

Books and Borders: Exploring the Holiday-Tourism Narratives of ASEAN Students Studying in Thailand

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the holiday-tourism narratives of ASEAN students in Thailand, highlighting leisure travel as a vital aspect of personal development and well-being. Using a descriptive phenomenological method, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight undergraduates from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines. Data were analyzed through iterative coding and thematic synthesis, revealing six themes: Rejuvenation and escape, nature-centric destinations, group travel logistics, cultural immersion, identity development, and coping with constraints. Findings indicate that holiday tourism extends beyond recreation, serving as a form of stress relief, an informal intercultural classroom, and a means of fostering ASEAN identity. Despite barriers related to finances, academic schedules, and visas, students employed adaptive strategies such as cost-sharing, short trips, and digital tools, transforming obstacles into opportunities for growth. The study highlights tourism's role in supporting mental health, intercultural learning, and regional belonging, and proposes practical measures such as student-friendly travel packages, flexible calendars, and language assistance initiatives. This research contributes to broader understandings of youth mobility and social dimensions of tourism in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: ASEAN Students, Thailand, Holiday Tourism, Phenomenology

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Introduction

Holiday travel has become an integral aspect of ASEAN students' experiences in Thailand, contributing to their personal development, intercultural appreciation, and psychological well-being. As Southeast Asia's leading tourism hub, Thailand offers a blend of modern attractions and traditional cultural heritage, making it an ideal environment for students to engage in leisure activities that foster reflection, enjoyment, and learning (Sirivadhanawaravachara, 2024a). Beyond recreation, wellness tourism has become particularly attractive, with opportunities such as meditation retreats, hot springs, herbal therapies, and alternative medicine, all of which support students' holistic health. This aligns with Sangkhathat's (2023) observation that wellness tourism reflects a broader view of health, encompassing mental clarity, stress relief, and overall well-being, in addition to conventional treatment.

Furthermore, Thailand has emerged as a key gateway for intra-ASEAN mobility, where initiatives such as the Intra-ASEAN Student Program (IASP) highlight tourism's role in fostering regional cooperation, cultural appreciation, and identity formation (ASEAN Secretariat, 2025). Despite this potential, most existing scholarship has focused on institutional frameworks, policy structures, or mobility trends, with less attention given to the lived experiences of students themselves. Specifically, how ASEAN students narrate their holiday travels, negotiate symbolic and practical borders, and derive meaning from these experiences remains underexplored (Jampaklaya et al., 2022).

To address this gap, the present study employs a descriptive phenomenological method to capture students' narratives of holiday tourism in Thailand. Phenomenology is well-suited to this inquiry, as it seeks to reveal the essence of lived experience through participants' perspectives. Colaizzi's (1978) systematic seven-step approach from familiarization to validation ensures that findings remain grounded in authentic accounts while preserving the integrity of participants' lived meanings and experiences. This interpretation is further reinforced by Morrow, Rodriguez, and King (2015), who clarified and operationalized Colaizzi's method for contemporary qualitative research. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how ASEAN students make sense of holiday tourism as both a coping mechanism and a developmental resource.

Research Objectives

This study's primary goal was to explore and understand the holiday-tourism experiences of ASEAN students in Thailand. Specifically, the research aimed to:

1. Investigate the holiday-tourism narratives of students, focusing on their motivations, preferences, and lived experiences.
2. Examine how holiday tourism contributes to students' personal growth, coping strategies, and the development of an ASEAN identity.
3. Generate recommendations that address the constraints students face and enhance their overall holiday-tourism experiences.

Literature Review

Conceptual Foundations: Books and Borders

The title of this study, "Books and Borders", encapsulates the dual nature of ASEAN students' holiday-tourism experiences. This framework provides the conceptual anchor for understanding their travel narratives.

The term “books” represents the narratives of joy, discovery, and personal growth that students construct from their journeys. They are the stories students tell to interpret their cultural encounters and make sense of their experiences. This aligns with Moscardo’s (2020) argument that stories are central to the tourism experience, as they transform passive travel into a meaningful, lived narrative.

The term “borders” refers to the tangible and symbolic boundaries that students must navigate. Tangible borders encompass logistical challenges such as visa regulations, financial constraints, and academic schedules. Symbolic borders encompass intangible barriers, such as language differences and cultural misunderstandings. As Timothy and Gelbman (2022) explain, these borders are not static but are dynamic cultural and social constructs that shape mobility and identity.

Taken together, the “Books and Borders” framework allows us to analyze how students narrate (their “books”) and negotiate (their “borders”) their travel experiences. This duality will be employed in the discussion to illustrate how the six emergent themes from the study, rejuvenation, cultural immersion, and coping strategies, directly reflect the interplay between narrative possibility and practical constraint.

ASEAN Youth and Student Tourism Narratives

Recent scholarship on ASEAN youth tourism reveals a layered and evolving understanding of how students’ travel narratives are shaped by cultural, social, and psychological factors. The “Books” dimension of their experiences, which represents their lived stories, is consistently framed by a desire for meaningful engagement and personal growth. Studies by Phakdee-Auksorn et al. (2023) and Panyadee and Wetprasit (2018) establish that motivations such as cultural richness and adventure are central to Thai youth tourism, a finding that is directly mirrored in the narratives of ASEAN students. This literature moves beyond viewing students as passive sightseers, with Liu (2019) illustrating their active role as cultural ambassadors and Khamkhong et al. (2024) highlighting how Filipino students leverage travel for intercultural understanding. Kou and Chang (2024) further extend this concept by linking novelty-seeking to creative travel engagement, reinforcing that students’ journeys are a form of self-expression and discovery. This body of research collectively affirms that students’ narratives are deeply interwoven with cultural learning, peer interactions, and self-development, creating a rich “book” of experiences that contributes to their personal and regional identity.

This perspective is further supported by research on youth involvement in responsible tourism. The work of Liew et al. (2022) underscores that young people are not merely consumers, but active agents in shaping sustainable and authentic travel experiences. This perspective aligns with the idea that holiday tourism for ASEAN students is more than a simple leisure activity; it functions as a space for intercultural learning, regional solidarity, and personal well-being. Both structured responsible tourism initiatives and informal holiday journeys are recognized as having the transformative potential to foster sustainability, cultural preservation, and community engagement in Southeast Asia.

However, students’ narratives are not solely shaped by freedom and opportunity. The “Books” of their experiences are always being written within the confines of “Borders”. Research by Anantamongkolkul (2020, 2021) on the Theory of Planned Behavior reveals how perceived limitations from financial constraints to time directly influence travel intentions. This is echoed by Ramesh Babu et al. (2021), who found a strong preference for low-cost group trips, and by

Thrane (2008), who highlighted that intrinsic motivations often outweigh demographic factors. This body of work collectively demonstrates that students' narratives are a product of both enabling opportunities and limiting constraints, creating a dynamic interplay that this study seeks to explore.

Tourism, Mobility, and Intercultural Education in Thailand

Thailand's role as a regional gateway for ASEAN student mobility provides a critical context for understanding how students negotiate these "Borders". These boundaries are not only political and physical but are also academic and cultural. Jampaklaya et al. (2022) stress the importance of transcending classroom borders through travel and intercultural experiences, while UNICEF Thailand (2019) documents how inclusive education policies for migrant learners promote social cohesion. These studies collectively highlight how a student's journey across both educational and physical borders contributes to holistic well-being and personal growth.

The inclusive education policy of Thailand, while a gateway to integration for many, also highlights the complexities of these "Borders". Despite policies offering 15 years of free schooling to all children regardless of nationality, migrant students still face significant challenges related to language barriers, financial constraints, and documentation issues (UNICEF Thailand, 2019). These dynamics resonate with the broader experiences of ASEAN students, who must also navigate these limitations to achieve belonging and resilience.

The broader tourism scholarship provides a final layer of context, positioning students' narratives within global debates on identity and mobility. Cohen's works on authenticity and mobility (King, 2018) provide a framework for understanding how students negotiate cultural meaning through travel. Kılınç et al. (2020) demonstrated that studying abroad fosters intercultural adaptation and resilience. Educational tourism is becoming a key strategy for Thailand to expand its global influence by promoting mobility, cultural exchange, and skill development. According to Sirivadhanawaravachara (2024b), Thailand's cultural heritage, language programs, and training opportunities make it a top destination for educational tourism, which includes academic exchanges, cultural immersion, and language learning. Despite its potential to align with ASEAN student mobility trends, the sector faces significant challenges in infrastructure, quality, and sustainability, requiring stakeholder collaboration. This shows that for ASEAN students, tourism is increasingly a tool for education and personal development, not just leisure.

Methodology

Data Collection

In phenomenological research, Creswell (2013) recommends a sample size ranging from approximately three to twenty-five homogeneous participants to generate meaningful descriptions of lived experiences. This guideline is supported by Alase (2017), who likewise emphasized that a small, purposively selected group typically between five and fifteen participants ensures depth and richness of qualitative data. Guided by these principles, eight respondents were purposively selected, as their insights were deemed sufficient to address the study's aims. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews in English.

The interview guide, developed in line with Creswell's framework for phenomenological inquiry, was validated by three experts to ensure its clarity and alignment with the research objectives. Questions were open-ended and probing, designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' travel habits, motivations, intercultural encounters, emotional experiences, challenges, and the personal implications of their holiday tourism. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and was supplemented with field notes and reflective memos to strengthen interpretative validity.

Analysis

The study utilized Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, a structured framework frequently employed in qualitative research. Table 1 outlines the seven systematic steps of this approach, which served as the basis for analyzing participants' narratives.

Table 1 Steps in Colaizzi's Descriptive Phenomenological Method

Steps	Description
1. Familiarization	The researcher familiarises him or herself with the data by reading through all the participant accounts several times.
2. Identifying significant statements	The researcher identifies all statements in the accounts that are of direct relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.
3. Formulating meanings	The researcher identifies meanings relevant to the phenomenon that arise from a careful consideration of the significant statements.
4. Clustering themes	The researcher clusters the identified meanings into themes that are common across all accounts.
5. Developing an exhaustive description	The researcher writes a full and inclusive description of the phenomenon, incorporating all the themes produced in Step 4.
6. Producing the fundamental structure	The researcher condenses the exhaustive description down to a short, dense statement that captures just those aspects deemed to be essential to the structure of the phenomenon.
7. Seeking verification of the fundamental structure	The researcher returns the fundamental structure statement to all participants to ask whether it captures their experience.

Source: Morrow et al. (2015); Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method

Sampling Method and Inclusion Criteria

A criterion sampling technique was employed to ensure all participants met specific inclusion criteria (Creswell, 2013). Participants were screened based on the following qualifications: they had to be ASEAN nationals, currently enrolled as students in Thailand, and engaged in domestic holiday tourism during their stay. To maintain ethical confidentiality, the eight undergraduate student participants were assigned pseudonyms, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Summary of Participant Demographics and Study Context

Participants	Age	Gender	Country	Program of Study	Length of Stay
Amy	21	F	Myanmar	Aviation Business Management	3 Years
Chok	22	M	Cambodia	International Modern Trade Management	3 Years
Greg	22	M	Philippines	English Communication	13 Years
Lyn	23	F	Philippines	English Communication	5 Years
Kiki	21	F	Myanmar	International Modern Trade Management	2 Years
Alas	21	M	Myanmar	International Modern Trade Management	3 Years
Eric	22	M	Myanmar	International Modern Business Management	2 Years
Jake	22	M	Laos	Hospitality and Tourism Management	3 Years

Result

Six themes emerged from the study, each offering insight into how students experience and interpret their holiday travel within the context of studying abroad. The themes Rejuvenation and Escape, Nature-Centric Destinations, Group Travel Logistics, Cultural Immersion and Exchange, Personal and ASEAN Identity Development, and Constraints and Coping Strategies reflect the layered intersections of leisure, culture, and identity in shaping ASEAN students' narratives. Together, these themes illuminate the complex ways holiday tourism contributes to personal well-being, intercultural learning, and the broader meaning of mobility across borders while pursuing education in Thailand.

Table 3 Six Emergent Themes

Theme	Description	Supporting Participants Narratives
Rejuvenation & Escape	Traveling as a way to find mental and emotional relief from academic pressure, manage stress, and relax personally	<i>"It helps me to relax and not think about exams. After beach trips, I feel more ready to study again." – Jake, Laos.</i> <i>"I recharge when I go out of the city." – Lyn, Philippines</i>
Nature-Centric Destinations	Preference for beaches, mountains, parks, and scenic locales; nature as a setting for reflection and enjoyment	<i>"Hua Hin beach is my favorite place. I like to feel the wind and ocean." – Jake, Laos.</i> <i>"I always go to Doi Inthanon. The nature is so peaceful." – Kiki, Myanmar</i>

Table 3 Six Emergent Themes (Con.)

Theme	Description	Supporting Participants Narratives
Collective Travel Logistics	Planning and traveling with friends or peers; group travel as economical, social, and safer	<i>"We always plan together. It's cheaper and more fun." – Greg, Philippines</i> <i>"My classmates and I booked a van, split the gas." – Chok, Cambodia</i>
Cultural Immersion & Exchange	Engaging with local Thai culture and heritage, food, language, and festivals, travel an informal education	<i>"I learned more about Buddhism when we visited Chiang Mai temples." – Eric, Myanmar.</i> <i>"Trying Thai food during trips makes me feel more connected." – Alas, Myanmar</i>
Personal Growth & Identity Building	Travel reinforces self-awareness, independence, and appreciation of regional identity	<i>"I feel more ASEAN because I can explore different cultures within one region." – Jake, Laos.</i> <i>"Traveling alone made me more confident." – Lyn, Philippines</i>
Constraints & Coping Strategies	Financial, time, or visa-related barriers; creative problem-solving to make travel possible	<i>"Sometimes I don't have enough money, so I just go to nearby places." – Chok, Cambodia.</i> <i>"I wait for long weekends and promotions." – Greg, Philippines</i>

ASEAN students in Thailand treat short, nature-focused group getaways as an affordable way to de-stress, deepen intercultural understanding, and hone life skills. The same trips simultaneously highlight and help them overcome practical hurdles of money, language, and logistics, reinforcing both personal competence and regional belonging.

Across the eight interviews, six themes emerged, each clearly illustrated by the participants' own words.

Theme 1: Rejuvenation and Escape

One of the most prominent motivations behind students' holiday travel was the need to mentally and emotionally recover from academic responsibilities. Participants described travel as a coping mechanism for stress and a way to sustain their mental well-being.

Jake from Laos shared:

"It helps me to relax and not think about exams. After beach trips, I feel more ready to study again."

Similarly, Kiki from Myanmar emphasized:

"When I go to nature places, it's like I forget all the school problems. It refreshes me."

Lyn from the Philippines echoed this sentiment:

"I need time away sometimes. Even short trips make a big difference in my mood."

Amy, also from Myanmar, noted how holiday trips energized her:

"Traveling gives me something to help me recharge. When I come back, I feel more motivated and refreshed."

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Eric from Myanmar explained that traveling helped him “*open (his) mind*” and feel less burdened by school routines. These reflections underscore that travel is not merely leisure but an essential activity that revitalizes mind and spirit, reinforcing the therapeutic value of tourism in students’ lives.

As the integrative review by Yan et al. (2023) highlights, while everyday leisure is known to support health, vacation-taking as an extraordinary leisure type is increasingly recognized for its distinct contribution to subjective well-being. The study’s themes of “Rejuvenation and Escape” directly support this idea, as the review synthesizes research showing how people use holiday trips to “recharge” and find mental relief. This demonstrates a clear connection to the research that investigates the “how and why” of travel’s positive effects on well-being, confirming that for many, tourism is not just a leisure activity but a necessary tool for maintaining their mental and emotional health (Yan et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Nature-Centric Destinations

Participants consistently expressed a strong preference for natural environments such as beaches, mountains, waterfalls, and national parks.

Jake explained:

“*Hua Hin beach is my favorite place. I like to feel the wind and ocean.*”

Kiki highlighted:

“*I enjoy Doi Inthanon. The cool weather and nature help me reflect.*”

Greg, from the Philippines, described his preference:

“*Most of the time, I choose quiet and green places. Not malls or cities.*”

Alas from Myanmar added:

“*Of course, it’s Kanchanaburi. The rivers and waterfalls make me feel fresh.*”

Amy likewise described her affinity for coastal destinations:

“*I love beach cities because I enjoy the relaxing energy of the sea and local life.*”

These perspectives reveal that nature is not only a backdrop for relaxation but also a setting for reflection, healing, and a deeper connection with place. Natural environments have been shown to deliver strong restorative benefits for stressed individuals, with forests and lakesides providing the highest recovery effects compared to paved squares or grass plots (Li et al., 2023). In parallel, ASEAN students in Thailand consistently expressed a preference for beaches, mountains, waterfalls, and other green destinations. For them, these natural settings were more than scenic spots; they functioned as places for relaxation, healing, and reflection. Whether feeling the ocean breeze, enjoying the cool air of mountain parks, or refreshing themselves in rivers, participants highlighted nature’s ability to restore energy and uplift mood. These lived narratives affirm empirical evidence that natural spaces promote both emotional relief and deeper connections with place.

Theme 3: Collective Travel Logistics

Travel was most often undertaken with peers, reflecting the importance of group support, cost-sharing, and companionship.

Greg remarked:

“*We always plan together. It’s cheaper and more fun.*”

Chok from Cambodia agreed:

“*My classmates and I rented a van, split the gas. We help each other.*”

Alas also shared:

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“Group travel is better. We cook together, and we share the budget. No one feels left out.”
Amy explained her preference:

“I usually travel with my friends. It’s more fun and easier to share experiences.”

Lyn added that traveling with friends helped her overcome fears of getting lost due to language barriers:

“I don’t speak Thai much, so I usually go around with someone I can rely on for directions.”

This theme illustrates how ASEAN students rely on social networks to enable tourism, making it a communal practice rather than an individual luxury. According to Zion Market Research (2023), the travel and tourism spending market is increasingly shaped by millennial and Gen Z tourists, who are motivated by a desire to explore new destinations while remaining highly budget-conscious. The students’ remarks about “splitting the gas” and “sharing the budget” reflect this broader trend, demonstrating how their micro-level practices align with a documented shift toward more resourceful and collaborative travel among young people.

Theme 4: Cultural Immersion and Exchange

Holiday travel provided rich opportunities for intercultural encounters.

Eric reflected:

“I learned more about Buddhism when we visited Chiang Mai temples.”

Alas shared:

“Trying Thai food during trips makes me feel more connected. It’s a way to learn.”

Jake described linguistic immersion:

“When we go to provinces, I try to talk with locals and learn a few Thai words.”

Chok recalled celebrating the Thai New Year:

“During Songkran, I saw how similar and different it is from Cambodian culture. It was exciting to learn and exchange stories.”

Greg added:

“When I went to Chiang Mai, the way people lived there reminded me more of Filipino culture than Bangkok.”

These insights reveal that travel acts as an informal education, broadening intercultural understanding and strengthening ASEAN identity through shared experiences. Cultural immersion through tourism not only allows students to engage with local practices and traditions but also mirrors broader dynamics observed in heritage tourism. Wang et al. (2025) illustrate through their research on the Fahai Temple Murals in Beijing that tourism functions both as a platform for cultural transmission and as a contested space where authenticity, accessibility, and meaning are continually negotiated. Similarly, the students’ encounters with Thai food, festivals, and language demonstrate how holiday travel reframes cultural knowledge into lived experiences, enhancing understanding while also reshaping identity.

Theme 5: Personal Growth and ASEAN Identity

Participants connected travel with self-discovery, independence, and regional identity.

Lyn shared:

“Traveling alone made me more confident. I used to be shy, but now I can manage things by myself.”

Jake reflected:

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“I feel more ASEAN because I can explore different cultures within one region.”

Kiki emphasized:

“When I travel, I don’t just see the place. I see how we are similar in Southeast Asia.”

Amy described:

“I feel like I’ve grown a lot. Traveling helped me become stronger and more independent.”

Chok admitted:

“At first, I was introverted, but traveling opened me up to people and taught me how to solve problems during trips.”

These narratives show how tourism nurtures resilience, cultural pride, and the sense of being part of a regional community. Recent research on Vietnamese mobility students in Indonesia highlights that intra-ASEAN student mobility significantly contributes to fostering regional identity, particularly through cultural exposure, quality of interpersonal contact, and the use of local language (Du, 2022). This aligns with participants’ narratives in the present study, where holiday tourism in Thailand not only supported personal growth and resilience but also deepened their sense of belonging to a shared ASEAN community.

Theme 6: Constraints and Coping Strategies

Despite enthusiasm for travel, participants faced barriers such as finances, language, and academic workload.

Chok explained:

“Sometimes I don’t have enough money, so I just go to nearby places.”

Greg stated:

“I wait for long weekends and promotions. I always look for budget trips.”

Eric shared his thoughts:

“I cannot travel far because of a visa, but I try to enjoy what’s near me.”

Amy described her preparation strategies:

“Sometimes it’s hard to find transportation, so I research schedules and use apps like Grab or Bolt to adjust my plans.”

Lyn added:

“The biggest challenge is the language barrier, but I learned some Thai phrases and used translation apps to manage.”

These coping strategies highlight students’ adaptability and creativity in navigating constraints while still finding ways to engage in meaningful travel. Constraints such as language barriers, homesickness, and cultural adjustment are not unique to holiday tourism but are also evident in broader mobility experiences. A study on short-term exchange programs in Southeast Asia found that Vietnamese students similarly faced challenges of adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms and communication difficulties; however, they overcame these through cultural immersion, support networks, and proactive coping strategies (Thinh, 2024). This mirrors the coping behaviors of ASEAN students in Thailand, who relied on planning, peer collaboration, and technology to navigate financial, linguistic, and logistical constraints while still engaging meaningfully in travel.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate how holiday tourism functions as a multidimensional experience shaped by both opportunities and constraints. The six key themes, Rejuvenation and Escape, Nature-Centric Destinations, Collective Travel Logistics, Cultural Immersion and Exchange, Personal Growth and ASEAN Identity, and Constraints and Coping Strategies, each offer insight into how ASEAN students negotiate leisure, identity, and belonging while pursuing education abroad.

Holiday Tourism a Coping Mechanism

The theme of Rejuvenation and Escape highlights the therapeutic role of travel for international students. As prior research has shown, recovery experiences derived from leisure and tourism are critical for enhancing overall well-being and relieving stress (Yan et al., 2023; Zhou, 2021). Similar to findings from wellness tourism research in Thailand (Sangkhathat, 2023), students in this study emphasized the value of holiday trips for mental health recovery and maintaining academic motivation. For these participants, travel was not merely recreational; it was a survival strategy that enabled them to balance academic responsibilities with emotional well-being. These insights reinforce prior findings that leisure activities among international students significantly contribute to psychological resilience and academic persistence (Kılınç et al., 2020).

The Restorative Power of Nature

The central role of natural landscapes in students' holiday choices is highlighted by the theme of Nature-Centric Destinations. Beaches, mountains, waterfalls, and rural parks were favored not only for their aesthetic appeal but also for their restorative qualities, aligning with research by Phakdee-Auksorn et al. (2023) on youth tourism behavior in ASEAN. The student narratives suggest that these natural settings provide a crucial space for reflection and self-renewal, confirming that natural environments deliver strong restorative benefits for stressed individuals (Li et al., 2023).

Tourism as a Form of Intercultural Education

As Oyenuga and Akwen (2025) emphasize, mobility and cultural encounters enable tourists to develop intercultural sensitivity. This is mirrored in the theme of Cultural Immersion and Exchange, which reveals that holiday tourism serves as a parallel form of education, extending classroom learning into lived cultural encounters. Students' stories about learning Thai customs, tasting local food, and celebrating festivals align with Liu's (2019) findings that international students act as cultural intermediaries. By framing tourism as "books" of lived stories (Moscardo, 2020), the findings affirm that travel narratives are central to students' intercultural development and to the formation of regional connections within ASEAN.

Fostering Identity and Belonging

The findings also show that tourism contributed to Personal Growth and ASEAN Identity. Traveling enhanced students' confidence, independence, and resilience while also strengthening their identification as part of a Southeast Asian community. This complements the ASEAN Secretariat's (2025) observation that student mobility fosters regional consciousness. The study confirms that holiday tourism complements formal education by deepening students' sense of being ASEAN citizens, a perspective also reflected in Anantamongkolkul's (2020, 2021) application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to student tourism.

Negotiating Borders: Constraints and Coping

The Constraints and Coping Strategies theme demonstrates that students' tourism is shaped by both structural and personal limitations. Barriers included finances, visa rules, academic schedules, and language challenges. Yet, students showed resilience by finding affordable options, traveling nearby, or using apps and translation tools. This aligns with Timothy and Gelbman's (2022) argument that borders are not only political but also social and cultural constructs that shape mobility. The students' coping strategies represent active forms of "debordering", where resourcefulness allows them to transcend limitations and continue engaging in meaningful travel.

Integrating "Books" and "Borders"

Taken together, the six themes illustrate how ASEAN students' holiday-tourism experiences are simultaneously stories of possibility and constraint. Their "books" are narratives of joy, discovery, and growth, while their "borders" are the financial, institutional, and cultural boundaries they must navigate. This duality enriches our understanding of international student life in Thailand, situating tourism not as a luxury but as an integral dimension of education, cultural immersion, and identity formation.

Implications

These findings have several important implications. For higher education institutions in Thailand, there is an opportunity to support student well-being by facilitating affordable and culturally enriching travel opportunities. For tourism policymakers, recognizing international students as a distinct market segment can strengthen Thailand's role as a hub for ASEAN mobility and integration. Finally, for students themselves, holiday tourism provides pathways not only to relaxation but also to resilience, intercultural competence, and a stronger sense of regional identity.

Conclusion

This study indicates that holiday tourism among ASEAN students in Thailand transcends mere leisure, functioning as a vital mechanism for stress relief, an informal platform for intercultural education, and a means of cultivating a shared regional identity. Travel is fundamentally woven into the student experience, serving as both a coping strategy and a pathway for personal growth. Students primarily engage in short excursions to natural destinations such as beaches, mountains, and waterfalls, which facilitate emotional and physical renewal and support their overall well-being. Collective travel is also a prevalent practice, as it mitigates costs, enhances a sense of security, and reinforces social bonds, underscoring the collaborative dimension of student tourism.

Beyond personal rejuvenation, tourism also operates as an intercultural classroom. By participating in local festivals, sampling indigenous cuisine, and learning Thai customs, students deepen their cultural appreciation while building resilience, confidence, and a sense of ASEAN belonging. Although financial constraints, academic demands, and visa and language barriers remain significant, students demonstrate adaptability by employing adaptive strategies such as cost-sharing and the use of digital tools that transform these obstacles into opportunities for growth.

Ultimately, the study reveals that the holiday-tourism narratives of students embody a duality of possibility and constraint. Their “books” are rich narratives of joy, discovery, and learning, while their “borders” represent the institutional and cultural challenges they must navigate. This paradigm enriches our understanding of the international student experience in Thailand, positioning holiday tourism not as a luxury but as an integral dimension of education, cultural immersion, and identity formation. The study contributes to tourism and education scholarship by highlighting how leisure travel serves as a pedagogical and psychosocial resource within the ASEAN context.

Recommendations

Informed by the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to address the barriers ASEAN students face in engaging with holiday tourism in Thailand. These strategies aim to transform constraints into opportunities, supporting well-being, intercultural learning, and ASEAN identity formation.

1. Financial limitations can be addressed through student-friendly travel packages that provide discounts on transportation, accommodation, and entry fees. Additionally, cultural immersion grants from universities or ASEAN programs can reduce financial burdens and ensure equitable access to travel experiences that support both leisure and learning.
2. Tight academic schedules may be alleviated by introducing flexible academic calendars and designated cultural field trip weeks. By integrating travel into reflective journals or intercultural projects, tourism can be recognized as part of holistic education, rather than as a distraction from academic responsibilities.
3. Visa and mobility restrictions require strengthened intra-ASEAN student travel agreements and the establishment of student travel desks to assist with immigration processes. These measures would enable smoother cross-border mobility and improve compliance with travel regulations.
4. Language barriers can be reduced by offering short Thai crash courses focused on practical travel phrases, supplemented with multilingual travel guides and mobile applications. These tools will equip students with essential communication skills and foster meaningful engagement with local communities.
5. The need for safety, cost-sharing, and companionship can be addressed through peer-led travel clubs, ASEAN student councils, and affordable group packages. These initiatives can enhance students’ sense of security, lower costs, and build stronger social networks during travel.
6. The limited recognition of tourism’s educational role should be reframed by positioning holiday tourism as an extension of student development. Storytelling platforms such as blogs, exhibitions, and ASEAN narratives can highlight tourism as intercultural learning, reinforcing both personal growth and regional solidarity.

Table 4 Recommendations for Enhancing ASEAN Students' Holiday-Tourism Experiences

Constraint Identified	Recommended Strategy	Expected Outcome
Financial Limitations	Develop student-friendly travel packages with discounts on transport, accommodation, and entry fees; provide cultural immersion grants through universities or ASEAN programs.	Reduced financial burden; greater access to travel opportunities.
Tight Academic Schedules	Introduce flexible academic calendars and designated "cultural field trip weeks"; integrate travel into reflective journals or intercultural projects.	Balanced academic workload and travel; recognition of tourism as part of holistic education.
Visa and Mobility Restrictions	Strengthen intra-ASEAN student travel agreements; establish student travel desks to guide immigration and permits.	Easier mobility across Thai regions and ASEAN borders; improved compliance with travel regulations.
Language Barriers	Offer short Thai crash courses focused on practical travel phrases; create multilingual travel guides and mobile applications.	Improved communication with locals; more meaningful cultural immersion.
Need for Safety, Cost-Sharing, and Companion-Ship	Facilitate peer-led travel clubs or ASEAN student councils; partner with tour operators for affordable group packages.	Safer, cheaper, and more enjoyable travel experiences; stronger student networks.
Limited Recognition of Travel's Educational role	Reframe tourism as part of student development; encourage storytelling platforms (blogs, exhibitions, ASEAN narratives) to share experiences.	Holiday tourism is valued as intercultural learning, and it strengthens ASEAN identity among students.

By addressing barriers such as cost, time, mobility, and language, universities and policymakers can transform student travel into an accessible and enriching educational tool. Aligning tourism with education ensures stronger ASEAN solidarity and sustainable development.

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