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Anusara Sawangchai
Wanchai Akpornpis
Noppadol Chanrawang
Supattra Klammart

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Tradition and Innovation in Thai Tourism: A Role of Reverse Mentoring

By Anusara Sawangchai^{}, Wanchai Akpornpis[‡],
Noppadol Chanrawang[•] & Supattra Klammart[◊]*

The research examines the role of reverse mentoring as an effective method to overcome the generational digital adoption challenges within Thailand's tourism industry. Traditional knowledge held by senior tourism stakeholders in Southeast Asia remains valuable despite the digital transformation of the tourism sector, which causes difficulties in technology adaptation. The study investigates reverse mentoring by having youngsters in the tourism sector train senior adults in digital skills, which produces shared advantages, protects traditional expertise, and encourages mixed-age teamwork. The study highlights that reverse mentoring incorporated into tourism development initiatives helps to achieve sustainable growth by combining traditional practices with modern innovative technologies.

Keywords: *Reverse Mentoring, Thai Tourism, Digital Transformation, Aging Population, Innovation.*

Introduction

Tourism is one of the most significant and emerging sectors after COVID-19. When it comes to tourism, Asian countries are leading the market. Specifically, Thailand is one of the top tourist destinations in the world. Thailand is famous for its natural beauty, sea, sun, and sand (Yuan, 2010). Tourism is one of the most significant economic drivers in Thailand. The rise of digital platforms, specifically after the pandemic, and smart tourism presents opportunities and challenges unexpectedly. Thailand leads the tourism market because of its traditional methods, such as traditional massage parlours, native cuisine, and local medicine, and it aims to provide tourists with traditional and modern offerings (Novelli & Tisch-Rottensteiner, 2012). International travellers have been drawn to these elements, which simultaneously drive socioeconomic advancement in countryside areas dedicated to their cultural heritage. Traditional service providers who maintain valuable traditional knowledge demonstrate limited understanding of digital marketing procedures, online booking management, and social media platforms. Due to their preference for tech-enabled personalized services, Gen Z travellers find it challenging to interact with tourism workers from the senior generation who prefer different modes of service delivery. The research examines how reverse

^{*}Assistant Professor, Business Administration in Entrepreneurship Program, Faculty of Management Sciences, Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand.

[‡]Pol.Lt.Gen., College of Politics and Government, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand.

[•]Assistant Professor, Business Administration in Entrepreneurship Program, Faculty of Management Sciences, Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand.

[◊]Lecturer, Business Administration in Entrepreneurship Program, Faculty of Management Sciences, Phuket Rajabhat University, Thailand.

mentoring functions as a solution to bridge the generational gap for achieving sustainable, inclusive growth in the Thai tourism sector (Huang et al., 2024). The government's push for a digital economy targeting 50% digitization by 2030 has spurred significant changes in tourism strategies (Leesa-nguansuk, 2023; Nation Thailand, 2025).

However, international travellers who value technology now expect touch-free banking operations combined with virtual tour aids and personalized trip management software to be standard features when traveling. The transition of smart tourism tools into local and community-based tourism occurs only in a fragmented and inconsistent manner (Ambarwati et al., 2023). Apart from integrating and implementing digitalization, this revolution faces challenges due to different age groups having varying technological understanding. The generational gap exists because younger persons better understand new technology systems, but senior tourism operators either refuse to learn new skills or cannot obtain these capabilities (Gonda & Rátz, 2023). Dealing with this challenge requires more than technological solutions because it is an issue of cultural and social acceptance. The successful implementation of top-down policies needs trust, meaningful communication, and mutual respect between younger and senior tourism operators, which tend to be ignored in traditional hierarchical approaches (Patterson & Pegg, 2013). Therefore, this study proposed the implementation of reverse mentoring in the tourism sector to match tradition with innovation.

The mentorship strategy called reverse mentoring enables digital technology training from younger people to their elders. The process allows both parties to learn from each other since digitization skills benefit senior tourism operators or seniors linked with the tourism business, and the younger tourism businessmen or entrepreneurs gain understanding of cultural heritage alongside business proficiency, generational experience, and interpersonal wisdom (Jovicic, 2019). Through its reciprocal structure reverse mentoring has the capability to develop an equilibrium environment that supports innovation working alongside traditional practices. This study aims to understand how reverse mentoring applies to Thailand's tourism industry, specifically for community-based and cultural tourism areas. This study identifies how reverse mentoring supports sustainable development and enhances competitiveness, as well as supports digital economy initiatives. This study demonstrates operational strategies for reverse mentoring in Thailand's tourism market through qualitative research analysis.

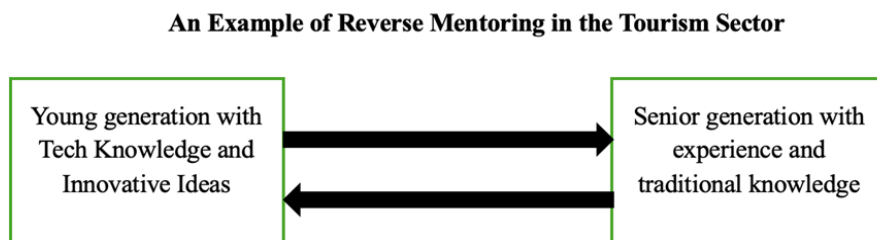
Literature Review

The tourism industry in Thailand has always promoted cultural heritage as its core attraction. Ancient temples, royal ceremonies, local crafts, and traditional medicine practices have been key elements of the Thai tourism experience. The country established itself as an exclusive global tourism hotspot through its cultural assets. However, as international travel preferences evolve, particularly with the emergence of digital-native tourists, the pressure to modernize and digitize becomes increasingly evident (Ajanapanya, 2023). Recent industrial reports show an increased

push toward digital tourism, focusing on promoting smart tourism infrastructure and innovation zones in key cities. Despite these efforts, digital illiteracy among the aging population, many of whom serve as local guides, traditional therapists, and community leaders, poses a significant challenge. According to Jantavongso, (2022) the digital literacy rate among Thais over 60, it is significantly low. This generational digital difference hampers community-based tourism's ability to fully benefit from online tools, digital marketing, and data analytics, which now define global competitiveness.

In organizational settings, reverse mentoring has been introduced as a transformative model to address knowledge gaps. As part of corporate innovation strategies, the concept has emerged to let younger people with technical expertise mentor senior colleagues. The literature has described reverse mentoring through intergenerational learning principles to improve employee skills in professional expertise, cultural understanding, and flexibility (Chen, 2013). The study of Chaudhuri et al., (2022) explained how reverse mentoring functions as an inclusion tool to develop capabilities in digital transformation processes. Successful reverse mentoring initiatives in Thai culture depend on organizational management support and employee understanding about respectful communication, since age-hierarchy values make this collaboration process sensitive. The practice of reverse mentoring in the tourism sector delivers unique dual advantages to tourism stakeholders. The reverse mentoring empowers senior stakeholders to understand digital tools while encouraging younger learners to learn cultural practices (Gannon et al., 2021). Modern tools become channels for transmitting intangible heritage such as storytelling, music, and local rituals, making them accessible to broader audiences through digital platforms. According to the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky, learning is inherently social and context-bound. Applied through this method, reverse mentoring in tourism appreciates the elder's knowledge and the youth's technological competence (Cismaru & Iunius, 2019). Literature and community initiatives support these initiatives, strengthening resilience, innovation, and inclusivity throughout traditional tourism systems by integrating digitalization. Further, Figure 1 depicts an example of knowledge, expertise, traditional knowledge, and social media information exchange in the young and senior generations.

Figure 1. *Reverse mentoring example in the tourism sector*



Methodology

A qualitative case study design is applied to investigate the outcomes of implementing reverse mentoring within Thai community-based tourism. This method is appropriate for tackling the exploratory question about understanding how generational groups interact in their native settings. Research data was obtained through semi-structured interviews of twelve participants selected by purposeful sampling. Three key participants of this study are youngsters related to the tourism sector. They were asked about teaching tech knowledge to the aging group and, in return, what they gain from the generational experience of the elder generation. The study only examined private organizations and businesses related to the tourism industry. The elderly people are ready to pass on their knowledge to the younger generation, who believe more in technological and less in generational knowledge. The study approached the business where youngsters are working under the guidance of elders and attempts to figure out how youngsters can master traditional knowledge and how elders can learn to use social media and the inclusion of technologies in the operations and ongoing processes. The study attempted to approach 20 respondents to ask about their tech knowledge or teaching use of innovative technologies, and how they benefit from the experience of senior businessmen, colleagues, and entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. However, the saturation point was obtained in 12 interviews with respondents in Phuket, as the destination was selected because it actively participates in cultural and community tourism and maintains traditional knowledge holders together with youth-led innovation groups.

Regarding the demographic information, 4 respondents were male, five were female, and others did not specify their gender. Regarding education, eight were undergraduates and four were below that level. From the age perspective, nine respondents were aged 18 to 23, and three were between 24 and 30. Further, Table 1 depicts the demographic information.

Table 1. Demographics

Gender		
	Male	4
	Female	5
	Better not to specify	3
Age		
	18 to 23	9
	24 to 30	3
Education		
	Diploma holders	4
	Undergraduates	8

Further, the researcher used the Thai language during the interviews, which participants consented to record and translated into English before further analysis.

The study assured the respondents about the confidentiality of their data, and their anonymity was ensured (Allmark et al., 2009). After the analysis, the personal information and recordings were removed to ensure no identifiable information was provided. The following interview questions were asked. 1) How do you introduce innovative ideas to senior colleagues while maintaining the Thai cultural values in tourism and respecting traditions? 2) What you see is essential to preserve, learn, and transfer to the next generation, even in this modernized era. 3) Do you believe your mentor's input leads to a positive change or innovation in a tourism-related project or business? 4) How do you deal with generational differences when mentoring senior professionals? 5) How do you think that reverse mentoring can help Thailand's tourism industry stay competitive?

Although this study is essential for any tourism segment, it specifically focuses on community-based and cultural tourism. Thailand is leading the Southeast Asian tourism market based on its community and diverse culture, as millions of tourists visit Thailand to experience local culture and get the local service that might not be available in any other region of the world.

Analysis and Results

Qualitative data analysis used thematic analysis with NVivo software for management and organization purposes. Qualitative data enabled the researcher to investigate the results of reverse mentoring and the emotional and social factors that shape its outcomes or failure. The findings revealed that reverse mentoring creates collaborative environments among generations within a workplace. The senior participants develop advanced digital skills during the program, and young adults learn about traditional cultural values through this experience. The interview results revealed several themes, which are discussed as follows.

Digital Literacy Development among Senior Participants

The participants mentioned that aging people in the tourism industry experience better competence with digital tools following reverse mentoring collaborations. Through reverse mentoring, many senior members have initiated smartphone skills that enable them to make Facebook platform posts and communicate with customers (Kaše et al., 2019). The senior cooking instructor experienced a higher-class reservation rate when their profile appeared on TripAdvisor due to guidance from a younger mentor about technological tools. Reverse mentoring within trust-based community work demonstrates how it transforms digital technology from reluctance to being seen as a beneficial opportunity. After the pilot phase ended, some mentoring relationships carried over into long-term personal connections, and the findings are aligned literature (Breck et al., 2018).

Cultural Knowledge Transfer to Youth

The young members demonstrated gratitude because they received valuable traditional knowledge that is not easily available through learn, which improved their creative work on a tourism application. Through reverse mentoring, participants experienced reciprocal learning, which Chaudhuri *et al.*, (2022) mentioned as talent development and knowledge sharing between different generations.

Enhanced Community Cohesion and Visibility

Through the mentoring sessions, senior practitioners gain better exposure through digital platforms. Many senior members who operated tourism services shared their services and knowledge and, in return, learned how to advertise on social media, which enhanced the resilience of their business. These mentoring sessions led the services to gain prominence online, followed by online social media networks, and appear on Google Maps. The elevated online presence enabled tourism businesses to obtain more reservations and service requests from younger travelers who depend on internet search and trip evaluator platforms (Farrell et al., 2022).

Challenges and Considerations

Overall, the mentoring session remains successful, yet the research pointed out barriers to achievement. Some senior adults first showed reluctance to accept youth advice because age precedes in their traditional cultural hierarchy. Multiple mentoring relationships face limited sustainability because senior members are reticent to adopt new technologies and deviate from the marketing norms that they inherited from their elders (Chaudhuri et al., 2022).

Implementation and Conclusion

The study mentions that reverse mentoring provides an effective solution to combining ancient customs with novel approaches in Thai tourism management. Young tourism businessmen or employees can assist elders in adapting to digital technologies and achieving cultural insight by establishing joint intergenerational tourism learning programs. Moreover, the study shows that reverse mentoring efficiently implements digital capabilities throughout the tourism industry, especially in community-based and cultural tourism. The two-fold strategic approach of reverse mentoring supports Thailand in achieving market leadership in tourism and protecting its traditional cultural essence. Additionally, the successful implementation of reverse mentoring programs requires the support of destination stakeholders through supporting policies. Further, community-based tourism organizations and vocational training institutes must incorporate these mentoring approaches when delivering outreach programs to the community. In this way, these initiatives can gain

additional value by associating them with academic service-learning and internship placements in the tourism industry. Therefore, the tourism industry benefits from reverse mentoring, which allows younger staff to instruct senior leaders in a way that exchanges wisdom for both parties in an evolving sector. In addition to reverse mentoring, experienced professionals can experience digital tools, including social media platforms, mobile booking applications, and virtual reality products, which now play essential roles in travel planning and marketing. In order for tourism organizations to maintain market competitiveness through digital strategies, reverse mentoring provides them. Younger staff members emphasize sustainable initiatives in travel practices, so they lead senior colleagues in supporting operational sustainability. So, through this exchange, both parties develop expanded workplace cultures that merge different generations into one inclusive environment.

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