Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites
ISSN 2065-0817, E-ISSN 2065-1198

Year XVIII, vol. 59, no. 2, 2025, p.563-571
DOI 10.30892/gtg.59205-1437

TOURIST'S BEHAVIORAL INTENTION TO VISIT SUKHIRIN IN NARATHIWAT PROVINCE: AN ECOTOURISM DESTINATION OF THAILAND

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Citation: Praprom, C., & Laipaporn, J. (2025). Tourist's behavioral intention to visit Sukhirin in Narathiwat province: An ecotourism destination of Thailand. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 59(2), 563–571. https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.59205-1437

Abstract: Narathiwat Province in the southernmost part of Thailand aims to shift its economic structure to a more sustainable and high-value tourism industry, with an emphasis on inclusive development of Sukhirin District to prominent ecotourism destination. This study examines factors influencing the behavioral intentions of Thai tourists travelling in Sukhirin, focusing on destination image, tourist satisfaction, reference group influence, and perceived risk. The structural equation model was employed to analyze the data obtained from 300 responses of Thai tourists, who travelled in Sukhirin district, Narathiwat province, Thailand. The demographic profile of respondents indicates that most tourists were male, with an average age of 29. A large proportion were self-employed, earning an average monthly income of approximately 18,299 THB. The majority identified as Muslim from Narathiwat and neighboring southern provinces. In terms of expenditure, they demonstrated relatively high spending with 2,229.82 THB per trip, primarily allocated to transportation, food, and accommodation. Moreover, the results showed that destination image significantly drives tourists' behavioral intentions, particularly in terms of their willingness to revisit and further recommend it to other potential tourists. The prominent Sukhirin's image are its reputation and the valuation of traveling. Likewise, a positive destination image also significantly enhances tourist satisfaction. As a result, improving the destination's image can effectively boost satisfaction levels among tourists. Furthermore, social influences by sharing information and experiences, especially from friends and family members, have a positive impact on the destination's image. Conversely, perceived risks like natural disasters, unrest situations and accidents negatively affected the tourism image of Sukhirin. To strengthen and sustain tourism growth of Sukhirin through enhancing tourists' behavioral intentions, stakeholders should focus on maintaining a positive destination image, emphasizing Sukhirin's natural attractions and its cultural richness, and leveraging word-of-mouth marketing through social networks to boost interest and trust in this destination. Additionally, investing in strengthening safety measures can also increase tourists' confidence and encourage both first-time and repeat travel to Sukhirin in the future.

Keywords: border tourism, Hala-Bala Wildlife Sanctuary, sustainable development, unrests, revisits

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INTRODUCTION

Presently, Thailand is one of popular destination for global tourists, since Thailand is well known for its richness of diversity of tourism such as unique culture, exotic foods and beautiful tourist attractions. In 2023, there were over 28 million tourists traveling to Thailand, generating income for the country amounting to 1.512 billion baht (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024). However, in 2024 the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Thailand announced 5 policies to stimulate tourism namely: 1) driving tourism that tourist can travel up to 365 days 2) application of soft power to navigate the tourism industry in Thailand 3) emphasizing on the involvement of safety and hospitality 4) responding to sustainable tourism 5) cross border tourism in ASEAN (Sorthong et al., 2024).

Narathiwat province is one of the three southern border provinces of Thailand considered as the connecting gate to neighboring countries, especially the East coast of Malaysian peninsular and the bordering the Gulf of Thailand. From the border, there are readily infrastructures to connect with other regions by land, rail, port and airport. However, Narathiwat province's economic structure still relies primarily on agriculture sectors and potential tourism sectors (the United Nations Development Programme, 2024). While in 2022, the Office of National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) stated that this province is still exhibiting the lowest GPP per capita in Thailand, with 1,740 USD per year (Muangthong & Sarntisart, 2017) and still being affected by the insurgency in the deep south of Thailand (Praprom & Laipaporn, 2022). Therefore, tourism is one of the areas of strategic development plans of Narathiwat province in order to reduce poverty or insurgency in this location, which is considered as a mechanism for eliminating both problems through providing high value services under the concept of natural tourism and cultural tourism.

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Sukhirin is a district in Narathiwat province as shown in Figure 1, located near the Malaysian border, close to the Buketa checkpoint in Waeng district. This district has held historical significance since ancient times due to the discovery of gold mines (To Mo gold mine) and its important role as the origin of the Telubin River, or Sai Buri River, as documented historically in a report on the exploration of the Telubin River in 1894 (Louis, 1894). Today, Sukhirin is an important agricultural area, featuring terraced rice fields and renowned fruit plantations, including durian and Longkong or Southern "*langsat*". It has also become an ecotourism destination, known for its beautiful natural landscapes. Furthermore, Sukhirin is the house of the precious forest Hala-Bala Wildlife Sanctuary, considered as one of the world's significant bird-watching sites. The Thai government has initiated efforts to promote this area as a UNESCO Natural World Heritage site.

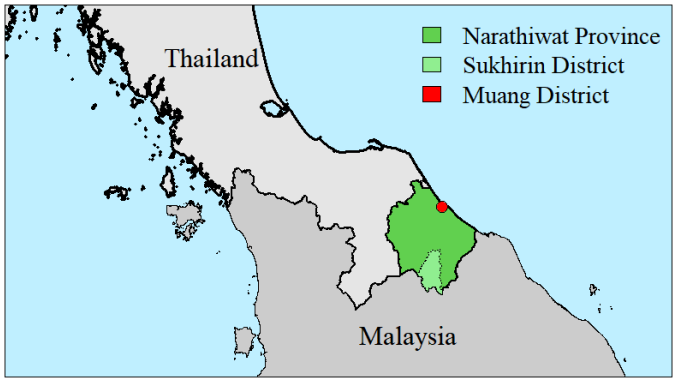

Figure 1. Sukhirin District in Narathiwat Province of Thailand (Source: Authors)

Narathiwat Province aims to shift its economic structure from an agricultural dependency to a high-value tourism industry, with a focus on enhancing tourism in Sukhirin. This study aims to investigate factors influencing the behavioral intentions of tourists, particularly Thai tourists, to revisit or recommend to other potential tourists including tourists' satisfaction, destination image, tourists' risk perception, and the influence of reference groups. The findings of this study will further provide valuable insights for policymaking in tourism development, promoting income distribution through tourism, alleviating poverty, expanding provincial products, and increasing per capita income.

Figure 2. A) Sea of Mist viewpoints; B) Traditional local food set at the Chulabhornpattana 12th community; C) Gold panning activity at Saiburi River in Sukhirin District on December 18, 2022 (Source: Authors)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of factors influencing tourists' behavioral intentions has received significant attention in most tourism-related research, as understanding these factors is essential for designing effective marketing strategies and increasing destination competitiveness. Tourists' behavioral intentions, such as the intention to revisit or recommend a destination, are shaped by their perceptions and experiences of the destination itself. Key factors, including destination image, tourist satisfaction, reference group influence, and risk perception, are widely recognized as determinants of these intentions. Investigating these dimensions provides insights into how tourists perceive and evaluate destinations, while also aiding in the development of strategies aligned with tourist expectations that support sustainable tourism development.

Research on tourists' behavioral intentions offers valuable insights for developing marketing strategies that align with tourist expectations, which are essential for sustainable destination management (Kanokwongpaisarn et al., 2019). Behavioral intentions, such as the intention to revisit and recommend, are often rooted in positive experiences with

tourism services, activities, and amenities. Word-of-mouth recommendations, a key aspect of behavioral intentions, are strongly influenced by the positive experiences shared by consumers (Luong, 2023).

Similarly, revisits indicate tourists' satisfaction with the destination's offerings (Gangadhari et al., 2023). Structural equation modeling (SEM) is frequently applied to identify the factors influencing revisit and recommendation intentions (Seyfi et al., 2021; Deb & Lomo-David, 2021). In this study, tourists' behavioral intentions are measured through their intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to others.

Destination image can be divided into three dimensions: 1) Cognitive image, which includes individual knowledge and beliefs about the destination, such as landscape, culture, and nature; 2) Affective image, which reflects tourists' emotions, such as atmosphere and hospitality; and 3) Tangible image, which includes infrastructure, amenities, and accommodations—all of which positively influence the intention to revisit (Phi et al., 2021). Previous research has shown that destination image positively influences tourists' intention to revisit (Sobaih et al. (2024); Manyangara et al., 2023; Luvsandavaajav et al., 2022; Nam et al., 2022; Primananda et al., 2022; Atmari & Putri, 2021; Phi et al., 2021; Liang & Xue, 2021; Viana et al., 2021). This aligns with findings by Luvsandavaajav et al. (2022) and Liang & Xue (2021), who identified cognitive image (nature, culture, infrastructure, travel environment) and affective image (pleasantness, relaxation, excitement, friendliness) as positively impacting revisit intentions. Additionally, Nam et al. (2022) highlighted that perceptions of naturalness, attractiveness, and diversity positively influence the intention to return.

Beyond revisit intentions, word-of-mouth recommendations are another key aspect of tourists' future behavioral intentions. Previous studies have found that destination image also positively impacts tourists' intention to recommend the destination to others (Yağmur & Aksu, 2022; Viana et al., 2021). Ragab et al. (2019) reported that destination image positively influences the intention to share positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Yağmur & Aksu (2022) also found that affective image positively impacts recommendation intentions, while Viana et al. (2021) noted that perceptions of natural and cultural attractions, social and environmental adaptation, infrastructure, accessibility, price, and value positively affect revisit intention, recommendations, and the sharing of travel experiences. In measuring the three dimensions of destination image, this study utilizes six indicators: 1) natural image and 2) cultural image for the cognitive image dimension, 3) social image for the affective image dimension, and 4) destination reputation, 5) destination valuation and 6) eco-tourism management for the tangible image dimension. Consequently, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Destination image has a direct positive effect on tourists' behavioral intentions.

Tourist satisfaction is defined as the alignment between a consumer's expectations and their actual travel experiences. This satisfaction is measured by the extent to which tourism products and services meet or exceed tourists' expectations (Tri & Nguyen, 2024; Ge & Chen, 2024). Satisfaction derived from a tourism experience significantly influences tourists' future behavior. Previous studies indicate that higher tourist satisfaction positively impacts the intention to revisit (Foster & Sidharta, 2021; Mutia et al., 2020; Bayih & Singh, 2020; Chenchan et al., 2020). Additionally, tourist satisfaction positively affects tourists' intention to share their experiences through word-of-mouth recommendations (Chenchan et al., 2020). Therefore, this has led to the formation of the second hyphothesis which proposes:

H2: Tourist satisfaction has a direct positive effect on tourists' behavioral intentions.

Most research on the relationship between tourist satisfaction and destination image examines how destination image influences satisfaction levels. Findings generally suggest that a favorable destination image enhances tourist satisfaction (Ge & Chen, 2024; Bayih & Singh, 2020). Positive destination image is associated with increased tourist satisfaction, which, in turn, encourages greater intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to others (Mutia et al., 2020; Chenchan et al., 2020). Based on these findings, this study forms the third hypothesis:

H3: Destination image has a direct positive effect on tourists' satisfaction

Reference groups, or Subjective Norms, represent the expectations from social circles, such as family, friends, and social media influences, that influence individual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). These groups shape tourists' perceptions by sharing information and experiences, which can significantly impact destination image. Research indicates that reference groups, including social media influencers, can positively shape destination image (Omeish et al., 2024; Najjarzadeh et al., 2022). Tourists with a positive perception of a destination image are often more inclined to follow recommendations from their social circles (Jin et al., 2020). Thus, the researchers have hypothesized:

H4: Reference groups have a direct positive effect on destination image

Risk perception in tourism refers to the likelihood that tourists may encounter potential losses associated with tourism services, activities, or the destination itself, which can influence their destination image. Research has shown that higher perceived risks negatively impact destination image (Nazir et al., 2021; Liang & Xue, 2021). For instance, Yağmur & Aksu (2022) similarly noted that perceived risks across health, psychological, environmental, and financial dimensions negatively influenced the cognitive image. Hences, based on these findings, this study proposes:

H5: Risk perception has a direct negative effect on destination image

These hypotheses collectively provide a framework for understanding the roles of destination image, satisfaction, reference groups, and risk perception in shaping tourists' behavioral intentions, as illustrated in Figure 3.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a quantitative research project aimed at examining the factors influencing the behavioral intentions of Thai tourists visiting Sukhirin. Data was collected through questionnaires from Thai tourists who visited Sukhirin between February and April 2023. The survey gathered information on tourists' demographics, travel behaviors, attitudes toward investigated factors, and behavioral intentions, with a sample size of 300 respondents based on the considerations of

statistical reliability and representativeness. Respondents were selected through stratified random sampling method, ensuring a diverse and representative cross-section of the Thai tourist population in Sukhirin.

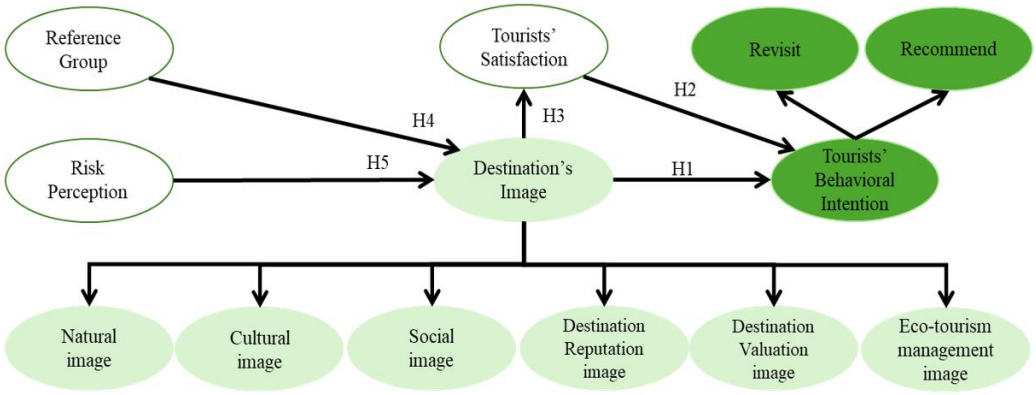

Figure 3. Research Hypotheses (Source: Authors)

This study utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to analyze the data and test the research hypotheses, specifically employing Covariance-based SEM. The R program with the "lavaan" package was used to conduct the SEM analysis. The structural model includes 11 latent variables and 28 measurement indicators, measured on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from disagree, neutral, to agree. These variables encompass behavioral intentions, and the associated determinants as outlined in the research hypotheses, as illustrated in Figure 1. Details of the measurement indicators for each latent variable are presented in Table .1

Table 1 Latent variables and their measurement indicators (Source: Authors)

Latent variable	Measurement indicators
Intention to revisit (RV)	- If I visit Narathiwat, I will try to find an opportunity to revisit Sukhirin (RV1) - I intend to revisit Sukhirin (RV2)
Intention to recommend (RC)	- I recommend my friend to travel to Sukhirin (RC1) - I recommend my family or relatives to travel to Sukhirin (RC1)
Natural Image (NT)	- Sukhirin has no pollution (NT1)
	- Sukhirin has a good environment (NT2)
	- Sukhirin has a clean natural environment (NT3)
Cultural Image (CT)	- Sukhirin shows a unique tradition (CT1) - Sukhirin has a rich cultural/historical heritage (CT2)
	- Sukhirin has a unique local historical culture (CT3)
Social image (SC)	- The way of life of people in Sukhirin is interesting (SC1)
	- People in Sukhirin are friendly, courteous and generous to tourists (SC2)
Destination Reputation image (RT)	- Sukhirin is widely known among tourists (RT1) - Tourist attractions in Sukhirin are widely known among tourists (RT2)
Destination Valuation image	- Product and services in Sukhirin are value for money (VA1)
(VA)	- Traveling expenses in Sukhirin are reasonable (VA2)
Eco-tourism management image (EC)	- Tourism management in Sukhirin supports the ecological initiatives (EC1)
	- Tourism management in Sukhirin is sustainable tourism management (EC2)
	- Tourism management in Sukhirin is responsible towards the environment (EC3)
Tourist satisfaction (ST)	- Satisfaction towards a price to pay for traveling (ST1)
	- Satisfaction towards people (ST2)
	- Satisfaction towards tourism activities (ST3)
	- Satisfaction towards the environment (ST4)
Reference groups' influence (RG)	- My family likes to visit Sukhirin the most (RG1) - Most of your friends recommend me to travel to Sukhirin (RG2)
Risk perception (RP)	- There might be a risk to life and property during travel due to natural disaster (RP1)
	- There might be a risk to life and property during travel due to unrest situation (RP2)
	- There might be a risk to life and property during travel due to an accident (RP3)

In addition to the interested latent variables, other observed variables are also investigated to represent tourists' demographic details and travel behaviors. These variables include age, monthly income, gender, educational level, occupation, religion, nationality, duration of stay, travel expenses, frequency of visits to Sukhirin, and mode of transportation.

In analyzing and testing the hypotheses with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), ensuring the model's over-identification is essential for establishing robustness. This step involves verifying that the number of known equations

exceeds the number of parameters to be estimated. Parameter estimation is then conducted using the Robust Maximum Likelihood method, enabling precise identification of relationships between latent variables and observed indicators.

To evaluate the model's fit with empirical data, four key indices are used: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). Together, these indices provide a comprehensive view of the model's alignment with observed data, offering insights into its appropriateness. If discrepancies arise between the model and empirical data, modifications will be considered. This iterative process aims to refine the relationships between variables, enhancing the model's explanatory power. Modifications will be made judiciously to ensure the model accurately captures the dynamics influencing tourists' behavioral intentions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1) Demographic and Tourists behavior

The majority of Thai tourists visiting Sukhirin are male, with an average age of 29. Most have attained a bachelor's degree and are primarily self-employed business owners, with an average monthly income of 18,299 THB. The majority are Muslim from Narathiwat and other southern provinces. Most Thai tourists visit Sukhirin primarily aiming for relaxation, while nature-based tourism is the next most popular reason. The average length of their stay is about 1.63 days. These tourists usually travel in small, self-organized groups, and the majority expressed that it is their first time visiting Sukhirin. Thai tourists tend to have higher average trip expenses than foreign tourists, with an average expenditure of 2,229.82 THB per trip. In terms of expense categories, transportation costs rank highest, followed by food and beverages, and accommodation.

2) Structural Equation Modeling

The first step in analyzing the structural equation model involves examining the correlation coefficients of the measurement indicators, as shown in Figure 4. It showed that measurement indicators within the same latent variable exhibit high correlation coefficients, visible through the clustering of green pixels along the diagonal of the diagram. Additionally, relationships were also observed between measurement indicators across different latent variables. For instance, the RP1-RP3 group has a clear negative correlation with the NT1-NT3 group, while the VA1-VA2 group shows a positive correlation with the EC1-EC3 group.

The second step is to perform Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the suitability of the measurement indicators for the latent variables. The model's statistical values are as follows: the chi-square test yielded a value of 545.142 with 332 degrees of freedom, showing statistical significance. The CFI and TLI values are 0.953 and 0.946, respectively, which are close to the threshold of 0.95. The RMSEA and SRMR values are 0.046 and 0.078, of which both values are below the thresholds of 0.05 and 0.08, respectively. These results indicate that the model fits well with the empirical data, and the chosen measurement indicators are appropriate for measuring the latent variables.

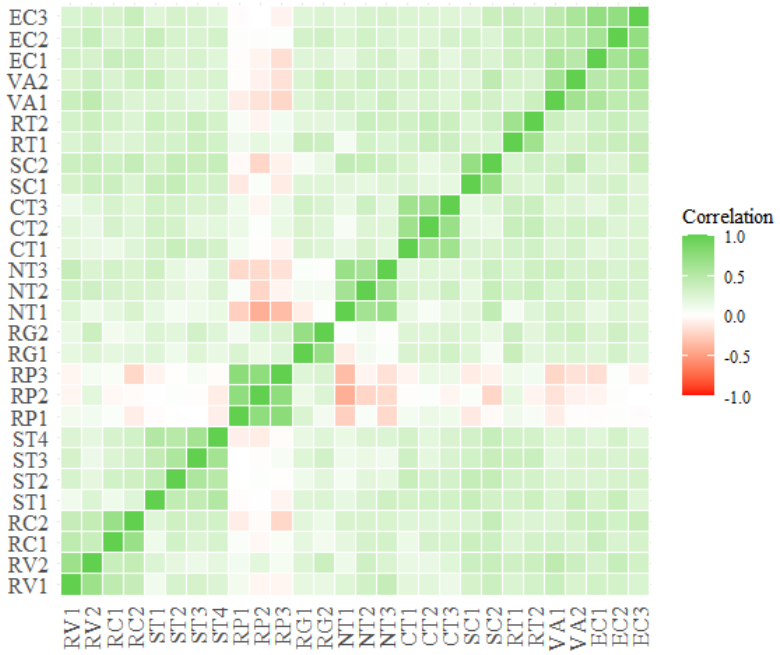

Figure 4. Correlation coefficients of investigated measurement indicators (Source: Authors)

Table 2 showed the loadings of the measurement indicators for each latent variable. It revealed that these loadings exceed 0.6, the AVE values are greater than 0.5, and both CR and Cronbach's alpha values are generally above 0.7. However, the CR values for a few latent variables are below 0.7 but still above 0.6.

According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), CR values slightly below 0.7 but above 0.6 are acceptable, particularly in exploratory research or when other indicators of construct reliability, such as AVE and indicator loadings, meet the necessary thresholds, thereby supporting the reliability of the constructs in this study.

Table 2. First-order Latent Variables, factor loadings of measurement indicators and relevant statistics (Source: Authors)

Latent Variables	Indicators	Loadings	AVE	CR	α
Tourists' Behavioral Intention to Revisit (RV)	RV1 RV2	0.800 0.834	0.667	0.672	0.800
Tourists' Behavioral Intention to Recommend (RC)	RC1 RC2	0.804 0.852	0.686	0.697	0.813
Natural Image (NT)	NT1 NT2 NT3	0.746 0.820 0.857	0.653	0.754	0.842
Cultural Image (CT)	CT1 CT2 CT3	0.804 0.815 0.822	0.661	0.772	0.853
Social Image (SC)	SC1 SC2	0.781 0.908	0.717	0.730	0.829
Destination Reputation Image (RT)	RP1 RP2	0.791 0.813	0.643	0.683	0.782
Destination Valuation Image (VA)	VA1 VA2	0.777 0.814	0.633	0.683	0.774
Eco-tourism management Image (EC)	EC1 EC2 EC3	0.810 0.826 0.867	0.696	0.804	0.868
Tourists' Satisfaction (ST)	ST1 ST2 ST3 ST4	0.699 0.724 0.742 0.742	0.528	0.751	0.807
Influence of Reference Groups (RG)	RG1 RG2	0.791 0.878	0.698	0.733	0.824
Risk Perception (RP)	RP1 RP2 RP3	0.841 0.869 0.879	0.744	0.791	0.900

Additionally, Table 3 presents the loadings of higher-order latent variables, which include Tourist Behavioral Intention (TBI) and Destination Image (DI). The loadings for the latent variables measuring TBI are both above 0.7, indicating that both Intention to Revisit (RV) and Intention to Recommend (RC) serve as effective indicators of TBI. For DI, only two latent variables, Destination Reputation Image (RT) and Destination Valuation Image (VA), have loadings above 0.7. This suggests that the prominent aspects of Sukhirin's image are its reputation and the valuation of traveling. The latent variables with loadings between 0.6 and 0.7, Social Image (SC) and Eco-tourism Management Image (EC), serve as secondary indicators of Sukhirin's image. Meanwhile, Natural Image (NT) and Cultural Image (CT) have loadings below 0.6, indicating that, from tourists' perspectives, Sukhirin's natural and cultural image are less distinctive.

Table 3. Higher order Latent Variables, factor loadings of measurement indicators and relevant statistics (Source: Authors)

Latent Variables	Indicators	Loadings	AVE	CR	α
Tourists' Behavioral Intention (TBI)	Intention to Revisit (RV) Intention to Recommend (RC)	0.787 0.776	0.676	0.778	0.800
Destination Image (DI)	Natural Image (NT) Cultural Image (CT) Social Image (SC) Destination Reputation Image (RT) Destination Valuation Image (VA) Eco-tourism management Image (EC)	0.524 0.594 0.687 0.751 0.737 0.686	0.670	0.905	0.884

Next, the structural equation model was established according to the model hypotheses, as shown in Figure 5. After estimating the model parameters, the Chi-square statistic was found to be 544.019 with 335 degrees of freedom, and the Chi-square statistic was statistically significant. The CFI and TLI values were 0.953 and 0.948, respectively, in which TLI was below the threshold of 0.95. Additionally, the RMSEA and SRMR values were 0.046 and 0.078, which were below the thresholds of 0.05 and 0.08, respectively. The TLI indicates that the model does not yet align well with the empirical data, necessitating modifications to improve the model's fit.

The model was subsequently adjusted by incorporating covariances between the latent variables VA and EC, as well as RP and NT. Additionally, it was found that the path for the second hypothesis, H2: TBI ← ST, was not statistically significant and contributed to model overfitting. This path was therefore removed from the model. A mediation analysis was also conducted to investigate whether ST acts as a mediator between DI and TBI. The results revealed that ST does not significantly mediate this relationship. Although DI has a direct positive effect on TBI, this effect is not transmitted through ST. As a result, this mediating path was excluded from the model.

Following these adjustments, the model fit indices improved. The Chi-square statistic was 468.548 with 334 degrees of freedom, remaining statistically significant. However, the CFI and TLI increased to 0.970 and 0.966, respectively,

both exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.95. The RMSEA decreased to 0.037, and the SRMR dropped to 0.071, both were below the recommended thresholds of 0.05 and 0.08, respectively. These enhancements indicate that the revised model, as depicted in Figure 5, now exhibits a strong alignment with the empirical data.

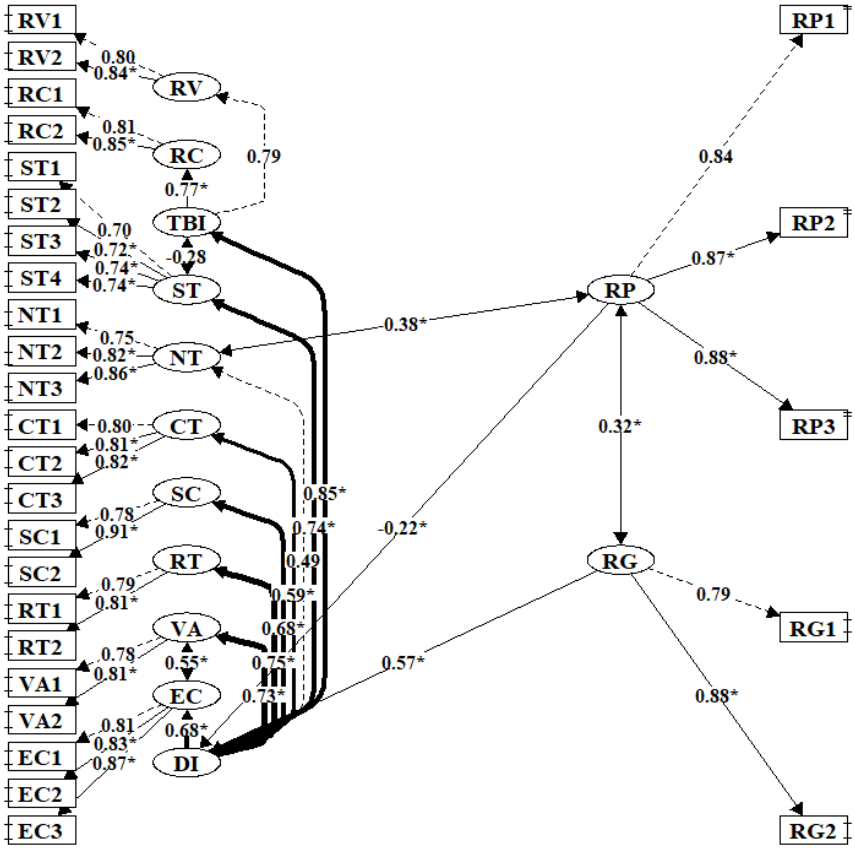

Figure 5 The revised Structural Equation Model (Source: Authors)

The structural model shows that Destination Image (DI) explains 72.4% of the variance in Tourist Behavioral Intention (TBI), indicating a strong predictive power of destination image in influencing tourists' intentions to revisit and recommend the destination. Furthermore, DI accounts for 54.1% of the variance in Tourist Satisfaction (ST), emphasizing its role in enhancing satisfaction levels. However, Reference Groups (RG) and Perceived Risk (RP) only explain 29.2% of the variance in DI. Following Table 4, the path TBI ← DI (H1) demonstrates a strong and highly significant positive effect, indicating that a favorable destination image is critical for driving tourists' behavioral intentions, such as encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. On the other hand, the path TBI ← ST (H2) was found to be non-significant and was subsequently removed from the model. However, the path ST ← DI (H3) remains highly significant, highlighting that a positive destination image significantly enhances tourist satisfaction. Improving the destination's image can effectively boost satisfaction levels among tourists. The path DI ← RG (H4) shows that reference groups positively influence the destination image, while the path DI ← RP (H5) indicates that perceived risks negatively affect the destination image. These findings suggest that social influences significantly shape tourists' perceptions, while minimizing perceived risks can enhance tourists' overall views of the destination.

Table 4. Proposed hypotheses, their coefficients and testing statistics (Source: Authors)

Path		Hypothesis	Coef.	Std. Error	p-value	Std. Coef.
TBI	← DI	H1	1.461	0.246	.000	0.851
ST	← DI	H3	1.406	0.253	.000	0.735
DI	← RG	H4	0.264	0.048	.000	0.569
DI	← RP	H5	-0.096	0.037	.009	-0.221

The study confirms that a positive destination image significantly influences tourists' behavioral intentions, indicating that when tourists perceive a destination positively, they are more likely to revisit and recommend it to others. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of cognitive, affective, and tangible aspects of destination image (Manyangara et al., 2023; Phi et al., 2021). Contrary to expectations, tourist satisfaction did not show a significant direct effect on behavioral intentions, while satisfaction is commonly seen as a predictor of revisits and recommendations (Chenchan et al., 2020; Mutia et al., 2020). The analysis highlights the positive impact of destination image on tourist satisfaction. Attributes like cleanliness, cultural uniqueness, and social environment enhance satisfaction, were found to be consistent with those findings by Bayih & Singh (2020). Thus, enhancing both cognitive

and affective dimensions of destination image is crucial for boosting satisfaction among tourists. Additionally, reference groups positively influence destination image, supporting Ajzen's (1991) theory of subjective norms.

Social networks and influencers play a crucial role in shaping perceptions, with social proof becoming increasingly important (Najjarzadeh et al., 2022). Finally, the study confirms a negative impact of perceived risk on destination image, aligning with Yağmur & Aksu (2022). Hence, high perceived risks can diminish the attractiveness of a destination, highlighting the need for effective risk management to maintain a favorable image of certain destinations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that destination image is a critical factor influencing the behavioral intentions of Thai tourists visiting Sukhirin. Among the key indicators of Sukhirin's image, destination reputation image and destination valuation image are the most influential factors, followed by social image and eco-tourism management image. However, from the tourists' perspective, natural image and cultural image appear to be less distinctive. Additionally, reference groups and perceived risks are two significant factors affecting the destination image. The influence of friends, family, and relatives contributes positively to the destination image, while risks related to natural disasters, unrest situations, and accidents exhibited negative impacts.

To encourage tourists' behavioral intention, revisits and word-of-mouth recommendations, stakeholders involved in tourism in Sukhirin must sustain the positive destination image and enhance weaker aspects of tourism to increase their perceived value among tourists. This involves promoting the global value of Sukhirin's natural attractions, as well as leveraging informal marketing through reference groups that positively shape the destination image.

Additionally, implementing enhanced safety measures and risk management strategies can build tourists' confidence, hence encouraging them to visit and revisit Sukhirin.

The limitation of this study is its specific focus on the perceptions of Thai tourists visiting Sukhirin. However, it can become a benchmark to other destinations in Thailand or ASEAN. Future research should consider expanding the scope to include international visitors, particularly from neighboring Malaysia, or niche markets like birdwatchers and eco-tourists. Perhaps, future research can incorporate a variety of research methods to further validate the findings.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.P. and J.L.; methodology, C.P. and J.L.; software, C.P. and J.L.; validation, C.P. and J.L.; formal analysis, C.P. and J.L.; investigation, C.P.; data curation, J.L.; writing - original draft preparation, C.P. and J.L.; writing - review and editing, C.P. and J.L.; visualization, J.L.; supervision, C.P.; project administration, C.P. and J.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: National Science, Research and Innovation Fund (NSRF) and Prince of Songkla University.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study may be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: This research was supported by National Science, Research and Innovation Fund (NSRF) and Prince of Songkla University (Grant No. HUM6601184S-0).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article history: Received: 22.11.2024 Revised: 04.03.2025 Accepted: 02.04.2025 Available online: 08.05.2025