

พฤติกรรมและความต้องการของนักท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพในจังหวัดภูเก็ต: กรณีศึกษา นักท่องเที่ยวชาวตะวันออกกลาง

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Behaviors and Needs of Wellness Tourists in Phuket, Thailand: A Study of Middle Eastern Tourists

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บทคัดย่อ

สถานการณ์การแพร่ระบาดของไวรัสโควิด-19 ส่งผลกระทบอย่างมีนัยสำคัญต่อภาคธุรกิจ โดยเฉพาะธุรกิจบริการและการท่องเที่ยว ธุรกิจจำเป็นต้องปรับเปลี่ยนรูปแบบการดำเนินงานและบริการเพื่อตอบสนองความต้องการของนักท่องเที่ยว การท่องเที่ยวในจังหวัดภูเก็ตเริ่มปรับเปลี่ยนโดยการพัฒนารูปแบบการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพมากขึ้นเพื่อการเติบโตที่ยั่งยืนและส่งเสริมให้จังหวัดภูเก็ตเป็นจุดหมายปลายทางของการท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพของโลกอีกด้วย งานวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาพฤติกรรมและความต้องการของนักท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพในจังหวัดภูเก็ต กรณีศึกษานักท่องเที่ยวชาวตะวันออกกลาง โดยเลือกใช้การสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบเจาะจง กลุ่มตัวอย่างคือ นักท่องเที่ยวจำนวน 78 คน จาก 10 ประเทศตะวันออกกลาง ซึ่งผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามส่วนใหญ่ 37.18 % มาจากคูเวต 19.23% มาจากบาห์เรน และ 8.97% มาจากอียิปต์และตุรกี ผลการศึกษพบว่าผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามส่วนใหญ่ (56.41%) ใช้จ่าย (ไม่รวมค่าเดินทาง) ระหว่าง 2,000 - 4,000 บาทต่อวัน ปัจจัยด้านสถานที่ท่องเที่ยวได้แก่ ชายหาดเป็นปัจจัยหลักที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการเลือกจุดหมายปลายทางของนักท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพชาวตะวันออกกลาง (22.28 %) ต้องการเลือกกิจกรรมที่ทำให้สุขภาพดี โดยเน้นกิจกรรมด้านการออกกำลังกายและเล่นฟิตเนส (92.31%) และการนวด (82.05%) โดยนักท่องเที่ยวเชิงสุขภาพชาวตะวันออกกลางให้ความสำคัญกับสถานที่ที่มีความงามตามธรรมชาติ ($\bar{x} = 4.56$) มีสภาพอากาศที่ดี ($\bar{x} = 4.53$) และเน้นสถานที่ที่อำนวยความสะดวกต่อเด็ก ($\bar{x} = 4.44$) อีกด้วย งานวิจัยฉบับนี้มีความสำคัญต่อการทำความเข้าใจพฤติกรรมของนักท่องเที่ยว ซึ่งจะช่วยให้ธุรกิจสามารถปรับกลยุทธ์ได้โดยทำความเข้าใจความต้องการและดึงดูดกลุ่มเป้าหมายทางการตลาด โดยเฉพาะในกลุ่มนักท่องเที่ยวชาวตะวันออกกลาง

Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impact on various business sectors over the past few years, especially on hospitality and tourism business. It is necessary for businesses to redesign their products and services to satisfy tourists' needs and trends. Phuket's tourism has begun to focus and revitalize by embracing the 'wellness tourism' for sustainable growth; and promoting Phuket as a 'world wellness' travel destination. This research aims to study the behaviors and needs of wellness tourism in Phuket, emphasizing on Middle Eastern wellness tourists. A 'purposive sampling' was created as a sampling technique for this study. The number of participants used in this sample was 78 tourists from ten Middle East countries.

Overall, the majority (37.18%) was from Kuwait, another 19.23% was from Bahrain, and 8.97% was from Egypt and Turkey. The results of the study showed that most of the respondents (56.41%) spent between THB2,000-4,000 per day; excluding the transportation costs. The destination's qualities; namely beach attractions, was the main factor influencing Middle East tourists' choice of destination (22.28%). With choice of activities; the most attractive for activities was to live a 'healthy lifestyle' with emphasis on exercise and fitness (92.31%) and massage therapy (82.05%). They also valued natural beauty attractions ($\bar{x} = 4.56$), good weather ($\bar{x} = 4.53$), and child-friendly accommodations ($\bar{x} = 4.44$). This research is crucial for understanding tourist behavior which helps businesses adapt their business strategies by identifying preferences and creating targeted market to attract specific demographics, especially among middle eastern tourists.

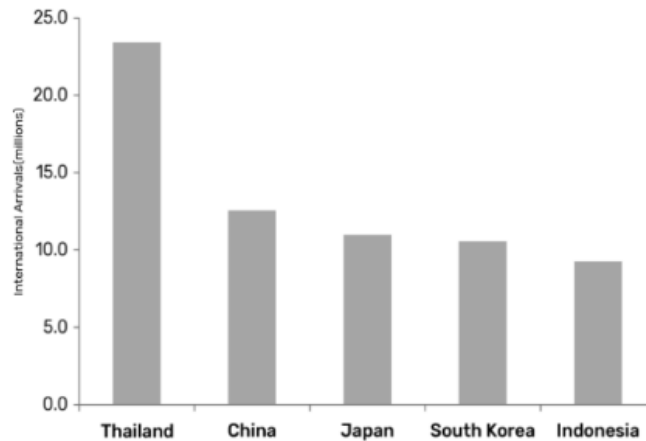
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1. Introduction

After COVID-19 pandemic, Phuket's tourism sector most likely went through a phase of adaptation and recovery with a renewed emphasis on sustainability, safety, and health. Phuket has likely started marketing initiatives to attract visitors to return to the island. The campaigns have highlighted the island's cultural attractions, natural beauty, and embracing more on the wellness industry services. Phuket is putting a lot of emphasis on wellness and health tourism, which could be an alternative form of travel that would boost the island's economy and meet the demands of travelers as the wellness tourism had consistently grown much faster than regular tourism in post COVID-19 (Clerici et al., 2024). Phuket also aims to attract a new segment of travelers seeking relaxation, rejuvenation, and a holistic approach to health and well-being ("BDMS wellness clinic", 2024). This will thereby diversify its tourism offerings and contribution to the sustainable development of the destination.

Wellness tourism is witnessing a new phase of revitalization and the conception of a new range of products and services both nationally and internationally. The new intensity lies in preventing disease and maintaining good health instead of focusing on curing illness. Thailand has been ranked as one of the best destinations in Southeast Asia for wellness tourism (TPM Team, 2024), it also has been regarded as one of the most popular and fastest growing tourism destinations in Southeast Asia since 2019 as shown in figure 1 (GlobalData, 2019). Following an expected decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Thailand wellness tourism is currently rebounding at a strong rate of 36 percent yearly growth (2020–2022), and Thailand's reputation as a wellness destination has been greatly enhanced by its wellness tourism industry, which places a strong emphasis on spa resorts and traditional Thai massage (Global Wellness Institute, 2024).

Figure 1: *Top 5 most visited destinations for health and wellness tourism in Asia, 2019 (million)*

Source: GlobalData Travel and Tourism Intelligence Center, 2019

According to the tourism statistics in 2023, despite the financial crises facing the world, Phuket's tourism industry showed significant recovery with almost nine million foreign visitors to Phuket, marking a 150 percent increasing from 2022 (The Phuket News, 2024). In addition, there has been a noticeable increase in Middle Eastern visitors to Phuket in recent years. The Middle East has grown significantly as a potential market for Phuket's tourism sector driven by factors such as increased air connectivity, promotional campaigns targeting Middle Eastern tourists, and a growing interest in travel to attractive destinations.

Wellness tourism among Middle Eastern tourists has been on the rise in recent years (Travel Markets News & Offers, 2024), reflecting a global trend towards seeking holistic well-being experiences while traveling. However, the majority of Middle Eastern tourists mostly are Muslim, and they may prefer to remain within familiar cultures when travelling (Salman & Hasim, 2012). It is important for business services providers in Phuket to develop a better understanding of Middle Eastern tourists' expectations, needs and the factors that can lead to their overall satisfaction, motivating them to revisit. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the behaviors and needs of wellness tourism in Phuket, focusing on Middle Eastern tourists.

2. Literature Review

Tourists travel to Thailand from several regions around the world. Different demographic groups of tourists have varying needs and expectations. To understand these tourist behavior differences is important for tourism businesses and destinations to manage their offerings effectively to meet the needs and preferences of visitors. By understanding the factors that influence tourist needs and preferences, business destinations e.g. accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, entertainment sector can focus on providing high-quality experiences that exceed visitor expectations. This may involve training staff, improving service standards, addressing safety and security concerns to enhance overall visitor satisfaction, leading to repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

2.1 Middle Eastern Tourists' Behaviors

The trend in terms of number of Middle Eastern tourists' arrival to Thailand has been encouraging over the last few years (Jitpleecheep, 2023). According to Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), Thailand has been ranked as the third Non- Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), after Singapore and Taiwan as Muslim-friendly destinations for tourists

(Sarisae et al., 2023). This may lead Muslim tourists to choose Thailand for their tourism destination. In particular, Middle Eastern or Arab tourists often have unique preferences compared to tourists from other regions. e.g., cultural and religious sensitivities. Understanding these differences is important for businesses to attract and provide to this market segment effectively.

Middle Eastern or Arab tourists have unique behaviors on specific needs when traveling, influenced by cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors (Hidayat et al., 2018). Middle Eastern tourists have their own kind of family-oriented travel which is often travel with extended family members, including children, parents, and sometimes grandparents (Salman & Hasim, 2012). Most of the tourists tend to look for accommodations that provide families with spacious rooms, family-friendly services, and activities suitable for all ages are preferred. Middle Eastern tourists also seek accommodations that offer Halal food options and prayer facilities. They prefer hotels and restaurants that provide halal-certified meals and designated prayer areas. Many Middle Eastern tourists have high disposable incomes and seek luxury travel experiences. They are attracted to luxury hotels, luxury shopping destinations, and exclusive leisure activities (Salman & Hasim, 2012).

Understanding tourist behavior helps the business sector design better marketing strategies, create products and services that meet tourist needs, and enhance the overall tourist experience (Armutcu et al., 2023). However, cultural background and traditions play an important role in shaping tourist preferences and behaviors. Different cultures can have different buying habits and product preferences.

2.2 Tourism Theory of Change: Wellness Tourism in Phuket Point of View

The theory of change in tourism is concerned with the understanding how change occurs, so that the tourism industry can maximize the industry's development potential. Changes in tourist behaviors and needs after COVID-19 had a major impact on tourism destinations. According to the Global Wellness Institute (2023), tourists are increasingly seeking wellness experiences to their individual needs and preferences. This enhances well-being through physical, mental, and spiritual practices through various activities, including healthy food consumption, spa treatments, meditation retreats, yoga sessions, and holistic health practices.

Phuket has emerged as a world destination in the wellness tourism sector leveraging its natural beauty and cultural heritage, and known for its diverse offerings that include hotel and accommodations, spa retreats, and holistic health experiences (Phuket Magazine, 2023). Wellness tourism in Phuket highlights a growing sector driven by increasing health awareness among tourists. Tkachuk and Weerakit (2023) suggest that travelers are seeking a wide range of wellness experiences from traditional Thai massages to contemporary holistic practices and seeking experiences that balance physical activity with wellness practices. Therefore, it is crucial for the business sector to create immersive experiences that meet the expectations of global wellness tourism market.

2.3 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory: Middle Eastern Tourist Point of View

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory provides insight into the expectations of Middle Eastern tourists by examining how their needs align with the different levels of the hierarchy.

Physiological Needs: Similar to tourists from any other region, tourists from the Middle East require basic necessities like food, water, and accommodation. However, Middle Eastern tourists require accommodations that offer Halal food options (Alfarajat, 2022).

Safety Needs: These needs are similar to other tourists, Middle East tourists expect destinations that provide a safe environment, may also seek assurances regarding health and medical facilities in case of emergency, as well as reliable transportation options for getting around safely.

Belongingness and Love Needs: Like those from other regions, Middle Eastern tourists have strong family ties and tend to travel with family members (Tongchoiy et al., 2020).

Esteem Needs: Middle Eastern tourists may have esteem needs related to recognition, respect, and status. They may also have preferences for luxury and prestige, seeking luxury accommodations, and exclusive leisure activities that offer comfort and personalized services (Alfarajat, 2022).

Self-Actualization Needs: At the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Middle Eastern tourists may have self-actualization needs related to personal fulfillment and self-expression. They may seek experiences from destinations that offer opportunities for spiritual enrichment and cultural immersion through activities such as religious tours and wellness retreats (Tongchoiy et al., 2020).

Overall, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory explains Middle Eastern tourists' expectations by highlighting their fundamental needs and motivations when traveling. Businesses in the tourism industry can enhance customer satisfaction by developing experiences that are attractive to Middle Eastern tourists by understanding their needs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

This quantitative research was conducted by distributing a questionnaire. The population of this study was Middle Eastern focused among wellness tourists who traveled to Phuket island, e.g. Kata Beach, Patong Beach, Nai Harn Beach, Karon Beach, and Phuket old town. Due to the unavailable source of specific data or number on wellness tourists from the Middle East, therefore the number of participants used in this study was 78 wellness tourists (Kannasut, 1995). Non-Probability Sampling Technique (Purposive Sampling) was used as a sampling technique in this study. A survey method was conducted during December 2023–February 2024. The adapted questionnaire (Wongwitwichote & Tangpattanakit, 2023) was based on three well-established parts which were the demographic of respondents, tourists' wellness behaviors/activities, and needs in wellness consumption.

3.2 Content Validity Test

The researchers conducted the Content Validity Test by using Index of Item Objective Congruence or IOC approach to indicate the degree to which the content of the questionnaire item is measuring the intended objective of the study. Three experts in tourism and management field evaluated the questionnaire item; the total value of IOC for each questionnaire item was over than 0.5. Therefore, the instrument is considered valid, as supported by the theory of Rovinelli and Hambleton (1977).

3.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. Mean ratings were used to analyse the items in regard to statements of perceptions.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Details on demographic compositions of the respondents are shown in Table 1. Descriptive analysis of demographic information indicated that most respondents were male with 67.95% while 30.77% were female. Most respondents were between the age of 20-23 years old, representing 35.90%, and 30.77.9% with the age between 41-50 years old. The sample was 78 tourists from ten Middle East countries. 37.18 % from Kuwait, another 19.23% from Bahrain, and 8.97% from Egypt and Turkey. The majority or 69.23% spent time for holidays during 1 month - 6 months. The results of the study showed that most of the respondents spent between THB2,000-4,000 per day; excluding the transportation costs (56.41%) with regard to main factors affecting tourists' decisions, beach attraction ranked first at 22.28%, followed by tourist facilities accounting for 19.80%.

Table 1

Middle Eastern Tourist Demographics in Phuket

Demographic Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	53	67.95
	Female	24	30.77
	Prefer not to disclose	1	1.28
	Total	78	100
Age range	Between 20-30 years	28	35.90
	Between 31-40 years	22	28.21
	Between 41-50 years	24	30.77
	Between 51-60 years	4	5.13
	Total	78	100
Country	Saudi Arabia	5	6.41
	Turkey	7	8.97
	Lebanon	2	2.56
	Kuwait	29	37.18
	United Arab Emirates	3	3.85
	Egypt	7	8.97
	Israel	3	3.85
	Bahrain	15	19.23
	Cyprus	5	6.41
	Iran	2	2.56
	Total	78	100
Trip Duration	Less than 1 month	17	21.79
	1 month - 6 months	54	69.23
	Over 6 months	6	7.69

Demographic Variable	Category	N	%
	Undefined	1	1.28
	Total	78	100
Cost Spending (except the transportation)	Less than THB 2,000 per day	27	34.62
	Between THB 2,000-4,000 per day	44	56.41
	Over THB 4,000 per day	7	8.97
	Total	78	100
Main Factors Influencing Tourists Decision (Multiple options)	Destination quality (Beach attraction)	45	22.28
	Destination quality (People)	33	16.34
	Destination quality (Tourist facilities)	40	19.80
	Reputation	28	13.86
	Safety reason	27	13.37
	Price & expense	29	14.36

4.2 The Middle Eastern Tourists' Behaviors and Needs of Wellness Tourism in Phuket

Table 2 below shows that most respondents were concerned with Sport Activities (exercise in fitness), representing 92.31%, followed by massage therapy and spa & sauna, representing 82.05% and 80.77% respectively.

Table 2

Middle Eastern Tourists' Wellness Behaviors/Activities

	%
1. Healthy food explorations	71.79
2. Sport Activities	
2.1 Play group sports e.g. beach volleyball and futsal	53.85
2.2 Participate in water sports such as surfing and diving	47.44
2.3 Participate in extreme sports such as surf-skating	53.85
2.4 Jogging on the beach	69.23
2.5 Trail running	57.69
2.6 Exercise and fitness	92.31
3. Massage therapy	82.05
4. Spa & Sauna	80.77
5. Yoga	37.18

Table 3 shows the needs of respondents in wellness consumption which is considered the most nature-friendly services. They put importance on places with the desire to experience natural aesthetics. ($\bar{x} = 4.56$), followed by good weather ($\bar{x} = 4.53$), and child-friendly places ($\bar{x} = 4.44$).

Table 3

Needs in Wellness Consumption

	\bar{x}	S.D.
1. Nature-friendly Value		
1.1 Perceived Good weather	4.53	0.83
1.2 Experiences of natural aesthetics	4.56	0.74
2. Physical- Friendly Value		
2.1 Child-friendly	4.44	1.03
2.2 Medical supervision	2.90	1.61
2.3 Pets welcome	4.14	1.30
3. Cultural Experiences/opportunities		
3.1 Perceived variety of cultural events	4.35	0.96
3.2 Experience with local people	4.19	1.14
3.3 Perceived knowledge of new places	4.29	1.00
3.4 Experience in historical/cultural sites	4.26	1.04

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Wellness tourism is an emerging industry that has seen impressive growth world-wide. Many of the wellness tourists are traveling to destinations that provide wellness facilities. From the research objective, is to study the behaviors and needs of wellness tourism in Phuket, emphasizing on Middle Eastern wellness tourists. The number of participants used in this sample was 78 tourists from ten Middle East countries. Overall, the majority (37.18%) from Kuwait, another 19.23% from Bahrain, and 8.97% from Egypt and Turkey. The results of the study showed that most of the respondents (56.41%) spent between THB2,000-4,000 per day; excluding the transportation costs. The destination's qualities; namely beach attractions, was the main factor influencing Middle East tourists' choice of destination (22.28%). With choice of activities; the most attractive for activities was to live a 'healthy lifestyle' with emphasis to exercise and fitness (92.31%) and massage therapy (82.05%) by valuing environmentally friendly as experience natural aesthetics ($\bar{x} = 4.56$), perceived good weather ($\bar{x} = 4.53$), also child-friendly accommodations ($\bar{x} = 4.44$).

This study showed that the most attractive activities among Middle Eastern wellness tourists was to live a healthy lifestyle with emphasis to exercise and fitness and massage therapy by valuing environmentally friendly as experience natural aesthetics. This is similar to the study of Sunthorntham (2014) that found most of the Middle Eastern tourists need health services such as Thai's traditional health therapies and massage therapy.

The behavior among wellness tourists from the Middle East is an appealing intersection of cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors. Understanding this behavior is vital for the tourism industry and policymakers seeking to increase the destination's appeal and to provide positive visitor experiences. The study also found that most Middle Eastern tourists prefer a type of family tour with child-friendly accommodations, consistent with the study of Chanin et al. (2015), most Arab

tourists travelled with their families or in a group. Therefore, family packages might need to be adapted differently than catering to a peer or smaller family tourists.

Nevertheless, cultural norms and traditions have a significant impact on Middle Eastern tourist behavior. Many tourists come from diverse cultural backgrounds, resulting in varying expectations and behaviors. Religious considerations also influence tourist behavior in the Middle East. Countries with entrenched religious identities, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, frequently impose guidelines on tourist behavior, particularly in terms of consumption or religious observance (Battour, 2017). Understanding and respecting these religious sensitivities is important for tourists seeking a positive experience in the tourist destinations.

Economy is one of the factors which influence tourist behavior in the Middle East (Tongchoiy et al., 2020). The result of the study showed that most of the Middle Eastern tourists spent between THB2,000-4,000 per day excluding the transportation costs which is considered high spending compared to their counterparts. This is consistent with the study of Phong (2024) that showed Middle Eastern tourists are one of the Thailand's biggest spenders at \$2,500 per trip. Tourists from affluent countries may have different spending habits from budget travelers, influencing their choice of accommodation, dining, and activities. Furthermore, the availability of tourism infrastructure and amenities can influence tourist behavior, with destinations using modern facilities frequently attracting more discerning visitors. To analyze the Middle Eastern tourist behavior is a multifaceted endeavor that requires consideration of cultural, religious, and economic factors. By learning about tourists' needs, preferences, and expectations, tourism industry can manage their services to better serve diverse tourist demographics. Moreover, fostering cross-cultural understanding in tourism practices is vital to develop inclusive and sustainable tourism destinations. Tourists who respect local customs and traditions can help to foster positive cultural exchange and mutual respect among host communities and visitors.

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