

A Qualitative Analysis of the Motivations for Chinese Gay Tourists Choosing Thailand as a Destination: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract

Chinese gay tourists, as the largest segment of gay tourists in Thailand, significantly contribute to the development of the Thai pink tourism industry. However, there has been limited research focusing on the motivations of Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their tourism destination. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study aims to understand the factors influencing the motivation of Chinese gay tourists in selecting Thailand as their travel destination. Through purposive and snowball sampling, 23 Chinese gays were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews to gather data. The data were transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory methodology. This study identified six key factors: acceptance and freedom, community and belonging, personal and emotional well-being, accessibility and convenience, sexual freedom and entertainment, and influence of media and friends. These factors collectively influence the motivation of Chinese gay tourists in their choice of tourism destination. Moreover, this study develops a theoretical framework that encapsulates these motivational factors and their interrelations.

Keywords: *Gay tourism, Chinese gay tourists, Thailand, motivation, grounded theory; pink tourism*

Introduction

Gay tourism refers to travel undertaken by individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, seeking destinations that offer inclusive, welcoming, and safe environments where they can express their identities freely and engage in social, cultural, and recreational activities without fear of discrimination (Waitt & Markwell, 2014). The pink tourism market has grown significantly in recent years, reflecting broader social acceptance and the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ rights worldwide (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021).

Globally, the gay tourism market is substantial, with an estimated 180 million individuals and an annual expenditure of \$200 billion (Stephens, 2023). This market has shown consistent growth over the years, driven by increasing social acceptance and targeted marketing strategies. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), the LGBTQ+ travel market grows at an annual rate of 8.5%, which is higher than the general travel market's growth rate. This demographic is recognized for its higher-than-average disposable income and propensity to travel frequently, making it a lucrative segment for the tourism industry (WTTC, 2021). Countries and cities worldwide are increasingly acknowledging the economic potential of gay tourism. For instance, in 2019, the United States saw an influx of LGBTQ+ tourists contributing over \$63 billion to the national economy (CMI, 2019). Similarly, European destinations such as Spain and Germany have actively marketed themselves as gay-friendly, resulting in substantial tourism revenue. The annual Madrid Pride, one of the largest LGBTQ+ events globally, attracts over 1.5 million visitors, contributing significantly to the local economy (País, 2019).

Thailand has long been recognized as a premier destination for international tourism, attracting a diverse range of visitors from across the globe (Beirman, 2018). Hess (2019) emphasize Thailand's popularity among worldwide tourists, noting its significant contribution to the Thai economy. Specifically, particularly Bangkok, has established itself as a popular destination for gay tourism, with Armartpon (2021) highlighting the city's cultural tolerance for homosexuality and transgenderism. Statham and Scuzzarello (2023) further discuss Thailand's global reputation as a 'queer paradise,' which influences its sex tourism industry and links

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it to the global sex market.

When it comes to Chinese gay men, Thailand's appeal is particularly strong due to its progressive stance on LGBTQ+ rights and its vibrant gay scene (Saejang, 2019). Monterrubio (2019) found that gay men's travel motivation and ability are positively related to their destination involvement and loyalty towards Thailand, indicating a strong connection between the gay community and their preference for Thailand as a travel destination. Furthermore, Gao and Yanchinda (2019) discussed the development of a knowledge model based on the destination management system framework to enhance the travelling efficiency for Chinese gay tourists in Bangkok, suggesting a targeted approach to cater to this specific demographic. These factors collectively contribute to making Thailand a preferred choice for gay travellers, reflecting a broader trend of inclusivity and diversity in global tourism.

Motivation plays a vital role in influencing the choice of tourism destinations, as it encompasses various psychological and social factors that drive tourists' decisions (Khan et al., 2017). Tourists are often motivated by a desire for unique experiences, cultural exploration, and personal fulfilment, which are critical in shaping their travel preferences and destination choices (Yoo et al., 2018). Focusing on Chinese gay tourism is particularly significant because this growing segment has specific needs and motivations, and understanding and catering to these can enhance their travel experiences, making destinations like Thailand more appealing and inclusive.

Gay tourism encompasses a diverse range of studies. Hattingh and Spencer (2018) suggest that the travel preferences and behaviors of gay travellers vary significantly, with sexuality influencing travel choices for only a subset. Similarly, Hartal and Sasson-Levy (2021) focused on Tel-Aviv, exploring the political economy of gay tourism and its effects on national and local LGBT politics. The support from national ministries and local organizations has been instrumental in Tel-Aviv's rise as a 'gay vacation' hotspot. Hartal and Misgav (2021) further proposed the idea of 'queer urban trauma' to understand the response of urban LGBT communities to traumatic events and their impact on LGBT activism and spatial dynamics. Vorobjovas-Pinta and Hardy (2016) uncover the development potential and experiences of inclusion and acceptance for gay tourists. These studies provide insights into the socio-cultural and economic impacts of gay tourism, highlighting the complexity and evolving nature of the field.

Despite extensive research on various aspects of gay tourism, there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific needs, challenges, and opportunities for gay tourism in Thailand, particularly from the perspective of Chinese gay tourists. Existing literature often focuses on broader environmental, economic, and social factors influencing tourism in Thailand but does not delve deeply into the unique motivations and experiences of Chinese gay tourists. Moreover, most studies are conducted through quantitative approaches, with fewer adopting qualitative methods to investigate the intentions of gay tourists. This methodological gap limits the depth of understanding regarding the nuanced motivations and personal experiences of gay travellers, particularly those from China who consider Thailand as a destination. Addressing these gaps would provide valuable insights for destination marketers and policymakers in Thailand to effectively cater to this segment.

To bridge the identified research gaps, this study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing grounded theory, to deeply and comprehensively understand the motivation of Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as a tourism destination. The study aims to identify the factors influencing this decision and to develop a theoretical framework modelling the motivation of Chinese gay tourists to select Thailand as their destination.

Literature Review

Gay Tourism in Thailand

Gay tourism in Thailand has garnered significant academic interest, reflecting the country's status as a leading LGBTQ+ friendly destination. The current academic landscape on this topic can be explored from

several key aspects (Citation).

Liu et al. (2023) examined both internal and external motivational factors influencing gay tourists' travel to Thailand and emphasized the interaction between these motivations and destination loyalty, finding that Thailand's welcoming atmosphere and inclusive policies significantly contribute to repeat visits and strong destination loyalty among gay tourists. Yasami et al. (2023) highlighted the mental health challenges faced by gay men and transgender women sex workers in Phuket during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring the necessity of mental health support within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly in tourist hotspots where sex tourism is prevalent. Armartpon (2021) also explored the cultural acceptance of homosexuality and transgenderism in Thailand, particularly in Bangkok's Silom area, known for its bustling gay nightlife. The city's cultural tolerance and legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals create a safe and appealing environment for gay tourists, enhancing Thailand's reputation as a "queer paradise" (Armartpon, 2021). The legal framework supporting LGBTQ+ rights in Thailand is another critical factor contributing to its attractiveness as a gay tourism destination. Thailand's comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, in place since 2005, provide a secure environment for LGBTQ+ travellers, ensuring their safety and acceptance (Newman et al., 2021). The active promotion of Thailand as a gay-friendly destination by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, through campaigns like 'Go Thai, Be Free', further solidifies its appeal. Overall, gay tourism in Thailand reveals a multifaceted industry that thrives on cultural acceptance, legal protections, and targeted promotional efforts. These factors collectively enhance Thailand's appeal as a leading destination for gay tourists.

Motivation and the Choosing of tourism destination

Travel motivation refers to the set of needs and desires that influence an individual's decision to travel, shaping their choices regarding destinations, activities, and experiences. It encompasses a wide range of factors, including psychological, social, cultural, and personal influences, that drive individuals to seek out travel opportunities. Numerous investigations have been undertaken to explore the motivations behind selecting tourism destinations (Yoo et al., 2018). Giachino et al. (2020) focused on identifying the motivations that lead university students, specifically Italian millennials, to choose mountain areas as tourism destinations during both winter and summer seasons. Similarly, Fakfare et al. (2020) aimed to develop a scale for tourism motivation related to second-tier destinations in Thailand and examined the structural relationships between travel motivation and the intention to visit these destinations. In a different context, Kim and Kim (2020) investigated the relationship between viewing motivation for reality travel programs and the viewing experience, satisfaction, and attitudes toward tourism destinations. The motivation includes factors such as vicarious gratification, entertainment, information-seeking, habitual time-spending, and socializing, which influence satisfaction and subsequent attitudes toward the destinations.

Additionally, Aldao and Mihalic (2020) introduced a composite model for measuring travel motivation and the impact of social media on travel behavior, focusing on the town of Longyearbyen in the High Arctic. Prentice et al. (2021) explored travel deterrents to regional destinations, identifying convenience, timing, motivation, and tourist attractions as major deterrents. The level of these deterrents depends on the demographic background of tourists. Arif et al. (2021) proposed an Automatic Scenario Control in a serious game to visualize travel recommendation scenarios based on players' expectations of potential tourism destinations criteria.

Current studies provide valuable insights into the motivations behind choosing tourism destinations, whether related to specific demographics, viewing preferences, social media influence, or travel deterrents. However, there remains a notable research gap: the motivation of Chinese gay tourists choosing Thailand as their tourism destination has not been adequately addressed. Thus, this study adopts qualitative approach to understand the motivation of Chinese gay tourists to choose Thailand as their tourism destination.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the motivations of Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as a travel destination. Grounded theory is especially useful in exploratory research where existing theories may not adequately explain the phenomena being studied (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). It allows for the emergence of theory directly from the data, ensuring that the developed framework is closely aligned with the lived experiences of the participants. This depth of understanding is crucial for developing targeted marketing strategies and tourism policies that effectively cater to the unique needs of Chinese gay tourists.

This study employs a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling to gather 23 Chinese gay tourists with tourism experience in Thailand. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, ethical considerations were paramount. Participants were fully informed about the study's purposes, assured of the confidentiality of their data, and given the opportunity to provide informed consent before participating.

In the first phase, guided by purposive sampling, the study identified six participants who met the following criteria: they self-identify as gay, and they have experience travelling to Thailand as gay tourists or have expressed interest in travelling to Thailand as gay tourists. These initial participants were selected to ensure they had relevant experiences and perspectives that could contribute valuable insights to the research. Following the initial phase, the study utilized snowball sampling to expand the participant pool. The six initial participants were asked to refer other individuals who also met the study's criteria and were willing to participate in face-to-face interviews. This approach leveraged the social networks of the initial participants to reach a broader group. As a result, 78 additional potential participants were identified. However, after considering the study's confidentiality assurances and the nature of the interviews, only 23 participants, including the initial six, agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews. The basic information of participants is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic information of participants

Participants' Number	Age	Education Degree	City	Times Visited Thailand
1	25	Bachelor	Beijing	2
2	30	Master	Shanghai	5
3	22	Bachelor	Guangzhou	1
4	28	Bachelor	Shenzhen	5
5	35	PhD	Tianjin	6
6	40	Under Bachelor	Nanjing	5
7	27	Master	Chengdu	7
8	33	Master	Hangzhou	3
9	29	Bachelor	Xi'an	6
10	31	Master	Wuhan	4
11	24	Under Bachelor	Qingdao	5
12	26	Bachelor	Kunming	4
13	32	Master	Liuzhou	8
14	38	Bachelor	Suzhou	5
15	34	Bachelor	Xiamen	4
16	36	Bachelor	Wenzhou	7
17	23	Under Bachelor	Chongqing	4
18	37	PhD	Changsha	3
19	39	Bachelor	Changchun	2
20	41	Bachelor	Fuzhou	2
21	42	PhD	Hefei	6
22	28	Master	Nanchang	7
23	42	Bachelor	Jinan	5

The data collection process for this study began with a focus group, followed by semi-structured interviews. The focus group aimed to provide general insights into the topic, which would then guide the subsequent semi-structured interviews. In the focus group phase, 7 participants were invited to discuss their experiences

and perspectives. Upon obtaining their consent, the session was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness in data capture. The focus group discussion lasted for 1 hour and provided valuable initial insights. Through careful analysis of the transcript, six key concepts were identified: ease of travel, affordable pricing, gay activities and events, availability of gay-specific products, medical services for gay individuals, and the ease of making friends. These concepts formed the basis for the development of the semi-structured interview guide, ensuring that the interviews would delve deeper into these identified themes to comprehensively understand the motivations of Chinese gay tourists choosing Thailand as a destination.

The second phase of data collection is conducted through the concepts identified in the focus group phase. To encourage participants to share more about their private and authentic experiences and ideas, the interview included flexible questions tailored to explore personal aspects of their travel experiences, such as their use of apps to make friends in Thailand and how they perceived their relationships with those individuals. The average duration of each interview was 50 minutes, and with the participants' consent, all interviews were audio recorded to ensure accuracy and facilitate detailed analysis. This method allowed for a thorough exploration of the key themes identified earlier, while also providing the flexibility to adapt to the flow of conversation and delve deeper into participants' unique experiences and perspectives. This comprehensive data collection approach aimed to capture the richness of participants' motivations and behaviors in selecting Thailand as a destination.

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12, following a systematic three-step coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (2017).

This approach facilitated the development of a robust theoretical framework grounded in the data. Initially, open coding involved meticulously examining the interview transcripts to identify distinct concepts and categories by breaking down the data into discrete parts, which were then compared for similarities and differences. Codes were assigned to various segments representing significant aspects of the participants' experiences and motivations. The second step, axial coding, focused on reassembling the data by establishing connections between the open codes, identifying relationships, and organizing them into a coherent structure. This process grouped the initial open codes into broader categories known as axial codes, based on their interrelationships. Finally, selective coding integrated and refined these categories to form a cohesive theoretical framework. During this phase, the central phenomenon of the study was identified, and the relationships among the axial codes were clarified, resulting in a comprehensive narrative that encapsulated the primary factors influencing the motivations of Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their travel destination.

Findings

Factors Affecting Motivation

The purpose of this study is to identify and understand the factors influencing the motivations of Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their travel destination. Through axial coding, 6 key factors have been identified. These factors collectively contribute to the motivations of Chinese gay tourists to choose Thailand as their preferred tourism destination.

Table 2 presents the detail of axial codes.

Table 2 The Results Of Axial Coding

Axial codes	Subcategories	Description
Acceptance and Freedom	Cultural Acceptance, Freedom and Expression, Safety and Legal Environment	Thailand provides a culturally accepting and legally supportive environment that allows Chinese gay tourists to live openly, express their identities without fear, and engage in activities without legal repercussions. This foundational layer influences other motivational factors by enhancing the sense of security and freedom, which are critical for the overall satisfaction of tourists.
Community and Belonging	Sense of Community, Social Dynamics and Interactions, Romantic Relationships	The strong and supportive gay community in Thailand offers a sense of kinship, solidarity, and social integration. This supportive environment fosters meaningful social and romantic connections, enhancing tourists' sense of belonging and overall satisfaction. The sense of community and belonging significantly contributes to the motivation of Chinese gay tourists by providing essential social and emotional support.
Personal and Emotional Well-being	Escaping Pressure, Personal Growth and Identity, Religious and Emotional Support	Thailand supports tourists' mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being through a relaxed atmosphere and the availability of emotional and spiritual support. The ability to escape pressures, explore personal identity, and receive emotional support significantly enhances tourists' overall happiness and quality of life during their stay, making it a crucial motivator for choosing Thailand as a travel destination.
Accessibility and Convenience	Ease of Travel, Language and Communication, Affordable Pricing	Thailand's accessibility, including visa-free entry, language compatibility, and affordability, makes it a practical and attractive destination for Chinese gay tourists. These practical aspects minimize logistical and economic barriers, making Thailand an easy and economically viable choice, which in turn supports and enhances other motivational factors.
Sexual Freedom and Entertainment	Sexual Freedom, Entertainment Options	Thailand's liberal attitudes towards sexuality and the wide variety of LGBTQ+ friendly entertainment venues and activities allow tourists to explore their identities and enjoy a vibrant social scene.
Influence of Media and Friends	Positive Media Portrayals, Peer Recommendations	Positive media portrayals and recommendations from friends significantly influence the decisions of Chinese gay tourists to visit Thailand. Media and peer recommendations highlight Thailand's cultural acceptance, community support, and entertainment options, creating a compelling narrative that encourages more tourists to visit. This social influence is a strong motivational factor, enhancing the destination's appeal.

Acceptance and Freedom

Acceptance and freedom encompass the cultural acceptance, freedom of expression, and legal environment in Thailand that collectively create a welcoming and liberating atmosphere for Chinese gay tourists. These components enable individuals to live openly, express their identities without fear, and participate in activities without legal repercussions.

Thailand's cultural acceptance reduces stigma and discrimination, allowing gay individuals to live openly without fear of being marginalized. Participants highlighted that the general attitude towards gay culture in Thailand is one of acceptance and respect. As P1 mentioned,

"Gay culture is very popular, no one looks down on you or discriminates against you."

Similarly, P8 and P9 hold the same view, with P8 stating,

"Out here, everyone did not know who knew who. In this way, there is no pressure for everyone to talk about it,"

and P9 expressing,

"At home, I was forced to be a man every day; in Thailand, I can really be brave enough to be myself!"

This widespread cultural acceptance creates a welcoming environment that significantly influences their choice of Thailand as a travel destination. This environment of acceptance is a significant motivator for Chinese gay tourists, as it contrasts sharply with the repression and marginalization they often face in their home country.

In Thailand, participants find the freedom to express their sexual orientation and gender identity without fear of societal backlash. This includes the ability to engage in public displays of affection and participate in cultural events. P9 expressed this freedom by stating,

"In Thailand, I can really be brave enough to be myself! I also took part in the drag queen here".

This level of freedom is crucial for their self-expression and contributes to their overall satisfaction with the destination.

The legal protections for gay activities in Thailand ensure that participants can engage in their desired activities without fear of legal repercussions. This sense of safety is a significant factor in their choice of destination. As P21 noted,

"Some behaviors in China will violate the public security regulations, but in Thailand it is legal and reasonable."

Similarly, P2 emphasized,

"When you get here, you want to do something related to sex without considering the so-called domestic public security regulations. After all, it is legal here."

This legal assurance not only provides a sense of security but also enhances their comfort and willingness to participate in various activities freely. The knowledge that they can live openly and engage in behaviors that might be restricted or punished in their home country empowers them to fully enjoy their stay in Thailand. This legal framework is a cornerstone of the welcoming atmosphere that attracts Chinese gay tourists, as it allows them to explore their identities and relationships without fear of legal consequences.

Analyzing the data, it is evident that gay events and activities in Thailand directly manifest cultural acceptance and freedom, leaving a profound impression on Chinese gay tourists. These events not only provide a space for celebration but also symbolize the broader societal acceptance of the LGBT community in Thailand. As P1 expressed,

"Every year, I enjoy the Gay Pride parade in Bangkok. During the event, we can kiss on the street, we can hold hands together on the street. Nobody discriminates against you! In contrast, you receive their smile and wishes!"

This open display of affection and acceptance during such events starkly contrasts with the experiences many Chinese gay tourists face in their home country, where public expressions of their sexuality might be met with stigma or hostility. The ability to participate freely in these events without fear of judgment or discrimination is a significant aspect of the appeal of Thailand as a destination. It allows these tourists to experience a level of personal freedom and societal acceptance that they may not encounter in their daily lives.

Furthermore, the inclusive atmosphere of these events fosters a sense of belonging and community among participants. It reassures them that they are welcomed and respected, not only during specific events but in their overall experience in Thailand. This acceptance and freedom are integral to why many Chinese gay tourists choose Thailand as their preferred travel destination. The positive interactions and the welcoming attitude of the local population enhance their sense of security and enjoyment, making their stay in Thailand both memorable and liberating.

Community and Belonging

Community and Belonging refer to the supportive gay community, vibrant social scene, and opportunities for romantic relationships in Thailand. These factors create a sense of kinship, solidarity, and social integration for Chinese gay tourists.

A strong, supportive gay community in Thailand fosters a sense of kinship and solidarity among participants, enhancing their sense of belonging. The presence of such a community provides a network of social bonds and interactions that contribute to their overall well-being. P11 mentioned,

"We met a lot of foreign gay couples or gay living partners in Bangkok, and we all agreed to get together in Bangkok every year."

This regular gathering underscores the strong communal ties and mutual support that are integral to their positive experiences in Thailand.

The vibrant social scene and positive interactions within the gay community contribute significantly to the participants' overall satisfaction. They find it easier to form social connections and feel accepted in a community that shares similar experiences and interests. P18 described this social dynamic by saying,

"Everyone says that there are no men in Thailand, only 'sisters'... haha being 'sisters' will meet in a place suitable for 'sisters'."

This humorous yet poignant statement reflects the ease with which participants can bond with others in a similar situation, creating an environment where they can fully embrace their identities without fear of judgment.

Moreover, the diverse and inclusive nature of the gay community in Thailand allows participants to interact with individuals from various backgrounds, fostering a sense of global connectedness. As P13 noted,

"You can also find that there are a lot of people who have the same or similar hobbies as you and everyone can form a group. So, there is a sense of belonging; I'm not fighting alone!"

This sense of unity and shared experience is a powerful motivator, as it alleviates feelings of isolation that many may experience in their home countries.

Through our interviews, we found that Thailand offers ample opportunities for developing and maintaining romantic relationships, including transnational love. Participants find it easier to meet potential partners and form meaningful connections in Thailand's accepting environment. P15 shared their experience,

"I am looking forward to having a transnational love; Thailand is where I realize my dream."

This sentiment underscores the appeal of Thailand as a destination where individuals can pursue and nurture romantic relationships without the societal constraints often present in their home countries. The open and inclusive atmosphere in Thailand not only facilitates romantic connections but also encourages long-term relationships. As P16 described their experience,

"I dated a Thai boy for years. He made me fall in love with the land. I came to Thailand on the one hand to see him and on the other hand because this is also my second hometown."

This highlights how the supportive environment in Thailand allows for deep and lasting relationships to flourish.

Personal and Emotional Well-being

Personal and Emotional Well-being includes escaping pressure, personal growth, and the support received from temples and monks. These factors contribute to the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of Chinese gay tourists.

Thailand's relaxed environment offers a mental and emotional respite from the high pressures of work and familial expectations faced in participants' home countries. This opportunity to unwind and enjoy life without the constant stress is a major motivator. P10 noted,

"In China, I work under great pressure and my parents put great pressure on me. I just want to find a place to relieve the pressure".

The supportive environment in Thailand allows for personal identity exploration and activities like drag, fostering significant personal growth and self-acceptance.

"At home, I was forced to be a man every day; to come to Thailand, I can really be brave enough to be myself" (P9).

This supportive atmosphere encourages participants to embrace their true selves.

A unique finding from our study is the significant role that temples and monks in Thailand play in providing emotional and spiritual support to Chinese gay tourists. This support helps participants cope with personal challenges and enhances their overall sense of well-being. For many, this spiritual guidance is a crucial aspect of their positive experience in Thailand.

"The temple here is very tolerant of us. After my last emotional injury, it was also a Chinese monk in Thailand who healed me" (P17).

His experience highlights how the inclusive and compassionate environment within Thai temples contributes significantly to the emotional healing and spiritual comfort of visitors.

Accessibility and Convenience

Accessibility and Convenience refer to the ease of travel, language compatibility, and affordability in Thailand. These factors make it a practical and attractive destination for Chinese gay tourists.

The ease of travel to Thailand, including visa-free entry and affordable travel costs, makes it a highly convenient destination for Chinese gay tourists. Participants appreciate the simplicity and cost-effectiveness of traveling to Thailand, which greatly enhances their overall travel experience. The ability to travel without the hassle of obtaining a visa is particularly appealing.

"They don't need a visa to come to Bangkok and we don't need a visa to come to Bangkok now. Take your passport and go out to a familiar place with a sense of belonging" (P11).

This convenience lowers the barriers to travel, fostering a sense of spontaneity and freedom that makes Thailand even more attractive.

Additionally, the prevalence of Chinese and English in Thailand significantly reduces language barriers, facilitating easier communication and integration into the local community. This ease of communication greatly enhances the travel experience, allowing tourists to navigate the country more comfortably and connect with locals.

"My English is not good. I can only speak Chinese. Fortunately, Chinese is also the second language in Thailand except English, and there is no barrier to language communication" (P12).

The experience of P12 highlights that linguistic accessibility ensures participants can fully engage with their surroundings, access services, and feel more at home during their stay.

Furthermore, the lower cost of living and affordable services in Thailand makes it an economically attractive destination, allowing participants to enjoy a higher quality of life without straining their finances. The affordability extends to various aspects of daily life, including healthcare and cosmetic services.

"Also, it is cheaper to do medical beauty than domestic beauty in Thailand, and maybe the doctors are your 'sisters'" (P19).

This economic advantage not only makes extended stays more feasible but also allows tourists to indulge in services and experiences that might be prohibitively expensive in their home countries. The combination of affordability and quality services significantly enhances their overall satisfaction with Thailand as a destination.

Sexual Freedom and Entertainment

Sexual Freedom and entertainment encompass the liberal attitudes towards sex and the variety of entertainment options available in Thailand. These factors provide Chinese gay tourists with the freedom to engage in sexual activities and enjoy diverse social venues without fear of societal constraints or legal repercussions.

Thailand's liberal attitudes towards sex allow participants to engage in sexual activities freely and without societal constraints. This freedom is a significant motivator for those seeking a more liberated environment where they can explore their sexuality openly. P2 explained,

"When you get here, you want to do something related to sex without considering the so-called domestic public security regulations".

This sense of liberation contrasts sharply with the restrictions many faces in their home countries, where such behaviors may be stigmatized or illegal. The ability to express and fulfill their sexual desires in a safe and accepting environment greatly enhances their overall experience in Thailand. The freedom experienced in Thailand goes beyond mere legal permission; it taps into a profound emotional liberation that many participants have longed for. For many Chinese gay tourists, visiting Thailand is not just a vacation but a journey to reclaim parts of their identity that have been suppressed. As P9 poignantly stated,

"In China, we are constantly looking over our shoulders, but here in Thailand, I can finally breathe and just be myself".

This new found freedom allows individuals to engage in relationships and activities that are authentic to their desires, fostering a sense of self-acceptance and joy.

Moreover, the legal environment in Thailand supports this sexual freedom, providing assurances that participants can engage in their preferred activities without fear of legal repercussions. As P21 presented,

"Some behaviors in China will violate the public security regulations, but in Thailand, it is legal and reasonable."

This legal backing is crucial, as it not only provides a sense of safety but also reinforces the overall feeling of acceptance and freedom that tourists seek. The knowledge that they can live openly and engage in behaviors that might be restricted or punished in their home country empowers them to fully enjoy their stay in Thailand.

Participants often describe their experiences in Thailand with a sense of profound relief and exhilaration. The ability to explore their sexuality without fear of judgment or reprisal is liberating. P20 captured this

sentiment perfectly:

"It's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I can be affectionate with my partner in public, and no one bats an eye. It's incredibly freeing".

This emotional liberation is a critical aspect of why Thailand is such a favored destination for Chinese gay tourists.

In addition to personal freedom, the supportive and understanding attitudes of the local population further enhance the sense of acceptance. The social acceptance found in Thailand extends beyond the confines of specific gay-friendly venues; it permeates everyday interactions, creating an inclusive atmosphere.

"Even when we are just walking around the city, we feel accepted. People here don't judge us; they respect us for who we are" (P19).

This broad societal acceptance amplifies the feeling of freedom, making Thailand a sanctuary where Chinese gay tourists can fully embrace their identities.

Thailand offers a wide range of entertainment options, including bars, clubs, saunas, and other venues specifically catering to gay individuals. These venues provide ample opportunities for fun, social engagement, and community building. Participants appreciate the diversity and vibrancy of the entertainment scene, which allows them to enjoy their time in Thailand to the fullest.

"There are too many entertainment venues for gay in Thailand. In addition to the sauna bathroom, cruising bar, there are ordinary dance bars and bars" (P23).

Participants also expressed their sexual motivation, both implicitly and explicitly. The freedom to engage in sexual activities without societal constraints was a significant factor in their decision to travel to Thailand.

"Every day, the apps introduce me to more people to meet up with! So, I choose to meet them in saunas or clubs"(P3).

This reflects the ease with which individuals can connect with others and arrange meetings in safe, designated venues.

Similarly, P21 directly expressed his sexual motivation.

"To be honest, I prefer European guys. In Thailand, there are lots of white guys. So, for me, Thailand is heaven, where I can have more opportunities to book up"(P21) .

Moreover, the legal environment in Thailand supports sexual freedom, providing a sense of security for tourists.

"Generally, sexual activities in Thailand are legal, which means our behavior is lawfully protected. It's legal, why don't I have fun here?" (P2)

This legal backing not only ensures safety but also reinforces the overall feeling of acceptance and freedom that tourists seek, allowing them to fully enjoy their experiences without fear of legal repercussions.

The variety of venues available means that there is something for everyone, whether they are looking for a lively night out, a place to meet new people, or a more intimate setting. This extensive entertainment landscape contributes significantly to the appeal of Thailand as a travel destination for Chinese gay tourists, offering them numerous ways to relax, socialize, and have fun.

Influence of Media and Friends

The influence of media and friends plays a crucial role in shaping the decisions of Chinese gay tourists to visit Thailand. Media portrayals and peer recommendations collectively create a favorable image of Thailand as a desirable and welcoming destination. Positive media coverage, in particular, highlights Thailand's vibrant gay culture, inclusive atmosphere, and diverse entertainment options, painting a picture of an ideal getaway for Chinese gay tourists.

Media coverage and recommendations from friends play a significant role in influencing participants' decisions to choose Thailand as a destination. The power of visual media, including television shows, online videos, and social media posts, cannot be overstated. These platforms often showcase Thailand's gay-friendly environment, from its lively nightlife to its cultural festivals, making the destination more appealing. One participant noted,

"More and more media are advocating that gay has to travel in Thailand. These media show Thailand's gay culture and venues multimodal, even live video. That's what seeing is believing" (P5).

This statement underscores the impact of media in providing a tangible, relatable depiction of what tourists can expect, reinforcing the idea that Thailand is not just a safe choice but an exciting and dynamic one.

Recommendations from friends are equally influential in the decision-making process. Personal endorsements from peers who have had positive experiences in Thailand add a layer of trust and relatability that media coverage alone cannot achieve. Hearing firsthand accounts of enjoyable trips, safe environments, and the freedom to express oneself encourages others to consider Thailand for their travels. As one participant shared,

"At first, I didn't know where to choose for a gay tourism destination, but many friends recommended going to Thailand. Every year on the Songkran Festival, almost all my gay friends show their situation in Thailand through social media. I want to join them too" (P6).

This example highlights how social proof through personal networks can significantly sway travel decisions, as potential tourists feel reassured by the positive experiences of people they know and trust.

Moreover, the combined influence of media and friends often creates a ripple effect, where positive reviews and exciting stories about Thailand spread through social circles, amplifying the destination's appeal. This phenomenon is particularly potent during cultural events such as the Songkran Festival, where the experiences shared on social media by friends can inspire others to join in. The sense of community and shared enjoyment seen in these posts can be highly persuasive, making the idea of visiting Thailand even more compelling.

These findings reveal that multiple factors influence the motivations of Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their destination. These factors range from cultural acceptance and personal freedom to community support and economic convenience. Understanding these motivations provides valuable insights for tourism stakeholders to better cater to this demographic and enhance their overall travel experience.

Theoretical Framework

Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining the categories identified during axial coding to form a coherent theoretical framework that encapsulates the central phenomenon of the study (Al-Eisawi, 2022). Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework conducted by this study.

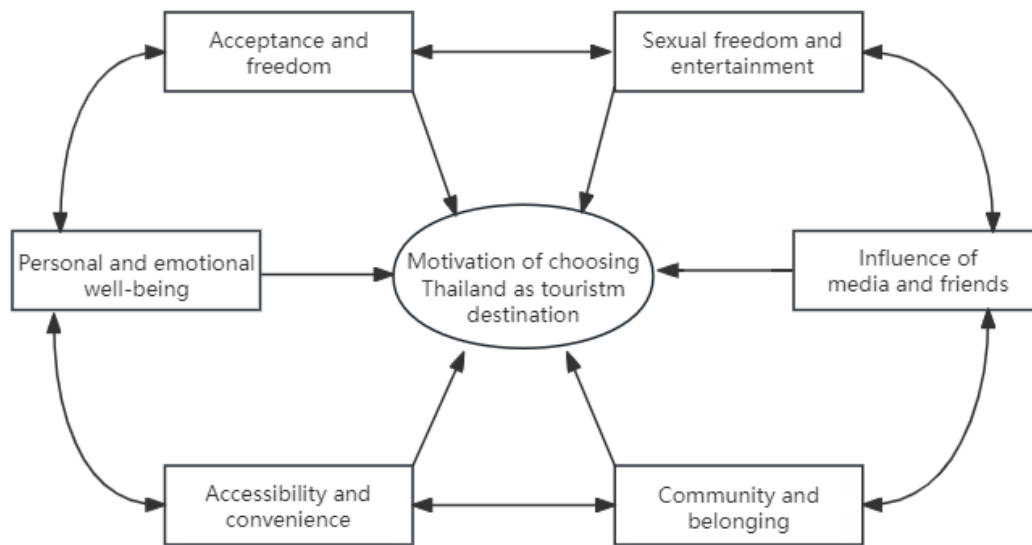


Figure 1 Theoretical framework of this study

Acceptance and freedom form the foundational layer, influencing other factors by creating a safe and liberating atmosphere. This foundational element enhances the sense of security and freedom, which are critical for the overall satisfaction of Chinese gay tourists. The acceptance and legal protections in Thailand enable tourists to experience personal freedom and security, making these aspects significant motivators for choosing Thailand as a destination. This factor significantly influences Community and Belonging by fostering a strong and supportive gay community that enhances social integration and a sense of belonging. It also impacts Personal and Emotional Well-being, as the safe and accepting environment helps tourists escape pressures, explore their personal identities, and receive emotional support. Furthermore, the welcoming environment complements Accessibility and Convenience, making travel and communication more comfortable for tourists. Sexual Freedom and Entertainment are also underpinned by acceptance and legal protections, allowing tourists to explore their sexuality and enjoy a vibrant social scene without fear. Finally, the positive media portrayals and recommendations from friends, often based on the acceptance and freedom experienced in Thailand, further enhance the destination's appeal.

Community and belonging enhance the sense of acceptance and freedom by providing essential social and emotional support, interacting with Acceptance and Freedom to create a supportive environment that fosters a sense of belonging and facilitates meaningful social and romantic connections. These social bonds are crucial for the overall satisfaction and motivation of tourists. This factor significantly influences personal and emotional well-being by helping tourists escape pressures, explore their personal identities, and receive emotional support, thereby enhancing their overall well-being. Additionally, a vibrant social scene supported by the community offers numerous entertainment options, enriching tourists' experiences and promoting sexual freedom and entertainment. Furthermore, positive experiences within the community often lead to recommendations from friends, thereby enhancing the appeal of Thailand through the influence of media and friends.

Personal and emotional well-being is bolstered by the sense of community and cultural acceptance in Thailand. The opportunity for tourists to escape pressures, explore their personal identities, and receive emotional support significantly enhances their overall well-being and happiness. This well-being and support are crucial motivators that improve the quality of life for tourists during their stay. Personal and emotional well-being, in turn, significantly influences other factors: enhanced well-being and personal growth contribute to stronger social bonds and a greater sense of community and belonging. Additionally, positive personal experiences related to well-being often lead to recommendations from friends, thereby enhancing the influence of media and friends and increasing Thailand's appeal as a destination.

Accessibility and convenience enhance the overall appeal of Thailand by minimizing logistical and economic barriers. Practical aspects of travel, such as visa-free entry and affordable living costs, make Thailand an easy and economically viable choice for tourists, thereby supporting other motivational factors. This factor significantly influences acceptance and freedom by complementing the welcoming environment, making tourists feel more comfortable and at ease. Additionally, it impacts sexual freedom and entertainment, as affordable pricing allows tourists to enjoy a variety of entertainment options without financial strain, further enhancing their overall experience.

Sexual freedom and diverse entertainment options are significant motivators that enhance the travel experience for Chinese gay tourists. Enabled by cultural acceptance and legal protections, these factors allow tourists to explore their sexuality and enjoy a wide range of social venues without fear of societal constraints. This freedom and variety in entertainment significantly contribute to the overall appeal of Thailand as a destination. This factor significantly influences Community and Belonging by providing numerous opportunities for social interactions and building relationships within a vibrant entertainment scene supported by the community. Additionally, positive experiences in entertainment often lead to recommendations from friends, thereby enhancing Thailand's appeal through the influence of media and friends.

In the theoretical framework, media and peer recommendations reinforce the attractiveness of Thailand by highlighting its cultural acceptance, community support, and entertainment options. This social influence creates a compelling narrative that encourages more tourists to visit, building on personal experiences and positive portrayals. The combined impact of media and peer recommendations provides a strong motivational factor, making Thailand an appealing destination. This factor significantly influences Acceptance and Freedom, as positive media portrayals often highlight the accepting and free environment, reinforcing Thailand's appeal. Additionally, community and belonging are enhanced through recommendations from friends, which often emphasize the supportive community, enhancing the sense of belonging for potential tourists.

The theoretical framework developed in this study highlights the unique combination of factors that make Thailand an ideal destination for Chinese gay tourists. By understanding and addressing these motivations, tourism stakeholders can enhance the travel experiences of this demographic, contributing to the growth and inclusivity of the global tourism industry. The interconnected factors collectively create a compelling environment that attracts and satisfies these tourists.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors influencing the motivation of Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their tourism destination. Through grounded theory, 6 factors were identified and integrated into a theoretical framework: acceptance and freedom, community and belonging, personal and emotional well-being, accessibility and convenience, sexual freedom and entertainment, and influence of media and friends. The study underscores the critical role of a supportive and inclusive environment, along with practical considerations like affordability and accessibility, in shaping the travel motivation of Chinese gay tourists.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the existing body of literature on LGBTQ+ tourism by highlighting the unique motivational factors influencing Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their destination. By integrating these factors into a theoretical framework, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between cultural, social, legal, and personal elements in shaping travel decisions. The results of this study both align with and expand upon previous research in several key areas.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of a culturally accepting and legally supportive environment for LGBTQ+ travellers (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). Our findings align with these

studies, demonstrating that cultural acceptance and legal protections in Thailand significantly enhance the sense of security and freedom for Chinese gay tourists. However, our study extends this understanding by specifically highlighting how these factors influence the personal freedom and security of Chinese gay tourists, making these aspects significant motivators for their travel decisions. Additionally, Jiang and Ke (2024) highlighted the role of social media in promoting gender equality and cultural acceptance within the gay tourism industry, supporting our findings on the importance of cultural acceptance.

The sense of community and belonging has been identified as a crucial factor in LGBTQ+ tourism (Hahm et al., 2018). Our study supports these findings by showing that a strong and supportive gay community in Thailand fosters a sense of kinship, solidarity, and social integration among Chinese gay tourists. This sense of belonging not only enhances social interactions but also facilitates meaningful romantic relationships, thereby contributing to the overall satisfaction and motivation of tourists. Kang et al. (2023) also found that social dynamics and community support significantly influence destination choice among Chinese homogeneous tourists, reinforcing our findings on the importance of community and belonging.

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ travellers often seek destinations that offer emotional and spiritual support (Kaygalak-Celebi et al., 2020). Our findings corroborate this by illustrating how the ability to escape pressures, explore personal identities, and receive emotional support from temples and monks in Thailand significantly enhances the well-being and happiness of Chinese gay tourists. This aspect of personal and emotional well-being is a crucial motivator that improves the quality of life for tourists during their stay.

Practical considerations such as ease of travel, language compatibility, and affordability have been highlighted in previous studies as important factors in destination choice (Gidebo, 2021). Our study reinforces these findings by demonstrating that Thailand's visa-free entry, prevalence of Chinese and English, and affordable living costs minimize logistical and economic barriers, making it an easy and economically viable choice for Chinese gay tourists. This accessibility and convenience enhance the overall appeal of Thailand. The mathematical modelling by Kang et al. (2023) also identified these practical factors as significant determinants of destination choice among Chinese tourists, further validating our findings.

The significance of sexual freedom and diverse entertainment options in LGBTQ+ tourism has been well-documented (Liu et al., 2023). Our study supports these conclusions by showing that Thailand's liberal attitudes towards sex and the variety of entertainment venues allow Chinese gay tourists to explore their sexuality and enjoy a vibrant social scene without fear of societal constraints. This freedom and variety in entertainment significantly contribute to the overall appeal of Thailand as a destination.

The role of media and peer recommendations in shaping travel decisions has been highlighted in several studies (Aldao & Mihalic, 2020). Our findings align with these studies by showing that positive media portrayals and recommendations from friends significantly influence the decisions of Chinese gay tourists to visit Thailand. Media and peer recommendations create a compelling narrative that highlights Thailand's cultural acceptance, community support, and entertainment options, thereby enhancing the destination's appeal. Jiang and Ke (2024) emphasized the impact of social media on shaping perceptions and promoting gender equality in the gay tourism industry, supporting our findings on the influence of media.

Practical Implications

The results of this study have several important managerial implications for different stakeholders, including tourism marketers, policymakers, hospitality providers, and community organizations.

Tourism marketers can leverage the insights on Acceptance and Freedom by highlighting Thailand's culturally accepting and legally supportive environment in their promotional materials. Emphasizing the safety and freedom that Chinese gay tourists can experience in Thailand will attract more visitors from this demographic. Additionally, showcasing positive media portrayals and encouraging peer recommendations through social media campaigns can enhance Thailand's appeal.

Policymakers can play a critical role in maintaining and enhancing the legal protections that support the

safety and freedom of LGBTQ+ tourists. Ensuring that laws and regulations continue to promote cultural acceptance and protect the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals will help sustain Thailand's reputation as a welcoming destination. Furthermore, supporting initiatives that foster community belonging and personal well-being, such as funding for LGBTQ+ community centers and mental health services, can enhance the overall experience for tourists.

Hospitality providers, including hotels, restaurants, and entertainment venues, should focus on creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for Chinese gay tourists. Training staff on LGBTQ+ cultural competence and ensuring that facilities are safe and accepting will enhance tourists' sense of belonging and personal well-being. Additionally, offering packages that highlight the diverse entertainment options and promoting the affordability of travel and accommodation in Thailand can attract more tourists.

Community organizations play a vital role in supporting LGBTQ+ tourists by providing social and emotional support. These organizations can enhance the sense of community and belonging by organizing events and activities that facilitate social interactions and build relationships among tourists. Partnering with tourism marketers and hospitality providers to create a cohesive support network for LGBTQ+ tourists will improve their overall experience and satisfaction.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the factors influencing Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their tourism destination. The six key factors are identified: Acceptance and Freedom, where Thailand's culturally accepting and legally supportive environment enhances the sense of security and freedom for Chinese gay tourists; Community and Belonging, with a strong and supportive gay community fostering a sense of kinship, solidarity, and social integration; Personal and Emotional Well-being, as the ability to escape pressures, explore personal identities, and receive emotional support significantly enhances tourists' well-being and happiness; Accessibility and Convenience, with practical considerations such as visa-free entry, language compatibility, and affordability minimizing logistical and economic barriers; Sexual Freedom and Entertainment, where liberal attitudes towards sex and diverse entertainment options allow tourists to explore their sexuality and enjoy a vibrant social scene; and Influence of Media and Friends, with positive media portrayals and recommendations from friends significantly influencing the decisions of Chinese gay tourists. These factors collectively illustrate the complex interplay of cultural, social, legal, and personal elements shaping the travel choices of Chinese gay tourists.

This study contributes to the literature on LGBTQ+ tourism by providing a nuanced understanding of the motivational factors influencing Chinese gay tourists. The integration of these factors into a theoretical framework offers valuable insights into the interplay of cultural, social, legal, and personal elements in shaping travel decisions. The study extends previous research by highlighting the specific motivations of Chinese gay tourists and identifying the unique aspects of Thailand that appeal to this demographic.

The findings have significant managerial implications for various stakeholders. Tourism marketers can leverage the insights to enhance promotional strategies, emphasizing cultural acceptance, safety, and the vibrant gay community. Policymakers can focus on maintaining and enhancing legal protections and supporting community initiatives. Hospitality providers can improve their services by creating inclusive environments and offering tailored packages. Community organizations can foster a sense of belonging and provide essential support to tourists.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size may not be representative of the entire population of Chinese gay tourists, which could limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study focuses solely on Thailand, and the findings may not be applicable to other destinations. Third, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews may introduce bias, as participants may have tailored their responses to align with perceived social desirability.

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample size and including a more diverse group of participants to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Comparative studies across different

destinations would provide a broader understanding of the factors influencing LGBTQ+ tourism globally. Additionally, employing mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative data, could offer deeper insights into the motivations and experiences of LGBTQ+ tourists. Exploring the impact of digital media and social networks on travel decisions and examining the long-term effects of travel experiences on personal development and identity formation would also be valuable areas for future research.

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive theoretical framework that enhances our understanding of the factors influencing Chinese gay tourists in choosing Thailand as their destination. By highlighting the importance of cultural acceptance, community support, personal well-being, accessibility, sexual freedom, and media influence, the study offers valuable insights for stakeholders aiming to improve the travel experiences of this demographic. Future research should continue to build on these findings to further our understanding of LGBTQ+ tourism and contribute to the development of inclusive and supportive travel environments.

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