The Influence of Identity-based Soft Power on Travel Decision-making in Secondary Provinces of Central Thailand

Chitpong Ayasanond[1*], Jirawat Chucharoen[2], Sirachaya Karawek[3], Chutidaj Munkongtum[4] and Withep Watawuti[5]

Master of Business Administration Program in Sustainable Logistics and Supply Chain Management, Bangkok Thonburi University, Thailand

E-mail: chitpong.aya@bkkthon.ac.th, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1444-1467
E-mail: happines465@gmail.com, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7654-6632
E-mail: sirachaya.g@bkkthon.ac.th, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4428-9189
E-mail: chutidaj.mun@bkkthon.ac.th, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3030-8335
E-mail: Goowagoo@gmail.com, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5880-3503

Abstract

Background and Aim: Tourism is a key economic driver in Thailand, accounting for 11.6% of the country's GDP in 2023. However, tourist concentration in major provinces creates income distribution challenges, particularly affecting secondary provinces in the central region. Identity-based Soft Power, through key cultural elements including Thai fashion, culinary heritage, festivals, and traditions, presents an opportunity for tourism development in these areas. This research aimed to (1) identify key determinants of travel decision-making in secondary provinces of Central Thailand, (2) analyze the structural equation model of causal factors influencing travel decision-making, and (3) develop policy and strategic guidelines for tourism development based on Identity-based Soft Power appropriate for secondary provinces in Central Thailand.

Materials and Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative phase surveyed 400 Thai tourists across seven secondary provinces (selected based on annual tourism revenue below 4,000 million baht and proximity to Bangkok) using structured questionnaires. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan formula and validated against the requirements of structural equation modeling. The qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 21 stakeholders, including tourists, entrepreneurs, government officials, and community leaders. Data were analyzed using structural equation modeling, selected for its ability to examine complex causal relationships, and thematic analysis.

Results: The findings revealed that Identity-based Soft Power significantly influenced travel decision-making (Mean = 4.15, S.D. = 0.69), with food having the strongest impact (Mean = 4.21, S.D. = 0.65), reflecting the cultural significance of culinary experiences in shaping destination choices. The structural equation model showed excellent fit (CHI-SQUARE/DF = 1.152, p-value = 0.142, GFI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.018) and explained 70% of the variance in travel decision-making. Tourism Attitude emerged as the most significant mediating variable in the relationship between Identity-based Soft Power and travel decision-making ($\beta = 0.72$).

Conclusion: Secondary provinces in Central Thailand can enhance their competitiveness by leveraging distinctive cultural identities and Soft Power elements, particularly food culture and traditional festivals. Success requires balancing cultural authenticity with modern tourism infrastructure while implementing digital marketing strategies and fostering community participation for sustainable development, as evidenced by the strong mediating effect of Tourism Attitude identified in the research.

Keywords: Identity-based Soft Power; Travel Decision-making; Tourism Image Perception; Tourism Attitude

Introduction

Tourism significantly contributes to Thailand's economy (11.6% of GDP in 2023; World Travel and Tourism Council, 2023), but tourist concentration in major provinces creates economic disparities and sustainability challenges. Secondary provinces generate less than 4,000 million baht annually despite significant cultural assets-struggle to attract visitors, while major destinations face environmental pressure. Soft Power has emerged as an effective tourism promotion tool globally. Japan's "Cool Japan" initiative (Özkan & Boylu, 2021) and South Korea's entertainment media strategy (Quijano Herrera & Pérez Tapia, 2024) demonstrate how cultural elements shape destination selection through cultural affinity and experiential appeal.

In Thailand's central region, seven secondary provinces possess distinctive Identity-based Soft Power assets categorized as:

Eco-tourism Destinations:

Chainat offers river-based attractions and agricultural experiences (Dachum & Jiarakul, 2024).

Cultural and Heritage Tourism Destinations:

Singburi and Suphan Buri feature historical heritage and cultural monuments (Simasathiansophon et al., 2020). Ang Thong showcases traditional handicrafts (Losuwan, 2023), while Lopburi blends historical architecture with cultural diversity (Yansombat & Chantanee, 2023; Nguyen Thi et al., 2024).

Community-based Tourism Destinations:

Samut Songkhram preserves riverside communities and traditional markets (Yodsurang et al., 2022; Wiyati & Yodsurang, 2023), while Ratchaburi celebrates multicultural heritage and craftsmanship (Loyma & Kaewnuch, 2020; Maiphranate et al., 2023).

Despite these distinctive characteristics, these provinces face challenges in attracting tourists due to inadequate promotion and limited infrastructure (Sermchayut, 2020; Supromajakr et al., 2022).

This research examines Soft Power's influence on tourism destination selection in secondary provinces through mixed-methods research. By analyzing factors affecting destination choices through structural equation modeling, this study aims to develop evidence-based strategies that leverage Soft Power elements while promoting sustainable tourism development.

The findings will inform tourism policy, marketing strategies, and community engagement initiatives addressing secondary destinations' specific needs, contributing to more sustainable and inclusive tourism development across Thailand.

Objectives

1. To study factors influencing Travel Decision-Making in secondary provinces of Central Thailand
2. To analyze the structural equation model of causal factors influencing Travel Decision-Making
3. To study tourism development guidelines based on Identity-based Soft Power appropriate for secondary provinces in Central Thailand.

Literature review

Soft Power Theory

Soft Power theory originated in international relations studies. Rosenberg & Hovland (1960) established a framework for understanding attitude components-cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions-which provides a basis for analyzing soft power influence processes. This model explains how Identity-based Soft Power elements initially shape tourists' knowledge, trigger emotional connections, and influence travel behaviors. Ma et al. (2024) and Sari & Meydan Uygur (2024) demonstrate how cultural elements function as destination differentiators for secondary provinces seeking distinctive brand identities. From a marketing perspective, Kotler & Keller (2016) conceptualize Soft Power as analogous to brand identity creation, exemplified by Japan's "Cool Japan" and South Korea's "Hallyu" wave. Hu et al. (2022) and Özgeriş et al. (2024) examine Soft Power within sustainability frameworks, emphasizing cultural preservation in tourism development. Hair et al. (2017) propose Structural Equation Modeling for analyzing Soft Power, enabling examination of relationships between Identity-based Soft Power, Tourism Image Perception, Tourism Attitude, and Travel Decision-Making.

Tourism Image Perception

Research shows that tourism destination image significantly influences decision-making in emerging destinations. Loyma & Kaewnuch (2020) and Maiphranate et al. (2023) reveal how secondary destinations can leverage cultural assets to enhance their image through Soft Power elements, communicating authenticity. Özkan & Boylu (2021) demonstrate how cultural values strengthen destination appeal in developing tourism markets. In today's digital landscape, these perceptions are increasingly shaped through social media and peer reviews, extending the reach of Identity-based Soft Power elements.

Tourism Attitude

Tourism attitude comprises cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). In the context of Identity-based Soft Power, these manifest as knowledge about cultural traditions, emotional connections to experiences, and intention to engage with cultural offerings. Loyma & Kaewnuch (2020) and Maiphranate et al. (2023) demonstrate how emotional attachments to cultural elements create more enduring attitudes toward destinations than functional attributes alone.

Travel Decision-Making

Kotler & Keller (2016) outline the tourism decision-making process as beginning with demand recognition, followed by information search and alternatives evaluation. Identity-based Soft Power influences each stage: cultural interests trigger initial travel desire, provide distinctive search criteria, and become key evaluation factors. Loyma & Kaewnuch (2020) and Maiphranate et al. (2023) highlight the influence of cultural interests on destination selection in secondary tourism markets, while Özkan & Boylu (2021) demonstrate how experiences serve as key motivational factors in culturally rich destinations.

Synthesis and Theoretical Integration

This literature review provides a theoretical foundation for examining Identity-based Soft Power's influence on tourism destination selection in Thailand's secondary provinces. Specific elements—traditional craftsmanship in Ang Thong, religious heritage in Singburi and Suphan Buri, riverside lifestyle in Samut Songkhram, and multicultural traditions in Ratchaburi—serve as potential differentiators. Tourism Image Perception and Tourism Attitude function as mediating factors, while digital engagement levels, socio-demographic characteristics, and previous travel experience may moderate these relationships. Structural Equation Modeling methodology enables a comprehensive analysis of these complex relationships.
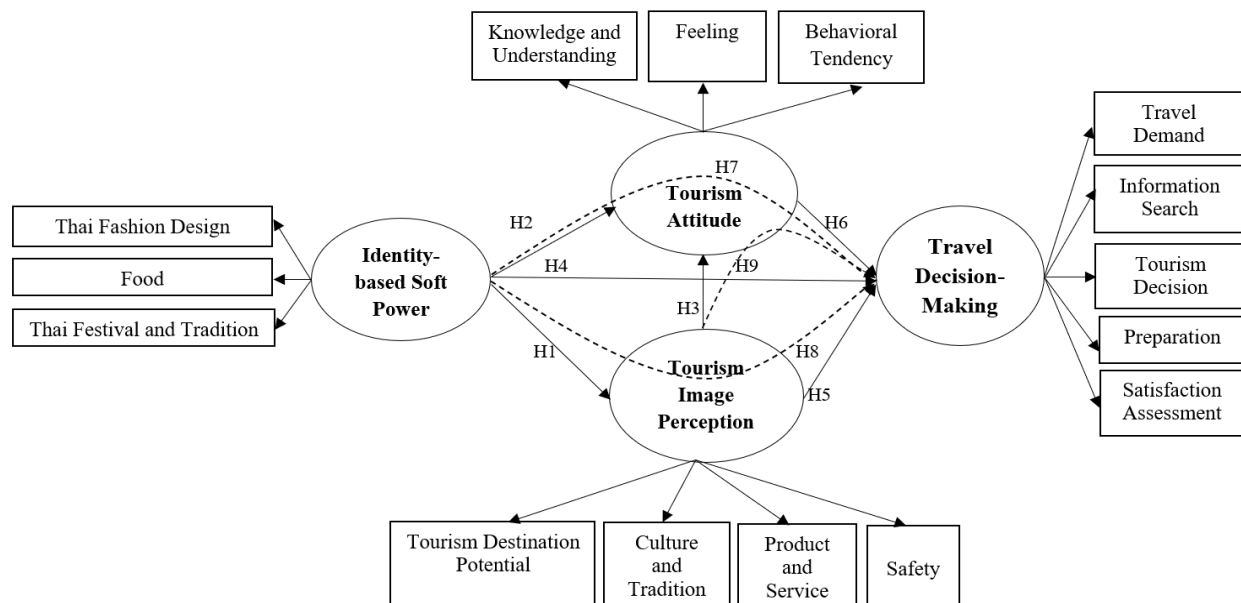
Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework Development
1. Framework Development Based on Objectives:

This research framework was developed based on research objectives and literature synthesis. Objective 1 identified four key constructs: Identity-based Soft Power (independent variable), Tourism

Image Perception and Tourism Attitude (mediating variables), and Travel Decision-Making (dependent variable).

The selection of mediating variables is empirically grounded. Ma et al. (2024) and Sari & Meydan Uygur (2024) demonstrated tourism image perception's role in transmitting cultural identity influence to travel decisions. Similarly, Loyma & Kaewnuch (2020) and Maiphranate et al. (2023) established tourism attitude as a significant mediator connecting destination perceptions with tourism behavior in secondary provinces.

2. Relationships and Hypotheses:
Direct Effects (H1-H6):
H1: Identity-based Soft Power→Tourism Image Perception (supported by Hu et al., 2022)
H2: Identity-based Soft Power→Tourism Attitude (supported by Loyma & Kaewnuch, 2020)
H3: Tourism Image Perception→Tourism Attitude (follows Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960 theory)
H4: Identity-based Soft Power→Travel Decision-Making (supported by Özkan & Boylu, 2021)
H5: Tourism Image Perception→Travel Decision-Making (supported by Maiphranate et al., 2023)
H6: Tourism Attitude→Travel Decision-Making (supported by Kotler & Keller, 2016)
Mediating Effects (H7-H9):
H7: Identity-based Soft Power→Tourism Attitude→Travel Decision-Making
H8: Identity-based Soft Power→Tourism Image Perception→Travel Decision-Making
H9: Tourism Image Perception→Tourism Attitude→Travel Decision-Making
3. Measurement Components:
Identity-based Soft Power included four dimensions: Thai Fashion Design, Food, Thai Festivals, and Tradition, based on Özkan & Boylu (2021) and Quijano Herrera & Pérez Tapia (2024).

Tourism Image Perception comprises Tourism Destination Potential, Culture and Tradition, Product and Service, and Safety, aligned with Ma et al. (2024) and Sari & Meydan Uygur (2024).

Tourism Attitude followed Rosenberg & Hovland's (1960) framework: Knowledge and Understanding, Feeling, and Behavioral Tendency.

Travel Decision-Making encompasses five dimensions based on Kotler & Keller (2016): Tourism Demand, Information Search, Tourism Decision, Preparation, and Satisfaction Assessment.

Alignment with Research Objectives:
This framework systematically addressed all research objectives. The first objective was achieved through direct effect hypotheses (H1-H6). The second objective validated the structural equation model through comprehensive hypothesis testing, explaining 70% of the variance. The third objective translated findings into practical guidelines in marketing strategies, infrastructure development, and community participation approaches.

Theoretical Foundation:
The framework is grounded in Nye's (2004) Soft Power theory, Ma et al. (2024) and Sari & Meydan Uygur (2024) Tourism Image concepts, Rosenberg & Hovland (1960) attitude components, and Kotler & Keller (2016) decision-making process.

While comprehensively capturing travel decision-making complexity in secondary provinces, limitations include not addressing demographic variables, past travel experiences, and alternative transmission mechanisms like digital engagement.

Methodology
Research Methodology Design
This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to investigate Identity-based Soft Power influence on tourism destination selection. This approach addressed tourism decision-making's multifaceted nature, with quantitative data identifying statistical relationships and qualitative insights providing contextual understanding. The sequential design enabled the establishment of influence patterns through statistical analysis before exploring underlying reasons through interviews.

The quantitative phase surveyed 400 Thai tourists across seven secondary provinces using a structured questionnaire measuring Identity-based Soft Power components (16 items covering Thai Fashion Design, Food, Festival, and Tradition), Tourism Image Perception (16 items), Tourism Attitude (12 items), and Travel Decision-Making (20 items). The qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 21 key stakeholders (15 tourists, 2 entrepreneurs, 2 government officials, and 2 community leaders), focusing on Soft Power experiences and destination selection factors.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised Thai tourists who visited the selected provinces within the past six months (approximately 1.2 million visitors based on the Tourism Authority of Thailand data). The quantitative sample of 400 respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) criteria, with proportional allocation across provinces: Chainat (57), Singburi (57), Ang Thong (57), Lopburi (57), Suphan Buri (58), Samut Songkhram (57), and Ratchaburi (57). Convenience sampling was employed with data collection across various locations and times to mitigate potential bias.

The qualitative sample included 21 key informants selected through purposive sampling. Non-tourist stakeholders had at least five years of experience in tourism development, direct involvement with cultural tourism initiatives, and decision-making authority within their organizations.

Research Instruments

Quantitative data collection used a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale (1932) covering demographic information, Identity-based Soft Power components, Tourism Image Perception, Tourism Attitude, and Travel Decision-Making. The instrument was developed based on a literature review and adapted from established scales.

For qualitative data, a semi-structured interview guide explored Identity-based Soft Power influence and tourism development. The protocol was developed based on gaps identified during preliminary quantitative analysis, ensuring complementarity between research phases.

Instrument Quality Assessment

The quantitative instrument underwent validation through content validity testing (IOC values: 0.80-1.00) by five experts, construct validity verification using Confirmatory Factor Analysis, and reliability testing with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients (0.70-0.93). A pilot test with 30 samples was conducted with subsequent revisions to improve clarity.

The qualitative instrument was validated through data source triangulation, member checking, and peer review of interview protocols by two independent researchers.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), with mean scores interpreted using Likert's five-point scale where 4.21-5.00 = Highest, 3.41-4.20 = High, 2.61-3.40 = Moderate, 1.81-2.60 = Low, and 1.00-1.80 = Lowest.

Path coefficients (β) were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) criteria: values $\geq$.50 indicate a strong effect, .30-.49 indicate a moderate effect, .10-.29 indicate a weak effect, and <.10 indicate minimal effect.

Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Research Scope

The research encompassed seven secondary provinces in Central Thailand, selected based on annual tourism revenue below 4,000 million baht, tourism potential, proximity to Bangkok (within 200km), and cultural connectivity potential. The content scope examined causal relationships between Identity-based Soft Power components, Tourism Image Perception, Tourism Attitude, and Travel Decision-Making. Data collection occurred from January to December 2024, focusing on tourist experiences within six months before data collection to ensure recent recollection while accommodating seasonal variations.

Results

First Research Objective: To study factors influencing Travel Decision-Making in secondary provinces of Central Thailand

Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Factors Influencing Travel Decision-making (n=400)

Factors	Mean	S.D.	Level
1. Identity-based Soft Power -Thai Fashion Design	4.13	0.72	High
- Food	4.21	0.65	Highest
- Thai Festival and Tradition	4.12	0.69	High
Total Average	4.15	0.69	High
2. Tourism Image Perception - Tourism Destination Potential	3.89	0.78	High
- Culture and Tradition	3.72	0.82	High
- Product and Service	3.68	0.85	High
- Safety	3.49	0.89	High
Total Average	3.70	0.84	High
3. Tourism Attitude - Knowledge and Understanding	4.09	0.71	High
- Feeling	4.02	0.75	High
- Behavioral Tendency	4.05	0.73	High
Total Average	4.05	0.73	High
4. Travel Decision-Making - Tourism Demand	4.13	0.68	High
- Information Search	4.23	0.64	Highest
- Tourism Decision	4.15	0.67	High
- Preparation	4.06	0.72	High
- Satisfaction Assessment	4.02	0.74	High
Total Average	4.12	0.69	High

Based on Table 1, the findings reveal several key patterns in the influence of various factors on travel decision-making:

Identity-based Soft Power demonstrated high overall influence (M = 4.15, SD = 0.69), with Food emerging as the most influential component (M = 4.21, SD = 0.65). This finding aligns with research by Ma et al. (2024) that identifies culinary heritage as a powerful cultural attractor in Asian tourism contexts. Food represents a uniquely accessible form of cultural engagement that offers both sensory experience and cultural insight, characteristics not as immediately available through fashion or festival attendance. The prominence of food as a Soft Power element in secondary provinces reflects global trends in gastronomic tourism, where local cuisine serves as an authentic cultural marker and experiential attraction (Özkan & Boylu, 2021). In the Thai context, this suggests that culinary tourism initiatives focused on local specialties could be particularly effective in distinguishing secondary provinces from mainstream destinations.

Tourism Image Perception showed high overall ratings (M = 3.70, SD = 0.84), with Tourism Destination Potential ranking as the strongest element within this factor (M = 3.89, SD = 0.78). However, these ratings were notably lower than other constructs, suggesting challenges in destination branding and perception development. This aligns with findings from Sermchayut (2020) and Supromajakr et al. (2022) regarding the marketing limitations faced by secondary destinations. Safety received the lowest score (M = 3.49, SD = 0.89), indicating a potential barrier to tourism development that requires targeted intervention. As Loyma & Kaewnuch (2020) noted, secondary destinations often struggle with cognitive image formation due to limited exposure to mainstream tourism narratives, creating a perception gap that affects destination selection. The relatively higher score for Tourism Destination Potential suggests that tourists recognize the untapped possibilities of these provinces, even while perceiving certain limitations in current offerings.

Tourism Attitude exhibited consistently high ratings (M = 4.05, SD = 0.73), with Knowledge and Understanding receiving the highest score (M = 4.09, SD = 0.71). This finding corresponds with Rosenberg

& Hovland's (1960) framework, suggesting that cognitive components may precede affective connections in forming tourism attitudes toward emerging destinations. The strong cognitive dimension indicates that tourists are developing knowledge about secondary provinces, which Maiphranate et al. (2023) identified as a crucial first step in building sustainable tourism interest. The nearly equal scores across all three attitude components demonstrate a balanced attitudinal development, which may contribute to more stable tourism patterns than destinations that rely primarily on emotional appeal without a substantial knowledge foundation.

Travel Decision-Making displayed high overall scores (M = 4.12, SD = 0.69), with Information Search emerging as the most significant component (M = 4.23, SD = 0.64). This finding has substantial practical implications for tourism development in secondary provinces. The prominence of Information Search suggests that tourists actively seek knowledge about these destinations, aligning with Kotler & Keller's (2016) decision-making model, where information gathering plays a crucial role when considering fewer familiar alternatives. As Yodsurang et al. (2022) noted, secondary destinations typically lack established reputations, requiring tourists to engage in more extensive research before committing to visits. This finding indicates that enhancing information accessibility and developing comprehensive digital content about cultural attractions could be particularly effective in converting interest to actual visitation. Meanwhile, the relatively lower score for the Satisfaction Assessment (M = 4.02, SD = 0.74) suggests opportunities to improve post-visit experiences and communication to strengthen long-term destination loyalty.

The findings collectively demonstrate that Identity-based Soft Power significantly influences travel decision-making in secondary provinces, with distinct patterns emerging across different components and dimensions. The prominence of Food as a Soft Power element and Information Search as a decision-making component provides a clear direction for tourism development strategies, highlighting opportunities to leverage culinary heritage while enhancing information accessibility to strengthen the competitiveness of secondary tourism destinations in Central Thailand.

Second Research Objective: To analyze the structural equation model of causal factors influencing Travel Decision-Making

Table 2 Comparison of Model Fit Statistics Before and After Model Adjustment

Index	Criteria	Before Adjustment	Result	After Adjustment	Result
CHI-SQUARE/DF	< 3.00	3.245	Not Pass	1.152	Pass
p-value of χ^2	> 0.05	> 0.05	Not Pass	0.142	Pass
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.876	Not Pass	0.984	Pass
AGFI	≥ 0.90	0.845	Not Pass	0.953	Pass
CFI	≥ 0.95	0.923	Not Pass	0.998	Pass
NFI	≥ 0.95	0.912	Not Pass	0.993	Pass
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.085	Not Pass	0.018	Pass
RMR	< 0.05	0.048	Pass	0.010	Pass

Note: Model fit indices indicate the statistical fit between the theoretical model and empirical data.

From Table 2, the analysis of model fit statistics revealed significant improvements after model adjustment. Initially, before adjustment, most fit indices failed to meet the standard criteria. The Chi-Square/Degrees of Freedom (CHI-SQUARE/DF) was 3.245, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 3.00. The Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) showed values of 0.876 and 0.845, respectively, both falling below the required criterion of ≥ 0.90. Similarly, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Normed Fit Index (NFI) registered values of 0.923 and 0.912, failing to meet the ≥ 0.95 threshold. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.085, slightly above the acceptable level of < 0.08. Only the Root Mean Square Residual (RMR) at 0.048 passed the criterion of < 0.05 in the initial model.

The model adjustment process followed the recommended procedures by Hair et al. (2017) for structural equation modeling refinement. Modifications included: (1) establishing error covariances between theoretically related measurement items within the same construct, particularly within the Tourism Image Perception and Tourism Attitude dimensions, (2) eliminating three items with factor loadings below 0.5 that demonstrated high cross-loadings across constructs, and (3) adjusting the measurement model by consolidating closely related sub-dimensions within the Identity-based Soft Power construct. These modifications were guided by both statistical indicators (modification indices) and theoretical considerations to maintain construct validity while improving model fit, consistent with best practices in tourism research methodology (Hair et al., 2017).

After model adjustment, all indices showed remarkable improvement and met their respective criteria. The CHI-SQUARE/DF decreased significantly to 1.152, well within the acceptable range. The p-value of χ^2 improved from 0.000 to 0.142, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.05 and indicating that the model fits the data well. Both GFI and AGFI improved substantially to 0.984 and 0.953, respectively, comfortably exceeding the minimum requirement of 0.90. The CFI and NFI also showed excellent improvement, reaching 0.998 and 0.993, respectively, well above the 0.95 threshold. The RMSEA decreased dramatically to 0.018, indicating a much better fit, while the RMR improved further to 0.010, maintaining its compliance with the standard criteria.

These comprehensive improvements across all fit indices demonstrate that the adjusted model achieved excellent statistical fit, validating its reliability in representing the relationships between variables in the study. The adjusted model thus provides a robust framework for understanding the factors influencing travel decision-making in secondary provinces of Central Thailand.

Table 3 Research Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	Effect	Coefficient	R²	Result
H1: Identity-based Soft Power → Tourism Image Perception	Direct	+	.44	.19	Accepted
H2: Identity-based Soft Power → Tourism Attitude	Direct	+	.72	.58	Accepted
H3: Tourism Image Perception → Tourism Attitude	Direct	+	.08	.58	Accepted
H4: Identity-based Soft Power → Travel Decision-Making	Direct	+	.36	.70	Accepted
H5: Tourism Image Perception → Travel Decision-Making	Direct	+	.21	.70	Accepted
H6: Tourism Attitude → Travel Decision-Making	Direct	+	.41	.70	Accepted
H7: Identity-based Soft Power → Tourism Attitude → Travel Decision-Making	Indirect	+	.30	.70	Accepted
H8: Identity-based Soft Power → Tourism Image Perception → Travel Decision-Making	Indirect	+	.09	.70	Accepted
H9: Tourism Image Perception → Tourism Attitude → Travel Decision-Making	Indirect	+	.03	.70	Accepted

Note: All path coefficients are significant at p < .05; + indicates a positive effect; R² represents explained variance.

From Table 3, the hypothesis testing results revealed several key findings:
Direct Effects:
1. Identity-based Soft Power demonstrated strong direct effects: Strongest influence on Tourism Attitude (β = .72, p < .05), Moderate influence on Tourism Image Perception (β = .44, p < .05), Moderate influence on Travel Decision-Making (β = .36, p < .05). The stronger effect on attitude than image perception suggests that cultural elements like food and festivals create emotional connections and behavioral tendencies more directly than they shape cognitive perceptions of destination attributes. This

aligns with Rosenberg & Hovland's (1960) theory that affective responses can form independently of comprehensive cognitive assessment, particularly when cultural elements evoke immediate emotional resonance.

2. Tourism Attitude showed a strong direct effect on Travel Decision-Making (β = .41, p < .05) and emerged as the strongest predictor among mediating variables. This finding supports Loyma & Kaewnuch (2020) and Maiphranate et al. (2023), who identified attitudinal factors as crucial in tourism decision processes for emerging destinations, where established reputation may be lacking but positive attitudes can compensate for limited familiarity.

3. Tourism Image Perception exhibited a moderate effect on Travel Decision-Making (β = .21, p < .05) and a weak influence on Tourism Attitude (β = .08, p < .05). The relatively weak relationship between image perception and attitude (β = .08) is particularly noteworthy and contrasts with findings from primary tourism destinations. This pattern may reflect the nascent stage of image development in secondary provinces, where, according to Sermchayut (2020), clear destination images are still emerging and haven't yet crystallized into strong attitudinal responses. Drawing from destination image formation theory, this weak connection suggests that secondary provinces' image perception may still be fragmented or incomplete due to limited promotional exposure, preventing the formation of strong attitudinal associations despite recognition of tourism potential.

Indirect Effects:

1. Identity-based Soft Power's indirect effects: Strong mediating effect through Tourism Attitude (β = .30, p < .05), Weak mediating effect through Tourism Image Perception (β = .09, p < .05). The substantial difference between these indirect pathways indicates that Soft Power influences decision-making primarily through emotional and behavioral connections rather than cognitive image formation. This reinforces Hu et al. (2022) and Özgeriş et al. (2024) argue that cultural elements create tourism appeal through experiential and affective pathways even when destination brand awareness remains underdeveloped.

2. Tourism Image Perception showed a minimal indirect effect through Tourism Attitude (β = .03, p < .05). This minimal indirect effect further confirms the limited connection between cognitive image and attitudinal development in secondary destinations, suggesting that image perception and attitude may develop somewhat independently in this context rather than in the sequential cognitive-affective process often observed in well-established destinations.

Overall Model Performance:

The model explained a substantial 70% of the variance in Travel Decision-Making (R² = .70), indicating strong predictive power. All hypothesized relationships (H1-H9) were supported, validating the theoretical framework. Tourism Attitude emerged as the most effective mediating variable between Identity-based Soft Power and Travel Decision-Making, confirming its crucial role in the decision process.

The unexplained 30% variance likely encompasses factors outside the model's scope, including (1) external economic factors such as price sensitivity and travel costs, which Yodsurang et al. (2022) identified as particularly relevant for secondary destinations; (2) digital and social media influences, including user-generated content and peer recommendations through platforms like Instagram and TripAdvisor; (3) accessibility and transportation considerations, which Supromajakr et al. (2022) noted as significant barriers for some secondary provinces; and (4) travel constraints such as time availability and competing destination alternatives. Future research incorporating these elements could further enhance model comprehensiveness.

The relatively low explained variance for Tourism Image Perception (R² = .19) compared to other constructs suggests that additional factors beyond Identity-based Soft Power significantly influence image formation. According to Wiyati & Yodsurang (2023), these might include media representation, prior exposure to marketing materials, and social network influences – factors that could be particularly important for secondary destinations with limited tourism visibility.
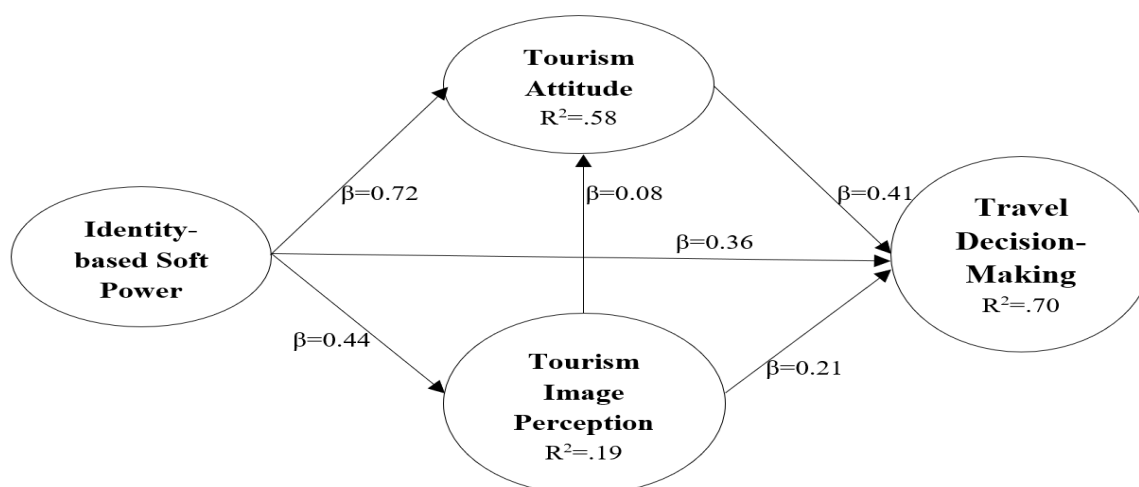
Figure 2 Final Structural Equation Model of Factors Influencing Travel Decision-making in Secondary Provinces of Central Thailand After Model Adjustment

Note: All path coefficients (β) are significant at $p<0.05$, R^2 values indicate explained variance in dependent variables

Figure 2 illustrates the final structural equation model after adjustment, demonstrating the complex relationships between Identity-based Soft Power and Travel Decision-Making through various mediating pathways. The model reveals several significant patterns:

Direct Path Relationships:

1. Identity-based Soft Power exhibits its strongest direct influence on Tourism Attitude ($\beta = 0.72$), indicating that cultural elements strongly shape tourists' attitudes toward destinations. This strong relationship suggests that cultural experiences create immediate attitudinal responses that can drive interest in secondary destinations even when the formal destination image hasn't fully developed.

2. A moderate direct effect is shown on Tourism Image Perception ($\beta = 0.44$), suggesting that cultural identity influences how tourists perceive destination images. This moderate effect indicates that while Soft Power elements contribute to the destination image, substantial opportunity exists to strengthen this connection through more effective branding and promotion strategies.

3. The direct path to Travel Decision-Making ($\beta = 0.36$) demonstrates that Soft Power elements directly influence travel choices, supporting the proposition by Özkan & Boylu (2021) that cultural elements can trigger travel motivation independent of fully formed destination perceptions or attitudes.

Mediating Relationships:

1. Tourism Attitude emerges as the strongest mediator, with a substantial path coefficient to Travel Decision-Making ($\beta = 0.41$). This finding aligns with Kotler & Keller's (2016) consumer behavior framework, highlighting attitude's role as a proximal determinant of purchase decisions, including tourism choices.

2. Tourism Image Perception shows a moderate influence on Travel Decision-Making ($\beta = 0.21$) while having a minimal effect on Tourism Attitude ($\beta = 0.08$). This disparity suggests that tourists may develop travel intention based on perceived destination attributes without necessarily developing strong attitudinal connections, particularly in less familiar destinations.

Variance Explained:

1. The model explains 70% of the variance in Travel Decision-Making ($R^2 = .70$), indicating strong predictive power and confirming the appropriateness of the selected variables for understanding tourism choices in secondary provinces.

2. Tourism Attitude shows substantial explained variance (R^2 = .58), reflecting its important role as a mediator and the significant impact of Identity-based Soft Power in shaping tourist attitudes toward secondary destinations.

3. Tourism Image Perception demonstrates lower explained variance (R^2 = .19), suggesting other factors may influence image formation. This relatively low explanatory power highlights the need for additional research on image development factors specific to secondary tourism destinations, which may differ from those of primary destinations.

This comprehensive model demonstrates the complex interplay between cultural soft power and tourism decision-making, with Tourism Attitude serving as a crucial mediating factor in the relationship. The high overall explained variance validates the model's effectiveness in explaining tourism decision-making processes in secondary destinations, providing a robust framework for developing targeted tourism strategies based on Identity-based Soft Power elements.

Third Research Objective: To study tourism development guidelines based on Identity-based Soft Power appropriate for secondary provinces in Central Thailand.

Table 4 Tourism Development Guidelines Based on Identity-based Soft Power in Secondary Provinces

Province	Identity-based Soft Power Highlights	Development Guidelines	Key Informants
Chainat	-Riverside lifestyle -Farming culture -Local food	-Develop lifestyle tourism -Promote agricultural routes -Preserve rice culture	-Tourists (2) -Community leaders (1) -Government officials (1)
Singburi	-Thai-Chinese culture -Local food -Local tradition	-Develop cultural routes -Promote food festivals -Preserve tradition	-Tourists (2) -Entrepreneurs (1) -Community leaders (1)
Ang Thong	-Local handicraft -Riverside lifestyle -Performing arts	-Develop learning centers -Organize lifestyle activities -Promote performances	-Tourists (2) -Government officials (1) -Entrepreneurs (1)
Suphan Buri	-History -Local food -Art and culture	-Develop historical sites -Promote local food -Preserve art and culture	-Tourists (3) -Community leaders (1)
Lopburi	-History -Mixed culture -Nature	-Develop historical sites -Promote cultural tourism -Preserve nature	-Tourists (2) -Government officials (1)
Samut Songkhram	-Riverside lifestyle -Seafood -Floating market	-Develop community tourism -Promote food routes -Preserve lifestyle	-Tourists (2) -Entrepreneurs (1)
Ratchaburi	-Handicraft -Cultural diversity -Local tradition	-Develop learning centers -Promote cultural tourism -Organize traditional festivals	-Tourists (2) -Community leaders (1)

Note: Data was collected from in-depth interviews with 21 key informants across seven provinces.

From the analysis of tourism development guidelines based on Identity-based Soft Power, the secondary provinces displayed distinct patterns and can be categorized into three main groups:

First, provinces with prominent riverside cultures (Chainat, Ang Thong, and Samut Songkhram) emphasized lifestyle-based tourism development. According to Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model (1980), these destinations are in the exploration to involvement stages, where authentic experiences remain intact but require strategic development. Yodsurang et al.'s (2022) framework suggests emphasizing experiential authenticity through limited-scale tourism products that maintain ecological integrity.

Implementation strategies include digital storytelling platforms, micro-funding for community entrepreneurs, seasonal experience calendars, and capacity development programs.

Second, provinces with rich historical heritage (Lopburi and Suphan Buri) leveraged their historical assets, aligning with Ritchie & Crouch's (2003) competitiveness model through core resources and attractors but requiring enhanced supporting factors. Loyma & Kaewnuch (2020) note these destinations' potential for cultural heritage tourism, appealing to educational segments. Strategies include augmented reality applications, public-private partnerships for infrastructure, thematic historical routes, visitor management systems, and cultural ambassador programs.

Third, provinces featuring cultural diversity (Singburi and Ratchaburi) focused on multicultural elements. Maiphranate et al. (2023) identify these as ideal for creative tourism development with active cultural participation. Within Hu et al. (2022), these provinces can leverage cultural diversity as a competitive advantage. Strategies include experiential workshop programs, cultural calendar applications, exchange platforms, targeted digital marketing, and multilingual interpretation materials.

Common themes across all provinces included local food tourism integration, community participation, authentic experience preservation, and sustainable development strategies. The SEM results revealing food's strong influence (Mean = 4.21) and tourism attitude's importance as a mediator (β = 0.72) provide empirical support for these approaches.

These findings align with Özgeriş et al.'s (2024) sustainable tourism development concept. For effective implementation, provincial tourism offices should develop integrated digital marketing approaches, establish cross-provincial networks, implement community-based governance models, create monitoring systems, and establish sustainable funding mechanisms.

Successful tourism development in secondary provinces requires tailored approaches based on each area's unique Identity-based Soft Power elements while maintaining cultural authenticity. This strategy aligns with Sermchayut (2020) and Supromajakr et al. (2022), who emphasize that secondary destinations must develop distinctive identities rather than competing directly with established tourism centers.

Discussion

This research provides significant insights into Identity-based Soft Power's role in tourism development across secondary provinces in Central Thailand, revealing important theoretical and practical implications.

Factors Influencing Travel Decision-Making

Identity-based Soft Power exerts significant direct and indirect influences on Travel Decision-Making. Food emerged as the most influential component (Kim et al., 2009), offering accessible authenticity and creating memorable experiences that directly influence destination selection, particularly in areas where distinctive culinary traditions remain intact. Thai fashion design, festivals, and traditions also demonstrated substantial impact (Özkan & Boylu, 2021), confirming cultural identity's crucial role in developing compelling destination images.

Tourism Image Perception received high ratings across dimensions, with tourism destination potential emerging as primary. Safety perception indicates improvement areas, highlighting inadequate infrastructure as a development barrier (Sermchayut, 2020; Supromajakr et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges requires coordinated governance approaches combining provincial authorities, private investment, and national tourism policy.

Structural Equation Model Analysis

The structural equation model exhibited excellent fit post-adjustment, validating relationships among key variables. The dramatic improvements in fit indices indicate strong empirical support for the theoretical relationships proposed. Tourism Attitude emerged as the primary mediator between Identity-based Soft Power and Travel Decision-Making, supporting Rosenberg & Hovland's (1960) theory that emotional and cognitive connections significantly influence decision-making.

Tourism Image Perception's weaker mediating role suggests secondary destinations might benefit more from strategies focusing on emotional connections rather than competing directly with primary destinations on conventional image attributes (Gallarza et al., 2002). The model's high explanatory power (70% of variance) emphasizes Identity-based Soft Power's practical significance in influencing tourism behavior.

Tourism Development Guidelines

The research identifies distinct development patterns across the seven provinces, necessitating tailored tourism strategies. Riverside culture provinces succeed with lifestyle-based initiatives, while historically rich provinces show promise through heritage-based opportunities. These provincial patterns align with established tourism frameworks like Ritchie & Crouch's (2003) Competitiveness Model and Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle.

Common themes emerged across all provinces: local food tourism integration, community participation, and authentic experience preservation. Implementation requires coordinated stakeholder collaboration and smart tourism technologies to enhance visitor experiences while preserving cultural authenticity (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

Overall Implications

This comprehensive approach provides a valuable framework for understanding how Identity-based Soft Power shapes tourism development in secondary provinces. Food and cultural elements serve as primary attractions, while Tourism Attitude acts as a crucial mediating factor. Long-term sustainability depends on meaningful community engagement and equitable economic distribution (Dangi & Jamal, 2016).

Limitations include potential selection bias from convenience sampling and the cross-sectional nature, preventing long-term assessment. Future research should address these through longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and action research evaluating specific implementation strategies.

Conclusion

This research contributes to tourism and cultural soft power literature by providing empirical evidence of its regional impact. Findings show that Identity-based Soft Power significantly influences travel decisions, particularly through food culture and traditional festivals, with Tourism Attitude serving as a critical mediator. Within Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle framework, most secondary provinces in Central Thailand exist between exploration and involvement stages, where authentic experiences remain intact but require strategic development. This aligns with Nye's (2004) concept of cultural attraction as an influence, extending international relations theory into tourism development.

The structural equation model explains 70% of the variance in Travel Decision-Making, demonstrating that cultural identity influences travel choices through direct and indirect pathways. These findings suggest tourism strategies emphasizing community participation and cultural authenticity can help maintain positive host-guest relationships as visitation increases. By recognizing Tourism Attitude as the primary mediator, destination managers should focus on building emotional connections with local culture rather than solely developing physical infrastructure.

Secondary provinces should leverage their cultural identities through strategies aligned with Thailand's National Tourism Development Plan and key Sustainable Development Goals (8, 11, and 12), balancing:

1. Economic sustainability through stable income generation and supply chain integration
2. Cultural sustainability by preserving authenticity while allowing organic evolution.
3. Environmental sustainability through carrying capacity management and green infrastructure.

This research demonstrates that Identity-based Soft Power represents a practical mechanism for transforming under-visited provinces into thriving cultural destinations. Success requires coordinated efforts among provincial authorities, cultural organizations, tourism enterprises, and community representatives with clear governance structures. By integrating cultural assets with innovative tourism

strategies, stakeholders can boost local economies while fostering cultural sustainability. As tourism evolves toward authentic experiences, Thailand's secondary provinces are well-positioned to leverage their distinctive Soft Power elements to create sustainable models preserving cultural heritage while generating economic opportunities for future generations.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, this study proposes strategic recommendations for enhancing tourism development in secondary provinces through Identity-based Soft Power, organized in a phased implementation framework.

Phase I: Foundation Building (1-2 years) focuses on establishing essential structures and strategies. Authorities should implement an adaptive governance model integrating multiple stakeholders following a polycentric approach. This includes creating provincial Cultural Tourism Councils with diverse representation, developing cultural mapping initiatives, implementing safety standards that preserve authenticity, and establishing incentive mechanisms for community-based tourism initiatives. Marketing strategies should leverage the strong influence of Tourism Attitude by focusing on emotional connections through digital storytelling platforms, thematic tourism routes based on the three provincial categories, targeted social media campaigns highlighting food and festivals, and destination branding guidelines emphasizing unique cultural identities.

Phase II: Development and Capacity Building (2-4 years) centers on sustainable initiatives aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This includes prioritizing infrastructure investments that maintain environmental integrity, establishing learning centers within the Creative Tourism Network framework, developing experiential programs, particularly focused on food tourism, and implementing cultural preservation initiatives. Comprehensive capacity-building programs should focus on entrepreneurial skills development, service quality training, financial literacy workshops, and network initiatives connecting provinces with complementary Soft Power elements.

Phase III: Expansion and Innovation (4-6 years) builds on established foundations by developing cross-border tourism collaborations, expanding international marketing to specific segments using tourist typology frameworks, implementing digital innovations like augmented reality, and establishing visitor management systems that monitor tourism impacts.

The research agenda should employ sophisticated methodologies, including longitudinal studies tracking quantitative and qualitative indicators, economic impact analyses using established tourism frameworks, cross-cultural perspectives on tourism preferences, digital platform effectiveness studies, and policy implementation assessments.

These recommendations draw from successful cases like Kyoto and Luang Prabang, which have balanced cultural preservation with tourism growth. The goal is creating sustainable tourism ecosystems where Identity-based Soft Power elements are not merely preserved but enhanced, generating virtuous cycles of cultural pride, economic opportunity, and visitor satisfaction while maintaining each province's distinctive character.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2), 77-101.

Buhalis, D., & Amaranggana, A. (2015). Smart Tourism Destinations Enhancing Tourism Experience through the Personalization of Services. *In I. Tussyadiah & A. Inversini (Eds.), Information and communication technologies in tourism 2015 (pp. 377-389).* Springer.

Butler, R. W. (1980). The concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution: Implications for management of resources. *Canadian Geographer*, 24(1), 5-12.

Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dachum, P., & Jiarakul, D. (2024). Developing slow tourism potential in Chai Nat Province. *Thai Studies Journal*, 21(2), 294-340.

Dangi, T. B., & Jamal, T. (2016). An integrated approach to "sustainable community-based tourism. *Sustainability,* 8(5), 475.

Gallarza, M. G., Saura, I. G., & García, H. C. (2002). Destination image: Towards a conceptual framework. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29(1), 56-78.

Hair, J. F., Hult, G. T. M., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2017). *A primer on partial least squares structural equation modeling* (PLS-SEM) (2nd ed.). Sage.

Hu, B., He, F., & Hu, L. (2022). Community empowerment under powerful government: A sustainable tourism development path for cultural heritage sites. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 752051.

Kim, Y. G., Eves, A., & Scarles, C. (2009). Building a model of local food consumption on trips and holidays: A grounded theory approach. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 28(3), 423-431.

Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2016). *Marketing management* (15th ed.). Pearson.

Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement,* 30(3), 607-610.

Likert, R. (1932). A technique for the measurement of attitudes. *Archives of Psychology*, 22(140), 55.

Losuwan, W. (2023). Development of cultural tourism quality in Ang Thong Province. *Journal of Graduate Studies Valaya Alongkron Rajabhat University*, 17(3), 158-174.

Loyma, K., & Kaewnuch, K. (2020). Guidelines for enhancing the perceived image of secondary city tourism in Thailand: A case study of Sing Buri province. *Sripatum Review of Humanities and Social Sciences,* 20(2), 91-104.

Ma, Y., Puangmaha, L., & Farangthong, S. (2024). Factors affecting Chinese tourists' decision to travel abroad after the change of policies. *Journal of Management Science Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University,* 4(2), 525-540.

Maiphranate, P., Rattana, T., Phongphitakyotin, T., & Dokchan, P. (2023). Secondary cities tourism policy and reducing tourism spatial inequality. *Journal of Administration and Social Science Review*, 6(2), 221-228.

Nguyen Thi, H., Nguyen Thi, T., Vu Trong, T., Nguyen Duc, T., & Nguyen Nghi, T. (2024). Sustainable tourism governance: A study of the impact of culture. *Journal of Governance and Regulation*, 13(2), 474-485.

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.

Özgeriş, M., Demircan, N., Karahan, A., Gökçe, O., Karahan, F., Sezen, I., & Külekçi, E. A. (2024). Cultural heritage management in the context of sustainable tourism: The case of Öşkvank Monastery. *Sustainability,* 16(22), 9964.

Özkan, B. I., & Boylu, Y. (2021). A study on the use of tourism as a soft power instrument in international relations. *Journal of Tourismology*, 7(1), 73-99.

Quijano Herrera, J. L., & Pérez Tapia, G. (2024). *Tourism as a driver of soft power: The case of South Korea.* In Sustainable tourism, culture and heritage promotion (pp. 221-227). Springer.

Ritchie, J. R. B., & Crouch, G. I. (2003). *The competitive destination: A sustainable tourism perspective*. CABI Publishing.

Rocharungsat, P., Prabpriree, M., Phachan, N., Suwannachang, N., & Ozawa, M. (2024). How can we search for community soft power in tourism development in developing countries? *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research*, 2(8), Article 52.

Rosenberg, M. J., & Hovland, C. I. (1960). *Cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of attitudes*. In M. J. Rosenberg & C. I. Hovland (Eds.), Attitude organization and change: An analysis of consistency among attitude components. Yale University Press.

Sari, Ö., & Meydan Uygur, S. (2024). *Tourism diplomacy as a soft power*. Paper presented at Mtcon - The Conference on Managing Tourism Across, İstanbul, Türkiye.

Sermchayut, R. (2020). Promotion Strategy for Community-Based Tourism. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Academic Research and Development*, 2(4), 51-61.

Simasathiansophon, N., Jotikasthira, C., Onputtha, S., & Tiwasing, A. (2020). Tourist's decision to travel to a Thai cultural tourism destination in the central part of Thailand. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 164, Article 10002.

Supromajakr, I., Putthongsri, P., Mahapornpong, P., & Chusakul, W. (2022). Strategy Development to Promote Tourism in a Second Tiercity at Chiangkhan, Loei Province. *Dhammathas Academic Journal*, 22(3), 107-116.

Wiyati, W., & Yodsurang, P. (2023). Riverside environment and community-based tourism in Ayutthaya. *Sarasaard Journal*, 1(2023), 136-150.

World Travel & Tourism Council. (2023). *Economic Impact Report 2023* - Thailand. WTTC.

Yansombat, N., & Chantanee, M. (2023). Historical tourism management Tha Ruea district, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya province: The 117th year visit unofficially of the Nakorn Noi of King Rama V. *Journal of MCU Social Science Review,* 12(5), 205-219.

Yodsurang, P., Kiatthanawat, A., Sanoamuang, P., & Kraseain, A. (2022). Community-based tourism and heritage consumption in Thailand: An upside-down classification based on heritage consumption. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), 2096531.