândia na pandemia de Covid-19.

Estrutura teórica: Estudos sobre a motivação e comportamento dos turistas proporcionariam implicações mais perspicazes e salvaguardas Covid-19 para empresas de turismo, especialmente no sul da Tailândia - um destino dominante para a demanda do turismo doméstico.

Design/metodologia/abordagem: Os dados foram coletados de 400 FITs domésticos usando uma pesquisa por questionário, processados no software SPSS, e analisados com estatísticas descritivas, Qui-quadrado, e ANOVA unidirecional.

Descobertas: O nível mais alto de motivação para puxar e empurrar dos FITs domésticos enquanto se viaja para o sul da Tailândia. O nível mais alto de motivação para puxar identificado neste estudo foi um esquema promocional, chamado "NÓS VIAJAMOS JUNTO" o governo subsidiou 40% das despesas de hospedagem para aumentar a demanda turística.

Pesquisa, implicações práticas e sociais: Respostas comparativas ao padrão SHA Plus entre turistas nacionais e internacionais usando dados qualitativos e quantitativos de todas as partes interessadas envolvidas forneceriam uma variedade de perspectivas perspicazes e benéficas sobre a NNT na pandemia de Covid-19.

Originalidade/valor: A CCSA deveria prestar mais atenção a este comportamento particular dos turistas que poderiam facilmente propagar a doença para outros. Todos deveriam estar mais conscientes deste risco e mostrar sua prática mais responsável na sociedade.

Palavras-chave: Comportamento do Turista, Novo Turismo Normal (NNT), COVID-19, Viajantes Independentes Livres (FITs).

NUEVO COMPORTAMIENTO TURÍSTICO NORMAL DE LOS VIAJEROS INDEPENDIENTES LIBRES EN LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

Propósito: Esta investigación se propuso investigar la motivación y el comportamiento de los viajeros independientes libres (FIT) que viajaron al sur de Tailandia en la pandemia de Covid-19.

Marco teórico: Los estudios sobre la motivación y el comportamiento de los turistas proporcionarían implicaciones más perspicaces y salvaguardias contra Covid-19 para las empresas turísticas, especialmente en el sur de Tailandia, un destino dominante para la demanda turística nacional.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Se recogieron datos de 400 turistas nacionales mediante un cuestionario, se procesaron con el programa informático SPSS y se analizaron mediante estadística descriptiva, Chi-cuadrado y ANOVA unidireccional.

Resultados: El nivel más alto de motivaciones generales de atracción y empuje de los FIT nacionales durante sus viajes al sur de Tailandia. El mayor nivel de motivación de atracción identificado en este estudio fue un plan promocional, llamado "WE TRAVEL TOGETHER" (VIAJEMOS JUNTOS), que subvenciona el 40% de los gastos de alojamiento para aumentar la demanda turística.

Investigación, implicaciones prácticas y sociales: La comparación de las respuestas a la norma SHA Plus entre turistas nacionales e internacionales utilizando datos cualitativos y cuantitativos de todas las partes implicadas proporcionaría una variedad de perspectivas esclarecedoras y beneficiosas sobre el NNT en la pandemia de Covid-19.

Originalidad/valor: La CCSA debería prestar más atención a este comportamiento concreto de los turistas, que podría propagar fácilmente la enfermedad a otras personas. Todo el mundo debería ser más consciente de este riesgo y mostrar una mayor práctica responsable en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: Comportamiento Turístico, Nuevo Turismo Normal (NNT), COVID-19, Viajeros Independientes Libres (FITs).

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has seriously impacted on tourism industry worldwide due to forbidden or restriction on mobility of international travelers since 2020 (Sung et al., 2021). The behavior of Thailand's domestic tourists has also changed into a "New Normal Tourism (NNT)", which concerned primarily on safety and preventive principles to safeguard themselves from Covid-19 infection. A Thai tourists' New Normal behavior often consisted of three principles. Firstly, they intended to travel domestically as perceiving a higher risk of Covid-19 infection for outbound tourism. Secondly, they preferred to take a short haul and self-drive route as perceiving a better prevention of Covid-19 infection. Finally, they attempted to become free and independent travelers traveling to a less-crowded destination. The tourism industry has played significant role in Thai economy (Laparojkit and Sutipun, 2021). In addition to direct revenue generated from both international and domestic tourists' spending, an increased value in capital investment and human capital has indirectly, stimulusly and positively influenced other industrial sectors (Srisathan and Naruetharadhol, 2022; Rogerson, 2021). Recently, Tourism authority of Thailand reported that the planning of Thai tourist behaviors depended on economic and social situations which significantly impacted on frequency and distance of their travel, whereas the destinations depended on their justification of social circumstances, timely and dynamically reinforced by social medias and networks. Accordingly, Sun et al. (2022) found that searching for online information about tourism helped tourists prepared their trips has become easy and convenient. Therefore, free and independent travelers (FIT) have had an opportunity to dramatically increase (Maneze and Pacheco, 2018; Kim and Yu, 2017). In Thailand, domestic tourists seemed to be well-prepared and collaborative in following the instructions on prevention of Covid-19 infection (Kruger and Viljoen, 2021). They regularly checked body temperature, registred at tourist attractions, wore face mask, kept distance at least one meter from others, and always washed hands with soap or alcohol gel. Online payment or eWallet was optionally substituted for cash payment (Daragmeh et al., 2021). They also kept themselves updated on the Covid-19 news and situations. Hence, domestic tourism in Thailand has become a dominant source of tourism revenue – increasing from 36% to 60% in the past two years. In addition, the tourism vaccine passport scheme recently employed in several countries was implemented in Thailand. It had been an administrative tool in filtering and accommodating domestic and inbound tourists, which positively impacted on economic activities (Sotis et al., 2021). Thai government has also lauched another economic scheme, called "WE TRAVEL TOGETHER", to boost a domestic tourism demand, especially in the Covid-19 endemic. For this tourism promotional scheme, the government would partially

subsidize domestic tourists' expenses i.e. accommodation, transportation and meals (Arwatchanakarn et al., 2021). It seemed despite the fact that Thailand has well planned and implemented schemes to boost a domestic tourism demand in the Covid-19 pandemic, further studies on tourist motivation and behavior would provide more insightful implications and Covid-19 safeguards for tourism businesses especially in Southern Thailand – a dominant destination for domestic tourism demand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Demography and Personal Information

Characteristics of demography revealed personal information that influenced their consuming behaviors, a basis for market segmentation identifying that different individuals would behave differently based on their varying preference and perceived information (Eime et al., 2018). Demography, as a basis for classification of individual characteristics, helped identify groups of people on age, gender, family size, revenue, education, occupation, life cycle, marital status, religion, ethnicity, nationality and social status (Kanavakis et al., 2016). Demographic information, as explained in different groups of people, also helped identify similar consuming behaviors from the same group of people. Hence, people classified into a similar hierarchy of social status would have a similar response to a similar content of news and interpersonal difference theory (Kim and Kim, 2020). Different behaviors of people have been driven by external forces, believing that people with different demographic characteristics would have different behaviors (Kye et al., 2014).

Free Independent Travel (FIT)

FIT referred to tourism that tourists or free independent travellers (FITs) made a decision to travel on their own (Han et al., 2018). FIT was interpreted differently – including (i) an implied category to the tourists who traveled individually; and (ii) the tourists who either traveled individually or travelled with others (group), did not use scheduled services entirely offered by travel agencies and tour operators, or might use some of services from tour operators (Fieger et al., 2019; Yousaf et al., 2018). Finally, Wen and Huang (2019) revealed FIT as independent searching and travel to new destinations and attractions, FITs often relied on recommended guide books, maps and websites for their travel preparation, excluding services from travel companies. Also, Rebollo (2018) described that FITs referred to a category of tourists who managed the trips on their own. They relied primarily on tourism guidebooks to plan their trips, searched for useful information in advance, chose the most famous destinations,

and tended to having limited time and budget. Accordingly, Thongsawang (2021) concluded that FIT referred to FITs who preferred to travel on their own or with groups to their desired destinations, chose to freely travel without using scheduled services or programs offered by travel companies. They entirely planned and managed their own itineraries. However, they probably used some of services offered by travel companies for their convenience and flexibility.

Tourism Motivation and Behavior

Tourism motivation has been fundamental to tourism studies and tourism management (Lupu et al., 2021). Indeed, Fieger et al. (2019) argued further that motivation on travelling was the beginning of studies on tourist behaviors, which enabled to understand the processes of tourism. As such, the pattern of a varying travel behavior emerged from the processes of choosing destination significantly influenced by tourist motivation, demographic factor, and other economic and social variables. Kock et al. (2018) proposed that tourist motivation related to tourism activities and destinations could be divided into push and pull factors. Push factor revealed individual's internal forces or motives that stimulated their desire to travel. This process of decision making also depended on pull factor –attractiveness of the external factors which have stimulated or influenced the tourists to travel to the destination (Boonkaew et al., 2021).

New Normal Tourism in the Covid-19 Pandemic

New Normal Tourism (NNT) has become a new protocol of practical instructions for all tourism stakeholders involved in the Covid-19 pandemic and endemic (Joao, 2021; Brouder et al., 2020). Both domestic and international tourists looked forward to either traveling or re-visiting to a variety of destinations in Thailand. Hence, NNT was established in preventing the spreading of Covid-19 infection and ensuring Thailand was a safe destination for tourists (Nagai and Kurahashi, 2022). Indeed, NNT enhanced the procedures of tourism and healthy standards on cleanliness, sanitation and other possible factors to prevent the Covid-19 infection.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Population and sampling

Population for this research included domestic FITs traveling to Southern Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemic. With limited information during the Covid-19 pandemic, we could not identify an exact number of populations. As such, sampling was calculated based on

Cochran's (1977) formula at the level of 95% confidence (Ahmad and Halim, 2017). A minor justification was made, which enabled to include a total of 400 samplings.

Research Tool

Researchers used questionnaires to collect data from domestic FITs travelling to Southern Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemic. Questions were divided into 3 sections. The first section asked personal information using a check-list of gender, age, education, occupation, monthly income and marital status. The second section asked questions about their traveling behaviors. The last section included the rating-scale questions on tourism motivation, which were subdivided into the questions related to push and pull factors.

Data Analysis

After gathering the data required, researchers investigated the completion of each questionnaire before processing data analysis with SPSS statistic software. Researchers employed frequency, means, percentage and standard deviation to analyze descriptive results; and inferential statistics to investigate the relationships among personal factors, behaviors and motivation of domestic FITs traveling to Southern Thailand in the Covid-19 pandemic. Chi-square test was employed to investigate how personal factors related to behaviors of domestic FITs, while using T-test to investigate the relationship between tourism motivation and behaviors. The hypotheses of both results were tested using One-way ANOVA.

RESULTS

The gathered questionnaire results revealed that the majority of respondents were female, 36-40 years old, bachelor degree graduated, and self-employed or business owner with average of 10,000 – 20,000 Baht monthly income. Summary of data gathered for this study was described in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The summary of data gathered from 400 respondents.

No	Description of Respondents' Summary Data	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender		
	- Males	56	14.0
	- Females	344	86.0
2	Ages (years old)		
	- Below 25	69	17.3
	- 25-30	85	21.3
	- 31-35	89	22.3
	- 36-40	95	23.6
	- 41-45	56	14.0
	- More than 45	6	1.5
3	Education		
	- Below bachelor degree	106	26.5
	- Bachelor degree	288	72.0
	- Above bachelor degree	6	1.5
4	Occupation		
	- Students	63	15.8
	- Employees at private and state companies	93	23.2
	- Government officer	106	26.5
	- Business owner	112	28.0
	- General laborer	12	3.0
	- Others	14	3.5
5	Monthly Income (Thai Baht)		
	- Lower than 10,000	76	19.0
	- 10,000 – 20,000	123	30.8
	- 20,001 – 30,000	106	26.5
	- 30,001 – 40,000	50	12.5
	- 40,001 – 50,000	27	6.7
	- More than 50,000	18	4.5
6	Marital Status		
	- Single	151	37.8
	- Married	237	59.2
	- Divorce, separated	12	3.0
7	Time searching on information prior to traveling		
	- Less than 5 days	59	14.8
	- 6 – 10 days	215	53.8
	- 11 – 15 days	72	18.0
	- More than 15 days	54	13.5
8	Type of tourism destinations and activities		
	- Nature-based destinations and activities i.e. beach, waterfall, mountain, etc.	354	88.5
	- Cultural tourism i.e. archeological and historical sites, local lifestyles, traditions and festivals		
	- Adventurous activities i.e. rock climbing, trekking	19	4.8
	- Rural tourism i.e. homestay, farm stay, agrotourism, etc.	20	5.0
		7	1.8
9	Days of traveling		
	- 1 day trip (no overnight stay)	11	2.8
	- 2 – 4 days	275	68.8
	- 5 – 7 days	95	23.8
	- More than 7 days	19	4.8
10	Types of accommodation		
	- Hotel	263	65.8
	- Resort	108	27.0
	- Hostel	6	1.5
	- Guesthouse	4	1.0

	- Others	19	4.8
11	Payment methods		
	- Debit and credit cards (VISA, MASTER, JCB)	183	45.8
	- Internet banking / eWallet	198	49.5
	- Others	19	4.7
12	Covid-19 news and situation updated (choose more than 1)		
	- Mass communication i.e. TV and radio	302	75.5
	- Printed media i.e. newspaper, announcement	151	37.8
	- Social media platforms i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Line	334	83.5
13	Self-safeguard from Covid-19 (choose more than 1)		
	- Keeping physical distance from others	328	82.0
	- Wearing mask in public or less air-circulation areas	358	89.5
	- Avoiding less air-circulation area	234	58.5
	- Washing hands with soap and alcohol gel	343	85.5
	- Following instructions as required	374	93.5
	- Closing nose and mouth when coughing, sneezing	263	68.5

Source: the authors.

NNT behaviors of FITs during the covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand

Respondents mostly spent 6-10 days searching information in advance and preferred to travel to the destinations with nature-based attractions like beaches, waterfalls, and mountains. They often traveled for 2-4 days and stayed at hotels using internet banking or online payment method. They followed news and Covid-19 updated from online and social media i.e. facebook, instagram, twitter and line; and well-safeguarded from the spreading of Covid-19 infection. For examples, they strictly followed the instructions of Covid-19 preventive practices as required by attractions and service providers. They showed their vaccine passport or certified vaccination document before entering to the venues and using services.

Motivation of FITs during the covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand

Findings indicated that an overall motivation of FITs in Southern Thailand ranked at highest level. As considering the means of all factors, pull factors were identified at highest level, and followed by push factors. Looking at each of the push factors being identified at the highest level for motivation of domestic FITs in Southern Thailand, we found that escaping from Covid-19 related difficulties ranked highest and traveling to new destinations ranked second. Other push factors also ranked at highest level - consisting of desire for leisure at natural destinations and escape from crowded people. For motivation of domestic FITs ranked at high level, this study found that they travelled to and preferred to take photos at the destinations with aesthetic and natural surroundings, and followed by escaping from a busy and boring routine work or daily environment

Motivation of FITs in Southern Thailand also revealed the highest level for overall pull factors. After considering the means of respondents' results, the government scheme of "WE TRAVEL TOGETHER" by subsidizing up to 40% of accommodation expenses was identified at highest level, and followed by attractiveness of tourism activities, i.e. snorkeling, water rafting and kayaking. Other pull factors also ranked at the highest level included the vaccine passport policy that accommodated those having 2 doses of Covid-19 vaccinated, aesthetic landmark of tourist attractions, standards and instructions on Covid-19 prevention (i.e. certified Amazing Safety and Health Administration or SHA Plus, body temperature check, and online and/or document registration), convenience and accessibility to the destination (i.e. transportation, airport, and train station), and provision of lodging facilities and services (i.e. guest room, restaurant, swimming pool, fitness, sauna, etc.).

Hypothesis 1: personal factors having an impact on the behavior of FITs during covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand

The result of Hypothesis 1 found that demographic or personal factors of respondents – including gender, education, occupation, and marital status had an impact on the behavior of FITs during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand. Table 2 below illustrated the results of statistical testing at a significant level of 0.05.

Table 2. Relationships between demographic factors and behaviors of FITs during the covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand.

Behavior of FITs	Demographic Factors (Chi-Square)					
	Gender	age	Educatio n	Occu- pation	Monthly Income	Marital status
1. Searching and preparation time prior to traveling	3.803	23.450	4.716	32.897**	25.218*	7.138
2. Days of traveling	2.941	23.770	15.275*	31.459**	38.084**	6.417
3. Type of accommodation	43.163**	21.032	4.959	18.165	13.228	22.086**
4. Payment method	1.440	9.711	3.347	17.747	11.393	11.497*

*statistically significant level of 0.05
 **statistically significant level of 0.01
 Source: the authors.

Hypothesis 2: tourism motivation having an impact on the behavior of FITs during covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand

The results of Hypothesis 2 indicated that overall motivation of respondents representing FITs travelling to Southern Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemic did not have

an impact on their traveling behavior. Table 3 below identified the results of statistical testing at a significant level of 0.05.

Table 3. Relationships between tourism motivation and tourism behavior of FITs during covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand.

Tourism Behaviour of FITs	Tourism Motivation (Chi-Square)		
	Push Factors	Pull Factors	Total
1. Searching and preparation time prior to traveling	7.906	18.701*	10.920
2. Days of traveling	10.020	14.996*	8.573
3. Type of accommodation	7.715	19.082*	4.797
4. Payment methods	6.393	1.195	7.302

*statistically significant level of 0.05

Source: the authors.

Hypothesis 3: different demographic factors influencing the traveling motivation of FITs during the covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand

The results of Hypothesis 3 indicated significant differences of respondents' age, occupation, monthly income and marital status with their traveling motivation during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand. Table 4 below indicated the result of statistical testing at a significant level of 0.05.

Table 4. Comparison of respondents' different demographic factors and motivation of FITs during the covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand.

Factors influencing tourism motivation of FITs in Southern Thailand	Demographic Factors (T-Test / Anova)					
	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Monthly Income	Marital Status
Push Factors	0.002	5.673**	0.372	1.660	1.554	9.952**
Pull Factors	0.392	8.741**	1.111	2.460*	2.505*	8.719**
Total	0.028	8.568**	0.683	2.142	1.603	11.800**

* statistically significant level of 0.05

**statistically significant level of 0.01

Source: the authors.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Tourism motivation of FITs during the covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand

Push Factors – the results found in this research revealed that overall motivation of push factors for FITs during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand was identified at the highest level. However, after scanning the means of all the respondents' answers we found that their need of escaping the hustle and bustle from Covid-19 pandemic was the most important motivation for their traveling. This reflected a global crisis of Covid-19 pandemic, where people faced difficulties, chaos and unexpected circumstances on their daily life. Each country has

issued different procedures and instructions to prevent Covid-19 infection and reduce numbers of patients. Some countries temporarily dismissed their inbound tourism and locked down the spreading areas of Covid-19 infection. As people across the globe stopping their traveling for a year or more, they kept worrying and awaiting with longing for traveling again. They were concerned about healthy practices, did things on their own, reduced possibility of physical touch or face-to-face meeting with others. Accordingly, Fieger et al. (2019) and Yousaf et al. (2018) stated that motivation of push factors has become a stimulating drive emerged from a tourists' desire to be responded to the factors of their relevant traveling experience. Also, a basic need of tourists for their leisure and physical preferences has also been used to independently search for individual travel. This hierarchical motivation of physical preference and leisure related to the findings researched by Thongsawang (2021), revealing that push factor of overall individual preference was the most important motivation for Thai youth tourists in the Covid-19 endemic. This group of tourists preferred to change their surrounding environment and avoid or escape from the hustle and bustle of Covid-19 crisis.

Pull Factors – the results found in this research also revealed that overall motivation of pull factors for FITs FITs during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand was identified at the highest level. After considering the means of all the respondents' answers, we found that the WE TRAVEL TOGETHER scheme - 40% of tourists' accommodation expenses subsidized by government - was identified at the highest level. This promotional scheme helped stimulate domestic tourism demand and inject cash flow for accommodation and other related businesses (i.e. restaurants and airlines) to boost their business operations, employment and confidence at national level. As Fieger et al. (2019) argued that pull factor was motivational or an external factor beyond the destinations that stimulated tourists' decision over conditions or somethings not emerged from their inner motivation. Some examples might include tourism promotion project, accommodation price, and destination image and reputation. Accordingly, Nagai and Kurahashi (2022). studied how to generate tourism confidence in the Covid-19 pandemic and found that tourism restoration and promotion during the pandemic should focus on domestic tourism. The attempts on promoting tourism should be more appropriate with changing behavior of domestic tourists. WE TRAVEL TOGETHER, Thailand Tour Project and Half-payment Person Project were great examples in stimulating domestic FITs in the Covid-19 pandemic. This result was relevant to the research undertaken by Thongsawang (2021) identifying that the most important factor influencing behavior of Thai youth tourists in the post Covid-19 was tourism expenses. Especially, accommodation expense had the highest level of influence on tourist behavior in the post Covid-19.

Tourism behavior of FITs during the covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand

This study found that most respondents or FITs spent 6-10 days searching information and preparation prior to travel for 2-4 days to the nature-based destinations with beach, waterfall and mountain. As most tourists were from other regions; they needed more days to travel, and search for information on accommodation and popular attractions at natural destinations. They followed the instructions and procedures on how to prevent Covid-19 infection as publicly required, i.e. providing certificate of Covid-19 vaccinated, avoiding physical touch as much as possible, choosing to stay at hotels or resorts certified by SHA Plus, and paying their traveling expenses using online payment or internet banking. Accordingly, Ministry of Public Health mentioned that NNT in the post Covid-19 would be important procedures that all the parties involved should be mindful and well-prepare in accommodating their needs. To be more specific, NNT required enhancement of tourism and health standards, cleanliness, sanitation, possible and preventive measures to reduce the spreading of Covid-19 infection, and tourism confidence as a safe destination from Covid-19.

FITs in Southern Thailand followed Covid-19 news and situational updates from online media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Line). Electronic and social media was easy to use, interactive and functional for everyone to share, react, discuss, present, exchange and store similar information, news and opinions with others. As such, Sun et al. (2022) stated that searching online information was an easy and convenient preparation prior to traveling. Also, social media platforms effectively helped promote tourism to the target groups; and spread the perception and understanding of Covid-19 infection and preventive practices which influenced tourists to follow this NNT behavior. Social media platforms also helped promote the campaign to people paying more attention on their health. Accordingly, Fieger et al. (2019) investigated the factors influencing behavior of Thai youth tourists in post Covid-19 and found that this group of tourists began thinking about their travel by searching information on news and updates of Covid-19 situations from internet, an easily accessible media with image and audio.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1 – Respondents' gender, education, occupation, monthly income and marital status were significantly related to behavior of FITs during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand. Indeed, gender of FITs was related to their accommodation choices; education was related to days of their traveling; and occupation was related to their searching period of information prior to travel, days of their traveling, and their payment methods. Also,

monthly income of respondents was related to their searching period of information prior to travel and days of their traveling; marital status was related to their accommodation choices and payment methods. As empirically tested, different demographic or personal factors had a significant influence over tourist behavior. Hence Kye et al. (2014) confirmed accordingly that demographic characteristics were personal information influencing the demand and purchasing of tourism products and services. In addition, Madhyamapurush (2022) studied the factors related to changing behavior of Bangkok residents in the Covid-19 endemic and empirically confirmed the same finding as statistically investigated in this research. Finally, Madhyamapurush (2022) reported that varying demographic characteristics of Bangkok residents in terms of gender, marital status and education significantly revealed changing behavior of NNT in the Covid-19 endemic.

Hypothesis 2 – Tourism motivation, pull factors had significantly influenced over behavior of FITs during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand. The main reason behind this finding might reflect the fact that respondents (or FITs) increased their concerns on health and safety. They looked forward to acquiring motivation on health and safety to safeguard themselves from Covid-19 infection. Besides, motivation of FITs emerged after the government launched the tourism promotion projects and obtained tourist confidence. Such findings were linked with the research that Pattanasri et al. (2022) investigated the perception of Covid-19 news and updates for residents in Bangkok toward their attitude and behavior in protective infection and reported that attitude toward news updated from government agencies had a positive link with behavior in traveling and safeguarding Covid-19 infection. In contrast, Rahman (2021) studied the factors that influenced behavioral change of NNT in post Covid-19, and empirically confirmed that push factors had a statistically significant impact on changing behavior of NNT. Also, Wen and Huang (2019) investigated the results of push and pull motivations as personal value and familiar of loyalty tourists on their chosen destination – a case study of Chinese tourists traveling to Cuba for Cigar, using regression analysis; and concluded that motivation of tourists varied depending on a different destination they had carefully chosen. Nevertheless, tourism destinations intendedly restored and promoted by government schemes (pull factors) could potentially predict for repeating travel or revisiting.

Hypothesis 3- respondents with different characteristics on age, occupation, monthly income and marital status statistically indicated their significant difference of motivations on traveling during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand. The main reason revealed that tourist behavior had been viewed as a component or direction that formed and changed the extent of tourist behavior dependent upon individuals' limitations. Indeed, tourists with lower

income often spent only a few days traveling to nearby destinations. Meanwhile, tourists with higher income tended to have more time and intended to travel to the better, modern and quality destinations. Also, age differences influenced on different motivations of travel depending on experience anticipated. Furthermore, different marital status of respondents revealed different motivation on traveling. Tourists with married status tended to have lesser motivation on traveling than single tourists. It might reflect the fact that single tourists had more freedom than married ones. Also, marital status was linked with legal, social and economic status. Individuals would carefully consider when making important decision on their life. As such, Eime et al. (2018) described that demographic characteristic – including age, family size, marital status, income and occupation – was used as a popular tool for market segmentation. Indeed, this statistical and measurable tool had been used to identify target markets with influential consequence on specific demand and purchasing power. Accordingly, Madhyamapurush (2022) researched the factors influencing different behavior of NNT in the post Covid-19; and reported that residents in Bangkok with different characteristics of gender, education, occupation, monthly income and marital status significantly had a different NNT behavior in the Covid-19 endemic.

SUGGESTION AND RECOMMENDATION

Research Suggestion

Based on the results of this study, most FITs had followed the Covid-19 news and situations using online and social media platforms, i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Line. Therefore, Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) should pay more attention on news and information on Covid-19 available in the social media platforms. CCSA should provide and communicate sufficient information to the public to reduce possible gaps of fake news and improper or risky practices in digital world. For example, implementing law enforcement on fake news released, while media receivers should always check the source of information. In addition, the preventive practice of closing mouth with napkin when coughing and sneezing in public was the least practiced habit of FITs during the Covid-19 pandemic in Southern Thailand. As such, CCSA should pay more attention on this particular behavior of tourists which might easily spread the disease to others. Everyone should be more aware of this risk and show their greater responsible practice in society.

Recommendations for future studies

Future studies should focus on different contextual measurements and methodologies. Firstly, motivation and behavior of NNT should be investigated among different groups of special interest in tourism, i.e. those considered as time spender, optimizer, and health tourist. Their attitudes, interests and specific characteristics of lifestyles might insightfully contribute to research completion in NNT in the Covid-19 endemic. Secondly, further studies should focus on comparison between domestic and international tourists in response to the establishments providing facilities and services certified by SHA Plus standard. Tourists with different cultural, historical, socioeconomic and environmental backgrounds might behave differently in the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, further studies should employ a mixed method to bring in and compare qualitative and quantitative data with industrial stakeholders involved in the Covid-19 endemics. This would provide a variety of insightful and beneficial perspectives on NNT.

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