

UNDERSTANDING TRAVEL CONSTRAINTS: EVIDENCE FROM TIKTOKERS

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Abstract: This study investigates the underlying reasons why Chinese tourists hesitate to revisit or choose Thailand as a travel destination, employing the Leisure Constraints Theory as the conceptual framework. Data were collected from TikTok videos and user-generated content, reflecting authentic voices of Thai tourism stakeholders regarding their concerns and experiences. The findings reveal that intrapersonal constraints are influenced by the sluggish Chinese economy, reduced purchasing power, and changing travel preferences toward independent travel. Interpersonal constraints emerge from dissatisfaction with service quality, experiences of unfair practices such as scams, and the rapid dissemination of negative narratives via social media platforms. Structural constraints are associated with safety concerns, political instability, rising travel costs, and competing tourism policies promoted by the Chinese government. This study highlights the complexity of multi-level barriers that hinder Thailand's competitiveness in attracting Chinese tourists. The results provide practical insights for policymakers and tourism stakeholders in Thailand to redesign strategies that enhance safety perceptions, service quality, and destination value, ultimately overcoming the leisure constraints perceived by Chinese travelers.

Keywords: Chinese tourists, Leisure constraints theory, Destination image, TikTokers

1. Introduction

Thailand has long been recognized as one of Asia's premier tourist destinations, consistently ranking among the world's most visited countries. In 2024, tourism statistics from Ministry of Tourism and sports (2025) reveals that Thailand hosted 6.73 million tourists from China, 4.95 million from Malaysia, 2.13 million from India, 1.75 million from Russia, and 1.01 million from Singapore. Despite China maintaining its position as Thailand's largest source market, tourists from China tends to drop in number of international tourists arrival in thailand. This circumstance draw a concern that warrant academic investigation.

This study adopts Crawford and Godbey's (1987) leisure constraints theory as its theoretical foundation, later refined by Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey (1991). Constraints are defined as factors that "limit people's participation in leisure activities, people's use of leisure services, or people's enjoyment of current activities" (Jackson & Scott, 1999).

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on leisure constraints theory in international tourism contexts, particularly focusing on the Chinese outbound market. The findings will provide valuable insights for Thailand's tourism stakeholders, including the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), destination marketing organizations, and tourism businesses seeking to better understand and address barriers that may limit Chinese tourist engagement.

2. Literature Review

This study adopts leisure constraints model as a foundation theory. Leisure constraints theory has become a foundational framework in tourism studies, offering insights into why individuals do or do not participate in tourism activities and how they negotiate barriers to participation. Leisure constraints theory, initially conceptualized by Crawford and Godbey (1987), identifies three primary categories of constraints, namely, intrapersonal (psychological factors), interpersonal (social factors), and structural (external barriers such as time, money, or accessibility).

Although the leisure constraint model was developed to describe constraints to leisure participation, tourism scholars have applied the model as an overarching theory to investigate travel constraints. For example, leisure constraints theory has been applied to understand tourism seasonality, highlighting how constraints influence when and how people travel (de Almeida & Kastenholtz, 2019; Hinch et al., 2001). In addition, Yoon et.al. (2022) found four categories, namely, domestic underwater leisure education and condition, leisure facilities and user level, tourism information and environment, and financial constraints, in the context of underwater leisure constraints. This study revealed negative influence of constraints on tourism satisfaction. Moreover, Intrapersonal constraints mediate the relationship between structural constraints, perceived travel risk, and travel intention among Malaysian tourists during COVID-19, suggesting that tourism authorities should reduce constraints and mitigate risk perception (Aziz et al., 2022). Later, Clark & Nyaupane (2023) tried to understand millennials' nature-based tourism experience through travel constraints in a nature-based tourism context. From 276 millennials, they are able to identify four dimensions of travel constraints among millennials, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, time, and destination attributes. One recent study from Zientara et. al (2024) examines tourists' use of public transportation in ten European capitals. This recent study found significant relationship with intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints, however, depending upon types of tourists.

In this study, we seek to find travel constraints from Chinese tourists and aim to suggest tourism policy makers how to attract such tourism markets into their destination. Thailand is used as a case study.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine key reasons why Chinese tourists prefer not to visit a destination, like Thailand. Content analysis is particularly suitable for systematically analyzing data in this study to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Krippendorff, 2018). Data were collected from TikTok, one of the world's popular social platforms, created by Thai users to understand potential constraints from the destination perspective. The criteria were used for data selection included the contents mentioning why not Thailand and posted from January 2025. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have become influential channels for destination marketing and tourist decision-making processes. By examining how Thailand is portrayed, discussed, and perceived through Thai-generated TikTok content, this study offers a unique lens to identify potential misalignments between destination image projection and Chinese tourist expectations.

Contents of issues why not Chinese visiting Thailand contain total of 28 videos meeting these criteria. A subset of 28 videos was manually exported to the document application and coded by two independent researchers to validate and refine the themes identified through topic modeling.

4. Result and Discussion

Drawing upon data collected from TikTok content and user-generated comments, the findings shed light on the diverse range of constraints that discourage Chinese tourists from visiting Thailand. Interpreted through the lens of the Leisure Constraints Theory, these barriers manifest at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels. The findings of this study confirm the relevance of the Leisure Constraints Theory in explaining why Chinese tourists are hesitant to choose Thailand as a travel destination. Consistent with the foundational framework introduced by Crawford and Godbey (1987), the barriers identified fall into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural categories. Importantly, the data from TikTok comments show that these constraints are interconnected, rather than operating independently, echoing insights from later developments of the model (Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991).

Intrapersonal Constraints

Intrapersonal constraints primarily relate to tourists' perceptions and psychological states. A notable issue is the sense of declining novelty and excitement associated with Thailand. Many respondents expressed that Thailand is "not as attractive as before," reflecting a perception that the destination no longer offers new or distinctive experiences. For example, "*Thailand feels the same as last time—nothing new.*" This diminished sense of novelty is particularly evident among repeat visitors, who felt that Thailand failed to deliver fresh attractions to justify another trip. Additionally, changes in travel preferences, especially among younger generations, highlight a shift from organized group tours to independent travel, "*Younger tourists now travel alone, but it's not as convenient.*" While this shift reflects a desire for autonomy, it also reveals apprehension about safety and convenience when traveling independently. These findings suggest that intrapersonal constraints revolve less around resources and more around evolving perceptions of value, safety, and personal travel style.

The perception that Thailand has lost its novelty and that independent travel creates uncertainty among younger tourists resonates with studies emphasizing the role of psychological and perceptual factors in shaping travel behavior. For example, Aziz et al. (2022) found that intrapersonal constraints mediate between structural barriers and travel intention by shaping tourists' perceptions of risk. Similarly, in this study, perceptions of safety, value, and convenience were central to tourists' decision-making, suggesting that psychological barriers often amplify or reinterpret structural issues such as safety concerns or rising costs.

Interpersonal Constraints

The study also identifies significant barriers arising from social interactions and service encounters. A recurring theme in the TikTok narratives is dissatisfaction with the quality of services in Thailand, for instance. Chinese tourists shared negative experiences, such as being overcharged by taxis, encountering unfair practices in shops, and facing poor hospitality. For example, "*Taxi drivers charge unfair prices.*", "*Shops overcharge Chinese tourists.*" These experiences not only damaged individual tourist satisfaction but also circulated widely on social media, reinforcing negative impressions across a broader audience. Furthermore, interpersonal influences from peers and online communities amplify these constraints, as stories of scams or mistreatment are easily shared and shape collective attitudes toward Thailand. Thus, interpersonal constraints highlight how both direct experiences and mediated narratives within social networks act as deterrents to visiting Thailand, "*Bad experiences go viral on TikTok, discouraging others.*"

The dissatisfaction with service quality, reports of scams, and negative peer-to-peer communication align closely with Clark and Nyaupane's (2023) exploration of millennial travel constraints, where social interactions and destination attributes were identified as significant limiting factors. In the context of Chinese outbound tourism, social media platforms such as TikTok serve as powerful amplifiers of interpersonal constraints, spreading individual negative experiences across wider audiences. This confirms prior research that highlights the role of communication channels in shaping destination image (de Almeida & Kastenholz, 2019). The amplification effect also points to the importance of cross-cultural communication challenges, where minor service issues can quickly escalate into broader reputational problems.

Structural Constraints

The most prominent constraints identified fall within the structural category, encompassing external and situational barriers. Safety concerns were frequently mentioned, with tourists expressing doubts about Thailand's ability to guarantee a secure and reliable environment. Political instability, including government transitions and perceptions of uncertainty, further undermined confidence in the destination, "*Thailand's political situation is unstable.*" Another major structural constraint was economic in nature. The sluggish recovery of China's economy has reduced disposable income, making international travel less affordable for many. Tourists also highlighted dissatisfaction with the value-for-money proposition, criticizing the imbalance between rising prices and declining service quality, "*Prices are too high for the quality.*" Finally, policies from the Chinese government that actively promote domestic tourism or alternative destinations added another layer of structural limitation, redirecting tourist flows away from Thailand. For instance, "*The government promotes domestic destinations instead.*" Structural barriers emerged as the most dominant in this study, particularly economic hardship in China, political instability in Thailand, and perceived declines in value-for-money. These findings echo Yoon et al. (2022), who identified financial constraints as central in shaping satisfaction in underwater leisure activities. Similarly, Zientara et al. (2024) showed that structural and interpersonal constraints vary across tourist groups, highlighting that such barriers are not uniform but context-specific. In the Chinese case, declining disposable income and government policies redirecting tourist flows away from Thailand reflect macro-level influences that strongly condition travel decisions. These findings reinforce Hinch et al.'s (2001) argument that constraints are not limited to individual-level barriers but are embedded in broader tourism seasonality, economic, and policy contexts.

Taken together, the findings support the notion that constraints in tourism are multidimensional and interrelated. While structural factors such as declining purchasing power and political instability are critical, intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics play equally important roles in shaping perceptions and amplifying dissatisfaction. Consistent with the negotiation dimension of the leisure constraints framework, it is clear that reducing barriers cannot rely solely on addressing one category of constraint. Tourism authorities in Thailand need to simultaneously mitigate perceptions of risk, improve service quality and cross-cultural communication, and enhance destination value to compete effectively in the Chinese outbound market.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Chinese tourists' hesitation to visit Thailand is influenced by a complex interplay of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. While perceptions of diminished novelty and changing travel preferences shape intrapersonal

barriers, dissatisfaction with service encounters and peer-shared narratives amplify interpersonal constraints. Structural constraints—ranging from economic hardship to political instability and safety concerns—emerge as the most influential deterrents. Importantly, these constraints are interrelated: economic downturns (structural) shape perceptions of affordability (intrapersonal), while interpersonal complaints about scams are magnified through structural mechanisms such as digital media. The interconnected nature of these constraints underscores the need for Thailand's tourism policymakers and stakeholders to address barriers holistically in order to restore confidence among Chinese tourists.

The findings further highlight the importance of constraint negotiation strategies for Thailand to remain competitive in the Chinese tourism market. As the literature suggests, constraints do not automatically prevent participation; rather, tourists often attempt to negotiate them through psychological reframing, social support, or structural facilitation (Crawford et al., 1991; Aziz et al., 2022). For Thailand, this implies that restoring confidence among Chinese tourists requires a multi-pronged approach. On the intrapersonal level, campaigns emphasizing safety, novelty, and authentic experiences can counter perceptions of risk and monotony. On the interpersonal level, improving service quality, implementing anti-fraud measures, and investing in cross-cultural communication training for hospitality staff can mitigate dissatisfaction and reduce the spread of negative narratives online. At the structural level, collaborative tourism policies, competitive pricing strategies, and improved political communication are crucial to address economic and institutional barriers. By adopting integrated negotiation strategies that address all three layers of constraints, Thailand can reposition itself as a desirable and trustworthy destination for Chinese outbound tourists.

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