

THAI STUDENTS' DESTINATION CHOICE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON U.S, U.K AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the underlying factors for Thai students' destination choice as well to explain the relationship between the influencing factors and decision making process of Thai students. Push and pull factors were used to explain the motivation underpinning students' choice of study destination. A total of 660 self-administered questionnaires were distributed using convenience sampling at OCSC International Education Expo 2013, organized by the Office of Civil Service Commission (OCSC), on 2 November 2013, of which 640 were used for analysis. The results showed that both push and pull factors proposed in this study significantly influenced Thai students' destination choice. It was found that the suitability of the environment factor and recommendations of friends and family were components of country characteristics (pull factor), which have the greatest influence on Thai student's destination choice. Thai students' destination choice was also influenced by the cost of education and degree (content and structure), physical facilities and resources and the value of education. On the other hand, personal factors is the push factors that can influence Thai students' destination choice.

Keywords: International education, Country characteristics, Push and pull factors, Personal Factors

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ จัดทำขึ้นด้วยจุดประสงค์ในการค้นหาปัจจัยที่สำคัญที่มีผลกระทบในกระบวนการตัดสินใจของนักศึกษาไทยในการเลือกประเทศที่ต้องการไปศึกษาต่อโดยการใช้ปัจจัยผลักดัน (Push factors) และปัจจัยดึงดูด (Pull factors) เพื่อใช้ในการอธิบายถึงขั้นตอนในการตัดสินใจและผลกระทบของปัจจัยสำคัญต่อกระบวนการตัดสินใจของนักศึกษา มีการแจกแบบสอบถามเป็นจำนวนทั้งหมด 660 ฉบับเพื่อเก็บข้อมูลจากกลุ่มตัวอย่างที่เป็นบุคคลที่มาร่วมงาน 'งานมหกรรมการศึกษาต่อต่างประเทศ' ซึ่งจัดโดยสำนักงาน ก.พ. ที่ศูนย์การค้าพารากอน เมื่อวันที่ 2 พฤศจิกายน 2556 จากจำนวนแบบสอบถามทั้งหมด มี 640 ฉบับได้ถูกนำไปประมวลผลเชิงสถิติแบบสมการโครงสร้าง (Structural Equation Modeling) ผลการวิจัยพบว่าตัวแปรสองกลุ่มหลักคือ ปัจจัยผลักดัน (Push factors) และปัจจัยดึงดูด (Pull factors) มีผลกระทบต่อการตัดสินใจของนักศึกษาในการเลือกประเทศที่จะไปศึกษาต่อ ตัวแปรย่อยสำคัญที่มีผลต่อนักศึกษาในการเลือกประเทศคือ สภาพแวดล้อมที่เหมาะสมและการแนะนำของเพื่อนหรือครอบครัว ปัจจัยย่อยสำคัญที่มีผลต่อนักศึกษาในการเลือกสถาบันและหลักสูตรคือ ค่าใช้จ่ายในการศึกษาต่อ, ความหลากหลายของหลักสูตร, สิ่งอำนวยความสะดวกและคุณค่าด้านการศึกษาของหลักสูตรซึ่งทั้งหมดนี้คือตัวแปรย่อยที่สำคัญของปัจจัยดึงดูด (Pull factors) นอกจากนี้ผลการวิจัยยังพบว่าปัจจัยส่วนตัวซึ่งเป็นตัวแปรย่อยของปัจจัยผลักดัน (Push factors) เป็นปัจจัยที่มีอิทธิพลต่อการตัดสินใจของนักศึกษาที่จะเลือกประเทศที่จะไปศึกษาต่ออย่างมีนัยยะสำคัญ

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INTRODUCTION

As international education has become an important source of income for many western countries, it is found that more and more players have entered the market. Universities from the U.S, the U.K and Australia that once enjoyed a high recruitment rate of international students are not only facing competition from universities in other western countries, but also from many Asian universities (Padlee, Kamaruddin & Baharun, 2010). Therefore, it is important for marketers to understand the prospective students' motivation and behavior when evaluating the international education service. The need for marketers to understand the decision making process of prospective students is key to differentiating institutions with competitors (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Lawley, 1998). Moreover, the factors that significantly influence prospective students to select their study destination need to be identified by marketers (Duan, 1997; Lawley, 1998). The underlying factors, as well as the relationship between factors, would be useful for institutions to understand why Thai students are still willing to pay the extra cost to study in the U.S, the U.K. or Australia.

The aim of this study is to investigate the key factors that influence Thai students' destination choice. The main research question in this study is: *"What are the influencing factors in Thai student's destination choice for international education between the U.S, the U.K and Australia?"*

This study builds on previous research to develop a model which integrates factors influencing Thai students' decision making process for international education. The push and pull factors are used to explain the motivation for students to study overseas (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In addition, it also attempts to explain the relationship between the influencing factors and how they impact on the decision making process of Thai students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Push and Pull" Factors affecting decision making when choosing higher education

The study of higher education is considered as very intangible, which causes prospective students to experience high risk when making decisions. One

of the reasons is that higher education is a high involvement initiative. There are many factors that can affect the decision making process. It has been found that many researchers have divided the macro environmental influences into push and pull factors. Push factors are those factors that arise from the home country that can initiate student decisions to engage in international study. On the other hand, Pull factors are those factors from the host country that attract students to select a particular destination (Duan, 1997; Lawley, 1998; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; McMahon, 1992).

Much of the research in the past decade on push and pull factors has been conducted in Asian and African countries. The reason is that the number of students from these countries has made the greatest contribution in the Higher Education (HE) industry (Duan, 1997; Lawley, 1998; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The linkages between the host and home factors play an important role in the international education field.

It has been said that both push and pull factors are factors that involve economic, political and educational opportunities in the home compared to the host country. Nevertheless, there are some criticisms of the use of push and pull factors as it includes only macro variables and disregards one of the crucial factors, which is personal attributes (Duan, 1997; Lawley, 1998).

To counter this, the work of Mazzarol et. al (1997) and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) included factors such as social-cultural, family and friends' recommendations. As a result, their work has made push-pull factors one of the most widely cited concepts when considering the factors influencing international student destination choice (Daily, Farewell, & Kumar, 2010). Moreover, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) proposed three stages in the decision process of students who engage in international study. In the first stage, push factors play an important role in influencing whether students pursue higher education in a foreign country. In stage two, the selection of the host country is influenced by the six pull factors. Lastly, in the third stage, students select institutions based on pull factors.

Decision Making Process

Intention to purchase relating the push-pull fac-

tors for international education

In this research, the objective is to conduct a study on student choice of international education that is non-retrospective. Therefore, the respondent's intention is measured by "the likeliness of choosing a country destination" in this study. Few complete models have been proposed in this area of study. One such model in the area of choice of destination for international education was proposed by Lawley (1998) who identified 'intention' as a dependent variable. The most significant factors that can influence a student's intention are the country and course characteristics factor and alternative evaluation. In later research, some authors have also proposed additional variables, such as institution related factors and course evaluation as independent factors which directly affect intention.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Push and pull models are used as a backbone in this study to identify the significant influencing factors and to show how they affect each stage in the decision making process for Thai students' destination choice. Moreover, the model of choice of destination is adopted to organize and structure the push and pull factors to explain the evaluation

and intention to choose a destination. According to alternative evaluation theory, consumers form attitudes after processing information about alternatives in order to make the final decision (Lawley, 1998). Based on international education literature, prospective students form attitudes toward selected institutions and courses. At this stage, country image as a primary source in the process has a strong influence on alternative evaluation of institutions and courses being considered by prospective students (Papadoulous & Heslop, 1993). After the process of alternative evaluation, a purchase intention is formed by prospective students (Lawley, 1998). Figure 1 below illustrates the conceptual model employed in this study.

Factors influencing students' decision to study outside their home country (Push factors)

Personal factors

The courses not being available in the home country factor is proposed to have a positive relationship with students' intention to undertake overseas study. One of the reasons was found to be the lack of development in the domestic education structure (Cumming, 1984; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This may be due to a lack of resources in the home country, such as a lack of specialized professors or laboratories and the lack of seats in prestigious public universities. Therefore, the first

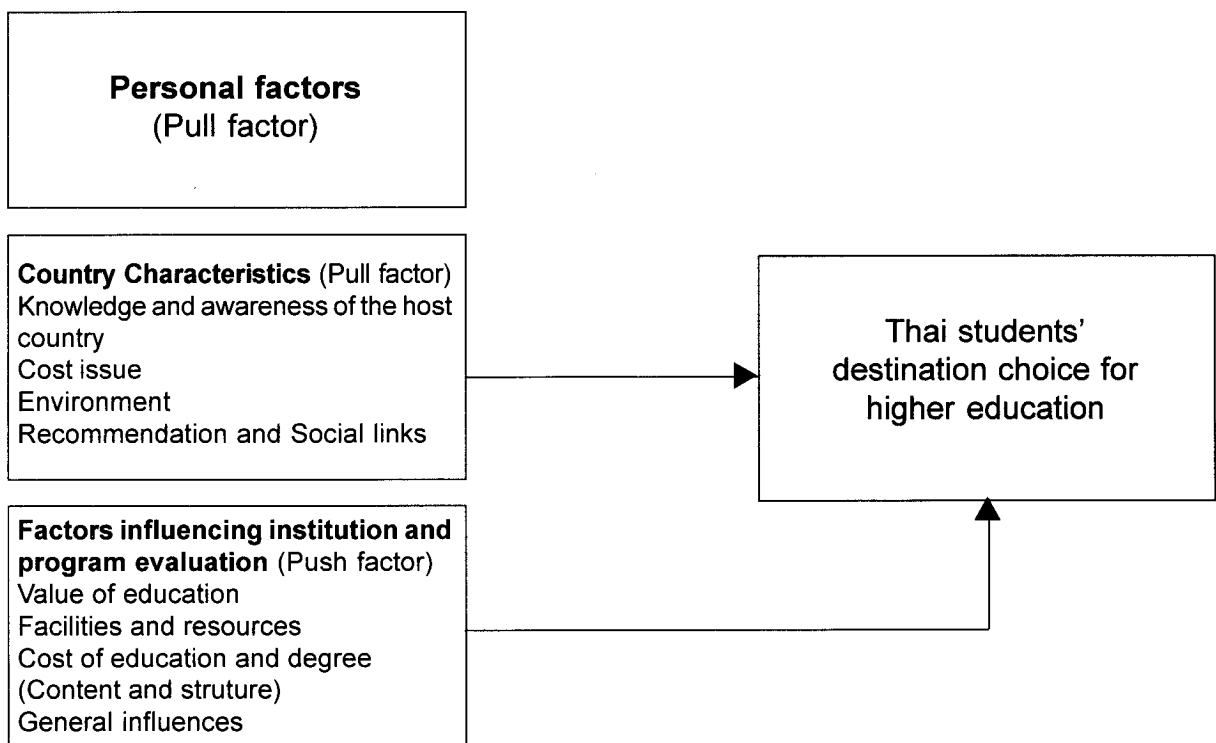


Figure 1: Conceptual model for this study

hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Personal factors are positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

Factors influencing the choice of host country (Pull factors)

A positive relationship is expected between the country characteristics and the student's intention to choose their study destination (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Lawley, 1998; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). This construct is composed of five factors which are the importance of knowledge and awareness of the host country, the importance of the influence of family and friends, the importance of cost issues, the importance of the environment, and the importance of social links and geographic proximity. It is expected that students are likely to choose their country's destination when there is a positive feeling in student's cognitive beliefs about that country's characteristics. Therefore, this leads to the derivation of hypothesis 2:

H2: Country characteristics, which include the importance of knowledge and awareness of the host country, the importance of the influence of family and friends, the importance of cost issues, the importance of the environment and the importance of social links and geographic proximity are positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

It is expected that the greater the awareness of the host country, more knowledge about the host country, the better the quality of education in the host country and wider recognition of the host qualifications, the stronger the intention of students to choose that particular country for study. The country's image plays an important role in a student's mind when exposed to a country's information (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Lawley, 1998; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). This is because the attitude of consumers is affected by the stereotypes of a particular country (Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino, 2006). Therefore, the more favorable a country image, the more likely that a student will choose to study in that particular country (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Lawley, 1998; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002). This leads to hypothesis 2.1:

H2.1: The importance of knowledge and awareness about the host country is positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

Recommendations from family and friends are based on the reputation of an institution and knowledge awareness about the host country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Parents and friends recommend a destination country to prospective students when they perceive that the institution in the host country has a good reputation, and they have positive beliefs about the host country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Also, many prospective students select a destination because their friends and family had studied there (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Lawley, 1998). Furthermore, the perception of students with regard to the geographic proximity of the destination country was expected to have a moderate influence (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). A closer destination can make that country relatively attractive to prospective students (Jones, 2006; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2.2: The importance of recommendations from family and friends, social links and geographic proximity is positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

In this study, social costs, which include a safe environment, racial discrimination and enhanced job opportunities, are included in addition to general costs. Social costs are factors that many studies have failed to include as a component in the cost issues construct (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Lawley, 1998). It is predicted that the higher the cost issues of a country, the lower the intention of a student to choose that country as their destination. Therefore, this leads to hypothesis 2.3:

H2.3: The importance of cost issues is positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

The suitability of the environment is important for students to enjoy their life while studying overseas (Duan, 1997; Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). A comfortable climate is one of the important reasons for Asian students to choose their destination. The country's image also affects the students' beliefs and attitudes about

the country's environment, such as whether it is boring, relaxing or pleasant (Palacio, Meneses, & Perez Perez, 2002). A quiet-studious environment is also another significant pull factor for a potential destination (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This leads to hypothesis 2.4:

H2.4: The suitability of the environment is positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

Factors influencing institution and course evaluation (Pull factors).

At this stage, consumers process information of all targeted selections in order to make a final choice (Kotler, 2006). Prospective students determine the criteria and list the importance of attributes of an institution and course to form a belief and attitude toward the targeted selection which then leads to their intention to choose a destination (Lawley, 1998). Therefore, the institution and course characteristic can alter the magnitude of the influence of country characteristics on prospective students' intention to choose a destination country. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is postulated:

H3: The factors influencing institution and course evaluation, which include value of education, physical aspects, facilities and resources, degree (content and structure), general influences and cost of education, are positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

According to the literature, students are influenced mostly by the recognition and reputation of a university and selected program attributes (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Joseph & Joseph, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This is because the recognition and reputation of university factor can affect their prospective careers as well as their background (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Ivy, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Moreover, the reputation for quality of the university's faculty members is another significant factor for students to choose their destination (Lawley, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Therefore, this leads to the derivation of hypothesis 3.1:

H3.1: Value of education is positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

One of the most important concerns for prospective students when choosing their destination is the physical facilities offered by a university (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Price, Matzdorf, Smith & Agahi, 2003). Students who need to live outside the university's campus may need to consider the distance from their accommodations (Joseph & Joseph, 1998; Joseph & Joseph, 2000). Therefore, institutions that are situated in an ideal location can be considered as an advantage (Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Importantly, many students and their families certainly consider choosing an institution that provides a clean and safe environment as a main priority (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Therefore, hypothesis 3.2 is proposed in this study:

H3.2: Physical facilities and resources are positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

A reasonable cost to study at an institution may not be the main priority for Asian students of a higher social class (Lawley, 1998; Maringe, 2006). However, an institution that offers the most reasonable cost can have a relative advantage over other choices where all other attributes have met the student's requirements (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Lawley, 1998). It is found that students prefer to choose a university that provides their students with high quality infrastructure and resources that come at a reasonable cost (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Moreover, reasonable entry requirements for institutions and programs are other pull factors that can motivate the students to choose their study destination (Bourke, 2000). Another important pull factor is the suitability of the program which is provided by an institution. It is expected that an institution that provides more specialized programs that suit the student's needs, is more likely to be selected (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Soutar & Turner, 2002). This leads to hypothesis 3.3:

H3.3: Cost of education and Degrees (content and structure) are positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

The general influence consists of family and friends, recognition its student's previous qualification and strong alumni. The influence of family and friends affects every stage of a student's deci-

sion making process (Duan, 1997; Pimpa, 2003). According to the literature, at the stage of evaluating institution and courses, the influence of peers and family is expected to have a moderate effect on a student's decision making (Duan, 1997; Pimpa, 2003). It is reported that international students consider whether an institution is willing to recognize student's previous qualification from their home country as well as whether the host institution has a strong alumni base are the most important issues when selecting institution. Therefore, hypothesis 3.4 is proposed as follows:

H3.4: General influences are positively related to Thai students' destination choice for higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The relevant target population of this study is students who are in the process of pursuing post-graduation level study overseas within the next 12 months. Therefore, data was obtained from the education fair for students interested in studying abroad. In this research, non-probability sampling was adopted. The questionnaire is developed based on measurements from various studies that focused on the choice of destination for international education and exploratory research conducted for this study. Also, the back translation was done for Thai version as the target respondents are all Thai students. Zikmund (2000) defined back translation as "the process of translating a questionnaire from one language to another and then back into the original language by a second, independent translator" (p.331). The process of back translation was done by two professionals who have an excellent command of both English and Thai language. Structural Equation Modeling was employed to test the hypotheses.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A total of 660 self-administered questionnaires were distributed through convenience sampling at OCSC International Education Expo 2013, organized by the Office of Civil Service Commission (OCSC), on 2 November 2013 at the Royal Paragon Hall, Siam Paragon. There were 652 questionnaires returned, however, 12 questionnaires

were invalid due to data missing. Therefore, 640 questionnaires were used in this study.

Demographics Profile of the Respondents

The majority of respondents were female (69.4 percent) compared to 29.5 percent who were male. The age groups 20-25 years old formed the majority group of students interested in studying abroad which accounts for 80% of the total respondents. Also, the majority of respondents were looking to study in the area of Business Administration, which accounted for 49 percent of the total respondents. The majority of the respondents' current university or one they had graduated from was Chulalongkorn University (26.4 percent). This was followed by Thammasat University (20 percent), Kasetsart University (12.3 percent) and Mahidol University (9.8 percent). The three main means of financial support were self, family and a combination of both.

Hypotheses Test Results

For the hypothesis 1, the results in Table 1 indicated that personal factors and Thai students' destination choice for US had a significant positive relationship ($\beta = 0.151$, C.R. = 2.136, $p < 0.05$). However, the structural relationship between personal factors and Thai students' destination choice for both UK and Australia were not significant as indicated by the statistical result shows that ($\beta = -.081$, C.R. = -1.174, $p > 0.05$) for UK, and ($\beta = 0.110$, C.R. = 1.741, $p > 0.05$) for Australia. Therefore, the hypothesis 1 is only supported for Thai students' destination choice for US.

There are four paths to investigate based on the structural relationship between the Country characteristics and Thai students' destination choices. First, hypothesis 2.1, examining the structural relationship between knowledge and awareness of the host country and Thai students' destination choice across three countries was not supported. Also, hypothesis 2.3 proposed that cost issues were positively related to Thai students' destination choice. However, the results show that the structural relationship was insignificant across all destination choices. In addition, hypotheses 2.2 were supported only for Australia as a destination choice. In other words, recommendations from friends and family & social links and geographic

Table 1: A Summary of Hypotheses Test Results on Thai students' destination choice.

No.	Path of Relationship	β	C.R.	Hypotheses Testing
H1	Personal factors → Intention			
	US	0.151*	2.136*	Supported*
	UK	-0.081	-1.174	
	AUS	0.119	1.741	
H2	Country characteristics → Intention			
H2.1	Knowledge and awareness → Intention			
	US	0.076	1.032	
	UK	0.036	0.5	
	AUS	-0.004	-0.057	
H2.2	RSG → Intention			
	US	0.038	0.593	
	UK	0.017	0.272	
	AUS	0.236	3.477	
		***	***	
H2.3	Cost issues → Intention			
	US	0.043	0.893	
	UK	0.027	0.566	
	AUS	0.082	1.731	
H2.4	Environment → Intention			
	US	-0.448	-1.89	
	UK	0.494*	2.093*	Supported*
	AUS	0.269	1.20	
H3	IP → Intention			
H3.1	Value of education → Intention			
	US	0.128	1.793	
	UK	0.011	0.158	
	AUS	-0.17*	-2.47*	Supported*
H3.2	Physical facilities and resources → Intention			
	US	0.230*	2.055*	Supported*
	UK	-0.074	-0.662	
	AUS	0.044	0.416	
H3.3	Cost of education and Degrees (content and structure) → Intention			
	US	0.234*	2.171*	Supported*
	UK	0.027	0.251	
	AUS	-0.019	-0.182	
H3.4	General influences → Intention			
	US	-0.055	-0.797	
	UK	-0.049	-0.708	
	AUS	-0.105	-1.521	

Note: IP= Factors influencing host institution and program evaluation selection, RSG = Recommendations from family and friends & Social links and geographic proximity.
Supported at * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, NS = not significant.

proximity as one of the pull factor and Thai students' destination choice for Australia were found to have a strong and positive relationship ($\beta = 0.236$, C.R. = 3.477, $P < 0.001$). However, the hypothesis was not supported for the destination choice of US ($\beta = 0.038$, C.R. = 0.593, $P > 0.05$) and UK ($\beta = 0.017$, C.R. = 0.272, $P > 0.05$). Hypothesis 2.4 proposed that the environment situation had a positive relationship with Thai students' destination choice. The results showed that this relationship was supported only for Thai students who were likely to choose UK ($\beta = 0.494$, C.R. = 2.093, $P < 0.05$) as their study destination. In summary, environment situation is not positively related to US and Australia as a destination choice for Thai students.

The second pull factor of this study involved factors influencing institution and program evaluation. There are four factors which include facilities and resources, cost of education, value of education and general influences. This study sought to examine whether the factors influencing institution and program evaluation had a positive relationship with Thai students' destination choice. From the test of hypothesis 3.1, the structural relationship between value of education and Thai students' destination choice, it is found that the value of education was negatively related to Thai students who are likely to choose Australia as their destination ($\beta = -0.17$, C.R. = -2.47, $P < 0.05$). For hypothesis 3.2, facilities and resources had a significant positive relationship with Thai students' destination for US ($\beta = 0.23$, C.R. = 2.055, $P < 0.05$). However, Thai students who plan to study in UK and Australia did not indicate facilities and resources as an important factor. For hypothesis 3.3, the structural path between cost of education and Thai students' destination choice was significant only for the US. The statistical test results of the structural path showed that $\beta = 0.234$, C.R. = 2.171, $P < 0.05$ for the US as a choice. For the last hypothesis which is hypothesis 3.4, it was found that the general influences factor is not positively related to Thai students' decision across all three destinations.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings showed that the personal factor (push factor) was positively related to Thai stu-

dents who chose to study in US. This implies that Thai students' choice of the US could be because they perceive that they can improve language skills, understand Western cultures better and enhance their future career prospects. Many Thais perceive that the US is one of the most technological, up-to-date and multi-cultural country (Lawley, 1998). Therefore, it is plausible that Thai students who wish to improve their personal skills would prefer the US as a destination rather than other choices since the US is linked with high quality standards and choices in education.

Positive recommendations from friends and family & social links can motivate Thai students to choose their study destination, especially, to Australia. The relationship is in line with many previous researches which indicated that family and friends' recommendation is one of the most influencing pull factors for students' choice of Australia as a destination (Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Duan, 1997; Lawley, 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). One of the reasons could be that many Thai students who wish to study abroad at the post-graduate level need to rely on their parents for financial support (Pimpa, 2003; Terry, 2008). Thailand still remains a high power distance country in which a strong family culture is deeply embedded in society (Tarry, 2008).

Moreover, the result of this study is partially in line with the hypothesized relationship such that the likelihood of Thai students' choice of UK as a study destination increases when the students perceive that the environment of UK is better than other destination choices (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Palacio, Meneses, & Perez Perez, 2002). One of the reasons that the suitable environment factor can attract Thai students to choose UK as a destination over US and Australia is because of the increase in British marketization which emphasizes better job opportunities. A better career with higher financial rewards can attract Thais to select UK as their destination for both study and work after graduation (Tarry, 2008).

The relationship between knowledge and awareness of the host country is not positively related to Thai students' destination choice. This may be explained by the fact that Thai students as well as their parents have long since been familiar with the three destination countries, which are US, UK and Australia; the three countries have been the most popular study destinations of Thai students

at the post-graduate level over the past decades (UNESCO, 2013). Therefore, knowledge and awareness of the host country factor alone do not have enough power to be a decisive factor to motivate Thai students' choice of a particular destination.

Although, cost issues were found to be important for Western and some Asian students, Lawley's (1998) result indicated that cost issues were not related to Thai students' destination choice. In fact, many Thai students rely on financial support from their family (Pimpa, 2005) which may explain the insignificant result between cost issues and Thai students' destination choice.

The statistical analysis reveals that the value of education is a determinant related to Thai students' destination choice. Basically, students tend to evaluate the reputation and recognition of university and program before considering other factors (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Ivy, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Interestingly, the statistical results suggest that the value of education is negatively related to Thai students' destination choice for Australia only. This may be explained by Thai students' perception on value of education of program and institutions in Australia as relatively lower when compared to institutions from US and UK. This is supported by Lawley (1998) who indicated that despite Thai students perceiving the overall standard of universities in Australia as high, they rated them lower than universities in US and UK.

Furthermore, the result showed that facilities and resources were significantly related to Thai students' destination choice. It is argued that students tend to have cognitive and affective emotion attached with physical aspects of the institution such as the building, facilities and the environment (Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003).

Another significant factor influencing host institution and program selection was the cost of education and degree (content and structure) factor. Lawley (1998) found that although Thai students perceived the overall quality of institutions from UK was higher than other host countries, they perceived the study and living cost to be high as well. As a result, some students may need to change their plan by choosing an alternative that offers a lower cost rather than the first choice which has higher cost. This is line with many previous studies which stated that university and living costs

were the major barriers for students to select UK as their destination (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Lawley, 1998; Maringe & Carter, 2007).

The result showed that general influence was not positively related to Thai students' destination choice. Duan (1998) and Pimpa (2002) revealed that the influence of family is strong only in terms of motivating students to study abroad and for destination choice, whilst, the effect of family influence on host institution selection of Thai students was found to be weaker compared to decision making process in the earlier stages (Pimpa, 2002). Pimpa's (2002) study also revealed that Thai students were allowed more freedom on institution and program choice. As a result, family and peer influence which is considered to be an important component in general influence factor was not found to have significant relationship to Thai students' destination choice.

The main findings of this study can be used as an input for government policy makers in both home and host countries to formulate as well as develop new strategies in order to attract more students from Thailand. For Australia, it is a vital that universities there maintain or improve their standard of education quality whilst at the same time maintaining costs as well as safety as these are the important factors to attract Thai students, especially those who want to maintain a closer proximity to home. For UK, it is found that environment factor is crucial for motivating Thai students as they perceive the overall quality of UK universities in a positive way. Therefore, it is important that UK policy makers maintain this positive image by advertising and promoting through media. Many Thais, while perceiving that UK institutions offer top class education, still find the living expenses are relatively high when compared to US and Australia. Therefore, the UK government may need to launch some measures that can reduce the cost for Thai and other international students by offering special discounts for public transport, special tax refunds for student visa holders, extend more options for work and working hours for students currently enrolled, and reduce university dormitory fees. For US, which is a popular destination for students from around the world, there is the need to maintain the image as a leader in economics, military, technology and innovation which is the main attraction for students opting to study there. The issue of concern for students and

parents is one of safety, and it is crucial that policymakers maintain an image of safety and freedom from violence and terrorism acts.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this study may not be used to generalize across countries in Asia. This is because the factors that were examined in this study may be suitable solely for Thai students. One of the obstacles could be the cultural factor that prevents the generalizability of the results. It was discovered that students from different cultures and backgrounds could perceive some factors differently. Therefore, further study could adopt the model proposed in this study as a basis to compare findings across national settings. Moreover, this study investigated only Thai students who had decided to engage in international education by travelling to the host countries. It is recommended that future researchers also consider the distance learning mode for international education. For example, some of the significant factors from this study such as personal values and recommendation from others can be empirically tested to examine the intention of Thai student who opt for the distance learning mode. It will be fruitful for future researchers in the international education to include animosity and ethnocentrism factors while examining student destination choice. It is believed that these two factors could have a significant impact on the country image, institution image as well as the final choice for prospective students. Conducting surveys on students after they have completed their education (post hoc) and returned to their home country would also throw more light on the complexities related to international education choices.

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