

TRADITIONAL FAITH IN THE DIGITAL AGE: RELIGIOUS TOURISM BEHAVIOR OF THAI MILLENNIALS IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

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Abstract: Digital technology is fundamentally transforming faith-based tourism in Thailand, particularly among young travelers. Thailand maintains its position as a significant global spiritual center with over 44,487 Buddhist temples and approximately 94% of Thais practicing Buddhism. Simultaneously, the country has emerged as one of the world's highest social media users, with 49.1 million users representing 68.3% of the population. The emergence of the "Mutelu" phenomenon exemplifies the integration of traditional spiritual beliefs with contemporary digital trends. Young travelers, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, demonstrate distinctive social media behaviors that reshape religious tourism experiences. The Tourism Authority of Thailand has developed the "12 Merit-Enhancing Routes" project under the concept of "Opening the Universe of Merit," with Phuket selected as a key destination. This research addresses the knowledge gap by examining the specific behavioral patterns of young Thai tourists in faith-based tourism under social media cultural influence. The study aims to provide crucial insights for tourism operators and stakeholders to develop faith-based tourism products aligned with contemporary traveler behaviors in the digital era.

Keywords: Faith-based tourism, Millennials and Gen Z, Religious tourism, Tourism behaviour, Digital transformation

1. Introduction

Faith-based tourism is experiencing fundamental transformation as digital technologies reshape how individuals engage with sacred spaces, particularly among younger generations who navigate spiritual practices through different cultural lenses.

Thailand, with over 44,487 Buddhist temples and 49.1 million social media users (68.3% of population), presents a compelling context for examining these transformations. The "Mutelu" phenomenon exemplifies how traditional religious tourism is being reimaged through digital integration, blending spiritual beliefs with contemporary social media trends.

Despite growing literature on faith-based tourism in Thailand, significant gaps remain in understanding how social media culture influences younger tourists' behaviors. Collins-Kreiner (2024) highlights increasing diversification of faith-based tourism visitors, driven partly by diminishing emphasis on traditional religious beliefs. However, specific mechanisms through which social media culture shapes these behaviors remain underexplored among young Thai tourists. This quantitative research addresses this knowledge gap by examining behavioral patterns of young Thai tourists in faith-based tourism under social media influence. The study objectives are: (1) to examine general characteristics of faith-based tourism patterns, activities, and destinations in Phuket Province, and (2) to investigate behaviors of Thai tourists at faith-based tourism sites in Phuket.

The study employs purposive sampling with 405 Thai tourists aged 18-25 years who have experience visiting faith-based tourism sites in Phuket Province.

2. Literature Review

Behavioral Patterns of Young Thais in the Social Media Era

Research by YouGov (2022) found that Thai Gen Z demonstrates distinctly different social media usage patterns compared to other generations, primarily utilizing TikTok (20%) and Instagram (14%). Nation Thailand (2025) reported that Thai Gen Z spends an average of 12 hours and 8 minutes per day online, significantly higher than the average across all age groups, thereby creating greater opportunities for awareness and access to various types of tourism experiences more easily and comprehensively.

Role of Social Media in Faith-Based Tourism

O'Keeffe and Dowson's (2024) study on social media usage in merit-seeking activities found that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp play roles across five main stages: pre-travel preparation, real-time updates, community building, experience sharing, and post-travel reflection. Additionally, research by Travel and Tour World (2024) supports that TikTok is becoming a primary travel recommendation source for Gen Z and Millennials, emphasizing the discovery of local experiences over visiting traditional popular tourist attractions.

Place Attachment and Destination Loyalty

Patwardhan et al. (2020) conducted significant research finding that tourists' emotional experiences mediate the effects of place attachment on destination loyalty in faith-based tourism contexts. The study also found that religious involvement plays a moderating role in the relationship between place attachment and loyalty. This aligns with Yu et al. (2025) research, which revealed important psychological mechanisms, finding that feelings of awe and subjective well-being mediate the relationship between perceived value and donation intentions. This explains why faith-based tourists tend to revisit destinations repeatedly and support conservation efforts at these locations.

Thailand as a Faith-Based Tourism Destination

Thailand's position as a premier faith-based tourism destination is anchored in its rich Buddhist heritage and extensive network of religious sites. The country hosts over 44,487 Buddhist temples, making it one of the world's most significant Buddhist centers (National Office of Buddhism, 2023). Approximately 94% of Thailand's population practices Buddhism, creating an authentic cultural environment that attracts both domestic and international faith-based tourists (Department of Religious Affairs, 2022).

Recent research by Srisuk and Thongrawd (2021) examined the development of Buddhist tourism in Thailand, identifying key factors that contribute to the country's appeal as a faith-based destination. These include the presence of historically significant temples, the continuation of living Buddhist traditions, the accessibility of religious sites, and the integration of spiritual practices with cultural experiences. The study highlighted that Thailand's Buddhist tourism market has shown consistent growth, with domestic tourists representing the largest segment.

3. Method

This research employs a quantitative research approach. The study population consists of 405 Thai tourists aged between 18-25 years who have experience participating in tourism activities at faith-based tourism sites in Phuket Province. The sample selection utilizes purposive sampling methods, with selection criteria including Thai tourists who have experience engaging in tourism activities at faith-based tourism sites in Phuket Province, such as Put Jaw Chinese Shrine and Jui Tui Shrine, Wat Chalong, Khao Rang Samakkee Tham Temple, among others. Data analysis employs descriptive statistics to analyze various data sets by examining frequency distribution and calculating percentages, as well as analyzing mean values to summarize the research findings.

4. Result and Discussion

The majority of survey respondents were female, totaling 212 individuals (52.3 percent). The age group with the highest proportion was 21-30 years, comprising 186 individuals (45.9 percent), followed by the 31-40 years age group with 134 individuals (33.1 percent). Combined, the 21-40 years age group accounts for 79.0 percent of the total sample, reflecting that the majority of faith-based tourists belong to the Millennials and Gen Y generations who are in their working years with purchasing power. Most respondents had single status, totaling 238 individuals (58.8 percent). Regarding educational level, the majority held bachelor's degrees, numbering 233 individuals (57.5 percent), indicating that the sample population possesses high educational levels. The largest occupational group was self-employed business/trade, comprising 119 individuals (29.4 percent), which reflects flexibility in time allocation for tourism activities.

Table 1

Table showing the three highest-ranked tourist behaviors classified by travel purpose, travel companions, and expenditure on activities at faith-based tourism sites in Phuket Province

Tourist Behavior	Quantity	Percent
Purpose of travel		
Relaxation and seeking spiritual refuge	245	60.5
Paying respects and seeking blessings at sacred sites	242	59.8
Merit-making and almsgiving based on personal beliefs	240	59.3
Travel Companions for Faith-Based Tourism Activities		
Family	170	42.0
Friends	89	22.0
Individual travel/Solo	56	13.8
Spending at Faith-Based Tourism Attractions		
301-500 THB	162	40.0
Less than 300 THB	144	35.6

501 – 1,000 THB

76

18.8

From Table 1, the analysis results reveal interesting trends regarding the primary purposes of tourists, which are diverse and closely aligned. The top purpose is relaxation or seeking spiritual refuge, with 245 respondents (60.5 percent), followed by paying respects and seeking blessings from sacred objects with 242 respondents (59.8 percent), and making merit according to personal beliefs with 240 respondents (59.3 percent). This data reflects that tourists have mixed purposes, combining spiritual needs (relaxation and seeking spiritual refuge) with religious beliefs (paying respects and making merit) in nearly equal proportions.

Regarding travel patterns, faith-based tourism is primarily a family activity, with the majority of respondents traveling with family members, totaling 170 individuals (42.0 percent), followed by traveling with friends at 89 individuals (22.0 percent), and solo travel at 56 individuals (13.8 percent). The research findings indicate that family travel accounting for nearly half of all trips reflects Thai cultural characteristics that emphasize engaging in religious activities together as a family unit.

In terms of spending for paying respects and seeking blessings from sacred objects, tourists demonstrate moderate spending levels. The largest group spent 301-500 baht, comprising 162 individuals (40.0 percent), followed by those spending less than 300 baht at 144 individuals (35.6 percent), and those spending 501-1,000 baht at 76 individuals (18.8 percent). This data shows that 75.6 percent of tourists spend no more than 500 baht per visit. These findings reflect faith-based tourism behavior that emphasizes belief over monetary expenditure, representing tourism that is accessible to people across all income levels.

Table 2

Tourist Behavior Classified by Frequency of Visits or Tourism Activities at Faith-Based Tourism Sites in Phuket Province within the Past Year

Frequency	Quantity	Percent
More than 3 times	162	40.0
2 times	111	27.4
3 times	74	18.3
First time	58	14.3
Total	405	100

From Table 2, the analysis of tourist behavior visiting or engaging in activities at faith-based tourism sites reveals that the majority of respondents traveled to or participated in tourism activities at faith-based tourism sites more than 3 times, totaling 162 individuals representing 40 percent, traveled twice at 111 individuals representing 27.4 percent, traveled 3 times at 74 individuals representing 18.3 percent, and first-time visitors at 58 individuals representing 14.3 percent. The frequency analysis of faith-based tourism travel in Phuket Province within the past year reveals data reflecting the **attachment and continuity** of tourists toward faith-based tourism sites.

Furthermore, the research findings demonstrate that the majority of tourists are **repeat visitors** who travel **more than 3 times per year**. This data highlights the **sustainability and continuity** of faith-based tourism in Phuket Province, indicating that tourists have attachment and faith in these locations, leading to repeated visits. The positive experiences they receive likely encourage return trips. Moreover, this high proportion of repeat visitors reflects the

development potential of faith-based tourism sites in Phuket Province to become sustainable destinations with an established customer base.

Table 3

Tourist Behavior: Top Three Rankings of Social Media Usage at Faith-Based Tourism Attractions in Phuket Province

Social Media Usage Behavior	Quantity	Percent
Types of Social Media Used for Searching Faith-Based Tourism Information		
Instagram	155	38.2
Tiktok	107	26.4
Facebook	98	24.1
Reasons for Choosing Social Media as a Tool for Searching Faith-Based Tourism Information		
Receiving current and trending tourism information	162	40.0
Having comprehensive important details for travel planning	139	34.3
Speed and accessibility from any location	128	31.6
Social Media Influence on Faith-Based Tourism Decision-Making		
Gaining in-depth information from news feeds through social media	149	36.7
Visiting places of personal interest based on location reviews through social media	132	32.5
Discovering additional faith-based tourism sites through social media information	102	25.1

From Table 3, regarding the types of social media used for information searching, research findings reveal that Instagram is the most popular platform among faith-based tourists, with 155 users representing 38.2 percent, followed by TikTok with 107 individuals (26.4 percent) and Facebook with 98 individuals (24.1 percent), respectively. This finding reflects the changing media consumption behavior of younger tourists who are increasingly turning to platforms that emphasize visual and video content.

Regarding motivation for social media selection, the study found that the primary reason tourists choose social media as a tool for searching faith-based tourism information is receiving current and trending tourism information, with 162 respondents (40.0 percent), followed by the need for important and comprehensive details for travel planning at 139 individuals (34.3 percent), and speed and convenience in accessing information from any location at 128 individuals (31.6 percent). These findings highlight the needs of younger tourists who desire real-time information and efficiency in travel planning.

Concerning social media influence on tourism decision-making, research results reveal that social media plays a significant role in influencing faith-based tourism decisions. The most important influence is receiving in-depth information through social media news feeds, with 149 individuals (36.7 percent), followed by making decisions to visit places of personal interest based on location reviews through social media at 132 individuals (32.5 percent), and discovering additional faith-based tourism sites through social media information at 102 individuals (25.1 percent). This data further demonstrates the influential role of social media as an important intermediary in the tourism decision-making process of younger generations.

Table 4

Number and Percentage of Top 3 Tourist Behaviors and Awareness of Faith-Based Tourism Sites in Phuket Province by Previously Visited Locations

Faith-Based Tourism Attractions in Phuket Province	Previously Engaged in Faith-Based Tourism Activities	Most Impressed and Intend to Revisit
Put Jaw Chinese Shrine and Jui Tui Shrine	290 (71.6%)	137 (33.8%)
Wat Chalong	271 (66.9%)	108 (26.7%)
Khao Rang Samakkee Tham Temple	240 (59.3%)	34 (8.4%)

From Table 4, the analysis of tourist behavior categorized by visited activity sites reveals that the most popular location is Put Jaw Chinese Shrine and Jui Tui Shrine, with 290 individuals (representing 71.6 percent), followed by Wat Chalong with 271 individuals (representing 66.9 percent), and Khao Rang Samakkee Tham Temple with 240 individuals (representing 59.3 percent).

However, when considering the level of impression and desire to return for another visit, the findings show that although Put Jaw Chinese Shrine and Jui Tui Shrine remain in first place, the proportion of impressed visitors decreased to 137 individuals (representing 33.8 percent), while Wat Chalong had 108 impressed visitors (representing 26.7 percent), and Khao Rang Samakkee Tham Temple had only 34 impressed visitors (representing 8.4 percent). The research findings also reveal that although all three sites received visits in similar proportions, when considering the impression that would lead to return visits, Put Jaw Chinese Shrine and Jui Tui Shrine were able to create greater impressions among tourists, with a higher conversion rate from "previously visited" to "impressed and wanting to return" compared to other locations. This reflects the differing quality of faith-based tourism experiences at each site.

5. Conclusions

The Phenomenon of Faith-Based Tourism in the Digital Era: Significant Transformations

The research findings reveal a clear adaptation of faith-based tourism behavior in the digital age, particularly evidenced by the 21-40 age group comprising 79.0 percent of the sample population. This aligns with global trends indicating that Gen Z and Millennials are transforming faith-based tourism patterns, with faith-based travel accounting for 60 percent of domestic tourism in India and projected to grow at an annual rate of 16.2 percent (Singh, 2024). The Tourism Authority of Thailand's launch of the AI application "Mu Thua Thai Pai Kub AI" to attract Gen Z to faith-based tourism, with Thailand's faith-based tourism market valued at 15 billion baht in 2023, demonstrates recognition and policy-level response to this trend (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024).

Integration of Traditional Faith with Modern Technology

Research findings indicating that tourists possess diverse primary objectives—namely relaxation and seeking spiritual refuge, paying respects for blessings, and merit-making—reflect the phenomenon of "**Digital Spirituality**" emerging in the contemporary era. Campbell's (2013) study of "digital religion," defined as "religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures," demonstrates that contemporary faith-based tourism encompasses not merely the pursuit of traditional spiritual experiences but also the search for psychological equilibrium in a technology-saturated world.

The moderate spending behavior of younger tourists (expenditure not exceeding 500 baht per visit) indicates increasingly accessible faith-based tourism, consistent with data showing Thai Gen Z spending an average of 12 hours and 8 minutes daily on the internet and primarily utilizing social media to search for content regarding self-development, income-generating skills development, and tourism destination discovery (Nation Thailand, 2025). This enables more efficient travel planning to visit tourism sites.

The Phenomenon of Repeat Visitors: Attachment Beyond Expectations

The most compelling finding of this research is that repeat visitors constitute 85.7 percent of the sample, significantly higher than studies in other contexts. Patwardhan et al.'s (2020) research on place attachment in faith-based tourism found that emotional experiences mediate the relationship between place attachment and destination loyalty. This aligns with Kamath et al.'s (2023) study, which discovered that tourists demonstrate loyalty to religious event venues through motivation, shared beliefs, emotional solidarity, and memorable religious experiences. Furthermore, the high proportion of repeat visitation in Phuket Province reflects what recent studies term "spiritual connection and break from the pressures of modern life," whereby these locations possess profound cultural and spiritual significance and provide opportunities for exploring traditional and personal values. These findings indicate that faith-based tourism in Phuket Province can create sufficiently valuable and meaningful experiences to encourage tourist returns. This corresponds with Duangtip Nakratok's (2020) study demonstrating that religious sites providing in-depth information and knowledge concerning culture and beliefs aligned with tourist interests create direct experiences, enhance positive psychological empowerment, and generate opportunities for future revisitation.

Social Media Influence on Tourism Behavior

The popularity and highest impression rates of Put Jaw Chinese Shrine and Jui Tui Shrine reflect social media's influence in driving tourism. O'Keeffe and Dowson's (2024) research found that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become essential tools for pilgrims, playing roles in providing information and support, promoting connections with other pilgrims, sharing personal experiences, and facilitating spiritual discourse.

This phenomenon aligns with Tourism Authority of Thailand research indicating that Millennials and Gen Z are increasingly utilizing TikTok as a source of real-time travel recommendations and prioritizing the discovery of local experiences, such as sampling local cuisine and spending time genuinely connecting with local residents, over visiting traditional popular tourist attractions (Travel and Tour World, 2024).

The Formation of "Digital Spirituality" Phenomenon in Thai Faith-Based Tourism

The emergence of the "Digital Spirituality" phenomenon in Thailand's faith-based tourism context, with Instagram achieving highest popularity, aligns with global trends indicating that Instagram is the most popular platform for tourism content, with 45 percent of travelers utilizing this platform for tourism-related activities (Winsavvy, 2024), and 89 percent of tourists using social media for travel inspiration (Benoit Properties, 2024). This phenomenon demonstrates how young Thai tourists seamlessly integrate traditional beliefs with digital technology, not replacing traditional faith but rather expanding channels for accessing and expressing spirituality.

Transformation of Family and Social Patterns

Family travel remaining the primary pattern, even in the digital age, demonstrates the significance of Thai culture emphasizing collective family participation in religious activities. However, the increasing proportions of solo and friend-based travel reflect transformations in Thai society, whereby Gen Z and Millennials experience concerns regarding cost of living,

unemployment, and income inequality, alongside heightened environmental concerns (Deloitte Thailand, 2024).

The Role of Technology in Conservation and Faith-Based Tourism Development

The success of faith-based tourism in Phuket Province in generating high repeat visitors reflects the integration of authenticity preservation with digital adaptation. The "Mutelu Wave" phenomenon occurring in Thailand demonstrates seamless integration of Thai spiritual traditions with contemporary digital trends (Thailand NOW, 2024). However, this research raises important questions regarding maintaining equilibrium between commercial development and traditional sacredness. Furthermore, Collins-Kreiner's (2024) recent study indicates increasing visitor diversification in faith-based tourism, driven partly by diminishing emphasis on traditional religious beliefs in contemporary society. This signifies that these sites must adapt to accommodate visitors with increasingly diverse motivations.

Impact on Sustainable Development

The global faith-based tourism market, projected to grow from \$254.3 billion in 2023 to \$671.93 billion in 2030 (Varga, 2024), demonstrates significant economic potential. The research finding of 85.7% repeat visitors carries substantial implications for sustainable tourism development, as recent studies indicate that feelings of awe and subjective well-being at sacred sites lead to loyalty and donation behaviors for conservation purposes (Yu et al., 2025). This demonstrates that creating quality experiential activities not only generates tourist satisfaction but also supports long-term conservation and development of tourism sites (Aiyarat Apasin, 2020).

The research findings reveal successful adaptation of faith-based tourism in Phuket Province to the digital era while maintaining traditional values. This success is reflected in high repeat visitor rates, appropriate spending levels, and diverse travel purposes. This study not only supports the concept of "Digital Spirituality" but also demonstrates the potential for developing faith-based tourism as a sustainable tourism model that creates value for both tourists and local communities. Understanding young tourist behavior in the social media era will be crucial for developing marketing strategies and tourism site development that responds to future market demands while preserving the authenticity and sacredness of these locations.

Challenges and New Opportunities in Faith-Based Tourism

This transformation presents both opportunities and challenges for the religious tourism industry. "Tour operators in Thailand have the opportunity to leverage social media to expand the scope of the tourism sector" (Future Market Insights, 2024), particularly through influencer marketing strategies, as evidenced by "the Tourism Authority of Thailand's collaboration with TikTok Thailand for the 'Amazing Thailand Passion Ambassador' campaign, inviting tourists to create content showcasing more meaningful travel experiences" (Skift, 2024). However, this research indicates that faith-based tourism in the social media era does not replace traditional beliefs but rather represents a "reimagining" of expression forms and access to the sacred through digital technology. This creates new opportunities for Thailand's tourism industry to reach high-potential young markets while maintaining equilibrium between commercial development and conservation of authenticity and sacredness of faith-based tourism sites in the 21st century.

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