Behavioral Mechanisms of Chinese Tourists in Thailand's Coffee Tourism: A Structural Equation Modeling Analysis Based on the Experience Economy

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Abstract

International tourism recovery has intensified competition among destinations to attract experience-oriented outbound markets. Coffee tourism in northern Thailand is a culturally embedded special-interest segment that requires tourists not only to consume services but also to interpret local practices and interact with hosts. This study examines how travel motivation translates into behavioural intention among Chinese tourists participating in Thailand's coffee tourism, with particular attention to the mediating roles of cultural adaptation and tourism experience, including a chained (sequential) mechanism.

A cross-sectional survey was administered to Chinese tourists who participated in or showed clear interest in coffee-related tourism activities in Thailand. After data screening, 527 valid responses were retained. Structural equation modelling with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) was employed to test direct, parallel mediation, and chained mediation effects. The structural model showed excellent fit (χ^2/df = 1.181, CFI = 0.988, TLI = 0.987, RMSEA = 0.019, SRMR = 0.032) and strong explanatory power for behavioural intention (R^2 = 0.845).

The findings are as follows: (1) Travel motivation positively predicts behavioural intention (β = 0.345). (2) Motivation positively predicts cultural adaptation (β = 0.455), which in turn predicts behavioural intention (β = 0.314); the indirect effect via cultural adaptation is significant (β = 0.143). (3) Motivation positively predicts tourism experience (β = 0.350), and tourism experience is the strongest proximal predictor of behavioural intention (β = 0.432); the indirect effect via tourism experience is significant (β = 0.152). (4) A weaker but significant chained

mechanism is supported (motivation to cultural adaptation to tourism experience to behavioural intention; indirect β = 0.093).

These results suggest that destinations can more effectively convert motivation into revisit and recommendation intentions by simultaneously reducing cross-cultural interaction frictions and designing immersive, story-based coffee experiences.

Keywords: coffee tourism; travel motivation; cross-cultural adaptation; tourism experience; behavioural intention; structural equation modelling.

Introduction

International tourism is entering a critical recovery phase following the easing of global travel restrictions. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, global tourism is projected to contribute USD 11.7 trillion to global GDP by 2025, accounting for over 10% of the worldwide economy (Belgium, 2025). Thailand remains one of the most essential outbound destinations for Chinese tourists, supported by its cultural diversity, natural resources, affordability, and accessibility (Wang et al., 2021). In 2019, Chinese tourist arrivals to Thailand reached nearly 11 million, highlighting their economic and strategic importance to the destination.

Beyond volume and expenditure, Chinese outbound tourism has undergone a structural shift from sightseeing-oriented travel toward experiential and special-interest tourism. Chinese tourists increasingly seek learning-oriented, emotionally engaging, and culturally immersive experiences, particularly in cross-cultural settings (Huang et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2019). This transformation has created new challenges for destinations that rely not only on physical attractions but also on tourists' capacity to interpret, adapt to, and co-create cultural experiences. In such high-interaction settings, Chinese tourists' behavioural formation may differ from that observed in more standardised international tourism markets, as their experiential evaluation relies more on cultural interpretation and adaptive engagement than on standardised service consumption.

Coffee tourism in northern Thailand represents a high-cultural-density, interaction-intensive form of special-interest tourism, where these challenges are particularly salient—originating from government-led Arabica cultivation programs in the 1970s (Meesaeng, 2022; Noppakoonwong et al., 2014), coffee-producing regions such as Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai have gradually developed a farm-to-cup tourism model that integrates agricultural production, cultural interpretation, and participatory experience (Pan, 2023). Through plantation visits, hands-on

processing activities, and community interaction, coffee tourism requires tourists to engage with local culture rather than passively consume services. As such, tourists' behavioural outcomes are shaped not only by their initial motivation but also by their ability to adapt culturally and to construct meaningful experiences.

Existing tourism research has extensively examined travel motivation, cultural adaptation, tourism experience, and behavioural intention. Motivation influences cognitive and emotional engagement (Kim, 2024); cultural adaptation reduces cross-cultural friction and enhances interaction quality (Li et al., 2024; Wong & Kuo, 2021); and experience quality predicts satisfaction and behavioural intention (Chen et al., 2021). However, much of the empirical literature examines these constructs either in isolation or through single-mediation models. For example, studies on Chinese tourists in Thailand often model motivation as a direct antecedent of behavioural intention or satisfaction, while treating cultural adaptation as a contextual or moderating factor rather than a behavioural transmission mechanism (Wong & Kuo, 2021). Similarly, experience-economy research in coffee tourism emphasises experiential value and memorability but rarely embeds cross-cultural adaptation as a prerequisite for experience formation (Chen et al., 2021). Consequently, limited attention has been paid to how tourists' internal motivation is sequentially transformed into behavioural intention in high-interaction, cross-cultural tourism contexts.

Although chained mediation mechanisms have been validated in psychology and organisational research (Chen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023), and sequential effects have been observed in tourism-related host–guest interactions (Wang & Cheablam, 2024), empirical evidence remains scarce in special-interest tourism, particularly coffee tourism. To date, no study has systematically examined the complete behavioural pathway linking travel motivation, cultural adaptation, tourism experience, and behavioural intention in this context.

Addressing this gap, the present study integrates Experience Economy Theory (Pine & Gilmore, 2022) and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001) to develop and test a chained mediation model of Chinese tourists' behaviour in Thailand's coffee tourism. By applying structural equation modelling (SEM) to survey data from Chinese tourists, the study examines both parallel and sequential mechanisms through which motivation influences behavioural intention.

This research makes two primary contributions. First, it extends Experience Economy Theory by demonstrating that experiential value in high-cultural-density tourism settings is not solely a function of participation and immersion but is conditioned by tourists' cross-cultural adaptation processes. Second, it advances Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory by empirically

demonstrating that adaptation operates as a behavioural transmission mechanism linking motivation to experiential evaluation and subsequent intention. In practice, the findings provide insights for designing culturally embedded, experience–oriented tourism products in coffee–producing destinations across Southeast Asia.

Research Objectives

This study focuses on the behavioural patterns of Chinese tourists participating in coffee tourism in Thailand. The research objectives are as follows:

1. To analyse the direct influence mechanism of travel motivation on behavioural intention among Chinese tourists participating in coffee tourism in Thailand.

2. To examine the mediating role of cultural adaptation between tourists' travel motivation and behavioural intention.

3. To analyse the mediating role of tourism experience between travel motivation and behavioural intention, as well as its direct effect on behavioural intention.

4. To explore the chained mechanism through which travel motivation indirectly influences behavioural intention via cultural adaptation and tourism experience.

Literature Review

Coffee tourism is a form of special–interest tourism in which visitors' value creation depends heavily on situated participation, cultural interpretation, and sensory–emotional engagement. In such settings, tourists' post–trip behavioural intentions (e.g., revisit and recommendation) are not driven by a single factor but emerge through a multi–stage psychological process. Building on this premise, the present study integrates Experience Economy Theory (Pine & Gilmore, 2022) and Cross–Cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001) to explain how motivation is translated into intention through adaptation and experience.

Specifically, Cross–Cultural Adaptation Theory explains how tourists reduce cultural distance and function effectively in unfamiliar environments through cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and communicative adjustments (Kim, 2001). This adaptation process is particularly salient in coffee tourism because many core activities (farm visits, processing workshops, and host–guest interaction) require interpretive engagement rather than passive consumption. Once tourists reach a workable level of cultural adaptation, Experience Economy Theory further explains

how the destination and service providers stage experiences across entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics, thereby producing memorable value and emotional resonance (Pine & Gilmore, 2022).

Therefore, the integrated logic of this study is that motivation initiates participation, cultural adaptation enables deeper engagement in the host context, and the tourism experience captures the experiential value co-created in the process, ultimately strengthening behavioural intention. This integration also clarifies why cultural adaptation is theorised to precede optimal experiential engagement in the proposed model.

Experience Economy Theory and Tourism Experience

The Experience Economy Theory, proposed by Pine & Gilmore (2022), argues that economic value increasingly derives from staged, meaningful experiences rather than from goods or services. Within tourism contexts, experiential value is often manifested through emotional resonance and memorability, which shape post-visit evaluations and future behavioural responses. Prior studies suggest that memorable tourism experiences predict behavioural intention, such as revisit and recommendation (Kim, 2014; Kim et al., 2012).

In coffee tourism, experiential value is typically constructed through sensory stimulation (aroma, taste, atmosphere), interpretive cultural narratives (origin stories and local identity), and participatory activities (plantation visits and coffee-making). Empirical evidence indicates that sensory and learning-based engagement can increase satisfaction and strengthen revisit intention (Chen et al., 2021), while co-creation with local communities and providers enhances experiential depth (Casalegno et al., 2020). Importantly, in the present model, tourism experience is conceptualised not only as an outcome shaped by antecedents (motivation and cultural adaptation), but also as a proximal predictor of behavioural intention, consistent with the experience-to-loyalty mechanism emphasised in Experience Economy Theory.

Travel Motivation

Travel motivation is a core driver of tourist participation and remains a robust predictor of travel-related decision-making (Crompton & Petrick, 2024). Motivation can be understood as a multidimensional structure involving cognitive, affective, social, and self-actualisation motives, which collectively shape tourists' willingness to engage, interpret, and invest emotionally in tourism settings (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). In coffee tourism, these

motives are expected to translate into stronger experiential engagement, as many activities require active participation and learning rather than passive sightseeing.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory Kim (2001) explains how individuals adjust to unfamiliar cultural environments. Adaptation develops through continuous learning, communication, and internal adjustment. The theory follows a stress–adaptation–growth cycle. In tourism, adaptation helps tourists manage cultural shock, reduce interaction barriers, and evaluate destinations more positively (Wong & Kuo, 2021). Adaptation involves cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and communicative adjustments that jointly facilitate social integration and meaningful interaction (Hosany et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2024). In coffee tourism, adaptation is particularly relevant because cultural interpretation and host–guest engagement are embedded in core experiences (e.g., learning production practices and interacting with local communities), suggesting that greater adaptation should enable deeper experiential immersion.

Behavioral intention

Behavioural intention in the present study refers to tourists' stated likelihood to revisit, recommend, and maintain positive loyalty–related responses toward Thailand's coffee tourism experiences. This construct is treated as the ultimate behavioral outcome of the motivation–adaptation–experience mechanism. In special-interest tourism contexts such as coffee tourism, behavioural intention also reflects tourists' willingness to sustain culturally embedded and experience-oriented consumption.

Hypotheses

Based on the integrated theoretical logic above, this study proposes the following hypotheses: motivation to Behavioural Intention. Motivation increases willingness to participate and strengthens goal-consistent evaluations, thereby directly enhancing revisit and recommendation intentions (Crompton & Petrick, 2024; Kim, 2024).

H1: Travel motivation has a significant positive effect on behavioural intention.

Highly motivated tourists tend to display greater openness and learning orientation in cross-cultural contexts, facilitating adaptive adjustment (Wong & Kuo, 2021).

H2: Travel motivation has a significant positive effect on cultural adaptation.

Experience Economy Theory suggests that active participation, driven by motivation, enables deeper immersion and more meaningful experience creation (Pine & Gilmore, 2022), a claim supported by empirical work on memorable tourism experiences (Kim et al., 2012).

H3: Travel motivation has a significant positive effect on tourism experience.

Adaptation reduces interaction barriers and improves interpretive capacity, enabling tourists to co-create more valuable experiences (Kim, 2001; Wong & Kuo, 2021). Therefore,

H4: Cultural adaptation has a significant positive effect on tourism experience.

Better adaptation is associated with stronger satisfaction and loyalty-related outcomes (Wong & Kuo, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

H5: Cultural adaptation has a significant positive effect on behavioural intention.

Memorable and emotionally resonant experiences predict revisit and recommendation intention (Chen et al., 2021; Kim, 2014).

H6: Tourism experience has a significant positive effect on behavioural intention.

Prior research supports that motivation can influence intention indirectly via experiential and relational mechanisms (Chen et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024), because highly motivated tourists tend to actively seek participation, sensory stimulation, and emotional engagement even when cultural familiarity is limited, allowing experience quality to mediate the motivation–intention relationship directly.

H7: Travel motivation has a significant, positive, indirect effect on behavioural intention through tourism experience.

In addition, motivated tourists who adapt more effectively tend to experience lower interaction anxiety, greater psychological comfort, and stronger relational attachment to the host context, which can directly reinforce revisit and recommendation intentions.

H8: Travel motivation has a significant, indirect, positive effect on behavioural intention through cultural adaptation.

Integrating the two theories implies a sequential process in which motivation facilitates adaptation, adaptation enables deeper experience, and experience drives intention, consistent with multi-stage mechanisms in tourism behaviour research and broader chain-mediation logic (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023; Wang & Cheablam, 2024).

H9: Travel motivation has a significant indirect positive effect on behavioural intention through the chained path of cultural adaptation and tourism experience.

Figure 1 summarises the proposed integrated behavioural mechanism derived from the two theories.
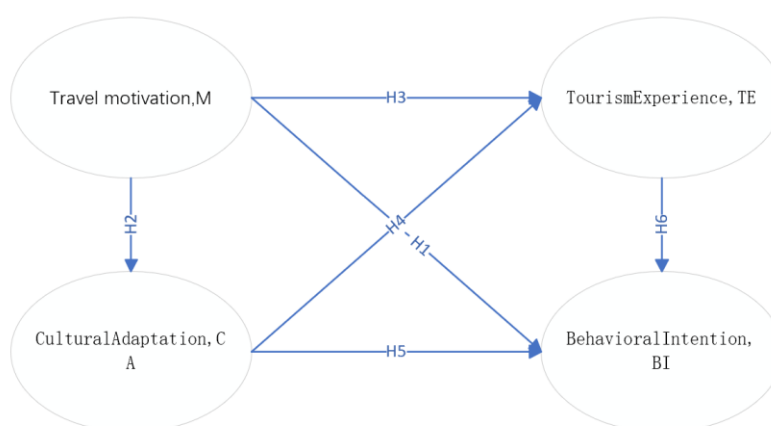

Figure 1 Research Framework

Research Methodology

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy, assuming that tourists' perceptions and behavioural mechanisms can be measured objectively and that relationships among constructs can be identified through systematic statistical testing. A deductive approach was employed: hypotheses derived from Experience Economy Theory and Cross–Cultural Adaptation Theory were tested using empirical survey data from Chinese tourists. Methodologically, this research is a mono–method quantitative study using a cross–sectional survey design.

Population and Sampling

The target population consists of Chinese tourists visiting Thailand who have participated in (or demonstrated clear interest in) coffee–related tourism activities. This group was selected because Chinese tourists represent one of Thailand's largest inbound markets, and coffee tourism is a high–cultural–density, special–interest context in which motivation, adaptation, experience, and intention are salient psychological processes.

The sample size was estimated using Yamane's (1973) formula and further justified in accordance with SEM guidelines. Following Hair et al. (2010) and Kline (2011), complex mediation models generally require >350 cases and at least 10 observations per free parameter.

A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed through an online platform (Tencent Questionnaire) using convenience sampling, yielding 527 valid responses after data screening.

Although the sampling approach was non-probabilistic, the study prioritises contextual representativeness for theory testing within a niche segment (Chinese coffee tourists), thereby strengthening internal validity while limiting broad statistical generalisation.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire developed by integrating and adapting validated measurement scales from prior studies.

The measurement framework covered four latent constructs: travel motivation (M), cultural adaptation (CA), tourism experience (TE), and behavioural intention (BI).

Specifically, measurement items were adapted from: travel motivation (Chen et al., 2021), cultural adaptation (Wong & Kuo, 2021), tourism experience (Kwame Opoku et al., 2023), and behavioural intention (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023), with semantic localisation to fit the coffee tourism context without altering construct meanings.

The questionnaire contained 47 items in total, including demographics and screening questions; the core measurement section included 43 observed items representing the four latent constructs.

This resolves the apparent item-number discrepancy: "47" refers to the full questionnaire length, while "43" refers to the scale items used for construct measurement and psychometric testing.

Language and equivalence: The questionnaire was administered in Chinese to ensure respondent comprehension. Item wording was reviewed to ensure linguistic clarity and contextual relevance for Chinese outbound tourists in Thailand.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in two stages: a pilot test and a formal survey.

In the pilot stage (July 2024), 85 questionnaires were collected via online and offline channels (e.g., Wen Juan Xing and Google Forms), and 79 valid responses were retained after removing incomplete or inconsistent cases. Pilot data were analysed using SPSS, including item analysis, reliability testing, independent-samples t-tests, and EFA; several items were revised for clarity before the formal survey.

In the formal survey stage, convenience sampling was used. The primary tool was the Tencent Questionnaire, supplemented by online social media dissemination and email invitations.

The survey was conducted between August 2024 and July 2025. A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed, and 527 valid responses were retained (effective response rate = 75.3%).

Quality control and exclusion criteria were applied to improve data validity, including removal of cases with excessive missing data, logical inconsistencies, or unrealistically short completion times (e.g., < 90 seconds).

Additional controls included informed consent procedures, mandatory response settings for key items, and restrictions on duplicate submissions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics and AMOS. SPSS was used for data cleaning, descriptive statistics, and preliminary reliability/validity checks; AMOS was used for CFA, SEM, and mediation tests.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). Validity testing included KMO and Bartlett's tests, convergent validity (loadings ≥ 0.60, CR ≥ 0.70, AVE ≥ 0.50), and discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker and HTMT criteria).

CFA followed a two-step approach. Model fit was evaluated using x^2/df, CFI, TLI, GFI, AGFI, and RMSEA, with commonly used thresholds (e.g., x^2/df < 3, CFI/TLI ≥ 0.90, RMSEA ≤ 0.08).

For mediation and chain mediation hypotheses, indirect effects were tested using bootstrap procedures with 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals; effects were considered significant when the confidence interval did not include zero.

To address potential concerns with standard methods inherent in single-source self-report surveys, procedural controls (anonymity, informed consent, and response-quality screening) were implemented during data collection, and model diagnostics were examined during analysis.

Result Research

A total of 527 valid questionnaires were collected for this study. The demographic profile is summarised in Table 1. Male respondents accounted for 59.2% of the sample, and female respondents for 40.8%. Most participants were young and middle-aged adults, with 47.1% aged

18–27 and 26.2% aged 28–37. In terms of education, 63.8% held a bachelor's degree or above, indicating generally high educational attainment among respondents. Monthly income levels were mainly concentrated between 5,001 and 11,000 RMB, reflecting moderate to strong spending power, consistent with the characteristics of coffee tourism participants.

Table 1 Basic Information of the Sample

Demographic Characteristics	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	312	59.2
	Female	215	40.8
	Less than 2,000	75	14.2
	2,001–5,000	109	20.7
	5,001–8,000	123	23.3
Average Monthly Income (RMB)	8,001–11,000	116	22
	11,001–14,000	47	8.9
	14,001–17,000	25	4.7
	More than 17,000	32	6.1
	18–27 years	248	47.1
Age	28–37 years	138	26.2
	38–47 years	96	18.2
	Above 47 years	45	8.5
	High school or below	37	7
Education Level	Junior college	154	29.2
	Bachelor's degree	246	46.7
	Master's degree or above	90	17.1

Following the two–step approach recommended by Kline (2011), the measurement model was evaluated prior to testing the structural relationships. Both first–order and second–order measurement models were assessed to ensure reliability and validity.

As shown in Table 2, at the first–order level, all observed indicators exhibited satisfactory standardised factor loadings exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating adequate item reliability. Cronbach's alpha values for all first–order dimensions were above 0.80, confirming internal consistency.

Subsequently, a second–order confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to reflect the multidimensional nature of travel motivation, cultural adaptation, and tourism experience. As shown in Table 2, all second–order constructs demonstrated strong reliability and convergent

validity, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.889 to 0.913, composite reliability (CR) values exceeding 0.85, and average variance extracted (AVE) values above the recommended threshold of 0.50.

Table 2 Summary of Reliability and Validity Statistics (First–Order and Second–Order Constructs)

Variable	M1	M2	M3	M4	CA1	CA2	CA3	CA4	TE1	TE2	TE3	TE4	M	CA	TE	BI
Cronbach's alpha	0.824	0.846	0.838	0.883	0.785	0.839	0.864	0.842	0.839	0.84	0.865	0.818	0.912	0.913	0.9	0.889
CR	0.825	0.848	0.84	0.884	0.789	0.841	0.864	0.842	0.84	0.841	0.866	0.82	0.869	0.884	0.857	0.891
AVE	0.612	0.652	0.637	0.656	0.556	0.639	0.615	0.572	0.637	0.638	0.682	0.603	0.625	0.655	0.601	0.671
SQ AVE	0.782	0.807	0.798	0.81	0.746	0.799	0.784	0.756	0.798	0.799	0.826	0.777	0.791	0.809	0.775	0.819

As shown in Table 3, discriminant validity was further assessed using the HTMT criterion. All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity among the latent constructs.

Table 3 HTMT Ratios among Second–Order Constructs

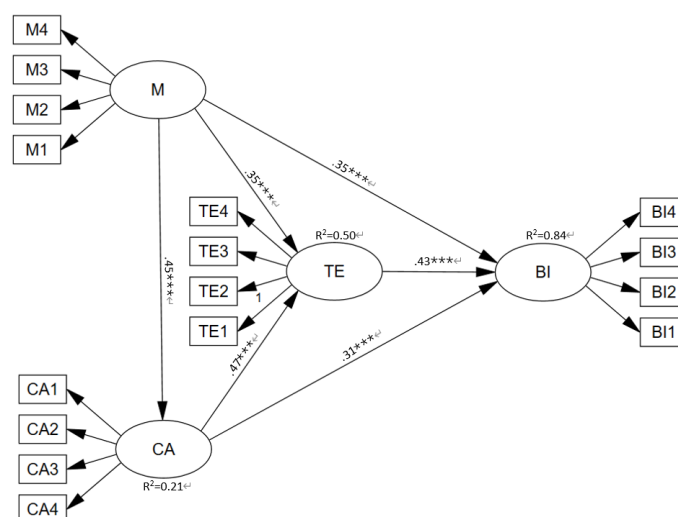| Construct	M	CA	TE	BI
Travel Motivation (M)	––	0.454	0.566	0.732
Cultural Adaptation (CA)	0.454	––	0.633	0.745
Tourism Experience (TE)	0.566	0.633	––	0.825
Behavioural Intention (BI)	0.732	0.745	0.825	––

Overall, the results confirm that both the first–order and second–order measurement models exhibit adequate psychometric properties and are suitable for subsequent structural analysis.

The structural model was estimated using maximum likelihood estimation with bootstrap procedures to address potential non–normality. Based on the validated first–order and second–order measurement models, structural relationships among the higher–order latent constructs were subsequently estimated. As shown in Table 4, the model demonstrated excellent overall fit to the data, with fit indices exceeding commonly accepted thresholds (x^2/df = 1.181, CFI = 0.988, TLI = 0.987, RMSEA = 0.019, SRMR = 0.032). These results indicate that the hypothesised model provides an adequate representation of the observed data.

Table 4 Model Fit Indices for the First–Order and Second–Order Measurement Models

Model–Fit	Travel Motivation	Cultural Adaptation	Tourism Experience	Model Value
x^2/df	0.800	1.077	1.000	1.181
CFI	0.987	0.979	0.985	0.988
TLI	1.000	0.998	1.000	0.987
RMSEA	0.000	0.012	0.000	0.019
SRMR	0.0187	0.0213	0.0173	0.032

Figure 2 presents the structural model with standardised path coefficients and explained variance. All hypothesised direct paths were significant ($p < 0.001$).

Figure 2 Structural model with standardised path coefficients and explained variance (R^2).

Note: Standardised path coefficients (β) are shown. *** $p < 0.001$. R^2 indicates the proportion of variance explained in each endogenous construct.

Hypothesis Testing and Research Objectives

Regarding Objective 1, travel motivation was found to have a significant, positive direct effect on behavioural intention ($\beta = 0.345$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. This finding indicates that highly motivated Chinese tourists are more likely to express stronger intentions to revisit and recommend coffee tourism experiences in Thailand.

Table 5 Results of Direct Effects among Key Constructs

Path	β	Lower Bounds (BC)	Lower Bounds (BC)	SE	CR	p
M–BI	0.345	0.419	0.261	0.054	7.841	***
M–CA	0.455	0.569	0.395	0.055	7.436	***
M–TE	0.350	0.435	0.263	0.055	6.178	***
CA–TE	0.474	0.556	0.396	0.068	7.391	***
CA–BI	0.314	0.382	0.233	0.064	6.629	***
TE–BI	0.432	0.515	0.342	0.070	7.864	***

Regarding Objective 2, travel motivation significantly predicted cultural adaptation (β = 0.455, p < 0.001), and cultural adaptation, in turn, exerted a positive effect on behavioural intention (β = 0.314, p < 0.001), supporting H2 and H5.

Bootstrap analysis further revealed that the indirect effect of travel motivation on behavioural intention through cultural adaptation was significant (β = 0.143, 95% CI excluding zero), supporting H8. These results confirm that cultural adaptation serves as an essential mediating mechanism through which motivation influences behavioural intention in cross–cultural contexts of coffee tourism.

Table 6 Specific Mediation Pathways and Indirect Effects

Mediation Path	Indirect effect (β)	Description
M – CA – BI	0.143	Significant single mediation via cultural adaptation
M – TE – BI	0.152	Significant single mediation via tourism experience
M – CA – TE – BI	0.093	Significant serial mediation
Total Indirect (M→BI)	0.388	Consistent with AMOS (0.387)

Regarding Objective 3, travel motivation had a significant positive effect on tourism experience (β = 0.350, p < 0.001), and tourism experience exhibited a substantial positive impact on behavioural intention (β = 0.432, p < 0.001), supporting H3 and H6. Notably, tourism experience demonstrated the most significant direct effect on behavioural intention among all predictors.

The indirect effect of travel motivation on behavioural intention through tourism experience was also significant (β = 0.152, 95% CI excluding zero), supporting H7. This finding highlights the central role of experiential value in transforming tourists' motivation into loyalty–related outcomes.

Regarding Objective 4, cultural adaptation was found to significantly enhance the tourism experience (β = 0.474, p < 0.001), supporting H4. More importantly, the chained mediation pathway from travel motivation to behavioural intention via cultural adaptation and tourism experience was statistically significant (β = 0.093, 95% CI excluding zero), supporting H9.

This result provides strong empirical evidence for the proposed sequential mechanism: travel motivation first facilitates cultural adaptation, which subsequently enables deeper experiential engagement, ultimately leading to favourable behavioural intentions.

The model accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in behavioural intention (R^2 = 0.845), indicating strong explanatory power. Tourism experience explained 49.8% of the variance, while cultural adaptation accounted for 20.7%. Although the variance explained in cultural adaptation was comparatively lower, this suggests that factors beyond travel motivation, such as prior cross-cultural experience or language competence, may also influence tourists' adaptive processes.

Overall, both direct and indirect effects contribute meaningfully to behavioural intention, with tourism experience emerging as the most influential proximal predictor.

Discussion

This study aimed to explain how travel motivation is translated into behavioural intention among Chinese tourists participating in Thailand's coffee tourism, with particular attention to the mediating roles of cultural adaptation and tourism experience, including a sequential (chained) mechanism. Drawing on Experience Economy Theory (Pine & Gilmore, 2022) and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory (Kim, 2001), the study employed structural equation modelling with bootstrapping to test a dual- and serial-mediation framework. The results confirm that travel motivation influences behavioural intention both directly and indirectly through two parallel pathways (via cultural adaptation and tourism experience) as well as a weaker but significant sequential pathway (motivation to cultural adaptation to tourism experience to behavioural intention).

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, travel motivation exerts a significant and positive direct effect on behavioural intention. This finding supports long-established tourism research indicating that motivation functions as a fundamental psychological driver of revisit and recommendation intentions (Jiang et al., 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2023). In the context of coffee tourism,

motivated tourists tend to frame their trips as meaningful and repeatable experiential investments rather than as one-off leisure activities. This interpretation aligns with Chen et al. (2021), who demonstrated that motivation in coffee tourism directly enhances post-visit satisfaction and loyalty intentions through heightened engagement and evaluative commitment.

The results support Hypotheses 2, 5, and 8 by demonstrating that cultural adaptation partially mediates the relationship between travel motivation and behavioural intention. Motivated tourists are more willing to invest cognitive and emotional effort in understanding local norms, service interactions, and consumption rituals, thereby reducing cultural friction and increasing psychological comfort. Prior studies have similarly shown that cultural adaptation and cultural intelligence improve interaction quality and foster revisit and recommendation intentions in cross-cultural tourism contexts (Li et al., 2024; Wong & Kuo, 2021).

In coffee tourism, adaptation is especially salient because tourists often engage in culturally embedded practices, such as coffee-tasting rituals, farm visits, and direct interaction with producers and baristas. These activities require interpretive effort and behavioural flexibility, which motivated tourists are more likely to exhibit. As Huang et al. (2023) observed, cultural values and adaptive capacity play a decisive role in shaping Chinese tourists' behavioural responses in overseas destinations.

The findings also confirm Hypotheses 3, 6, and 7, showing that tourism experience is a potent mediator between motivation and behavioural intention and the most proximal predictor of intention. This result is consistent with Experience Economy Theory, which emphasises that emotionally engaging and memorable experiences are the primary drivers of post-consumption behaviour (Pine & Gilmore, 2022). Empirical tourism research has repeatedly demonstrated that experiential quality enhances revisit and word-of-mouth intentions (Hosany et al., 2022; Kwame Opoku et al., 2023).

In the context of coffee tourism, experiential value arises from sensory stimulation, learning, participation, and emotional resonance. Motivated tourists are more likely to actively co-create experiences by engaging in coffee production processes and cultural storytelling, thereby strengthening experiential evaluations and behavioural intention (Casalegno et al., 2020; Pan, 2023).

Beyond parallel mediation, the study confirms a significant chained mediation mechanism (Hypothesis 9), whereby motivation enhances cultural adaptation, which, in turn, improves the tourism experience and ultimately strengthens behavioural intention. This sequential process

supports theoretical assumptions that cultural adaptation functions as a psychological gateway enabling deeper experiential engagement. Similar sequential patterns have been observed in tourism and related fields, where intermediate psychological states transmit motivational effects through ordered pathways (Liu et al., 2023; Wang & Cheablam, 2024).

Notably, the serial indirect effect is weaker than the two parallel indirect effects, suggesting that adaptation and experience often develop concurrently rather than in strictly linear stages. This pattern is consistent with experiential tourism settings characterised by high sensory intensity and rapid engagement, in which tourists evaluate experiential quality while still adjusting culturally (Chen et al., 2021; Kwame Opoku et al., 2023).

Several alternative explanations merit consideration. First, conceptual and measurement proximity between cultural adaptation and tourism experience may compress the sequential pathway. Second, the sample's relative homogeneity—comprising highly motivated coffee tourists—may inflate correlations while attenuating temporal ordering effects. Third, different tourist segments (e.g., first-time versus repeat visitors) may adapt and experience in other sequences, imposing boundary conditions on the chained mechanism (Huang et al., 2023; Li et al., 2024).

The high explanatory power of behavioural intention ($R^2 = 0.845$) indicates strong model adequacy but should be interpreted cautiously. As noted in prior methodological research, single-source, self-reported data can inflate shared variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The sample's coherence enhances internal validity but may limit generalizability.

Several limitations should be acknowledged—first, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference about the temporal sequencing implied by the chained mediation model. Second, convenience sampling limits generalisation beyond Chinese tourists actively engaged in coffee tourism. Third, reliance on self-reported measures introduces potential recall and social desirability biases. Fourth, the focus on Thailand's coffee tourism context may limit applicability to other destinations or tourism forms.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal or time-lagged designs to validate causal ordering in the proposed sequential mechanism. Replication across other special-interest tourism contexts, such as wine, culinary, or wellness tourism, would enhance external validity. Comparative studies across tourist segments and cultural contexts could further clarify boundary conditions. Additionally, incorporating antecedents such as language preparedness, prior international experience, or

perceived cultural distance may improve explanatory power for cultural adaptation, which exhibited relatively modest variance explained.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that the joint application of Experience Economy Theory and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory may benefit from recognising a dual-channel mechanism in which adaptation and experience concurrently transmit motivational effects. Practically, the findings suggest that destination managers should simultaneously reduce cultural adaptation barriers through culturally responsive services and enhance experiential richness through immersive, story-based coffee tourism activities. Such integrated strategies can more effectively convert tourist motivation into loyalty-oriented behavioural outcomes while supporting sustainable community-based tourism development.

New knowledge from Research

This study contributes new knowledge to tourism behaviour research by identifying and empirically validating a dual-channel behavioural mechanism through which travel motivation is translated into behavioural intention in culturally embedded special-interest tourism. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that motivation influences behavioural intention not through a single linear pathway, but through two dominant parallel routes—cultural adaptation and tourism experience—supplemented by a weaker but significant sequential path.

Figure 2 visualises this mechanism by illustrating the relative strengths of the direct, parallel, and serial relationships among travel motivation, cultural adaptation, tourism experience, and behavioural intention. The model highlights that, while motivation directly affects intention, its influence primarily flows through two concurrent psychological conversion channels rather than through a strictly staged process.

The first significant knowledge contribution lies in demonstrating that parallel mediation pathways are empirically stronger than the sequential route. Cultural adaptation and tourism experience each function as independent yet complementary mechanisms that convert motivation into behavioural intention. This finding refines existing tourism behaviour models, which often assume either a single dominant mediator or a strictly ordered sequence of psychological processes.

The dominance of parallel pathways suggests that, in high cultural density and sensory-intensive tourism contexts, tourists do not wait until complete cultural adaptation is achieved before forming experiential evaluations. Instead, psychological adjustment and experiential

appraisal develop simultaneously, enabling tourists to evaluate experience quality while still navigating cultural unfamiliarity. This insight challenges simplified "adaptation–before–experience" assumptions and reveals a more dynamic behavioural conversion structure.

Although weaker in magnitude, the significant chained mediation pathway provides additional theoretical insight. The sequential route indicates that cultural adaptation can serve as a psychological enabler, facilitating deeper experiential engagement. This subordinate mechanism reveals that while adaptation is not a strict prerequisite for experience formation, it enhances tourists' capacity to access higher–order experiential value, such as learning, immersion, and aesthetic appreciation.

From a theoretical standpoint, this layered structure suggests that behavioural intention formation in experiential tourism is multi–modal rather than unidirectional. Motivation can be converted into intention through immediate experiential resonance, through gradual cultural adjustment, or through a combination of both processes operating in tandem.

By integrating Experience Economy Theory and Cross–Cultural Adaptation Theory within a single empirical framework, this study advances both theories in essential ways. Experience Economy Theory is refined by demonstrating that experiential value is not produced solely by participation intensity, but is supported by concurrent cultural adjustment processes. Cross–Cultural Adaptation Theory is extended beyond long–term acculturation contexts by showing that adaptation can operate as a short–term behavioural transmission mechanism in tourism settings.

Notably, the coexistence of parallel and sequential pathways indicates that cultural adaptation should not be conceptualised merely as an upstream prerequisite, but rather as a supportive psychological infrastructure that operates alongside experiential value creation. This dual–channel structure offers a more nuanced explanation of tourist behaviour in cross–cultural experiential environments.

Beyond theoretical advancement, this new knowledge has broader societal and industry implications. Understanding the dual–channel mechanism provides practical guidance for enhancing Thailand's coffee tourism sector by identifying two leverage points for intervention: reducing cultural adaptation barriers and enriching experiential design. By simultaneously addressing both channels, destinations can more effectively convert tourist motivation into sustainable revisit and recommendation behaviours.

At a societal level, facilitating cultural adaptation through interpretive support and structured host–guest interaction can promote cross-cultural understanding and reduce friction in tourism encounters. At the community level, experience-oriented coffee tourism that integrates cultural storytelling and participatory engagement can generate greater value for local producers while supporting sustainable tourism development. Thus, the dual-channel mechanism identified in this study contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to socially responsible and culturally sensitive tourism practice.

Conclusion

This study set out to explain how travel motivation is translated into behavioural intention among Chinese tourists participating in Thailand's coffee tourism, with particular attention to the mediating roles of cultural adaptation and tourism experience. Addressing a gap in tourism behaviour research, which has often examined these constructs in isolation, the study adopted an integrated mediation framework grounded in Experience Economy Theory and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory to capture the complexity of tourist decision-making in culturally embedded experiential contexts.

The findings demonstrate that behavioural intention in coffee tourism is shaped through a coordinated psychological process rather than a single linear pathway. Travel motivation influences intention both directly and indirectly through two dominant parallel mechanisms—cultural adaptation and tourism experience—alongside a weaker but significant sequential route. This pattern indicates that, in high cultural-density and experience-intensive tourism settings, tourists simultaneously adjust to cultural contexts and evaluate experiential quality when forming post-visit intentions. Behavioural intention thus emerges from the joint operation of adaptive adjustment and experiential value creation.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances tourism research by refining the combined application of Experience Economy Theory and Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory. Rather than positioning cultural adaptation solely as an upstream prerequisite, the results suggest that adaptation functions as a concurrent psychological support mechanism that operates alongside experiential engagement. This dual-channel perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of tourist behaviour in cross-cultural experiential tourism, moving beyond simplified sequential models and highlighting the multi-modal nature of motivation–intention conversion.

Although the empirical analysis focused on Chinese tourists in Thailand's coffee tourism, the behavioural mechanism identified in this study has broader relevance. The proposed framework provides a conceptual lens for understanding tourist behaviour in other forms of special-interest and experience-oriented tourism, such as wine, culinary, and cultural heritage tourism, where visitors must navigate unfamiliar cultural environments while engaging in immersive experiences. As experiential tourism continues to expand globally, recognising the interplay between motivation, adaptation, and knowledge is essential for explaining tourist decision-making across diverse cultural settings.

Overall, this study contributes a theoretically integrated and empirically supported explanation of how tourist behavioural intention is formed in culturally rich experiential tourism contexts. By clarifying the psychological mechanisms through which motivation is converted into intention, the research enhances understanding of cross-cultural tourist behaviour. It offers a foundation for future studies examining experiential tourism beyond specific destinations or markets.

Suggestions

Suggestions for Implementing the Research Findings

Suggestions related to Objective 1 (direct effect of travel motivation). Results from Objective 1 indicate that travel motivation has a significant and direct influence on behavioural intention. Therefore, destination marketing organisations and tourism promotion agencies should place greater emphasis on cultivating and sustaining tourists' intrinsic motivation toward coffee tourism. This can be achieved by explicitly communicating the experiential and cultural value of coffee tourism in pre-trip information, branding narratives, and digital marketing strategies, particularly for outbound markets such as Chinese tourists who increasingly seek meaningful, experience-oriented travel.

Suggestions related to Objective 2a (cultural adaptation pathway). Results from Objective 2 show that cultural adaptation partially mediates the relationship between motivation and behavioural intention. Therefore, tourism service providers and destination managers should actively reduce cultural adaptation barriers faced by tourists. In coffee tourism settings, this may involve providing bilingual interpretive materials, culturally responsive service scripts, and structured interaction opportunities that help tourists understand local consumption norms, service

practices, and social cues. Such measures can enhance psychological comfort and interactional confidence, thereby strengthening loyalty-related behavioural outcomes.

Suggestions related to Objective 2b (tourism experience pathway). Findings from Objective 3 demonstrate that tourism experience is the strongest proximal predictor of behavioural intention. Therefore, coffee tourism operators and local communities should prioritise experience design that integrates sensory engagement, learning, and participatory elements. Experiences that allow tourists to engage in coffee cultivation, processing, and storytelling actively are more likely to generate emotional resonance and memorable value, which, in turn, foster revisit and recommendation intentions.

Suggestions related to Objective 4 (chained mediation mechanism). Results from Objective 4 confirm a significant chained mechanism in which motivation influences behavioural intention through cultural adaptation and tourism experience sequentially. Therefore, destination planners should adopt an integrated approach that simultaneously supports cultural adaptation and experiential engagement. Rather than treating adaptation as a preliminary stage, experiential activities should be designed with built-in interpretive support that enables tourists to adjust culturally while engaging experientially. This alignment can facilitate smoother behavioural conversion from motivation to intention in culturally dense tourism contexts.

Suggestions for Future Research

The dual-channel mechanism identified in this study raises several substantive questions for future research. Scholars are encouraged to examine whether the relative strength of parallel and sequential pathways varies across tourist segments (e.g., first-time versus repeat visitors) and cultural distance contexts. Longitudinal or time-lagged designs may further clarify temporal ordering within the dual-mechanism framework. Additionally, future studies could extend this model to other forms of special-interest tourism, such as wine, culinary, or wellness tourism, to assess its generalisability. Incorporating additional antecedents of cultural adaptation, such as language preparedness or prior international experience, may also enhance theoretical understanding of adaptation dynamics in experiential tourism.

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