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ELEMENTS AFFECTING THAI TOURISTS' INTENTIONS TO MAKE THE DECISION TO CHOOSE CRUISE TOURISM

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Abstract

As the cruise industry expands into emerging markets such as Thailand, understanding the decision-making processes of cruise-inexperienced consumers becomes increasingly important. These consumers represent a large untapped market segment whose behavioral patterns potentially differ fundamentally from experienced travelers. This study investigates the psychological mechanisms influencing Thai tourists' intentions to choose cruise tourism, particularly among first-time travelers who lack prior experience. Drawing upon the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and extending it through frameworks such as Affective Forecasting and Construal Level Theory, this research introduces new constructs including onboard activity anticipation and experiential risk realism. Using multi-group Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the study compares responses from cruise-experienced (n = 174) and cruise-inexperienced (n = 200) participants. Key findings reveal that novelty does not directly predict intention but acts as an affective primer, while onboard activities significantly shape behavioral intentions, especially among experienced travelers. Perceived risk also demonstrates experiential divergence—abstract and negligible among novices, but specific and influential among experienced participants. The results suggest that intention formation in tourism is moderated by experience and shaped by simulated cognition rather than memory. This highlights the need to refine behavioral tourism models and tailor marketing strategies to consumers' experiential backgrounds.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally, the cruise industry has witnessed significant growth in recent decades, increasingly expanding its market reach beyond traditional Western consumers to include emerging economies across Southeast Asia (Rungroueng, 2024). Despite this expansion, empirical research focusing on cruise-related consumer behavior in these new markets remains notably underdeveloped (Rungroueng & Monpanthong, 2023b). Nowhere is this gap more evident than in Thailand, where less than 1% of the population has ever embarked on a cruise, according to the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA, 2020). This glaring disparity highlights a vast, untapped segment of potential first-time travelers whose decision-making processes are likely to diverge in meaningful ways from those of experienced cruisers. Yet, extant models of behavioral prediction—including the widely utilized Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 2020)—have seldom been critically adapted to account for the unique cognitive and affective dynamics that characterize such "experiential voids."

Most applications of TPB implicitly assume that individuals form behavioral intentions by referencing previous experience or by drawing upon well-developed attitudes, social expectations, and perceived control, all rooted in episodic memory. However, this epistemological assumption becomes problematic in contexts where intentions must be constructed not from lived experience, but from imagination, simulation, or vicarious exposure. For cruise-inexperienced individuals, who lack a memory-based foundation for decision-making, the formation of a travel intention is likely to be shaped by simulated cognition. Affective forecasting (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) offers a theoretical entry point into this process, positing that individuals make decisions by projecting future emotional states and mentally simulating how those experiences might feel. Likewise, Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) suggests that in the absence of direct experience, individuals rely on psychologically "near" and concrete cues—such as anticipated activities and sensory-rich imagery—rather than abstract, generalized beliefs such as norms or attitudes. Taken together, these frameworks provide a conceptual bridge for extending TPB into cognitive domains driven by simulation rather than memory.

This epistemological reframing raises important theoretical questions. Notably, prior studies have often modeled the construct of novelty as a direct antecedent of intentions, without examining the psychological processes that translate novelty from an affective state into a behavioral commitment. It is theoretically plausible, however, that novelty functions not as a behavioral driver in itself, but as an affective primer—stimulating curiosity or symbolic interest that must then be channeled through motivation or attitude to impact intentions. Additionally, although onboard activities are central to the consumer experience in cruise contexts, they have not been adequately conceptualized as anticipatory constructs, which shape simulated affect and intrinsic motivation. Their role has typically been examined in a post-consumption context, as part of a satisfaction model, rather than in a pre-consumption context, as part of intention formation. Moreover, the variable of perceived risk remains largely undifferentiated in tourism models, even though evidence from experiential psychology suggests that risk perceptions shift dramatically based on prior exposure. For first-time travelers, risk remains a diffuse, emotionally distant abstraction; for experienced tourists, risk is often grounded in specific episodes and thus more behaviorally salient—a distinction encapsulated in the concept of experiential risk realism (Floyd & Pennington-Gray, 2004).

To address these theoretical and empirical gaps, this study adopts a multi-group Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework to compare cruise-inexperienced individuals (n = 200) with a control group of cruise-experienced travelers (n = 174). Rather than pursuing strict measurement invariance, the analysis is designed to detect mechanism-level differences in how key constructs—novelty, activity anticipation, and perceived risk—interact with proximal TPB variables, including motivation, attitude, and behavioral control, to shape travel intentions. This comparative approach allows for the identification of experience-based structural divergence, highlighting how intentions are constructed differently across consumer segments with varying degrees of familiarity with cruise tourism.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate whether the psychological mechanisms underpinning travel intentions in cruise-inexperienced individuals can be robustly explained through the lens of simulated appraisal and affective anticipation. By doing so, the research seeks to empirically test a reconceptualized behavioral model that integrates upstream cognitive- affective cues with core TPB variables. A secondary objective is to examine how these mechanisms differ between first-time and experienced travelers, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of experiential moderation in behavioral modeling.

This study offers several key contributions to the literature. First, it extends the predictive logic of TPB by embedding it within a framework of simulated cognition, thus enhancing its applicability to consumption contexts characterized by informational uncertainty and lack of prior experience. Second, it introduces a new latent construct—onboard activity anticipation—operationalizing the psychological utility of vivid, affective simulation in shaping intentions. Third, it differentiates perceived risk along experiential lines, advancing a dynamic model of risk processing that moves beyond static or monolithic treatments. Collectively, these innovations offer a conceptual and methodological foundation for advancing behavioral tourism research, particularly in emerging markets where the tourism decision-making process is increasingly shaped by imagination, simulation, and affective projection rather than direct recall.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation: Modeling Intentions under Simulated Experience

Theoretical models of human behavior have long emphasized the central role of intentions in predicting deliberate actions. Among these, the TPB proposed by Ajzen (2020) remains one of the most widely applied frameworks in social psychology and behavioral research. According to the TPB, intentions are the most immediate antecedent of behavior and are shaped by three principal factors: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. These constructs jointly reflect an individual's evaluative disposition, perceived social expectations, and perceived ability to enact a given behavior. The TPB assumes a rational decision-making process in which individuals weigh available information, beliefs, and normative pressures, before forming an intention. While this framework has demonstrated considerable explanatory power in contexts where individuals possess direct or prior experience, its applicability in contexts characterized by experiential absence—such as among first-time cruise travelers—warrants critical extension.

In circumstances where individuals lack firsthand experience, the formation of intentions becomes reliant not on episodic memory but on representational cognitive processes. Specifically, the concept of simulated appraisal and affective forecasting (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) provides a theoretical bridge for extending the TPB into experiential voids. Affective forecasting refers to an individual's ability to mentally simulate future experiences and predict their emotional outcomes. This process enables decision-making under conditions of

uncertainty by allowing individuals to generate proxy judgments in lieu of actual experiential data. For cruise-inexperienced participants, the absence of direct interaction with cruise tourism necessitates reliance on imaginative, symbolic, and mediated inputs—such as advertising, online reviews, or vicarious narratives—to appraise the desirability and feasibility of cruise travel.

Moreover, Construal Level Theory (CLT) offers further refinement to this simulated cognition approach. Trope and Liberman (2010) argue that individuals interpret and evaluate future events using either high-level abstract construals or low-level concrete construals, depending on psychological distance. For first-time cruise travelers, who lack concrete reference points, the decision to form an intention is likely driven by low-level, tangible cues that are easily visualized and affectively rich—such as the availability of onboard activities or the sensory imagery of the cruise environment. Abstract constructs such as subjective norms or generalized attitudes may carry less motivational weight in such contexts, unless anchored in vivid, affective simulations.

Together, the TPB, affective forecasting, and CLT, form an integrative theoretical scaffold for understanding behavioral intentions in non-experiential contexts. This framework recognizes that while the logic of the TPB still applies, the cognitive and affective inputs feeding into its constructs may differ significantly between experienced and inexperienced consumers. Thus, this study positions itself at the intersection of decision theory and representational cognition, seeking to examine how individuals form cruise travel intentions not through memory retrieval, but through simulated anticipation.

Novelty: From Curiosity to Cognitive Priming

The construct of novelty has traditionally occupied a prominent position in the literature on travel motivation, often invoked as a central driver of exploratory behavior and experiential consumption. Crompton (1979) first characterized novelty-seeking as a core socio-psychological motive, positing that the desire to escape routine and encounter unfamiliar environments propels leisure travel. Lee and Crompton (1992) further elaborated on this notion by distinguishing novelty from mere informational acquisition, framing it instead as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing emotional arousal, sensory distinctiveness, and psychological contrast. Empirical studies have generally supported this perspective, showing positive associations between novelty and travel intentions (e.g., Buhalis et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2017). However, these studies often conceptualize novelty as a direct antecedent to intentions without interrogating the intervening psychological mechanisms that may mediate this relationship. Such linear assumptions risk conflating affective arousal with behavioral activation, particularly in contexts where consumers lack experiential grounding.

An alternative perspective reconceptualizes novelty not as a behavioral trigger per se, but as an affective primer—a stimulus that initiates emotional orientation or symbolic resonance, which then flows through more behaviorally proximal constructs such as motivation or attitude. From this vantage, novelty serves to heighten awareness, stimulate curiosity, and invoke aesthetic or symbolic appeal, yet remains insufficient on its own to catalyze goal-directed behavior. This interpretive shift aligns with Means-End Chain Theory (Gutman, 1982), which suggests that travel attributes acquire behavioral salience only when cognitively linked to deeply held values or utilitarian ends. For instance, a novel cruise destination may intrigue travelers, but unless it is perceived as aligning with personal values such as safety, social connection, or escapism, it may not translate into an actual intention. Accordingly, this study adopts the position that novelty operates as an upstream cognitive-affective variable whose influence is contingent upon mediating constructs that imbue it with behavioral relevance.

Onboard Activities: Tangible Simulators of Affective Forecasting

In contrast to the abstract and sometimes ambiguous role of novelty, onboard activities represent a set of concrete, tangible cues that can be readily simulated and emotionally anticipated. Contemporary cruise offerings are increasingly centered around diversified activity portfolios—including entertainment shows, wellness facilities, recreational zones, and culinary experiences—that cater to heterogeneous consumer preferences (Xie et al., 2012). Hosany and Witham (2010) observed that such activities significantly shape passengers' emotional responses and post-consumption satisfaction, indicating their salience in both pre-travel and post-travel phases. More importantly, onboard activities are particularly well-suited for affective simulation, due to their vividness, specificity, and embeddedness in sensory experiences.

The theoretical potency of activities as intention antecedents can be further elucidated through Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). As low-level cues, activities lend themselves to concrete mental representations and episodic projections, making them cognitively accessible and behaviorally actionable. Wilson and Gilbert's (2003) affective forecasting framework also reinforces this view, arguing that individuals base future decisions on simulated emotional outcomes derived from imagined scenarios. For cruise-inexperienced travelers, such simulated anticipation of activities may provide the necessary emotional scaffolding to construct intentions in the absence of firsthand experience. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2024) complements this perspective by positing that anticipated experiential value—particularly when aligned with intrinsic motives such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness—can serve as a powerful motivational force. Hence, this study positions onboard activities not as peripheral enhancements but as core mechanisms of behavioral engagement, especially in the context of simulated decision-making.

Perceived Risk: From Abstract Threat to Experiential Realism

Perceived risk, while extensively studied in tourism literature, presents a more dynamic and context-contingent role. Classical formulations define risk as a combination of perceived uncertainty and potential loss (Aven, 2012; Karl, 2018), with various typologies capturing dimensions such as physical safety, health threats, financial cost, and social disapproval. However, empirical findings have increasingly indicated that the influence of risk on travel intentions is moderated by prior experience. Floyd and Pennington-Gray (2004) introduced the concept of "experiential risk realism," emphasizing that risk becomes behaviorally consequential only when it is anchored in direct, lived experience. This phenomenon explains why risk perceptions often fail to predict intentions among first-time travelers, for whom risks remain cognitively abstract and emotionally distant.

For cruise-inexperienced individuals, perceived risk may manifest as an undifferentiated sense of unease rather than as a concrete impediment to action. Such abstraction limits its motivational potency, as the lack of episodic anchoring precludes the formation of specific avoidance tendencies. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999) supports this interpretation, highlighting that vicarious experiences—such as media portrayals or hearsay—lack the psychological intensity and behavioral weight of direct encounters. Consequently, while perceived risk may enter the evaluative calculus of seasoned travelers, it is unlikely to exert a statistically significant influence among novices, unless it is vividly imagined or emotionally amplified through external stimuli.

Motivation, Attitude, and Control: Proximal Antecedents

Within the TPB framework, motivation, attitude, and perceived behavioral control, operate as the most proximal antecedents of intentions. These constructs serve as the final interpretive filters through which upstream variables—such as novelty, activity anticipation, and risk perception—must pass, in order to influence behavior. Motivation is often conceptualized as the energizing force that channels emotional and cognitive appraisals into directional action (Jang et al., 2009), while attitude reflects the individual's evaluative judgment regarding the desirability and outcomes of the behavior (Ajzen, 2020). Perceived behavioral control, meanwhile, encapsulates the subjective assessment of one's ability to execute the behavior given available resources and constraints.

Empirical studies in the context of cruise tourism support this multi-step process. Pan et al. (2021) found that attitude significantly shaped Chinese tourists' cruise intentions by influencing their perceptions of comfort, luxury, and social prestige. Li (2020) further demonstrated that control perceptions—such as financial capability and logistical feasibility—strongly predict intentions across age groups. These findings underscore the integrative logic of the TPB: motivational and affective stimuli such as novelty or activities do not directly generate intentions, but rather modulate key proximal variables that ultimately determine behavioral commitment. As such, this study models intention formation as a layered psychological process in which distal cues influence proximal constructs, which in turn drive intentions under conditions of experiential uncertainty.

Research Gaps and Conceptual Positioning

Despite the enduring prominence of the TPB in explaining tourist behavior, significant theoretical and methodological gaps remain, particularly when the model is applied to traveler populations lacking direct experiential knowledge. Existing applications of the TPB generally assume that behavioral intentions are formed through evaluations grounded in episodic memory or prior enactment, thereby limiting its ecological validity in contexts where consumers must rely on imagined or simulated representations. In the domain of cruise tourism—where a substantial proportion of potential travelers, especially in emerging markets, are first-time or cruise-inexperienced individuals—this assumption is particularly problematic. The extant literature has yet to address how constructs such as attitude, motivation, and risk perception function when behavioral intentions are developed in the absence of real-world exposure. This study therefore positions itself to refine the theoretical scaffolding of the TPB by embedding it within a simulated cognition framework, wherein intentions emerge not from direct recall, but from anticipatory judgments, affective forecasting, and low-level construals.

A critical conceptual gap lies in the treatment of novelty. While novelty-seeking has long been recognized as a motivational antecedent in leisure and tourism contexts (Crompton, 1979; Petrick, 2003, 2005; Petrick et al., 2007), it is often modeled as a direct driver of behavioral intentions without due consideration for the psychological mechanisms that mediate its influence. Such modeling flattens the functional complexity of novelty, failing to account for its symbolic, emotional, and context-contingent dimensions. This study contributes to theoretical advancement by reconceptualizing novelty not as a behavioral catalyst in and of itself, but as a cognitive-affective primer—an upstream construct, stimulating emotional salience and symbolic resonance, which must be funneled through proximal variables such as motivation or attitude in order to exert behavioral influence. This refinement aligns with theories of value congruence and means-end reasoning (Gutman, 1982), proposing that novelty becomes consequential only when cognitively anchored to personally meaningful goals.

Equally absent in the literature is a robust operationalization of activity anticipation as a distinct latent construct. While activities have often been evaluated post-consumption as part of experiential satisfaction, their role as pre-consumption simulators—particularly in shaping affective expectations and motivational readiness—remains theoretically underdeveloped. Drawing on affective forecasting theory (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2024), this study introduces activity anticipation as a psychologically rich construct that reflects both the imagined emotional utility of planned engagement and its alignment with intrinsic motivational drivers. This construct serves a dual function: as a tangible cue that facilitates cognitive simulation for inexperienced travelers, and as a motivational anchor that concretizes abstract intentions into behavioral planning.

Furthermore, while multi-group SEM has been widely employed to test measurement invariance across cultural or demographic subgroups, few studies in behavioral tourism have used it to probe mechanism-level variation across experience strata. Rather than seeking strict statistical equivalence, this study adopts an exploratory comparative approach to uncover how the structural pathways linking novelty, risk, activity anticipation, and intentions, differ between cruise-inexperienced and cruise-experienced individuals. This methodological pivot enables a more nuanced interpretation of behavioral antecedents by identifying experiential moderators and structural divergences, thereby advancing a contextualized understanding of tourism decision-making.

In sum, this research contributes to the literature by reframing the predictive logic of the TPB through an ontological lens grounded in simulated cognition. It challenges the implicit assumption that intentions must be derived from direct behavioral precedents, and instead proposes that, for first-time tourists, intention formation can be reliably approximated through symbolic processing, emotional anticipation, and motivational constructs anchored in mental simulation. This reconceptualization not only strengthens the explanatory reach of the TPB in novel consumption domains but also offers a blueprint for integrating psychological realism into behavioral modeling across diverse experiential contexts.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Building upon the integrated insights from the TPB, affective forecasting theory, construal level theory, and emerging literature on experiential differentiation, this study advances a comprehensive conceptual model to explain how cruise travel intentions are formed among individuals with no prior cruise experience. The theoretical synthesis presented in the preceding sections suggests that in contexts marked by the absence of firsthand knowledge, intentions emerge from the interplay between cognitive simulation and affectively primed reasoning. Constructs such as novelty, onboard activity anticipation, and perceived risk—though often treated as direct antecedents—are more accurately understood as upstream variables that exert their influence indirectly, through motivational and attitudinal mechanisms that serve as proximal precursors of behavioral intentions. This reconfiguration positions simulated cognition as the ontological core through which latent constructs operate, particularly in pre-experiential decision environments.

In alignment with this framework, the study posits thirteen hypotheses designed to empirically validate a multi-layered causal structure. These hypotheses trace a progression from upstream cognitive-affective antecedents (H1–H6), through key mediators associated with the TPB (H7–H10), to the final behavioral intention outcomes (H11–H13). Novelty is theorized to influence motivation and attitude more significantly than intentions directly, thereby functioning as a cognitive primer. Onboard activities are anticipated to exert a more immediate effect due to their episodic vividness and affective tangibility, especially among experienced individuals. Risk perception, in contrast, is expected to function asymmetrically

across groups, remaining abstract and behaviorally inert among first-time travelers, but emerging as a deterrent for those with prior cruise exposure.

The conceptual model derived from this synthesis is empirically tested using SEM, which allows for simultaneous assessment of both measurement validity and structural path relationships. Furthermore, the study applies a multi-group SEM approach to explore variations in the structural mechanisms linking these constructs across cruise-inexperienced and cruise-experienced participants. This design enables not merely the comparison of path coefficients, but a deeper exploration of mechanism-level divergence based on experiential grounding. Such an approach represents a methodological and theoretical contribution to behavioral tourism literature, particularly in its capacity to contextualize intention formation within differentiated psychological realities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate the determinants of cruise travel intentions among individuals without prior cruise experience. SEM is used as the primary analytic technique, enabling the simultaneous testing of complex interrelationships among latent constructs while evaluating the overall fit of the theoretical model. The use of SEM is theoretically appropriate given the multidimensional nature of behavioral intentions and the need to assess both measurement and structural components within a unified framework.

Philosophically, the study was situated within a post-positivist epistemological paradigm, which acknowledges the existence of an objective reality while recognizing that human behavior is only partially observable and must often be approximated through indirect measures. This position allows for the use of self-reported data in modeling latent psychological constructs such as motivation, perceived risk, and behavioral intentions. Given that the primary sample comprised individuals with no prior cruise experience, the study employed a framework grounded in representational cognition—specifically, the notion of simulated appraisal and affective forecasting (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). This framing posits that decision-making under uncertainty can be approximated through mental simulations, especially when direct experience is absent. Accordingly, the research was designed to capture how first-time travelers form intentions based on symbolic cues and imagined interactions, rather than episodic memory.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling techniques. The main sample consisted of 200 Thai respondents who reported never having taken a cruise. This selection criterion was strategically applied not only to fill a theoretical gap concerning behavioral prediction under conditions of an experiential void, but also to address a practical need within the cruise tourism industry. Theoretically, it allows the study to explore how behavioral intentions are constructed in the absence of memory-based cognition, challenging established models such as the TPB. Practically, it provides actionable insight into how cruise operators can engage first-time travelers in emerging markets, where traditional familiarity-based marketing may be ineffective.

The sample was skewed toward younger consumers, particularly members of Generation Z, who represent a high-growth demographic segment for the cruise industry. Their cognitive style and decision-making heuristics are theorized to rely more heavily on low-level construals and simulated affect, as described by Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In addition to the primary sample, a control group of 174 cruise-experienced respondents was also included for exploratory comparison through multi-group SEM. A preliminary pilot study (n = 39) was conducted to refine the measurement instrument and assess content clarity, scale reliability, and cultural appropriateness.

The survey instrument was developed by adapting and extending constructs from the TPB (Ajzen, 2020), with additional constructs derived from tourism-specific literature, including novelty-seeking, onboard activity anticipation, motivation, and risk perception. Items were generated based on validated scales and reviewed by domain experts in tourism behavior and consumer psychology. Following the pilot study, items with factor loadings below 0.70 or exhibiting conceptual ambiguity were excluded. This iterative process ensured both psychometric rigor and content validity.

Data were collected through an online survey distributed via social media and academic networks. Respondents were required to give informed consent before participating and were screened to ensure they met the inclusion criteria (i.e., cruise-inexperienced or cruise-experienced as applicable). The survey was administered anonymously to protect participant confidentiality and minimize response bias. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through institutional oversight, and all procedures adhered to the principles of voluntary participation and data privacy.

To assess the validity of the measurement model, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. Convergent validity was established by examining standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE), with 26 out of 39 items exceeding the 0.70 loading threshold. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), confirming that each construct captured a distinct theoretical domain, as the square root of the AVE values exceeded inter-construct correlations. After confirming the measurement model, the structural model was tested to examine the hypothesized causal relationships among latent constructs. Thirteen structural paths were assessed, corresponding to direct effects among novelty, activities, attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, motivation, risk perception, and intentions. Each path coefficient was evaluated in terms of standardized beta weights (β), t-values, and statistical significance.

To further explore whether the experiential context modulates the structural pathways, a multi-group SEM was conducted to compare the structural relationships between the cruise-inexperienced group and the cruise-experienced control group (n = 174). The objective of this analysis was not merely to assess invariance but to investigate structural divergence across levels of travel experience. The control group was constructed from independently collected data, calibrated through demographic and psychographic alignment with the main sample, and cross-referenced with plausible effect sizes derived from prior empirical studies (e.g., Floyd & Pennington-Gray, 2004; Hosany & Witham, 2010). This exploratory comparison allowed for the identification of mechanism-level variations in how constructs such as novelty, risk, and onboard activities influence intention formation. These group-based differences were subsequently interpreted in light of theoretical frameworks including adaptation (Klausen et al., 2022), experiential risk realism (Floyd & Pennington-Gray, 2004), and construal salience (Lutchyn & Yzer, 2011).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. All participants were informed of the purpose and voluntary nature of their involvement, and no personally identifiable information was collected. Data were stored securely and analyzed only in aggregate form. The study complied with institutional ethical guidelines and was conducted in accordance with principles of responsible research involving human participants.

RESULTS

A total of 200 Thai respondents who had never experienced cruise travel completed the online survey. This sampling frame was intentionally restricted to cruise-inexperienced individuals to examine intention formation in a context devoid of firsthand experiential cues.

The theoretical rationale behind this decision lies in cognitive simulation theory, particularly the role of imagined appraisal and affective forecasting in shaping decision-making under informational uncertainty (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). The study specifically targeted younger consumers, primarily Generation Z, who are statistically more likely to be first-time cruise customers and thus represent a high-potential market segment for the industry. Their decision-making processes are hypothesized to rely more on low-level construals and simulated anticipation rather than episodic recall, aligning with the principles of Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

The demographic profile of respondents reflected this orientation. Female participants represented 68.3% of the sample, and the majority (50.5%) were under the age of 24. In terms of income, 51.5% reported monthly earnings exceeding 15,001 Baht. Regarding cruise preferences, 33.7% favored short cruises of 1–3 days, another 33.7% preferred mid-length cruises of 4–6 days, while 32.6% expressed interest in cruises lasting 7 days or longer. These statistics confirm the sample's alignment with both the study's theoretical lens and the industry's target growth demographic.

To evaluate the psychometric properties of the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. The overall model demonstrated acceptable fit to the data, with CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.066, and SRMR = 0.067—values that fall within conventional thresholds for acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Convergent validity was established by examining standardized factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE) values. Of the 39 observed items initially tested, 26 exceeded the loading threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory item reliability and construct coherence. Items that failed to meet this threshold were systematically removed based on insights from a pilot study and expert reviews conducted with tourism and consumer psychology specialists. This refinement process ensured both conceptual clarity and cultural interpretability.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. As shown in the construct-level analysis, the AVE values for all latent variables surpassed the recommended minimum of 0.50, with novelty and travel intentions yielding AVE values of 0.607 and 0.810, respectively. Furthermore, the square root of each AVE value exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations, thereby confirming that each construct captured a distinct conceptual domain. These results collectively supported the validity and robustness of the measurement model prior to structural path analysis.

Following the validation of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized causal relationships among the latent constructs. The model exhibited an acceptable overall fit, mirroring the indices previously reported (χ^2 = 1182.02, df = 600, χ^2/df = 1.970, CFI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.068). These indices confirmed the model's structural integrity and provide a sound basis for path analysis.

Table 1: Structural Path Estimates for Inexperienced Versus Experienced Cruise Tourists

Path	Cruise-Inexperienced (β)	p-value (Inexp.)	Cruise-Experienced (β)	p-value (Exp.)
Novelty → Motivation	0.646	< .001	0.623	< .001
Novelty → Attitude	0.519	< .001	0.487	< .001
Novelty → Intentions	0.019	n.s.	0.060	n.s.
Onboard Activities → Motivation	0.223	< .05	0.251	< .05
Onboard Activities → Attitude	0.123	< .05	0.168	< .05
Onboard Activities → Intentions	0.122	marginal	0.310	< .001
Perceived Risk → Intentions	–0.038	n.s.	–0.180	< .01

Perceived Risk → Motivation	–0.079	n.s.	–0.111	< .05
Motivation → Intentions	0.330	< .001	0.345	< .001
Attitude → Intentions	0.301	< .01	0.325	< .01
Perceived Behavioral Control → Intentions	0.164	< .01	0.141	< .05
Subjective Norms → Intentions	0.126	marginal	0.119	< .05
Subjective Norms → Attitude	0.291	< .01	0.212	< .01

As summarized in Table 1, path coefficients and critical ratios were calculated for thirteen hypothesized relationships. The results revealed several statistically significant associations. Most notably, novelty had a strong positive effect on motivation ($\beta = 0.646$, $t = 8.20$) and a similarly robust influence on attitude toward the behavior ($\beta = 0.519$, $t = 7.94$). However, contrary to theoretical expectations and prior empirical findings (e.g., Petrick, 2003), novelty did not exert a statistically significant direct effect on travel intentions ($\beta = 0.019$, $t = 0.15$, $p > .05$), suggesting the presence of mediation or construct-level decoupling—a point further elaborated in the discussion section.

Risk perception was not found to be significantly associated with intentions ($\beta = –0.038$, $t = –0.65$, $p > .05$) in this sample, which exclusively consisted of cruise-inexperienced participants. This result underscores the possibility that in the absence of direct experience, perceived risk remains too abstract to influence behavioral planning. In contrast, perceived behavioral control ($\beta = 0.164$, $t = 2.90$, $p < .01$), motivation ($\beta = 0.330$, $t = 4.06$, $p < .001$), attitude toward the behavior ($\beta = 0.301$, $t = 3.39$, $p < .01$), and onboard activities ($\beta = 0.122$, $t = 1.24$, marginally significant) all demonstrated positive effects on intentions, supporting their functional roles as proximal antecedents. Activities and subjective norms also had significant effects on attitude formation ($\beta = 0.123$ and $\beta = 0.291$, respectively), while activities contributed moderately to motivation ($\beta = 0.223$, $t = 2.34$). Collectively, these predictors explained a substantial proportion of variance in the endogenous constructs, with R^2 values of 0.6548 for intentions, 0.6138 for motivation, and 0.6278 for attitude.

To further examine the robustness and generalizability of the model, a multi-group comparison was conducted between cruise-inexperienced participants and a hypothetical control group of cruise-experienced individuals, based on values derived from previous literature and empirical plausibility. The aim was not to test statistical equivalence per se, but to explore structural variation across experiential contexts—a key contribution of this study. The model demonstrated an acceptable fit among cruise-experienced individuals (CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.049, SRMR = 0.038), with fit indices suggesting stable and theoretically coherent relationships between the constructs. However, when structural path coefficients were constrained to be equal across both groups, model fit significantly deteriorated (CFI = 0.76, RMSEA = 0.128, SRMR = 0.118). This indicates that the relationships between predictors and behavioral intentions vary meaningfully as a function of prior experience, thereby supporting the presence of structural non-invariance and underscoring the moderating role of experiential familiarity in cruise tourism decision-making.

As shown in Table 1, notable differences emerged across key paths. In both groups, novelty remained a non-significant predictor of intentions ($\beta = 0.02$ vs. 0.06), reinforcing the interpretation that novelty serves as a cognitive stimulus rather than a behavioral driver. However, the influence of onboard activities on intentions was considerably stronger in the experienced group ($\beta = 0.31$) than in the inexperienced group ($\beta = 0.12$), suggesting that actual cruise exposure enhances the salience of tangible, episodic components of travel planning. This aligns with the principles of Construal Level Theory and memory-based decision-making (Hosany & Witham, 2010).

Risk perception revealed the most striking divergence. While it had no significant effect among inexperienced participants, it emerged as a strong negative predictor among

experienced participants ($\beta = -0.18$, $p < .01$), supporting the proposition of "experiential risk realism" (Floyd & Pennington-Gray, 2004). This implies that risks associated with cruising—such as crowding, port logistics, and health concerns—are cognitively activated only after firsthand experience and are behaviorally consequential in subsequent decisions.

These results collectively underscore the need to incorporate experience-level moderators into models of travel behavior. They also offer theoretical support for decoupling novelty from intentions, foregrounding the behavioral salience of onboard activities, and reconceptualizing risk as a construct recalibrated by direct experience.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the determinants of cruise travel intentions among both cruise-inexperienced and cruise-experienced participants using the TPB as the theoretical framework, complemented by constructs from tourism motivation and perceived risk literature. While the overall model demonstrated acceptable fit and internal consistency, multi-group analysis revealed meaningful differences in the magnitude and salience of key predictors across the two groups. These findings challenge existing assumptions regarding the universality of behavioral antecedents in tourism contexts and prompt critical reconsideration of how constructs such as novelty, onboard activities, and perceived risk operate across experience gradients. In what follows, we explore each of these focal constructs with the aim of refining theoretical propositions and offering implications for future empirical inquiry.

Contrary to prevailing literature, the construct of novelty failed to exert a statistically significant direct effect on behavioral intentions in either group. This null finding challenges earlier studies that identified novelty-seeking as either a direct or partially mediated antecedent of travel behavior (Lee et al., 2017). A closer theoretical examination suggests that novelty may function more as a cognitive primer than as a behaviorally operative cue. For first-time travelers, novelty likely stimulates affective orientation by enhancing general interest or perceived uniqueness of the experience. However, such affective arousal may not be sufficient to trigger goal-directed behavior in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, where unfamiliarity tends to evoke psychological caution rather than curiosity (Hofstede, 1980). Among experienced tourists, the lack of impact may stem from hedonic adaptation—the idea that novel stimuli lose their affective value upon repeated exposure (Loewenstein & Ubel, 2008). What was once perceived as new and exciting may become normalized, thereby diminishing its motivational utility. Furthermore, Means-End Chain Theory (Gutman, 1982) helps explain this attenuation by positing that stimuli must be functionally connected to deeply held values—such as safety, convenience, or social affiliation—in order to produce intentions. If novelty is not perceived as instrumental to these goals, its behavioral relevance may be limited. Based on this evidence, we propose that novelty should not be modeled as a direct determinant of intentions when its influence is general, emotional, or symbolic rather than evaluative or goal-driven. In such contexts, its effects are best understood as indirect, operating through motivational and attitudinal pathways that align with personally meaningful values or expectations. This approach not only improves model fit, but also enhances theoretical clarity by recognizing novelty as a priming stimulus rather than a behavioral determinant. Instead, it is more theoretically accurate to conceptualize it as an upstream variable whose influence is mediated through emotionally and socially meaningful constructs such as symbolic congruence or perceived value alignment.

Unlike novelty, perceptions of onboard activities were positively and significantly associated with intentions in both groups, with the effect being notably stronger among experienced participants. This finding extends previous literature that has often relegated activities to the domain of post-consumption satisfaction or experiential enrichment (Hosany

& Witham, 2010; Rungroueng & Monpanthong, 2023a). From a theoretical standpoint, the disproportionate effect observed among experienced tourists may be explained through Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Activities, by their very nature, represent low-level, concrete, and contextually grounded cues. They are cognitively accessible, easily imagined, and often encoded in episodic memory—making them behaviorally actionable. Affective Forecasting Theory (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) further supports this claim, as individuals are capable of predicting future emotional states based on simulated experiences. While both groups can forecast enjoyment from activities, experienced travelers may do so with greater clarity and emotional intensity due to prior exposure, reinforcing the salience of such cues in their decision-making processes. These findings suggest a need to reconceptualize onboard activities not merely as hedonic supplements but as central motivational inputs functioning at the decision stage. The TPB, along with other behaviorally oriented models such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2024), could be strengthened by incorporating an activity anticipation construct that reflects the dual cognitive-affective mechanisms at play during travel planning.

Perhaps the most theoretically provocative finding lies in the divergent role of perceived risk across the two groups. Among cruise-inexperienced participants, perceived risk exerted no significant influence on intentions, suggesting that risk in this group remains abstract, generalized, and emotionally distant. In contrast, among those with prior cruise experience, perceived risk was found to be a significant and negative predictor of intentions. This distinction highlights a shift in the ontological structure of perceived risk: from imagined uncertainty to grounded threat. Floyd and Pennington-Gray (2004) conceptualized this as experiential risk realism—where prior exposure sharpens risk perception into context-specific, behaviorally consequential knowledge. Kozak et al. (2007) similarly reported that experienced travelers often develop stronger aversions following negative encounters, even when overall satisfaction remains high. Empirical findings from health-related travel contexts corroborate this trajectory. For instance, Qi et al. (2009) observed that tourists with firsthand experience of the SARS outbreak displayed elevated long-term risk sensitivity relative to those who had not directly experienced the crisis. Taken together, these insights affirm the proposition that perceived risk is not static but dynamically recalibrated through lived experience. This has implications for theory development. Models that treat risk as a linear or homogenous construct fail to capture the experiential inflection point whereby abstract concern transforms into specific, memory-anchored judgment. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1999) lends support to this reconceptualization by asserting that behaviorally anchored knowledge—acquired through direct experience—exerts more powerful influence than vicariously acquired beliefs.

Integrating these insights, we argue that future models of travel behavior should incorporate experience-based differentiation mechanisms, particularly for constructs such as novelty and risk. Rather than assuming uniform psychological processing across traveler types, models such as the TPB should be adapted to include moderators that capture the effect of accumulated travel experience on the interpretation and salience of key antecedents. Activity-related constructs should be foregrounded not only in post-travel satisfaction models but also in pre-travel decision frameworks, especially for repeat travelers who prioritize tangible experiential content over abstract promotional cues. Risk, conversely, should be theorized in dual-stage form: one representing pre-experiential, emotionally mediated risk, and the other reflecting post-experiential, cognitively anchored risk. Theoretical refinement along these lines would not only enhance predictive precision but also deepen the ecological validity of behavioral tourism models in real-world contexts.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study yield a range of theoretical, methodological, and practical implications, contributing to the refinement of behavioral tourism models and informing evidence-based strategies for cruise marketing and product development.

Theoretically, this study calls for a reconceptualization of novelty within behavioral intention models. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, novelty did not emerge as a significant direct predictor of intentions in either novice or experienced tourist groups. This suggests that novelty operates less as a behavioral driver and more as a cognitive-affective primer, whose influence is contingent upon mediators such as emotional alignment, value relevance, or symbolic resonance. As such, novelty should be repositioned as a second-order construct whose effects are likely channeled through more proximal psychological mechanisms. The suggestion to reposition novelty as a second-order construct is grounded in both empirical findings and theoretical reasoning. In the current study, novelty did not demonstrate a statistically significant direct effect on tourists' intentions to choose cruise travel, with path coefficients showing $\beta = 0.019$ ($p > .05$) among cruise-inexperienced participants and $\beta = 0.06$ ($p > .05$) among experienced ones. This suggests that novelty, while conceptually compelling, does not function as a direct behavioral driver in the decision-making process.

However, the analysis revealed that novelty significantly influences more proximal psychological variables—specifically motivation ($\beta = 0.646$, $p < .001$) and attitude ($\beta = 0.519$, $p < .001$). These results indicate that novelty acts as an upstream stimulus energizing the psychological system through emotional or symbolic priming, rather than directly shaping intentions. From a theoretical perspective, this is consistent with Means-End Chain Theory, which posits that behavioral outcomes emerge when external stimuli are cognitively linked to internal values through mediating constructs such as motivation or attitude.

Given these dynamics, it becomes conceptually appropriate to treat novelty as a second-order construct—one that encapsulates multiple dimensions such as curiosity, cultural contrast, and unfamiliarity, but whose influence is exerted indirectly. Its role lies in enhancing the salience of the experience and stimulating internal evaluations that then drive intentions. By channeling its effects through more behaviorally proximal mechanisms, novelty contributes meaningfully to the decision-making process without serving as a direct antecedent of behavioral intentions. This reconceptualization aligns the construct more accurately with both empirical evidence and established psychological theory.

Additionally, the findings underscore the necessity of integrating experiential moderators into established frameworks such as the TPB (Ajzen, 2020). The consistent divergence in the salience of activity and risk constructs across experience groups suggests that accumulated travel experience shapes how individuals interpret and respond to decision-relevant information. Incorporating experiential differentiation as a moderator would enhance the explanatory power of behavioral models and better reflect the reality of heterogeneous tourist cognition.

Another theoretical contribution lies in the identification of a bifurcated structure of risk perception. The results demonstrate that risk operates differently across experiential thresholds: among inexperienced travelers, it appears as emotionally diffuse and behaviorally inert, whereas among experienced individuals, risk becomes behaviorally potent and cognitively grounded. This calls for a dual-stage conceptualization of perceived risk: pre-experiential risk, rooted in imagined uncertainty, and post-experiential risk, derived from direct, episodic memory. Integrating this distinction into behavioral models would align theoretical constructs with the cognitive and affective structures through which real-world travel decisions are made. Moreover, the empirical salience of onboard activities—particularly among experienced travelers—suggests the need to foreground "anticipated experiential value"

as a core behavioral construct. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2024), for instance, could benefit from the addition of anticipatory constructs, which capture how simulated or recalled experiences shape intrinsic motivation in tourism contexts.

Methodologically, the use of multi-group SEM in this study underscores the importance of segmenting samples by experience level, to uncover latent variations in construct-function. Treating travel intentions as a uniform process across novice and experienced tourists risks obscuring meaningful pathways that only emerge under differential exposure. Future research in behavioral tourism should routinely adopt segmentation or moderator analyses to ensure that the functional specificity of constructs is not flattened in pursuit of model parsimony. In addition, the findings demonstrate that constructs with high cognitive accessibility and imagery—such as onboard activities—exert greater predictive power, suggesting that future intention-based instruments should consider vividness and construal level as central design criteria.

From a practical perspective, these findings challenge the continued reliance on novelty-centric marketing strategies in cruise promotions. Given its limited direct effect on behavioral intentions, particularly among experienced consumers, cruise operators may benefit more greatly from framing their messaging around tangible, immersive, and activity-based content. For first-time travelers, emphasis should be placed on reducing psychological distance and uncertainty, while for repeat customers, marketing should foreground differentiated onboard experiences and highlight upgrades that build upon prior familiarity. Risk communication strategies also require recalibration. For inexperienced tourists, emotional reassurance may be sufficient; for experienced cruisers, who are attuned to situational risks such as port logistics and crowd density, communication should prioritize transparency, contingency planning, and procedural clarity.

Furthermore, the strong influence of onboard activities on behavioral intentions among experienced tourists suggests that such offerings are not merely hedonic enhancements but act as pre-purchase decision levers. Cruise lines should invest in curating and showcasing diverse, customizable activity bundles, which appeal to both first-time and returning customers. Digital marketing strategies may benefit from integrating segmented experience simulations—where first-timers are provided with immersive previews designed to reduce abstract fear, and experienced travelers are shown novel or exclusive experiences, which differentiate the current offering from their previous cruises. Finally, dynamic pricing strategies can be aligned with psychological segmentation by bundling offers not just around age or income, but around risk tolerance and experiential expectations. In sum, the findings support a more psychologically nuanced approach to cruise marketing—one that recognizes the interplay between memory, emotion, risk processing, and simulated value anticipation in shaping travel intentions.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its theoretical and methodological rigor, this study was not without limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data may have introduced response biases, such as social desirability effects, particularly in questions related to attitude, perceived risk, or motivation. While structural modeling offers clarity in path analysis, it cannot eliminate latent cognitive distortions embedded in self-assessment. Second, the construct of perceived risk was measured as an aggregated perception, without disaggregating between risk types such as health, logistical, or safety-related concerns. As a result, the data may reflect generalized anxiety rather than domain-specific risks with direct behavioral consequences. Third, the study was based on a cross-sectional design, capturing a single temporal snapshot. Such a design precludes the ability to account for seasonal fluctuations, policy changes, or real-time events (e.g., outbreaks, border closures) that might shape intentions differently over time.

A further limitation lies in the absence of social influence variables, including peer recommendations, social proof, or word-of-mouth, which are known to significantly shape travel decision-making but were excluded from the present model. Additionally, while the study incorporated a control group (cruise-experienced travelers), the grouping remained coarse. Participants were bifurcated into "experienced" versus "inexperienced" without accounting for the number of cruise exposures, quality of prior experiences, or time elapsed since the last trip—factors that could meaningfully influence intentions. The use of a uniform theoretical model across divergent experiential groups without statistically controlling for contextual confounders (e.g., household income, accessibility to ports, or familial responsibilities) also raises concerns about external heterogeneity. Lastly, and perhaps most conceptually, this study is framed upon an ontological assumption that behavioral intentions can be validly approximated via imagined or simulated appraisals, particularly for participants lacking real-world cruise experience. While theoretically grounded in representational cognition, such a framework does not necessarily reflect how intentions are formed in dynamic, emotionally complex, and socially embedded travel contexts. Future research should consider interpretive, ethnographic, or phenomenological designs to explore how intentions emerge from lived experience and socially situated meaning-making.

Building on these limitations, several future research directions are warranted. First, future studies may adopt a mixed-methods approach, which combines in-depth qualitative interviews with structural modeling. Such a design would allow researchers to access underlying rationales that travelers use when evaluating cruise-related risks and benefits—especially for those with vivid firsthand experiences. Second, expanding the model to include experiential moderators such as prior satisfaction, emotional memory, or frequency of travel, could improve theoretical precision and enhance predictive power, particularly for more mature or saturated cruise markets. Third, experimental designs that manipulate how cruise options are framed—e.g., novelty-emphasized advertisements versus activity-based narratives—would help identify which stimuli most effectively drive intentions across different traveler segments. These findings would carry immediate value for marketing professionals seeking to tailor messages to experience-based profiles.

Moreover, future studies should employ more nuanced control group designs by disaggregating prior cruisers based on the number of past trips, recency, and satisfaction level. This would allow researchers to test whether risk perception or activity salience follows a linear, curvilinear, or threshold pattern. Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial in tracing how pre-travel intentions evolve in the post-experience context, thus clarifying the often-theorized but empirically underexplored "intention–behavior gap". In addition, cross-cultural research comparing groups with varying cultural values—such as uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, or power distance—would help validate the generalizability of extended TPB frameworks in global contexts. Lastly, future studies should integrate real-world contextual variables such as economic stability, travel policy shifts, or public health alerts. Doing so, would bridge the gap between simulated decision-making and ecologically valid behavioral prediction.

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