



Mu-Thelu tourist behavior and motivations: A case study in Thailand

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-6641

Volume: 04

Issue: 03

May-June 2025

Received: 09-03-2025

Accepted: 13-04-2025

Page No: 47-55

Abstract

This study aimed to examine the motivations and behaviors of spiritual-themed tourists in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province using a quantitative research approach. The sample consisted of 400 tourists who engaged in spiritual tourism, with data collected through questionnaires and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that: (1) demographic factors—such as gender, age, education level, occupation, average income, religion, and place of origin—were significantly associated with spiritual tourism behavior; (2) both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were significantly related to spiritual tourism behavior. Key intrinsic motivations included the desire to pay respect for peace of mind and personal spiritual development, while major extrinsic motivations involved social media influence and popular trends; and (3) spiritual tourism behaviors observed included traveling to seek blessings for career success, traveling 2–3 times per year, traveling with family, and spending at a moderate level during trips. These findings are beneficial for planning and developing spiritual tourism to better meet the needs of contemporary travelers and to promote sustainable tourism growth.

Keywords: Tourism motivation, tourist behavior, spiritual tourism, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

1. Introduction

Spiritual tourism, commonly referred to in Thailand as “Mu-Thelu” tourism, represents a compelling phenomenon that blends belief systems, religious practices, traditional cultural values, and contemporary ideologies. This form of tourism has gained notable popularity, particularly among younger generations seeking luck, spiritual reassurance, and psychological refuge amid growing societal uncertainties (Thai PBS, 2023; Taopahiran, 2023; Urban Creature, 2023). Nakhon Si Thammarat Province has emerged as a major spiritual tourism destination, renowned for its sacred sites steeped in legend and historical significance, which attract large numbers of visitors for pilgrimage and blessing-seeking activities (True ID, 2024; Public Relations Department, 2024).

Despite the increasing prominence of spiritual tourism, in-depth academic research exploring the underlying motivations, influencing factors, and behavioral patterns of spiritual tourists remains limited. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the relationships between demographic factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and spiritual tourism behaviors in Nakhon Si Thammarat. The goal is to generate insights that can inform strategic tourism planning to better meet tourist needs and contribute to the sustainable development of faith-based tourism in Thailand.

2. Literature Review

This study on the motivations and behaviors of spiritual tourists in Nakhon Si Thammarat draws upon a wide range of literature, including books, academic articles, reports, and related research. The goal is to establish a conceptual foundation, develop relevant hypotheses, and construct the research framework. The key areas of literature reviewed are outlined as follows:

2.1. Concepts and Theories Related to Tourism

Tourism is a vital service industry that contributes significantly to both economic and social development. Although various definitions exist, they commonly emphasize temporary travel away from one’s usual place of residence for non-income-

generating purposes such as leisure, recreation, and the consumption of services (Goeldner *et al.*, 2006; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2002; Klongthong, 2022)^[8]. Tourism also represents a complex interaction among multiple stakeholders (McIntosh & Goeldner, 1984)^[12]. It can be categorized based on several criteria such as geographical scope, characteristics of the destination, the nature of the tourist experience, and the purpose of travel (Tourism Standard Development Bureau, 2021; Khwanmuang, 2016). Understanding these conceptual foundations supports the effective planning and promotion of tourism that aligns with tourist expectations and facilitates sustainable development.

2.2. Concepts and Theories Related to Demographics

Demography is the study of populations, particularly in terms of structure, size, distribution, and change. It encompasses fundamental factors such as age, gender, education, income, occupation, religion, ethnicity, and place of residence, all of which are associated with individual behaviors, decisions, and lifestyles in various contexts (Satawetin, 2021; Panjaphong & Prasartkul, 2021). In the context of marketing, demographic analysis serves as a key tool for market segmentation, consumer behavior analysis, and strategic planning tailored to specific target groups (Serirat *et al.*, 2020). Key demographic variables—including age, gender, income, education, occupation, family status, and location—are known to influence preferences, tastes, and purchasing behaviors. A sound understanding of demographic characteristics enables marketers and planners to design more precise and effective strategies that resonate with diverse consumer segments.

2.3. Concepts and Theories Related to Tourism Motivation

Motivation refers to the driving force behind individual behavior aimed at achieving specific goals or satisfying needs. In the context of tourism, motivation represents the internal or external stimuli that encourage tourists to travel to particular destinations to fulfill various needs, such as relaxation, stress relief, personal enrichment, or spiritual fulfillment (Labbamrungwong, 2019; O'Reilly, 2020; Thauthamphithak *et al.*, 2022; Klongthong, 2022; Nakratok, 2020)^[11, 13]. Motivation can generally be categorized into two types: intrinsic motivation, which arises from internal satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which is triggered by external environmental stimuli.

One of the most widely recognized theories in tourism motivation is Dann's (1977) push and pull factor model, which posits that tourism behavior is driven by internal push factors (e.g., escape, relaxation) and external pull factors (e.g., destination attractions). Crompton (1979)^[9] further developed this model by emphasizing the interaction between internal and external forces in travel decision-making (as cited in Phumiborpap, 2018). In the context of spiritual tourism, key motivational drivers include religious faith, spiritual needs, cultural attraction, as well as influence from peers and social media (Chanthasuri, 2022). Understanding these motivations is essential for designing tourism products and experiences that align with tourists' expectations and lead to meaningful and sustainable experiences.

2.4. Concepts and Theories Related to Tourist Behavior

The study of tourist behavior provides insight into the needs, preferences, and decision-making processes of target groups,

thereby enhancing the effectiveness of tourism development. Consumer behavior encompasses the processes involved in searching for, evaluating, selecting, and using products or services to meet personal needs (Techasaksri, 2019; Phongli, 2021; Leechaimongkol *et al.*, 2021)^[25]. Behavioral analysis tools such as 6W1H and the 7O's model help researchers understand consumer actions by exploring questions like who the target audience is, what they want, when they purchase, and how they make decisions (Phongli, 2021).

Additionally, the Stimulus-Response (S-R) theory explains that consumer behavior results from external stimuli that enter the "buyer's black box"—a metaphor for internal psychological processing—and lead to specific responses or purchasing decisions (Serirat *et al.*, 2003). When applied to tourism, these behavioral frameworks are collectively referred to as "tourist behavior," encompassing pre-trip planning, the travel experience itself, and post-travel reflections (Seaton & Bennett, 1996, as cited in Khongprasert, 2017). Important variables include demographic characteristics, travel objectives, motivation, trip planning, activity selection, travel companions, expenditure, and satisfaction (Klongthong, 2022). These insights are instrumental in identifying target segments, designing appropriate tourism products, developing marketing strategies, and enhancing the overall tourist experience.

2.5. Information on "Mu-Telu" Spiritual Tourism

The phenomenon of Mu-Telu (a Thai term referring to spiritual practices blending superstition, religion, and popular culture) has gained widespread popularity, particularly among younger generations seeking psychological and emotional support. This trend reflects a fusion of traditional beliefs, religious practices, cultural heritage, and contemporary values (Thai PBS, 2023; Ananya Tosangchai, 2022). Although rooted in long-standing spiritual traditions, Mu-Telu has expanded in modern times to include the use of amulets, online ritual participation, and engagement in innovative spiritual activities (Supajira Srimeetham & Rattanawadee Setthachit, 2023).

The majority of Thais maintain beliefs related to fortune, supernatural powers, and spiritual rituals, often participating in merit-making or blessing ceremonies (Mahidol University College of Management, 2020; Urban Creature, 2023). This is especially prominent among Gen Y, who exhibit particularly strong belief in astrology and spiritual forces (Thai Post, 2023; Thansettakij, 2023)^[28]. When connected with tourism, these beliefs align closely with religious and cultural tourism, wherein travelers visit sacred sites to perform rituals and receive blessings (Khon Kaen University, 2024).

Mu-Telu tourism also contributes to local economic development through expenditures on accommodations, food and beverages, souvenirs, and other services (Future Markets Insight, 2022; Thansettakij, 2023; Phannapap Chanachai & Anamai Damnet, 2024)^[28]. This indicates that Mu-Telu tourism not only integrates belief systems with travel experiences but also promotes psychological well-being, cultural continuity, and balanced local economic development.

2.6. Mu-Telu Tourism in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

Nakhon Si Thammarat Province is recognized as one of Thailand's most prominent Mu-Telu tourism destinations,

owing to its significant religious and cultural landmarks deeply embedded in local belief systems. These include: Wat Phra Mahathat Woramahawihan, which enshrines a relic of the Buddha; Wat Chedi (Ai Khai), famed for the legend of a sacred child spirit; Wat That Noi, which preserves the remains of the revered monk Phor Than Khlaai; the City Pillar Shrine, designed in Srivijaya architectural style and home to the guardian deity Jatukam Ramathep; Wat Khao Khun Phanom, believed to be the retreat of King Taksin the Great; and Wat Yang Yai (Ta Phra Phan Bun), featuring a pink statue of a local forest hermit spirit known for granting fortune and protection.

These spiritual sites not only reflect the profound faith embedded in the region's culture but also serve as pivotal drivers of the local tourism economy through experiential travel. Moreover, they play a critical role in the preservation of cultural heritage while fostering sustainable tourism development. As such, Mu-Telu tourism in Nakhon Si Thammarat represents a unique convergence of spirituality, culture, and economic growth, making it an invaluable asset in Thailand's broader tourism landscape.

2.7. Hypothesis Development and Related Studies

Previous studies have explored motivations and behaviors related to faith-based tourism in various contexts. For instance, Siwaporn Meenapha (2018) ^[22] found that motivation had no significant influence on tourism behavior in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province, whereas Duangrat Koykitcharoen (2019) ^[5] identified that the physical environment significantly affected religious tourism behavior in Phuket. Duangthip Nakratok (2020) investigated specific motivational dimensions and concluded that these played a critical role in tourists' pilgrimage behaviors. Regarding demographic factors, Kwanchanok Suwanpong (2021) found significant correlations between demographic characteristics and behavior in Buddhist ritual-based tourism in Phuket.

In studies addressing both push and pull motivations, Wipapada Thauthampitak *et al.* (2022) reported that tourists exhibited high levels of both internal and external motivations, with external motivations varying across demographic profiles. Siwat Kongthong (2022) concluded that motivation and the perceived potential of tourism sites significantly influenced tourists' revisit intentions. Specifically concerning Mu-Telu tourism, Athip Chansuri (2022) ^[2] analyzed the phenomenon as arising from a combination of internal and external factors, while Saowalak Taphaothiran (2023) ^[19] highlighted the relationship between belief in Mu-Telu and behaviors related to seeking assurance and engaging in risk-taking. Chansuri (2022) ^[2] also examined the influence of social media on spiritual travel decisions.

In the context of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phattanun Athitang *et al.* (2024) ^[16] conducted a study on Wat Chedi (Ai Khai) and found that Mu-Telu tourism is closely intertwined with social influence and spiritual belief, with service quality playing a pivotal role in enhancing competitive advantage. Additionally, Arisara Imuan (2024) ^[1] found that intentions to seek blessings in areas such as career, mental and physical well-being, and spirituality were key factors influencing participation in Mu-Telu tourism at Wat Phra Sri Uma Devi (Wat Khaek, Silom).

Based on the review of literature and related empirical studies, the researcher developed a conceptual framework that identifies demographic factors and travel motivations (both internal and external) as independent variables, and Mu-Telu tourism behavior as the dependent variable. This framework forms the basis for two research hypotheses. Conducting the study within this framework is expected to yield findings that contribute to more targeted and sustainable development of Mu-Telu tourism in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, in alignment with contemporary tourist expectations and cultural dynamics.

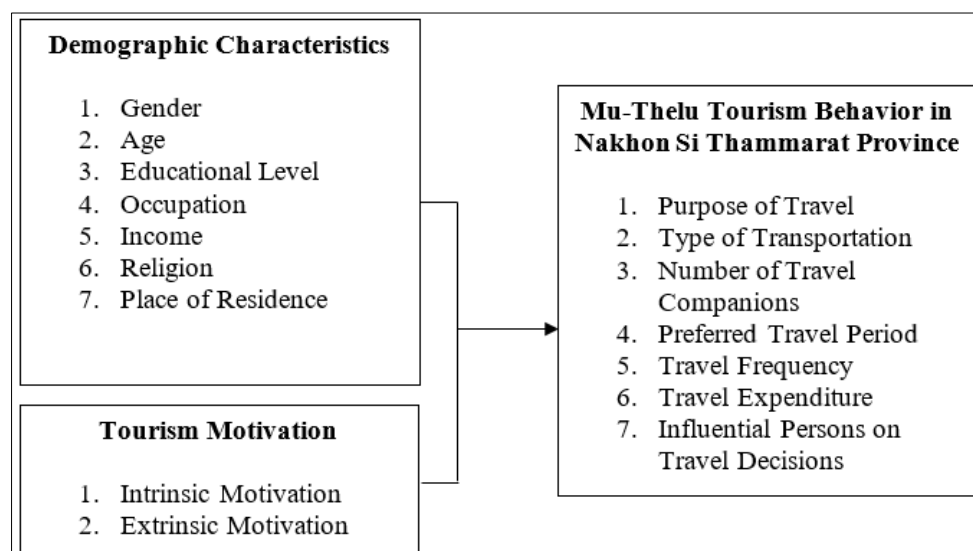


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Findings from the aforementioned related studies provided a critical foundation for identifying the variables and formulating the research hypotheses concerning the influence of demographic factors, travel motivation, and Mu-Telu tourism behavior in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. These insights support the development of effective and context-

sensitive tourism promotion strategies. Based on the conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1(H1): Demographic factors are associated with Mu-Telu tourism behavior in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

Hypothesis 1(H2): Travel motivation is associated with Mu-Telu tourism behavior in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

Research Methodology

This study aimed to analyze travel motivation and the behavior of Mu-Telu tourists in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. The target population consisted of tourists participating in faith-based tourism in the province. Since the total number of such tourists could not be precisely determined, Cochran's formula was used to calculate the sample size at a **95%** confidence level and a **0.05** margin of error, resulting in a total sample of **402** respondents. Data were collected from six popular Mu-Telu tourist destinations using multistage sampling techniques (including stratified, quota, and convenience sampling). The independent variables included demographic characteristics and travel motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic), while the dependent variable was Mu-Telu tourism behavior.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire developed based on relevant theories and prior studies. It was divided into three sections and underwent a quality assurance process through content validity (assessed by Item-Objective Congruence, or IOC) and reliability testing (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$). Data sources included primary data collected through questionnaires and secondary data from academic documents and related literature. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics—such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation—and inferential statistics using

chi-square tests to examine the associations between variables as specified in the research hypotheses.

4. Research Results

4.1. General Information of the Respondents

In terms of gender, the majority of respondents were female (263 participants), accounting for 65.75%, followed by males (128 participants), accounting for 32%. Regarding age, most respondents were between 26 and 35 years old (210 participants or 52.50%), followed by those aged 36 to 45 years (76 participants or 19%). As for educational level, the majority held a bachelor's degree (252 participants or 63%), followed by those with less than a bachelor's degree (82 participants or 22%). Concerning occupation, the largest group worked as government officials, state enterprise employees, or employees of public organizations (103 participants or 43.75%), followed by those in private business/entrepreneurship/freelance occupations (124 participants or 31%).

In terms of average monthly income, most respondents earned between 15,001–30,000 THB (175 participants or 43.75%), followed by those earning between 30,001–50,000 THB (90 participants or 22.50%). The majority of respondents identified as Buddhist (390 participants or 97.50%), followed by Muslims (6 participants or 1.50%). Lastly, regarding place of origin, most respondents were from Southern Thailand (343 participants or 85.75%), followed by those from the Northern region (21 participants or 5.25%).

Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Demographic Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	128	32.00
	Female	263	65.75
	Not specified	9	2.25
	Total	400	100.00
Age	18–25 years	21	5.25
	26–35 years	210	52.50
	36–45 years	76	19.00
	46–55 years	56	14.00
	56–65 years	34	8.50
	66 years and above	3	0.75
	Total	400	100.00
Educational Level	Below Bachelor's degree	82	22.00
	Bachelor's degree	252	63.00
	Higher than Bachelor's degree	60	15.00
	Total	400	100.00
Occupation	Student	30	7.50
	Government/state enterprise/organization officer	103	43.75
	Private company employee	94	22.50
	Business owner/self-employed	124	31.00
	Homemaker/retired	26	6.50
	Others	23	5.75
	Total	400	100.00
Monthly Income	Less than 15,000 THB	77	19.25
	15,001–30,000 THB	175	43.75
	30,001–50,000 THB	90	22.50
	More than 50,000 THB	58	14.50
	Total	400	100.00
Religion	Buddhism	390	97.50
	Christianity	4	1.00
	Islam	6	1.50
	Others	0	0.00
	Total	400	100.00
Place of Residence	Northern region	21	5.25
	Central region	8	2.00

	Eastern region	6	1.50
	Northeastern region	13	3.25
	Bangkok and vicinity	9	2.25
	Western region	0	0.00
	Southern region	343	85.75
	Total	400	100.00

4.2 Motivations for Mu-Thelu Tourism

For intrinsic motivation, it was found that the respondents' overall level of intrinsic motivation for engaging in Mu-Thelu tourism in Nakhon Si Thammarat was high (Mean = 4.32, S.D. = 0.11). When examined item by item, the highest mean score was found for "worshipping sacred objects for peace of mind and emotional support" (Mean = 4.49, S.D. = 0.83), followed by "opportunities for mental, emotional, and

intellectual development" (Mean = 4.38, S.D. = 0.85).

For extrinsic motivation, the overall level was also high (Mean = 3.93, S.D. = 0.05). The highest mean score was observed for "influence of popular trends and word-of-mouth" (Mean = 4.00, S.D. = 1.07), followed by "stimuli from reviews and social media posts" (Mean = 3.99, S.D. = 1.09), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Motivations for Mu-Thelu Tourism in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

Motivation Type	Item	Mean	S.D.
Internal Motivation	1. Faith in sacred entities and supernatural powers	4.27	0.86
	2. Worship of sacred objects for peace of mind and encouragement	4.49	0.83
	3. Opportunity for mental, intellectual, and spiritual development	4.38	0.85
	4. Belief in blessings and auspiciousness from sacred entities	4.37	0.86
	5. Inspiring new perspectives and motivation in life	4.25	0.96
	6. Expression of identity, beliefs, and way of life	4.17	0.97
	Overall Internal Motivation	4.32	0.11
External Motivation	1. Influence and persuasion from people around	3.90	1.05
	2. Stimulation from social media reviews and posts	3.99	1.09
	3. Inspiration from celebrities or public figures who have visited	3.97	1.06
	4. Desire to participate in rituals or significant religious festivals	3.85	1.11
	5. Motivation from success stories of past visitors	3.92	1.05
	6. Influence from popular trends and word-of-mouth	4.00	1.07
	Overall External Motivation	3.93	0.05

4.3. Mu-Thelu Tourism Behaviors

Regarding the primary purpose of Mu-Thelu tourism, most respondents reported traveling to seek blessings for career advancement (n = 189, 47.25%), followed by blessings for luck and fortune (n = 120, 30%). In terms of travel frequency, the majority traveled two to three times per year (n = 207, 51.75%), followed by four to five times per year (n = 129, 32.25%). For the mode of transportation, most respondents traveled using private vehicles (n = 372, 93%), followed by public transportation (n = 20, 5%). Regarding travel companions, most respondents traveled with family (n = 325, 81.25%), followed by friends (n = 57, 14.25%). In terms of factors influencing the decision to travel, most respondents cited personal beliefs and faith (n = 306, 76.50%), followed by recommendations from close acquaintances (n = 39,

9.75%).

For the average travel expenditure per trip, most spent 1,001–3,000 THB (n = 166, 41.50%), followed by less than 1,000 THB (n = 126, 31.50%). Regarding preferred travel timing, most respondents indicated no specific time (n = 160, 40%), followed by weekdays (n = 83, 20.75%). In terms of amulets or sacred objects previously purchased, most reported buying auspicious items such as Buddha amulets or coins (n = 140, 35%), followed by items associated with financial fortune (n = 82, 20.50%). Regarding expenditure on such items per purchase, most spent 501–1,000 THB (n = 137, 34.25%), followed by less than 500 THB (n = 129, 32.25%). For donation or merit-making expenses per visit, the majority donated 101–500 THB (n = 268, 67%), followed by less than 100 THB (n = 88, 22%), as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Mu-Thelu Tourism Behaviors in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province

Item	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Main purpose of spiritual tourism		
– Praying for career success	189	47.25
– Praying for love	12	3.00
– Praying for good fortune	120	30.00
– Cultural tourism	65	16.25
– Buying sacred items	14	3.50
Total	400	100.00
Frequency of visits per year		
– First time	64	16.00
– 2–3 times	207	51.75
– 4–5 times	129	32.25
– More than 5 times	0	0.00
Total	400	100.00
Mode of transportation		

– Private car	372	93.00
– Public transportation	20	5.00
– Tour bus/operator	8	2.00
– Other	0	0.00
Total	400	100.00
Travel companion		
– Alone	10	2.50
– Family	325	81.25
– Friends	57	14.25
– Tour group	8	2.00
– Other	0	0.00
Total	400	100.00
Factors influencing travel decision		
– Personal belief and faith	306	76.50
– Recommendation from close persons	39	9.75
– Information from social media	36	9.00
– Past personal experiences	13	3.25
– Other	6	1.50
Total	400	100.00
Average travel expenditure per trip (THB)		
– Less than 1,000	126	31.50
– 1,001–3,000	166	41.50
– 3,001–5,000	108	27.00
– More than 5,000	0	0.00
Total	400	100.00
Preferred time for visiting		
– Weekdays	83	20.75
– Weekends	82	20.50
– Public holidays/Festivals	75	18.75
– No specific time	160	40.00
– Other	0	0.00
Total	400	100.00
Types of sacred items purchased		
– Never purchased	93	23.25
– Sacred amulets (e.g., Buddha, coins)	140	35.00
– Holy water/oil	17	4.25
– Charms (e.g., yantras, child spirits, takrud)	18	4.50
– Business-related sacred objects	48	12.00
– Luck-enhancing sacred items	82	20.50
– Other	2	0.50
Total	400	100.00
Spending on sacred items per trip (THB)		
– Did not purchase	104	26.00
– Less than 500	129	32.25
– 501–1,000	137	34.25
– 1,001–3,000	25	6.25
– 3,001–5,000	0	0.00
– More than 5,000	5	1.25
Total	400	100.00
Charity/donation per trip (THB)		
– Less than 100	88	22.00
– 101–500	268	67.00
– 501–1,000	38	9.50
– 1,001–3,000	4	1.00
– 3,001–5,000	1	0.25
– More than 5,000	1	0.25
Total	400	100.00

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

The results of the first hypothesis test indicated that demographic factors were significantly associated with Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was accepted. Specifically, all demographic variables—gender, age, education level, occupation, average income, religion, and region of origin—showed a statistically significant relationship with Mu-Thelu tourism behaviors in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. The results of the second hypothesis

test revealed that motivation was significantly related to Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. Internal motivation was found to be significantly associated with all aspects of Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. The hypothesis was accepted as all behaviors had a significance level (P-value) of 0.000, except for the variable “travel companions,” which had a P-value of 0.005, both values being less than 0.05. This demonstrates that internal motivation was significantly associated with all behavioral aspects of Mu-Thelu tourism.

External motivation also showed a significant association with Mu-Thelu tourism behaviors. The hypothesis was accepted because all behavioral variables had a significance level (P-value) of 0.000, which is less than 0.05. This confirms that external motivation was significantly

associated with all dimensions of Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. In summary, Hypothesis 2 was accepted, indicating that both internal and external motivation are significantly related to Mu-Thelu tourism behavior in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Research Hypothesis	Result
Hypothesis 1: Demographic factors are related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
1.1 Gender is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
1.2 Age is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
1.3 Education level is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
1.4 Occupation is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
1.5 Average income is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
1.6 Religion is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
1.7 Place of origin is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
Hypothesis 2: Motivation is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
2.1 Intrinsic motivation is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted
2.2 Extrinsic motivation is related to spiritual tourism behavior.	Accepted

This study on motivation and Mu-Thelu tourism behavior in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province presents the following key findings: (1) Demographic factors, including gender, age, education level, occupation, average monthly income, religion, and place of origin, were significantly associated with Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. The majority of tourists were female, aged 26–35 years, held a bachelor's degree, were employed as government officers or state enterprise employees, earned an average monthly income between 15,001–30,000 baht, identified as Buddhist, and resided in the southern region of Thailand. (2) Regarding Mu-Thelu tourism behavior, most tourists traveled for the primary purpose of seeking blessings related to their careers, typically traveling 2–3 times per year by private car, accompanied by family members. Their decisions were mainly influenced by personal beliefs and faith. Tourists reported spending approximately 1,001–3,000 baht per trip, without specifying a preferred time for travel. Most had purchased religious amulets or sacred items, typically spending 501–1,000 baht per purchase and donating between 101–500 baht per visit. (3) Both internal and external motivations were found to be significantly associated with all aspects of Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. Internally, respondents were driven by a desire to worship sacred objects for peace of mind and spiritual development. Externally, their motivations were influenced by popular trends, word-of-mouth communication, and stimulation from social media reviews and posts.

The hypothesis testing confirmed acceptance of Hypothesis 1, indicating that all demographic factors—gender, age, education, occupation, income, religion, and origin—were significantly associated with Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. Likewise, Hypothesis 2 was supported, demonstrating that both internal and external motivations were significantly related to Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. These findings highlight the critical role of demographic and motivational factors in shaping the tourism behavior of Mu-Thelu travelers. The insights gained from this study are valuable for the strategic planning and development of Mu-Thelu tourism initiatives, ensuring alignment with tourist needs and behaviors, enhancing visitor experiences, and increasing the attractiveness and sustainability of this culturally significant form of tourism.

5. Discussion

Based on the findings of the study on motivation and Mu-Thelu tourism behavior in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, the discussion can be presented as follows:

The demographic characteristics of tourists were found to be significantly associated with Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. This result aligns with the concept proposed by Kotler and Keller (2012) ^[10], who emphasized that demographic segmentation is a widely used criterion in market targeting and has strong relevance to consumer behavior. Differences in gender, age, education, occupation, income, religion, and place of origin influence individual needs, decision-making processes, and tourism behavior. The study demonstrates that tourists with different demographic profiles tend to exhibit different patterns of Mu-Thelu tourism behavior. Therefore, demographic analysis is crucial for developing tourism marketing strategies that align with the characteristics of target segments. This finding is also consistent with the research of Khwanchanok Suwanpong (2021), which found a statistical relationship between demographic characteristics and Buddhist pilgrimage behavior in Phuket Province.

Regarding Mu-Thelu tourism behavior, most tourists traveled with the primary purpose of seeking blessings related to their careers. This finding corroborates the study of Arissara Imuan (2024) ^[1], which identified that praying for career success is the most influential factor driving Mu-Thelu tourism at Wat Phra Sri Uma Devi (Wat Khaek, Silom). Additionally, most tourists traveled with their families and made travel decisions based on personal faith, underscoring the significance of individual and familial belief systems. Travel characteristics, frequency, expenditure, and tourism-related activities offer useful insights for designing tourism programs, facilities, and services that reflect the actual preferences and behavior of tourists. This is in line with the work of Siwat Kongthong (2022), who provided a comprehensive synthesis of key variables in tourism behavior research.

Motivations found to be significantly associated with Mu-Thelu tourism behavior include intrinsic motivations such as the desire to worship sacred objects for emotional comfort and to develop one's mental and spiritual well-being. This aligns with the framework of Wipada Thaothamphithak *et al.* (2022), who categorized motivations into intrinsic drivers stemming from personal satisfaction, and Duangthip

Nagratok (2020), who emphasized that intrinsic motivations reflect emotional and spiritual needs. As for extrinsic motivations, respondents indicated that social trends and online media played an important role, which corresponds with the findings of Athip Chansuriya (2022)^[2], who stated that social influence and the role of social media significantly impact individuals' beliefs and travel decisions related to Mu-Thelu tourism.

However, the finding that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are significantly associated with all aspects of Mu-Thelu tourism behavior contrasts with the research of Siwaporn Meenapha (2018)^[22], which found no significant influence of motivation on religious tourism behavior in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya. This discrepancy may be attributable to contextual and environmental differences, as Mu-Thelu tourism embodies a unique cultural identity that seamlessly integrates both internal and external motivational dimensions. This is further supported by Duangrat Koykitjaroen (2019), who highlighted the influence of environmental context and local identity on religious tourism behavior.

In summary, the discussion demonstrates that this study aligns with several prior theories and research findings, particularly regarding the influence of demographic variables, tourist behavior characteristics, and the relationship between motivation and tourism behavior. At the same time, certain differences emerged, likely due to the distinctive and culturally embedded nature of Mu-Thelu tourism. Nonetheless, the research findings contribute valuable insights for the strategic development of faith-based tourism initiatives that effectively respond to tourist needs while fostering long-term sustainable growth.

5.1 Research-Based Recommendations

1. Tourism operators and related agencies should prioritize tourists' demographic factors by utilizing this information for market segmentation, defining target groups, and developing tourism products and services tailored to the needs of each segment. This approach will help enhance tourist satisfaction and encourage repeat visitation.
2. Tourist behavior data should be integrated into the design of routes, activities, and amenities. For instance, family-oriented travel packages, accommodation and dining services located near Mu-Thelu sites, and event planning aligned with popular travel periods and festivals can improve convenience and elevate overall visitor experience.
3. The development of marketing strategies should consider key motivational drivers, particularly those related to faith and spiritual development. Emphasizing the value and psychological benefits of Mu-Thelu tourism through appropriate messaging can effectively meet tourists' intrinsic needs. Moreover, leveraging the influence of social media to foster word-of-mouth promotion and trend-driven visibility can further attract a broader audience.
4. Integrated collaboration among government agencies, private sector actors, and local communities is essential for enhancing the environment and identity of Mu-Thelu destinations. This includes maintaining cleanliness and safety standards and promoting a holistic tourism model that interweaves belief systems with local history, culture, and economy. Such integration can enrich

tourists' experiences and foster sustainable growth of Mu-Thelu tourism sites.

5.2 Suggestions for Future Research

1. Future research should expand the scope of investigation to include other regions where Mu-Thelu tourism is practiced, in order to compare and contrast the influencing factors across different contexts. This comparative analysis will enhance the understanding of the overall dynamics of Mu-Thelu tourism and support the development of strategic plans that are context-specific and broadly applicable.
2. Qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews or focus group discussions with tourists, business operators, and community leaders are recommended for future studies. These approaches would provide rich insights into beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and expectations, which are essential for enhancing the quality and relevance of Mu-Thelu tourism in line with stakeholders' needs.
3. In addition to demographic and motivational factors, future research should examine other variables that may influence Mu-Thelu tourist behavior, such as service quality, destination image perception, tourist satisfaction, and loyalty. This would provide a more comprehensive data foundation for developing effective marketing strategies and improving destination management practices.
4. Researchers are also encouraged to explore the potential and feasibility of integrating Mu-Thelu tourism with other tourism forms—such as cultural tourism, ecotourism, or gastronomic tourism—to create added value and diversify visitor experiences. Such integration may contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of the tourism industry over the long term.

6. Conclusion

This study on motivation and behavior in Mu-Thelu tourism in Nakhon Si Thammarat has yielded meaningful and applicable findings for the development of faith-based tourism. However, future studies should aim to broaden the research scope, deepen qualitative inquiry, investigate additional influencing factors, and incorporate interdisciplinary knowledge. These steps will help generate more robust and actionable insights that support the advancement of sustainable Mu-Thelu tourism, potentially positioning it for international recognition.

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