

# ENHANCING SECONDARY CITY TOURISM IN THAILAND: EXPLORING REVENUE GENERATION, SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES, AND THE ROLE OF BRAND IDENTITY

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## Abstract

Tourism is a significant contributor to economic development, particularly in countries like Thailand, where primary cities dominate tourism revenue. However, secondary cities, despite their rich cultural, natural, and historical assets, remain underexplored. This study addresses the need to promote secondary city tourism in Thailand by exploring the key factors influencing tourist decision-making and satisfaction. Using a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative and quantitative research, the study investigates elements such as perceived value, cultural and natural attractions, and brand identity that shape tourist preferences and behaviors. Findings indicate that strategic promotion and infrastructure development in secondary cities, along with a well-defined brand identity, can enhance tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions. The research highlights the significance of regional-level attributes, suggesting that region-specific marketing strategies could play a pivotal role in promoting secondary city tourism. This study aims to provide actionable insights to stakeholders for sustainable tourism development, community revenue generation, and equitable distribution of tourism benefits across Thailand's diverse regions.

**Keywords:** Secondary City Tourism, Second-Tier Tourism Destination, Brand Identity, Sustainability, Revenue Generation, Regional Tourism

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a vital contributor to economic development (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016) and cultural exchange (Pearce, 1995), especially in countries like Thailand, where the sector significantly influences local economies and livelihoods. While the nation's primary cities, such as Bangkok and Phuket, have long attracted tourists worldwide, secondary cities remain underexplored despite their unique cultural, natural, and historical offerings (Jørgensen et al., 2018). Recent data indicates that 80% of tourism revenue in Thailand is concentrated in only 10 primary cities, with secondary cities accounting for a mere 20% (Fakfare et al., 2020). This unequal distribution of tourism highlights a pressing need to promote secondary cities as attractive travel destinations and to distribute tourism benefits more evenly across the country.

In response to this challenge, the Thai government and the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) have initiated strategic efforts to decentralize tourism. These include rebranding 55 secondary cities as "cities worth visiting" and implementing policies such as tax incentives to encourage domestic tourism. Despite these initiatives, tourism in secondary cities faces several obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure, limited accessibility, and a lack of strong brand identity. Previous research has predominantly focused on primary city tourism

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(e.g., Leruksa et al., 2023; Park & Lee, 2019), leaving a significant gap in understanding how secondary cities can attract tourists and achieve sustainable economic growth.

This study aims to bridge this research gap by exploring the key factors influencing tourist decision-making in selecting secondary city destinations, assessing the impact of regional attributes on satisfaction and revisit intentions. A multi-phase research design, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, was employed to identify the primary factors shaping tourist preferences, including perceived value, cultural and natural attractions, and brand identity. The study also examines the challenges faced by secondary cities, such as infrastructure limitations and the implementation of policies, which hinder their development as prominent tourist destinations.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research has been divided into three specific sub-studies. The initial phase involves a qualitative investigation to identify the key factors influencing tourists' travel decisions. This foundational study aims to create a shared understanding of the primary factors that can be strategically used to develop marketing programs, effectively promoting second-tier tourism in a targeted manner. The research follows the protocol established by Manosuthi et al. (2024) for extracting the main points in this initial exploration. The protocol is as follows.

### **Study 1**

The initial phase of this research adopted a qualitative approach, inspired by Ajzen (2020) methodologies. The study commenced with a pilot phase using an open-response format to explore the decision-making process and identify key variables that are most influential and top-of-mind for individuals. Unlike focus groups, which may be affected by group dynamics, this free-format method captures individual perspectives. Although focus groups can provide valuable insights, the factors identified in such settings are often influenced by group interactions rather than purely individual considerations. In this pilot study, nine participants were involved. This group comprised six tourists and three categories of key informants: two experienced second-tier tourists, two who were inexperienced but planned to visit second-tier destinations, and two who had neither experience with less-visited destinations nor any intention of visiting them. Additionally, two researchers specializing in second-tier tourism and marketing, along with a general tourism business operator who had participated in second-tier tourism campaigns, were included.

Each participant was given 10 minutes to list factors that influence their decision-making regarding both traditional and second-tier tourism destinations. They were asked to simulate their decision-making process, drawing on real-life experiences and contemplating various events or factors that might have altered their travel intentions. After this initial exercise, participants were provided with additional academic context, including the Theory of Planned Behavior and concepts of Community-Based Tourism. These theories were explained in detail to ensure a comprehensive understanding. Following this, participants were given another 10 minutes to reconsider their initial decisions and document them on new sheets of paper.

The factors identified were then extracted and consolidated, with an emphasis on those common across participants. Remaining factors were categorized according to the aforementioned theories. To deepen the exploration, a subsequent focus group session was conducted, allowing participants to discuss their individual decision-making processes and identify instances where theoretical concepts did not fully align with their experiences. This phase facilitated the reconsideration of factors previously categorized as peripheral. Based on

these insights, the list of factors was regrouped and refined to create a more parsimonious set, as participants reported fatigue when completing questionnaires exceeding 15 items.

To further refine the variables, the preliminary list was tested with 15 undergraduate students who either had or had not experienced second-tier tourism. This phase provided feedback on clarity and usability. In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted to gain more in-depth insights into the decision-making factors highlighted by the focus group findings, helping to validate and further refine the variables while addressing any discrepancies.

Following revisions based on feedback, the measurement items were evaluated by a committee of five experts to determine the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) index. Finally, a pilot test involving 200 participants was conducted to assess the psychometric properties of the measurement items, ensuring their validity and reliability.

## **Study 2**

In this part of the study, tourists who had previously traveled to secondary cities were revisited and asked to reconsider their decision-making process when selecting their travel destinations. Often, tourists decide between locations within the same region, initially selecting a broader destination, such as the province of Nan, before further narrowing down their choices. This approach aids in extracting factors that influence tourists' decisions to visit different regions of the country, facilitating the support of macro-level marketing efforts aimed at promoting tourism and increasing the geographical distribution of tourists across various regions. Consequently, the design of this segment focuses on the differences between regions, which not only assists in marketing and promotional activities at a macro level but also aligns with insights derived from qualitative research.

Tourists were asked to reflect on their decision-making process at the regional level rather than at specific tourist locations, which are typically within the same region. However, if both potential destinations were in the same region, tourists were required to consider an alternative secondary city destination until one from a different region was chosen. The final selection involved choosing between two regions, one of which was selected for the tourist's travel to a secondary city. The factors studied here stem from two primary sources: the outcomes of initial qualitative research and a pilot survey conducted with 200 real tourists and 15 students, totaling 215 participants. This pilot helped identify both the errors and decision-making factors real tourists use. Following this pilot, the same panel that conducted the first round of qualitative research also played a role in refining and extracting the factors used in this research phase.

The analysis in this section utilizes logistic regression to examine the weight each considered factor has towards influencing a preference for one region over another. This design approach provides more specific and accurate information about the regional preferences of tourists than a combined test would, as each factor is highly likely to be significant. However, what remains untested in previous research that could benefit Thai tourism is the specific appeal of each region in attracting tourist groups (Calero & Turner, 2020; Yang & Fik, 2014). Therefore, the design of this study segment is expected to reveal meaningful differences in decision-making, which will be reflected in the brand identity in the subsequent study, along with issues of revenue and sustainability from the tourists' perspectives.

## **Study 3**

After qualitatively refining the preliminary results and those from Study 2, issues related to regional attraction factors that influence tourists' decisions to visit secondary cities

were re-examined. The primary reason for this re-evaluation was to understand tourists' behaviors in selecting secondary city destinations from a regional perspective before and after their actual travel experiences. Furthermore, this study broadens the understanding from the tourists' viewpoint, where expectations and realities are reflected through their satisfaction levels. This phase also hypothesizes that the brand identity of the destination is mirrored through diverse cultural attributes (Konecnik & Go, 2008), cuisine (Suna & Alvarez, 2021), scenery (Saraniemi & Komppula, 2019), and the distinctive image of the tourist spots (Konecnik & Go, 2008), thereby highlighting the significant influence these unique regional features have on tourists' satisfaction after their real-life experiences. This approach aims to capture the fullest possible spectrum of tourists' perspectives, extending understanding to the implications for revenue generation and sustainability from tourism in secondary cities.

The analysis in this segment comprises eight distinct models. The first seven models employ single regression analysis to verify that each factor should independently have a significant impact on the dependent variable without controlling for other variables. This method helps minimize interpretation errors arising from simultaneous analysis (Manosuthi et al., 2024). The initial confirmation of each factor's significance suggests that any factors appearing non-significant in the comprehensive Model 8 may be overshadowed by other influences. This does not necessarily indicate that these factors are irrelevant, but rather that their effects could be masked by the stronger influences of other variables. Subsequently, it is assumed that factors related to brand identity are manifested through universally recognized attributes such as food, culture and history, natural attractions, and distinctive imagery (Hall, 2002). This assumption aligns with the findings from Study 1 and previous literature (Hall, 2002; Konecnik & Go, 2008; Park & Lee, 2019; Saraniemi & Komppula, 2019; Suna & Alvarez, 2021), which consistently underscore these attributes as significant. Brand identity will be assessed for its psychometric properties and tested in conjunction with the final model.

The final model expands the understanding to revisit intentions, which are categorized into intentions to return to the same place, intentions to revisit the same secondary city but a different location within the region, and intentions to visit a new region altogether. Recognizing the impact of such factors is practically beneficial as it allows stakeholders to identify potential opportunities or threats in attracting both returning and new tourist groups. Besides the marketing perspective to attract tourist groups, the tourists' views on the economic and environmental impacts on the community, as well as sustainability, are also tested.

## **RESULTS**

### **Study 1**

The study's participants included six tourists aged between 20 and 51 years, with monthly incomes ranging from 5,000 to 220,000 Baht. All had at least a bachelor's degree and demonstrated a strong interest in second-tier tourism, except for one individual who had no prior experience or interest in visiting second-tier destinations. Additionally, two experts in tourism market research contributed to the study: one from the private sector and the other from a public institution. Both experts had extensive experience in tourism research, held doctoral degrees, and were on average 49 years old, with monthly incomes exceeding 200,000 Baht. The final participant was a tourism industry professional with over a decade of direct experience in the field. This individual was 47 years old, had a monthly income over 200,000 Baht, and held a master's degree. Table 1 outlines the methods and procedures used in this study.

Through the ideation process, nine key variables were identified as likely to influence tourists' destination choices: accommodation, perceived value, cultural and historical significance, authentic and less crowded experiences, natural attractions, social influence and

image, incentives and promotions, safety, and unique branding of the destination. Details of these factors are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** Findings from Customary Methods

Key factors from ideation process	Regrouping and remodifying	Parsimonious factors	Conceptualization and definition	Theoretical support
Travel cost, Local prices, Current exchange rates (for foreigners), Accessibility, Tourist facilities, Sustainability practices, Community involvement, Hospitality, Tourism services, Novelty-seeking, risk Perception, Travel motivation, Recreational activities, Gastronomic experience, Local events and festivals, Demographics, Cultural sensitivity, Social media influence	Economic factors (travel cost, local prices, current exchange rates (for foreigners),	Accommodation	It refers to the quality, availability, and variety of lodging options within a destination. It encompasses aspects like comfort, affordability, location relative to attractions, and the uniqueness of the stay that contribute to the overall tourist experience.	SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1991)
	Environmental and infrastructure factors (accessibility, tourist facilities, sustainability practices, community involvement) Service quality factors (hospitality, tourism services)	Perceived value		
	Personal and psychological factors (novelty-seeking, risk perception, travel motivation)	Cultural and historical significance	It highlights the importance of the destination's historical landmarks, cultural heritage, and traditions. It measures how these elements enhance the attractiveness of the destination and enrich the visitor's experience.	Authenticity theory (Moore et al., 2021)
	Experience and activity-based factor (recreational activities, gastronomic experience, local events and festivals)	Authentic and less crowded experiences (later included in cultural factor)		
Social and demographic factors (demographics, cultural sensitivity, social media influence)	Natural attractions	It includes the geographical and natural features that draw tourists, such as beaches,		

**Table 1 (Continued)**

Key factors from ideation process	Regrouping and remodifying	Parsimonious factors	Conceptualization and definition	Theoretical support
			mountains, parks, and reserves. This factor assesses how these elements contribute to the appeal of the destination.	
		Social influence and image	It considers how perceptions and behaviors are influenced by social interactions and media. It includes the impact of recommendations from social networks, the image portrayed by others who visit the destination, and the overall social reputation.	Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2020)
		Incentive and promotion (Initially included as a factor, this was later removed after discovering that tax incentives are not a necessary condition for travel among second-tier tourists.	It involves strategies used by destinations to attract tourists through discounts, special offers, or unique packages. This factor evaluates how effective these tactics are in influencing the decision to visit.	Incentive theory (Korman et al., 1981)
		Safety (later removed after second pilot study)	Safety measures the perceived and actual security of the destination, covering personal safety, health risks, and the general environment's stability. It is crucial for determining a destination's suitability for travel.	-
		Unique branding of the destination	This factor involves the creation and communication of a distinctive identity and image that sets a destination apart from others. It encompasses themes, symbols, and narratives that are consistently promoted to enhance recognition and appeal	Unique Selling Proposition (Wang et al., 2019)

The scales were then refined based on feedback from experts and respondents, ensuring that all Item Objective Congruence (IOC) values exceeded 0.8. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the psychometric properties. The CFA results showed factor loadings between 0.72 and 0.94, with reliability coefficients ranging from 0.81 to 0.89. Furthermore, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) values were below 0.82, confirming both convergent and discriminant validity. Additionally, items from the original scale were significantly correlated with those from the refined scale (correlations greater than 0.79 for all factors). Table 2 summarizes the basic statistics for the refined scale, which was tested on a sample of 200 individuals. After thorough refinement with input from experts, the factors most relevant and parsimonious to tourist decision-making were streamlined to seven. These final factors for testing in the subsequent study (Study 2) include: perceived value, social influence and image, accessibility and convenience, cultural and historical attractions, natural attractions and unique scenery, and food.

**Table 2** Refined Scale and Its Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Original scale	Refined scale	Average	Min	Max	SD
PV	<p>The overall cost of visiting this destination was reasonable.</p> <p>I felt that what I received from my visit outweighed the costs incurred.</p> <p>The destination offered good value for money.</p>	<p>Considering the costs, the value I received from my visit to this destination met my expectations for money spent.</p>	4.96	1	7	1.54
SI	<p>Recommendations from friends or family influenced my decision to visit this destination.</p> <p>The destination's image on social media positively influenced my decision to visit.</p> <p>I chose this destination because it is popular among people I know.</p>	<p>The positive recommendations and popularity of this destination among my social circle and on social media influenced my decision to visit.</p>	4.74	1	7	1.56
ACC	<p>The quality of the accommodation facilities met my expectations.</p> <p>The accommodation provided good value for the price I paid.</p> <p>The staff at the accommodation were responsive and helpful.</p>	<p>The accommodation met my expectations in quality, value, and staff responsiveness during my stay.</p>	4.7	1	7	1.6
CUL	<p>The cultural and historical sites were well-preserved and</p>	<p>The well-preserved and informative cultural and</p>	4.69	1	7	1.55

**Table 2 (Continued)**

Variables	Original scale	Refined scale	Average	Min	Max	SD
	informative. Visiting cultural and historical sites enhanced my appreciation of the destination. The cultural and historical aspects of the destination were a major factor in my decision to visit.	historical sites significantly enhanced my appreciation (and influenced my decision to visit this destination).				
NAT	The natural surroundings were a crucial factor in my choice to visit this destination. I felt a personal connection with the natural environment of this destination. The natural attractions at the destination were well-maintained and accessible.	The well-maintained and accessible natural surroundings were crucial in my choice to visit this destination and fostered a personal connection with the environment.	4.64	1	7	1.53
FOOD	The local cuisine added significantly to my overall experience of the destination. I was satisfied with the variety and quality of food options available at the destination. Trying local food was an important part of my visit to this destination.	The variety and quality of local cuisine significantly enhanced my overall experience and were important aspects of my visit to this destination.	4.86	1	7	1.44

*Note.* PV = perceived value, SI = social influences and image, ACC = accessibility and convenience, CUL = cultural, authentic, and historical attractions, NAT = natural attractions, FOOD = local food and cuisine

## Study 2

The conclusion from Study 1 underscores the necessity of regional-level studies in tourism because the information gleaned enhances the direction and efficiency of marketing communications and management of tourism projects in second-tier cities. This need arises due to the significant variation in cultural and natural assets across different regions, which, until now, has been underexplored in academic research (Calero & Turner, 2020). Study 2, therefore, aims to fill this research gap. By addressing regional challenges, the findings are expected to inform tailored development strategies for sustainability and influence policy implications



from stakeholders. Table 3 summarizes data from tourists who recalled their decision-making process before choosing a destination. The places of interest were compared at a regional level, not within the same region. In the table, the columns represent the regions tourists ultimately chose to visit, while the rows represent the regions they considered but did not select. For instance, among the 308 tourists who deliberated between the Eastern and Northeastern regions, 166 chose the East, while 142 opted for the Northeast.

The logistic regression analysis highlights intriguing aspects of regional decision-making in second-tier tourism. Specifically, several variables effectively differentiate regional choices, with perceived value being a consistently critical factor, especially prominent in the Northeast. This indicates that perceived value is a prerequisite in all comparisons within this region.

Further details from Table 4 are as follows: Of the tourists deciding between the Northern and Central regions, 109 chose the North and 127 chose the Central region. Factors such as natural attractions and cuisine swayed tourists towards the North, while perceived value and social influences and image drew them to the Central region. In total, 257 tourists chose between the Northern and Northeastern regions, with 138 opting for the North and 119 for the Northeast, influenced by factors like social influence and image, accessibility, and natural attractions in the North, versus perceived value and cultural and historical attractions in the Northeast. A total of 240 tourists were analyzed to understand their regional preferences between the Northern and Southern regions. Among them, 104 tourists opted for the Northern region, while 136 chose the Southern region. The key factors influencing their decisions included perceived value and cultural attractions for the Northern region, and natural attractions and local cuisine for the Southern region.

Additionally, 215 tourists made decisions between the Northern and Eastern regions. Here, 104 tourists selected the Northern region, and 111 favored the Eastern region. The factors guiding these choices were cultural and historical attractions for the Northern region, and natural attractions and food for the Eastern region.

In choices between the Central and Northeastern regions, 174 tourists participated. Among these, 98 preferred the Central region, and 86 opted for the Northeastern region. Accessibility was a decisive factor for choosing the Central region, while perceived value and food significantly influenced the choice of the Northeastern region. Similarly, between the Central and Southern regions, 160 tourists were surveyed. Of these, 69 chose the Central region, and 91 preferred the Southern region. Perceived value and accessibility were prominent factors for choosing the Central region, whereas natural attractions primarily drew tourists to the Southern region. Further analysis included 250 tourists deciding between the Central and Eastern regions. In this group, 121 tourists chose the Central region, and 129 favored the Eastern region. The determinants for these choices were similar, with perceived value and accessibility influencing the choice for the Central region, and natural attractions for the Eastern region.

Moreover, between the Northeastern and Southern regions, 148 tourists made their regional choices, with 97 opting for the Northeastern and 51 for the Southern region. The factors influencing these decisions were perceived value and cultural attractions for the Northeastern region, whereas accessibility, natural attractions, and food were key for the Southern region. Moreover, 308 tourists decided between the Northeastern and Eastern regions, where 142 chose the Northeastern and 166 the Eastern region. Perceived value and cultural attractions influenced choices toward the Northeastern region, while social influence and image, accessibility, natural attractions, and food swayed decisions toward the Eastern region.

Lastly, 423 tourists chose between the Eastern and Southern regions, with 197 opting for the Eastern and 226 for the Southern region. The driving factors for the Eastern region were perceived value and cultural attractions, whereas social influence and image alongside natural attractions predominantly influenced the Southern region.

**Table 3** Distribution of Tourists by Selected Region (Column) Relative to Their Comparative Choices (Row)

	Northern	Northeastern	Eastern	Central	Southern	Total
Northern		119	111	127	136	493
Northeastern	138		166	98	51	453
Eastern	104	142		121	226	593
Central	109	86	129		91	415
Southern	114	97	197	69		477
Total	465	444	603	415	504	2431

**Table 4** Findings from Logistic Regression

	PV	SI	ACC	CUL	NAT	FOOD	Observations
N-C: N					*	***	109
N-C: C	**	*					127
<b><u>Total N-C</u></b>							<b><u>236</u></b>
N-NE: N		***	***		***		138
N-NE: NE	***			*			119
<b><u>Total N-NE</u></b>							<b><u>257</u></b>
N-S: N	*			***			104
N-S: S					***	***	136
<b><u>Total N-S</u></b>							<b><u>240</u></b>
N-E: N				***			104
N-E: E		*			***	***	111
<b><u>Total N-E</u></b>							<b><u>215</u></b>
C-NE: C			***				98
C-NE: NE	***					***	86
<b><u>Total C-NE</u></b>							<b><u>184</u></b>
C-S: C	*		**				69
C-S: S					***		91
<b><u>Total C-S</u></b>							<b><u>160</u></b>
C-E: C	**		***				121
C-E: E					***		129
<b><u>Total C-E</u></b>							<b><u>250</u></b>
NE-S: NE	**			***			97
NE-S: S			**		***	*	51
<b><u>Total NE-S</u></b>							<b><u>148</u></b>
NE-E: NE	***			***			142
NE-E: E		*	***		***	**	166
<b><u>Total NE-E</u></b>							<b><u>314</u></b>
E-S: E	***			***			197
E-S: S		**			***		226
<b><u>Total E-S</u></b>							<b><u>423</u></b>

*Note.* PV = perceived value, SI = social influences and image, ACC = accessibility and convenience, CUL = cultural, authentic, and historical attractions, NAT = natural attractions, FOOD = local food and cuisine, N = Northern, C = Central, NE = Northeast, E = Eastern, S = Southern, \*\*\* = significance at .001, \*\* = significance at .01, \* = significance at .05

### Study 3

In this section, the analysis provides an overview of tourism in second-tier cities. Distinctly, the factor of ‘image’ was separated from ‘social influences and image’ because ‘image’ forms a part of the brand identity of the destination within the region. As detailed in Table 5, regression analysis was employed, with separate analyses for individual factors (Models 1-7) and a combined analysis of all factors (Model 8). This methodological choice was made to clearly demonstrate that individual factors identified as potential causes of decision-making independently affect satisfaction. Unlike the previous sections where tourists’ expectations prior to visiting were analyzed (as in Study 2), this section reflects tourists’ actual experiences, manifested through their satisfaction levels. Table 5 confirms that while individual factors significantly influence satisfaction, when analyzed collectively in Model 8, only social influences and accessibility were found to be insignificant, as other factors more substantially explained the overall satisfaction with tourism in second-tier cities.

Table 6 initially tested the psychometric properties of the ‘perceived brand identity’ variable, preparing it for further testing within a structural equation modeling framework. The test results demonstrated a good fit, reflected through GFI, CFI, TLI values exceeding .95, and an SRMR below .04 (Manosuthi et al., 2021). The variable ‘perceived brand identity’ was then examined alongside key variables related to policy management, strategic management, marketing programs, and sustainability. These included revisit intention to the same region (RI), switching intention to a similar destination within the same region (SIS), and switching intention to another region (SIO). Additionally, spending was not measured directly but was assessed in terms of perceived economic impact from tourist spending in the community, as well as perceptions of environmental impact and sustainability. Table 7 confirms the significance of ‘perceived brand identity’ in enhancing tourist satisfaction and its positive impact on the community, including aspects of income, environment, and sustainability. Moreover, it highlights that tourists generally intend to revisit second-tier tourism locations in the future.

**Table 5** Results of Regression Analyses

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
	SAT	SAT	SAT	SAT	SAT	SAT	SAT	SAT
PV	.745***							.16***
SI		.694***						.016
ACC			.694***					.012
CUL				.741***				.114***
NAT					.751***			.082***
FOOD						.768***		.203***
IMAGE							.787***	.346***
R-sq	.555	.481	.481	.549	.564	.59	.619	.712

*Note.* PV = perceived value, SI = social influences, ACC = accessibility and convenience, CUL = cultural, authentic, and historical attractions, NAT = natural attractions, FOOD = local food and cuisine, IMAGE = distinctive destination image, \*\*\* = significance at .001, \*\* = significance at .01, \* = significance at .05

**Table 6** Assessment of Perceived Brand Identity Construct

Factor	Items	Loadings	R-sq	Alpha	AVE
Perceived Brand Identity	CUL	.873***	.762	.934	.783
	NAT	.929***	.862		
	FOOD	.900***	.810		
	IMAGE	.836***	.700		

*Note.* p-value (Chi-sq) = .000, GFI = .980, AGFI = .903, CFI = .988, TLI = .965, SRMR = .013, CUL = cultural, authentic, and historical attractions, NAT = natural attractions, FOOD = local food and cuisine, IMAGE = distinctive destination image, \*\*\* = significance at .001, \*\* = significance at .01, \* = significance at .05

**Table 7** Impact of Factors Affecting Satisfaction and Its Consequence

Relationship	Std. Coefficient	UnStd. Coefficient
PV => SAT	.202***	.178***
SI => SAT	-.001	-.001
ACC => SAT	.018	.015
BI => SAT	.774***	.776***
SAT => ECI	.652***	.732***
SAT => EVI	.644***	.675***
ECI => SUS	.409***	.379***
EVI => SUS	.497***	.493***
SAT => RI	.662***	.751***
SAT => SIS	.690***	.771***
SAT => SIO	.716***	.762***

*Note.* PV = perceived value, SI = social influences, ACC = accessibility and convenience, BI = brand identity, SAT = satisfaction, ECI = perceived economic impact, EVI = perceived environmental impact, SUS = perceived sustainability, RI = revisit intention to the same destination, SIS = switching intention to different destination within the same region, SIO = switching intention to different region, \*\*\* = significance at .001, \*\* = significance at .01, \* = significance at .05

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to explore the key factors influencing tourists' decisions to visit secondary cities, assess the impact of regional attributes on tourist satisfaction, and examine the role of brand identity in shaping perceptions and community sustainability. The research employed a multi-phase design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to identify crucial determinants such as perceived value, natural and cultural attractions, and brand identity.

For tourist decision-making, the results of the qualitative phase confirmed the significance of identifying regional-level attributes as well as identified several factors influencing tourists' decisions, including accessibility, perceived value, cultural and historical significance, destination image, cuisine, natural attractions, and distinct brand identity. The prominence of perceived value in tourists' decision-making underscores the need for secondary cities to focus on offering unique experiences that justify tourists' investments in travel and leisure. This aligns with previous literature (Chen & Chen, 2010; Peña et al., 2012), indicating that tourists are more likely to visit destinations where they perceive a balance between cost and value.

For regional influence, the analysis of regional factors revealed distinct patterns in tourists' preferences. For Northern Region, the study's findings highlight that cultural and

historical attractions play a crucial role in promoting tourism in northern secondary cities. Tourists visiting this region often seek experiences related to local traditions, crafts, and festivals. This aligns with the government's efforts to promote "Must See" and "Must Seek" experiences, such as exploring ancient temples, local markets, and traditional handicrafts (TAT, 2024). For example, the historical narratives, such as those found in "The UNESCO Heritage Trail" (Deri et al., 2023) covering Sukhothai and Kamphaeng Phet, attract tourists who have an interest in Thailand's ancient history and cultural evolution. This regional emphasis aligns with tourists' preferences for authentic, culturally immersive experiences, underscoring the importance of brand identity and perceived value in promoting secondary cities in the north.

For Northeastern region, the findings indicate that tourists in this region are drawn to its authenticity, local festivals, and agricultural lifestyle. The focus on community-based tourism and rural experiences distinguishes Isaan from other regions (Okazaki, 2008), appealing to travelers seeking off-the-beaten-path destinations that offer a different perspective on Thai culture. For Central region, the study findings suggest that the primary draw remains its historical sites, aligning with tourists' preferences for cultural and historical experiences. Given its accessibility, the central region holds potential for quick getaways, with tourists opting for day trips or short stays. Promotional strategies here can capitalize on the region's convenience while highlighting its rich historical background to enhance perceived value and encourage longer visits. For Southern region, the research findings identify natural attractions as a significant factor influencing tourist preferences in the southern region. The region's unique coastal environments and marine biodiversity are major draws for tourists seeking scenic and adventure-based experiences (Konecnik & Go, 2008). In addition to natural beauty, the south is renowned for its diverse cuisine, which forms a crucial part of the tourist experience. Local dishes like seafood curries and tropical fruits add to the region's allure, reinforcing the "Must Eat" component of TAT's promotional campaign. However, challenges such as limited transportation options and fewer upscale accommodations in some southern secondary cities restrict accessibility. Addressing these infrastructural constraints could enhance the region's brand identity and attract more visitors (Yang & Fik, 2014), thereby stimulating local economies. For Eastern region, according to the research findings, tourists are increasingly looking for unique, less-crowded destinations that offer authentic local experiences. The eastern region has the potential to meet this demand by promoting lesser-known natural spots, traditional crafts, and local festivals. Craftsmanship and culinary experiences serve as distinguishing factors, appealing to tourists interested in local culture and heritage (Ashworth, 2000). However, the need for improved transport links and tourism infrastructure remains a challenge, affecting tourists' perceived accessibility and convenience.

Additionally, a key finding of this study was the significant impact of brand identity on tourists' satisfaction and revisiting intentions. Destinations with a well-defined brand identity, encompassing cultural heritage, natural beauty, and local cuisine, were more likely to foster positive tourist experiences and encourage future visits. This result implies that branding efforts should highlight these unique characteristics to enhance the appeal of secondary cities. The research indicates that cultural heritage is a cornerstone of brand identity for many secondary cities, particularly in regions like the North and Northeast. Cities with deep-rooted historical and cultural assets (e.g., Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Sukhothai) can leverage these features to build a distinct brand identity. The study found that tourists are often drawn to destinations that emphasize local culture, history, and unique traditions, contributing to a more authentic travel experience. This is consistent with the recent campaigns by TAT. TAT has been actively promoting cultural heritage through campaigns like "5 Must Do in Thailand," where the "Must See" and "Must Seek" aspects focus on cultural attractions (TAT, 2024). For example, the northern region's brand identity is built around Lanna culture and ancient temples, while the Northeast emphasizes its unique festivals and rural traditions, as seen in the "Naga Legacy"

route. By highlighting these regional distinctions, secondary cities can differentiate themselves from more commercialized primary destinations, creating a compelling brand narrative that resonates with tourists seeking culturally immersive experiences.

The study shows that regions like the South, with its pristine beaches and islands (e.g., Trang and Satun), attract visitors who are looking for scenic beauty and adventure. Similarly, the Northeast's rural landscapes and traditional agriculture add to its unique appeal, drawing tourists interested in eco-tourism and off-the-beaten-path experiences. This is consistent with TAT plan in the Paradise Islands route. By cultivating an identity centered on natural assets, these secondary cities can position themselves as attractive alternatives to mainstream beach destinations, thereby appealing to niche markets like eco-tourists and adventure seekers.

Culinary experiences play a pivotal role in enhancing the overall satisfaction of tourists, as they seek to explore the unique flavors and food traditions of different regions. The research found that local cuisine not only adds to the authenticity of the travel experience but also serves as a memorable touchpoint that influences tourists' intentions to revisit. Also, this aligns with 5 Must Do in Thailand campaign (TAT, 2024), specifically "Must Eat". Regions such as the South are known for their seafood specialties and tropical fruits, while the North offers traditional Lanna cuisine, including dishes like "khao soi" and "sai ua." These culinary identities are instrumental in differentiating secondary cities from one another, reinforcing each region's brand. By promoting food tourism, secondary cities can attract food enthusiasts and culturally curious travelers, providing them with an immersive experience that goes beyond sightseeing.

The research findings underscore that a strong brand identity significantly influences tourist satisfaction and revisiting intentions. Tourists are more likely to return to destinations where they feel a connection to the culture, nature, and local lifestyle. By delivering on the brand's promise—whether it is an authentic cultural experience in the North or a beach getaway in the South—secondary cities can foster loyalty and repeat visits. This aligns with the TAT's initiatives to promote unique regional identities, such as "Unseen Thailand" destinations that showcase lesser-known attractions. By differentiating each secondary city through its brand identity, TAT hopes to decentralize tourism and stimulate economic growth in these areas. The focus on niche experiences (e.g., culinary tours, cultural festivals, eco-adventures) is designed to cater to specific tourist interests, enhancing overall satisfaction and the likelihood of revisits.

For the community impact and sustainability, the study indicates that tourists' perceptions of value and regional attractions contribute positively to local community revenue and sustainability. This finding is significant, as it reinforces the potential of secondary city tourism to promote economic growth while supporting eco-friendly and community-based tourism initiatives. Therefore, policymakers and tourism developers should consider these aspects when planning sustainable tourism strategies.

The study indicates that tourists' engagement in community-based tourism (CBT) can drive sustainable development in secondary cities. Community-based tourism empowers local residents to take an active role in managing and benefiting from tourism activities (Okazaki, 2008). This model not only preserves local culture and traditions but also fosters environmental stewardship by promoting eco-friendly practices. Tourists who participate in CBT often have a more profound appreciation for the region's natural and cultural heritage, which can enhance their overall experience and encourage revisiting. The government's policy push for secondary city tourism includes plans to improve infrastructure while supporting local businesses through incentives. This aligns with the study's suggestion that sustainable tourism strategies should involve the community. For example, by focusing on locally operated accommodations, like homestays and eco-friendly lodges, and promoting environmentally conscious travel routes, such as those in the southern "Paradise Islands" region, policymakers can create tourism experiences that directly benefit local communities while protecting natural resources. Moreover, initiatives like tax incentives for businesses to hold seminars and training in

secondary cities foster economic growth and skill development, further supporting community-based tourism.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS**

Based on the research findings from both qualitative and quantitative analyses, there are at least three key areas for future research that merit further exploration to enhance the sustainability of secondary city tourism.

First, the flow of revenue to the local community is crucial for sustainable tourism development. Finding suggests that tourists are often interested in purchasing unique local products or souvenirs; however, they frequently encounter difficulties due to the unavailability of retail outlets or local shops during their visit. A potential solution to this problem could be the implementation of vending machines that dispense local products. Such an initiative could be supported by government funding or investment from local stakeholders. The advantage of vending machines is their ability to provide tourists with access to local products at any time, even when traditional retail outlets are closed (Fakfare et al., 2024). Although this concept has been successfully piloted in different contexts, such as coffee vending machines in non-tourism settings (Fakfare et al., 2024), its effectiveness in a tourism context has not yet been empirically tested. While preliminary evidence suggests that vending machines has potential to help generate a steady revenue stream for local businesses (Fakfare et al., 2024), further research is needed to directly examine their impact on tourism-related revenue. Therefore, a future research direction could involve conducting a cost-benefit analysis of implementing vending machines in tourist destinations, alongside studying the perceptions of both tourists and the local community regarding this approach.

Second, the research confirms that brand identity plays a powerful role in driving secondary city tourism. However, findings from qualitative phase implies that promoting a large number of destinations (e.g., 55 secondary cities) may lead to inefficiencies in tourists' selective attention. While diversity and numerous options are beneficial, an overwhelming number of choices can lead to cognitive overload (Zheng et al., 2024), thereby blurring the overall brand message. This phenomenon may reduce the level of awareness and engagement with individual destinations, falling short of marketing expectations. Future research should, therefore, consider the cognitive limitations of tourists when designing branding strategies for secondary cities. Investigating how to optimize the number and presentation of destinations within a branding campaign could provide valuable insights for tourism authorities seeking to balance diversity with effective promotion.

Third, one potential strategy to mitigate cognitive overload and enhance the visibility of less-visited secondary cities is to promote them as part of a package of attractions within a region rather than as isolated destinations. The findings from this study suggest that a regional tourism route, which offers a cohesive and memorable experience, could significantly improve the appeal and sustainability of secondary city tourism. Packaging multiple destinations in a structured tourism route, with the support of local and governmental stakeholders, may enhance tourists' experiences while also providing a more comprehensive promotional strategy. Thus, future research should explore the development and marketing of regional tourism routes, analyzing their effectiveness in boosting the economic impact and sustainability of secondary city tourism.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of single-item measures for each factor in the survey, while reducing the response burden on tourists, may compromise the accuracy of the results when compared to multi-item measures. Future research should consider employing more comprehensive measures to capture the complexity

of each factor more accurately. Second, despite employing a rigorous screening process to ensure data quality, this study relies partly on self-reported responses, which are subject to potential bias, including social desirability and recall bias. Therefore, caution is needed when interpreting the findings, and future research should aim to incorporate additional methods, such as observational or behavioral data, to mitigate these biases. Third, although this study confirms the significance of sustainability, economic impact, and environmental impact from the tourists' perspective, these assessments are based solely on their perceptions. The actual reality of these impacts might differ substantially from tourist perceptions. To address this limitation, future research should seek to triangulate these findings with objective data, such as economic indicators, environmental impact assessments, and community-level surveys, to obtain a more holistic and accurate understanding of the tourism impact.

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### Appendix

#### Logistic Regression: Northern (109) – Central (127)

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	1.554	4.733	[.585,39.688]
PV	0.272**	1.313	[1.085,1.602]
SI	0.241*	1.273	[1.013,1.619]
ACC	0.147	1.159	[0.956,1.408]
CUL	-0.102	0.902	[0.727,1.117]
NAT	-0.272*	0.761	[0.606,0.947]
FOOD	-0.575***	0.562	[0.447,0.695]

#### Logistic Regression: Northern (138) – Northeastern (119)

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	6.436***	624.485	[42.700,12634.6]
PV	0.668***	1.951	[1.439,2.746]
SI	-1.789***	0.166	[0.096,0.264]
ACC	-0.539***	0.583	[0.425,0.782]
CUL	0.383*	1.467	[1.042,2.104]
NAT	-0.607***	0.544	[0.393,0.733]
FOOD	-0.277	0.757	[0.530,1.071]

#### Logistic Regression: Northern (104) – Southern (136)

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	-0.927	0.395	[0.038,4.051]
PV	-0.173 <sup>+</sup>	0.840	[0.691,1.017]
SI	0.038	1.039	[0.770,1.40]
ACC	0.050	1.051	[0.859,1.289]
CUL	-0.691***	0.500	[0.388,0.632]
NAT	0.569***	1.767	[1.414,2.248]
FOOD	0.336***	1.399	[1.151,1.714]

#### Logistic Regression: Northern (104) – Eastern (111)

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	-5.094***	0.006	[0.000,0.084]
PV	0.145	1.156	[0.897,1.495]
SI	0.392*	1.479	[1.098,2.026]
ACC	0.102	1.108	[0.859,1.435]
CUL	-0.754***	0.470	[0.338,0.632]
NAT	0.747***	2.111	[1.607,2.862]
FOOD	0.534***	1.705	[1.303,2.279]

**Logistic Regression: Central (98) – Northeastern (86)**

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	-6.560***	0.001	[0.000,0.023]
PV	0.736***	2.089	[1.566,2.895]
SI	0.080	1.083	[0.793,1.484]
ACC	-0.415***	0.659	[0.511,0.836]
CUL	0.027	1.028	[0.770,1.375]
NAT	0.129	1.138	[0.885,1.471]
FOOD	0.906***	2.475	[1.850,3.453]

**Logistic Regression: Central (69) – Southern (91)**

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	-2.797	0.060	[0.000,3.963]
PV	-0.432*	0.649	[0.447,0.906]
SI	-0.234	0.790	[0.511,1.201]
ACC	-0.512**	0.598	[0.426,0.807]
CUL	-0.057	0.944	[0.679,1.306]
NAT	1.600***	4.953	[2.986,9.078]
FOOD	0.174	1.190	[0.800,1.766]

**Logistic Regression: Central (121) – Eastern (129)**

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	0.331	1.393	[0.0876,22.615]
PV	-0.385**	0.680	[0.508,0.895]
SI	0.168	1.183	[0.919,1.534]
ACC	-0.548***	0.577	[0.425,0.770]
CUL	-0.142	0.867	[0.672,1.111]
NAT	0.789***	2.201	[1.709,2.903]
FOOD	0.118	1.126	[0.894,1.420]

**Logistic Regression: Northeastern (97) – Southern (51)**

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	-6.508	0.001	[0.000,0.040]
PV	-0.282**	0.753	[0.519,0.977]
SI	0.274	1.315	[0.889,1.987]
ACC	0.377**	1.458	[1.084,2.017]
CUL	-0.386***	0.679	[0.473,0.949]
NAT	0.991***	2.695	[1.864,4.133]
FOOD	0.355*	1.426	[1.021,2.045]

**Logistic Regression: Northeastern (142) – Eastern (166)**

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	-1.815	0.162	[0.014,1.729]
PV	-0.506***	0.602	[0.470,0.758]
SI	0.288*	1.334	[1.059,1.696]
ACC	0.329***	1.390	[1.148,1.697]
CUL	-0.598***	0.549	[0.435,0.682]
NAT	0.689***	1.992	[1.560,2.599]
FOOD	0.322**	1.380	[1.097,1.758]

Logistic Regression: Eastern (197) – Southern (226)

	Estimate	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Intercept	1.705	5.506	[0.620,50.203]
PV	-0.767***	0.464	[0.377,0.561]
SI	0.324**	1.383	[1.140,1.691]
ACC	-0.109	0.896	[0.761,1.053]
CUL	-0.330***	0.718	[0.602,0.850]
NAT	0.355***	1.427	[1.146,1.788]
FOOD	0.141	1.152	[0.904,1.472]