การท่องเที่ยวเชิงจิตวิญญาณและการตัดสินใจเดินทางของนักท่องเที่ยวถ้ำนาคา จังหวัดบึงกาฬ ในประเทศไทย: บทบาทของสื่อสังคม ประสบการณ์ของนักท่องเที่ยว ความเชื่อทางศาสนา และการบอกเล่าต่อ
Spiritual Tourism and Travel Decision of Naga Cave Tourists, Bueng Kan, Thailand: Roles of Social Media, Tourist Experience, Religious Belief, and Word of Mouth

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การวิจัยนี้มีเป้าหมายเพื่อทดสอบผลกระทบของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงจิตวิญญาณที่มีต่อการตัดสินใจเดินทางของนักท่องเที่ยวถ้ำนาคาจังหวัดบึงกาฬในประเทศไทย และยังมีการทดสอบตัวแปรแทรกสื่อสังคมและตัวแปรสาเหตุประสบการณ์ของนักท่องเที่ยว ความเชื่อทางศาสนา และการบอกเล่าต่อของความสัมพันธ์ของการวิจัยนี้ด้วย การวิจัยนี้ได้ทำการเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลจากนักท่องเที่ยวถ้ำนาคา จำนวน 400 คน ซึ่งใช้การวิเคราะห์โมเดลสมการโครงสร้างในการทดสอบผลกระทบทางตรงและเชิงสาเหตุ และการวิเคราะห์การถดถอยแบบพหุคูณในการทดสอบผลกระทบเชิงแทรก ผลลัพธ์การวิจัย พบว่า การท่องเที่ยวเชิงจิตวิญญาณ มีผลกระทบเชิงบวกต่อการตัดสินใจเดินทาง นอกจากนี้ ประสบการณ์ของนักท่องเที่ยวและความเชื่อทางศาสนา ยกเว้นการบอกเล่าต่อ ยังเป็นสาเหตุที่สำคัญของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงจิตวิญญาณ แต่ในทางตรงกันข้าม สื่อสังคมไม่ใช่ตัวแปรแทรกของความสัมพันธ์ในการวิจัยนี้ ดังนั้น การท่องเที่ยวเชิงจิตวิญญาณกลายเป็นแนวคิด หลักการ และแนวทางที่สำคัญสำหรับการจัดการการท่องเที่ยวอย่างยั่งยืน ซึ่งสามารถส่งเสริม จูงใจ และกระตุ้นให้นักท่องเที่ยวจากทั้งในประเทศและต่างประเทศ มาท่องเที่ยวและเยี่ยมเยือนถ้ำนาคาคือจุดหมายปลายทางของการท่องเที่ยวที่อยู่ในจังหวัดบึงกาฬ ประเทศไทยอย่างต่อเนื่อง ด้วยเหตุนี้ ผู้บริหารอุทยานแห่งชาติในจังหวัดบึงกาฬ การท่องเที่ยวแห่งประเทศไทย และหน่วยงานราชการและเอกชนอื่นๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้อง ต้องมีการทำงาน วางแผน บริหารจัดการ และร่วมมือกันอย่างมีประสิทธิผลในการบำรุงรักษาและทำให้เกิดความยั่งยืนสำหรับทรัพยากร สินทรัพย์ และสภาพแวดล้อมของถ้ำนาคา ซึ่งกิจกรรมและการดำเนินงานที่กล่าวมาแล้วข้างต้น สามารถส่งเสริมและยกระดับผลลัพธ์ ความสำเร็จ การเจริญเติบโต และความยั่งยืนทั้งทางตรงและทางอ้อมของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงจิตวิญญาณของถ้ำนาคา

คำสำคัญ: การท่องเที่ยวเชิงจิตวิญญาณ การตัดสินใจเดินทาง สื่อสังคม ประสบการณ์ของนักท่องเที่ยว ความเชื่อทางศาสนา การบอกเล่าต่อ นักท่องเที่ยวถ้ำนาคา

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Abstract

This study aims at examining the impacts of spiritual tourism on travel decision of Naga Cave tourists, Bueng Kan, Thailand. It also investigates a moderator of social media and antecedents of tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth on the research relationships. In addition, data are collected from 400 Naga Cave tourists. Structural equation model analysis is employed to test the direct and antecedent impacts. Multiple regression analysis is used to examine the moderating impacts. The research results indicate that spiritual tourism has a positive impact on travel decision. Similarly, both tourist experience and religious belief, except for word of mouth, are the significant antecedents of spiritual tourism. In contrast, social media is not the moderator of the research relationships. In summary, spiritual tourism becomes a critical concept, principle and guideline for sustainable tourism management. It has promoted, motivated and encouraged all tourists from inside and outside Thailand to continuously visit the Naga Cave, a tourist destination located in Bueng Kan, Thailand. Moreover, the executives of the national park in Bueng Kan, Tourism Authority of Thailand, and other related government and private agencies need to work, plan, manage, and collaborate effectively in order to maintain and sustain the resources, the assets and the surroundings of the Naga Cave. All aforementioned activities and operations could directly and indirectly enhance the performance, success, growth, and sustainability of spiritual tourism of the Naga Cave.

Keywords: Spiritual tourism, Travel decision, Social media, Tourist experience, Religious belief, Word of mouth, Naga Cave tourists

Introduction

Nowadays, tourism industry is considered the largest and fastest growing leisure sector of the world economy and is expected to generate more national income and potential employment in a country (Bodhanwala & Bodhanwala, 2021). It promotes tourists' travel and stay experiences for leisure, fun, recreational activities, sports, sightseeing, and adventure. It motivates them to explore new areas to know new people, reunion, and business and religious activities (Stoddart et al., 2019). In addition, tourism industry provides direct and indirect employment opportunities and raises the standard of living and quality of the resident population. It has become a main economic enhancement and a major social development in both developed and developing countries. Therefore, tourism industry is considered important for earning foreign currency, increasing employability, enhancing economic growth, providing infrastructure development, promoting cultural exchange, supporting regional development, and building environmental awareness. The benefits and advantages of tourism industry contribute towards complete growth and development of the country through national income enhancement, foreign exchange reserve, employment opportunity creation, and social development potentiality (Jesurajan & Prabhu, 2012). Accordingly, tourism industry is a growing global leisure sector and it

is a significant contributor to achieve national goals through creating good employment opportunities, stimulating small business development and curtailing poverty status.

Spiritual tourism is an established part of tourism industry and it is becoming one of the most dynamically growing areas in the tourism industry sector (Haq, 2014). It is a subset of special interest tourism that contains religious tourism and pilgrimage. It is defined as a visit of a specific place out of his/her usual environment with an intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth and without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature as the main reason for travelling (Heidari et al., 2018; Medhekar & Haq, 2012). It motivates tourists to respect religions so as to attain the devotee's religious and moral improvement. It focuses on admiring the natural and anthropic resources with a religious vacation and the authenticity of the religious place and considering sacred being a religious practice and a form of religious tourism. In addition, spiritual tourism has moved beyond religious tourism to establish inner peace, love and enhanced knowledge through exploring personal beliefs and divine experiences contributing to enhanced self-worth and confidence with a mental customized and personalized heed fulfillment (Kaur, 2016). It is a journey to a sacred place or shrine of importance to tourist's beliefs or faith. It is a tour for attaining spiritual improvement or getting creator's bliss. Accordingly, spiritual tourism critically motivates, persuades, influences, and enhances tourists' travel decision to visit a sacred place or a shrine of importance to their beliefs or faith for the fulfillment of inner peace, love and enhanced knowledge.

To strengthen the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships, social media plays a significant role in moderating these relationships. It is proposed to be an important moderator of the relationships. Interestingly, social media refers to an internal and external communication enhancer to build social capital among organizational stakeholders through the utilization of technologies, channels and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for them (Gaffar et al., 2022). It is an important resource in tourists' information search and it plays an important role in the travel planning process. It helps tourists collect structured and unstructured data from online sites and extract meaningful information out of them to interpret an opinion of the tourists (Chu et al. 2020). Moreover, social medial plays an important role in choosing a destination for making travel decision of tourists. It is considered to be credible, trustworthy and effective and it influences the way tourists plan for, buy and consume tourist products. It contributes to tourists' travel-related experiences, their engagement with others, their connection with people from different destinations and their decision for buying travel-related products and services (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). It is a crucial function in creating and interactive and mutual relationship with destinations and tourists. Therefore, social media can help attract potential tourists and promote tourism products and services through direct interaction with the tourists. Accordingly, social media has a tendency to enhance tourists' potential destination choices and best travel decision. It positively moderates the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships.

In addition, in this study a tourist's travel decision to visit a tourist destination is an outcome of successful spiritual tourism. Travel decision is defined as a mental orientation characterizing a tourist's approach making choices which includes the cognitive and affective components of a tour purchase process (Choudhary & Gangotia, 2017). It is a process by which tourists select and purchase travel products to satisfy their needs. It focuses on the tourist's choice behavior, including attitudes, beliefs, involvement, risk perception, traits, and personality. Furthermore, travel decision depends on a tourist's (a) desire to travel for rest and relaxation, health, prestige, adventure, and social interaction, (b) a specific destination attribute, such as novelty, low travel cost, natural environment, weather contraction, cultural attraction, shopping opportunities, and security and safety, (c) trip features, and (d) experiences of his or her travel (Adel et al., 2021). It includes expenditure, information acquisition, joint decision-making, vacation activities, satisfaction, and complaints. It is considered an essential component for a successful result of tourist destination choices and tourism businesses. Accordingly, travel decision becomes a successful result of potential spiritual tourism implementation. It is also a valuable outcome of spiritual tourism success.

In this study, an antecedent factor of spiritual tourism is also investigated. It is a significant factor that affects the motivations, persuasions and enhancements of the spiritual tourism. It consists of tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth. Firstly, tourist experience is defined as an individual's immediate and ongoing, subjective and personal response to an activity, setting or event outside their usual environment (Shekari et al., 2023). It helps actively remember and recall after the end of tourism activities through travel experiences and emotional feelings. It includes expectations before the trip, perceptions during the trip and memories after the trip (Sheng & Chen, 2013). It accumulates and creates tourists' overall feelings toward the trip. Therefore, a better understanding of tourist experience is essential to better meet the expectations, needs and wants of spiritual tourism. Accordingly, tourist experience is an important antecedent of participation in spiritual tourism. Secondly, religious belief refers to one's understanding of the divine and humanity's relationship to it (Hu & Cheng, 2019). It encompasses all beliefs related to deity, including supernatural and paranormal beliefs. It included beliefs in heaven, hell, miracles, afterlife, angels, and demons, and an immaterial soul. In addition, religious belief plays an important role in both the physical and spiritual nature of an individual (Budak et al., 2021). It helps protect the individual's mental health and ensure psychological relief. Therefore, religious relief has a positive effect on spiritual tourism by increasing tourists' motivations, persuasions and enhancements. Accordingly, religious relief is considered to have a positive influence and impact on willingness to visit a tourist destination under the spiritual tourism. Lastly, word of mouth is an informal person-to-person communication to evaluate products/services between private parties (Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2015). It is also an interpersonal communication that is positively influential in the tourism industry. It can help positively promote and recommend spiritual tourism. Moreover, word of mouth can influence the perceptions and behaviors of individuals with varying opinions through the exchanging

behavior of tourist information between tourists and relatives (Hyun et al. 2023). Therefore, word of mouth has a significant impact on a tourist's motivation for travelling to a tourist destination according to spiritual tourism. It is an important factor influencing tourist decision making and reflecting the interpersonal influence among tourists, friends, families, and relatives. It also influences changes of the tourists' attitudes and behaviors. Accordingly, word of mouth positively influences a visit of a tourist destination in spiritual tourism.

Historically, Naga Cave is located in Phu Langa National Park, Bueng Kan, Thailand. It borders Laos PDR. It is one of the many wonders in Thailand. Naga means 'snake' in the Thai language, and the cave took its name from the texture of some stones in the area, which resembled the scaled skin of a snake. Often described as the 'Snake Cave of Thailand', the Naga Cave owes its name to its snake-like rocks and formations. It is the home to many mysterious myths and legends, and is a hotspot for tourists every year. Many of the legends come from the rock's appearance, which takes the form of a snake. Because of its unique structure, there are many myths surrounding its history and how the cave came to be. The Naga is a serpent-like mythical creature significant in several Southasian and Southeast Asian cultures. In addition, the Naga Cave is a place of religious significance. In Buddhist lore, the Naga is half-human, half-serpent being that lives in the netherworld and occasionally takes human form. It is considered to be the guardian of water, and often lives in a damp cave by water's edge. Buddhism plays a major role in many of the legends that appear around the cave as serpent beings are considered to be the guardian of water which live in a damp cave. Every year, new parts of the cave that resemble snakes are discovered which fuel more stories to be told. As mentioned earlier, the Naga Cave is considered the most common incentive why tourists visit this area. In the past several years, it has become a major magnet for tourists. Therefore, Naga Cave tourists' travel behaviors, motivations and decisions in Bueng Kan, Thailand are of interest to be investigated. Accordingly, Naga Cave tourists are considered the appropriate samples of this study.

The objective of this study is to examine the impacts of spiritual tourism on travel decision of Naga Cave tourists through the moderating impacts of social media. In addition, tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth are hypothesized to be the antecedents of spiritual tourism. Accordingly, spiritual tourism is an independent variable, social media is a moderating variable, travel decision is a dependent variable, and tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth are antecedent variables of the study. The major research question is how spiritual tourism has an impact on travel decision. The specific research questions are: (1) How social media moderates the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships and (2) How tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth have impacts on spiritual tourism.

The structure of the study is organized as follows. Firstly, this study reviews spiritual tourism, social media, travel decision, tourist experience, religious belief, and word of mouth, and their relationships and impacts. Secondly, it presents the data and methodology of a quantitative approach, followed by the results of the study and the discussion of the results. Thirdly,

conclusions are drawn together with limitations of the study and suggestions for further research. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications are suggested.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are presented as follows.

1. To examine the impacts of spiritual tourism on travel decision of Naga Cave tourists, Bueng Kan, Thailand,

2. To examine the moderating impacts of social media on the research relationships, and

3. To examine the antecedent impacts of tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth on spiritual tourism.

Relevant Literature Review of Spiritual Tourism and Hypotheses Development

In this study, the theory of reasoned action is applied to explain the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships. This theory explains the relationships between attitudes and behaviors within human action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It is mainly used to predict how individuals will behave based on their pre-existing attitudes and behavioral intentions. An individual's decision to engage in a particular behavior is based on the outcomes the individual expects will come as a result of performing the behavior. In a context of tourism, a tourist's travel decision is motivated by attributes, characteristics and qualifications of spiritual tourism through a tourist destination. Therefore, spiritual tourism is considered an important source of motivation that promotes, encourages and influences tourist decision making to visit the tourist destination of spiritual tourism. Interestingly, spiritual tourism is an independent variable, social media is a moderating variable and travel decision is a dependent variable of the study. Tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth are also hypothesized to be the antecedent factors that affect a visit of a tourist destination under the application of spiritual tourism. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships.
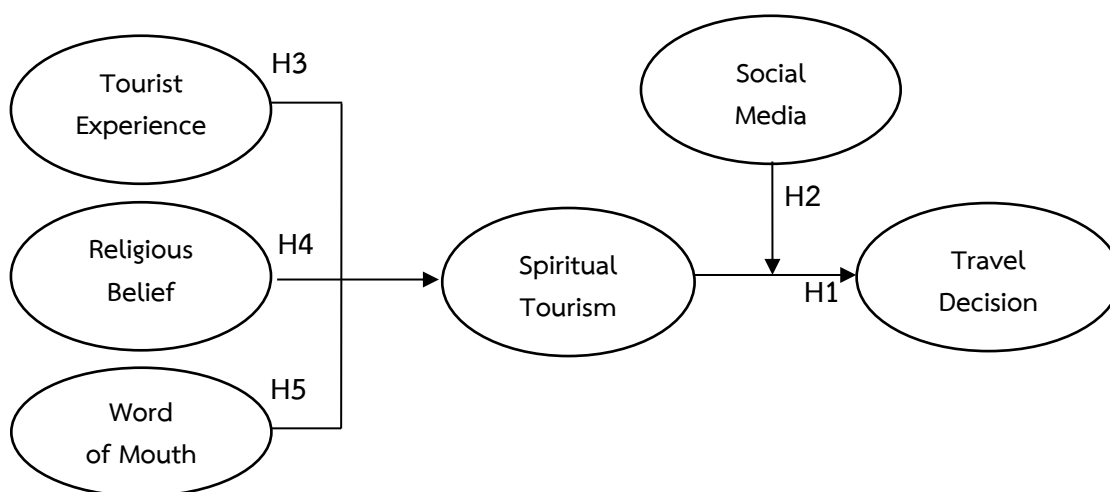

Figure 1 A conceptual model of the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships

I. Travel decision

A tourist's travel decision to visit a tourist destination is a significant goal of spiritual tourism. In this study, travel decision is considered to be a successful spiritual tourism of a tourist destination. It refers to a mental orientation characterizing a tourist's approach making choices which includes the cognitive and affective components of a tour purchase process (Choudhary & Gangotia, 2017). It is a process by which tourists select and purchase travel products to satisfy their needs. It focuses on the tourist's choice behavior, including attitudes, beliefs, involvement, risk perception, traits, and personality. In addition, travel decision is defined as a process by which tourists select and purchase travel products and services to satisfy and fulfill their needs and wants (Park et al., 2022). It reflects to tourists' consumption decisions, including trip planning (destination choice and selection, travel date and companions), predetermined decision (flexible to change, such as secondary destination, activity, tourist attractions, and accommodations) and route decision (hotels, car rentals, restaurants, rest areas, and shopping places (Martin & Woodside, 2012). It includes expenditure, information acquisition, joint decision-making, vacation activities, satisfaction, and complaints. Moreover, travel decision is an affective nature of decision making and choice behavior, including attitudes, beliefs, involvement, risk perception, traits, and personality and it follows a utility maximization of tourist destination (Dunne et al., 2011). It depends on a tourist's (a) desire to travel for rest and relaxation, health, prestige, adventure, and social interaction, (b) a specific destination attribute, such as novelty, low travel cost, natural environment, weather contraction, cultural attraction, shopping opportunities, and security and safety, (c) trip features, and (d) experiences of his or her travel (Adel et al., 2021). It is an essential component for a successful result of tourist destination choices and tourism businesses. As mentioned earlier, travel decision is an important value outcome of a successful tourist destination. Accordingly, travel decision is considered a critical result of spiritual tourism success in this study. Therefore, it is regarded as a significant successful consequence of tourist destination under the concepts of spiritual tourism.

II. Spiritual tourism

Spiritual tourism plays a significant role in driving, explaining and determining a tourist' travel decision. It is an established part of the tourism industry and it is becoming one of the most dynamically growing areas in the tourism industry sector (Haq, 2014). It is a subset of special interest tourism that contains religious tourism and pilgrimage. It includes admiration and curiosity of the natural and anthropic resources with religious vacation; the authenticity of the religious place; commemoration of events related to a certain religion; religious faith; the desire for authenticity and feelings that ensure peace of mind; interest in the archeology of the religious site; cognitive and knowledge enrichment purposes; spiritual salvation and confession of supreme sins; and participation in ceremonies, congress events and religious camps (Sharma et al., 2019). Interestingly, spiritual tourism is defined as a visit of a specific place out of his/her usual environment with an intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth and without overt religious

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compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature as the main reason for travelling (Heidari et al., 2018; Medhekar & Haq, 2012). It involves tangible products and services (churches, mosques, temples, shrines, and other venter with a spiritual focus) and intangible products and services (organized spiritual events, seminars, festivals, and gatherings with spiritual motives). It motivates tourists to respect religions for attaining the devotee's religious and moral improvement. Spiritual tourists are special-interest tourists undertaking travel to achieve specific objectives and goals with specific needs and wants (Haq & Wong, 2010).

In addition, spiritual tourism is a search for personal meaning which leans towards this side rather than the left side of the continuum that represents religious tourism (Kaur, 2016). It is more about personal belief than leisure travelling and the focus is on relationship with self, life and meaning. It focuses on admiring the natural and anthropic resources with a religious vacation and the authenticity of the religious place and considering sacred being a religious practice and a form of religious tourism. Moreover, spiritual tourism has moved beyond religious tourism to establish inner peace, love and enhanced knowledge through exploring personal beliefs and divine experiences contributing to enhanced self-worth and confidence with a mental customized and personalized heed fulfillment. Furthermore, spiritual tourism involves the devotional aspect as well as sightseeing, travelling, visiting nearby places, buying souvenirs, and voyaging by air (Gupta & Gulla, 2010). It is a journey to a sacred place or a shrine of importance to tourist's beliefs or faith. It is a tour for attaining spiritual improvement or getting creator's bliss. Accordingly, spiritual tourism critically motivates, persuades, influences, and enhances tourists' travel decision to visit a sacred place or a shrine of importance to their beliefs or faith for the fulfillment of inner peace, love and enhanced knowledge. It is likely to have a significant positive impact on travel decision. Therefore,

H1: Spiritual tourism has a positive impact on travel decision.

III. Social media

To strengthen the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships, social media is hypothesized to moderate the research relationships. It refers to an internal and external communication enhancer to build social capital among organizational stakeholders through the utilization of technologies, channels and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for them (Gaffar et al., 2022). It is a tool of self-presentation and self-disclosure, which involves impressment and public sharing or personal information. It employs internet-based applications that carry destination and tourist-generated content, which encompass media impressions created by them, typically informed by relevant experience, and achieved or shared online for easy access or distribute by other impressionable parties (Chatterjee & Dsilva, 2021). It attracts potential tourists and promotes tourism products and services through direct interaction with tourism (Lin et al., 2020). Accordingly, social media can help tourists collect structured and unstructured data from online sites and extract meaningful information out of them to interpret an opinion of the tourists (Chu et al. 2020). It is an important resource in tourists'

information search which plays an important role in the travel planning process. It is considered to be credible, trustworthy and effective. It influences the way tourists plan for, buy and consume tourist products.

Moreover, social media plays an important role for choosing a destination of making travel decision of tourists (Moro & Rita, 2018). It contributes tourists' travel-related experiences, their engagement with others, their connection with people from different destinations and their decision for buying travel-related products and services (Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017). It includes micro-blogging, blogs such as user sponsored blogs, social networking sites, company sponsored web sites, sharing sites for video or photos, viewing pictures, collaborative web sites and news delivery sites, social bookmarking sites where users discuss their point of view and recommend online new stories, videos, music, content communities, forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators (Kavoura & Stavrianeas, 2015). Furthermore, social media is a crucial function in creating an interactive and mutual relationship with destinations and tourists (Chu et al., 2020). It helps engage potential tourists to a tourist destination's activities, such as a destination management with forming new relationships with the tourists and facilitating their meaningful contact with the destination through the creation and enhancement of a sense of an online community belonging. It also helps create a better understanding of the perceptions tourists have about the tourism destination which is necessary for all who are in charge of forming communication strategies about a destination and their potential in the tourism industry. Accordingly, social media has a tendency to enhance tourists' potential destination choices and best travel decision. It positively moderate the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships. Therefore,

H2: Social media positively moderates the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships.

IV. Tourist experience

Tourist experience is the first antecedent of a visit of tourist destination through spiritual tourism. It is defined as an individual's immediate, ongoing, subjective and personal response to an activity, setting or event outside their usual environment (Shekari et al., 2023). It refers to consumer experience through pre, during to post-purchase or consumption journey (Prentice, 2020). It busts out of the comfort zone to grow, learn and engage with the world outside of the personal bubble that helps to create an organic and effective way to bring about personal change with experiential value, the motive of learning and the expansion of perception (Bideci & Bideci, 2021). It focuses more on tourists' emotional stages to spice the feelings than the tourist products or service-related emotional stages. It also occurs from interactions with a local culture, experiencing different landscapes or learning a new language (Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, tourist experience is associated with important outcomes of a tourist destination through tourist emotions, social interactions among travelers and overall service evaluations. It enables intellectual development and self-improvement and increases tourists' perceived utility and

overall satisfaction. It also leads to personal, transformative and memorable outcomes that positively link to the tourists' participation of tourist destination according to spiritual tourism.

In addition, tourist experience refers to subjective metal states felt by participants during service (Ratnasari et al., 2021). It is the nature and magnitude of tourists' memorable and emotional experience with destination activities. It positively influences the behavioral intentions of tourists. It is divided into active experience (educational or escapist experiences, as people actively participate and are involved in travelling situations, and can even create various experiences in the process) and passive experience (esthetic and entertainment experiences) (Sheng & Chen, 2013). It helps tourists to remember and recall after the end of tourism activities through travel experiences and emotional feelings. Moreover, tourist experience is an individual's subjective evaluation and undergoing of events related to his/her tourist activities which begins before, during and after the trip (Musa et al., 2017). It includes expectations before the trip, perceptions during the trip and memories after the trip. It accumulates and creates tourists' overall feelings toward the trip. Tourists can achieve value experiences though visiting, seeing and living in a different mode of life. They engage in a personal way that is enjoyable, engaging and memorable. Therefore, a better understanding of tourist experience is essential if meeting the expectations, needs and wants of spiritual tourism needs to be achieved. Accordingly, tourist experience is an important antecedent of participating spiritual tourism. Therefore,

H3: Tourist experience has an important antecedent that positively influences tourists to participate in spiritual tourism.

V. Religious relief

Religious belief is the second antecedent of a visit of tourist destination through spiritual tourism. It is defined as one's understanding of the divine and humanity's relationship to it (Hu & Cheng, 2019). It is an organized set of practices and ethics within a faith community. It encompasses all beliefs related to deity, including supernatural and paranormal beliefs. It includes beliefs in heaven, hell, miracles, afterlife, angels and demons, and an immaterial soul. Similarly, religious relief can guide an individual's consumption attitudes and behaviors (Teng et al., 2023). It plays a key role in forming social behavior (Gill et al., 2018). It positively influences and enhances the choices and ways people continuously make. It critically affects the economies, political structures, legal environments, and social behaviors of people around the world. In a context of spiritual tourism, religious belief conveys values that influence the attitudes of tourists toward a tourist destination. It can change more dramatically, as tourists feel compelled to critically evaluate their beliefs after being presented with new ideas, beliefs and role models at a tourist destination. Therefore, religious belief influences and motivates the tourists to participate spiritual tourism through the tourist destination. It has a positive effect of their participation in spiritual tourism.

Furthermore, religious belief plays an important role in both the physical and spiritual nature of an individual (Budak et al., 2021). It is a supernatural agent of control, ranging from

personal living to spiritual forces prominently in nearly every culture humanity. It enhances a positive development of people's mental states and behaviors. Next, religious belief is a set of practices, which is historical, public or social and generally includes some kind of cultic or ritual activity (Kay et al., 2010). It also includes a discourse and contains criteria which believers use to determine the appropriateness or inappropriateness of actions and utterances. It helps protect the individual's mental health and ensure psychological relief. Therefore, religious relief has a positive effect on spiritual tourism by increasing tourists' motivations, persuasions and enhancements. It also plays a significant role in the promotion of spiritual tourism. Accordingly, religious relief is considered to have a positive influence and impact on willingness to visit a tourist destination under the spiritual tourism. Therefore,

H4: Religious belief has an important antecedent that positively influences tourists to participate in spiritual tourism.

VI. Word of mouth

Word of mouth is the third antecedent of a visit of tourist destination through spiritual tourism. It is defined as an informal person-to-person communication to evaluate products/services between private parties through face to face or other communication channels (Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2015). It has potential to send high-quality data with accuracy and objectivity, source credibility and powerful cue and the level of susceptibility and risk aversion of the consumer (Kuo et al., 2013). In addition, word of mouth is the act of consumer providing information about goods, services, brands, or firms to other consumers (Mukerjee, 2020). It is an interpersonal communication between consumers regarding a product, service or firm that the emitter of the information is an independent individual. It could lead to satisfaction, loyalty, perceived value and consumer experiences. In a context of tourism, word of mouth is a personal behavior which makes the information transmitted more real and credible and has a much greater effect on tourists' decision making related to a tourist destination. It is also an interpersonal communication that is positively influential in the tourism industry. It can help positively promote and recommend spiritual tourism. Therefore, word of mouth enables tourists to self-enhance and signal identity and foster positive impressions about tourist destination (Saenger et al., 2020).

Moreover, word of mouth refers to the exchanging behavior of information between consumers (Hyun et al. 2023). It is an important factor influencing and determining consumer decision making through interpersonal communication, the receiver's attitudes and behaviors can be positively changed. Similarly, word of mouth is an information communication which informs other consumers about the possession, utilization or qualities of certain goods and services and/or their sellers (Ahmadi, 2019). It is an important force in the marketplace, influencing attitudes, preferences, purchase intentions, and decision making. It helps evaluate products or services and critically enhance consumers' psychological behavior about purchasing and restoring the threatened self-views. In the tourism industry, word of mouth can influence the perceptions and behaviors of individuals with varying opinions through the exchanging behavior of tourist

information between tourists and relatives. Therefore, word of mouth becomes a positive communication between existing tourists and new possible coming tourists on the topic of tourist destination. It has a significant impact on a tourist's motivations for travelling to a tourist destination according to spiritual tourism. It is an important factoring influencing tourist decision making, reflecting the interpersonal influence among tourists, friends, families, and relatives, and changing the tourists' attitudes and behaviors. Accordingly, word of mouth positively influences a visit of the tourist destination in spiritual tourism. It has a tendency to influence spiritual tourism participation. Therefore,

H5: Word of mouth has an important antecedent that positively influences tourists to participate in spiritual tourism.

Research Methodology

I. Research subjects and sampling method

Using a survey design, a total of 400 Naga Cave tourists, Bueng Kan, Thailand were the samples of this study because the population of this study could not be counted (Yamane, 1967). Moreover, structural equation model analysis requires the minimum acceptable sample size of 200 (Xu, 2020). Therefore, the sample of the study is considered appropriate. Adopting the convenience sampling method, a questionnaire was used to collect data during February-April, 2023. The tourists who come to visit Naga Cave were the target research groups due to their different characteristics with regard to gender, age and salary. The accuracy and completeness of the returned questionnaires were checked to ensure that all information was ready to be used for investigating the research hypotheses. To protect their privacy of the participants, this study focuses solely on presenting their overall research opinions and results.

II. Measures

The self-developed measures of the constructs through spiritual tourism, social media, travel decision, tourist experience, religious belief, and word of mouth from existing relating literature were employed as using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), but excluding control variables of gender, age and salary. Spiritual tourism is an independent variable of the study and a nine-item scale was introduced to assess how tourists valued and benefited from visiting Naga Cave with an intention of spiritual meaning and/or growth and without overt religious compulsion, which could be religious, non-religious, sacred or experiential in nature as the main reason for travelling. Next, social media is a moderating variable of the study and a five-item scale was developed to measure how tourists utilized and obtained tourism information and data through a social media of internet-based applications that carried destination and tourist-generated content. Moreover, travel decision is a dependent variable of the study and a ten-item scale was created to gauge how tourists made tourist choices which included the cognitive and affective components of a tour purchase process by which tourists selected and purchased travel products to satisfy their needs.

In addition, tourist experience is the first antecedent of spiritual tourism visit and a five-item scale was developed to evaluate how tourists employed the nature and magnitude of their memorable and emotional experience with destination activities, which positively influenced the behavioral intentions of tourists. Next, religious belief is the second antecedent of spiritual tourism visit and a five-item scale was developed to verify how tourists possessed an organized set of practices and ethics within a faith community, which encompassed all beliefs related to deity, including supernatural and paranormal beliefs in heaven, hell, miracles, afterlife, angels and demons, and an immaterial soul that guide an individual's consumption attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, word of mouth is the third antecedent of spiritual tourism visit and a five-item scale was developed to prove how tourists made the information transmitted more real and credible and have a much greater effect on tourists' decision making, which enabled them to self-enhance, signal identity, and foster positive impressions about tourist destination.

Interestingly, there are three control variables of the study, including gender, age and salary. Firstly, gender was measured using a dummy variable suggesting that male = 0 and female = 1. Secondly, age was measured using a dummy variable indicating that below 35 years old = 0 and equal to or above 35 years old = 1. Lastly, salary was measured using a dummy variable indicating that below 30,000 baht = 0 and equal to or above 30,000 baht = 1.

III. Factorability, validity and reliability of research instrument

All factor loadings, item-total correlations and Cronbach alpha coefficients were utilized to test factorability, validity and reliability of the study (Hair et al., 2010). The factor loadings of all items as 0.79-0.99, were greater than 0.60. Moreover, the item-total correlations as 0.78-0.99, were greater than 0.30 indicating the achievement of the convergent validity. Furthermore, the Cronbach alpha coefficients as well as the composite reliability as 0.94-0.99, were achieved with scoring greater than 0.07. Therefore, all the indices could be accepted. Table 1 presents the results of measure validation through factorability, validity and reliability for multiple-item scales used in this study.

Table 1 Results of measure validation

Items	Factor Loadings	Item-total Correlation	Cronbach Alpha
Spiritual tourism (ST)	0.79-0.91	0.78-0.92	0.95
Social media (SM)	0.95-0.98	0.91-0.95	0.98
Travel decision (TD)	0.91-0.94	0.95-0.97	0.98
Tourist experience (TE)	0.98-0.99	0.98-0.99	0.99
Religious belief (RB)	0.98-0.99	0.98-0.99	0.99
Word of mouth (WM)	0.82-0.95	0.81-0.95	0.94

IV. Measurement model

According to Awang (2014), the maximum likelihood estimation was applied to verify the model fit in this study. There are the comparative fit index (CFI), the goodness of fit index (GFI), the incremental fit index (IFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The measurement model was performed with all constructs included. In this study, the model for indices is achieved (CFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.93, IFI = 0.95, and RMSEA = 0.05). Therefore, the initial test of the measurement model resulted in a good fit to the data this study could continue further when at least three of the indices met the threshold requirement (Hair et al., 2010).

V. Statistical technique for hypotheses testing

Structural equation model analysis was employed to investigate (a) the impacts of spiritual tourism on travel decision and (b) the impacts of tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth on spiritual tourism (Quratulain et al., 2021). Next, multiple regression analysis is applied to examine the moderating impacts of social media on the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships. The results of this study are presented in the next section.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for all variables. Firstly, multicollinearity problem might occur when inter-correlation in each predict variable is more than 0.80, which suggests a strong relationship (Hair et al., 2010). The correlations range from 0.04 to 0.79 at the $p < 0.05$ level, which suggests that the possible relationships of the variables in the conceptual model could be tested. Secondly, variance inflation factor presents a value of 1.03-2.14, but is not more than 10, which recommends that the multicollinearity does not exist (O'Brien, 2007). Thus, there are no substantial multicollinearity problems encountered in this study.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

Variables	TD	ST	SM	TE	RB	WM
Mean	4.22	4.64	4.61	4.41	4.39	4.42
S.D.	0.86	0.48	0.61	0.74	0.74	0.67
TD						
ST	0.14***					
SM	0.04	0.08				
TE	0.06	0.14***	0.63***			
RB	0.06	0.14***	0.64***	0.79***		
WM	0.06	0.13***	0.76***	0.74***	0.75***	

***p<.01

Table 3 presents the results of path coefficients and hypotheses testing of the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships and the relationships among tourist experience, religious belief, word of mouth, and spiritual tourism. Figure 2 also shows a summary of the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships. In this study, spiritual tourism has a significant positive impact on travel decision (b = 0.24, $p < 0.01$). It is a search for personal meaning, leans towards this side rather than the left side of the continuum that represents religious tourism (Kaur, 2016). It is more about personal belief than leisure traveling and the focus is on relationship with self, life and meaning, including (1) admiring the natural and anthropic resources with a religious vacation and the authenticity of the religious place, (2) considering sacred being a religious practice and a form of religious tourism and (3) establishing inner peace, love and enhanced knowledge through exploring personal beliefs and divine experiences contributing to enhanced self-worth and confidence with a mental customized and personalized heed fulfillment. Within the attributes and characteristics of spiritual tourism through Naga Cave, tourists tend to make their travel choice and decision to visit the sacred place or shrine of importance to their beliefs or faith for the fulfillment of inner peace, love and enhanced knowledge. Accordingly, spiritual tourism plays an important role in determining travel decision. *Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported.*

Table 3 Results of path coefficients and hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Relationships	Coefficients	t-value	Results
H1	ST → TD	0.24***	3.11	Supported
H3	TE → ST	0.19***	2.87	Supported
H4	RB → ST	0.32***	4.93	Supported
H5	WM → ST	0.05	1.32	Not supported

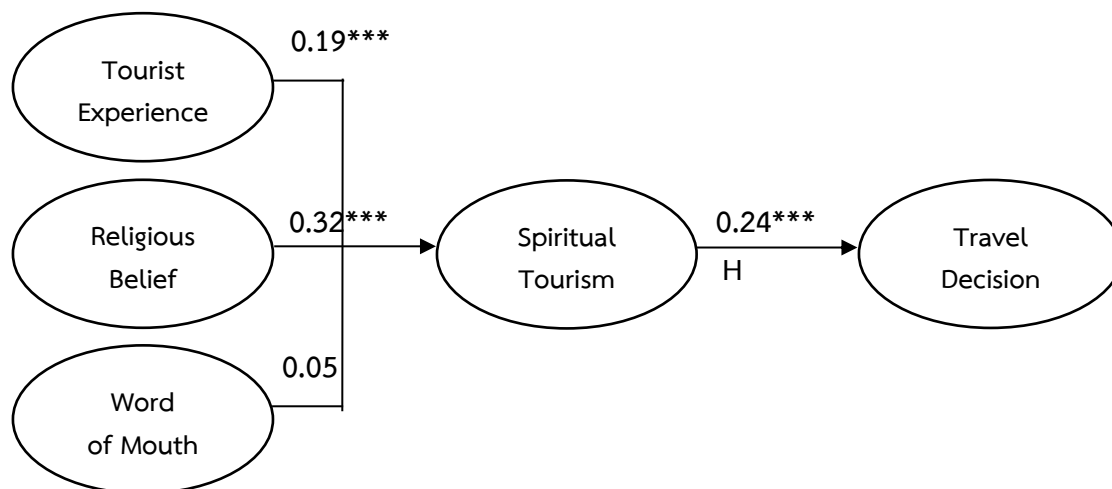***p<.01, CFI = 0.94; GFI = 0.93; IFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.05

Figure 2 A summary of the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships

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Interestingly, tourist experience is a significant first antecedent of spiritual tourism visit. It has a critical positive impact on spiritual tourism (b = 0.19, $p < 0.01$). In existing literature, tourist experience is an individual's immediate and ongoing, subjective and personal response to an activity, setting or event outside their usual environment (Shekari et al., 2023). It helps establish an organic and effective way to bring about personal change with experiential value which is the motive of learning and the expansion of perception. It is associated with important outcomes for a tourist destination through tourist emotions, social interactions among travelers and overall service evaluations and increases tourists' perceived utility and overall satisfaction. Accordingly, tourist experience positively impacts a motivational visit of spiritual tourism through Naga Cave. *Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported.* In addition, religious belief is also an important second antecedent of spiritual tourism visit and has a critical positive impact on spiritual tourism (b = 0.32, $p < 0.01$). It is an organized set of practices and ethics within a faith community (Hu & Cheng, 2019). It encompasses all beliefs related to deity, including supernatural and paranormal belief, including beliefs in heaven, hell, miracles, afterlife, angels and demons, and an immaterial soul. It can guide an individual's consumption attitudes and behaviors. It positively influences and enhances the choices and ways people continuously make. In a spiritual tourism context, religious belief conveys values that influence the attitudes of tourists toward a tourist destination. It can influence and motivate the tourists to participate spiritual tourism through the tourist destination of Naga Cave. It tends to have a positive impact on their spiritual tourism visits. *Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is supported.*

In contrast, word of mouth has no impact on spiritual tourism (b = 0.05, $p < 0.19$). According to existing literature, word of mouth is an interpersonal communication between consumers regarding a product, service or firm. It is the emitter of the information of an independent individual, which leads to satisfaction, loyalty, perceived value and consumer experiences (Mukerjee, 2020). In a tourism context, word of mouth is a personal behavior which makes the information transmitted more real and credible and has a much greater effect on tourists' decision making related to a tourist destination. It enables tourists to self-enhance and signal identity and foster positive impressions about tourist destination. However, word of mouth is proved not to be important in this study because tourists may make a choice and ac decision relating to tourist destination of Naga Cave based on the more direct impacts of both tourist experience and religious belief than word of mouth. An interpersonal communication of word of mouth may not appropriately provide high-quality data with accuracy and objectivity, source credibility and powerful cue, the level of susceptibility, and risk aversion of the tourist (Arica et al., 2022). Moreover, word of mouth can help exchange informal information, but it may provide overload faith information and over supernatural information. Tourists may get confused about tourist destination information. Thus, they may not choose the Naga Cave as the tourist destination or they may postpone travel decision of this tourist destination. Accordingly, word of mouth does not impact spiritual tourism. *Therefore, Hypothesis 5 is not supported.*

Table 4 Results of multiple regression analysis and hypotheses testing[a]

Independent	Dependent Variables		
Variables	TD	TD	TD
ST		0.14***	0.13**
		(0.05)	(0.05)
SM		0.02	0.02
		(0.05)	(0.05)
ST*SM			0.05
			(0.04)
Gender	0.07	0.08	0.08
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Age	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Salary	0.03	0.04	0.04
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Adjusted R^2	0.10	0.11	0.21

**p<.05, ***p<.01, [a] Beta coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis.

Table 4 presents the results of multiple regression analysis and hypotheses testing for the moderating impacts of social media on the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships. Interestingly, social media does not moderate the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships (b = 0.05, p < 0.32). Generally, social media is an internal and external communication enhancer which builds social capital among organizational stakeholders through the utilization of technologies, channels and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for them (Gaffar et al., 2022). It is a tool of self-presentation and self-disclosure, which involves impressment and public sharing or personal information. It can attract potential tourists and promote tourism products and services through direct interaction with tourism. It is an important resource for tourists' information search which plays an important role in the travel planning process. However, social media is not a moderator of the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships in this study because the executives of Naga Cave may not utilize social media in order to motivate tourists' choices and decisions, which need, want and wish to visit the Naga Cave. Furthermore, social media may generate too much tourist destination information from different channels and platforms of communication. Sometimes, tourist destination information differs. Thus, tourists may not pay attention to tourist destination information from this social media. Accordingly, social media does not have a moderating impact on the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships. *Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.*

Contributions and Directions for Further Research

I. Theoretical contribution and directions for further research

According to theory of reasoned action, this study verifies that spiritual tourism is an important subset of special interest tourism and it becomes a significant influencer of tourists' travel decision in visiting Naga Cave, Bueng Kan, Thailand. To expand and increase the benefits of the current study, future research may need to reexamine and reconceptualize roles and characteristics of both social media and word of mouth in a tourism context in order to confirm the conceptual research model and effectively utilize them. Next, future research may need to search for new moderating constructs and other antecedent factors of the research relationships in order to add values and increase contributions of these relationships. Moreover, future research may need to put dimensions and components of spiritual tourism concept in order to enhance utilizations and benefits of the research relationships. Furthermore, future research may need to find a mediator of the research relationships in order to achieve a strong support of the research results. In addition, there are different Naga Caves in Thailand. Future research may need to collect data from different tourist destinations in order to verify and confirm the current study's research results by using a comparative study method for proving the research relationships.

II. Managerial contribution

Spiritual tourism critically motivates, persuades, influences, and enhances tourists' travel decision to visit a sacred place or a shrine of importance to their beliefs or faith for the fulfillment of inner peace, love and enhanced knowledge. It plays a significant role in driving, explaining and determining travel behavior, motivation and decision relating to Naga Cave, Bueng Kan, Thailand. Thus, spiritual tourism is considered an important determinant of visiting this Naga Cave. To achieve more benefits and better advantages of the Naga Cave, the executives of national park and other government agencies need to pay close attention to planning their allocated reasonable and appropriate resources and assets, managing tourist operations, activities and practices well, and promoting this tourist destination effectively. Moreover, the executives need to employ effective tourism strategies in order to maintain, add, increase, and enhance valuable Naga Cave's travel motivation, choice and decision. With an awareness of spiritual tourism sustainability, a schedule of maintaining attributes and characteristics of the Naga Cave should be appropriately organized and practiced. The executives need to set and allocate a sufficient budget of spiritual tourism management, determine a number of Naga Cave tourists each year, and present clear rules and criteria of visiting the Naga Cave. Accordingly, sustainable spiritual tourism is an important target of Naga Cave, Bueng Kan, Thailand.

Conclusion

Spiritual tourism is becoming one of the most dynamically growing areas in the tourism industry sector. It is a subset of special interest tourism that practically contains religious tourism and pilgrimage. The objective of this study is to examine the impacts of spiritual tourism on travel

decision of Naga Cave tourists, Bueng Kan, Thailand through a moderator of social media and antecedents of tourist experience, religious belief and word of mouth. 400 Naga Cave tourists, Bueng Kan, Thailand are the samples of the study. Both structural equation model analysis and multiple regression analysis are utilized to investigate the direct impacts and moderating impacts of the research relationships respectively. The research results suggest that spiritual tourism significantly and positively impacts travel decision. Moreover, both tourist experience and religious belief are important determinants of spiritual tourism, but word of mouth does not impact spiritual tourism. In contrast, social media does not moderate the spiritual tourism-travel decision relationships. To verify and expand the current study, future research may need to reexamine and reconceptualize roles and characteristics of both social media and word of mouth in a tourism context, search for new moderating constructs and other antecedent factors of the research relationships, put dimensions and components of spiritual tourism concept, find a mediator of the research relationships, and collect data from different tourist destinations. In summary, the executives of national park and other government agencies should be aware of importance for Naga Cave. They need to pay close attention to planning their allocated reasonable and appropriate resources and assets, managing tourist operations, activities and practices well, promoting this tourist destination effectively, initiating and establishing beneficial tourism strategies, setting and allocating a sufficient budget of spiritual tourism management, determining a number of Naga Cave tourists each year, and presenting clear rules and criteria of visiting the Naga Cave. Accordingly, sustainable spiritual tourism is an important target of Naga Cave, Bueng Kan, Thailand.

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