



Enhancing Visitor Experiences at Religious Tourism Sites in Thailand

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Received: 17 December 2024; Revised: 7 May 2025; Accepted: 14 May 2025; Available Online: 20 June 2025

Abstract

Religious tourism, characterized by visits to sacred sites for spiritual, cultural, or recreational purposes, plays a pivotal role in shaping visitor satisfaction and engagement. Despite its growing global significance, research on visitors' multidimensional experiences at sacred sites remains limited. This study investigates the layered experiences of Thai tourists at religious tourism sites in Thailand. A qualitative research design was employed, using thematic analysis to interpret data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 23 Thai tourists. Participants were purposively selected to ensure variation in age, gender, and visit purpose, and interviews were conducted on-site at three key Buddhist temples in Phitsanulok Province: Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat Woramahawihan, Wat Nang Phaya, and Wat Ratchaburana.

The findings reveal four main dimensions of visitor experience: enjoyment, learning, aesthetics, and escape. Enjoyment stems from activities such as sightseeing, merit-making festivals, and personal leisure. Learning emerges through historical narratives, cultural engagement, and hands-on experiences like meditation. Aesthetic value was linked to architectural beauty and artistic detail, while escape reflected mental rejuvenation and spiritual reflection in peaceful surroundings. These dimensions illustrate how emotional, spiritual, and cultural elements interweave to shape meaningful visitor experiences.

This study provides practical insights for tourism planners and site managers. Operational recommendations include installing interpretive signage, designing inclusive cultural programs, and enhancing the spiritual atmosphere of sacred spaces through soundscapes and spatial planning. Such measures can balance visitor engagement with cultural preservation, reinforcing Thailand's positioning as a destination for transformative religious tourism.

Keywords: Religious Tourism, Emotional Tourism Experience, Visitor Experience, Sacred Sites

Introduction

Tourism is widely recognized as a powerful vehicle for fulfilling diverse personal needs, including relaxation, mental and physical rejuvenation, social connection, learning, and self-fulfillment. As a voluntary pursuit, it offers meaningful experiences that blend entertainment, education, relaxation, and a sense of connection to destinations (Kim & So, 2022). In contemporary tourism discourse, the visitor is not merely a consumer but an active participant in co-creating experiences that deliver emotional, physical, and spiritual value (Crouch et al., 2004; Horner & Swarbrooke, 2020). The delivery of meaningful and memorable experiences is thus central to tourism development and planning.

Tourism experiences are transformative, deeply shaping satisfaction and perspectives on life. Sacred sites, in particular, offer profound experiences that play a pivotal role in cultural and religious contexts (Iliev, 2020; Tsironis, 2022). Religious tourism—defined as travel motivated by religious purposes such as ritual practices, worship, learning, or the pursuit of peace—has garnered attention for its capacity to provide deep psychological and emotional benefits to visitors (Kim et al., 2020; Terzidou et al., 2018). According to Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy framework and Cohen's (1979) typology of tourist experiences, religious tourism provides a range of experiences from recreational and aesthetic to existential and transformational, particularly through emotionally and spiritually immersive encounters. Experiential tourism and religious tourism are therefore



intrinsically linked, as sacred sites serve as dynamic platforms for emotional engagement, learning, and introspection (Kirillova et al., 2017). Moreover, experiences at religious sites play a critical role in determining travel intentions and overall satisfaction (Albayrak et al., 2018).

Globally, religious tourism represents a significant and expanding sector. According to Business Research Insights (2025), more than 300 million people travel annually for religious purposes. The market was valued at USD 50.4 billion in 2024, is projected to grow to USD 54.78 billion in 2025, and is forecasted to reach USD 115.55 billion by 2033, reflecting a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 8.7% over the forecast period. In Thailand, millions of domestic and international tourists visit Buddhist temples each year, drawn by their architectural beauty, historical significance, and spiritual ambiance. These sacred spaces not only serve as religious centers but also act as cultural heritage sites, contributing to community development, identity preservation, and the national tourism economy (Kim & Kim, 2019).

Despite the cultural and economic importance of sacred sites, there remains a notable research gap in understanding how visitors experience these places. Much of the existing literature in Western contexts has emphasized pilgrimage and theological motivations, whereas research in Southeast Asia—including Thailand—has yet to fully explore the emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions that shape the modern visitor experience (Iliev, 2020; Kittipornpaiboon, 2022; Mutanga et al., 2017; Suhartanto et al., 2020; Terzidou et al., 2018; Tsironis, 2022; Weaver et al., 2009).

To address this gap, this study explores multidimensional visitor experiences at Buddhist religious tourism sites in Thailand through the conceptual lens of experiential tourism and spiritual authenticity. The research investigates how Thai tourists engage emotionally, spiritually, and culturally with sacred spaces, and how these dimensions shape their overall experience. By generating context-specific insights, this study aims to support tourism planners, site managers, and policymakers in enhancing visitor engagement while preserving the cultural and spiritual essence of Thailand's religious heritage.

Religious Tourism

Traveling to religiously significant sites or pilgrimage destinations for religious or leisure purposes is one of the oldest and most popular forms of travel, often referred to as religious tourism (Rashid, 2018). While traditionally associated with religious motivations, such as seeking divine power, healing, or blessings, religious tourism also encompasses a broader range of drivers, including the desire for relaxation, exploration of new places, and appreciation of a site's beauty (Božić et al., 2016). Studies by Blackwell (2007) and Harrison (2007) highlighted that religious tourists often aim to learn new things and create spiritual memories, broadening their motivations beyond strictly religious aspirations. Moreover, Abad-Galzacorta et al. (2016) and Kujawa (2017) revealed that some religious tourists may lack religious beliefs altogether, with their motivations rooted in curiosity, admiration for architecture, or enjoyment of local activities and services, such as tours and recreational opportunities. This complexity underscores that religious tourism caters to both spiritual and recreational needs.

Seyer and Müller (2011) categorized the religious tourism market into 12 subgroups, including pilgrimage, missionary travel, religious leisure, cruises, religious conferences, stays at sacred places, Christian camps, and family tourism. Similarly, McKercher (2016) conceptualized religious travel as “personal quest tourism” involving journeys related to self-development and learning, such as pilgrimages, visits to sacred sites, and



spiritual retreats in both traditional and contemporary contexts. In Thailand, Pichphandaycha (2019) divided religious tourism into two types: short-term trips for merit-making and personal peace and longer journeys for practicing meditation or pursuing enlightenment based on Buddhist beliefs. These forms of tourism are centered on sacred and/or religious sites, which can be found worldwide across various religions, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism.

The literature also provides diverse definitions of religious tourism. For instance, Chianeh et al. (2018) defined it as travel to religiously significant places, encompassing products that reflect art, culture, and architecture. Budovich (2023) considered religious tourism as visits to cultural and religious sites, while Collins-Kreiner (2020) emphasized its conceptual ambiguity, with terms like “pilgrimage”, “religious tourism” and “spiritual tourism” often used interchangeably in academic discourse (Iliev, 2020). Furthermore, terms such as ‘religion’, ‘faith’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘pilgrimage’ are frequently interchanged to describe religious tourism.

Additionally, religious sites, memorials, and destinations attract not only devout individuals but also those interested in cultural heritage, irrespective of religious affiliation (Aulet & Vidal, 2018). Tsironis (2020) highlighted the multifaceted nature of religious tourism, which includes visits to monuments, relics, and artifacts, as well as intangible heritage such as local beliefs, values, and lifestyles. This form of tourism also involves participation in rituals, festivals, and cultural activities, alongside purchasing souvenirs with religious or cultural significance. Religious tourism thus extends beyond pilgrimages, encompassing journeys that fulfill both spiritual and cultural heritage dimensions.

However, defining the precise meaning of a “religious experience” remains a challenge in scholarly research, as terms like “spiritual tourism” and “pilgrimage” are often used interchangeably, creating potential confusion in theoretical frameworks and practical applications (Božić et al., 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2021). A deeper understanding of the nature of religious tourism experiences is essential to address these gaps, enriching knowledge about the diverse dimensions of spiritual and cultural engagement in religious tourism.

Religious Tourism Experiences

Religion plays a crucial role in shaping individuals’ thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, cultures, and values, particularly within the context of tourism. Religious and spiritual experiences are frequently recognized as fundamental outcomes of tourism (Poria et al., 2003). Cohen (1979) proposed a model of tourism experiences consisting of five types: recreational mode, diversionary mode, experiential mode, experimental mode and existential mode. Tourists operating within the “existential mode”, characterized by a search for spiritual authenticity, often share similarities with pilgrims. Using phenomenological methods, Andriotis (2009) identified five dimensions of authentic experiences at religious sites: spiritual, cultural, environmental, secular, and educational. These findings align with Cohen’s (1979) emphasis on the existential mode, underscoring its significance within religious tourism. Similarly, Kirillova et al. (2017) emphasized that tourism experiences can facilitate self-transformation, a notion that echoes MacCannell’s (1973) assertion that pilgrims’ aspirations to visit religious sites are analogous to tourists’ motivations to explore socially, historically, and culturally significant locations.

Religious experiences also possess a strong emotional dimension (Ferran, 2019). Belhassen et al. (2008) synthesized three key components of religious tourism experiences: place, belief, and practice. These components highlight the intrinsic connection between religious experiences and individual beliefs, as well as the meanings ascribed to specific sites. Similarly, Balwick and Balkwell (1978) found a positive correlation between



religious orthodoxy and emotions such as love and happiness. Andriotis (2009) further revealed that the pursuit of spiritual authenticity in tourism is often linked to profound emotional and spiritual connections to religious sites, emphasizing the quest for sacredness. For instance, Kasim's (2011) study of the Thaipusam ritual in Batu Caves, Selangor, Malaysia demonstrated that participants experienced a sense of unity with others, closeness to God, and fulfillment of their religious missions, framing the event as both a religious experience and a form of spiritual healing.

From the perspective of religious tourists, Packer and Ballantyne (2016) identified ten dimensions of religious tourism experiences, with spiritual and emotional dimensions receiving the most attention in prior research. Taheri (2016) highlighted the close relationship between emotional connections and religious experiences. Despite these insights, research on religious tourism experiences remains limited, particularly in Thailand—a country with a rich religious heritage and Buddhism as a core element of its cultural and social framework. Existing studies have predominantly focused on pilgrimage or temple visits as isolated activities, often neglecting in-depth exploration of tourists' broader experiences and motivations when visiting sacred sites. Addressing this research gap, further investigation into the religious tourism experiences of Thai tourists could substantially enrich the academic discourse on tourism. Such research would provide valuable insights for tourism practitioners, aiding the development and management of religious destinations in ways that enhance visitor experiences and align with their spiritual and emotional needs.

Research Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design, employing semi-structured, in-depth interviews to examine the multidimensional experiences of Thai tourists engaged in religious tourism. The target population consisted of Thai tourists who visited religious sites in Phitsanulok Province—specifically Wat Nang Phaya, Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat Woramahawihan, and Wat Ratchaburana—and participated in religious activities at these locations during the study period.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: 1) they had visited the temple for religious, spiritual, or cultural purposes, and 2) they were willing and able to reflect on their experiences. To enhance the transferability and trustworthiness of the findings, efforts were made to include a diverse sample in terms of age, gender and frequency of visits (first-time vs. repeat visitors). Recruitment was conducted on-site using an intercept approach, where researchers briefly screened potential participants and obtained informed consent before proceeding with the interviews. The number of participants was guided by data saturation, a point at which no new information emerges from additional interviews (Kumar, 2018). In this study, data saturation was achieved after interviewing 23 participants.

The interview questions were open-ended, focusing on the experiences of Thai tourists engaging in Buddhist religious tourism. To ensure the content validity, the questions were reviewed by three experts in the field. Each question was assessed for its alignment with the research objectives using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). Questions with IOC scores between 0.5 and 1.0 were deemed suitable for inclusion. The quality assessment of the interview protocol in this study indicated that all questions achieved an IOC score of 1.0.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Both latent (interpretive) and manifest (surface-level) codes were developed to identify recurring



patterns. To enhance analytic rigor, a coding protocol was established, and intercoder reliability was ensured by having two researchers independently code a subset (30%) of the transcripts. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, achieving a coding agreement rate of 85% (Hennink et al., 2020).

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, the study employed methodological triangulation by incorporating field observations and informal conversations with local staff and monks during the data collection process. These methodological steps collectively ensured that the findings were both credible and contextually grounded, providing a robust understanding of visitors' emotional, cultural, and spiritual engagements with Buddhist religious tourism sites in Thailand.

Results

This study identified four core dimensions of visitor experiences at Buddhist religious tourism sites: Enjoyment, Learning, Aesthetics, and Escape. These dimensions were derived through thematic analysis, with insights supported by direct quotes from the 23 participants. While participants varied in age, gender, and visitation history, the analysis focused on shared thematic patterns across the sample rather than subgroup distinctions, in line with the study's aim to explore the collective dimensions of visitor experience. The findings are summarized in Table 1, followed by a detailed narrative.

Table 1 Core Dimensions of Religious Tourism Experiences

Dimension	Description	Illustrative Experiences	Theoretical Link
Enjoyment	Emotional Satisfaction Through Leisure and Active Engagement	Walking Tours, Festivals, Photography	Cohen's Recreational Mode
Learning	Acquisition of Knowledge and Cultural Understanding	Historical Narratives, Rituals, Meditation	Kirillova's Authenticity; Cohen's Experiential Mode
Aesthetics	Appreciation of Sacred Beauty and Artistic Design	Admiring Architecture, Buddha Images, Temple Surroundings	Existential Authenticity Through Sensory Immersion
Escape	Emotional and Spiritual Refuge from Daily Life	Meditation, Chanting, Quiet Reflection Spaces	Cohen's Existential Mode

Enjoyment

Visitors frequently described their experiences as enjoyable, characterized by relaxation, leisure, and engagement in culturally rich activities. This aligns with Cohen's (1979) recreational mode, where tourists seek enjoyment without deep religious commitment, as the following responses attest:

Tourist TR14, a young male first-time visitor, shared:

"I usually spend about an hour here, walking around, paying respects, and visiting the souvenir shop."

TR17 stated that:

"... I take a stroll around the temple grounds, pay respects to the Buddha images, and make merit."

TR19, a repeat, visitor said:

"... I walk around the cloisters and the back area with Phra Buddha Chinnasi, enjoying every aspect of exploring the temple."



Activities like photography, casual walks, or attending events, such as merit-making festivals or boat races, provided tourists with interactive and fun experiences, as described in interviews:

TR01, a middle-aged repeat visitor, expressed joy in festival participation:

“I wanted to attend the event and watch the long-tail boat races. I usually come whenever Wat Yai holds events like this.”

TR03 shared:

“I enjoy participating in the activities, strolling around the events, and paying respects to the Buddha.”

Enjoyment also stemmed from passive observation and personal interests, such as photography and shopping for sacred souvenirs (TR02, TR05). Collectively, participants reported that such activities created a lighthearted, emotionally uplifting experience. This response reflects Cohen’s recreational mode, where the visitor seeks light enjoyment rather than spiritual transformation.

Learning

The second theme captures learning as a transformative experience, echoing Kirillova et al.’s (2017) view that spiritual tourism fosters personal growth and Cohen’s experiential mode, where tourists seek authenticity through cultural immersion. Participants gained insights from temple histories, Buddhist teachings, and hands-on engagement. For example:

TR13, a first-time visitor from Bangkok, said:

“Reading about its history, origins, and artifacts deepened my understanding of the temple and Phitsanulok Province.”

TR23 described the social dimension of learning:

“During the Buddhist Lent period, I also participate in candle offerings... these activities are done with a group, making them meaningful.”

These learning processes were often facilitated through informal dialogue with monks, reading signage, or participating in rituals, reinforcing the site’s educational and spiritual function.

Aesthetics

Tourists frequently expressed emotional and spiritual admiration for the visual and spatial beauty of the temple environments. This dimension resonates with existential authenticity, where the sacred space’s sensory impact fosters a deep emotional connection.

TR22, a female tourist, noted:

“I visited this temple for its renowned reputation and to admire its beautiful art, architecture, and Buddha images. They’re truly beautiful.”

Similarly, TR23 stated that:

“It’s a true Thai heritage, home to the most beautiful and revered Buddha image in Thailand. The stunning temple is deeply respected by Thais and admired by international visitors alike.” (TR23)

Visual appreciation of architecture, nature, and artistic elements elevated the visitor experience beyond passive sightseeing to a form of sacred contemplation, reinforcing the cultural value of heritage preservation.



Escape

Participants also described religious tourism as an escape from stress, consistent with Cohen's existential mode, in which travelers seek spiritual meaning and inner peace.

TR04, a university lecturer, reflected:

"I usually spend 2–3 hours at the temple, meditating alone in the quiet and peaceful hall... a perfect escape."

TR07 similarly emphasized the therapeutic function of chanting:

"Evening chanting here offers a peaceful escape... creating a serene and renewing experience."

This dimension was especially strong among repeat visitors, suggesting that religious sites serve as emotional sanctuaries for personal healing and reflection.

Discussion

This study sheds light on the multidimensional experiences of tourists engaging in Buddhist religious tourism in Thailand, emphasizing the dimensions of enjoyment, learning, aesthetics, and escape. These dimensions illustrate the complex interplay between emotional, spiritual, and cultural engagement, offering a more holistic understanding of how sacred sites function as spaces for both devotion and leisure. While these findings align with prior literature (Kim et al., 2020; Kittipornpaiboon, 2022; Terzidou et al., 2018), this study extends current debates by contextualizing these experiences within contemporary Southeast Asian tourism, where hybrid motivations—spiritual, recreational, and cultural—are increasingly evident.

The enjoyment dimension of religious tourism illustrates how sacred spaces can offer both spiritual enrichment and emotional gratification. It highlights the evolving role of religious sites as spaces that support devotion while also accommodating leisurely engagement. This dual function reflects Cohen's (1979) concept of the recreational mode and resonates with the expectations of contemporary tourists. Similarly, Rashid (2018) observed, such a dual-purpose framework aligns with a broader understanding of religious tourism, which encompasses both spiritual and recreational motivations. For example, visitors may derive enjoyment from the intricate details of temple architecture, the serene beauty of surrounding gardens, or the cultural vibrancy of festivals hosted at the site. Such experiences create a balance between intellectual appreciation and emotional satisfaction, contributing to an overall sense of relaxation and enjoyment. These opportunities for passive yet fulfilling engagement reflect the capacity of religious sites to serve as spaces of contemplative leisure. However, the incorporation of festivals, performances, and commercial elements raises concerns about the commodification of sacredness, as highlighted by Collins-Kreiner (2020) and Olsen (2021). These observations provoke a critical reassessment of how spiritual authenticity can be preserved amid increasing tourist activity.

Learning, as a transformative process, enriches tourists' knowledge of religious and cultural contexts. Visitors gain insights from rituals, architectural narratives, and guided practices like meditation. These findings echo Andriotis' (2009) and Ferran's (2019) assertions that religious tourism fosters shared cultural understanding. However, some participants' learning experiences were superficial—limited to symbolic gestures or reading signs—which calls attention to the need for deeper interpretive strategies that foster critical engagement and dialogue. This is because learning experiences at religious sites contribute to cultural preservation by educating



visitors about the local traditions and values that define these destinations. By engaging in the stories and practices upheld by religious communities, tourists act as participants in the transmission of cultural knowledge. For example, learning about the history of a temple or the symbolic meaning behind its architecture provides visitors with a contextual understanding of the destination. This intellectual engagement deepens their connection to the site and enhances their overall experience. Consistent with Ferran's (2019) assertion that religious tourism is not only about personal fulfillment but also about fostering a shared understanding of cultural and spiritual heritage.

Aesthetic experiences in religious tourism arise from tourists' appreciation of architectural design, artistic craftsmanship, and the surrounding natural environment, fostering a strong emotional connection with the site. The findings of this study support Tsironis' (2020) view that religious tourism integrates both sensory and spiritual dimensions, with the visual and aesthetic qualities of sacred sites playing a crucial role in enhancing their overall appeal. The intricate architecture of temples often embodies the cultural and religious heritage of the destination, which tourists admire not only for its beauty but also as a manifestation of sacredness and devotion. Symmetry, symbolism, and detailed design elements frequently evoke feelings of awe and reverence, deepening spiritual engagement. This aligns with Ferran's (2019) argument that the aesthetic presentation of sacred spaces reinforces their spiritual significance. Moreover, the aesthetic dimension underscores the visual and sensory richness of Thai Buddhist temples, resonating with Kirillova et al.'s (2017) concept of existential authenticity. Tourists often derive meaning through beauty, harmony, and symbolic design, experiencing the sacred through sensory immersion rather than doctrinal interpretation. However, the increasing visual commodification of these spaces—driven by photography, social media, and aesthetic branding—raises concerns about the fine line between admiration and appropriation. As temple imagery becomes a tourism product, there is a risk of reducing the spiritual depth of the experience to superficial visual consumption.

The escape dimension reveals how religious tourism provides a refuge from the stresses of daily life. Activities like meditation, chanting, and seeking tranquil spaces highlight the restorative potential of religious tourism. Such practices enable tourists to temporarily step away from the pressures of modern life, focusing instead on their inner well-being. This aligns with Cohen's existential mode and reaffirms the idea of religious tourism as therapeutic. Similarly, this supports the notion that such sites offer tourists a chance to reconnect with themselves and achieve mental rejuvenation, resonating with the findings of Belhassen et al. (2008) on the transformative power of religious tourism experiences. Religious tourism sites also serve as sanctuaries, offering visitors a sense of peace and quietude. This therapeutic value of religious tourism sites echoes the concept of "spiritual retreats", where the primary goal is personal healing and self-discovery (Park et al., 2019). However, this refuge is not equally accessible to all visitors. Repeat visitors or locals may access deeper meditative states, while first-time or casual tourists may only experience superficial calm. This distinction opens avenues for more inclusive and structured spiritual programming (Lee et al., 2021).

These dimensions reflect the dynamic interplay between spirituality, culture, and leisure, underscoring the hybrid motivations that characterize contemporary religious tourism. By situating these findings within the context of Southeast Asian tourism, the study enriches ongoing theoretical debates and emphasizes the evolving functions of sacred sites as spaces of both devotion and personal transformation.



Implications

The study contributes to the understanding of religious tourism experiences in Thailand by revealing their multifaceted nature and highlighting areas for improvement. By focusing on the interplay of emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions, the study makes several important theoretical contributions to the field of religious tourism. First, it advances Cohen's (1979) typology of tourist experiences and Kirillova et al.'s (2017) framework of existential authenticity by illustrating that emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of visitor experiences at Buddhist sacred sites are deeply interconnected rather than discrete. The findings reveal that enjoyment, aesthetic appreciation, and personal transformation often occur simultaneously, highlighting the fluid boundaries between recreational and spiritual motivations. Second, the study introduces a multidimensional conceptual lens that foregrounds underexplored dimensions such as enjoyment and escape within religious tourism. While previous research has largely emphasized pilgrimage, devotion, and spiritual seeking (e.g., Olsen, 2021; Collins-Kreiner, 2020), this study demonstrates that leisure and psychological restoration are also integral components of sacred site visitation in contemporary contexts. Third, by focusing on Buddhist religious sites in Thailand, the study situates Southeast Asian experiences within the broader global discourse on religious tourism. It provides culturally embedded insights into hybrid tourist motivations, combining ritual, recreation, learning, and healing, and thereby enriches our understanding of religious tourism beyond the Western-centric or pilgrimage-dominated models that have traditionally dominated the literature.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the findings are context-specific, focusing on Buddhist sacred sites in Thailand, and may reflect a degree of cultural and religious familiarity shared between the researchers and participants. This cultural proximity may have influenced interpretations or limited the generalizability of the findings to non-Buddhist or cross-cultural religious tourism contexts. Second, data collection through on-site interviews may have introduced response bias due to the presence of researchers, a potential manifestation of the Hawthorne effect. Participants might have altered their responses to align with perceived expectations. Lastly, while efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants, the sample size and qualitative approach inherently limit the representativeness of the data.

Future research should pursue longitudinal and comparative studies across diverse religious and cultural contexts to examine how the experiential dimensions of religious tourism such as enjoyment, learning, aesthetics, and escape vary according to setting and demographic background. Comparative analyses between Buddhist sacred sites in Southeast Asia and those from other religious traditions could reveal whether similar patterns of engagement emerge or whether cultural and doctrinal differences produce distinct experiential outcomes. Furthermore, exploring the influence of generational factors and digital engagement, particularly the role of social media in shaping perceptions, narratives, and expectations, could provide deeper insights into evolving tourist motivations and the mediating role of technology in religious tourism experiences.

In terms of practical contributions, the findings of this study suggest several actionable directions for religious tourism planners, site managers, and researchers seeking to enhance visitor experiences while preserving the sanctity of sacred spaces. There is a clear need to move beyond conventional interpretive signage by developing multi-sensory engagement strategies. These may include guided storytelling tours, meditation workshops, or the integration of digital heritage tools that allow visitors to interact meaningfully with cultural and spiritual narratives. Such approaches not only deepen understanding but also foster emotional and spiritual immersion.



These can help position Thailand as a leading destination for meaningful and transformative religious tourism experiences.

The study also highlights the importance of visitor management strategies that balance accessibility with reverence. Planners might consider zoning specific areas within temple grounds to separate sacred rituals from tourist activities or implementing capacity controls during major festivals to avoid overcrowding and maintain a contemplative atmosphere. These measures can help preserve the spiritual integrity of the site while accommodating diverse visitor needs.

Finally, the findings underscore the value of cross-sector collaboration. Involving monks, local guides, and tourism stakeholders in the co-design and delivery of religious tourism experiences can help maintain authenticity and ensure that tourism development is aligned with the cultural and spiritual values of the host community. Such participatory planning not only safeguards religious significance but also supports sustainable and culturally sensitive tourism innovation. Altogether, these contributions support the growing recognition of religious tourism as a multifaceted phenomenon—both reflective of cultural heritage and responsive to evolving tourist expectations.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of enhancing visitor experiences at Buddhist religious tourism sites in Thailand by revealing the multifaceted dimensions of enjoyment, learning, aesthetics, and escape. These findings illuminate how tourists engage with sacred spaces not only as sites of devotion but also as places of leisure, cultural appreciation, and personal transformation. The interplay of emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions affirms that religious tourism is not solely a spiritual endeavor but a holistic experiential process. This perspective extends Cohen's typology of tourist experiences and Kirillova's concept of existential authenticity by showing how these dimensions overlap dynamically in contemporary Buddhist settings.

To meet the evolving expectations of religious tourists, destination managers and tourism operators should implement targeted strategies that preserve cultural sanctity while enriching visitor engagement. This includes developing interpretive signage that communicates symbolic meaning, integrating spiritual design elements to evoke contemplative atmospheres, and adopting digital narrative tools to deliver immersive storytelling experiences. Such approaches enhance not only understanding but also emotional and spiritual resonance. Moreover, fostering deeper tourist engagement requires clear operational guidelines. Tourism operators should facilitate guided rituals, meditation workshops, and culturally informed orientation sessions to promote respectful participation and authentic connection. Zoning sacred areas, managing visitor flows during high-traffic periods, and involving monastic communities in experience co-design are also essential strategies for safeguarding spiritual integrity.

By adopting a comprehensive approach that aligns infrastructure, interpretation, and management with the multidimensional nature of visitor experience, Thailand can strengthen its position as a global hub for meaningful and transformative religious tourism. These insights offer a valuable foundation for practitioners and policymakers to enhance sustainability and ensure that future visitors continue to find spiritual, emotional, and cultural fulfillment at sacred sites.



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