

Overtourism and Cultural Commodification in Thailand: A Critical Analysis of Sustainable Tourism Management Practices

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Received February 26, 2026; **Revised** June 8, 2026; **Accepted** June 11, 2026

Abstract

Tourism has been a major driver of Thailand's economic growth over the past twenty years, having a big effect on jobs, national income, and regional development. However, the rapid expansion of tourism has raised concerns about overtourism, damage to the environment, and changes to native customs in many popular tourist spots. Even if national policy frameworks call for sustainable tourism, overtourism is still a concern. This suggests that the issue may be linked to more than simply the number of tourists; it may also be linked to the way tourism is governed and planned for. This study aims to examine the structural elements that lead to overtourism in Thailand, analyze the processes of cultural commodification resulting from mass tourism, and critically evaluate current rules for sustainable tourism management. The research utilizes a qualitative documentary research methodology. Data were collected from national tourist development plans, policy documents from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and the Tourism Authority of Thailand, reports from international organizations, academic literature, and tourism statistics published between 2000 and 2025. The data underwent theme analysis and critical discourse analysis to identify policy narratives, governance frameworks, and developmental objectives influencing tourism growth. The findings indicate that overtourism in Thailand is not solely attributable to elevated tourist numbers but is closely connected to a growth-oriented tourism paradigm characterized by centralized administration and policy objectives that prioritize visitor arrivals and tourism revenue. These structural reasons also make it easier for cultural commercialization to happen, which is when local customs and traditions are slowly turned into tourism products that can be sold. The research emphasizes the importance of institutional reforms, including decentralized tourism governance, improved regulatory frameworks, and heightened community engagement, to more successfully align tourism development with long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Overtourism; Cultural commodification; Sustainable tourism governance

Introduction

Tourism has been one of Thailand's most important industries in the last 20 years. It provides a lot of jobs, boosts the country's GDP, and brings in a lot of foreign currency. Before the COVID-19 epidemic, Thailand was one of the most popular tourism destinations in the world, with about 39.8 million international tourists arriving in 2019 (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020). Even if the epidemic briefly stopped people from moving throughout the world, the return of tourism has shown that the sector is still an important part of Thailand's overall growth plan. At the same time, the concentration of tourism in major locations has made people more worried about environmental damage, pressure on infrastructure, and the long-term socioeconomic sustainability of communities that depend on tourism.

People are talking more and more about these problems in terms of overtourism, which is when the amount and intensity of tourism at a destination is too much for the environment, society, or infrastructure to handle. This hurts the quality of life for residents and the long-term viability of tourism itself (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019). In Thailand, overtourism is evident in popular tourist spots like Bangkok, Phuket, Krabi, and coastal islands, where a lot of tourists have caused environmental damage, traffic jams, and conflicts between economic expansion and the health of the local people. The 2018 closure of Maya Bay owing to environmental degradation is frequently mentioned as a prominent example of the repercussions of unregulated tourism expansion, illustrating the inadequacies of reactive management strategies and the necessity for more systematic governance frameworks (Israngkura et al., 2022).

Tourism growth also poses critical considerations concerning cultural transformation, in addition to environmental issues. In order to meet the needs of tourists and promote a place, local customs, festivals, heritage, and everyday activities may be turned into tourism products. This process, often referred to as cultural commercialization, has been extensively disputed in tourist studies because of the inherent contradictions between authenticity, economic value, and community agency (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). In Thailand, the commercialization of cultural practices is not just about how they are shown, but also about how they are governed (Pang et al., 2025). This is because state policies, market interests, and institutional power relations all play a role in deciding how culture is shown, how tourism is promoted, and how benefits are shared.

Sustainable tourism has become a big part of Thailand's tourism policy and development plans, but overtourism is still a problem in many popular places. This shows that there is still a gap between what people say about sustainability and what actually happens. A lot of the time, research on Thai tourism has looked at environmental management, destination competitiveness, or community-based tourism as separate topics. Nonetheless, there exists a paucity of critical studies that systematically integrate overtourism, cultural commodification, and tourism regulation within a comprehensive structural framework (Auksondee & Darawong, 2024). There has been a lack of focus on how growth-oriented development agendas, centralized governance structures, and market-driven tourist regulations can collectively exert environmental pressure and induce cultural transition in tourism destinations.

This paper fills that vacuum by looking at overtourism in Thailand from a critical political economy point of view. The paper examines overtourism not merely as an issue of tourist numbers but as a phenomenon influenced by governance frameworks, development plans, and policy agendas that affect tourism growth and its ramifications. The aims of this study are: (1) to investigate the structural factors contributing to overtourism in Thailand; (2) to analyze the process of cultural commodification within the context of mass tourism; and (3) to critically assess sustainable tourism management practices. The study tries to add to a broader structural

understanding of the problems that Thailand has in developing sustainable tourism by connecting overtourism, cultural commodification, and tourism governance.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the structural causes of overtourism in Thailand.
2. To analyze how cultural commodification occurs under mass tourism.
3. To critically evaluate sustainable tourism management policies.

Literature Review

1. Concept of Overtourism

The concept of overtourism has gained popularity in the field of tourism studies during the last ten years, particularly in response to the increasing number of visitors to popular tourist destinations worldwide. Although the term itself is relatively new, the underlying problems are not. Overtourism happens when the volume and intensity of tourism exceeds a destination's environmental, social, or infrastructure capabilities, which lowers the standard of living for residents and lowers the level of happiness for visitors (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019). Importantly, in addition to absolute visitor numbers, overtourism is impacted by development plans, spatial concentration, seasonality, and governance systems (Mihalič, 2020). Understanding overtourism requires an understanding of two key concepts in tourism theory: carrying capacity and the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC).

1.1 Carrying Capacity: Originating in ecological science, the term "carrying capacity" was initially used in tourism studies to describe the maximum number of visitors that a location can accommodate without causing unacceptable environmental harm, sociocultural disruption, or a decline in the standard of the visitor experience (O'Reilly, 1986). Carrying capacity is typically conceptualized in terms of multiple dimensions: (1) Physical capacity, which encompasses infrastructure and space limits. (2) Environmental/ecological capacity: the thresholds beyond which ecosystems suffer irreversible damage. (3) Social capability, or the degree of tolerance in the host society. (4) Perceptual capacity: how guests view crowding and quality.

Although the carrying capacity framework is widely used in destination management and protected area planning, it has been criticized for its technocratic focus and difficulty in defining precise numerical requirements (Saveriades, 2000). Critics claim that carrying capacity views overtourism less as a core political-economic issue and more as a quantitative management challenge. In this sense, it could obscure how government institutions, real estate markets, and development plans all influence the concentration of tourists. Carrying capacity, however, remains a crucial analytical starting point for understanding the environmental and social boundaries associated with overtourism.

1.2 Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC): The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, created by Butler in 1980, is another crucial paradigm for comprehending overtourism. Discovery, engagement, expansion, consolidation, stagnation, and either decline or revitalization are all phases in the process of destination development, according to TALC. During the phases of development and consolidation, rapid visitor growth usually leads to increased investment, improved infrastructure, and commercialization. However, if growth is left unchecked, places may go through a period of stagnation characterized by environmental degradation, a loss of distinctiveness, and dissatisfaction among residents—conditions that closely resemble contemporary definitions of overtourism.

TALC offers a dynamic perspective by integrating overtourism into destination change rather than treating it as a stand-alone issue. It suggests that long-term growth-oriented strategies may have led to overtourism in the latter stages. Like the carrying capacity model, TALC has drawn criticism for being linear and ignoring the power dynamics, global capital flows, and governance structures that influence destination trajectories (Bramwell, 2006). Contemporary scholars argue that TALC should be combined with political economics perspectives to gain a better understanding of how structural incentives for continuous growth may hinder or distort changes toward sustainable management.

In conclusion, overtourism may be theoretically supported by carrying capacity and life-cycle models, which place an emphasis on environmental thresholds and developmental stages. New research, however, shows that overtourism is not only a result of crossing geographical borders but is also impacted by broader governance frameworks and economic demands that shape destination planning and resource distribution (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019). This study builds on these basic theories and uses a critical political economy lens to analyze the structural causes that underpin overtourism in Thailand.

2. Cultural Commodification Theory

Cultural commodification is the term used to describe how cultural practices, symbols, rituals, and traditions are transformed into commercial goods and experiences in the travel sector. In tourism studies, this concept has been crucial to comprehending how commercial forces change local identities and social meanings. According to Cohen (1988), commercialization recontextualizes culture, altering its social significance and incorporating it into networks of commercial exchange rather than destroying it. Refocusing on visitor consumption shifts the value of customs from their intrinsic cultural significance to their market-driven portrayal. Places that host festivals, the performing arts, handicrafts, and everyday activities to appease tourists are where this shift is most apparent.

Discussions of commodification are closely linked to the idea of authenticity. MacCannell (1973) introduced the revolutionary concept of manufactured authenticity, arguing that tourist settings often employ acts meant to replicate "backstage" cultural realities. Tourists look for authenticity as a cure for modern alienation, but what they see is frequently a fabricated or reconstructed picture of local life. Additional research has improved this view by recognizing that hosts, guests, and intermediaries socially construct and negotiate authenticity (Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999). Conflicts still arise, nevertheless, between the desire to adapt traditions to worldwide tourism markets and the requirement to preserve cultural authenticity.

From a political economy perspective, cultural commercialization is not merely a cultural phenomenon but rather a structural outcome of capitalist expansion and neoliberal governance. In the broader capital accumulation circuits that tourism functions in, destinations compete for investment and branding advantage (Bianchi, 2009). These circumstances often result in unequal power dynamics among host communities, corporate actors, and state authorities as local culture is mobilized as a strategic asset for economic advancement (Im, et al., 2025). When centralized organizations and outside investors are given primacy in the distribution of advantages and decision-making authority, community agency may be undermined.

It is crucial to understand that cultural commodification in tourism is a representational and structural phenomenon that is impacted by market logics, authenticity discourses, and political-economic forces that govern destination development.

3. Sustainable Tourism Management

Sustainable tourism management is a strategy and normative framework that aims to reconcile economic growth, environmental preservation, and social justice. A key idea that

underpins this approach is the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), which emphasizes the simultaneous pursuit of social well-being, environmental stewardship, and economic viability (Elkington, 1998). The TBL framework has impacted destination planning and policy evaluation in the tourism sector by encouraging integrated performance assessment that extends beyond financial returns alone (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Critics respond that when economic outcomes are prioritized during implementation, social and environmental considerations are often viewed as secondary.

Sustainable governance in the tourist sector has been influenced more recently by the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards. The SDGs, particularly Goals 8, 12, and 14, notably recognize the potential benefits of tourism to inclusive growth, ethical consumerism, and marine conservation (United Nations, 2015). ESG frameworks also institutionalize accountability by linking sustainability performance to investment decisions and risk management (Font et al., 2021). Empirical study cautions that alignment with ESG and SDGs may remain purely rhetorical in the absence of measurable measures and legally binding procedures.

At the local level, community-based tourism (CBT) has been promoted as a participatory approach that encourages fair benefit sharing and local empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999). While CBT can enhance social capital and cultural preservation, its efficacy depends on governance competence, real engagement, and institutional support.

4. Critical Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a Critical Political Economy (CPE) perspective to investigate the systemic elements that underlie overtourism and cultural commodification. Critical political economics studies the effects of capitalist accumulation, state regulation, and market expansion on patterns of socio-spatial development (Harvey, 2005). Beyond managerial explanations, CPE in tourist studies explores how broader neoliberal restructuring processes, such as deregulation, privatization, and the commodification of space, are linked to the growth of tourism (Bianchi, 2018). Instead of considering overtourism to be a technological design failure, this notion situates it within systemic imperatives for continuous capital accumulation and destination competitiveness.

Under neoliberal tourist governance, states are increasingly promoting public-private partnerships, investment incentives, and branding strategies to attract foreign capital, framing tourism as a vital export sector (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). As governance shifts from redistributive planning to market-oriented coordination, sustainability is often reframed as a tool for reputation building and risk management rather than structural reform. This strategy may lead to policy conflicts because revenue maximization and growth targets remain important performance metrics, notwithstanding the spread of sustainability discourses.

A CPE viewpoint holds that the expansion of the tourism industry is shaped by unequal power dynamics among state institutions, international corporations, investors, and local inhabitants. Decision-making power over land use, infrastructure, and heritage commodification is usually held by centralized agencies and private capital, despite the fact that host communities have limited engagement and unequal benefit distribution (Bramwell, 2011). Whose interests are prioritized when formulating and carrying out policies is impacted by these power imbalances. Therefore, rather than being viewed as undesirable side effects, overtourism and cultural commercialization can be seen as outcomes of governance systems that place a higher priority on growth-oriented collaborations between corporate and state actors. The analytical foundation for evaluating Thailand's sustainable tourism policy is thus provided by this framework.

Research Conceptual Framework

This study posits that overtourism in Thailand cannot be attributed only to the high volume of tourists but is intricately linked to the structural circumstances inherent in tourism governance and development initiatives. This research, utilizing a Critical Political Economy (CPE) viewpoint, analyzes how the spread of tourism is influenced by growth-oriented economic policies, centralized governance structures, and market-driven tourism promotion.

Within this perspective, the structural determinants of tourism development—comprising a growth-centric tourist model, centralized tourism planning, and the ongoing promotion of mass tourism—constitute the principal contextual elements shaping tourism dynamics. These institutional factors promote the aggregation of tourism activities in primary locations, hence intensifying the strain on natural, social, and cultural resources.

In these circumstances, two principal processes arise. The concentration of tourism activities results in overtourism, evidenced by environmental deterioration, infrastructure strain, and a diminished quality of life for residents. Secondly, the expansion of tourism fosters cultural commercialization, wherein local customs, festivals, and quotidian cultural practices are progressively converted into marketable tourism items to satisfy the expectations of the tourism sector.

The interplay between these structural determinants and tourism results underscores the deficiencies of current sustainable tourism governance. Sustainability is routinely highlighted in policy discussions, although its implementation is frequently limited by growth-centric agendas. This study employs a conceptual framework to examine the interconnections among tourist development frameworks, overtourism, and cultural commercialization, to critically assess Thailand's sustainable tourism management policies.



Fig. 1 Research Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative documentary research approach to meticulously examine sustainable tourism management in Thailand and the structural elements that lead to overtourism. This study utilizes documentary research due to its emphasis on policy frameworks, governance structures, institutional agendas, and development narratives, rather

than only on individual perceptions. Bowen (2009) asserts that documentation analysis facilitates a systematic examination of official texts, policy documents, and statistical records to identify patterns, assumptions, and institutional orientations. This study utilizes a methodology that adeptly enables an analysis of the framing, institutionalization, and operationalization of sustainability within Thailand's tourism governance framework. Moreover, the documentary method corresponds with the study's critical political economy framework, which seeks to clarify the impact of state policies, development priorities, and market-oriented tactics on tourism growth and its consequences.

Data Sources and Document Selection

The study utilizes a wide range of documentary sources from 2000 to 2025 to deliver a thorough analysis and accurate results. The materials consist of: (1) Thai national tourism development plans and associated strategic policy documents; (2) reports and statistical publications from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and other official tourism agencies; (3) international institutional documents, particularly from UNESCO and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO); (4) peer-reviewed academic journal articles pertinent to overtourism, cultural commodification, and sustainable tourism governance; and (5) tourism statistics regarding visitor arrivals, tourism receipts, and the geographical concentration of tourism activities.

We used purposive sampling to choose papers based on four criteria for inclusion. The material must have been written by a reputable institution or a distinguished scholar. Second, it must either explicitly address Thailand or have theoretical and policy significance to the Thai context. Third, it has to be on one of these things: tourism management, sustainability, overtourism, or the cultural effects of tourism. Fourth, it must happen between 2000 and 2025, which is when Thailand's tourism industry grew, and new policies were put in place. We used these criteria to make sure that the materials we chose were both useful and strong enough for close study.

Data Analysis

The materials were examined using three complementary methodologies: thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and policy analysis. Thematic analysis was utilized to identify recurring patterns among the texts, specifically focusing on themes related to growth orientation, sustainability rhetoric, decentralization, community participation, and cultural transformation. This step followed the coding, categorization, and theme design structure set up by Braun and Clarke (2006). Secondly, critical discourse analysis was employed to examine the portrayal of sustainability, development, and tourism growth in official documents, and how these portrayals facilitated the legitimization of particular policy directions and governance strategies (Fairclough, 2013). Third, policy analysis was used to look at stated goals, ways of carrying them out, and measurable indicators to see if policy promises to be sustainable were in line with plans for enforcement and the ability of institutions to carry them out. These techniques collectively enabled the study's evolution from a superficial descriptive policy analysis to a rigorous critique of the structural processes affecting tourism governance in Thailand.

Methodological Scope and Limitation

The documentary technique aligns effectively with the study's aim of analyzing the structural and institutional aspects of overtourism. But it doesn't directly show how local people, tourism businesses, or government officials feel or what they think. Consequently, the results ought to be seen as an examination of governance frameworks, policy discourses, and

institutional agendas, rather than a holistic representation of all stakeholder viewpoints. Subsequent studies could enhance this area of investigation by integrating interviews, field observations, or community-based information to augment the documentary findings and facilitate a more thorough comprehension of the practical implications of tourism.

Research Results

1. Structural Drivers of Overtourism

The findings demonstrate that, rather than being just the consequence of an excess of visitors, overtourism in Thailand is a structural outcome of governance structures and development priorities embedded in the nation's tourism sector. The documentary and policy study identifies three interrelated factors: a growth-driven economic model, centralized tourism planning, and the continuous promotion of mass tourism.

First, centralized tourism planning continues to dominate Thailand's tourism governance. While strategic direction, branding, and investment incentives are mostly created at the national level, local governments and host municipalities have little decision-making power. While this type of centralized coordination might increase global competitiveness and policy coherence, it often restricts context-sensitive management and reduces the responsiveness of local destinations. Previous research indicates that by restricting participatory planning processes and excluding community perspectives, top-down governance arrangements may worsen socio-spatial inequities (Bramwell, 2011; Dredge & Jamal, 2015). In well-known tourist destinations, centralized planning usually prioritizes national income targets over local carrying capacities.

Second, the main measures of success for Thailand's tourism sector are visitor arrivals and tourism income, which have increased under a growth-driven economic framework. This quantitative method reflects broader neoliberal restructuring trends in which tourism functions as an export-oriented economic engine (Bianchi, 2018). Policy documents consistently highlight competitiveness, market expansion, and destination branding, reinforcing incentives for continuous expansion over demand control. Such expansion imperatives naturally favor stringent visitor limitations or redistribution strategies that can limit short-term earnings. Third, the continual promotion of mass tourism—through advertising campaigns, the expansion of low-cost flights, and the building of infrastructure—has made certain regions more densely populated. Even if diversification objectives are occasionally stated, investment flows and branding campaigns occasionally boost tourism in areas that are already oversaturated. These results are consistent with overtourism research (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019), which argues that the core cause of overtourism is systematic policy alignments that put expansion, speed, and market share ahead of ecological thresholds and community resilience.

All of these structural variables suggest that Thailand's overtourism is not the result of individual management errors but rather of institutionalized growth objectives.

2. Cultural Commodification in Practice

The findings demonstrate that, in addition to expressions at the level of representation, institutionalized actions that modify cultural production and governance are another way that cultural commercialization occurs in Thailand. Three interrelated phenomena are evidently at work: the gradual erosion of local authority, the commercialization of festivals, and the transformation of local traditions into mainstream vacation packages.

First, one example of how cultural events are increasingly being exploited as financial tools in destination branding campaigns is the commercialization of festivals. Traditional religious and seasonal activities, which were once primarily based on ceremonial and

communal contexts, are often reinvented to attract both domestic and international tourists. Through marketing efforts, corporate sponsorship, and event management strategies, schedules, performance formats, and spatial layouts are frequently modified to accommodate visitor consumption. As Cohen (1988) suggests, commodification shifts the emphasis toward spectacle and trade value but does not always eliminate cultural importance. Festivals often become staged events designed to boost publicity and visitor spending, which supports MacCannell's (1973) concept of produced authenticity.

Second, the transformation of local traditions into tourism offers demonstrates a broader trend toward standardization. Handicrafts, cooking methods, and performances are carefully selected and packaged to offer marketable experiences that satisfy tourists' expectations. This type of transformation can generate income opportunities while also simplifying complex cultural statements into symbols that are easy for consumers to understand. According to Wang's (1999) reinterpretation, authenticity is socially negotiated; nevertheless, when market logics take precedence, local agency in creating cultural meaning may be lost. Third, the community loses control over cultural resources and decisions as a result of these processes. According to political economic theory, the commercialization of tourism usually occurs in governance structures that prioritize investors, government organizations, and intermediaries over the local populace (Bianchi, 2018). As cultural assets are integrated into broader cycles of capital accumulation, local custodians may lose control over branding, pricing, and representation. This redistribution of power reinforces power disparities and intensifies tensions between the objectives of economic advancement and cultural sustainability.

These findings collectively suggest that cultural commercialization in Thailand is not merely symbolic but is deeply embedded in market-oriented development plans and tourism management.

3. Gaps in Sustainable Tourism Policies

According to the report, there are significant differences between Thailand's rhetoric and its real implementation of sustainable tourism. Even while policy documents regularly include promises about balanced growth, environmental protection, and community involvement, these objectives are usually aspirational rather than realistic. This policy rhetoric–implementation gap reflects a broader critique in sustainable tourism studies that sustainability is frequently portrayed as a discursive commitment without accompanying structural reform (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Sharpley, 2000). In practice, quantitative growth indicators—such as visitor arrivals and tourism receipts—continue to dominate performance evaluation metrics, even in frameworks that are centered on sustainability, promoting expansionary agendas.

A second gap concerns inadequate enforcement strategies. Zoning, environmental protection, and tourism management rules exist, although enforcement power is usually divided among multiple entities. Institutional overlap, insufficient monitoring systems, and unequal punishment administration all undermine the effectiveness of regulatory tools. Without measurable standards and clear accountability frameworks, sustainability regulations risk becoming symbolic rather than revolutionary, according to research on tourism governance (Hall, 2011). Economic pressures have the potential to further relax laws in well-known locations, especially when tourism revenue is viewed as strategically significant to the nation.

Third, inadequate levels of local participation limit the inclusiveness of sustainable tourism governance. Even while stakeholder participation and community-based tourism are frequently mentioned in policy frameworks, decision-making authority is typically concentrated in one location. Empirical research suggests that participatory processes that are sometimes consultative rather than empowering may limit community influence over land use,

cultural representation, and revenue distribution (Tosun, 2000; Bramwell, 2011). This discrepancy could maintain unequal power dynamics and undermine public trust in environmental initiatives.

Overall, the findings indicate that Thailand's sustainable tourism policies need to overcome structural obstacles related to governance frameworks, enforcement capacities, and participatory limitations. Therefore, in addition to better policy formulation, tackling overtourism necessitates institutional reforms that align implementation tactics with sustainable goals.



Fig. 2: Overtourism and Cultural Commodification in Thailand

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that overtourism in Thailand should not be seen merely as a result of excessive tourist influx. The issue is more clearly understood as a structural outcome of a growth-oriented tourism paradigm, in which policy efficacy is perpetually assessed through tourist arrivals, income generation, competitiveness, and the expansion of destinations. This perspective is consistent with critical tourism literature, which argues that overtourism is rooted in neoliberal governance frameworks that emphasize accumulation, branding, and market capture, often to the detriment of ecological constraints and community well-being (Bianchi, 2018; Koens et al., 2018). In this perspective, overtourism is not a temporary imbalance but a condition produced by policy, shaped by institutional objectives, governance structures, and inequitable power relations. Recent research emphasizes that tourism pressures must be examined through the frameworks of politics, mobility regimes, and structural governance, rather than exclusively through visitor numbers (Goodwin, 2021; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bianchi, 2024; Donaire Benito & Zerva, 2025).

This structural analysis clarifies why cultural commercialization in Thailand should be viewed as a governance issue rather than only a representational one. The findings demonstrate that local festivals, traditions, and cultural practices are being included in destination branding and market-oriented tourism strategies. This supports previous claims that commodification changes not only the meaning of culture but also who has authority over how culture is packaged, valued, and spread (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). Recent literature substantiates this claim by illustrating that cultural sustainability relies on the governing bodies of tourism development, the values prioritized in representation, and the degree to which local

communities retain substantial control over cultural resources (Lundberg et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2025). In Thailand, cultural commercialization should be viewed as part of a larger political and economic process in which the dynamics of commercial tourism can weaken community agency and limit chances for culturally rooted self-representation.

The conversation suggests that Thailand's approach to managing tourism is similar to those of other places that have had trouble finding a balance between tourism growth and social and geographic fairness. Barcelona and Venice are often used as examples of how tourism-driven development may make housing pressure, public space disputes, and resident displacement worse (Milano et al., 2019; Seraphin et al., 2018). Recent research on Barcelona, Kyoto, and other tourism-dependent areas demonstrates that overtourism is increasingly provoking protests, anti-tourism rhetoric, mobility conflicts, and diverse forms of social resistance, especially when policy frameworks prioritize excessive growth (González-Reverté & Soliguer Guix, 2024; Cartier, 2024; Burtis, 2024). These comparative observations reinforce the statement that technical visitor-management solutions alone are unlikely to alleviate overtourism if the underlying development mindset remains unchanged.

Another problem is the limits of sustainable tourism talk in Thailand. Even though sustainability is a big part of tourism planning talks, the results show that putting it into action is hard because of centralized power, weak enforcement, and the fact that quantitative growth metrics are still used. This supports a long-standing claim in sustainable tourism research that policy rhetoric often exceeds genuine institutional transformation (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Sharpley, 2000; Hall, 2011). Recent research in Thailand reveals similar issues. Studies on "quality tourism," sustainable tourism planning, and festival-focused sustainability efforts show that sustainability goals can either make existing inequalities worse or lead to more inclusive results, depending on how governance, regulation, and local participation are set up (Veilleux & Sarrasin, 2025; Manotungvorapun & Gerd Sri, 2025; Suvittawat et al., 2025). This analysis enhances the literature by illustrating that the principal challenge resides not in the absence of sustainability vocabulary, but in the persistent institutional frameworks that prioritize expansion above redistribution, resilience, and community governance.

These findings collectively indicate a substantial theoretical implication: overtourism in Thailand needs to be perceived as a governance issue rooted in political economy, rather than solely a difficulty of demand management. This perspective expands the conversation beyond carrying capacity and destination congestion by highlighting the impact of political goals, centralized planning, and market-driven growth on tourism concentration and cultural evolution. It also suggests that significant change requires a redefinition of tourist success that goes beyond just expansion in numbers. This means improving decentralized governance, making sure that rules are followed more strictly, including cultural impact assessments in tourism planning, and giving communities more say in decisions about tourism. If these changes aren't made, sustainable tourism will likely stay primarily theoretical because the main reasons for overtourism and cultural commodification will keep happening.

Recommendation

1. Theoretical Recommendation

This study contributes to the field of tourism studies by integrating the concept of overtourism with a critical political economy (CPE) framework in the Thai setting. While much of the overtourism literature focuses on issues like crowding, carrying capacity, and resident perceptions, fewer studies systematically examine the structural economic and governance logics that create and sustain tourism intensification in Southeast Asia (Koens et al., 2018; Milano et al., 2019). By situating overtourism within a growth-first political-economic model,

this study reframes it as a consequence of institutionalized development priorities and power imbalances rather than an episodic problem of excessive demand.

The inclusion of CPE allows for a shift from technocratic and managerial interpretations to structural analysis, which stresses unequal benefit distribution, capital accumulation, and state-corporate partnerships (Bianchi, 2018). The study adds to the theoretical discussion between critical governance scholarship and sustainable tourism studies by demonstrating how sustainability discourses can coexist with expansionary economic imperatives. As a result, the Thai case offers a perspective from the Global South that enriches mostly Eurocentric conversations on overtourism and highlights the importance of political economy in understanding nations that depend significantly on tourism.

2. Policy Recommendation

The results highlight the necessity of systemic change in Thailand's tourism governance structure, going beyond temporary visitor control. There are five interconnected policy consequences.

First, to improve context-sensitive and adaptive management, decentralized governance is necessary. Enhancing responsiveness to regional ecological and social thresholds can be achieved by giving provincial and local authorities more regulatory autonomy, especially in the areas of zoning, land-use planning, and visitor management. According to research on tourism governance, multi-level and participatory governance structures are better at striking a balance between local needs and sustainability goals (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Hall, 2011).

Second, legally binding carrying capacity frameworks should be used to institutionalize the adoption of visitation cap systems. Although some locations have implemented interim caps, reactive crisis management can be avoided with a methodical approach backed by environmental indicators and open monitoring. According to studies on overtourism, demand management strategies might lessen traffic and environmental damage when they are incorporated into legal frameworks as opposed to being implemented on an as-needed basis (Koens et al., 2018).

Third, it is advised that Cultural Impact Assessments (CIA) be incorporated into tourism planning procedures. CIAs would assess how tourism developments might affect cultural practices, heritage meanings, and community agency, much like environmental impact assessments do. These evaluations can encourage development that is sensitive to cultural differences and stop the overcommodification of cultural assets.

Fourth, equitable benefit-sharing and decision-making authority can be improved by bolstering community ownership models, such as locally run destination organizations and cooperative tourist businesses. When backed by institutional capability and policy support, community-based approaches have shown promise in enhancing empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999).

Lastly, it is crucial to alter the systems used to distribute tourism revenue. Revenue-sharing schemes can shift incentives away from solely growth-driven criteria by allocating a predetermined percentage of tourism revenue to community development initiatives, conservation funds, and local infrastructure.

When taken as a whole, these reforms seek to change Thailand's tourism governance from one that prioritizes growth to one that is more focused on equity and sustainability.

3. Practical Recommendation

Practically speaking, this study provides information for changing policies to support Thailand's sustainable tourism governance. By identifying structural drivers, including growth-oriented performance measures, centralized planning, and restricted community participation, the research identifies areas that require institutional recalibration. Decentralization, enforced

visitor management systems, cultural impact assessments, and fair revenue redistribution procedures are highlighted in the recommendations.

The results suggest that rather than advocating for minor, incremental improvements, successful reform requires redefining policy success metrics beyond tourist volume and revenue growth. Coordination of governance processes with community empowerment and long-term ecological resilience can enhance policy coherence and reduce the frequency of overtourism problems. The study provides useful insights for policymakers who want to transform sustainable rhetoric into actual structural transformation.

4. Further research recommendation

Despite the fact that this study offers a structural and policy-focused analysis of Thailand's cultural commercialization and overtourism, certain areas still need further research.

Future studies should incorporate community-level empirical investigations that employ interviews and participatory methodologies to gain a better understanding of how local actors view and respond to overtourism. A longitudinal study is also needed to ascertain if the post-pandemic recovery has led to substantial governance transformation or has only restored pre-existing growth-driven regimes.

Comparative cross-national studies that contrast Thailand with places in Europe and Asia would support theoretical development by demonstrating how different governance systems affect the outcomes of overtourism. More study should operationalize frameworks for evaluating cultural impact and develop quantitative indicators in order to monitor cultural commodification in action.

Finally, the depth of research would be enhanced by interdisciplinary collaboration between environmental economics, urban planning, and tourism studies. Such programs will encourage awareness of overtourism as a structural socio-political and ecological issue rather than just a management one.

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