

SECONDARY AND FRINGE TOWNS ALONG THE NORTHERN THAILAND ROUTE FOR SELF-DRIVE TOURISM: AN INVESTIGATION OF TOURISTS' PERCEIVED SOUVENIR QUALITIES AND ATTRIBUTES PREDICTING DECISION MAKING TO PURCHASE

Siripen Yiamjanya

**International College, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand,
E-Mail: siripen.yi@ssru.ac.th*

ABSTRACT

The paper investigated perceived qualities, expected qualifications of souvenirs and related pull attributes that predicted decision making to purchase, and satisfaction towards purchasing experience, utilizing the Thai self-drive tourism case study. The study area encompassed the secondary and fringe towns along the Northern Thailand route. Employing the quantitative approach with self-administrated questionnaire, a total of 222 self-drive tourists was collected. The analysis was carried out by use of mean, standard deviation and Multiple Regression statistics. The findings reported high level of perceived qualities of souvenirs, with the product value attribute obtaining the highest rank among the six qualification categories, with some improvements being addressed. Product values, product forms and recollection quality were discovered to perform the significant predictor of decision making to purchase, whereas product utilities, physical accessibility of shops and atmosphere were not significantly recognized in the context of self-drive tourism along Thailand's northern route. The findings conveyed some recommendations; that town hubs for souvenirs should be established as the town storefronts and information and interpretation stop point for visitor orientation for the towns and the route identities. Community souvenir zones should be introduced to the fringe areas for benefit of tourism-related product diversification. Self-drive tourism along the northern route of Thailand characterized by high automobile dependency notably catalyses a linear travel pattern, resulting in linear behaviour of tourists in making en route stops for purchasing souvenirs. More nodal points should be well planned and developed in these fringe towns that will distribute tourists from the main highway to the roads inside.

Keywords: Northern Thailand Route, Secondary and Fringe Towns, Self-Drive Tourism, Souvenirs

INTRODUCTION

Drive tourism is defined by Prideaux and Carson [1] as tourism that centres on travelling from an origin point to a destination by car that is either privately owned or rented, and engaging in tourism related activities during the journey. Drive tourism can increase travellers' opportunities to drive out of the main highway to access further more remote areas. It also has a close relationship with development of rural areas reachable by car [2]. This visualises the idea of income distribution into rural businesses. Thai's domestic self-drive tourism has been dominated by the routes in the northern Thailand. The main routes include Highway No. 1 or Phahon Yothin Road starting from Bangkok to Mae Sai District in Chiang Rai Province that connects with Tha Khe Lek, Shan State of Myanmar, and Highway No. 11 starting from Ayutthaya Province to Chiang Mai Province. The situational analysis report of Thailand's domestic tourism during 2014- 2016 provided by Ministry of Tourism and Sports revealed steady trend of increased number of travel within the country with less seasonal manner [3]. In 2016, the tourism statistics of Northern Thailand showed a total of 1,839,502 Thai self-drive tourists who bought package tour, and of 10,134,329 who arranged the trip on their own [4]. The statistics of expenditure of Thai tourists during 2014- 2016 showed an increase of spending on souvenirs and other general products during their travel, from 1.89 percent in 2014 to 4.29 percent in 2015, and 3.48 percent in 2016. Despite a slight decline in 2016, the percentage share of the spending in souvenir sector remained significant, which was approximately 22 percent [3]. Along the northern route of Thailand locate many provinces with old and newly expanded communities due to land transportation development; many are notable as the stop point for resting and buying souvenirs, while the others have many attractions inside, both the lesser-known and the emerging ones. This paper therefore aimed to investigate perceived qualities, expected qualifications of souvenirs and related pull attributes that predicted decision making to purchase, and satisfaction towards purchasing experience, by utilizing the Thai self-driving tourist market. The study

also addressed issues concerning development of tourism and tourist souvenirs of the study area, considered in this study as the secondary and fringe towns.

Fringe towns in the dimension of urban development may be considered as secondary towns in tourism development. These towns are defined as areas where rural and urban neighborhoods are connected. Development of transportation connectivity such as highways or intercity trains creates fringe towns, to which people move for living as a result of town expansion and more population factors. Today, it is more difficult to identify which area are rural or urban as more rural places have become more urbanized with a merit of transport development making most of places are more accessible. In many cases, there is a phenomenon called 'urban sprawls'. Fringe towns are mostly chosen as the location for factories, transport hubs and terminals, or farms due to demand of large, open space. Today, another type of land use of empty space in the area of fringe towns is location of outlet or shopping towns/ villages. In Thailand context, especially along the highway from the central part to the northern part, many spaces between rural and urban areas remain attractive in terms of natural and social character. Under being threatened by urbanization, some old communities have been made marginalized; some have also attempted to maintain or revitalize their traditional social and cultural fabrics. Convenient travel today gives attractiveness and potential to these towns for tourism. Nevertheless, tourism development of these secondary towns needs to be aligned with primary towns that are main tourist attractions.

If a tourist destination is the main place to arrive and refers to the primary place of visitation, secondary place may not be explained by the meaning of 'destination' as the main place to arrive, but rather it is an added- on, alternative place for en route stop on the way to the primary destination)on tourist itinerary(. Secondary place attaches with ' a reason to travel within a bigger destination' [5]. It connects with the secondary market that provides secondary profits in terms of tourism business. It is not a ' must- see' or ' must- visited' destination. In the consumer decision making perspective, secondary destination may influence tourists to make an immediate or an in- situ decision to take a visit during the trip to the primary destination or after completing the tour at the primary destination. From the marketing point of view, secondary destinations may be confined with a shortage or a lack of interpretation and information publicity resulting in being less chosen as a tourist destination. Several of them may have a particular image, or they may not have been established with a clear and positive image [6]. This may demotivate tourists or make them feel reluctant to visit them because they may not want to lose their time to be afforded for main destination visits; or they feel secondary places are not worth to make a visit unless the significance of those places is presented or told. Secondary destinations, thereafter, may not be able to stand alone to call for the tourism market's attention unless they receive strong promotion and interesting interpretation.

Souvenir shopping is an important activity in tourism and travel industry. Apart from tourists' expenditure in accommodation, shopping during their travel and holiday presents critical spending especially at tourist destinations. In self- drive tourism in Thailand, stop for souvenir shopping is considered the stop for resting as well, and places for stops include the secondary towns such as Nakorn Sawan, Kamphaengphet, Tak and Lampang. These provinces are normally represented as typical secondary towns both for short stops for visit and rest, as well as stop points for souvenir purchase. Popular stop points among Thai self- drive tourists mainly are standard gas stations with supermarkets and clean toilets, toll way rest points and big souvenir shops with restaurants available [7]. Souvenir shopping can also be a pleasure during trip, especially among self- drive tourists due to freedom induced by time and vehicle factors. Points for shopping souvenirs along the Northern Thailand route are normally seen located along both sides of the highway. Most are both in the forms of permanent shop and temporary stalls at temporary markets, rather than in the form of community market. Souvenirs in Thai sense include not only handicraft products but also food and snack products. These products are sold at souvenir shops in the abovementioned secondary towns.

METHODOLOGY

The selected study area was linear as it was the road to the North of Thailand on Highway No. 1 that passed the secondary cities including Nakorn Sawan, Kamphaengphet, Tak and Lampang. These provinces are the en route stop points of most Thai self- drive tourists to take rest, have meals and buy souvenirs. Data were collected via self- administered questionnaire with 222 Thai self- drive tourists at resting points for example gas stations, souvenir shops and open markets. The questionnaire was designed by use of five- point Likert- type scale measuring level of importance. Before the actual fieldwork, a pilot study was carried out to test the reliability of the research tool. Cronbach's alpha was used for the analysis of the pilot study, and the

calculation found that a reliability coefficient score was 0.799, which was acceptable [8]. After the actual fieldwork, the data was analysed by use of mean, standard deviation and Multiple Regression statistics.

RESULTS

The study found that the majority of tourists or 54.1 percent travelled from Bangkok heading to Chiang Mai as the destination or 22.5 percent; 78.8 percent of them used bypasses to avoid high traffic in the centre of towns. The average number of trip party was between 4-5 persons or 42.3 percent. The provinces where most of the tourists stopped to buy souvenirs ranked from the most to the least frequent stop included Nakorn Sawan (34.7 percent), Lampang (20.3 percent), Phitsanulok (14.9 percent) and Kamphaengphet (14 percent). The average time spent at souvenir shops was more than half an hour but not longer than 1 hour. The most frequently bought souvenir type was foods and desserts (83.7 percent), and the least included decoration and art works (33.3 percent). The investigation of self- drive tourists' perceived souvenir qualities, shown in Table 1, reported that the product values was ranked as the highest significant attribute, followed by the quality in helping tourists have a recollection of the places, atmosphere of souvenir shops, product forms, physical accessibility and product utilities.

Table 1
Ranking of Self- Drive Tourists' Perceived Souvenir Qualities

No.	Perceived Souvenir Quality	\bar{X}
1	Product values	3.97
2	The quality in helping tourists have a recollection of the places	3.94
3	Atmosphere of souvenir shops	3.92
4	Product forms	3.90
5	Physical accessibility	3.74
6	Product utilities	3.68

The tourists' good experience in purchasing the souvenirs indicated their high level of satisfaction towards all souvenir attributes, as exhibited in Table 2, yet the least satisfactory one was the recollection quality. The highest level of satisfaction was product values (Mean = 4.19), followed by product utilities (Mean = 4.07), atmosphere of souvenir shops (Mean = 4.04), product forms (Mean = 4.02), physical accessibility (Mean = 4.00), and the quality in helping tourists have a recollection of the places (Mean = 3.99).

Table 2
Ranking of Self- Drive Tourists' Satisfaction towards Purchase Experience of Souvenir Attributes

No.	Perceived Souvenir Quality	\bar{X}
1	Product values	4.19
2	Product utilities	4.07
3	Atmosphere of souvenir shops	4.04
4	Product forms	4.02
5	Physical accessibility	4.00
6	The quality in helping tourists have a recollection of the places	3.99

By the multiple regression analysis, all 6 attributes predicted the tourists' souvenir purchasing at 53.60 percent with an approximate prediction error variance of 0.43087. Product values, product utilities, atmosphere, product forms, physical accessibility, and recollection quality were discovered as the predictor, as the attributes affected the satisfaction on souvenir purchasing experience. However, not all showed a significant presence. Product values, product forms and the quality helping tourists recall tourist places significantly predicted the purchase, whereas product utilities, physical accessibility and atmosphere of souvenir shops showed less significance in the prediction. Table 3 exhibits level of importance for improvement and development of souvenirs, pointing out that some souvenir types need improvement and development. The most indicated attributes include picture or photo types, local handicrafts, souvenirs that help tourists recall their travel experiences at destinations and remember their engagement in local events and festivals (souvenirs that represent travel experience and local festivals).

Table 3
Level of Importance for Improvement and Development of Souvenirs

No.	Souvenir Characteristics	\bar{X}	Level of Importance for Improvement and Development
1	Picture or photo types (i.e. postcards, photo book)	4.07	High
2	Recollection quality	3.95	High
3	Local handicrafts	3.92	High
4	Souvenirs with the quality to represent and materialise tourists' memory of their experiences of travel places, events and festivals	3.90	High
5	Souvenirs made from natural resources	3.82	High
6	General souvenirs with places' name printed on	3.81	High
7	Miniature replicas of landmarks	3.75	High

The findings provided an understanding of tourists' decision-making behaviour in purchasing souvenirs during their driving trip along the secondary and fringe towns. Product values as the most meaningful attribute in the perception of tourists towards souvenir qualities explain preferences of domestic leisure tourists, who pay more attention to the aesthetic side of product through forms, representation of local idea, uniqueness and local sense [9]. Souvenirs with the quality to represent and materialise tourists' memory of their experiences of travel places, events and festivals are essential, which can be designed through forms, words and pictures. Tourists use physical characters and atmosphere of souvenir shops, and product displays in making an impulse decision to stop to buy [10]. What can attract them to stop and travel to more inner areas to take a short trip as part of the whole trip, as well as to buy souvenirs include tourist signage, visitor information centre, market places and production manifestation.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The findings of this study concurred with previous studies, as in Farahani et al. [11], Wilkins [12], Wick et al. [10] and Kim [9]. These studies emphasized an importance of design, originality and qualities of souvenirs in ways that created aesthetics, appreciation, remembrance and recollection of tourists towards tourist places, events and festivals, as well as an influence of shop location, product display and atmosphere on tourists' decision making to stop and buy souvenirs. The findings of this current study suggested further development for souvenir business along the northern route and of the secondary towns in terms of local brand identities that connect with destinations to enhance souvenir-destination reminiscence quality. Identity enhancement and image improvement of secondary and fringe towns through development of the souvenir sector may be considered an alternative solution for building more local sense and tourism and leisure image and impression in the case of towns located along the linear landscape. A provision of history details of places and products could entail high effect on tourists' positive attitude and perspective upon the aesthetic side of souvenir products, and decision to purchase [9]. Most products are recommended to have details that represent local production and that connect with the places of destination in various aspects for instance geographic space, built environment and landscapes, community and people.

Bringing food and desserts for relatives and friends as the gift after coming back from trips has characterised Thai hospitality and collectiveness; this has accordingly become the outstanding culture in souvenir purchase for domestic market. It is suggested that food and desserts as souvenir product be attached with details to convey historical, social, cultural and geographical significance. The development of this souvenir type can provide a further contribution to gastronomic tourism development that links to the principal historical or cultural heritage of the cities [13] as well as of the route. Moreover, the fact that many tourists use bypasses to avoid high traffic in the centre of towns may lead to an expansion of more businesses involving home construction and travel such as gas stations, restaurants and accommodation. More souvenir shops and stalls have also been established along these bypasses. This seems to reduce the frequency and the

likelihood of visits to be made by self- drive tourists to the older precincts of the towns mostly located in the inner areas. The situation may gradually lead to a fading of authentic locality, spiritually and socially, due to the fact that the business expansion has gradually developed in a more distant manner from the town itself. It is noteworthy to address that some old houses and community markets situated near the highway have also been revitalized for adaptive- reuse as souvenir shops and restaurants to attract tourists to stop by; some newly developed shops were also built as a replica of the original shop houses. Sustaining community products and old- style retailers is a significant way to support and promote community products from local wisdoms [14].

This paper also pointed out that the establishment of souvenir shops presented the linear character along the highway, which has been shaping self- drive tourists' souvenir purchase into a linear pattern, in particular addressing decisions under individual push factors in making a stop, and in situ decision making influenced by pull factors to buy souvenirs just along the highway. The situation may benefit the economics of souvenir sector especially for bigger investors, but may not represent sustainability and equality in economic, social and cultural aspects in the holistic approach. This assumption therefore contributes to some recommendations. Community souvenir shops or centres may be established along the highway. More nodal points should be developed to distribute tourists from highways to roads and streets in inner areas, which may lead to future development of nodal attractions. This may promote the secondary towns to be more frequently visited. Policy on new tourism clusters may also be developed based on local souvenir identities as well as route identities. Additionally, town hubs for souvenirs may be established as the town storefronts, and information and interpretation stop point for visitor orientation to the towns and the route.

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