# DIGITAL MOBILITY AND THE CHANGING FAÇADE OF TOURISM LANDSCAPE: A CASE STUDY OF SELF- DRIVE EXCURSIONISTS, CENTRAL THAILAND ROUTES

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**Abstract-** This paper investigated travel motivation, planning behavior and experiences utilizing the case study of Thai self-drive excursionists driving along the Central Thailand routes. The study employed the qualitative approach with the snowball sampling technique and the semi structure in- depth interview. The findings revealed the significance of information retrieval from the technological mobile device in assisting in-situ travel planning, whereas the signage were useful with some limitations; these addressed an importance of physical and information flow in tourism logistics for destination management. The self- drive tourism market was also characterized by socially fun and pleasurable atmosphere along the roadand information technological- oriented behavior. The travel experiences underlined the respondents' consumption in leisure in attachment with eating and shopping, value of time spent with friends and family, and frequent en route stops. The findings contributed to a better understanding of this immensely growing tourism market of Thailand, particularly in terms of creative tourism products development, regional tourism promotion, creative souvenir sector, improvement of car- based infrastructure and services and road landscapes, as to motivate more frequent holidays and higher spending out of the tourism enclaves.

**Keywords**- Digital Mobility, In- Situ Travel Planning, Self- Drive Excursionist, Tourism Landscape.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of urbanization where most parts of the world have become urbanized, Asia including Thailand and some other developing countries has changed in many aspects including patterns of traveling and spending on leisure time of its residents. People started to travel more frequently especially within short and longer distance both for weekends and long holiday. Short break traveling is usually based on road transport, which is a preferable for short distance. Thailand's domestic tourism has mainly based on self- driving. Having car ownership in Thailand continued to reach at rapid level, self-driving tour has gained high popularity among Thai visitors. Most of them use private car as the main vehicle in traveling within the country. Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has also launched the self- drive touring campaign to promote domestic travel during green season and created different themed routes aiming to boosting the domestic travel market and responding new generation travelers' lifestyle and variety of demands. The self- drive touring routes suggested by the TAT present the highlighted tourist attractions each region offers to driving excursionists and they can be categorized into cultural, historical and natural attractions. Routes around the central part of Thailand are perfectly suitable for short trips originated from Bangkok during weekend and some national holidays of Thailand. Domestic travel represents the majority of revenue of the country. This means that each holiday period encourages people to spend money on traveling and other spending during trip. Self- drive market is considered the main market for domestic tourism of Thailand.

With a merit of road transport infrastructure in each part of Thailand projecting to give a better mobility to people, such as by improving the quality of roads and completing the road network, plus a rising use and development of digital technology application helping in self- driving, thus there is an immense potential of growth of self- drive excursionist market. However, what has not been known include studies of motivation of this market, especially travel motivations and those associated with self- driving, travel planning behavior, behavior en route and experiences of this growing market particularly of Thailand. Self-drive tourism is a recently new area in tourism market study. Literature from the past has demonstrated limited reviews. Most studies attempted to study self- drive market behavior and its travel patterns for market segmentation and responding destination development and management based on the market's characteristics and preferences. From the review of the past studies, most of the studies concern the markets in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and U.S.A [1]-[5]. Some studies were examined for domestic drive tourist market of Japan and China [6], [7].

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Drive Tourism

Studies about this large market are within the countries that enjoy physically geographical variety in which offers of beautiful landscapes has been originated. These studies were conducted to explore

the market in U.S.A, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, as the examples. Becken and Wilson [2] studied about trip planning and decision making of self- drive tourists. The study sought to understand more about tourists' reasons for selecting particular travel itineraries, using independent self- drive travelers who hired rental cars or caravans and made self-drive tours in New Zealand as their samples. The finding revealed that most tourists had planned their routes in advance while some made a rough plan or even unplanned. Most of them were influenced by their own past experience and words of mouth especially from their friends and relatives in New Zealand. In terms of selecting routes and activities choice, most followed the main touristic routes, which was easier for them, and did activities highlighted in the Rough Guide. During the pre- trip, the tourists were aware of additional destinations, yet they could not be sure whether they would visit those destinations. Moreover, the finding revealed that weather was an important factor that made them change their travel plan. In terms of their en route stop overnight and accommodation booking, the study found that most tourists avoided booking their accommodation for the whole trip during the pre- trip stage, but rather booked the accommodation while en route each day. In retrieving local travel information when they arrived from the long haul flight at the destinations, information from brochure and words of mouth from the staff at the airport played a role, followed by the information from visitor centers, the accommodation in the first night.

Another exploratory study conducted by Hennessey et al. [3] addressed an importance of scenic drive tourism by identifying the propensity and characteristics of scenic drive tourism market by comparing differences between Canadian and U.S. respondents. The research finding revealed that the majority was female, married and worked full time. Some were retired. The age, education level and annual household income of the respondents varied widely. Out of this, the majority was in the age group between 45- 54 years old, considered working age. The results also suggested that the majority of the respondents took scenic drive when traveling and there was no statistically significant difference across the country of residence. Besides, there was a consistency in terms of statistics between the Canadian and U.S. respondents in that they tended to research the scenic drives available before traveling. The study also found that there was a difference across both countries of residence in terms of information source used in researching the scenic drives. The U.S. respondents obtained information about scenic drives both before traveling to a destination and while at a destination. Meanwhile, the Canadian respondents were more likely to rely on the advice or words of mouth of friends or relatives, advertisement on television, travel agents, and visiting to trade or travel shows was also their information source for scenic drives. The information sources the U.S. travelers used for gathering the information about scenic drives included visitor information centre at a destination, the official website provided by the destination, the official website of the scenic drives, an auto club, other travelers or hosts at destination, and articles in newspapers or magazines about the destination.

Seasonal flow of travel by car each year on long holiday occasion seems to be an obvious impact to the destinations visited, especially the popular ones. They usually are the destinations located within remote distance in high season. It is therefore studying on self- drive spending behavior is very essential, as it provides a more concrete idea how to encourage more expenditure. Encouraging tourists to spend during their trip is in its nature a way to promote local living quality and destination development. However, there was found of a little research that addresses the economic issue. A study found is the British Columbia (BC) Tourism's research on drive travelers on the Alaska Highway [8], which reported its finding of traveler's spending. The study found that those from the United States spent slightly more than the Canadians who in turn spent more than those from other overseas countries per day. The highest spending was on transportation, followed by accommodation and activities. This result may imply that promotion for higher spending for activities done during trip should be considered.

### 2.2. Drive Tourism in Asian Context

Recently, there have been papers examining issues in drive tourism in Asian countries like Japan and China. The study of Japan [6] profiled the drive tourism market using the case study based on Golden Week holiday periods to illustrate aspects of the particular Japanese approach to drive tourism. Japan has a significantly high level of car ownership. With an excellent highway network and sufficient disposable income, domestic tourism by driving is considered an important sector. The development of drive tourism travel behavior in Japan has recently changed from travel in big group such as companies, schools or neighborhoods, and agricultural and other associations, to individual travel with families and friends, with use of private car. The study also addressed the issue of being less- culturally aware of the Japanese. Moreover, the study revealed that drive tourism during the Golden Week of the Japanese was dominated by day trippers, who at best decided to stay single overnight. Besides, they do touring to more than one site, those of which are in close proximity to each other, and the routes are carefully selected. Road congestion as the problem of drive tourism in Japan has been foreseen as an influence for the Japanese to make drive day- trips holiday close to

home in the future, and new drive market would be those in baby boomer generation.

Studies about domestic drive tourism of the Chinese were also found in the drive tourism literature [7], [9] that introduced the growth and structure of drive tourism in general and self- drive market in China. Yu et al. [7] reviewed previous research in China in regard to drive tourism by examining its growth, structure and opportunities for further research in the future. The paper suggested the profile of drive tourism market in China underlining economic and demographic characteristics, space and time travel patterns, travel motivation and satisfaction, plus the roles of organizations, information channels, travel agencies and development of destinations, infrastructure, and self- drive support services. Briefly the paper made a case that research about drive tourism in China still saw a lack of in-depth examination of self-drive tourist behavior and experience.

In this regards, this current paper aimed to investigate the drive tourism in the context of Thailand, utilizing the Central Thailand touring routes as the area of study. The paper investigated travel motivation, planning and experiences of Thai self- drive excursionists.

## III. DETAILS EXPERIMENTAL

### 3.1. Materials and Procedures

The study employed a qualitative approach to investigate motivation, travel planning and experiences of self- drive excursionists. The case study was Thai nationals who experienced self- drive holiday. The selected touring routes were those in the central part of Thailand, primarily focused on travel routes, stop points and bypasses. The aim was not to generalize findings to the population of Thai excursionists on self- drive holidays, but to obtain insight into the motivation, travel planning and experiences of the interviewees in their own words. The author developed a set of open- ended questions relating to what motivated participants to travel on their private vehicle as well as to travel in general; how participants planned for their self- drive holidays; and how their en route experiences were. The study also probed external limitations in self-drive holiday as part of their experiences. The author conducted a pilot study to test the designed set of questions with only 2 interviewees due to the time constraint, and revised the questions before actual use in the main fieldwork. The main fieldwork, conducted during April and July 2015. The questions are both semi- structured and open- ended to encourage free expressions of interviewees. The fieldwork applied the technique of snowball sampling resulting in acquiring a total of 10 participants, whose names were withheld to protect the owners' privacy. Each interview lasted approximately between 1 hour and 1.30 hours. The content of the interview was digitally recorded with the consent of the participants. After each interview, the digitally recorded content was transcribed into text for data analysis.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three major categories represented the findings of this study: self- drive motivations, self- drive en route travel planning, and self- drive en route travel experiences.

### 4.1. Self- drive motivation

The findings revealed that the motivations of the self-drive excursionists concerned with the factors associated with convenience and comfort, privacy, freedoms and independence, value- to money, and fun. Most respondents addressed convenience and comfort factor associated with the fact that they could stop anytime to do some shopping, which could not be done if they used public transport.

'I could stop anywhere, anytime'.

'Traveling by car is a comfortable and convenient way of travel'.

'I could choose and change routes to drive easily'.

Moreover, it was interesting to hear that privacy factor disclosed a significance of friends of the respondents, as the respondents' following statements.

'Traveling by my own car gives me a comfort of mind, especially when I go with friends. It is good that we can talk loud, laugh, and it is fun'.

'While driving to destination, it was a good time where I spent with my friends. We talked together, because we don't meet often'.

'Having private car, I can meet friends easily and we make a quick decision together easily for a short trip out of Bangkok. If we don't have car, I think it would be more difficult'.

The above statements reflected the presence of fun factor in connection with traveling based on self-drive with friends. Self- drive trip with friends created fun and pleasure along the road.

Freedom and independence factor was notable for traveling by private vehicle such as car. The respondents expressed about freedoms associated with their en route trip planning. The independence and freedom factors here referred to the freedom to stop anywhere and anytime, to make their own routes, or to change routes, to adjust travel plan during trip, and to arrive destination anytime.

Car- based travel represents a travel with value to money or the economic reason- type of travel. The value of holiday time is significant to them, as most of the respondents have limited time to make a holiday, thus consideration of value to money for a

trip is essential. This could be explained by most of the respondents who expressed that choosing to drive on a holiday also associated with an ability to plan and manage time and expenses of the travel. A respondent stated that appropriate number of travelers in a trip party for making a car- based self- drive trip was between 4-6 persons, as the number allowed travelers to easily manage seats and expenses of petrol, toll ways or motorways, entrance fee of attractions, eating and night stays.

Furthermore, general travel motivations of the respondents covered the following push factors: (1) a short break to escape from boredom living in Bangkok; (2) reducing stress from routine work; (3) a feeling of just wanting to go somewhere out of Bangkok; (4) being energized by natural atmosphere, changing to/ trying new environment/ doing something not done in daily life; (5) bringing kids to learn new things; (6) making a revisit to the same place to do activities or to see things uncovered from the last visit; and (7) trying some places/ some things recommended by other people.

**4.2. Self- drive en route travel planning**

The findings revealed that the types of travel party for the Thai self- drive excursionists were friends, family, colleagues, and couples or lovers, in the working age. Mostly, they make a trip during weekend and long weekend; and with a loose plan. Loosely planning for their travel was found in association with the fact that they traveled with friends as notable in this paper. Car is the place where they can spend time together talking and planning during the driving trip about what places they should stop to visit along the road to destination, where to eat, what to see and do, and where to shop. However, each trip was planned with some specific destinations, whereas some attractions found en route were also visited without pre-planning, if time was available. Mostly the respondents chose the routes that had many attractions in close proximity for the reason of time and money value invested in each trip. Arrival time to accommodation was found to be less worrying factor, due to the fact that they drove so they could control and manage their travel time. The study found that the primary information sought involved that of travel route choices, dining places, attractions en route and accommodation. The main source of travel information is the Internet using the mobile device. The findings explained that the self-drive travel planning greatly associated with the technological- oriented behavior as all respondents used Google Maps, GPS, social media (for example Facebook.com) and Line Application. Especially the social media and the Line Application, the study reported an ability of self- drive excursionists to change plan during the journey by the influence of the information retrievable from the social media sites and Line Application. Also, some respondents expected interesting and appealing signage along the roads to be enough attracting them to make a visit, which was quite rare. Internet search involves again in this pattern.

Main types of attractions typically visited included temple, beach, floating market, dam, national park, man- made attractions such as shopping village and farm, fair and festival or event, viewpoint, agricultural and ecological park and learning center, and museum. The respondents were engaged in the following activities: taking photos, worshipping at temples, shopping at old markets, eating, going picnic, sightseeing for views and scenery, driving ATV and shooting BB gun, visiting farms, learning centers and museums, and relaxing at hotel out of town.

Additionally, the findings revealed a significance of genders' role, where women were found to have role in searching for travel information, whereas men played role of driving. It is by this pattern for self-drive travel among all types of travel parties. Some respondents addressed an issue of feeling more confident and saved if men drove.

**4.3. Self- drive en route travel experiences**

The findings of this session addressed mainly the significance of spatial and technological influences on the en route travel experience of the Thai self-drive excursionists. The spatial factors that determined the self- drive experience included the physical condition of main roads and bypasses, stop points, signage and attractive characters of the routes. Most respondents expressed that mostly the road condition was not good especially along the bypasses due to heavy use of trucks. However, most respondents still chose bypasses for the drive, despite longer distance, as it reduced the time travelled as a result of lower traffic density, and they had to drive more carefully and tried not to drive close to trucks. Furthermore, the study found that the popular stop points mainly were standard gas stations with supermarkets and clean toilets, toll way rest points and big souvenir shops with restaurants available. The respondents gave the reasons that gas stations provided one- stop service where they could take a rest, buy things, eat and fill gas. Community stop point was found not popular among the Thai self-drive excursionists. Road safety issue is another factor the respondents concern when driving; they pointed out that driving in the provincial roads required a more careful drive, and that they were very much aware of and kept an eye out for local motorcycle riders.

Signage was found not to be very helpful, expressed by the respondents. The main problems regarded its visibility, physical condition, connectivity and utility of the signs. The findings unveiled that many official

signs installed by authorities had small fonts, and some were blocked or hidden by branched of trees and other local and temporary signs installed by local people. This reduced the visibility of the main signs. Some directional signs disappear from the roads, resulting in drivers' confusion of getting to destinations. Moreover, in regard to the utility of the signs, most signs were designed for a more functional than aesthetic or motivational purpose. Another spatial factor is the attractive characters of the routes; most respondents felt that self- drive routes should have a variety of tourist attractions, eating and shopping sites and availability of stop points.

The en route travel experience was found to be digitally- oriented. All respondents relied throughout the whole holiday on digital travel content and digital directional guiding application retrieved from the handheld mobile devices such as smartphones. The study discovered that the respondents utilized GPS and Google Map as the directional purpose, yet a problem concerned the fact that some places were not updated in the GPS system or the Google Map. Therefore, the respondents used the applications as the guideline, with assistance of road signage. Another interesting aspect is the use of social media websites and Line Application for travel information search in making a decision where to visit, where to stop and where to eat. High accessibility to the travel information network during a drive was reported very significant for the drivers and the party to make a prompt decision to visit places or a spontaneous change of direction. The study discovered that the behavior of 'Check In' in Facebook.com and reviews of tourist sites were influencing the en route experience of the self- drive excursionists. A respondent described that sometimes he made an immediate change of the visit from the pre- planned one to the one reviewed about by his friends on the Facebook on the same route. Another example was that the respondent knew from this social media site about the place planned to visit, that the site was crowded, and thus he made a quick decision to change to other destinations on the same route. Additionally, some respondents unveiled that they sometimes booked rooms during the drive by use of browser-based Internet services from handheld mobile devices. These examples reflect the self- drive excursionists' freedom enhanced by the digital technology.

Generally, the findings of this study coincided with the previous studies in the same area in the Japanese and Chinese context in the aspects of short holiday or short break or day trip made by self- drive market and the socialization among friends and family during a car trip. The findings also notably revealed the significance of travel information logistic flow enhanced by the digital technology that facilitated automobile self- drive market in terms of en route travel planning, freedom and spontaneity of en route stops and in-situ experience. Digital accessibility in retrieving instant and real- time travel content has augmented the travel experiences and this is more meaningful for the experiences and decision making en route. This finding was slightly different from the findings of the drive tourism studies in the western context. The western context rather focused on physical forms of travel content gathered at visitor center or at stop points, due to attractiveness, availability and high utility of the travel brochures supplied, comparing to those provided in Thailand. Also, the socializing way of self- drive market: socially fun and pleasurable atmosphere along the road with friends and family was found noteworthy. The travel experiences underlined the respondents' consumption in leisure in attachment with eating and shopping, value of time spent with friends and family, and frequent en route stops motivated by the digital tourism information flow. Car becomes a private zone for leisure spending with groups of familiar persons. Travel pleasure starts in the car and a journey becomes as significant as the destination.

The findings of this study contributed to some recommendations. Sings should be designed to be more useful and attractive for directing, giving travel information and interpreting the destination landscapes. It should be noted that there must be inspections carried out by the responsible authorities for maintenance of road signs and landscapes in order to improve the visibility of signage. Moreover, installation of signage must be consistent throughout the route to destinations to assist drivers who may seek for benefits of signs during their travel, and to create confidence of driving to destinations without getting lost. Signs can be designed for each type of tourist attractions to facilitate drivers' quick glance and understanding, with English language to be supplied. Stop points for instance gas stations operated by private sector will be more useful if there are provisions of travel information desk, big board recommending tourist sites in a form of trail or circuit route, with attractive design as an orientation for visitors to destinations. This is to respond to the Thai self- drive behavior of mostly making stops at gas station. Interestingly, the authorities may develop other types of resting points that supply local community products, foods and beverage, as Witthaya Mekhum [10] pointed out an importance of local products for local communities through OTOP projects; local travel information and other augmented services for self- drive excursionists for instance massage service. Presently there are increasingly simple accommodations along travel routes in rural areas for temporary stay, for instance 2-3 hours stay.

The previous studies emphasized on the presence of scenic drive routes and themed touring routes in the western context. For Thailand, scenic drive still is

not distinctive due to a lack of physical landscape and destination development for touring routes, themed route product initiatives and attractive tourism landscape interpretation, and promotions. Therefore, touring routes in Thailand should be designed and developed with more attractive characteristics, route connection, and under creative themes, enough to call a scenic route and a themed route. Advantaged by the automobile accessibility, this will contribute to more expenditure to be generated to the peripheral or secondary destinations of Thailand.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study of self- drive tourism is interesting because there is a potential growth. The findings gained provide a better understanding of Thai self-drive excursionist market, particularly in developing creative tourism products that relate to self- drive tourism for example themed- route drive tour and other promotional activities, including lessening limitations and risks perceived by self- drive market. Understanding the characteristics of self-drive excursionists and the nature of driving visitor flows is crucial for the sustainable development of tourism in many destinations [11]. The results could be an impetus for the authorities' awareness of road landscapes maintenance and development at the regional areas, and regional tourism promotion, and these would be beneficial in terms of tourism resources development as well as improvement of infrastructure related to drive- tourism facilities, in suburban or peripheral areas both in terms of physical infrastructure, service elements and investments to be more allocated to those areas. Moreover, seeing that self- drive touring is a symbol of freedom and independence of driving excursionists, it is thus that they can make their own routes with more accessibility which is a way to increasing traveling expenditure out of the tourism enclaves at the center. This would support the idea of opening more local attractions and related services by local communities. In this respect, self- drive tourism can help boost a local economic and tourism industry in particular [3]. Academically, the results of this study contributed to a wider range of literature related to drive tourism and self- drive tourist behavior. This can fill a missing gap of this sector particularly in terms of tourist behavior and demographic profile, to be anticipated as worth for investigating similarities and differences among the previous studies on self- drive markets, especially those concerning the countries in the same region like China and Japan. A limitation of this study concerned a small number of the respondents used in the study forced by the constraints. Therefore the findings may not be generalized, yet could give at a certain degree a preliminary idea of domestic self- drive tourism market of Thailand. Further studies can cover an analysis specifically of effectiveness of signage and design preferences, and potential of themed route development along regional roads.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the Research and Development Institute, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand for financial support. Also, the author would like to thank all participants who dedicated their time for the interviews.

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