

THE IMPACT OF CELEBRITY TOURISM ON THE THAI TOURISM INDUSTRY. A STUDY BASED ON NOOM SORN RAM THE APPITAK'S CHINESE FANS BEHAVIORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THAI CELEBRITY TOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Following the Korean culture so called 'Korean wave' has been successfully populated in many Asian countries, Thai entertainments are beginning to appear in the TV programmes in mainland China and has rapidly taken airtime in some of the provinces in mainland China. It has created 'initial Thai wave' among the mainland Chinese audience. However, though there are substantial studies done for Western film culture influences and the Korean culture influences, very limited studies have been done on Thailand film/TV drama influences on the behavior of the mainland Chinese behavior towards Thai tourism industry. This research is using the qualitative research methodology to examine the impact of Thai celebrity Noom Sornram's Chinese fans behavior that contributed to Thai tourism industry. The study provides methodological contributions as well as explores the potential of celebrity tourism to be developed in Thailand.

Keywords: Thai celebrity tourism; Thai tourism industry; Noom Sornram Theappitak; Chinese fans behavior

Introduction

Seven years ago, Thai TV drama was rather new in mainland China, its popularity was far from Thai fragrant rice and Tom Yam Soup. However, since 2009, following the deteriorating in the "Hong Kong and Taiwan wave" and the recent weakening of the "Japanese and Korean wave" is the rising in popularity of "kaka" and "krupkrup" TV drama of Thailand. The Thai TV drama was first aired by China Central Television (CCTV) in 2003, where it began the first exposure of Thai drama in China. As of 2010, China has the world's largest television audience, with a 97% household penetration for TV coverage. On average, China Central Television's (CCTV) programs are seen by about 73 million viewers daily, and a typical viewer spends about 2 hours watching CCTV programs a day (Italian Trade Commission 2011). CCTV has emerged as China's most influential state-owned national TV broadcaster having over 90% of TV network coverage nationwide and has the world's largest audience. Following CCTV was Hunan TV station in 2004, Thai TV dramas had gained its popularity gradually ever since. In 2009, CCTV had released 8 Thai TV dramas to air concurrently, with slogan "The First Thai TV Drama TV station in China" (China Forum 2011).

In the meantime, iQIYI, China's leading advertising supported online television and movie portal that focuses on fully licensed, high-definition, professionally produced contents videos, obtained the exclusive rights to air 6 Thai TV dramas within 6 months period, "blew" the first ever "Thai wave" into the Internet world, with more than 40 million viewing times within a month's airing in one single Thai drama "Ruk Nai Marn Mek" in the internet (Yuegu 2011). It also outnumbered the Korean drama that aired at the same time. Subsequently, Thai TV dramas entered into the golden hours in various China TV stations. In 2009, Anhui TV station aired "Battle in Angels" at 10 p.m.; hit the China's Provincial top 10 TV viewing rates within a week, and the second placing in the entire China viewing rates. This brought the first hit in Thai TV drama in China. The purchases of Thai TV dramas to air in China TV stations rose from 1-2 dramas in 2009 to over 10 dramas in 2011, especially TV station such as Zhejiang Huace Firm & TV Co. Ltd., when it purchased 6 dramas in one purchased. In other word, with Thailand's annual TV productions estimated to be about 50 dramas only, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the yearly TV productions of Thailand TV dramas were purchased and brought in into China market, reported by Chongqing Evening newspaper (2011). Currently, besides the China TV stations that air Thai TV dramas, internet video sites are the main channels of entertainments where mainland Chinese viewers watch the Thai TV drama and movies from. Based on the list provided by Icitez (2011), the existing top 10 online video websites in China are:

Table 1: The Top 10 online video websites in China by daily reach (million visitors)

1	2	3	4	5
Youku.com (26.449)	Tudou.com (16.484)	Xunlei.com (9.89)	Qiyi.com (Baidu) (7.914)	Ku6.com (6.749)
6	7	8	9	10
56.com (6.734)	Cnti.cn (4.734)	Pps.tv (3.073)	Pptv.com (3.051)	joy.cn (2.501)

Source: Data from iResearch Top 10 Online Video Websites in China (Q2 2011)

With the rise of the Thai TV drama in the top video platform in China, Chinese viewers are able to watch Thai dramas on a daily basis in the internet. The effect of the free video platform is gaining boom of Thai popular culture, the trend indicates that Thai popular culture is gaining a fast-growing popularity in mainland China particularly via mass-entertainment products such as MV, songs, movies, or TV dramas. Chinese fans have now becoming more active in visiting Thailand, learning Thai language, tasting Thai food, and experiencing Thai lifestyle.

Existing tourism and leisure literature suggests that mass media serve as a powerful tool for stimulating tourism/leisure demand by having the viewer form certain images and anticipation for what they have watched in the films or television (Connell 2005; Kim and Richardson 2003; Riley and Van Doren 1992; Riley, Baker and Van Doren 1998; Tooke and Baker 1996). However, these studies contributed only the understanding of the impact of mass media on tourism/leisure phenomena, the detailed linkage between the diverse components of mass media and tourism/leisure perceptions and behavior are rarely researched on, where the role of celebrities in the tourism/leisure perception that shaped the fans into the potential tourists to the destination are not thoroughly researched either.

Fans attachment to the celebrity may play an important role in developing perceptions and attitudes in relation to the celebrity. As such, the concept of celebrity fandom is introduced and examined in this study.

Fandom means “fanaticism”, which is a derivative of the word fanum, which means “temple or sacred place” (The American Heritage Dictionary 1985:489). Fan, an abbreviation of *Fanatic*, is the followers of different professional and amateur sports teams (Jenkins 1992). The non-sport, commercial entertainment use was to refer to female theater-goers, known for their admiration for particular actors rather than the films. Media fans and sports fans have become a popular character of scholarly investigation because of the high visibility and familiarity to many individuals (Gibson 2000; Smith 2004). Media fans are the ones who are more devoted to their favorite star itself in their everyday life with more intensity, not only devote their time and money to a star, but also become emotionally attached to the star. For them, fandom becomes a part of everyday life to the point at which it is included as a major part of their self-identity. Thus, it can be said that the level of leisure involvement significantly influences fans’ behavior and attitudes particularly in relation to the supporting star. Furthermore, being a fan provides individuals with risk-free topics of conversation that can help establish social interaction and cohesion (Smith, Patterson, Williams & Hogg 1981). The attachment to the Thai celebrity seems to create an actual demand for tourism in Thailand. The increased number of mainland Chinese tourists to Thailand (Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Thailand 2013) can be attributed to the heightened interest and affection to the Thai celebrities, which points toward the possible linkage between celebrity fandom and tourism. As Morgan and Pritchard (1998) indicated, celebrities not only operate as supporters of tourism, but become icons of tourism themselves.

This objective of the research aims to study the under-researched power of celebrities in shaping mainland Chinese fans’ tourism/leisure related perceptions and behaviors and how the behavior would impact celebrity tourism industry in Thailand. The Thai star to research on is Sornram Theappitak (nickname Noom or Num), a celebrity who has been in the entertainment since 1992 till present. With the results of the findings, the significance of the study will be able to explore the potential of celebrity tourism to be developed in the hospitality & tourism industry in Thailand.

Literature Review

Literature that examines the phenomenon of fandom provides clues about the association between leisure involvement and celebrity fandom and the impact that influence the tourism industry have been identified as celebrity endorsement in advertising, celebrity endorsement in media induced tourism, celebrity endorsement in film induced tourism, where extensive study have been discussed about the influences each of this has impact the tourism. Tourism by endorsing celebrity in film, advertisement, and media as promotion tool to attract tourists is not something new. However, the attraction of tourism in Thailand by using a particular Thai star: Sornram Theappitak and his influence towards the mainland Chinese fans’ contribution to the Thailand tourism has not been researched on.

Tourism potential of icons

The famous individual; or “icon”, as Pearce, Morrison, and Moscardo (2003) first defined famous individuals in their fields of human achievements as “icons” and their discussion focused on the tourism potential of icons. Examples of famous icons and their related tourist attractions include: William J. Clinton in the Presidential Center and Park in Little Rock, Arkansas in the United States; Alexandre Dumas in File Island, Marseille in France; and Zedong Mao in Shaoshan, Hunan in China. The icon used in the research is the celebrity of Thailand. Celebrities have been employed or involved in special tourist resources and potential attractions. However, the academic research focusing on celebrities are very minimal, what more on one particular Thai entertainer Sornram Theappitak.

Celebrity endorsement in advertising

In a study by McCarney and Pinto (2014) in examining the influence of advertising on Chinese outbound travelers and celebrity endorsement strategy in decision making taking Macao as a destination, the findings indicated that the celebrity endorsement tactic did have influence on younger and middle-income tourists, whereas the high income tourists were the most influenced when it came to actual destination selection and purchase. The findings also suggest that resources assigned to celebrity endorsement should be taken into account along with the revenues that will induce from the younger tourists, middle-income tourists, and high-income tourists to Macao. The study suggested that the impact of celebrity endorsement should be tested in each Asian market and ethnic regions, given the many provinces within Asian countries such as China, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, or Indonesia.

Celebrity endorsement in media-induced tourism

Generally the impact of television programs such as drama series or soap operas have been studied with regards to their influence on tourism (Fernandez Young & Young, 2006; Han & Lee, 2006; Iwashita, 2006; Kim, Agrusa, Lee & Chon, 2007). Chang & Teng (2013) in their study suggested that celebrity involvement may be translated into celebrity worship, and the transfer process of construction significant personal meanings will enhance tourists’ intention to visit a travel destination; as such, the tourist will perceive that the benefits are higher than costs, which will result in future behavioral intentions. However, media exposure is also increasingly getting the attention as well. In a suggestion by Mowen & Brown (1981) and Trippet, Jensen & Carlson (1994) that paid celebrity endorsement may not be that effective.

Celebrity endorsement in film-induced tourism

Film-induced tourism is the visits to the destination due to the influence of television, video and DVD (Beeton, 2005). Film-induced tourism has received increased attention over the past decade (Beeton, 2004; Iwashita al, 2006; Macionis & Sparks, 2006; Riley & Baker al, 1998). In general, destinations such as Korea, USA, New Zealand, UK and Australia are popular for film tourism. There have been extensive studies on film-induced tourism focusing on western film and the Korean film, while there has been limited research to investigate the effects of Thai drama series featuring on television, DVD and Internet on the tourist decision although Thai celebrity has gained popularity in Asia. The table below shows the growth in visitor numbers at TV and film locations.

Table 2: The growth in visitor numbers at TV and film locations

Film/TV dramas	Locations	Impact on tourism
Braveheart	Wallace Mounment, Scotland	300% increase in visitors year after release
Bull Durham	Durham, North Carolina	25% increase year after release
Captain Corelli’s Mandolin	Cephalonia, Greece	50% increase over 3 years
Close Encounters of the Third Kind	Devils Tower, Wyoming, U.S.	75% increase in 1975 20% visit now because of the film
Crocodile Dundee	Australia	21% increase every year 1991-1998 from U.S.
Dances with Wolves	Fort Hayes, Kansas, U.S.	25% increase compared with 7% for previous 4 years
Dallas	Southfork Ranch, Dallas	500,000 visitor per year
Deliverance	Rayburn Country, U.S.	20,000 film tourist a year
Field of Dreams	Iowa, U.S.	35,000 visits in 1991 Steady increase every year
Forrest Gump	Savannah, Georgia, U.S.	7% increase in tourism
Four Weddings and a Funeral	The Crown Hotel, Amersham, England	Fully booked for at least 3 years
Gorillas in the Mist	Rwanda	20% increase in 1998

Harry Potter	Various locations in U.K.	50% or more increase
Heartbeat	Goathland, North Yorkshire, England	3 times the number of normal visitors in 1991
Steel Magnolias	Louisiana	48% increase year after release
Last of the Mohicans	Chimney Rock Park, North Carolina	25% increase year after release
Little Women	Orchard House, Concord, Massachusetts	65% increase year after release
Mission Impossible 2	National Parks in Sydney, Australia	200% increase in 2000
Miami Vice	Miami, U.S.	150% increase 1985-1988 from German
Middlemarch	Stamford, Lincolnshire, England	27% increase in 1994
Mrs. Brown	Osborne House, U.K.	25% increase
Notting Hill	Kenwood House, England	10% increase in one month
Pride and Prejudice	Lyme Park in Cheshire, U.K.	150% increase
Saving Private Ryan	Normandy, France	40% increase from U.S.
Sense & Sensibility	Saltram House, England	39% increase
The Beach	Thailand	22% increase in youth market in 2000
The Fugitive	Dillsboro, North Carolina	11% increase year after release
The Lord of the Rings	New Zealand	10% increase every year 1998-2003 from U.K.
Thelma and Louise	Arches National Monument in Moab, Utah, U.S.	19.1% increase in 1991
To the Manor Born	Cricket St Thomas Leisure Park, England	37% increase between 1978-1980
Troy	Canakkale, Turkey	73% increase in tourism
Winter Sonata	Nami Island, Korea	2,600% increase in 2004 from Japan

Sources: Busby, Brunt and Lund (2003); Croy and Walker (2003); Riley, Baker, and Van Doren (1998); Riely and van Doren (1992); Tooke and Baker (1996)

Thai tourism situation

What is the role of Thai government in the tourism industry? In 2012, Thailand achieved 22 million tourists arrivals marked for the first time with two markets, China and Malaysia; that generated more than two million annual arrivals each. (Svetasreni, 2013) According to the Thailand visitor arrival report From January to May 2013, Thailand received a total of 1.9 million mainland Chinese arrivals (+93%). China crossed the one million tourists marked back in March 2013. This shows that the number of China tourists have sharply increased since 2012, an up of 93% in total tourist arrivals. As such, what are the tourism plans Thai tourism sectors have prepared themselves?

In the speech given by the Governor, Tourism Authority of Thailand at the British Chamber of Thailand Special Luncheon Meeting (2013), Svetasreni has indicated that the TAT strategies in 2013:

Thai tourism sector has introduced the DISCO plan that comprises five components:

D is for Digital Marketing

I is for Image Building

S is for sustainability

C is for Crystallization and Crisis Communication

O is for Organization Management

The Governor further reported about the image building in which Thailand is working with Thai celebrities to promote Thailand:

Image building is not confined only to colorful ads, but also involves in essence taking Thainess to the world at every high-profile opportunity. In this regard, we go to great length to maintain consistency when we work with celebrities to promote Thailand, when we have exposure at major international events like the recently concluded Monaco Grand Prix, the Paestum Balloon Festival in Italy, the Sapporo Snow Festival in Japan, and BNP Paribas Tennis Open at Indian Wells in the United States, as well as leveraging the success of movies and TV programmes filmed here like Lost in Thailand and The Bachelor in the United States. (Svetasreni al, 2013)

The speech showed the awareness of the Thailand Tourism authority in using celebrity in their promotion strategic plan. The Department of Tourism Thailand al (2013) indicated that its new tourism promotion measures included a 30-day extension of stay for visitors from 48 countries and one territory, in addition to the free visa for Chinese guests, although tourists from many other countries don't need holiday visas.

Celebrity Involvement

The term celebrity involvement is used to describe the affection and attachment of fans toward a celebrity. Havitz and Dimanche (1997:256) referred to the concept of involvement as “unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product.” They further argued that it is evoked by

particular stimulus or situation and has drive properties. In other word, celebrity is an object of leisure involvement for fans; whereas involvement is about the length and frequency of activity participation (Park 1996; Schuett 1995; Venkatraman 1988), expenditure associated with a chosen leisure activity (Bloch 1993; Siegenthaler and Lam 1992), and a future intention to participate in a chosen leisure activity (McCarville, Crompton and Sell 1993; Norman 1991). Although there were research findings illustrated that there were influences of celebrity on diverse aspects of society, but few studies have been conducted to explore the celebrity fan experiences particularly as a part of leisure activity. The celebrity does have influence over his/her fans' attitude toward intention to visit Thailand, which this research aims to study on.

Methodology

This study aims to examine the extent to which mainland Chinese who are fans of Thai celebrity – Num Sornram Theappitak influence their perceptions of Thailand as a tourism destination.

Research Study Design

In this research, authors were to design the methodology by using the questionnaire and conducting interviews.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire in this study consists of two sets of questionnaire, 1) the demography characteristics and 2) attitude and behavior about Thai celebrity – Num Sornram Theappitak. The questionnaire was translated from English to Chinese and native Chinese speakers who are both proficient in Chinese and English translated it. This process is to ensure the accuracy of multilingual survey instrument (Soriano and Foxall, 2002). The questionnaire was designed for open-ended text responses and the data analysis was collected from the 'Survey Monkey' website. Prior to the data collection, the questionnaire was checked by a senior fan of Sornram who is one of the pioneers in the 'Baidu Tieba Num Bar' forum for the validity of the questions asked. It is only valid that since it is a survey about Sornram, that it was checked and consulted by a senior Nuomi (nickname for Sornram Chinese Fan Club (SFCC)) or “sticky rice” (a popular food in Thailand). A pretest of revised questionnaire was conducted to one of the Nuomi fan to test if the system in the survey works in an attempt to answer to all the survey questions before the questionnaires were distributed for data collection.

Focus group selection

The population of this research is primarily from mainland Chinese who are over 18-year old and reside in China. The sample of this study was collected from Baidu Tieba Num Bar in China. It is an online forum where Sornram's fans “Nuomi” blog. Since this study is related to Sornram, it is right to collect data from the Bai Tieba Num Bar where all his Chinese fans are blogging. Baidu Tieba Num Bar provides an alternative context to contact a reasonably diverse range of fans in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. However, the data collected does not necessarily represent the opinion of the entire mainland Chinese's fan populations.

Analysis and Findings

Analysis

The sample size for the study consists of 42 respondents. The survey questionnaire is combined into two sections which are the demography characteristics and attitude and behavior about Thai Star –Num Sornram Theappitak. The first section is to explain the difference in fan's attributes and knowledge about Thailand. This part included (1) age group, (2) marital status, (3) education, (4) occupation, (5) monthly income before tax, (6) views and image of Thailand, (7) familiarity with Thailand as travel destination; how much the respondents' perception by seeing and hearing about Thailand through which channel, (8) familiarity with Thai culture, (9) a view of past experience about Thailand and (10) the intention to visit Thailand.

(1) Age	Below 20 years old, 2.38% ; 21-30, 33.33% ; 31-40%, 33.33% ; 41-50, 30.95% ; above 51 years old, 0.00%
(2) Marital Status	Single, 35.71% ; Married, 64.29%
(3) Education Level	Below secondary school, 14.29% ; Secondary school, 19.05% ; University, 61.90% ; Post-graduate, 4.76%
(4) Occupation	Student, 2.38% ; Full-time employee, 80.95% ; Housewife, 14.29% ; Self-employed, 9.52% ; Retired, 2.38%
(5) Monthly Income Before Tax	RMB 1,000-2,000, 7.14% ; RMB 2,000-4,000, 21.43% ; RMB 4,000-6,000, RMB 6,000-10,000, 23.81% ; Above RMB 10,000, 11.90%

<p>(6) Image of Thailand – perception of Thailand as a travel destination.</p>	<p>(A) Good value for travel expenditure – Strongly Disagree, 2.38%; Disagree, 0.00%; Neutral, 16.67%; Agree, 38.10%; Strongly Agree, 42.86% (B) Interesting of history/culture – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 0.00%, Neutral, 7.14%; Agree, 57.14%; Strongly Agree, 35.71% (C) Scenery/Natural Attraction – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 0.00%; Neutral, 0.00%; Agree, 35.71%; Strongly Agree, 64.29% (D) Appealing of local food cuisine – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 2.38%; Neutral, 0.00%; Agree, 38.10%; Strongly Agree, 59.52% (E) Good nigh-life entertainment – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 9.52%; Neutral, 30.95; Agree, 35.71; Strongly Agree, 23.81% (F) Good quality of transportation – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 9.52%; Neutral, 50%; Agree, 23.81%; Strongly Agree, 16.67% (G) Standard hygiene and cleanliness – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 2.38%; Neutral, 35.71%; Agree, 42.86%, Strongly Agree, 19.05% (H) Suitable accommodations – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 0.00%; Neutral, 4.76%; Agree, 42.86%; Strongly Agree, 35.71% (I) Smiling & Friendliness of Thai people – Strongly Disagree, 0.00%; Disagree, 0.00%; Neutral, 4.76%; Agree, 42.86%, Agree , 52.38%</p>
<p>(7) Familiarity with Thailand – list of information & sources on how much you’ve seen or heard about Thailand through which sources</p>	<p>(A) Travel Agency brochures – None, 19.05%; Some, 45.23%; A Great Deal, 35.71% (B) Film/TV drama/ other media products – None, 2.38%; Some, 33.34%; A Great Deal, 64.29% (C) Advertisement in magazine or TV – None, 4.76%; Some, 45.23%; A Great Deal, 50.00% (D) Articles from newspapers/magazine – None, 4.76%; Some, 52.37%; A Great Deal, 42.86% (E) Thailand tourist maps – None, 16.67%; Some, 45.23%; A Great Deal, 38.10% (F) Travel books – None, 16.67%; Some, 47.61%; A Great Deal, 35.71% (G) Word of mouth information from friends & relatives – None, 0.00%; Some, 54.75%; A Great Deal, 45.24% (H) Internet – None, 0.00%; Some, 26.19%; A Great Deal, 73.81%</p>
<p>(8) Familiarity with Thailand – list of different aspects of Thailand culture</p>	<p>(A) Thai language – Not at all, 35.71%; Somewhat Familiar, 64.29%; Extremely Familiar, 0.00% (B) History of Thailand – Not at all, 14.29%; Somewhat Familiar, 85.92%; Extremely Familiar, 0.00% (C) Thai Food – Not at all, 21.43%; Somewhat Familiar, 73.81%; Extremely Familiar, 4.76% (D) Thai Lifestyle – Not at all, 21.43%; Somewhat Familiar, 76.19%; Extremely Familiar, 2.38% (E) Popular of Thai Culture – Not at all, 19.05%; Somewhat Familiar, 78.57%; Extremely Familiar, 2.38%</p>
<p>(9) Past experience with Thailand</p>	<p>(A) How many trips have you made to Thailand? - Once, 21%; 2 to 10 times, 17%; Never, 62% (B) What was your purpose of trip to Thailand? – Tour, 40%; Because Thai Star is my idol, 10%; To see Thai Star, 26%; Tour & Work, 5%; If there’s chance will see him, 2%; Fan Meeting, 5%; Tour & Fan Meeting, 10%; None, 1% (C) Have you been to Sornram fan meeting? - Yes, 17%; No, 83% (D) How many times have you been to Sornram fan meeting? – Yes, 17%; No, 83% (E) Will you meet Sornram at the fan meeting and tour Thailand at the same time? – Yes, 93%; No, 2%; Maybe, 5% (F) What is your estimated budget to tour Thailand? – Below RMB10,000, 21%; RMB 10,000-20,000, 53%; RMB 30,000 & Above, 5%; No plan & depends on the needs, 19%; No limit, 2%</p>
<p>(10) Intention to visit Thailand</p>	<p>(A) Being a fan of Sornram, does it impacting your interest toward Thailand? – Yes, 96%; No, 2%; A Little, 2% (B) Being a fan of Sornram, does it impacting your desire to travel to Thailand? – Yes, 98%; No, 2% (C) Since you became a fan of Sornram, do you think you have contributed to the Thailand celebrity tourism? – Yes, 79%; No, 9% (D) Would you continue to contribute to Thailand tourism? – Yes, 100%</p>

Table 3.1 represents several demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. The overall distribution of different age group seems to have a similar result presented, there was considerably higher presence of age group between 21-30 years (33.33%), 31-40 years (33.33%), followed by 41-50 years (30.95%), below 20 years (2.38%) made up the smallest group which is 2.38% and none of age above 51 years old. A higher presence of married (64.29%) than single (35.71%), this disproportionate presence of married women appears to identify that the Thai star has more influenced to the married women. In terms of education, university degree constitutes the majority (61.90%) of the respondents in this study, followed by secondary school (19.05%), below secondary school (14.29%) and post-graduate (4.76%). The result shows that full-time employees were (80.95%), housewife (14.29%), self-employed (9.52%), and same percentage resulted of student and retired person for (2.38%). Based on earning monthly income, the majority group of respondents earn RMB 4,000-6,000 (35.71%), RMB 6,000-10,000 (23.81%), RMB 2,000-4,000 (21.43%), above RMB 10,000 (11.90%), and RMB 1,000-2,000 (7.14%).

For the image of Thailand about the perception of Thailand as a travel destination to explore on what Thailand is likely to offer to them. In this question, authors used rating scales to measure and compare sets of

variables from 1-5 (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree) where strongly agreed from respondent were: on good value for travel expenditure (42.86%), while slightly (57.14%) was interested in history and culture, majority of respondents of (64.29%) were interested in natural attraction and scenery, appealing local Thai food cuisine (59.52%), good night life entertainment (35.71%), good quality of transportation (50%), standard hygienic and cleanliness (42.86%), suitable accommodations (38.10%) and lastly smiling and friendly Thais (52.38%). In the category of familiarity with Thailand in terms of information sources on how much you've seen or heard about Thailand through which information channel; there was a highly presence considerably in internet, followed by film/TV drama and other media products, word of mouth information from friends & relatives, articles from newspapers/magazine advertisement in magazine or TV, travel books, travel agency brochures and Thailand tourist maps. With regards to familiarity with Thai culture, respondents were mostly familiar in history of Thailand, followed by popular of Thai culture, Thai lifestyle, Thai food, and lastly Thai language. Past experience with Thailand from respondents, there was a high percentage whom never been to Thailand (62%), travelled once (21%) and more than two times (17%). The purpose of trip to Thailand, about (40%) presented to tour in Thailand, followed by (26%) to see Thai Star, tour & fan meeting (10%), because Thai Star is my idol (10%), fan meeting (5%), tour & work (5%), if has chances will see Thai Star (2%) and none (1%). About (83%) the respondents never been to Thai Star fan meeting and (17%) had been to meeting. Most respondents (93%) are willing to meet Thai Star at the fan meeting and tour Thailand at the same time, where (5%) are not sure and (2%) will not see him. As for budget to tour Thailand, over (53%) will spend RMB 10,000-20,000, below RMB 10,000 (21%), No plan and depends of needs (19%), RMB 30,000 and above (5%), and no limit falls (2%). In the last part, we discussed about the intention to visit Thailand, most of respondents as fan of Thai Star agreed that it is impacting their interests towards Thailand (96%) and also impacting their desire to travel to Thailand (98%). Since they become fan of a Thai Star, most of the respondents have distributed to the Thailand celebrity tourism for (79%) and they admitted to continue to contribute to Thailand tourism (100%).

The second section of survey questionnaire is to explain the attitude and behavior about Sornram. This part is mainly discussed about the leisure involvement and the behavior related to Sornram. The leisure involvement is to raise interest towards recreational activity or associated product. (Havitz and Dimanche 1997; Rothschild 1984). The diagram below has shown the results of leisure involvement of Sornram.

Figure 3.2: Leisure Involvement

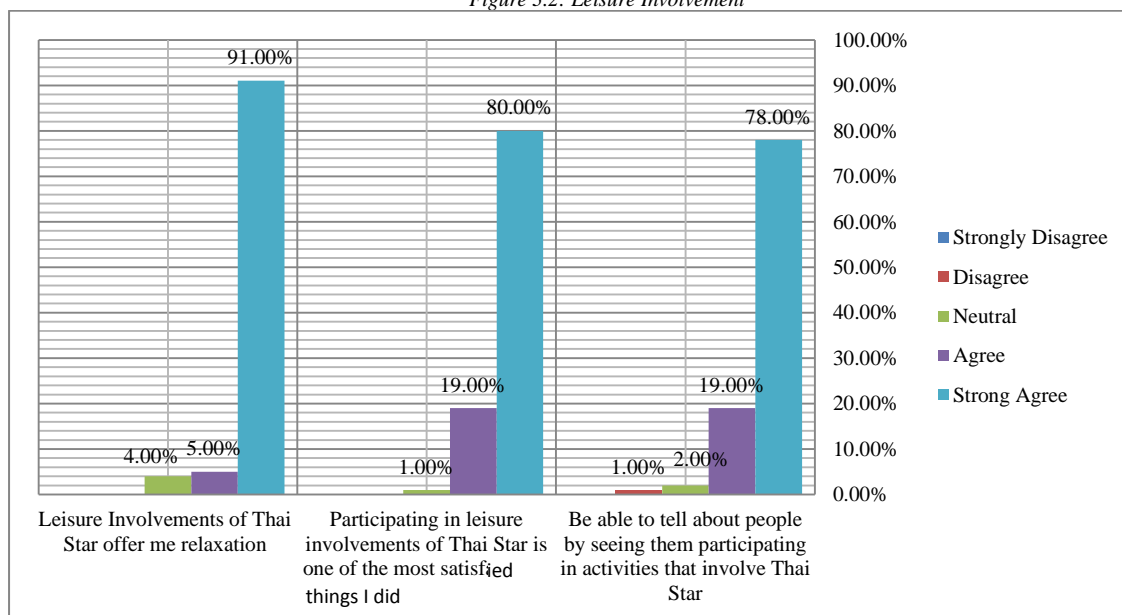


Figure 3.2 - In the category of leisure involvement of Sornram, respondents were mostly agreed (91%) that Sornram offered them relaxation, they also admitted (80%) that participating in leisure involvements of Sornram is one of the most satisfied things they do and they strongly agree that they can tell about people by seeing them participating in activities that involve Sornram (78%).

Figure 3.3.1: Behavior Related to Thai Star

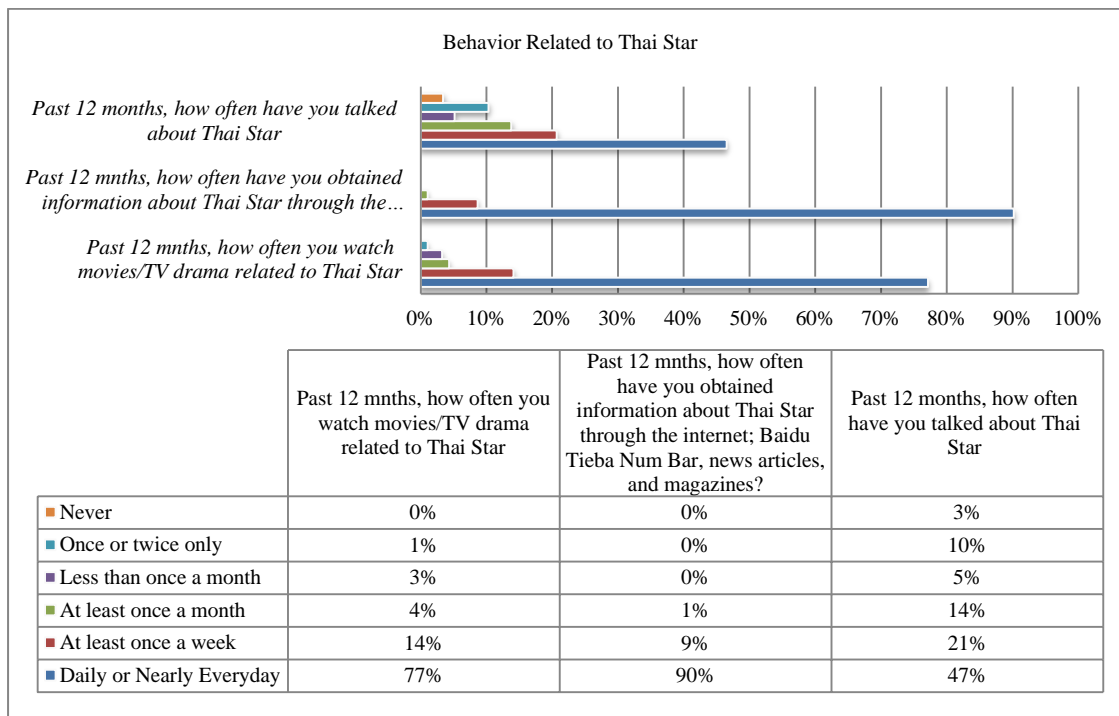
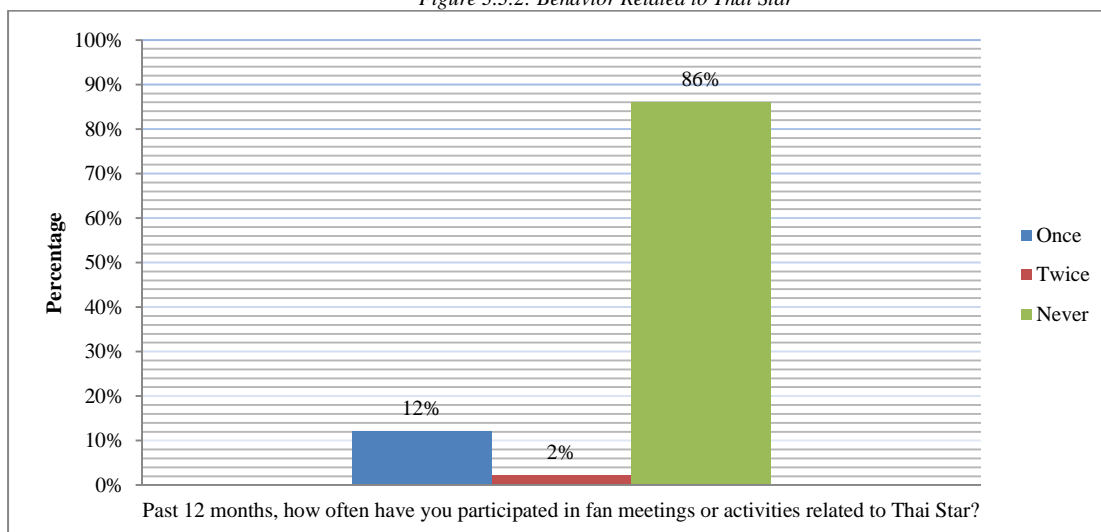
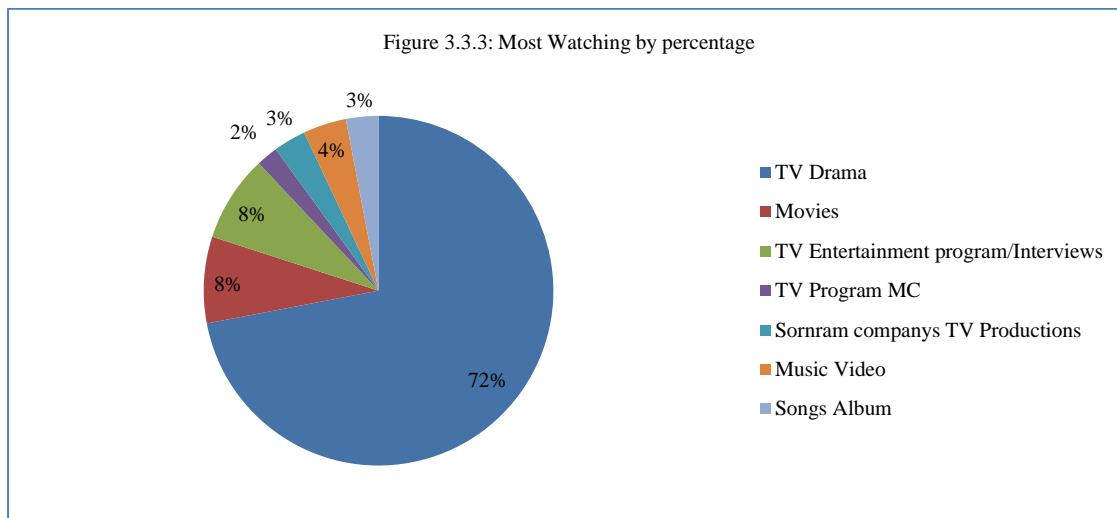


Figure 3.3.1 - In this category, the researcher would want to learn about respondents' behavior and attitude toward Sornram in over the past 12 months. About (77%) were on daily or almost everyday basis of watching movies/TV drama related to Sornram; over (90%) of respondents often obtained information related to Mr. Sornram through the internet, Baidu Tieba Num Bar, news articles and magazines and (47%) were talked about Sornram to others.

Figure 3.3.2: Behavior Related to Thai Star



In over the past 12 months, (86%) were participated in fan meetings or activities related to Sornram. (Figure 3.3.2)



The above diagram (Figure 3.3.3) represents media productions related to Sornram that is the most watched by percentage; TV drama presence the highest percentage (72%), followed by movies (8%), TV entertainment program/interviews (8%), music video (4%), Sornram’s production company’s Ritthiram TV programmes (3%), songs from albums (3%) and Thai TV program and MC in TV program (2%).

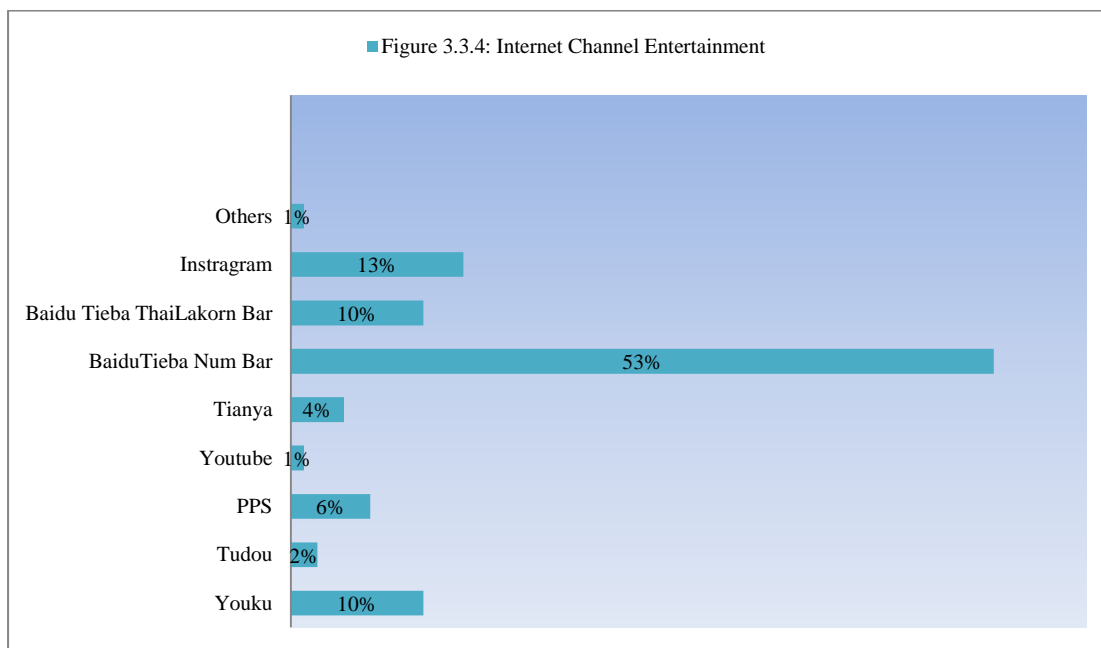


Figure 3.3.4 – respondents mostly learnt entertainment information through Baidu Tieba Num Bar (53%) website, followed by Instagram (13%), Baidu Tieba ThaiLakorn Bar (10%), Youku Video (10%), PPS (6%), Tianya Forum (4%), Tudou Video (2%), Youtube (1%) and others (1%).

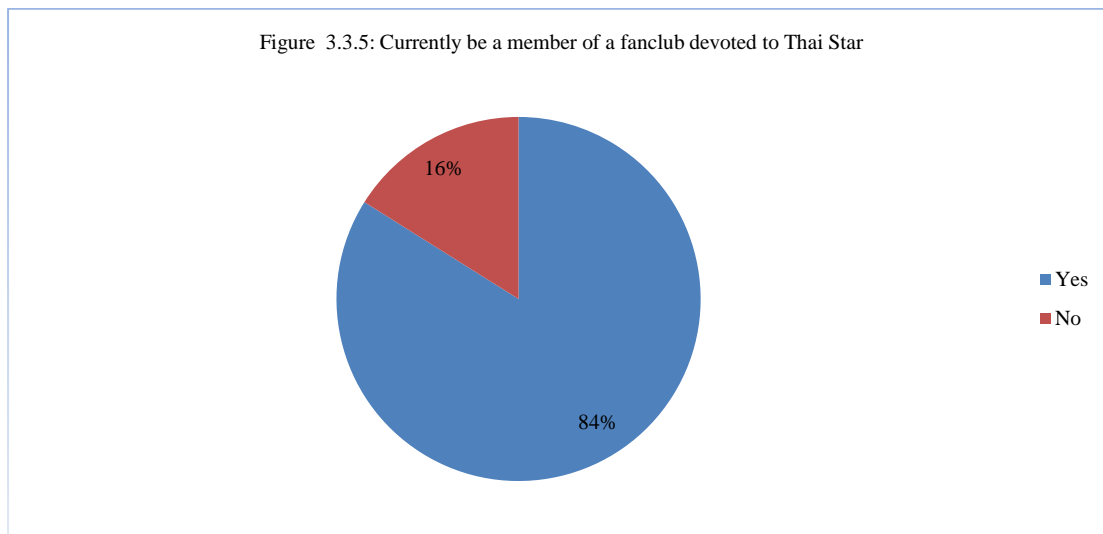


Figure 3.3.5 shows that about (84%) of respondents are currently members of Sornram Fan Club, China (SFCC) devoted to Sornram and (16%) are not member yet.

Findings

As survey was conducted with only 42 respondents, the findings of this study should not be generalized to all the Chinese fans population of Thai Star. In other words, this study does not necessarily represent the opinions of the entire Chinese fans population. Authors had two data collections from survey and conducting interview. This provides options for research strategy that helps to extent the understanding of the relationship between the celebrity involvement and Thailand as travel destination.

First, the demography characteristics and attitude of the respondents' part; most of respondents fall in the age range between 21-50 year old and married counts for 65%. About 62% of respondents earned university degree, where exceeding 80% are full-time employee. The top 24%, with the monthly income RMB 6,000-10,000 and the lowest of 7% monthly income earned for RMB 1,000-2,000. Respondents point of view over the image and perception of Thailand as a travel destination, they are mostly fully agreed that Thailand provides good value for travel expenditure, interesting history/culture, scenery and natural attraction, appeal towards local food cuisine, good night life entertainment, good quality of transportation, standard hygiene and cleanliness, suitable accommodations and friendliness of Thai people. As the result shows, familiarity with Thailand has the most powerful influence on Thai history to influence on travel intention. In other words, respondents like to travel to Thailand when they are familiar with Thailand information and culture. In additions, the respondents perceive good image of Thailand as a travel destination. As the data collected on past experience with Thailand, 62% of the respondents have never been to Thailand but they are willing and plan to travel soon. For the respondents whom travelled to Thailand before, their purpose of travelling is mostly to tour Thailand 40% and followed by 26% to see Thai Star. This represents almost half of respondents had experience to travel to Thailand and 26% purposely just to see their Thai Star where 83% have been to Thai Star fan meeting. Nevertheless, respondents are willing to meet Thai star at the fan meeting and tour Thailand at the same time. This reveals that respondents want to spend time with their favorite star as well as travel to Thailand.

To extend of the findings, there are two aspects of intention to travel to Thailand and what type of fan you belong to; the first criterion of respondents is (1) to meet star in fan meetings and tour Thailand at the same time and below is the supported statement:

“Sornram is an excellent actor. He has over 25 years of hard work in the Thai entertainment industry, likewise years of passions in charity involvements and extremely filial towards his parents. Therefore, I want to meet him in fan meeting and tour Thailand at the same time. One important thing that I like about him is because he cares for his fans and all his fan meetings were under his expense and all proceeds go to charity organizations. Because of him I made several trips to Thailand and I discovered that Thais are friendly people, with beautiful scenery, and good food which increase my intention to tour Thailand again and again.”

The next reason from respondents is (2) no intention to meet star, but will tour Thailand. This is one example:

“It started with watching his drama, his gentle and soft voice and excellence in acting drew my attention. I like his temperament, moral quality, his passion in his work, most of all he's a superstar

who lives an ordinary life. However, I have no intention to meet him but would like to tour Thailand. Sometimes, I did think of meeting him but I chose to look at him from a distant instead and keep him in my heart. As such, a fan meeting is not the best way of seeing him but I will still tour Thailand. I want to get a feel of the country's scenery and culture where he lives in. By watching his dramas made me wanting to tour Thailand"

Another example of no intention to meet star, but will tour Thailand as follows:

"He is an excellence actor and a good moral quality person. I have no intention to meet him because it is better to keep him in my memory, seeing him from far is enough for me. As for touring Thailand, I want to see what kind of beautiful country that nurtures such modest, peaceful, filial, cute, energetic, hardworking and goal oriented person."

Based on the research findings, over half of respondents will spend RMB 10,000 to RMB 20,000 to tour Thailand. This is a contribution of foreign currency into Thailand tourism industry from China fans of Sornram.

The Second section is to discuss about the attitude and behavior about Thai Star in the aspects of leisure involvement with a celebrity. From the findings of leisure involvement that involve Thai Star offers respondent to increase relaxation and induce a balanced mental and the result has shown high percentage in participating in leisure involvements provides a good way to relax and it satisfied them the most. In the result of frequency of leisure activities over the past one-year, more than half of respondents agreed that they watch the movies/TV programs daily, obtaining information about Sornram through Internet and talking about him with others. This indicates that respondents want to keep update about him every day. Besides, 86% of respondents have never participated in fan meeting. The result of entertainment productions that they mostly watch is TV drama 72%, this may illustrate that TV drama has a strong influence and Interest towards Chinese fan, which exposed wide-range of Thai culture and traditions. About 53% of respondents used the Baidu Tieba Num Bar as an Internet channel of entertainment to follow and learn information about Sornram. This implies that Baidu Tieba Num Bar provides the most powerful source of search engine for an online community where fans can update recent information about him. This study has shown that 84% are members for the Sornram Fan Club, China that devote to Sornram.

Conclusion

This study aims to examine the extent to which mainland Chinese who are fans of Thai celebrity – Num Sornram Theappitak leisure involvement influence their perceptions of Thailand as a tourism destination. A survey questionnaire and interview were conducted at Sornram Fan Club (SFCC) of Baidu Tieba Num Bar, to examine mainland Chinese' intention to tour Thailand in relation to their leisure involvement with Thai celebrity. Qualitative methodology was used by designed survey questions and interviews to test the model. Three models were then developed from the findings:

The result of the findings for intention to visit Thailand – Sornram, the celebrity icons, has direct impact for his fans to visit Thailand. Furthermore, most of respondents admitted that they contributed to Thailand celebrity tourism and all of them will continue to contribute it. Therefore, the motivation of mainland Chinese fans to visit Thailand and contribute to Thailand tourism literally derives from Thai star Sornram.

Attached to Thai celebrity Sornram

The first model that impacts the mainland Chinese fans toward Thai star Sornram that affect their intention to tour Thailand is how much they are 'attached' to Sornram. From the findings, the author concludes that the mainland Chinese fans' level of celebrity involvement positively affected destination familiarity and visitation intention. It was the high frequency of their viewing of Sornram's TV dramas/films that created the desires to know more about Thailand, thus eventually lead to the destination intentions. It began from viewing the Thai TV drama/films, the mainland Chinese fans came to know about Sornram, and subsequently because of the high attachment to the Sornram that created the intention to visit Thailand.

This study has significance contribution to existing tourism literature. First of all, it introduces a concept of celebrity fandom that impacting the tourism studies. It therefore contributes a theoretical understanding of how fans' frequency in participating in mass media influence tourism attitudes and behaviors. Second, although leisure involvement has been receiving extensive research over the last two decades (Guttmann 1986; Jenkins al 1992; Leerhsen 1986), however, its application to celebrity fandom has been under-researched. This study helps expand the applicability of leisure involvement concept by researching it within the context of media celebrity fandom. This study suggests that fans' attachment to a celebrity can be analyzed as a privilege kind of leisure activity, which has been under-researched by leisure scholars. For a study of Sornram's mainland Chinese fans in this research, an attachment to a celebrity is a mean of attaining pleasure, expressing self-identity, and

developing social networks among the fans that have the same preference for Sornram. Future research could be focused more on the differences between the celebrity fandom and conventional leisure activities.

Fandom Forum of Thai Star Sornram – Baidu Tieba Num Bar

The second model of the finding is the ‘fandom forum’ that mainland Chinese fans gather together sharing their views and critiques on the TV drama/films and other information related to Thai star Sornram in the forum. About 53 % of the respondents used the Baidu Tieba Num Bar as an Internet channel of entertainment to follow and collect information about their favorite Thai star. BaiduTieba Num Bar forum acts as the most powerful source that bondage the fans throughout China together, in the journey of their fandom toward Sornram when 90 % of them use the Num Bar on a daily basis to obtain information related to Sornram. In addition, 84 % of the respondents are devoted members at the Num Bar. Baidu Tieba Num Bar provides a home for Sornram’s Chinese fans with risk free topics of conversation that can help establish social interaction and cohesion. They tend to develop feelings of solidarity with friends who support the same Thai star in that “SFCC, home of Sornram in China.”

This study contributes to expand the applicability of leisure involvement model, which has been tested in North America contexts, but this model has not been tested in Asian settings. This study confirms the validity of the fandom involvement in diverse cultural settings.

Motivation to visit Thailand

The third model of the study is the “motivation” from fandom of a Thai star that leads to their intention to tour Thailand. Based on the interviews results, there are 3 types of fandom’s attitude toward their favorite Thai star Sornram. More than 65% of the 42 respondents wanted to meet Sornram in person and tour Thailand at the same time. Whereas about 35% of the fans chose not to meet Sornram in person because they chose to see him from a distant and keep him in their memory instead, but the intention to visit Thailand still exists. None of the total respondents said that they have no intention to meet Sornram and no intention to visit Thailand. In other words, even when the mainland Chinese fans have no intention to meet Sornram for their own reasons, but the intention to visit Thailand remains. This is the influence from a Thai celebrity on the tourism in Thailand. As such, the mainland Chinese fans motivation to tour Thailand derived from Thai star Sornram and that they will continue to contribute to the Thailand tourism industry. The finding also reflects that fans’ familiarity with Thailand has the most powerful influence on travel intention. In other words, respondents like to travel to Thailand when they are familiar with Thailand information and culture, and familiarity with Thailand comes from the attachment to Sornram. The above discussed about the 3 models of fandom impacting their intention to tour Thailand.

Limitation and Future Research

This study has some methodological limitations. The first limitation is the sample utilized in this study; the site for sampling was limited to one specific group. As such, a caution should be taken to generalize the findings from this study to other population. This finding reflects the views of mainland Chinese people’s perception and attitudes towards their favorite Thai star Sornram, therefore, future research should be conducted in more diverse contexts with different population in order to enhance the external validity of the study results.

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