

Influences of Social Media Marketing Communication and Religious Motivation on Tourists' Decision-Making Along the Ashtavinayak Yatra, Maharashtra, India

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Abstract:

This research investigates the perceptions of Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC), faith-based motivation, and travel decision-making among Thai tourists on the Ashtavinayak Yatra pilgrimage in India, and analyzes the influence of the former two factors on travel decisions. The sample consisted of 377 Thai tourists who had traveled or planned to travel the route. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and Multiple Regression Analysis. The findings revealed that tourists' overall perceptions of SMMC, faith-based motivation, and travel decision-making were at a high level (mean scores ~4.00-4.10). All components of SMMC demonstrated a statistically significant positive influence on travel decision-making ($p < 0.05$). Direct Marketing had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.265$), highlighting the importance of personalized digital interaction. Similarly, all components of faith-based motivation significantly positively influenced travel decisions ($p < 0.05$), with Activities having the strongest impact ($\beta = 0.557$), underscoring that well-organized religious rituals are the primary driver. Consequently, it is recommended that marketers develop social media strategies centered on faith-based narratives and legendary storytelling. Strengthening Direct Marketing channels to provide timely and accurate information is crucial. Furthermore, ensuring the authenticity, completeness, and safety of religious activities along the route is paramount to fostering sustainable travel decisions and positive word-of-mouth. The study is limited to Thai tourists and self-reported data, which may affect generalizability. Ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent were upheld.

Keywords: Social Media, Faith-Based Motivation, Travel Decision-Making, Ashtavinayak, Lord Ganesha

Introduction

Pilgrimage tourism has gained increasing global attention, particularly across South Asia, where pilgrimage routes serve as both cultural anchors and socio-economic drivers (Hemprapai et al., 2023; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2021). According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), this segment remains highly resilient and distinct from general leisure tourism due to its spiritually oriented motivations and ritual-based experiences. Palmer and Chuamuangphan (2021) further note that, for Thai tourists who demonstrate a strong propensity toward international pilgrimage access to information and decision-making processes have been fundamentally reshaped by social media platforms (Kanchanathaveekul, Buddhapoompitak, Srithongphim, & Tangmungmee, 2024).

Recent studies (Worapongpat, 2023a) indicate that platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube now function as primary channels for information search, alternative evaluation, and content-driven persuasion in alignment with the Digital Consumer Decision Model and AIDA communication pathway. (Worapongpat, 2021; Worapongpat, 2023a) However, existing scholarship has predominantly concentrated on general tourism or niche areas such as gastronomic tourism. Only a limited number of studies have explored the interaction between Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) and faith-based motivation within the framework of pilgrimage decision-making, despite theoretical relevance to the S-O-R (Stimulus–Organism–Response) model and Push–Pull Motivation Theory.

This gap is particularly evident in the context of complex religious pilgrimage routes such as the Ashtavinayak Yatra an extended Hindu pilgrimage in Maharashtra, India, which remains academically underexplored (Phra Kru Pariyatti Wachirakhun, 2021). The Ashtavinayak Yatra is a profoundly sacred route for devotees of Lord Ganesha (Manop Nakkannian, Nakkannian, & Saramas, 2022). It encompasses eight Swayambhu (self-manifested) Mūrti of Lord Ganesha, spread across multiple districts in Maharashtra and covering a distance of over 800 kilometers (Worapongpat, 2023c). Pilgrimage completion requires advanced logistical coordination, including ritual arrangements (Puja), safe transportation, and adequate accommodation, all of which shape the travel experience.

A persistent challenge for Thai tourists and tour operators is the lack of reliable, comprehensive, and Thai-language information regarding rituals, safety protocols, and travel preparation on social media a factor that directly influences travel confidence and decision-making. Consequently, this study focuses on Thai tourists who have traveled or plan to travel along the Ashtavinayak route, a group characterized by strong faith-based motivation and active reliance on social media for planning, verification of ritual accuracy, and in-depth information search. Therefore, the central research gap lies in the absence of empirical evidence connecting SMMC and faith-based motivation to the pilgrimage decision-making process of Thai tourists within the Ashtavinayak Yatra context.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the level of perception of Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC), the level of faith-based motivation, and the level of travel decision-making along the Ashtavinayak Yatra.
2. To investigate the influence of Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) on travel decision-making along the Ashtavinayak Yatra.
3. To investigate the influence of faith-based motivation on travel decision-making along the Ashtavinayak Yatra.

Literature Review

1. Conceptualizing Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) The digital transformation of marketing has necessitated a critical re-evaluation of the foundational concepts of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) (Phra Supakit Supanyo & Phra Methee Pariyatti Wiboon, 2023). This section reviews the evolution from traditional IMC to Digital IMC (DIMC) and its specialized manifestation in the modern landscape: Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) (Worapongpat & Sandusit Borivongtrakul, 2022).

The review is anchored in the established principles of IMC theory (Phraathikanchaiya Piyatharo, Muangmai Sirirote, & Namsena, 2023), which emphasizes message consistency across channels, and the paradigm of digital marketing. (Worapongpat, 2022a). SMMC is operationalized herein to include crucial digital elements: digital advertising, digital PR/influencer marketing, and, most critically in this context, direct marketing facilitated

through social media platforms. Specifically, within the tourism context, it references studies highlighting the vital role of social media in information search and the powerful effect of online reviews/electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) (Worapongpat, 2022d).

While extensive research exists on social media marketing in tourism, the vast majority focuses on general leisure or mass tourism (Rai, 2020). There is a discernible lack of studies that specifically quantify the importance of direct messaging/direct marketing in high-involvement contexts like international pilgrimage, where consumers require extensive reassurance and detailed, personalized information due to high perceived risk. (Worapongpat, 2022b). This research directly addresses this gap by empirically measuring the beta coefficient of direct marketing within the overall SMMC construct, which is hypothesized to be highly significant due to the personalized, high-trust information required by pilgrims.

2. Conceptualizing Pilgrimage and Faith-Based Motivation This section synthesizes general tourism motivation theories (Sanvises & Kaewnuch, 2025) before delving into the specialized concept of faith-based motivation. We employ the Push-Pull Theory of Tourism Motivation to structure the analysis of internal and external drivers.

The theoretical foundation of this section lies in established pilgrimage theories (Shinde, 2021) and empirical studies that link religious participation and structured religious activities to the impetus for travel. **Internal Push Factors (Faith-Based Motivation):** These include personal, intrinsic drivers such as the pursuit of spiritual peace, moral purification (Santachitto, 2021), and the fulfillment of religious duties. (Worapongpat, 2022c). **External Pull Factors:** These include the destination's unique attributes, such as the sanctity of the location, the appeal of rituals, and the historical/architectural significance (Tuntipisitkul, Tsusaka, Kim, Shrestha, & Sasaki, 2021).

Existing research frequently emphasizes the physical or cultural pull factors of a destination (Sotrin Chokkatitwattana, 2022). However, comprehensive studies on specific, ritual-intensive pilgrimages, such as the Ashtavinayak Yatra, where performance of rituals and ceremonies is central to fulfilling the spiritual objective, remain sparse. (Worapongpat, 2022d). This study addresses this gap by specifically isolating and highlighting the significance of the Activities dimension (i.e., ritual participation), confirming that motivation grounded in religious behavioral fulfillment is the primary influence driving participation in this high-commitment pilgrimage.

3. Conceptualizing Tourism Decision-Making This section frames the pilgrimage planning process within the Consumer Behavioral Decision Model (e.g., Unhasuta, Sasaki, and Kim, 2021), tracing the stages from need recognition through to post-purchase behavior. (Worapongpat, 2023). **Theoretical Foundation:** Core references include research examining destination selection in contexts involving high-risk perception or complex travel logistics factors highly relevant to international pilgrimage, particularly travel to destinations like India (Worapongpat & Phokanittanon, 2020). The complexity and high-involvement nature of the Ashtavinayak Yatra elevate the decision-making process beyond that of typical leisure travel, making this framework essential.

Previous pilgrimage studies are often descriptive, lacking the empirical validation of causal relationships. This study employs inferential analysis to confirm how the combined effects of the external SMMC factors and the internal faith-based motivation factors influence both the purchase decision and subsequent post-purchase behavior within the specific context of the Ashtavinayak Yatra. (Worapongpat, Brorewongtrakhul, 2024). This approach provides clear empirical confirmation of causal relationships, which is an element often absent in descriptive pilgrimage research.

Conceptual Framework and Research Focus:

The literature review converges to establish a conceptual framework in which: Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) represents the external marketing pull

factors. Faith-Based Motivation embodies the internal spiritual push factors. Tourism Decision-Making functions as the dependent variable. This framework (Worapongpat, Choothong, Piamsuphakpong, Salathong, & Issalam, 2021) is designed to empirically test the influence of SMMC and faith-based motivation on the decision to undertake the Ashtavinayak Yatra, thereby addressing a critical research gap where such empirical validation has been absent for this specific pilgrimage route (Worapongpat, 2022d).

The study is particularly distinctive in its focus on verifying the predominant influence of the Direct Marketing dimension within SMMC and the Activities/Religious Rituals dimension within faith-based motivation on the overall decision-making process, providing granular, actionable insights for pilgrimage tourism providers.

Conceptual Framework

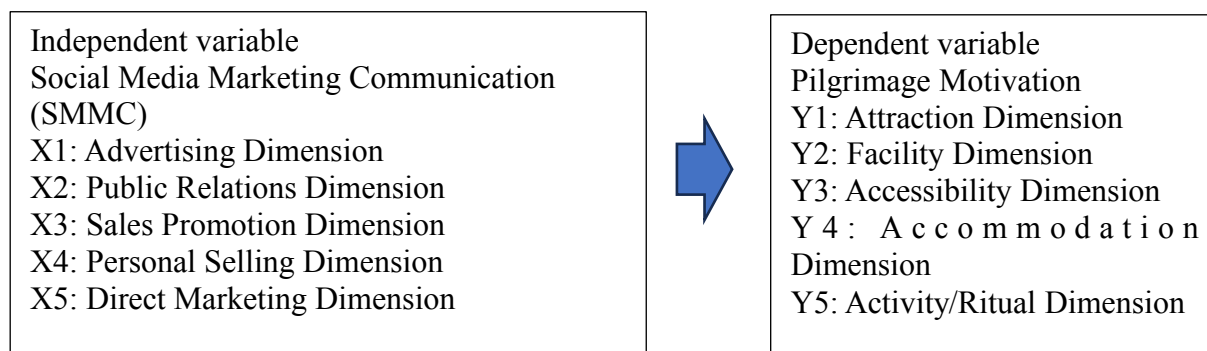


Figure 1. Research conceptual framework (Worapongpat N, 2025)

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design utilizing survey research to investigate the influential relationships between the independent variables: Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) and Pilgrimage Motivation, and the dependent variable, Travel Decision-Making. The primary inferential statistical technique used to test the proposed hypotheses and establish causal relationships was Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA).

2. Population and Sample

2.1 Population

The population of this study comprised Thai tourists who express devotion to Lord Ganesha and who are interested in, have previously undertaken, or are currently planning to undertake a pilgrimage along the Ashtavinayak Temple Circuit in Maharashtra, India.

2.2 Sample and Sampling Procedure

A total sample size of 377 respondents was determined. The study utilized non-probability sampling methods, specifically a combination of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling.

Purposive Sampling: This was executed by selecting respondents exclusively from online social media communities (e.g., dedicated Facebook groups and Line Open Chat forums) focused on pilgrimage travel to India and the Ashtavinayak Yatra. This technique ensured that all participants possessed relevant experience or a genuine, high-involvement interest in the specific pilgrimage route, thereby maximizing the construct validity of the responses.

Convenience Sampling: This was utilized for the final distribution within the identified groups, relying on the ease of access to these specific online communities.

3. Research Instrument The research instrument was a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed in the native language (Thai) and divided into four main sections, utilizing a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 5 = "Strongly Agree" to 1 = "Strongly Disagree") to measure the principal attitudinal constructs. Section 1) Demographic Information (Gender, Age, Marital Status, Income, and Occupation) Section 2) Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) (Five dimensions: X1–X5) 3) Pilgrimage Motivation (Five dimensions: Y1–Y5, with particular emphasis on Y5: Activity/Ritual fulfillment) 4) Travel Decision-Making (Five dimensions: Z1–Z5)

3.1 Instrument Quality Assessment Language and Translation Procedure

The original instrument was likely drafted in English, requiring a formal translation process.

The questionnaire was translated into Thai using a back-translation procedure involving two independent bilingual experts.

The final Thai version was then checked by a third expert to ensure linguistic and conceptual equivalence, maintaining the integrity of the constructs.

Content Validity was established through a rigorous expert review process.

The instrument was evaluated by at least three subject-matter specialists in the fields of social sciences, tourism anthropology, and digital marketing to ensure that all items accurately and comprehensively measure the intended constructs within the context of the Ashtavinayak Yatra.

Validity Content Validity was established through a rigorous expert review process.

The instrument was evaluated by at least three subject-matter specialists in the fields of social sciences, tourism anthropology, and digital marketing to ensure that all items accurately and comprehensively measure the intended constructs within the context of the Ashtavinayak Yatra.

Reliability Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α).

3.2 A pilot test was conducted with $N=30$ respondents who were not included in the final main sample.

The resulting Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient for each scale was calculated, with a pre-established target threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ to ensure acceptable reliability and consistency among the items within each construct.

4. Data Collection Procedure

4.1 Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

Prior to data collection, the study protocol received ethical clearance/approval from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) or Ethics Committee. The questionnaire commenced with a clear statement detailing: The study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality and anonymity of the data provided. Confirmation that proceeding with the survey constituted informed consent to participate.

4.2 Distribution and Duration

Authorization and Collaboration: Formal permission was secured from the administrators of the relevant social media groups related to pilgrimage in India to ensure authorized distribution of the research instrument.

Distribution Channels: The questionnaire was disseminated exclusively online using a digital survey platform (e.g., Google Forms), providing wide reach to the target population.

Duration: Data collection was conducted over an estimated period of four to six weeks, or until the targeted sample size of 377 valid and complete responses was successfully obtained.

5. Data Analysis and Statistical Techniques

The collected data were cleaned, coded, and processed using standard statistical software packages (e.g., SPSS or R).

The analysis comprised two main parts:

5.1 Descriptive Statistics Used to summarize and describe the characteristics of the sample and the general perceptions across all constructs (X, Y, Z).

Frequency and Percentage: Used for the analysis of demographic data (e.g., gender, occupation). Mean and Standard Deviation (S.D.): Employed to analyze the central tendency and dispersion of respondents' perception levels for all attitudinal constructs.

Research Results

The results clearly demonstrate the high predictive power of the independent variables and specifically identify the key components within SMMC and Pilgrimage Motivation that drive the Travel Decision-Making process for Thai tourists undertaking the Ashtavinayak Yatra.

1. Demographic Profile of Tourists

The sample (N=377) primarily reflects a mature, educated, and financially stable segment of Thai tourists who participate in international pilgrimage.

| Characteristic | Dominant Finding | Implication |
|----------------|----------------------------|---|
| Gender | Female (59.68%) | Women are the primary decision-makers or participants in this specific pilgrimage segment. |
| Age | 42–60 years (31.83%) | International pilgrimage is a high-involvement, high-cost activity typically undertaken by mature individuals with established financial capacity. |
| Education | Bachelor's Degree (58.09%) | The target audience is well-educated, suggesting a high capacity for information search and critical evaluation. |
| Occupation | Self-Employment (30.24%) | Flexible schedules and disposable income often associated with self-employment facilitate extended international travel. |
| Monthly Income | 15,000–25,000 THB (35.81%) | While income is moderate, it is often supplemented by family or savings for major spiritual travel, or it indicates a larger combined household income. |

The sample consisted of 377 Thai tourists who had either undertaken or expressed interest in undertaking pilgrimage travel along the Ashtavinayak route. The demographic characteristics were as follows: Gender: A majority was female (59.68%), consistent with the trend of higher female participation in religious and pilgrimage-related travel in Thailand. Age: Most respondents were between 42–60 years (31.83%), indicating that pilgrimage travel tends to attract mature adults with greater financial stability and spiritual motivation. Education: Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (58.09%). Occupation: The leading occupational group was self-employment (30.24%). Monthly Income: The most common income range was 15,000–25,000 THB (35.81%), reflecting a middle-income demographic capable of affording international pilgrimage travel.

Objective 1: Perception of Social Media Marketing Communication, Pilgrimage Motivation, and Travel Decision-Making

The results reveal that the perceptions of SMMC, faith-based pilgrimage motivation, and travel decision-making were at a high level, with mean scores ranging from 4.06 to 4.10

on a 5-point scale. This suggests a strong and consistent awareness among Thai tourists regarding the factors influencing pilgrimage decisions.

Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of SMMC, Pilgrimage Motivation, and Travel Decision-Making

| Dimension | Sub-Dimension | Mean (\bar{x}) | Overall Mean |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| SMMC (X) | Advertising | 4.09 | 4.06 |
| | Direct Marketing | 4.07 | |
| | Sales Personnel | 4.06 | |
| Pilgrimage Motivation (Y) | Accessibility | 4.11 | 4.09 |
| | Accommodation | 4.10 | |
| | Rituals/Activities | 4.09 | |
| Travel Decision-Making (Z) | Information Search | 4.12 | 4.10 |
| | Post-Travel Experience | 4.12 | |
| | Evaluation of Options | 4.08 | |

Interpretation: Within SMMC, advertising received the highest score, indicating strong exposure to digital promotional content. Within pilgrimage motivation, accessibility scored the highest, suggesting that tourists perceive the Ashtavinayak route as reasonably manageable. Within travel decision-making, information search and post-travel experience ranked highest, emphasizing the importance of reliable pre-travel information and memorable post-travel impressions.

Table 2. Summary of Mean Scores for Key Variables

| Variable | Mean (\bar{x}) | SD | Level | Sub-Dimension with Highest Mean |
|----------------------------|--------------------|------|-------|--|
| SMMC (X) | 4.06 | 0.93 | High | Advertising (\bar{x} =4.09) |
| Pilgrimage Motivation (Y) | 4.09 | 0.97 | High | Accessibility (\bar{x} =4.11) |
| Travel Decision-Making (Z) | 4.10 | 0.94 | High | Information Search & Post-Travel Experience (\bar{x} =4.12) |

Influence of Social Media Marketing Communication on Travel Decision-Making. Regression analysis shows that SMMC has a positive and statistically significant influence on travel decision-making ($p < 0.05$), accounting for 86.0% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.860$).

Table 3. Influence of SMMC Components on Travel Decision-Making

| Component (X) | Beta (β) | P-Value | Influence on Z |
|-----------------------|------------------|---------|-------------------|
| Advertising (X1) | 0.211 | 0.001** | Significant |
| Public Relations (X2) | 0.091 | 0.233 | Not significant |
| Sales Promotion (X3) | 0.189 | 0.019** | Significant |
| Sales Personnel (X4) | 0.195 | 0.016** | Significant |
| Direct Marketing (X5) | 0.265 | 0.001** | Most significant |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.860 | | 86.0% of variance |

These results indicate that direct marketing via personal social media channels, such as Line and WhatsApp, emphasizing in-depth information and reassurance about pilgrimage journeys, plays the most critical role in motivating Thai tourists to undertake travel along the Ashtavinayak route.

Influence of Pilgrimage Motivation on Travel Decision-Making
Table 4. Influence of Pilgrimage Motivation Components on Travel Decision-Making

| Component (Y) | Beta (β) | P-Value | Influence on Z |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------|-------------------|
| Attraction (Y1) | 0.143 | 0.003** | Significant |
| Facilities (Y2) | 0.158 | 0.011** | Significant |
| Accessibility (Y3) | -0.037 | 0.454 | Not significant |
| Accommodation (Y4) | 0.170 | 0.002** | Significant |
| Rituals/Activities (Y5) | 0.557 | 0.000** | Most significant |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.950 | | 95.0% of variance |

Interpretation: All variables except accessibility significantly and positively influence travel decisions. The strongest influence is rituals and religious activities ($\beta = 0.557$), indicating that Thai pilgrims prioritize the quality, authenticity, and completeness of religious rituals when deciding to undertake the Ashtavinayak pilgrimage.

Discussion

Finding: The overall perceived level of Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC), Faith-based Motivation, and Travel Decision-Making was generally High (means ranged 4.06–4.10). Within travel decision-making, Information Search and Post-Travel Sentiment had the highest mean scores. This may be because: Pilgrimage to complex, cross-site routes such as the Ashtavinayak Yatra represents a high-involvement, experiential, and culturally complex decision. Pilgrims therefore engage in intensive pre-trip information search, relying heavily on social media for experiential, peer-generated content (eWOM), travel tips, ritual guidance, and logistics prior to purchase. High faith-driven expectations produce satisfaction that frequently exceeds expectations, producing positive post-travel sentiment and WOM. These behaviors reflect contemporary consumer decision models for high-involvement tourism and the documented centrality of eWOM in travel choices. Supporting documents literature: Research shows social media and eWOM strongly affect travelers' information search and reduce perceived decision risk in tourism contexts, especially for high-involvement or high-risk destinations. Birau, and Bărbăcioru (2025) and Worapongpat and Brorewongtrakhul (2024), PMC Recent studies show social media's role in shaping destination choice and post-travel sentiment, especially via influencer content and peer reviews. Butcher and Chomvilailuk (2022) and Worapongpat, Nirandon, Issaralam, Khamsai, and Hemchatluechai (2023), ScienceDirect+1 Literature on pilgrimage motivation highlights that faith-driven travelers combine spiritual push factors with intensive planning behaviors when pilgrimage involves international travel or complex itineraries.

Results from Research Objective 2 Finding: Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) has a statistically significant positive influence on travel decision-making. The SMMC component with the largest standardized effect was Direct Marketing via messenger apps ($\beta = 0.265$). This may be because: The Ashtavinayak route is logistically complex (multiple temples, ritual booking needs, inter-site transport). Direct, private, responsive channels (e.g., Line Official Accounts, WhatsApp, or platform DMs) allow tour operators to provide personalized reassurance, quick problem solving, ritual logistics, and payment facilitation. Such targeted, two-way communications strengthen trust and reduce perceived purchase risk increasing conversion for high-involvement pilgrimage packages. Supporting documents literature: Integrated marketing communications and targeted, personalized messaging are highly effective in digital tourism contexts and especially in niche, experience-driven markets. Ghimire (2019) and Worapongpat, Wongkumchai, Sopraikan, Bhasabutr, and Somchob (2023), Taylor & Francis Online Studies on eWOM and social media marketing in

tourism conclude that direct messaging and timely responses are crucial for trust-building and for converting high-involvement consumers.

Results from Research Objective 3 Finding: Faith-based Motivation positively and significantly influences travel decision-making. Activities/Rituals had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.557$); Accessibility showed no significant influence ($\beta = -0.037$). This may be because: Pilgrims' primary aspiration is spiritual fulfilment (Puja, Darshan, ritual completion). The ritual's authenticity, spiritual intensity, and completeness are prioritized over physical comfort and accessibility. In other words, spiritual outcomes (push factors) dominate over pull factors like infrastructure especially in faith-oriented journeys where experiential authenticity matters most. Supporting documents literature: The pilgrimage motivation literature indicates ritual authenticity and the quality of spiritual experiences are key determinants for pilgrim satisfaction and behavioral intentions; access/comfort are secondary. (Hall, 2006) Empirical studies of religious tourism show activities/rituals strongly predict return intention and recommendations, while accessibility variables often have smaller effects for devout pilgrims. (Recent studies 2023–2025 in pilgrimage tourism).

New Knowledge from the Research

The study on the influence of Social Media Marketing Communication and Faith-based Motivation on travel decision-making along the Ashtavinayak Yatra in Maharashtra, India, yielded significant new knowledge that diverges from general tourism findings, specifically confirming the hierarchy of faith-based factors and the dominance of personalized communication.

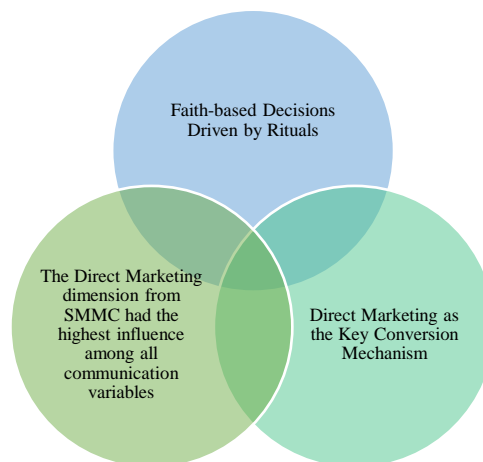


Figure 2. The Influence of Social Media Marketing Communication and Religious Motivation on Tourists' Decision-Making Along the Ashtavinayak Yatra in Maharashtra, India (Worapongpat N, 2025)

Figure 2. the most critical new knowledge relates to the overwhelming influence of religious activities and rituals and the paramount importance of direct social media marketing in pilgrimage travel decision-making: 1. Faith-based Decisions Driven by Rituals: The Activities/Rituals dimension from Faith-based Motivation exhibited the highest influence on the decision to travel. This confirms that Thai pilgrims travel to the Ashtavinayak Yatra for The Practice (Rituals) and not merely "The Visit (Sightseeing)". Furthermore, factors related to general infrastructure comfort are secondary. 2. Direct Marketing as the Key Conversion Mechanism: The Direct Marketing dimension from SMMC had the highest influence among all communication variables. This novel insight indicates that for complex, high-risk travel, personalized communication via messenger applications aimed at building confidence and

addressing specific ritual-related inquiries is the most effective mechanism for converting interest into a tour purchase decision.

Conclusion

This research confirms the influential relationship between Social Media Marketing Communication (SMMC) and faith-based motivation on the travel decision-making process of Thai tourists undertaking the Ashtavinayak Yatra in Maharashtra, India. The findings clearly demonstrate that faith-based motivation particularly the Activities/Rituals dimension ($\beta = 0.557$) is the strongest determinant of travel decisions. This highlights that Thai pilgrims prioritize the authenticity, completeness, and spiritual quality of ritual experiences above other motivational factors.

Similarly, the study found that Direct Marketing ($\beta = 0.265$) is the most effective communication strategy influencing pilgrimage decision-making, surpassing traditional promotional tools such as advertising and public relations. This indicates that Thai tourists rely heavily on personalized, in-depth, and reliable information delivered through direct communication channels before committing to long-distance religious travel.

Overall, the results suggest that tour operators and related agencies must shift their strategies away from generalized promotional approaches and toward the development of pilgrimage packages that emphasize ritual integrity, accurate spiritual guidance, and highly responsive information systems. Enhancing these components is essential to meet the unique expectations and high spiritual demands of the Thai pilgrimage market.

Suggestions

1. Recommendations for Practical Application

1.1 Strengthen Information Search and Post-Travel Sentiment

Given that Information Search and Post-Travel Experience received the highest mean scores, relevant organizations especially tour operators and international tourism authorities should: Invest in credible eWOM content: Produce authentic video reviews, vlogs, and testimonial-style content on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. These materials should emphasize real faith-based experiences to support information-seeking behaviors and strengthen electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Develop searchable knowledge hubs: Create central digital repositories with accurate Thai-language information regarding the Ashtavinayak route, rituals, safety, and travel preparation.

1.2 Leverage Direct Marketing as the Main Conversion Mechanism With Direct Marketing showing the strongest influence on travel decisions ($\beta = 0.265$), organizations should: Establish Expert Direct Chat Support: Develop a dedicated support team on LINE Official or WhatsApp Business trained in the Ashtavinayak rituals, geography, travel timelines, and safety requirements. This team should provide immediate, personalized responses to build trust and facilitate conversion. Implement personalized follow-up systems: Automated but customizable follow-up messages can help maintain engagement, reassure hesitant pilgrims, and increase booking rates.

1.3 Prioritize Ritual Integrity over Convenience since Activities/Rituals exerted the highest influence ($\beta = 0.557$), while Accessibility was not significant, tour operators should: Guarantee ritual completeness: Offer packages that ensure high-quality ritual experiences, such as: special Darshan arrangements, coordination with experienced Brahmin priests, detailed scheduling of ritual timings. Provide Pre-Trip Ritual Orientation: Deliver pre-departure briefings explaining required rituals, expected conduct, symbolic meanings, and preparation guidelines to ensure spiritual satisfaction. Shift focus from comfort-based to

experience-based value: Emphasize authenticity rather than luxury accommodations or premium transportation, as comfort is not the primary motivator for Thai pilgrims.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

The study establishes a foundational Hierarchy of Motivation and Digital Trust, where faith-oriented motives outweigh comfort-based motivations, and personalized direct communication is more influential than broad public relations efforts. These insights can inform studies of other complex pilgrimage routes such as Bodh Gaya (India), Shikoku Pilgrimage (Japan), or sacred Buddhist circuits in Nepal.

Future research should pursue:

Qualitative Studies: Conduct ethnographic or phenomenological research to explore: the meaning-making processes embedded in ritual participation, the role of spiritual trust in selecting pilgrimage operators, the psychological and emotional dimensions influencing pilgrims in high-risk or complex destinations.

Model Expansion: Integrate variables such as perceived risk, spiritual well-being, or digital trust frameworks to further refine the understanding of pilgrimage decision-making.

Comparative Studies: Compare Thai pilgrims with pilgrims from other cultural backgrounds to examine cross-cultural differences in faith-based motivation and media influences.

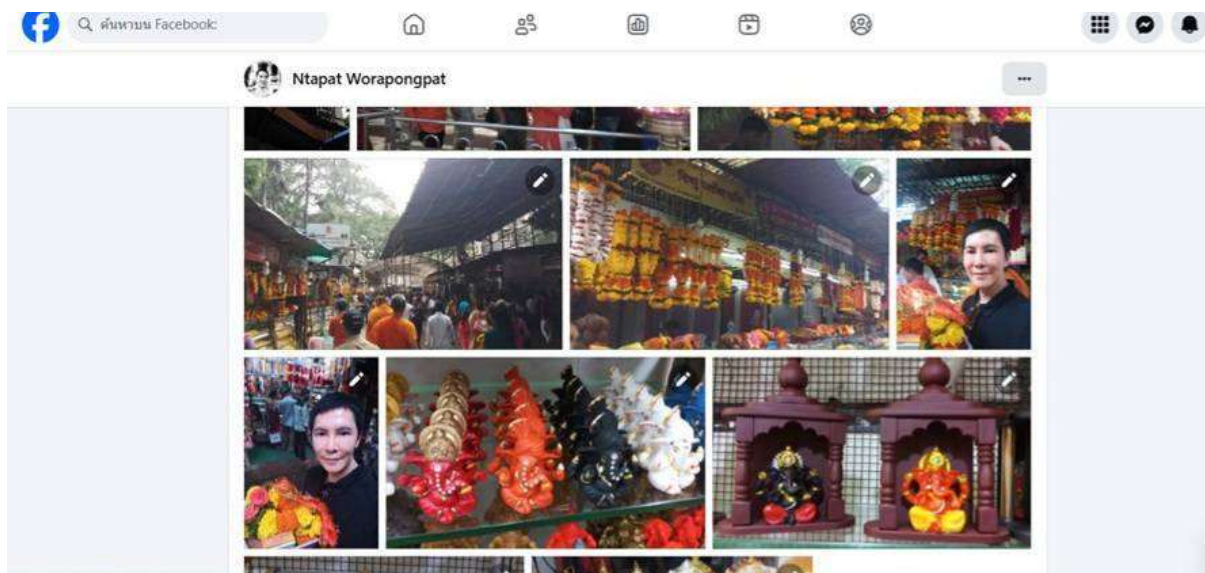


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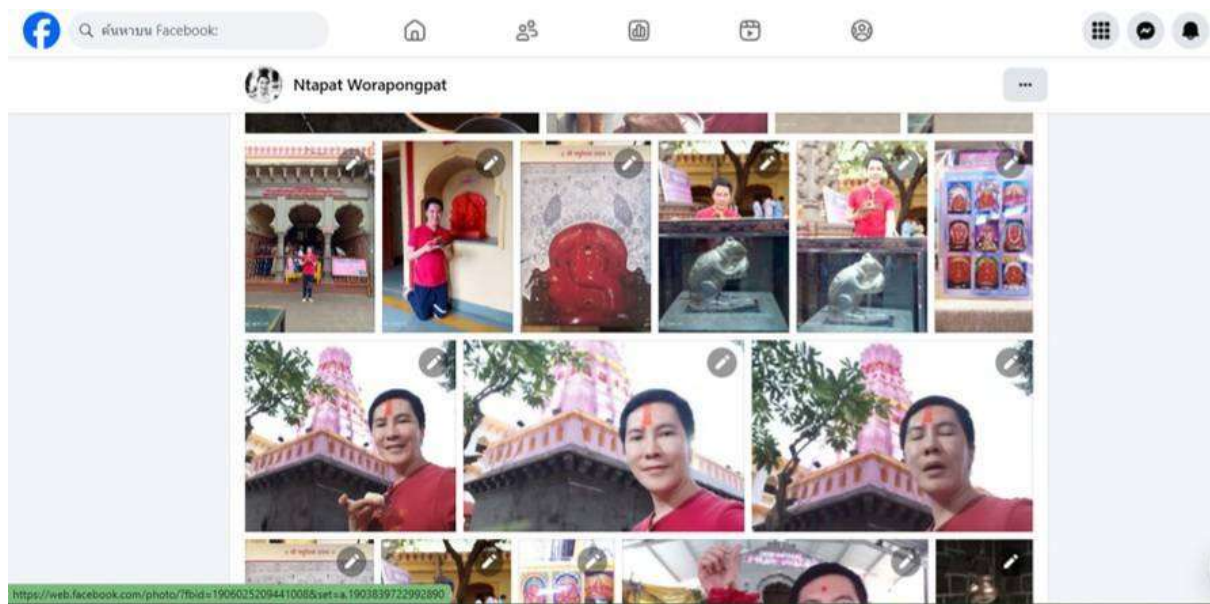


Figure 4. The Influence of Social Media Marketing Communication and Religious Motivation on Tourists' Decision-Making Along the Ashtavinayak Yatra in Maharashtra, India (Worapongpat N, 2025)

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