

A Structural Equation Model of Loyalty to LANNA Cultural Tourism in Northern Thailand

Tanawut Prakobpol

*Associate Professor Dr., KMITL Business School King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang
E-mail: tanawut.pr@kmitl.ac.th*

Abstract: The purposes of this research were: 1) to formulate a model of structural equation of loyalty to evaluate Lanna cultural tourism in the northern part of Thailand; 2) to evaluate alongside empirical data how consistent the model is in relation to Lanna cultural tourism in the northern part of Thailand and; 3) to investigate the direct and indirect impacts of the model on loyalty seen in the northern region of Thailand for Lanna cultural tourism. The study utilizes a qualitative and quantitative approach which started with interviewing eight people who are government tourism representatives and distributed a survey of 480 people tourists who have visited various Lanna cultural attraction areas in the northern region of Thailand. Descriptive analysis, factor analysis, correlation analysis and structural equation modeling were the methods used to analyze collected data. This led to results highlighting positive correlations between psychological factors and tourism experiences, and between the experiences and destination loyalty. It is for this reason that the results demonstrate that other factors such as tourist's psychological perception and tourist experience are significantly influential in the directive to loyalty. The findings implication that sustainable development to enhance the region's image should be implemented to promote cultural tourism.

Keywords: Tourism experience, tourism image, Loyalty to tourism, Lanna cultural tourism.

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is an important source of income for Thailand (Kornwan Sangkhakorn, 2016) and it promotes a variety of investments, including manufacturing, retail, wholesale, and services that help create jobs and careers for the public at large. Therefore, it can be said to be one of the main industries that has a great effect on stimulating the economy in many countries around the world.

Tourism business is a business that has been an important economic driver of Thailand continuously for the past several years (Maneetrakulthong et al., 2016) and there is still a trend of higher expansion every year. Continuously. Even in the past several years, Thailand's situation has faced many obstacles and problems, such as political problems and conflicts within the country, resulting in the country's lack of administrative stability, natural disasters, and security problems in some areas. Those problems affect the confidence and good image of Thailand in the eyes of foreigners, but in contrast to the tourism situation. As a result, tourism-related businesses such as hotels and travel agencies Continuous expansion has been observed which has granted plenty of opportunities to hotel businesses, and small and medium-sized travel agencies to meet the growing demand of tourism from foreign tourists. This also creates an opportunity for Thailand's tourism industry to grow with a diverse range of tourist attractions that are both complementary to the country's natural beauty. In addition, the availability of tourism services, especially low-cost airlines, has expanded and is able to transport short-distance tourists so that they can travel conveniently, economically and safely. As a result, foreign tourists will travel to Thailand because the cost of tourism is not high compared to other countries in the same region, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia. The above factors not only attract new tourists to travel. It also helps attract tourists who have previously visited and come back to travel again. (Tourism

Industry Council of Thailand, 2019) Therefore, it can be said that it is a component that greatly enhances the growth of tourism in Thailand.

Cultural tourism loyalty often starts with satisfaction, confidence, and participation in protecting tourist destinations. These things lead to long-term sustainability in the tourism industry (Channuwong et al., 2025; Sangkhakorn, 2016; Srilachai, 2016). Cultural tourism loyalty may arise from interest, cultural appreciation and perception of the psychological elements of tourists. It is reflected in the tourism image which is in a positive direction. The cultural tourism industry is a rapidly growing sector of the industry (Sirathanakul et al., 2023; McKercher and Du Cros, 2002). It has grown exponentially over the past decade (Smith, 2009). The European Commission made the same claim in 2009 (The European Commission). They state that over 50% of European tourism activity is based on cultural and heritage tourism. This citation is in accordance with the National Trust for Historic Preservation of the United States. It is claimed that the increase in cultural tourism has created many benefits, such as creating new jobs and businesses, increasing tax revenue, redistributing economic income to local communities, and create opportunities for those involved in preserving traditions and culture (Stratan et al, 2015)

The northern region of Thailand has the unique characteristics of diverse and interesting tourist attractions in addition to having beautiful landscapes. There is an ancient culture that is created from the perfect blend of art and culture between the regions of Siam, LANNA, Burma, and Lan Chang. This has led to it becoming a cultural heritage due to having been passed down per generation over a long period of time. However, there is no in-depth research carried out regarding the level of loyalty on cultural tourism despite the northern region holding significance as a popular destination for the uniqueness and rich history of LANNA cultural tourism. Further research will aid in appealing to more tourists, pushing them to stay longer and have more retention (return holidays). Therefore, in this research, the emphasis is on cultural tourism in the LANNA civilization by studying the potential of tourist destinations, problems and needs of tourists in cultural tourism.

The research is highly interested in carrying out research that utilizes the structural equation model based on the reasons mentioned earlier to evaluate loyalty to LANNA cultural tourism in the northern part of Thailand. This entails aligning the research with the following objectives: 1) to make an understanding by clearly defining what loyalty to Lanna culture in tourism in the northern region of Thailand means, 2) to establish dimensions that influence the level of loyalty tourists have toward Lanna cultural tourism in the northern region of the country and, 3) to identify the relationship seen between tourists behavior purposes and their perceived value of Lanna cultural tourism in the northern area of Thailand. The study will begin by carrying out a comprehensive analysis using an empirical structural equation model that will help assess what factors clearly define loyalty especially in the context of cultural tourism. The analysis that follows will utilize the model as a primary one while also ensuring validity and reliability is evaluated against empirical data for real-world applications. Moreover, this research will also see whether the structural equation model has direct, indirect and overall impacts on cultural tourism of Lanna by testing it and making estimates. By answering these objectives, this research can shed light into the nature of cultural tourism of Lanna and act as a framework to formulate tourism policies based on the level of loyalty observed which can also lead to creating plans to increase tourism in the area.

2. Research Methodology

The structural equation model with regards to loyalty of Lanna cultural tourism in the northern region of Thailand was analyzed using a mixed methods approach of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The data collection process was initiated with qualitative interviews and supported by quantitative surveys. It was then determined whether the used data was reliable and valid to obtain better results in SEM before processing the data. Descriptive statistics, factor analysis, correlation analysis was then used. The methodology section details the research paper's objectives and procedures with a rationale being outlined clearly for each stage of the research process. This also includes how the sample was determined, the construction of the research instruments and how statistical modeling was used to carry out empirical investigations of the study's data analysis.

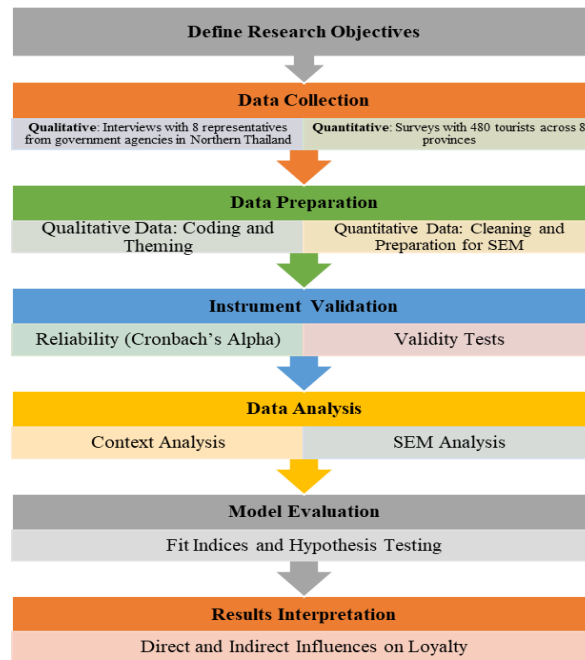


Figure 1. Process overview diagram

Study Design

Researchers used mixed methods which included qualitative interviews alongside quantitative surveys for developing a Structural Equation Model (SEM) of Lanna cultural tourism loyalty. The qualitative segment consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with eight northern provincial government tourism representatives in Thailand to gather their policies and tourism development strategies. A survey was distributed to 480 tourists who were carefully chosen from major Lanna cultural tourism locations for the quantitative part of this research.

This study used an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. The qualitative part of the investigation included semi-structured interviews with government tourism representatives of eight Northern provinces (Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Phayao, Phrae, Nan and Mae Hong Son). The quantitative instrument adopted by the previous study is divided into 7 sections: (1) general information about the respondents (2) tourism behavior (3) tourism potential (4) tourism image (5) tourism experience (6) perception of psychological elements, and (7) tourism loyalty. The researcher determined the scoring criteria for the opinion level questions using the Likert scale, divided into 5 levels (Roy, 2020), with the scoring criteria as follows: "much above average," 4 representing "above average," 3 denoting "fair/average," 2 signifying "below average," and 1 reflecting "much below average." This structured approach allows for a nuanced understanding of participants' opinions, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the data collected. The structural equation modelling (SEM) to analyze the tourism sector responses from 480 respondents with the aim and objectives guided by sample sizes suggested by Schumacker and Lomax (1996) and Hair et al (1998).

Sampling Method and Sample Size

A stratified random sampling technique produced a representative and balanced survey group for the study. Each of the eight northern provinces including Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Phayao, Phrae, Nan, and Mae Hong Son received 60 respondents according to their proportional representation. The distributed sample proportionally represented tourists who visited all types of cultural heritage destinations. The research included domestic tourists who made up 66.7% (n=320) of the sample while international tourists accounted for 33.3% (n=160) given their growing impact on Lanna cultural tourism. Tourism visitors from China together with Europe and ASEAN nations comprised the main foreign response sample because they represent Thailand's most significant tourism inbound markets. This approach proposed in the study was to obtain a balanced dataset for analysis on loyalty to Lanna cultural tourism using structural equation modelling (Provenzano & Baggio, 2020).

Research Instrument

The research data was obtained from on-site paper surveys and digital questionnaires which were distributed by travel agencies and local tourism information centers. The research team used Thai and English bilingual questionnaires while trained staff assisted question-answering processes particularly for participants outside of Thailand. A total of 87.5% participants completed surveys through the use of discount coupons that offered local cultural attractions and coffee shops as incentives.

The first instrument was a structured questionnaire, developed from available literature and adapted for the given context. The questionnaire consisted of seven sections: demographics, tourist behavior, tourist capacity, tourist attraction, tourist impression, tourist satisfaction, attitudinal variables, and commitment. Data was collected using a questionnaire with 5-Likert scale of scoring ranging from 1 (which represent much below average), 2, 3 & 4, 5 represent much above average) (Roy, 2020) .

Reliability and Validity

Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability test Alongside Average Variance Extracted indicated that the research instruments used provided accuracy and consistency for the study's results. Research participants provided similar/same responses when using these instruments which was confirmed through the reliability tests. Research indicates that a reliability score above 0.70 satisfies quality standards as described by Hair et al. (2021). The research produced these significant results for the selected study metrics. The measurement scale showed high reliability because all values exceeded 0.80. (Table 1)

Table 1 Reliability tests of instruments

| Construct | Cronbach's Alpha |
|-----------|------------------|
| TOUE | 0.891 |
| TOUP | 0.905 |
| DESI | 0.877 |
| POTT | 0.832 |
| LOYA | 0.923 |

Composite Reliability and Convergent Validity

The researcher calculated Composite Reliability to test the dependability of each measurement area. When Composite Reliability stands above 0.70 and Average Variance Extracted is above 0.50 the analysis demonstrates strong reliability and convergent validity. Each CR value in the study exceeded 0.80 for strong reliability and the AVE results above 0.50 confirmed good validity in measuring the model's constructs. (Table 2)

Table 2 Composite Reliability and Convergent Validity of instruments

| Construct | CR | AVE |
|-----------|-------|-------|
| TOUE | 0.902 | 0.678 |
| TOUP | 0.915 | 0.721 |
| DESI | 0.889 | 0.674 |
| POTT | 0.843 | 0.592 |
| LOYA | 0.928 | 0.745 |

Discriminant Validity

Fornell-Larcker Criterion and HTMT tests were applied to validate that the measured factors remained separate from each other. Each construct showed a higher square root of AVE than its relationships with other constructs which proved discriminant validity. The HTMT test results showed that all constructs remained separate because their values stayed below 0.85.

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with ethical standards by maintaining participant privacy and obtaining their consent before data collection. Researchers introduced the project goals and protected participant privacy alongside their decision to take part in the study. Every participant needed to authorize their participation in writing before continuing with the survey process. The research met academic ethical standards by using protected data and allowing participants to respond anonymously for educational research. The research examined common method bias by running Harman's single-factor test which

demonstrated that no single factor explained more than 40% of the total variance. The research ethics committee at King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang approved the research proposal ahead of data collection.

Data Analysis

The data underwent multiple quality checks before we tested it using SEM. The evaluation process is divided into three major steps to prepare and assess the data and model results.

During data screening and preparing, we verified that all data points were present and met normality requirements while looking for potential bias in the dataset. The analysis identified and handled missing values by removing cases with more than 5% missing data per variable and applying mean substitution for isolated missing entries. The data follows normal distribution because skewness and kurtosis results stayed between -2.0 and +2.0 as recommended by Kline (2015). The analysis of Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) showed all predictor variables had values under 5.0 which proves multicollinearity does not affect the results significantly. The single-factor test from Harman revealed that one factor did not explain more than 40% of the total variance which shows minimal risk of bias distorting the findings.

Using Confirmatory Factor Analysis to check if the measurement model showed reliable and valid results after preparing the data. The measurements showed strong reliability because Cronbach's Alpha and CR results exceeded 0.80 for all constructs. The measurement model showed good convergent validity because all Average Variance Extracted values exceeded 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The tests included Fornell-Larcker Criterion and HTMT to show that each construct stands independently from other measures. The measurement model demonstrated good fit to the data according to CFA results which showed $\chi^2/df = 2.35$, RMSEA = 0.047, CFI = 0.924, and TLI = 0.911 (Anandya, 2010).

After validating the measurement model SEM helped us test the relationships between our research variables. MLE calculated path coefficients while showing which effects worked directly or indirectly through the model. TOUE demonstrates the strongest combined influence on TOUP with a coefficient value of 0.823 ($p < 0.001$). The results show that Destination Image acts as a partial mediator between Tourism Potential and Tourism Loyalty based on 5,000 samples from the bootstrap method. The last SEM model showed better model fit with statistics including $\chi^2/df = 2.78$, RMSEA = 0.049, CFI = 0.918, and TLI = 0.906 which validated the proposed relationships.

The final analysis of the SEM model shows that how tourists perceive Lanna culture and their tourism experiences affect their loyalty to Lanna cultural tourism. The results confirm existing tourism loyalty research and reveal how experiential and psychological factors drive tourists to stay committed to Lanna cultural tourism. Enhancing cultural tourism activities and improving brand image will help Lanna tourism grow sustainably and bring back more visitors.

3. Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze data with results highlight that most tourists visiting the northern region of Thailand were female between the ages of 21-30 years who held bachelor's degrees and were single while also working in the fields of civil service or state enterprises and accumulating a monthly income of 15,000-30,000 Thai Baht. Observed variables have mean (\bar{X}) Between 3.39 – 4.56. The variable perceived value (VALU) had the highest mean value, and the escapism variable (ESCA) had the lowest mean value.

The Structural Equation Model (SEM) finalised in this study offers a universal map of how the latent variables interrelate. Significant pathways were identified, particularly emphasizing the role of Tourists' Psychological Factors Perception (TOUP), which demonstrated a direct effect on Tourist Experience (TOUE) and indirectly influenced Tourists' Psychological Factors Perception. The highest value of the total effect, TE, was achieved for TOUP and TOUE equal to 0.823 ($p < 0.001$) which indicates the primary importance of psychological factors affecting the subsequent experience. Additionally, Potential of Tourism (POTT) and Destination Image (DESI) were shown to have statistically significant impacts on tourists' psychological perception through both direct and mediated effects. These outcomes substantiate those prior beliefs about Lanna historical and cultural tourism, impressions obtained on-site, and psychological assessments after visits are all interrelated.

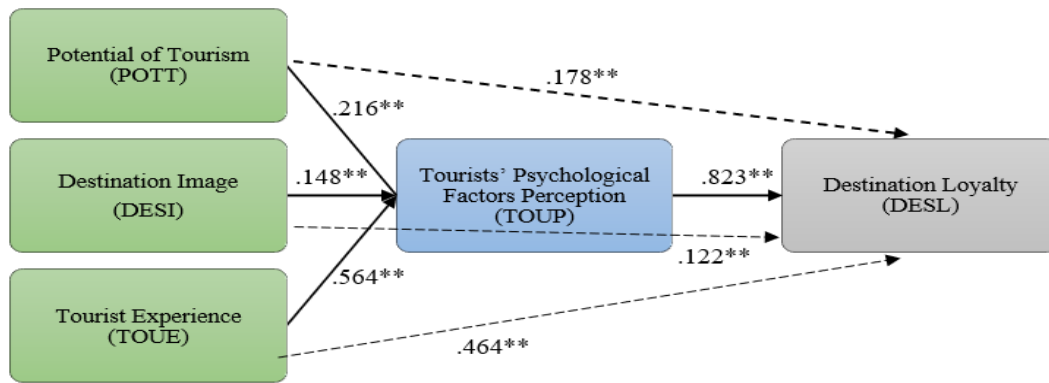


Figure 2: The Final SEM Model

Table 1. Statistical analysis values of the SEM of this study

| Finalizing SEM Model | | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|----|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| DVs | TOUP | | | DESL | | |
| IVs | TE | IE | DE | TE | IE | DE |
| POTT | 0.216** (0.001) | - | 0.216** (0.001) | 0.178** (0.001) | 0.178** (0.001) | - |
| DESI | 0.148 (0.012)** | - | 0.148** (0.012) | 0.122** (0.013) | 0.122** (0.013) | - |
| TOUE | 0.564 (0.000)** | - | 0.564** (0.000) | 0.464** (0.000) | 0.464** (0.000) | - |
| TOUP | - | - | - | 0.823** (0.000) | - | 0.823** (0.000) |

$\chi^2 = 355.374$, $df = 20$, $p = 0.000$, $RMSEA = 0.495$ Note:
 ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

The conceptual SEM model most closely matches the final design, and DE, IE, and TE among variables. Important correlations are emphasized, TOUE → TOUP (TE = 0.823, $p < 0.001$): This pathway underscores the centrality of tourism experience in shaping tourism uptake behavior. POTT → DESL (TE = 0.178, $p < 0.001$): Indicates that perceived tourism potential significantly contributes to destination loyalty. DESI → DESL (TE = 0.122, $p < 0.013$): Highlights the role of destination image in cultivating destination loyalty. TOUE → DESL (TE = 0.464, $p < 0.001$): Establishes a robust linkage between tourism experience and loyalty.

Discussion

The conclusion derived from this study is useful for understanding the psychological factors of tourists in the Lanna cultural tourism setting. The findings reveal that Tourists' Psychological Factors Perception (TOUP) plays a pivotal role, acting as a foundation for developing positive tourism experiences and subsequently influencing psychological perceptions. In line with this, Wang and Hung (2023) opine that psychological factors that could be attributed to expectation and perception before the visit are the foundation or antecedent to tourist satisfaction.

Potential of Tourism (POTT) also emerged as a significant predictor of tourists' psychological perception, both directly and indirectly. The total effect of 0.178 ($p < 0.001$) indicates the role of promoting diverse cultural and environmental endowments of the destination. This finding supports Chiu et al. (2022) who suggest that, when the DEST variables are high, perceptions are strong and positive, and tourists are satisfied.

The results again revealed a significant path between Destination Image (DESI) and psychological factors with TE = 0.122, $p < 0.013$. Even though the strength of the impact is not very strong, they state the fact that branding and other positive imagery are critical in the formation of tourists' perceptions. Kladou and Kehagias (2021) also point out that the positive destination image is stronger, and it makes an improvement in the positive psychological influence on the development of emotional associations. Tourist Experience (TOUE) demonstrated a substantial impact on psychological factors (TE = 0.464, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the idea that high-quality and culturally immersive experiences play a critical role in ensuring tourist satisfaction and advocacy. In their study, Lee et al. (2023) noted that such experiences

usually help in forming the foundation through which these emotional interactions with stakeholder's shape may be considered as a deeper psychological valuation.

While the model presented statistically significant paths, the indices of adjustment ($\chi^2= 355.374$, $df = 20$, $RMSEA = 0.495$) indicate that there is a need for the improvement of the adjustment of the model. The RMSEA value of the model is more than 0.08 which also poses some constraints on the structural model. Such differences might be due to what researchers call 'unobserved common factors' or 'sample-size factors. To fill these gaps, future studies should consider other moderating variables that may include socio-demographic variables, travel purposes and or, seasonality.

From the pragmatic perspective, therefore, the outcome of the study may inform stakeholders to focus on increasing the experience appeal, the tourism appeal, and the destination appeal. These elements, if incorporated together will help the tourism sector to promote enhanced culture and sustainable tourism. Besides, more specific advertising appeals to Lanna culture and its appeal in terms of tourism experience can advance tourists' psychological value and align with the region's goals.

4. Conclusion

This research investigated the antecedents that shaped tourists' psychological experience in the Lanna cultural tourism experience employing an SEM. The results highlight the pivotal role of Tourists' Psychological Factors Perception (TOUP), which was strongly influenced by Tourist Experience (TOUE) and, to a lesser extent, by Destination Image (DESI) and Potential of Tourism (POTT). This paper unveiled that Experiential Quality and perceived development potential of tourism resources play a substantial role in positively influencing tourists' psychological attributes and long – term tourist satisfaction.

The research offers useful directions for the improvement of tourism experiences based on increasing the experiential quality, positive destination image and cultural value of the destinations to engage the tourists psychologically. Although the current model has provided strong evidence to support the hypothesized relationships, moderate to poor model fit indices in this study imply that there are other factors (such as cultural activities and socio-demographic differences) that might moderate the above relations. In conclusion, this work fits into the tourism psychology body of knowledge, alongside providing practical recommendations for the continued and improved development of cultural tourism in the Lanna area.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to result regarding this research, the methods used in the study, data analysis, or the writing of this paper. This study was carried out independently, and no financial support or incentive was provided to the authors from any organization, institution, or individual that may have influenced the design, data analysis, manuscript writing, and the contents of the manuscript. Moreover, the authors would like to state that they have no personal, financial, or professional interest in or connection with tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and cultural organisations in the Lanna region that might influence the results or recommendations of this study. All data involved in the study were obtained and processed strictly without bias hence conforming to the research ethic.

Lastly, the research follows the principles of academic misconduct, reporting, and impartiality. The conclusions are strictly derived from the results and the study in question does not have any political pressure and/or other factors that can influence the work and its results.

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