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# **Antecedents and loyalty of tourists visiting secondary cities in provinces in southern Thailand**

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**Abstract**---Developing loyalty among tourists who visit secondary cities of provinces in Southern Thailand represents a way to support entrepreneurs in the areas of tourist attractions and businesses that are part of the networks of tourist service provision. However, the promotion of tourist loyalty is crucial problem in Southern Thailand. Despite the significant growth of tourism industry in Thailand, still the tourist loyalty is needed to promote to achieve higher performance in tourism industry. To address this challenge, this study examined the role of tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation and travel intention on tourist loyalty. To achieve this purpose, this study considered mixed method approach and data collection is performed through questionnaire survey and interviews in Southern part of Thailand. Statistical tool is used to examine the relationship between variables. Results of the study investigated that; tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation and travel intention have vital contribution to promote tourist loyalty in Southern part of Thailand. This study recommended that the tourism management companies should promote tourist loyalty by promoting tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation and travel intention.

**Keywords**---tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation, travel intention, tourist loyalty.

**Introduction**

Tourism industry of Thailand is one of the top industries globally (Laeq Razzak Janjua, Sukjai, Rehman, & Yu, 2021; Wannasuth & Wichasin, 2021). Because

this industry has handsome contribution to the international tourism industry along with the other top industries. Similarly, this industry has important contribution to the economic development nationality. Thai economic development is heavily based on the tourism industry as the revenue generated from tourism industry has vital importance for Thailand's economy. This industry promoting the economic development of Thailand through different ways (Bhaktikul, Aroonsrimorakot, Laiphrakpam, & Paisantanakij, 2021; Yodsuwan et al., 2019). The revenue generated from this industry contributing to the wellbeing of the people and this industry providing several employment opportunities for the people. Therefore, this industry contributing to the welfare of the people through different ways. It also creates income for communities and the opportunities to invest. Most of the communities in local areas of Thailand are dependent on this industry and tourists are the key contributor by purchasing services as well as products. This industry is divided into various sectors such as religious tourism industry, cultural tourism industry, supports tourism industry, medical tourism industry etc. All these elements of this industry have vital contribution to Thailand and the growth of this industry is noticed continuously. Figure 1 shows the performance of tourism industry in Thailand.

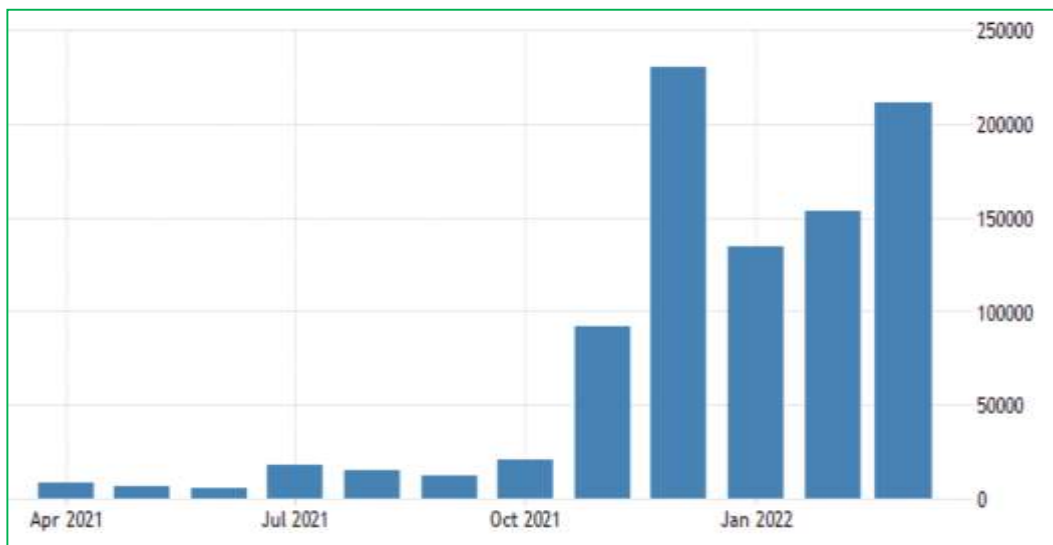


Figure 1. Thailand Tourist Arrivals (2021-2022)  
Source: Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Thailand

Despite the higher growth of this industry in Thailand, various parts of Thailand are lacking in tourism activities. Especially secondary cities in South of Thailand are facing different issues related to the tourism industry and these areas are not contributing significantly to the tourism industry. Although the literature considered Thailand tourism industry (Klinsrisuk & Pechdin, 2022), however, various parts of Thailand are neglected, especially in the secondary cities, the government policies are not fully adopted by the community as well as tourism companies which is not addressed in the literature. In this way, due to the lack of implementation of government policy is the secondary cities in South of Thailand, this area is lacking in tourism industry. Along with the other areas of Thailand, these areas also have significant potential for tourism activities, however, all these

areas are lacking. But tourism secondary cities in the South of Thailand were not in line with government policies that were aimed at diversifying tourist numbers. Even though there were projects to promote tourism in secondary cities and communities, there might be a lack of information in planning and a lack of potential development of tourist attractions.

The most important issue facing by these areas is based on the tourist loyalty. As reported in the literature tourism loyalty has most significant part to promote tourism industry (SETIAWAN, MARWA, WAHAB, & SHIHAB, 2021). Secondary cities related to the South of Thailand are facing the problem of tourist loyalty which causes to decrease overall performance of tourism industry in this part of Thailand. Therefore, it is needed to promote tourist loyalty with the help of different strategies. In this direction, this study proposed that there are several important factors which has the ability to enhance tourist loyalty. These factors include tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation and travel intention of the people towards the South of Thailand. These elements are needed to be address by the practitioners as well as academicians to promote tourist loyalty. Therefore, by considering these elements, the current study considered the role of these factors in tourist loyalty. Additionally, the specific objectives of the study are as follows;

1. To study the levels of potential of tourist attractions, government policies, service innovation, intention to travel and tourist loyalty in the secondary cities in provinces of Southern Thailand.
2. To examine the influences of potential of tourist attractions, government policies, service innovation and intention to travel on tourist loyalty in the secondary cities in provinces of Southern Thailand.
3. To develop a model for developing loyalty among tourists who visited secondary cities in provinces of Southern Thailand.

The objectives addressed in the current study has significance for the literature because these objectives are first time studied in the South part of Thailand. Therefore, these objectives have a potential to contribute through theoretical implications. Additionally, these objectives also have the importance to contribute practically and help to generate practical implications for the tourism industry. Achievement of these objectives are helpful for the management of tourism companies to promote tourist loyalty which may increase the tourism industry performance in South part of Thailand.

## **Literature Review**

Loyalty can be described as the state or quality of being loyal; faithfulness to commitments or obligations. This study studied tourist loyalty; therefore, it can be described as state or quality of being loyal; faithfulness to commitments by an individual to the tourism industry of a specific place. The tourist loyalty in the tourism industry of Thailand which has achieved a satisfactory position having effect on the overall performance of the industry. There are number of factors considered by the literature having influence on the tourist loyalty. The phenomena of tourism loyalty are examined in whole tourism industry. However, various areas of Thailand such as South part of Thailand related to the secondary

cities is rarely addressed. Southern Thailand is a southernmost cultural region of Thailand, separated from Central Thailand region by the Kra Isthmus. This part of Thailand is full of beaches and islands which are the attraction point for the tourists. Hence, this study examined different factors effecting tourism loyalty in the secondary cities in South part of Thailand. In this way, the current study considered the role of tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation and travel intention in tourist loyalty. The relationship between tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty are highlighted in Figure 2.

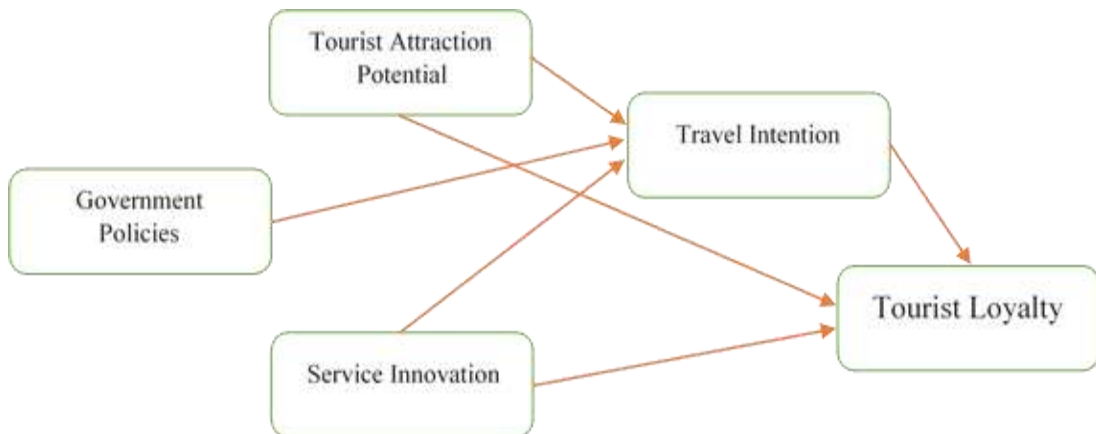


Figure 2. Theoretical framework of the study showing the relationship between tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty

### Travel Intention

To perform an activity by an individual it must have intention to do the task. Similarly, for the tourism activities the individual must have positive intention. Additionally, to perform a tourism activity, travel intention is most important. Because tourism activities are based on the travelling from one place to another place. A person with low level of travel intention cannot perform a tourism activity. Therefore, to promote tourism activities in a specific area the promotion of travel intention of the people must be emphasized. In this way, the current study highlighted the most important construct which is not highlighted in other studies. Intention of tourists is discussed in the literature (Nian et al., 2019; Pahrudin, Chen, & Liu, 2021) but travel intention is not highlighted by previous studies. Numerous factors affecting the travel intention of the tourists. The current study also considered various factors which has influence on travel intention of the people which further lead to the tourism activities as well as tourist loyalty. According to the study, tourist attraction potential, government policies and service innovation may influence the travel intention.

### Tourist Attraction Potential

The attraction among the tourists for any specific place or any tourism industry is important to promote tourism performance. As tourism activities are majorly

dependent on the tourist attraction (Kang, Lee, Kim, & Park, 2018). The potential among the tourist related to the attraction of various places is important. There are several places in South part of Thailand which can attract the tourists, but it is needed to highlight these places. The potential is existed in the South part of Thailand in relation to the tourist attraction. Number of previous studies identified the pivotal role of tourist attraction among the tourism activity (Gao, Su, & Zang, 2022). Generally, tourist attraction has effect on the intention of the tourists (Park, Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2019). The travel intention of tourists can be changed through tourist attraction. Hence, a relation exists between tourist attraction potential and travel intention.

*Hypothesis 1. Tourist attraction potential has positive effect on travel intention.*

### **Government Policies**

Due to the high importance of tourism industry among all nations, the government of various countries always try to focus to promote tourism industry. The increasing contribution of this industry in economic development (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019), the nations are trying to develop various policies (Susanto, 2019). Policies towards the tourism activities can influence the activities of tourism and attract the people from other countries. The government policy is to facilities and provide different services to the international tourist is important for this industry. Furthermore, the policies are also available for various tourism related organizations to facilitate the tourists. Similarly, the government of Thailand is also implemented various strategies with the help of different policies to facilitate tourists in specific areas. Therefore, this study proposed that government policy is has significant effect on travel intention of the people. Better government policy increases the intention of the tourists to avail the tourism opportunity related to a specific place.

*Hypothesis 2. Government policies have positive effect on travel intention.*

### **Service Innovation**

In the current era of industrialization, the role of innovation in all industries is most important (Frank, Mendes, Ayala, & Ghezzi, 2019). As innovation is found to be a tool which can decrease the level of cost and increase the efficiency in the services. Service innovation leads to the new features in the services (Khuong & Giang, 2014). It also helps the companies to shape services in line with the desires of the tourists. Literature identified that service innovation is most influential factor which can affect the tourism industry. As tourism industry is a service industry (Hameed, Nisar, & Wu, 2021; Tang, Zhang, Lu, Wang, & Tsai, 2020; Yeh, Chen, & Chen, 2019), therefore, the innovation in services can play influential role. Therefore, it has effect on the travel intention of the people. The quality services in a specific area for the tourists attract them to visit that place. Thus, this study preferred to study the relationship between service innovation and travel intention.

*Hypothesis 3. Service innovation has positive effect on travel intention.*

Furthermore, tourist attraction is not only limited to the travel intention of the people but it also has relationship with tourist loyalty. The promotion of loyalty is based on the tourist attraction potential because the attraction towards the tourism opportunities lead to the development of loyalty among the tourists. Similar with this study, other studies also mentioned the important connection between tourist attraction and tourist loyalty (Hermawan, Wijayanti, & Nugroho, 2019). Thus, this study proposed the effect of tourist attraction potential on travel intention and tourist loyalty. Similarly, the government policy has effect on the tourist loyalty. The government policy in the favor of tourists attract towards the tourism opportunities. The quality services provided by the government through various private companies shows positive effect on the tourist loyalty. Therefore, along with the effect of government policy on travel intention, it also has positive effect on tourist loyalty. Nevertheless, service innovation has relationship with tourist loyalty (Liat, Nikhashemi, & Dent, 2020). The increase in the quality-of-service innovation can increase the tourist loyalty. Therefore, following direct and indirect hypotheses are proposed;

*Hypothesis 4. Tourist attraction potential has positive effect on tourist loyalty.*

*Hypothesis 5. Service innovation has positive effect on tourist loyalty.*

*Hypothesis 6. Travel intention has positive effect on tourist loyalty.*

*Hypothesis 7. Travel intention mediates the relationship between tourist attraction potential and tourist loyalty.*

*Hypothesis 8. Travel intention mediates the relationship between government policies and tourist loyalty.*

*Hypothesis 9. Travel intention mediates the relationship between service innovation and tourist loyalty.*

## **Methodology**

This research employed a mixed research methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative research method, multi-stage sampling was employed in this study. Multistage sampling, or multistage cluster sampling draw a sample from a wide population using smaller and smaller groups or units at each stage. It's generally utilized to collect data from a large, geographically spread group of people in a survey. The sample consisted of 300 Thai tourists visiting the secondary cities in five provinces in Southern Thailand in which airports are located, namely; Chumphon, Ranong, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Trang, and Narathiwat Provinces. The sample size was determined based on the criterion of 20 times of the observed variables. Quantitative research part is handled with the help of survey questionnaire which is developed by considering various measures from previous studies. The questionnaire is developed with the help of five constructs which include tourist attraction potential, government policy, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty. Tourist attraction is measured with the help of attraction of various travelers towards the South part of Thailand including secondary cities. The government policies are measured with the help of policies available to promote the tourism activities in secondary cities of South Thailand. Service innovation is measured by using various latest services for the tourists. Additionally, travel intention is measured in relation to the same place. Finally, tourist loyalty addressed by considering various scale items related to the satisfaction of the

tourists with the specific place and services provided for tourism activities. These scale items are constructed with the help of 5-point Likert scale which is most suitable scale to collect data from the respondents. The first section of the questionnaire was based on the demographic information of the respondents. The second section of the questionnaire was based on the scale items related to the tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty. A structural equation model was used to analyze the data after the questionnaire were distributed. As for the qualitative research method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 key informants who were executives and experts in the tourism field in secondary cities in the provinces of Southern Thailand. The quantitative part of the study used data screening to confirm the accuracy of the collected data which is most important in any survey study (Flora, LaBrish, & Chalmers, 2012). In this process of data screening, different errors such as missing value and outlier is considered. The issue of missing values in the data are resolved with the help of recommended method proposed in the literature. Additionally, the outlier in the study is also fixed. The normality of the data is addressed through Skewness and Kurtosis as shown in Table 1. Other data statistics are also presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Statistical test of empirical variables (n=300)

Variable	M	S.D.	%CV	Sk	Ku	$\chi^2$	P-value
iden	4.20	.73	17.38	-2.390	-.777	6.316	.043
seva	4.29	.72	16.78	-3.101	-1.430	11.657	.003
nexp	4.28	.70	16.36	-2.775	-1.214	9.176	.010
devt	4.16	.80	19.23	-2.734	-1.750	1.540	.005
busp	4.11	.82	19.95	-2.547	-1.760	9.585	.008
ifsp	4.07	.84	20.64	-2.564	-1.696	9.453	.009
abil	4.17	.79	18.94	-2.891	-1.589	1.884	.004
mand	4.17	.73	17.51	-2.397	-1.169	7.111	.029
efin	4.21	.78	18.53	-2.955	-1.560	11.162	.004
atti	4.21	.80	19.00	-2.902	-1.589	1.947	.004
trus	4.14	.79	19.08	-2.529	-1.289	8.059	.018
perc	4.22	.71	16.82	-2.331	-.664	5.874	.053
recu	4.30	.67	15.58	-2.822	-1.385	9.881	.007
refe	4.27	.68	15.93	-2.706	-1.373	9.211	.010
imag	4.31	.76	17.63	-3.317	-1.844	14.406	.001

## Results

Results of the study are based on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) (Ali, Rasoolimanesh, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Ryu, 2018; Rahi & Abd Ghani, 2018). Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is based on two major steps including the measurement model and structural model. The first part is the measurement model which is included the reliability and validity. To test the reliability of the data, this study considered internal item reliability. The internal item's reliability is considered through factor loadings which must be higher than 0.5. Table 2 shows the factor loadings of tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty. All the scale items have

factor loadings higher than 0.5. Additionally, Cronbach Alpha is highlighted in the current study which is higher than 0.7. Table 2 shows that factor loadings, t-statistics and r-square value.

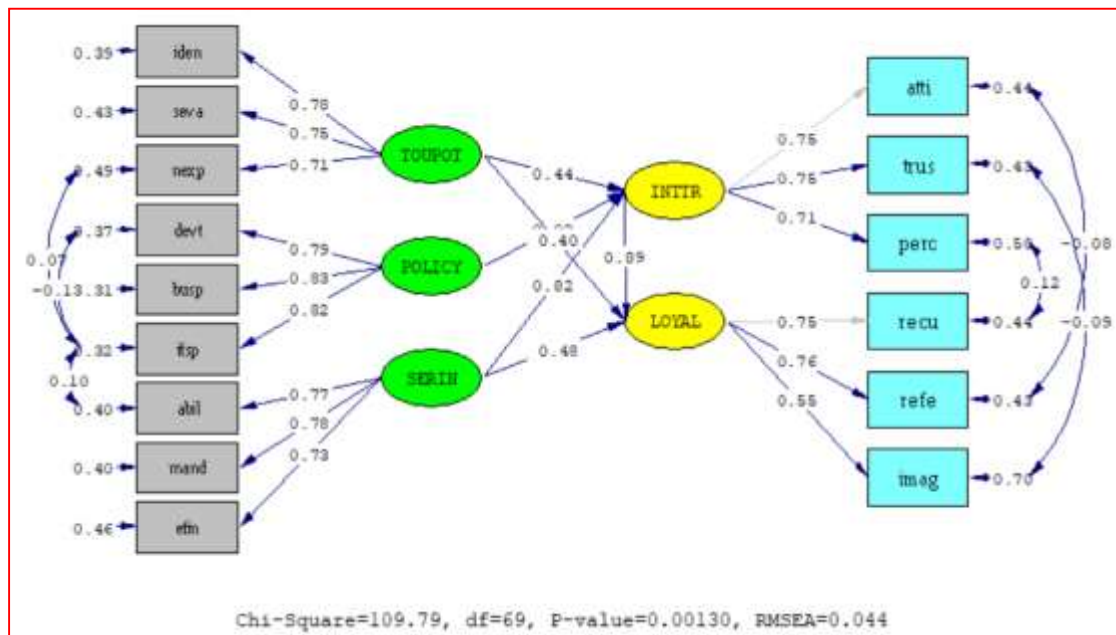
Table 2. Factor Loadings. (n = 300)

Variable	Factor Loading ( $\lambda$ )	Error ( $\theta$ )	t	R <sup>2</sup>
Tourist attractions potential (TOUPOT)				
iden	.75	.44	13.13	.56
seva	.75	.43	13.20	.57
nexp	.74	.45	13.01	.55
Government policies (POLICY)				
devt	.70	.51	12.80	.49
busp	.92	.15	17.88	.85
ifsp	.76	.42	14.20	.58
Service innovation (SERIN)				
abil	.73	.46	13.00	.54
mand	.82	.33	14.58	.67
efin	.73	.47	12.92	.53
Travel intention (INTTR)				
atti	.77	.40	13.31	.60
trus	.78	.39	13.41	.61
perc	.67	.56	11.47	.44
Tourist loyalty (LOYAL)				
recu	.75	.44	11.99	.56
refe	.75	.44	11.97	.56
imag	.62	.62	10.13	.38
$\rho_c = .75$ $\rho_v = .50$				

Note: Tourist attractions potential=TOUPOT; Government policies=POLICY; Service innovation=SERIN; Travel intention=INTTR; Tourist loyalty=LOYAL

To check the significance of the relationship, this study considered structural model (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021; Rahi & Abd Ghani, 2018; Sarstedt, Hair Jr, Nitzl, Ringle, & Howard, 2020). Beta value and t-value is considered to accept or reject the hypotheses. It is found that; tourist attraction potential has significant effect on travel intention. It also has significant effect to promote tourist loyalty. Furthermore, this study proved a significant effect of government policies on travel intention. The relationship between service innovation and tourist loyalty found significant. It is observed that; service innovation has positive effect on travel intention. Finally, travel intention has positive influence on tourist loyalty. Results are shown in Table 3. The model along with the results is given in Figure 3.





Note: Tourist attractions potential=TOUPOT; Government policies=POLICY; Service innovation=SERIN; Travel intention=INTTR; Tourist loyalty=LOYAL  
Figure 3. Model (n=300)

Table 3 Parameter estimation result of direct effect coefficient, indirect effect, and total effect from adjusting model (n=300)

Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Effect	Variable			
			INTTR	TOUPOT	POLICY	SERIN
INTTR	.93	DE	-	.44*(6.23)	.62*(8.34)	.82*(6.02)
		IE	-	-	-	-
		TE	-	.44*(6.23)	.62*(8.34)	.82*(6.02)
LOYAL	.88	DE	.89*(9.74)	.40*(9.03)	-	.48*(9.18)
		IE	-	.35*(8.18)	.65*(9.35)	.37*(8.53)
		TE	.89*(9.74)	.75*(7.50)	.65*(9.35)	.85*(9.77)
$\chi^2= 109.79$ df = 69 p-value = .00000, $\chi^2 / \text{df} = 1.59$ , RMSEA = .044, RMR = .018, SRMR = .032, CFI = .99, GFI = .95, AGFI = .92, CN = 256.81						

Note: Tourist attractions potential=TOUPOT; Government policies=POLICY; Service innovation=SERIN; Travel intention=INTTR; Tourist loyalty=LOYAL

Moreover, this study considered three indirect effects. First, the indirect effect of travel intention is considered between tourist attraction potential and tourist loyalty. Second, the indirect effect of travel intention is considered between government policies and tourist loyalty. Third, the indirect effect of travel intention is considered between service innovation and tourist loyalty. Results in Table 3 shows that; travel intention is a mediating variable between tourist attraction potential and tourist loyalty. The indirect effect of travel intention between government policies and tourist loyalty is significant. Similarly, the

indirect effect of travel intention between service innovation and tourist loyalty is also significant.

In addition, the findings from the qualitative research also showed that to develop loyalty among tourists who visited secondary cities in provinces in Southern Thailand, the tourists needed services that were unique and different from other tourist attractions, and the highest level of safety and security should be provided.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study addressed the relationship between tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty. This relationship is considered by proposing various direct and indirect hypotheses. Data collected through questionnaire survey was analyzed by using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Furthermore, results of the in-depth interviews are used to confirm the results of the hypotheses and to develop deep understanding of the phenomena.

Hypothesis 1 addressed the relationship between tourist attraction potential and travel intention. This hypothesis highlighted that tourist attraction potential has positive effect on travel intention. The people travelling from various parts of Thailand as well as other countries and their intention to travel is influenced by the tourist attraction potential. Higher the tourist attraction potential higher will be the travel intention of the people to various parts of Thailand. Hypothesis 2 indicated the effect of government policy on travel intention. Government of Thailand has developed several policies to promote the tourism activities in various parts of Thailand. The implementation of these policies in Thailand facilitates the tourists which increases the travel intention. Therefore, the implementation of government policy is related to the tourism in Thailand can increase the travel intention of the people. Furthermore, this study addressed the effect of service innovation on travel intention in hypothesis 3 which indicated that service innovation is positively associated with the increase in travel intention. The better availability of services for the tourists travelling from various countries always require good services (Mahmoud, Al-Mkhadmeh, & Alananzeh, 2021; Tang et al., 2020) which has the potential to promote their travel intention to visit various parts of Thailand. Similar with the current study, literature reported the positive relationship between service innovation and tourist intention (Khuong & Giang, 2014; Yeh et al., 2019). Similarly, literature also addressed the positive relationship between tourist attraction and tourist intention along with the positive relationship between government policies and tourist intention. Therefore, results of the current study are consistent with the literature.

Furthermore, results of hypothesis 4 indicated the effect of tourist attraction potential on tourist loyalty. It is found that tourist attraction potential has positive effect on tourist loyalty which indicated that increase in the tourist attraction potential can increase the tourist loyalty in South part of Thailand. Similarly, service innovation has strong effect on tourist loyalty which is reported in hypothesis 5. There is a strong association between service innovation and tourist loyalty. The increase in the quality of services in South part of Thailand in

relation to the tourism can increase the tourist loyalty which has influential effect on the tourism industry. Finally considering the direct effect, this study found that travel intention has positive effect on tourist loyalty which is highlighted in hypothesis 6. Higher the intention of the tourists to travel various parts of Thailand has positive effect to increase the tourist loyalty.

Nevertheless, the current study considered the mediation effect of travel intention to promote tourist loyalty. Hypothesis 7, 8 and 9 indicated the mediating effect of travel intention. These hypotheses are significant which shows that travel intention is a mediating variable. These results shows that travel intention has the ability to transfer the positive effect of tourist attraction potential, service innovation and government policies on tourist loyalty. Therefore, it is concluded that attraction potential, government policy and service innovation have positive role to influence travel intention which further increases the tourist loyalty in South part of Thailand related to the secondary cities

Finally, the findings proved that: 1) intention to travel, service innovation, potential of tourist attractions, government policies, and tourist loyalty in the secondary cities in provinces of Southern Thailand were all rated at a high level; 2) intention to travel, service innovation, potential of tourist attractions and government policies has an influence on tourist loyalty in the secondary cities in provinces of Southern Thailand; and 3) the model for developing loyalty among tourists who visited secondary cities in provinces of Southern Thailand, developed by this study is called the ISPGL Model (I = Intention to travel, S = Service innovation, P = Potential of tourist attractions, G = Government policies, and L = Loyalty of tourist).

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study investigated the vital relationship between tourist attraction potential, government policies, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty. This relationship is based on several unique relationships which has contribution to the literature. Other studies in the literature carried out research on tourism industry of Thailand but the secondary cities of Thailand in relation to the tourism activities are less addressed by the literature. Most importantly, the secondary cities related to the South part of Thailand are not considered. Additionally, this study also addressed with the help of customer loyalty along with the travel intention. The construct travel intention is first time highlighted as a mediating variable between the government policies and tourist loyalty. Furthermore, travel intention also contributed as an indirect effect between tourist attraction potential and tourist loyalty which is not highlighted in previous studies. Therefore, there are number of implications for the literature which provided the new aspects of tourist loyalty in secondary cities of South Thailand.

### **Practical Implications**

Findings can be applied as a guideline for determining tourism policies and business operations to promote loyalty among tourists who visit secondary cities

in provinces in Southern Thailand so that sustainable success can be achieved. Practically, the current study provided important insights for the management of various tourism companies. Results of the study are also helpful for the government to promote tourism activities. Furthermore, various other companies as well as practitioners may also promote tourism activities with the help of making various strategies by considering the results of the study. Results of the study highlighted that South part of Thailand including secondary cities are lacking in tourism potential. In this way, this study proposed different ways which can help to promote tourism activities in secondary cities. According to the results, tourist attraction potential along with the travel intention can lead to the tourist loyalty. Therefore, management of tourism companies as well as government should focus on tourist attraction potential. Similarly, service innovation can also facilitate tourist loyalty with the help of travel intention, therefore, the management should promote quality services in secondary cities. Additionally, the implementation of government policies to promote tourism activities in these areas must be focused and the maximum implementation of government policies should be ensured.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Tourism industry is not only dependent on the factors considered by the current study. This study considered tourist attraction potential, government policy, service innovation, travel intention and tourist loyalty, however, there are several important factors which has major influence on tourist loyalty. For instance, this study has not considered tourist satisfaction which is most important element. Therefore, future studies should consider various elements related to the tourist satisfaction while considering tourist loyalty. Furthermore, this study considered the tourism industry of Thailand as a whole, however, the consideration of tourism industry in relation to the types of the tourism is important. For instance, the future studies should consider religious tourism or health tourism or sports tourism or cultural tourism etc. The consideration of a single type of tourism can provide better results as compared to the whole tourism industry.

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