

Tourism Image, Tourism Marketing Mix, Service Quality, And Management Innovation Influencing the Loyalty of Thai Tourists in Visiting Ranong Province

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Abstract

The tourism industry remains a critical mechanism for driving Thailand's economic stability, yet secondary tourism cities like Ranong Province face significant challenges in retaining visitors amidst intensifying domestic competition. While destination image and marketing strategies are well-documented drivers of initial visitation, the mechanisms that convert these factors into sustained loyalty—specifically through the lens of innovation—remain underexplored. This research employs a mixed-method approach to investigate the causal relationships between tourism image, the marketing mix (10Ps), and service quality on tourist loyalty, with innovation management serving as a mediating variable. Quantitative data were collected via questionnaires from 520 Thai tourists who visited Ranong in the past year, analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Qualitative insights were derived from in-depth interviews with 16 key tourism stakeholders. The study posits that traditional marketing and service quality alone are insufficient for long-term retention; rather, they must be operationalized through process, product, and service innovation to foster genuine loyalty. The findings are expected to provide a strategic framework for entrepreneurs in secondary cities to transition from passive service delivery to active innovation management, thereby ensuring sustainable tourism development aligned with national economic policies.

Keywords: Ranong Province, Tourist Loyalty, Innovation Management, Tourism Marketing Mix, Service Quality.

1. Introduction

The global tourism landscape has undergone a paradigm shift, transitioning from a focus on mass volume to high-value, sustainable experiences. In the context of Thailand, the tourism sector is not merely a revenue generator but a fundamental pillar of the nation's socio-economic development structure, heavily influenced by the "Thailand 4.0" policy which emphasizes value-based economy and innovation-driven growth. As the global economy recovers and evolves, the competitiveness of tourism destinations increasingly depends on their ability to offer superior quality and distinctiveness. However, a significant disparity remains between major tourist hubs and secondary cities. While primary destinations enjoy established brand equity, secondary cities like Ranong Province struggle to convert transient visitors into loyal advocates. The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (2018) highlights that economic stability in these areas requires a strategic dispersion of tourism income, necessitating a move beyond attracting first-time visitors toward cultivating deep-seated tourist loyalty.

The central problem facing Ranong's tourism sector is the high level of competition and the changing behavior of modern consumers who demand seamless, high-quality, and novel experiences. Traditional approaches that rely solely on natural endowments or basic service provision are no longer sufficient to guarantee revisit intentions or positive word-of-mouth. Scholars have long established that service quality—defined as the discrepancy between customer expectations and perceptions—is critical for satisfaction (Puri & Singh, 2020). Furthermore, the complexity of the tourism product, which involves a multifaceted supply chain ranging from accommodation to souvenirs, requires a sophisticated marketing approach. Consequently, the standard 4Ps of marketing have been deemed inadequate for the hospitality sector, leading to the adoption of the 10Ps Marketing Mix (Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Physical Evidence, Process, Package, Programming, and Partnership) to fully capture the nuances of destination management.

Despite the extensive literature linking destination image and service quality to satisfaction, there is a notable gap regarding the operational mechanisms that bridge these antecedents to loyalty in secondary markets. Previous studies typically view satisfaction as the primary mediator. However, this research argues that "Innovation Management"—comprising product, process, and service innovation—acts as a crucial intervening variable. Innovation in this context does not solely imply technological disruption but refers to the adoption of new methods to deliver value, such as creative tour packaging, streamlined service processes, or unique local product development (Schiaivone & Simoni, 2019). It is posited that a positive tourism image and robust marketing strategies do not directly result in loyalty; rather, they create an environment where innovation can flourish, which in turn cements tourist loyalty.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the causal relationships between tourism image, the marketing mix, and service quality on the loyalty of Thai tourists visiting Ranong, specifically examining the mediating role of innovation management. Utilizing a rigorous mixed-method research design, the study integrates quantitative data analyzed via Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with qualitative depth from key stakeholders. By elucidating how innovation management transforms standard service inputs into loyalty outcomes, this research offers significant theoretical contributions to the domain of destination management and practical implications for operators in secondary cities striving for sustainability in a competitive marketplace.

2. Literature Review

To understand the mechanics of tourist retention in secondary cities, it is essential to deconstruct the foundational elements that influence traveler behavior. This section critically analyzes three primary independent variables—Tourism Image, the Marketing Mix, and Service Quality—synthesizing their theoretical underpinnings with their practical implications for a developing destination like Ranong Province.

2.1 Tourism Image: The Cognitive and Affective Driver Tourism image is not merely a static impression; it is a dynamic mental construct formed by the synthesis of information, expectations, and actual experiences. Tasci and Gartner (2021) posit that destination image operates on two levels: the cognitive (beliefs about attributes like infrastructure) and the affective (emotional responses such as feeling relaxed or excited). For a secondary city like Ranong, image is the primary heuristic used by tourists to mitigate the risk of visiting a less-famous destination. The literature identifies five critical dimensions of image relevant to this context: experience, memory, environment, infrastructure, and the diversity of attractions.

A positive tourism image acts as a precursor to loyalty by reducing the cognitive dissonance between pre-trip expectations and post-trip realities. When tourists perceive the environment as pristine and the infrastructure as accessible, the "memory" component of the image is reinforced, leading to a higher probability of revisit intention (Li, 2021). In the digital age, this mental picture is increasingly volatile, shaped by user-generated content and peer reviews. Therefore, managing tourism image is not just about promotion but about curating the actual "diversity of attractions" to ensure the on-ground reality matches the projected narrative.

2.2 The Extended Marketing Mix (10Ps) for Destination Management While the traditional 4Ps (Product, Price, Place, Promotion) provide a basic framework for goods, the complexity of the tourism product requires a more robust approach. This study adopts the extended 10Ps framework—adding People, Physical Evidence, Process, Package, Programming, and Partnership—to fully capture the destination management ecosystem (Pomaring, 2017).

- **Product & Price:** In tourism, the "product" is an amalgam of tangible assets (hot springs, islands) and intangible services. Pricing strategies must reflect value rather than cost, balancing affordability with the perceived exclusivity of the experience.
- **Place & Promotion:** "Place" in tourism refers to accessibility and distribution channels. For secondary cities, ensuring ease of access via digital booking platforms is as critical as the physical transportation network.
- **People, Process, & Physical Evidence:** These service marketing elements are crucial because the consumption of tourism is simultaneous with its production. The "People" (local hosts and staff) define the hospitality atmosphere, while "Physical Evidence" (signage, cleanliness) validates quality claims.
- **Package, Programming, & Partnership:** These three Ps are particularly vital for Ranong. "Packaging" simplifies the decision-making process for tourists unfamiliar with the area. "Programming" involves creating events or festivals that give tourists a specific reason to visit at a specific time. Finally, "Partnership" acknowledges that no single entity can manage a destination alone; collaboration between the public sector, private hotels, and local communities is essential for cohesive delivery (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016).

2.3 Service Quality: Bridging Expectations and Perceptions Service quality remains the bedrock of the hospitality industry, defined extensively through the SERVQUAL framework as the gap between customer expectations and their actual perceptions of service delivery (Puri & Singh, 2020). This framework categorizes service quality into five distinct dimensions: Tangibles (physical facilities), Reliability (performing service accurately), Responsiveness (willingness to help), Assurance (knowledge and courtesy), and Empathy (individualized attention).

In the context of Ranong, where heavy infrastructure may lag behind primary hubs like Phuket, the "soft" dimensions of service quality—Responsiveness and Empathy—become disproportionately important. Tourists may forgive a lack of luxury hardware (Tangibles) if the reliability and warmth of the service (Empathy) are superior. Conversely, a failure in "Reliability"—such as inaccurate transport schedules or overbooked tours—can permanently damage the destination's reputation regardless of its natural beauty. High service quality reduces the perceived risk of travel and acts as a direct antecedent to satisfaction, laying the groundwork for loyalty (Dosen et al., 2020).

Conclusion of Independent Variables Synthesizing these concepts, it becomes evident that Tourism Image, the 10Ps Marketing Mix, and Service Quality form a triad of competitive advantage. Image attracts the tourist, the Marketing Mix facilitates the visit, and Service Quality ensures the experience meets expectations. However, to transform a satisfied visitor into a loyal advocate who resists competitive alternatives, these factors must be actively managed and evolved. This necessitates a mechanism to continuously update and improve the offering, pointing toward the critical role of innovation management.

2.4 Innovation Management: The Strategic Mediator In the contemporary tourism landscape, static assets and standard service delivery are insufficient to sustain a competitive advantage. This study posits that **Innovation Management** acts as the critical mediator that transforms marketing efforts and destination image into tangible tourist loyalty. Innovation in this context is defined not merely as the adoption of digital technologies, but as a holistic approach to value creation involving three distinct dimensions: product innovation, process innovation, and service innovation (Hjalager, 2010).

Product innovation in a secondary city like Ranong involves the development of new tourism routes or the creative packaging of local cultural assets—such as integrating wellness tourism with traditional hot springs resources—to offer unique value propositions. Process innovation refers to the implementation of new management techniques or back-end operations that enhance efficiency, such as streamlined booking systems or eco-friendly waste management practices that resonate with modern sustainability trends (Trunina et al., 2020). Service innovation focuses on the interface between the tourist and the provider, involving novel ways of interacting with customers to solve problems swiftly and personalize the experience.

Scholars argue that while marketing attracts visitors, it is innovation that retains them. Innovation management allows tourism operators to adapt dynamically to changing consumer behaviors, thereby preventing the destination offering from becoming obsolete. By continuously revitalizing the tourism product and service delivery processes, innovation bridges the gap between the initial promise of the marketing mix and the long-term commitment of the tourist (Divisekera & Nguyen, 2018).

2.5 Tourist Loyalty: A Multidimensional Construct Tourist loyalty is the ultimate objective of destination management, yet it is often oversimplified as mere revisit intention. This study adopts a comprehensive definition of loyalty derived from Oliver (1999), viewing it as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior.

In the context of Ranong, loyalty is operationalized through four key behavioral and attitudinal dimensions:

1. **Word-of-Mouth (WOM):** The willingness of tourists to act as brand ambassadors, recommending the destination to friends and family.
2. **Purchase Intention:** The specific intent to return to the destination or purchase related services in the future.
3. **Price Insensitivity:** A loyal tourist demonstrates a willingness to pay a premium for trusted services and is less likely to switch to competitors based solely on price fluctuations (Stylos et al., 2016).
4. **Complaining Behavior:** Contrary to intuition, constructive complaining behavior is a sign of loyalty. Loyal customers often voice their dissatisfaction directly to the provider to seek redress and improvement, rather than silently exiting the relationship (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2018).

2.6 Hypothesis Development Based on the synthesis of the literature, it is evident that while Tourism Image, Marketing Mix, and Service Quality are foundational antecedents, Innovation Management plays a pivotal role in amplifying their effect on Loyalty.

- **H1: Innovation Management influences Tourist Loyalty.** Innovation creates superior value and unique experiences that differentiate a destination, directly fostering higher levels of retention and advocacy among tourists.
- **H2: Tourism Image influences Innovation Management.** A positive destination image attracts resources and talent, and creates a demand pressure that encourages operators to innovate their products and services to maintain that reputation.
- **H3: Marketing Mix influences Innovation Management.** The strategic application of the 10Ps—particularly through partnerships and physical evidence—provides the necessary resources and framework for developing innovative management practices.
- **H4: Service Quality influences Innovation Management.** High standards of service quality reveal gaps and opportunities in customer delivery, driving the need for process and service innovations to resolve friction points.
- **H5: Tourism Image influences Loyalty directly.** A strong, positive mental image of Ranong creates an emotional bond that directly encourages revisit intentions and positive word-of-mouth, independent of other variables.
- **H6: Service Quality influences Loyalty directly.** When tourists perceive that the service delivery meets or exceeds their expectations (reliability, responsiveness), their satisfaction translates directly into behavioral loyalty.

3. Research Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, this study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. This methodological triangulation allows for a robust validation of the causal relationships between tourism image, marketing mix, service quality, innovation management, and tourist loyalty. The quantitative phase utilizes Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships, while the qualitative phase involves in-depth interviews to provide contextual depth to the statistical findings.

3.1 Quantitative Research Design

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consists of Thai tourists who traveled to Ranong Province at least once during the preceding year (June 2023 – June 2024). Given that the exact population size is infinite or unknown, the sample size was determined based on the requirements for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Following the guidelines proposed by Hair et al. (2010) and Schumacher and Lomax (1996), which suggest a sample size-to-parameter ratio of 20:1 for stable maximum likelihood estimation, the sample size was calculated based on the 26 observed variables utilized in the model. Consequently, the calculation (26 variables \times 20) resulted in a target sample size of 520 respondents. The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select respondents who met the specific inclusion criteria (i.e., recent travel experience in Ranong) to ensure the data reflects genuine tourist perceptions.

Research Instrument and Validation

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). To ensure rigor, the instrument underwent a two-step validation process:

1. **Content Validity:** The questionnaire was reviewed by five experts in tourism management and marketing. The Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index was calculated for each item. All items retained in the final instrument possessed an IOC value greater than 0.50, indicating acceptable content validity (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977).
2. **Reliability:** A pilot study was conducted with 30 tourists who were not part of the final sample. The internal consistency of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The results yielded coefficients exceeding the 0.70 threshold for all constructs, confirming the instrument's reliability for full-scale data collection (Cronbach, 1951).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using AMOS software to perform Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The analysis followed a two-step approach: first, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model, followed by path analysis to test the structural relationships. The goodness-of-fit for the model was evaluated using standard indices recommended by Hair et al. (2010), including the Chi-square statistic (χ^2), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), and the Root Mean

Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). A model is considered to have an acceptable fit if the GFI and AGFI are greater than 0.90 and the RMSEA is less than 0.08.

3.2 Qualitative Research Design

To corroborate the quantitative results and gain deeper managerial insights, the qualitative phase employed a phenomenological approach through in-depth interviews.

Key Informants

A purposive sampling method was utilized to select 16 key informants who possess authoritative knowledge of Ranong's tourism sector. The panel included:

- Ten private tourism business operators in Ranong.
- The President of the Ranong Tourism Industry Council.
- The President of the Ranong Tourism Promotion Association.
- High-ranking officials from the Ranong Office of Tourism and Sports.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the practical application of innovation management and its perceived impact on tourist loyalty. The interview protocol focused on strategic adaptation in the "New Normal" tourism landscape. Data were analyzed using content analysis to identify thematic patterns that align with or explain the statistical outcomes derived from the SEM analysis.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore a critical shift in the operational dynamics of secondary tourism cities. While the extended Marketing Mix (10Ps) and Service Quality are indisputable prerequisites for attracting tourists to Ranong Province, the structural analysis reveals that they are not, in isolation, sufficient to guarantee long-term loyalty. Instead, their influence is significantly amplified when filtered through the lens of **Innovation Management**.

In the context of a secondary city like Ranong, "innovation" should not be misinterpreted as the deployment of high-capital technologies or robotics, which are often characteristic of primary hubs like Bangkok. Rather, the results align with the concept of "Creative Tourism" (Richards, 2020), where innovation manifests as the re-engineering of service processes and the creative packaging of local cultural assets. For instance, the "Partnership" and "Programming" elements of the 10Ps provide the structural framework for collaboration, but it is *Process Innovation* that streamlines these collaborations into a seamless tourist experience. Similarly, while Service Quality dimensions like reliability and responsiveness establish a baseline of trust, it is *Service Innovation*—such as hyper-personalized problem solving or proactive service recovery—that differentiates the destination.

4.1 The Mediating Role of Innovation Management The most significant theoretical contribution of this study is the empirical validation of Innovation Management as a mediator. Traditional models often posit a direct path from destination image and marketing to loyalty. However, this study argues that without the intervening variable of innovation, marketing

efforts merely generate footfall, not followers. Innovation Management acts as the "value multiplier." When operators in Ranong apply innovative management techniques—such as integrating wellness narratives into traditional hot spring products (Product Innovation)—they transform a generic commodity into a unique experience. This supports the argument by Pikkemaat et al. (2019) that in small-scale tourism, innovation is the mechanism that converts passive satisfaction into active loyalty (revisit intention and advocacy).

5. Managerial Implications

To translate these findings into practice, stakeholders in Ranong Province must pivot from a volume-centric strategy to a value-centric innovation strategy.

For Tourism Operators (Private Sector): Entrepreneurs must prioritize **Service Innovation** and **Product Innovation**. Given the resource constraints of a secondary city, service innovation should focus on agility—empowering staff to solve problems instantly without bureaucratic hurdles, thereby elevating the "Responsiveness" dimension of service quality. Furthermore, Product Innovation should leverage "local identity products." Instead of replicating generic souvenir shops or standard tours found in major cities, operators should innovate by bundling local gastronomy, wellness, and eco-tourism into exclusive packages that cannot be found elsewhere.

For Government and Policymakers: The study highlights "Partnership" as a critical component of the marketing mix. The local government and the Tourism Authority must act as facilitators of **Network Innovation**. This involves creating digital or physical platforms where small operators can share resources, data, and tourists, thereby creating a cohesive destination ecosystem. Policy support should move beyond simple promotion to funding capacity-building programs that teach local operators how to manage innovation systematically.

6. Conclusion

This research set out to decode the causal factors influencing tourist loyalty in Ranong Province. The analysis confirms that while Tourism Image, the 10Ps Marketing Mix, and Service Quality form the essential bedrock of destination appeal, **Innovation Management** is the decisive architect of loyalty. For Ranong to graduate from a transit province to a primary destination, the industry must embrace a paradigm where standard service delivery is replaced by innovative management practices. Sustainability in this context is not merely environmental; it is economic sustainability achieved through the continuous reinvention of the tourism experience. By embedding innovation into the core of destination management, Ranong can secure a resilient, loyal tourist base capable of weathering the competitive pressures of the modern tourism economy.

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