Online Media Consumption Behavior of Chinese Students Who Decide to Travel to Thailand Independently

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Thailand continues to be a leading international tourist destination, with recent growth driven by natural beauty, cultural appeal, and educational opportunities. From late 2024, tourism saw a significant rise, particularly from markets like China, Malaysia, and India. Educational tourism is expanding through international collaborations and tailored dual-degree programs, with Chinese students forming the largest international group. Chanthaburi Province, supported by institutions like Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University, is advancing both tourism and specialized education. Despite these developments, little research has explored how Chinese students use online media—especially within China's distinct platforms like WeChat and Douyin—for independent travel. This study investigates their online media consumption and the role of user-generated content in shaping perceptions and travel decisions, aiming to inform digital marketing strategies in Thailand's educational tourism sector.

Materials and Methods: This study used a mixed methods design to examine how Chinese students use online media in making independent travel decisions, integrating quantitative data from 400 students via structured questionnaires and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants (5 male, 5 female), conducted with a professional interpreter. The questionnaire addressed demographics, travel behavior, media usage, and perceptions of Thai tourism, while interviews explored deeper experiences and motivations. Ethical approval was obtained (Certificate No. EC016/2568). Quantitative data were analyzed using ANOVA, correlation, and t-tests, while qualitative responses underwent thematic and contextual analysis to identify patterns shaping travel decisions.

Results: A survey of 400 Chinese students showed most were digital natives aged 20–25 with bachelor's degrees. Around 43% planned trips 2–3 months ahead, using hotels (41.5%) and homestays (31.7%), guided by online reviews. Travel budgets typically ranged from 3,001–5,000 THB. Post-trip reviews and shared content fostered trust, supporting Word of Mouth and user-generated content theories. Interviews with 10 students revealed reliance on WeChat, Douyin, and Weibo for clear, visual, and up-to-date travel information. Challenges included outdated info, language barriers, and limited interactive features. WeChat Official Accounts and Douyin were seen as the most effective. Recommendations focused on frequent updates, tailored content, and real-time Q&A to build trust. While quantitative data showed no significant link between media use and travel decisions, qualitative insights emphasized the importance of platform alignment with user interests. Overall, tailored digital content and communication channels are vital for supporting Chinese students' independent travel decisions in Thailand.

Conclusion: This study explores how Chinese digital-native students use online media in making independent travel decisions to Thailand, revealing that high-quality user-generated content (UGC)—such as reviews, photos, videos, and KOL recommendations—builds trust and reduces uncertainty more effectively than sheer information volume. It supports the Uses and Gratifications Theory and AIDA Model, but also highlights the strong emotional and qualitative impact of authentic content, particularly during the "Interest" and "Desire" stages. Practically, effective digital marketing should focus on personalized, visually concise content tailored to specific platforms—using WeChat for formal information, Douyin for inspiration, and tools like AI chatbots for real-time engagement—demonstrating that a strategic mix of quality, platform fit, and interactive design is essential to influencing travel decisions.

Keywords: Decision-Making; Tourism Marketing; Online Consumer Behavior; Online Platform

Introduction

Thailand remains one of the most popular destinations for international tourists, owing to its natural resources, unique culture, and globally renowned cuisine. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2024), from September to December 2024, a total of 12,226,500 foreign tourists visited the country, representing a 20% increase compared to 2023. This influx generated over 652.8 billion baht in revenue, accounting for 97% of the annual target. The primary tourist groups originated from China, Malaysia, India,

South Korea, and Russia (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024). The trend of educational tourism has continuously expanded, driven by collaborations between Thai and international universities that support dual-degree programs and curriculum development tailored to global market demands (Smith, 2013). In 2023, Chinese students constituted the largest group of international students, totaling approximately 23,770 individuals (Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, 2024). Chanthaburi Province, known for its natural and economic potential, has seen ongoing development in both the tourism and education sectors. The Faculty of Communication Arts at Rambhai Barni Rajabhat University initiated specialized programs for Chinese students in 2020, focusing on lifelong learning, innovation integration, and educational tourism promotion (Faculty of Communication Arts, 2024). This initiative has attracted a considerable number of Chinese students to study in the region. However, there remains a lack of in-depth research on the online media consumption behaviors of Chinese students in the context of independent travel, particularly within China's distinctive digital ecosystem, which features platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. These platforms differ significantly from Western counterparts in terms of usage patterns and media culture (Li & Wang, 2021; Zhang, 2020). Independent travel decisions in the digital era are influenced by user-generated content and social pressures within online environments. Therefore, frameworks concerning the Information Search Process and social influence in digital contexts are critical for understanding the behaviors of this consumer group (Johnson & Johnson, 2018; Cheung & Lee, 2019). This study aims to examine the perception and reception of travel information through online media among Chinese students who decide to travel independently in Thailand. It emphasizes analyzing the dynamics of consumer behavior and information processing within the digital media ecosystem that affect travel decision-making. The research framework encompasses (1) the online media consumption behaviors of Chinese students who choose independent travel, and (2) the perception and cognitive processing of travel-related information obtained via online media. The findings are expected to contribute to the expansion of knowledge in digital marketing for educational tourism and provide strategic data for effective marketing communication planning tailored to Chinese tourists in the digital age.

Objectives

1. To analyze the online media exposure behaviors of Chinese students who choose to travel independently in Thailand, with a particular focus on understanding their media consumption patterns within the current digital tourism ecosystem. This includes the influence of user-generated content (UGC) as a significant factor in shaping travel behavior and decision-making.

2. To examine the perceptions of Thailand as a tourist destination among Chinese students as shaped by their engagement with online media, and to explore how such perceptions influence their decisions to undertake independent travel.

Literature review

This study, titled "Online Media Exposure Behavior of Chinese Students Who Decide to Travel Independently to Thailand," is grounded in relevant concepts, theories, and previous research as follows:

The paper is based on a body of communication, psychology, and tourism theories. Media exposure theory describes communication between media consumers and content/channels and is helpful to understand Chinese students' interactions with online media content and channels on digital platforms, such as travel websites, travel forums, and social media, to gain travel information (Berlo, 1960). Perception theory focuses on the process of message interpretation and its effects, and it will be helpful to discuss how Chinese students' perception of information posted online, such as Thailand travel-related content, will affect their online information searching, including their interest in travel and credibility in the website (Smith, 2013). The theories on online information exposure include selective exposure theory and agenda-setting theory, which are directly relevant to online information exposure to discuss Chinese students' motivation for information exposure about safety, costs, and local experience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Johnson & Johnson, 2018). The tourism concepts of experiential travel, FIT, and push-pull motivation are

helpful to analyze and discuss why Chinese students prefer to self-organize a trip to Thailand and how to use online media to self-organize the travel (Zhang, 2020; Li & Wang, 2021). The Uses and Gratifications Theory will support the paper to demonstrate and discuss the proactive use of online media with different uses for travel, such as comparison, decision-making, and entertainment purposes (Katz et al., 1993; Cheung & Lee, 2019). The AIDA Model can be incorporated to support the paper with the hierarchy of effects and purchasing behaviors based on awareness, interest, desire, and action (Cheung & Lee, 2019). Models of consumer decision-making, such as the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell model of decision-making, are helpful to illustrate how consumers go through all the stages of decision-making from need recognition to purchase and evaluation of a product or service, which is highly relevant to the paper (Blackwell et al., 2001).

1. Media Exposure Theory
Media exposure refers to how consumers access content, formats, and media channels. In the digital era, diverse and accessible online platforms—such as travel websites, social media apps, and video blogs—play a key role in informing Chinese students before making travel decisions.

2. Perception Theory
Perception involves how individuals filter and interpret information. In this context, the online portrayal of Thailand can influence Chinese students' interest, trust, and attitudes toward travel.

3. Online Information Exposure Theories
Theories such as *selective exposure* and *agenda-setting* explain how users engage with information that matches their interests or motivations. Chinese students planning independent trips seek content related to safety, cost, and local experiences.

4. Tourism Concepts
Key ideas include experiential travel, Free Independent Travelers (FIT), and push-pull motivation. These concepts help explain why Chinese students choose Thailand and rely on online media for self-planned trips.

5. Uses and Gratifications & AIDA Model
The Uses and Gratifications Theory highlights active media use for information, comparison, or entertainment. The AIDA model (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) explains how online media drives decision-making toward destination selection.

6. Consumer Decision-Making Models
Models such as the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell model outline stages from need recognition to post-purchase behavior, aligning with how Chinese students use online information to choose Thailand as a travel destination.

Conceptual Framework

The research titled "Online Media Exposure Behavior of Chinese Students Who Decide to Travel Independently to Thailand" is based on the following conceptual framework designed by the researcher.
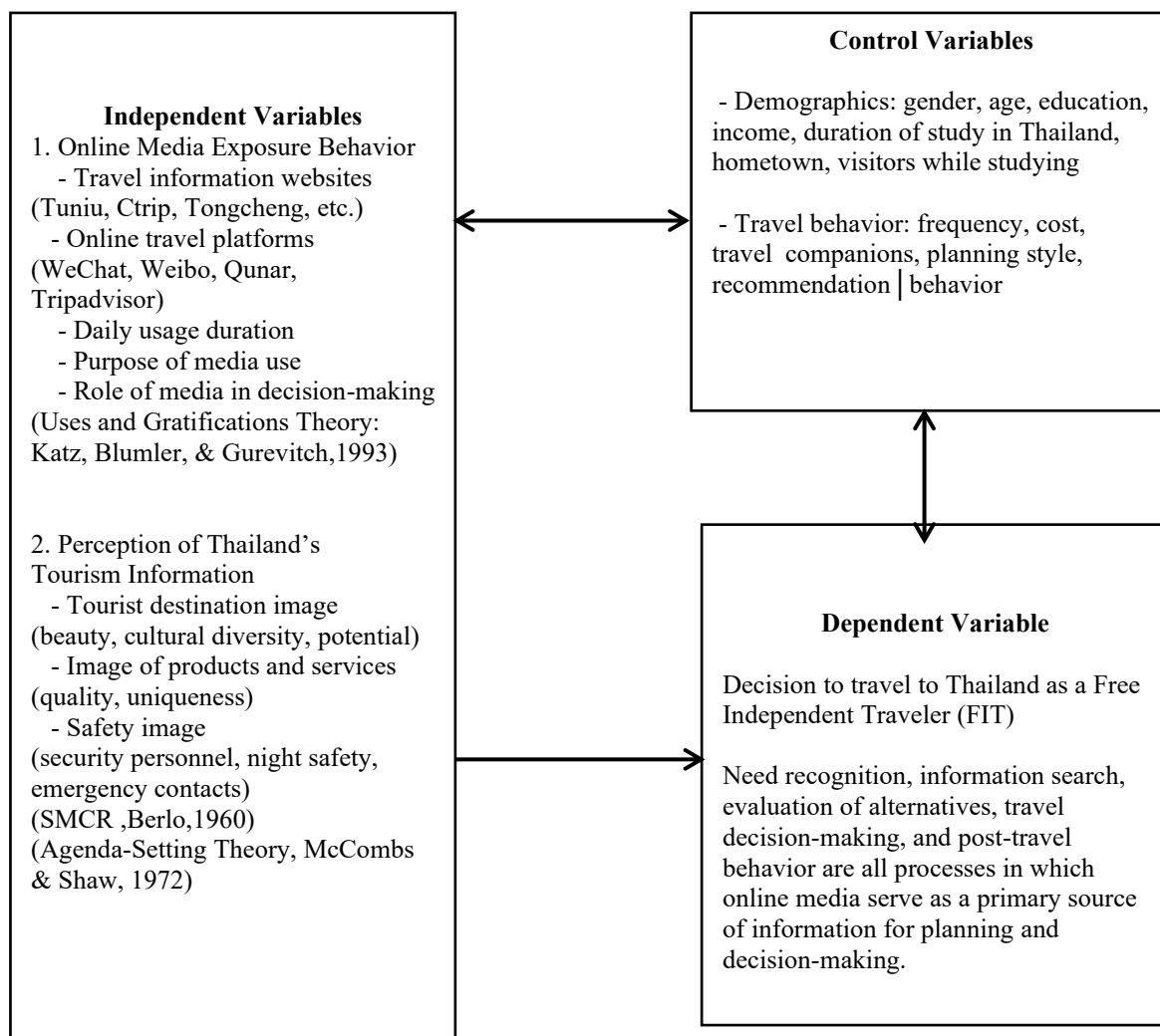
Independent Variables
1. Online Media Exposure Behavior
  - Travel information websites (Tuniu, Ctrip, Tongcheng, etc.)
  - Online travel platforms (WeChat, Weibo, Qunar, Tripadvisor)
  - Daily usage duration
  - Purpose of media use
  - Role of media in decision-making
(Uses and Gratifications Theory: Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch,1993)

2. Perception of Thailand's Tourism Information
  - Tourist destination image (beauty, cultural diversity, potential)
  - Image of products and services (quality, uniqueness)
  - Safety image (security personnel, night safety, emergency contacts)
(SMCR ,Berlo,1960)
(Agenda-Setting Theory, McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

Control Variables

 - Demographics: gender, age, education, income, duration of study in Thailand, hometown, visitors while studying

 - Travel behavior: frequency, cost, travel companions, planning style, recommendation│behavior

Dependent Variable

Decision to travel to Thailand as a Free Independent Traveler (FIT)

Need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, travel decision-making, and post-travel behavior are all processes in which online media serve as a primary source of information for planning and decision-making.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology
This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the online media exposure behaviors and influencing factors affecting Chinese students' decisions to travel independently. The rationale for adopting this design lies in its ability to combine statistical data with contextual and experiential insights, thus enabling a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. The research protocol was approved by a Human Research Ethics Committee (Certificate No. EC016/2568), with strict adherence to ethical standards regarding informed consent and personal data protection.
 Sample and Data Collection
Quantitative research involved a sample of 400 Chinese students selected through probability sampling. Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire comprising five sections:
1. Demographic information: gender, age, educational level, marital status, average monthly income, duration of study in Thailand, place of origin, and whether anyone had visited them during their stay in Thailand.

2. Tourism behavior: including frequency and nature of travel, expenses during the most recent trip, duration of stay, travel companions, trip planning habits, and whether respondents had recommended destinations to others.

3. Online media exposure behavior: identifying travel websites used (e.g., Tuniu, Ctrip, Tongcheng, etc.), online platforms used during travel (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, Qunar, Tripadvisor), daily usage time, purposes of use, and the role of online media in travel decision-making.

4. Perception of tourism information in Thailand, assessed across three dimensions:

4.1 Destination image (e.g., scenic beauty, cultural diversity, historical value, development potential)

4.2 Product and service image (e.g., quality, design, uniqueness)

4.3 Safety image (e.g., availability of security personnel, emergency contacts, nighttime safety)

A 5-point Likert scale was used for all rating items.

5. Additional suggestions, if any, from respondents.

Qualitative research was conducted with 10 key informants (5 male and 5 female), selected through snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted with the support of a professional Chinese interpreter to ensure accurate translation and meaning. A semi-structured interview protocol was used, covering five major themes:

1. General information: name, gender, age, educational background, and residence.

2. Experience with independent travel: including travel duration, companions, motivations, and objectives.

3. Online media exposure behavior: type of media used, reasons for selection, usage duration, satisfaction, and encountered issues.

4. Perception of tourism information: effective sources, influential content, suggestions for improvement, and overall impressions.

5. Other suggestions related to their experiences and perceptions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentage, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics, including one-way ANOVA**,** coefficient analysis**,** and t-tests**.**

Qualitative data were analyzed using textual analysis and contextual analysis to synthesize core meanings, behavioral patterns, and motivations underlying online media exposure and travel decision-making among the target group.

Results

A quantitative study using an online questionnaire distributed via WeChat to 400 Chinese university students interested in studying and engaging in independent travel in Thailand revealed that the majority of respondents were aged 20–25 (52.70%) and held a bachelor's degree (77.60%), indicating that they are digital natives with strong critical evaluation skills for online information. Approximately 42.90% of the students planned their trips 2–3 months in advance, while 30.50% planned within 1 month. This reflects the flexible and responsive use of online media in decision-making. Regarding accommodation, hotels were the most popular choice (41.50%), followed by homestays (31.70%), with decisions informed by online reviews. Most participants reported a travel budget of 3,001–5,000 THB (37.40%), reflecting cost-conscious behavior supported by price comparison via online platforms. Post-travel communication behaviors, such as posting reviews and sharing photos or videos, contribute to trust-building within online communities. This aligns with the Word of Mouth marketing theory and the Online Community concept, emphasizing the role of user-generated content in influencing interest and decision-making.

In-depth interviews with 10 Chinese students further revealed that this group tends to plan their trips meticulously, relying on platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Weibo for travel information and comparisons. They favored content that was easy to understand, visually supported, and clearly presented. However, challenges remain, including outdated information, language clarity, and a lack of two-way

communication features. The most effective platforms for tourism awareness were WeChat Official Accounts and Douyin, with target users expressing the need for up-to-date, clear, and interest-aligned content. Key recommendations include: regular updates of information, development of content tailored to target groups, and enhancement of real-time Q&A systems to build trust and provide a positive tourism experience in Thailand. Statistical hypothesis testing indicated no significant differences between media exposure or tourism awareness and the decision to engage in independent travel. However, qualitative findings support the idea that selecting platforms aligned with user interests continues to play a meaningful role in influencing perception and decision-making. In summary, the study highlights the importance of designing appropriate content and digital communication channels to support the media consumption behavior and travel decisions of Chinese students engaging in independent tourism in Thailand.

Discussion

This study on "Online Media Consumption Behavior of Chinese Students Who Decide to Travel to Thailand Independently" draws upon theoretical frameworks from communication studies, strategic communication, and consumer behavior in the digital context. The findings reveal that Chinese digital natives utilize a variety of online platforms—including WeChat, Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok), and Baidu—for travel information search and decision-making. These behaviors align with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), which posits that media users actively choose media that fulfill their specific needs, such as accurate information seeking, entertainment, and social integration.

Travel decisions among Chinese students are not based solely on digital content but are heavily influenced by the credibility built through electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and peer-generated reviews. This reflects the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), which suggests that individuals seek additional information to reduce uncertainty and reinforce their decisions. The students' emphasis on reviews and real-user experiences highlights the importance of participatory communication, which is central to content marketing that encourages users to co-create media.

The study further underscores the influence of user-generated content (UGC)—such as videos, reviews, and posts showcasing personal experiences—on brand trust and travel motivation. This finding is consistent with the principles of creative marketing communication, where consumer-generated media plays a key role in brand value creation. Additionally, influencer marketing emerges as a critical strategy, particularly in the Chinese context, where Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) significantly shape consumer perception and bridge personal experiences with brand messaging.

The decision-making process exhibited by the participants also reflects a deep engagement with digital information, which can be mapped through the Customer Journey Mapping model—from awareness to consideration and finally to decision. Furthermore, the AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) (Lewis, 1898) is applicable in explaining how digital content stimulates attention through visuals, builds interest and desire via relevant reviews and stories, and leads to actual travel decisions.

Although quantitative analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship between online media exposure or tourism perception and the decision to travel independently, qualitative insights suggest that content quality and relevance may play a more pivotal role than the sheer volume of media consumed. The lack of significant quantitative findings could be due to the broadness of measurement variables, which may not capture nuanced content types that influence user trust, such as image/video reviews or KOL endorsements.

Key theoretical linkages include:

The Uses and Gratifications Theory explains how students choose culturally and linguistically relevant media to satisfy needs for information accuracy, entertainment, and anxiety reduction.

The AIDA model helps interpret how engaging and targeted content moves users from attention and interest to desire, eventually leading to action (i.e., travel).

However, certain limitations, such as outdated content, language clarity issues, and a lack of interactive features (e.g., real-time responses), undermine trust in online platforms. The study recommends the integration of AI-powered chatbots and dynamic content personalization to enhance user experience and credibility. Moreover, strategic collaborations between Thai tourism organizations and Chinese platforms—such as utilizing WeChat Mini Programs or optimized video content on Douyin—are key to increasing marketing effectiveness.

In conclusion, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings with robust theoretical frameworks enables a deeper understanding of Chinese students' online media consumption behaviors and informs effective digital communication and marketing strategies in Thailand's tourism industry. This integration also enhances the academic value and practical implications of the study.

Conclusion

This study, "Online Media Exposure Behavior of Chinese Students Who Decide to Travel Independently in Thailand," provides an in-depth understanding of how Chinese digital-native students utilize digital platforms in their travel decision-making process. The findings reveal that decision-making is influenced not merely by the *quantity* of information consumed but more critically by the quality of content, particularly user-generated content (UGC), including reviews, photos, videos, and recommendations from key opinion leaders (KOLs), which foster trust and reduce uncertainty.

Theoretical Implications

The results reinforce the relevance of the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the AIDA Model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) in explaining consumer behavior in the digital era. While the research confirms the sequential stages of the AIDA model, it also highlights the increasing complexity within each stage. For example, trust derived from authentic user reviews may have a greater impact on the "Interest" and "Desire" stages than purely factual information. This suggests a need to refine or expand existing theoretical models to incorporate qualitative and affective dimensions of media influence in the online decision-making process.

Practical Implications

Practically, this research proposes strategic guidelines for digital marketing targeted at Chinese students who prefer independent travel, including:

1. Personalized content design with clear language and concise visual formats, such as short videos and images tailored to individual needs;

2. Platform-specific strategies, such as using WeChat Mini Programs or Official Accounts for formal information and Douyin for inspirational visual content;

3. Interactive features, including AI-powered chatbots and personalized content recommendation systems, to respond to user needs in real-time.

In summary, the integration of high-quality digital content, suitable platform choices, and tailored communication strategies plays a pivotal role in influencing the travel decisions of Chinese students. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for the development of effective digital marketing strategies and policies in Thailand's tourism sector.

Recommendation

1. Developing Digital Marketing Strategies Focusing on User-Generated Content (UGC) and Influencers

Future research should examine the effectiveness of strategies that leverage user-generated content alongside the role of influencers (Key Opinion Leaders, KOLs) in building trust and stimulating decision-making, especially within the Chinese market context, where high engagement in social commerce occurs on popular platforms such as Xiaohongshu and WeChat. Further studies will deepen understanding of social influence and source credibility dimensions affecting consumer behavior in this group.

2. Development and Evaluation of Real-Time Language Translation and Intelligent Response Technologies

Research should explore the efficacy of real-time translation systems and intelligent response tools, such as AI-powered chatbots that personalize content and recommendations according to individual user needs. These technologies can help overcome language barriers and enhance user experience in travel planning. They have the potential to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty, which directly impacts conversion rates and fosters platform loyalty (platform stickiness).

3. Longitudinal Studies to Capture the Evolution of Digital Consumer Behavior

Given the rapid changes in online media consumption behaviors within complex and dynamic digital ecosystems, longitudinal studies are necessary to track shifts in platform popularity, content formats (e.g., growth of short videos), and the evolving role of artificial intelligence (AI) in travel decision-making processes. Such studies also offer opportunities to compare independent travelers' behaviors with group tourists', enriching online marketing management and strategy development to better address diverse consumer needs.

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