



WHAT MOTIVATES TRAVELLERS TO VISIT LOW-CARBON DESTINATIONS? EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM THAILAND

Abstract

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Purpose – Despite growing interest in low-carbon tourism research, few studies have explored travellers' motivations for choosing low-carbon destinations, particularly through the push-pull theory. Research indicates that motivations for environmental tourism may vary across cultures due to multiple factors, necessitating a context-specific investigation and diverse research approaches. This study addresses these gaps by applying the push-pull motivation theory to examine travel motivations in the context of low-carbon destinations in Thailand. A thorough understanding of tourist motivations across different cultural settings is essential for advancing theoretical knowledge and promoting sustainable tourism practices.

Methodology/Design/Approach – Adopting a naturalistic inquiry approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. Participants were selected through purposive sampling.

Findings – The study identifies three push factors: good environment seeking, learning & knowledge seeking, and rest & escape; and six pull factors: attractive destination attributes, interesting tourist activities, appealing communication, convenient accessibility, environmentally friendly service providers, and environmental management appeals. The study reveals both common and new push and pull factors related to low-carbon travel motivations.

Originality of the research – This study contributes to the push-pull motivation theory by introducing good environment seeking as a distinct push factor. It further refines the conceptualisation of pull factors by integrating sustainability practices with traditional destination attributes, thereby enhancing the theoretical understanding of what makes low-carbon destinations attractive.

Keywords travel motivations, push factors, pull factors, low-carbon destinations

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INTRODUCTION

Low-carbon tourism has gained significant attention in tourism research and practice due to growing concerns about global warming (Dai et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025). This form of tourism emphasises environmentally responsible practices, such as staying in green accommodation, using low-emission transportation, and participating in low-impact activities to reduce carbon emissions and environmental impact (Liu et al., 2025). The aim of low-carbon tourism is to mitigate climate change and promote sustainable development (Hsiao et al., 2017). In addition to reducing the tourism sector's environmental footprint, low-carbon tourism also fosters environmental awareness among travellers, encouraging them to adopt sustainable behaviors beyond their trips (Dai et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025). Consequently, understanding tourists' related behaviors in this context is crucial for policymakers and tourism practitioners to promote responsible travel and sustainable tourism development, making it an important area of academic investigation (Hsiao et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2025).

Research has shown that travel behaviors, motivations and environmental concerns vary across cultural contexts (Kang & Moscardo, 2006; Sangpikul & Sivapitak, 2025), influencing tourists' travel interests and destination choices. Consequently, motivations for environment-related tourism (e.g. low-carbon tourism, ecotourism) differ across cultures due to variations in cultural values, social norms, perceptions and environmental awareness (Dai et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2017). For example, Kang and Moscardo (2006) identified significant differences in ecotourism motivations and behaviors among Korean, Australian and British tourists, attributing these variations to cultural backgrounds and environmental concern levels. Each group prioritised sustainability differently, affecting their ecotourism preferences. Similarly, Hudson and Ritchie (2001) found that cultural backgrounds influenced tourists' environmental attitudes and willingness to pay for eco-friendly products among American, British, and Canadian tourists. Levels of environmental concerns also varied significantly across these countries, thereby affecting their motivations to engage in sustainable travel. These insights are particularly relevant to low-carbon tourism, where cultural context may fundamentally alter how tourists perceive and engage with low-carbon practices. However, only a

few studies have examined low-carbon travel motivations, and all were conducted in China (i.e., Dai et al., 2022; Shie et al., 2022), where cultural and environmental factors may affect tourists' perceptions of low-carbon tourism. The travel motivations identified in the existing literature may not necessarily be similar in other contexts due to differing cultural backgrounds and other factors (Kang & Moscardo, 2006; Sangpikul & Sivapitak, 2025). This suggests that low-carbon travel motivations remain under-explored in different cultural contexts. Given the findings of cross-cultural studies (Hudson & Ritchie, 2001; Kang & Moscardo, 2006), the appeal of low-carbon tourism likely varies contextually. Therefore, motivations for visiting low-carbon destinations are not universal but are instead influenced by cultural values, social norms, perceptions, and environmental awareness. This underlines the need for a deeper, context-specific understanding of tourist motivations to promote low-carbon tourism effectively across different cultural settings.

Moreover, although several studies have investigated low-carbon tourism behaviors (e.g., Dai et al., 2022; Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2023; Lee & Jan, 2019; Shie et al., 2022), relatively few have sought to comprehensively examine tourists' travel motivations, particularly within the framework of push-pull motivations, in the context of low-carbon destinations. This represents a critical gap that may impede the advancement of knowledge in this emerging field. For instance, while Dai et al. (2022) developed a measurement scale for low-carbon travel motivations, their study primarily focused on general motivations without clearly distinguishing between push and pull factors. Similarly, Fakfare and Wattanacharoensil (2023) explored tourists' perceptions of low-carbon tourism attributes with an emphasis on destination-related pull factors, yet they did not offer a holistic analysis incorporating both push and pull motivations. These gaps limit our understanding of what drives tourists to choose low-carbon destinations. Especially, the literature offers limited insight into specific push factors, such as the desire for cleaner air and reduced pollution, motivations that are particularly relevant in countries like Thailand, where low-carbon tourism is actively promoted for its environmental benefits (Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2023). In addition, essential pull factors such as accessibility and communication channels (e.g., social media), which have been shown to significantly affect destination decision-making (Sangpikul, 2008), remain underexplored in the context of low-carbon travel. Collectively, these gaps highlight the need for further research to deepen our understanding of tourists' motivational dynamics when selecting low-carbon destinations.

Therefore, a comprehensive examination of low-carbon travel motivations through the push-pull theory is essential for advancing both academic understanding and tourism practice. Grounded in Dann's (1981) foundational work, the theory offers valuable insights into the internal drivers of travel (push factors) and the external attributes that influence destination choice (pull factors). The framework has been widely applied in various tourism contexts, including national parks (Kim et al., 2003), ecotourism (Kim Lian Chan & Baum, 2007), and senior tourism (Sangpikul, 2008). As such, the push-pull framework provides a valuable framework for analysing travellers' decision-making processes, particularly in the context of low-carbon destination selection.

Thailand is among the countries actively pursuing sustainable tourism development, including low-carbon tourism. As part of its sustainable tourism efforts, the government promotes low-carbon tourism across various destinations to mitigate the adverse effects of carbon dioxide emissions resulting from travel and tourism activities (Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2023; Sangpikul & Sivapitak, 2025). To effectively support national policies and strengthen the promotion of low-carbon tourism, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations that drive individuals to engage in such practices. However, research on low-carbon travel motivations within the Thai context remains limited. Therefore, the findings of the present study could assist the government in developing more targeted tourism strategies and campaigns to encourage the travel to low-carbon destinations and contribute to the sustainable tourism development of the country.

Building upon this research foundation, the present study employs a naturalistic inquiry method as a qualitative approach to identify the push and pull factors motivating travellers to visit low-carbon destinations in Thailand. The investigation is framed within push-pull motivation theory to systematically examine these factors. Naturalistic inquiry is particularly suited to supplement the limitations of quantitative research, particularly its constraints on flexibility and participant expression. Unlike structured quantitative methods, naturalistic inquiry allows for an in-depth, open-ended exploration of tourists' motivations within real-world settings (Bowen, 2008), thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities underlying push and pull factors. Numerous scholars have highlighted the significance of integrating diverse methodological approaches to more effectively capture the multifaceted nature of tourist behaviors in environmental tourism settings (Rahman & Reynolds, 2016; Yadav et al., 2019). In line with this perspective, the present study seeks to address the following research questions: 1) What push and pull factors motivate travellers to select low-carbon destinations in real-world contexts?, and 2) Are these motivations similar to or distinct from those influencing other types of tourist destinations? By answering these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of low-carbon travel motivations and provides practical insights for destination marketing and sustainable tourism development.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. The theory of push and pull motivations

The push-pull motivation theory, originally introduced by Dann (1981) and later refined by Uysal and Hagan (1993), offers a framework for understanding tourist behavior. According to this theory, travel decisions are influenced by two sets of motivations: push factors, which are internal psychological drivers (e.g., the desire for escape, relaxation, or adventure), and pull factors, which are external attributes of a destination that attract tourists (e.g., natural beauty, cultural experiences, amenities). Together, these dimensions help explain why individuals choose to travel and select specific destinations (Kozak, 2002; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). This framework has been applied in diverse tourism contexts, including national parks (Kim et al., 2003), ecotourism (Chan & Baum, 2007), and senior tourism (Sangpikul, 2008). Scholars suggest that understanding push and pull motivations is critical for developing effective tourism strategies, as it allows destination marketers to align tourist needs with destination attributes (Uysal & Hagan, 1993; You et al., 2000). However, its application to low-carbon destinations remains underexplored.

In the context of low-carbon destinations, tourist motivations are likely to differ from those associated with conventional travel destinations. This divergence arises from variations in destination attributes, image, attractions, and environmental factors, which can lead to distinct motivational dynamics (Kim Lian Chan & Baum, 2007). For instance, while traditional tourism destinations may emphasise luxury, entertainment, or cultural experiences, low-carbon destinations often prioritise sustainability, environmental conservation, natural/peaceful environment, and eco-friendly practices (Dai et al., 2022; Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2023). These unique characteristics suggest that travellers to low-carbon destinations may be driven by different motives and interests compared to those visiting conventional tourist spots. To further explore these motivations, the current study employs the theory of push and pull motivations as a theoretical framework to understand the interaction between internal psychological drivers and external destination attributes that influence travellers' decisions to choose low-carbon destination in Thailand context.

1.2. Low-carbon travel motivations

Table 1 synthesizes previous studies relevant to the present research, with a particular focus on tourist behaviors in low-carbon tourism contexts. Since travel motivations are a subset of tourist behaviors, and given the scarcity of literature specifically examining low-carbon travel motivations, this review adopts a broader analytical scope to critically examine the related literature and provide an overall understanding of the field. The review incorporates a wider range of research on low-carbon tourism behaviors to understand the current state of knowledge in the field, while also helping to identify research gaps.

Tables 1: The synthesis of related literature

Studies	Topics	Methods	Aims and findings
Wu et al. (2023)	Tourist attitudes and behaviors	Quantitative	To understand the factors influencing low-carbon travel behavior through regression analysis, low-carbon attitudes were found to significantly influence tourists' travel behavior. Policy rewards, environmental education, and financial incentives also played crucial roles in promoting low-carbon tourism behavior.
Kuo & Dai (2012)	Tourist attitudes and behaviors	Quantitative	To predict low-carbon travel behavior, through Structural Equation Modelling, personal attitudes and perceived behavioral control were found to significantly influence low-carbon tourism intentions, while subjective norms had minimal impact. Past travel experiences also enhanced perceived behavioral control, strengthening behavioral intentions.
Dai et al. (2022)	Motivations and scale measurement	Quantitative	To develop the scale for low-carbon travel motivations, factor analysis was used and identified six dimensions: environmental protection, experience seeking, escape or social connection, environmental protection appeals and measures, low-carbon products, and green transportation. Whereas four travel constraints were intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints, structural constraints, and the not a travel option.
Shie et al. (2022)	Motivations and scale measurement	Quantitative	To further develop a measurement and understand the relationships between green commitment, low-carbon travel motivations, and travel constraint, factor analysis and structural equation modelling were employed. Green commitments were found to positively affect low-carbon travel motivation and intention. In addition, six low-carbon travel motivation constructs for scale measurement were identified: environmental protection, experience-seeking, escape, eco-service providers, low-carbon products, green transportation.
Dai & Tsaor (2016)	Scale measurement and segmentation	Quantitative	To segment low-carbon tourists, Chi-Square analysis and Low-Carbon Travel Motivation Scale (LCTMS) were used to identify four segments: non, minimal, moderate, and strong low-carbon tourists. Significant differences in low-carbon travel motivations were found in gender, income, and origin.
Wu et al. (2017)	Tourism participation	Quantitative	To understand tourists' participation in low-carbon tourism, factor analysis was used to identify three factors (reasons) which explained why tourists participated in low-carbon activities including emotional value, cognitive value, and functional value.
Du & Wang (2017)	Tourism participation	Quantitative	To further understand tourists' willingness to participate in low-carbon tourism, Structural Equation Modelling was employed. Four factors (constructs) affecting tourists' participation were identified: emotional value, functional value social value, parents & relatives, and classmates & friends.
Lee & Jan (2019)	Tourism experience	Quantitative	To identify low-carbon tourism experience, seven constructs were identified through factor analysis: sensory experience, affective experience, learning experience, sociocultural experience, behavioral experience, escapism experience, and prestige experience.
Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil (2023)	Destination attributes and satisfaction	Quantitative	To identify destination attributes and satisfaction, factor analysis and impact range performance analysis were employed. Three dimensions were identified to affect customer satisfaction: 1) 'must-have' category (low-carbon service providers and activities), 2) 'hybrid' category (low-carbon knowledge and energy saving facilities), and 3) 'value-added' category (use of low-carbon practices).

Following table 1, the reviewed studies on low-carbon tourism are summarised in terms of their topics, research aims, methodological approaches, and findings. The synthesis identifies several topic areas, including tourist attitudes and behaviors, motivational scale development, tourism participation and experiences, and destination attributes. While these studies provide valuable insights into travel-related behaviors in the context of low-carbon tourism but still leave critical gaps, particularly in integrating the push-pull framework within this field.

For example, in the area of tourist attitudes and behaviors, research consistently demonstrates that tourists' attitudes play a pivotal role in determining low-carbon tourism behaviors. For instance, studies revealed that stronger environmental attitudes were linked to greater likelihood of engaging in low-carbon travel (Kuo & Dai, 2012; Wu et al., 2023). While Kuo and Dai (2012) found attitudes to be more influential than social norms, Wu et al. (2023) further revealed that attitudes exerted the greatest influence when tourists

actively sought out environmental impact information prior to booking. Although both studies provide valuable insights into the role of attitudes in influencing low-carbon tourism behaviors, neither study explores what specifically motivates tourists to choose low-carbon destinations, focusing instead on attitude-behavior relationships rather than destination-specific push-pull factors.

In addition, motivational scale development in low-carbon tourism has been a prominent approach in the literature with studies such as Dai et al. (2022) and Shie et al. (2022) identifying several key dimensions of low-carbon travel motivations such as environmental protection, experience-seeking, social connection, low-carbon products, and green transportation. While these studies provide valuable classification of motivational factors (generic motivations), both studies provided similar findings (overlapping constructs) such as environmental protection, experience-seeking, and social connection, due to the adoption of similar frameworks and constructs, suggesting the limitation of broader theoretical perspectives. Moreover, while factor analysis efficiently categorises motivations (see Dai et al., 2022; Shie et al., 2022), it may overlook context-specific drivers that qualitative methods could uncover. Building on these scales, Dai and Tsaur (2016) segmented tourists into four categories, from non-low-carbon to strong low-carbon tourists, based on the Low-Carbon Travel Motivation Scale (LCTMS), and revealed demographic differences in motivations by gender, income, and origin. Although this segmentation offers insight into push motivations, it does not engage with the pull factors that could explain why certain destinations are more attractive to different segments. Like the studies of Dai et al. (2022) and Shie et al. (2022), Dai and Tsaur's (2016) study does not fully address the relationships between push and pull factors to gain a better understanding of what specifically drives tourists to go to low-carbon destinations and destination preferences.

From another angle, a parallel stream of research explores low-carbon tourism experiences and participation. Wu et al. (2017) and Du and Wang (2017) adopted similar framework to examine the factors influencing tourists' willingness to engage in low-carbon activities, identifying emotional, cognitive, functional, and social values as key drivers. While these findings enhance our understanding of value-driven behaviors, they do not specifically investigate low-carbon travel motivations, which could provide additional insights into tourists' decision-making processes. Research on low-carbon tourism experiences (Lee & Jan 2019) identified seven dimensions such as sensory, affective, and sociocultural experiences, suggesting that rich and meaningful experiences may strengthen engagement in low-carbon tourism. While Lee and Jan's (2019) study provides a valuable framework for understanding the experiential dimensions of low-carbon tourism, their study, like those of Dai et al. (2022) and Shie et al. (2022), primarily focuses on scale development and the factors enhancing low-carbon tourism experiences rather than a comprehensive understanding of push-pull model. A recent research on destination attributes, such as that by Fakfare and Wattanacharoensil (2023), provides another view of pull factors of low-carbon destinations. By categorising low-carbon destination features into 'must-have,' 'hybrid,' and 'value-added' attributes, they offer practical insights for destination managers. While this study offers valuable insights into pull factors affecting tourist satisfaction at low-carbon destinations, it focuses exclusively on destination attributes without incorporating push motivations. This limits understanding of what fundamentally drives tourists' desire to visit such destinations.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, recent research suggests that both behavioral interventions and policy frameworks play complementary roles in fostering low-carbon tourism. Behavioral strategies such as nudging (e.g., carbon footprint labelling, eco-friendly choice framing) have been shown to encourage sustainable travel decisions (Song et al., 2024), suggesting how pull factors can be strategically designed to stimulate tourist motivations towards low-carbon destinations. Furthermore, tourist segmentation research highlights the need for tailored communication, as motivations vary among groups and each group values different destination attributes such as low-carbon supporters, pleasure seekers, and destination protectors (Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2024). These findings point to the importance of aligning messaging with specific motivational profiles. At the policy level, perceptions of supportive measures, particularly incentives for green transportation, are shown to work synergistically with built environment features to strengthen low-carbon travel intentions (Sheng et al., 2025). Although travellers' attitudes (push factors) remain the most powerful predictor of intention, evidence suggests that supportive policies outperform restrictive ones, implying that policy design should align with underlying psychological drivers. At a macro scale, Lin and Heeren (2025) propose a framework for low-carbon tourism itineraries by identifying key sustainability indicators (pull factors). The study highlights that effective management systems and environmental education programmes are particularly critical, and that implementation efforts should prioritise clean energy adoption, low-carbon operations, resource protection, and visitor education. By integrating these insights, this study reviews relatively recent research on low-carbon tourism while contextualising those findings within the scope of the present investigation.

In summary, past research on low-carbon tourism has explored a range of topics, including tourist attitudes and behaviors, motivational scale development, segmentation, tourism experiences, participation, destination attributes, behavioral interventions, and policy frameworks. While these studies offer valuable insights into specific aspects of the field, research focusing specifically on low-carbon travel motivations remains limited. Most studies examine either push or pull factors in isolation, with few integrating both perspectives. Consequently, there is still insufficient understanding of what truly motivates travellers to choose low-carbon destinations, particularly when analysed through the integration of push-pull framework. A critical gap in the existing literature stems from the limited application of the push-pull motivation theory to fully explain why people choose low-carbon destinations. This may reflect the relatively new and niche nature of low-carbon tourism (Dai et al., 2022; Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2023), especially compared with established fields such as ecotourism or nature-based tourism. Moreover, most existing studies rely on quantitative methods, which, while valuable for categorisation and measurement, may lack the depth needed to capture real-world motivations. This underlines the need for broader methodological approaches to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of

the phenomenon (Sangpikul & Thipbharos, 2024; Yadav et al., 2019). To address these gaps, the present study adopts a naturalistic inquiry method to identify the push and pull factors motivating travellers to visit low-carbon destinations, thereby complementing existing quantitative findings. This method enables researchers to explore the complexity and broader scope of push and pull motivations and may help uncover new or unanticipated motivational factors that structured surveys might overlook.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretivist research philosophy, emphasising understanding human experiences through the meanings people attribute to their actions within social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This approach is particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena like low-carbon travel motivations, as it facilitates in-depth exploration of perspectives and motivations in real-world situations. Employing naturalistic inquiry, a qualitative method, enables investigation of low-carbon motivations in authentic settings. The naturalistic inquiry method, implemented through semi-structured interviews, allows participants to freely express their views (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bowen, 2008), thereby improving the limitations inherent in quantitative approaches (e.g. close-ended questionnaires). The present study was undertaken through the following research methods.

2.1. Sampling method and data collection

Purposive sampling was used to select participants relevant to the study. The selection criteria were based on prior research (e.g., Dai et al., 2022; Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2023; Sangpikul & Thipbharos, 2024) and encompassed the following key attributes: (1) interests in low-carbon tourism, (2) knowledge of low-carbon destinations, (3) travel experience within six months, and (4) minimum age of 25 years with college education. These criteria were applied to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants at a Bangkok tourism fair (June 2024). Grounded in naturalistic inquiry, this approach captured participants' perspectives on low-carbon travel motivations in a real-world setting. Conducting interviews at the tourism fair, rather than at tourist destinations, provided a neutral environment, minimising destination-specific biases and encouraging authentic reflections on travel motivations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sangpikul & Sivapitak, 2025).

The interview questions were adapted from related studies on travel motivations (Caber & Abayrak, 2016; Dai et al., 2022; Kim Lian Chan & Baum, 2007; Yang et al., 2023), with modifications to align with push-pull theory in the context of low-carbon destinations. After obtaining informed consent and explaining the research objectives, interviews were conducted at the Green Tourism Association booth. The questions were designed to explore participants' general awareness of low-carbon tourism, their travel behaviors, and their push and pull motivations for visiting low-carbon destinations in Thailand. Sample questions, adapted from past studies (Caber & Abayrak, 2016; Dai et al., 2022), included: To what extent are you interested in environmental or low-carbon tourism? Do you intend to visit a low-carbon destination in the near future? If you have a chance to visit a low-carbon destination, what would be your primary motivations for doing so? What specific attributes of a low-carbon destination would attract you to visit? Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes, aligning with qualitative research practices where interviews are concluded once sufficient data saturation is achieved (Bowen 2008).

2.2. Data triangulation

Data triangulation was employed to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the study. This approach involved collecting data from diverse participant groups, including variations in gender (males and females), age (e.g., young adults, mature adults, and seniors), occupations (e.g., government and non-government sectors), and educational backgrounds (e.g., bachelor's degree holders and above). According to Bowen (2008), triangulation strengthens the validity of findings by incorporating multiple perspectives and reducing potential biases. Additionally, research highlights that the use of varied data sources enhances the reliability and depth of qualitative data. Interviews were conducted with 27 participants until data saturation was reached. Given the study's setting at a Thai domestic tourism fair, all participants were Thai nationals. The sample comprised 15 females and 12 males, with age distribution as follows: 9 participants aged 25–35 years, 12 participants aged 36–55 years, and 6 participants aged 56 years and older. In terms of education, 3 participants held a Ph.D., 12 had a Master's degree, and 14 held a Bachelor's degree. Most participants (15 persons) were employed in the private sector, while 7 worked in government, and 4 were entrepreneurs. Regarding prior experience with low-carbon tourism, 24 participants had no prior experience, whereas 3 had engaged in such travel.

2.3. Data analysis

This study employed the thematic analysis with three coding stages: open, axial, and selective coding. This method enables researchers to identify, analyse, and report patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the thematic analysis, after obtaining the data, they were transcribed by the researchers to interpret the general ideas and the actual meaning before the data were coded. During the open coding phase, the researchers read the transcripts and clustered the content into

initial codes. Similar words or statements related to push motivations (e.g., desires to travel) and pull motivations (e.g., destination attributes) were identified and grouped into codes. Initially, 19 codes for push motivations and 32 codes for pull motivations were generated. After removing duplicates and insignificant codes, the final set comprised 13 codes for push motivations and 24 codes for pull motivations. In the axial coding phase, the researchers refined and grouped the codes into categories by examining the relationships between codes and their relevance to the context of low-carbon tourism motivations. Concepts extracted during open coding were organised into categories, and synonymous concepts were linked to better understand why participants travelled to low-carbon destinations (Shafieea et al., 2019). During selective coding, the researchers integrated the identified categories by examining their relationships and relevance to push and pull motivations. Relevant categories were grouped to establish overarching themes, with each theme consisting of two or more categories related to low-carbon travel motivations.

To ensure the validity of the analysis, a co-researcher independently cross-checked the coding and thematic grouping using the same procedure. Discrepancies in coding or grouping were resolved through discussions until a consensus was reached. This process aligns with best practices in qualitative research to ensure methodological rigor and validity (Sangpikul & Sivapitak, 2025). Given the relatively small sample size (27 participants), the data analysis was conducted manually. In tourism research, scholars have argued that manual analysis remains a reliable and effective method, particularly for small datasets (Memarzadeh & Chang, 2015; Sangpikul & Sivapitak, 2025).

3. FINDINGS

Table 2: Thematic analysis of push factors influencing travel to low-carbon destinations

Coding (for example)	Categorising	Developing themes (push factors)	Theme rationale
01 To have fresh air 02 To experience the natural environment 03 To visit less polluted places 04 To visit less crowded places/peaceful places 05 To stay in natural environment	1) Seeking better climate (01, 03) 2) Natural environment (02, 05) 3) Less crowded/peaceful places (04)	1) Good environment seeking	This theme focused on environmental quality (air quality, nature environment, and peacefulness) as a primary driver
06 To see/learn how they reduce carbon emissions 07 To experience low-carbon facilities/practices 08 To see something new at low-carbon destinations 09 To understand the concept of low-carbon tourism 10 To participate in low-carbon activities/less-impact activities	4) Knowledge seeking and learning (06, 07, 09) 5) Seeking new experience & novelty (07, 08) 6) Activity participation (10)	2) Learning & knowledge seeking	This theme encompassed learning-oriented motivations including educational pursuits, novelty seeking, and participatory engagement, as key drivers.
11 To rest or relax as usual holiday 12 To escape or go away from routine life 13 To stay away from hard work or stressful environment	7) Rest & relaxation (01) 8) Escape (02, 03)	3) Rest & escape	This theme captured psychological needs, encompassing both rest/relaxation and escape motives as common drivers for visiting low-carbon destinations.
13 codes	8 categories	3 themes	

Table 2 presents the finding of push motivations. Based on the thematic analysis, 3 themes of push factors were established from coding and categorising process (13 codes and 8 categories). They were identified as: 1) good environment seeking, 2) learning & knowledge seeking, and 3) rest & escape. This analysis reveals that the participants are primarily motivated by a combination of environmental, educational, and relaxation needs to travel to low-carbon destinations. Each theme is presented as follows:

1. Good environment seeking: low-carbon destination is a place where local community endeavors to reduce carbon emissions by minimising the environmental impact of transportation, accommodations, activities, and energy used in the community. Many participants viewed low-carbon destinations as places with cleaner air as reflected in a response: *“My desire to go to a low-carbon destination because I want to have fresh air or good air as the city I live in now is so polluted. I want to have nice weather which is good for my health”* (male participant, 48 years old). In addition, most low-carbon destinations in Thailand are natural settings or some are located in rural areas with beautiful scenery. Many participants may desire to go to low-carbon destinations because of this motive as expressed in some responses, for example, *“I want to go to low-destinations to expose to a beautiful natural place with not many people. The trip may help to refresh me from busy work and polluted*

city” (male participant, 50 years old). The findings extend previous literature by highlighting the growing preference for low-carbon destinations that offer clean air and natural beauty, a factor rarely addressed in prior studies. Through thematic analysis, the findings were systematically examined for recurring patterns, resulting in code identification, category development, and ultimately the emergence of a core theme: environmental quality seeking.

2. Learning & knowledge seeking: low-carbon tourism generally involves a form of travel that aims to reduce carbon footprint associated with tourism activities. When visiting a low-carbon destination, many participants were motivated to seek new experience or to learn something which cannot be obtained from mass tourism. Some were curious to know how the community managed low-carbon tourism or activities into practice as reflected in some responses: “*Actually, I am interested in low-carbon tourism and I want to go there because I want to know (learn) more of what low-carbon tourism is and how they arrange for low-carbon activities. There should be something we can learn from there*” (male participant, 35 years old). Several participants desired to go to low-carbon destinations because they wanted to seek new experience or to do something different from their usual living with less impact activities. For instance, one female participant (48 years old) said “*Visiting low-carbon destinations may give us new or different travel experience from sea-sand-sun destinations. Our family wants to experience and do some low-impact activities and slow-life travel because we have aged parents. Such places may be good for them*”. This information clearly indicates that, in addition to experiencing nice weather, many participants desired to go to low-carbon destinations to gain new experience of low-carbon related activities. Employing the same analytical approach, these findings were systematically examined for patterns and relationships through coding and categorisation, ultimately revealing learning & knowledge seeking as the second push factor.

3. Rest & escape: many participants may view low-carbon destinations as the places where they can rest or relax as a part of their usual holiday. Some may go to low-carbon destination because they want to escape from routine or busy life as reflected in their responses, for example, “*I know low-carbon tourism. I and my family may go there to take a rest from my work and do some activities together*” (one female participant, 49 years old). Several participants also revealed that they wanted to escape from stressful work and busy environment and spent time together with family members during holidays. One male participant (35 years old) said “*I often travel to some places during the weekends to take a rest and relax from stressful work. Even though it is a low-carbon destination, my desire to go there is still to rest for a holiday*”. This finding may be consistent with traditional tourism motivations, where individuals seek to escape from their daily routines and stressful environment. Based on the analytical process, rest & escape emerged as the third push factor.

Table 3. Thematic analysis of pull factors influencing travel to low-carbon destinations

Coding (for example)	Categorising	Developing themes (pull factors)	Theme rationale
01 A place with good weather/climate 02 Natural environment/forestry area/mountains 03 Peaceful, not crowded destination 04 Beautiful/attractive destinations 05 Lovely small village	1) Good climate (01) 2) Natural environment (02) 3) Peaceful environment (03) 4) Beautiful destination (04, 05)	1) Attractive destination attributes	This theme emphasised on good climate, nature, peacefulness, and destination attributes as key attractions.
06 Nature-based activities 07 Culture-based activities/local participation 08 Low-carbon emission activities	5) Nature-based activities (06) 6) Culture-based activities (07) 7) Low-carbon activities (08)	2) Interesting tourist activities	This theme involved diverse activities (e.g., nature, culture, and low-carbon activities) to attract travellers.
09 Easy/convenient travel/ accessibility 10 Not too far destinations 11 Good transportation/infrastructure	8) Convenient travel (09) 9) Nearby destination (10) 10) Good infrastructure (11)	3) Convenient accessibility	This theme mainly focused on destination accessibility to encourage low-carbon travel.
12 Tourist reviews 13 Word-of-mouth/recommendation 14 Modern media (Line, Facebook, websites) 15 Traditional media (TV, newspapers, magazines)	11) Tourist reviews (12) 12) Word-of-mouth (13) 13) Modern media (14) 14) Traditional media (15)	4) Appealing communication	This theme emphasised the role of media and communication to promote low-carbon destinations.
16 Environmentally friendly/ green accommodation 17 Lovely/beautiful homestay/resort 18 Food (organic/green food/local food) 19 Rental of bicycles or low-carbon vehicles 20 Affordable prices, not expensive prices	15) Green accommodation (16) 16) Beautiful resorts (17) 17) Safety food (18) 18) Low-carbon transportation (19) 19) Affordable prices (20)	5) Environmentally friendly service providers	This theme focused on the availability of environmentally friendly service providers to reflect the image of low-carbon destinations.

Coding (for example)	Categorising	Developing themes (pull factors)	Theme rationale
21 Energy saving/less energy consumption practices 22 Low-carbon emission practices 23 Good garbage/waste management practices 24 Implementation of reduce, reuse, recycle	20) Energy saving practices (21) 21) Low-impact practices (22, 24) 22) Waste management (23)	6) Environmental management appeals	This theme involved the environmental management appeals to provide low-carbon travel experience.
24 codes	22 categories	6 themes	

Table 3 presents another finding of pull motivations (the attractiveness of low-carbon destinations). Based on the thematic analysis, 6 themes of pull factors were established from coding and categorising process (24 codes and 22 categories). They were identified as: 1) attractive destination attributes, 2) interesting tourist activities, 3) appealing communication, 4) convenient accessibility, 5) environmentally friendly service providers, and 6) environmental management appeals. The analysis of pull factors reveals that there are a wide range of destination attributes that may attract the participants to low-carbon destinations. Each theme is presented as follows:

1. Attractive destination attributes: most low-carbon destinations in Thailand are set in natural environments or small villages located in mountainous areas. These environments may appeal to nature lovers who appreciate the beauty of natural surroundings. Many participants shared similar views about this attribute of low-carbon destinations, as reflected in their responses. For instance, one male participant (41 years old) stated, *“If I go to a low-carbon site, I will choose a place where has good weather or pleasant environment. Especially, I especially enjoy natural areas such as forests or mountains because I can have fresh air”*. Similarly, a female participant (45 years old) said *“If I have a chance to visit a low-carbon destination, I will choose to go to a place with natural attractions or a peaceful village in the rural areas”*. These findings are consistent with general tourism trends, where natural beauty and environmental quality are key factors in destination choice, and this is also true for selecting low-carbon destinations. Applying the same analytical methodology, these findings were coded, categorised, and thematically analysed, revealing attractive destination attributes as the first key pull factor as shown in table 3.

2. Interesting tourist activities: this theme emerged from participants’ perceptions of low-carbon destinations as a type of tourist destination offering engaging activities, either nature-based or culture-based. Several participants highlighted their expectations for such activities to attract them. For instance, one male participant (57 years old) stated: *“We want to go to a low-carbon destination which provides some interesting activities. For me, I can visit either natural or cultural destinations, but such places should have interesting travel programs or activities such as biking, water-based activities, nature-tracking or visiting a cultural event at the destinations”*. Furthermore, several participants expressed a preference for activities with minimal environmental impact, which they believed would make low-carbon destinations more appealing. Like other tourism types, these findings contribute to the understanding that, in real-world setting, low-carbon destinations may be viewed as a tourist destination offering interesting low-impact activities. Based on the findings, thematic analysis identified interesting tourist activities as the second pull factors.

3. Convenient accessibility: this theme emerged as another important consideration for participants when deciding whether to visit low-carbon destinations. It emphasises the significance of ease of travel in destination choice. Several participants expressed that low-carbon destinations should be easily accessible to facilitate their travel and save time, as reflected in their responses. For example, one female participant (42 years old) said: *“I am interested in visiting a low-carbon destination but if the place is too far like 4 to 6 hour-drive or not easily accessed by car, we may not go there because it takes too long and costs more for gasoline”*. “The findings contribute an additional perspective for understanding the role of accessibility in low-carbon destination choice. Thematic analysis further revealed convenient accessibility as the third pull factor.

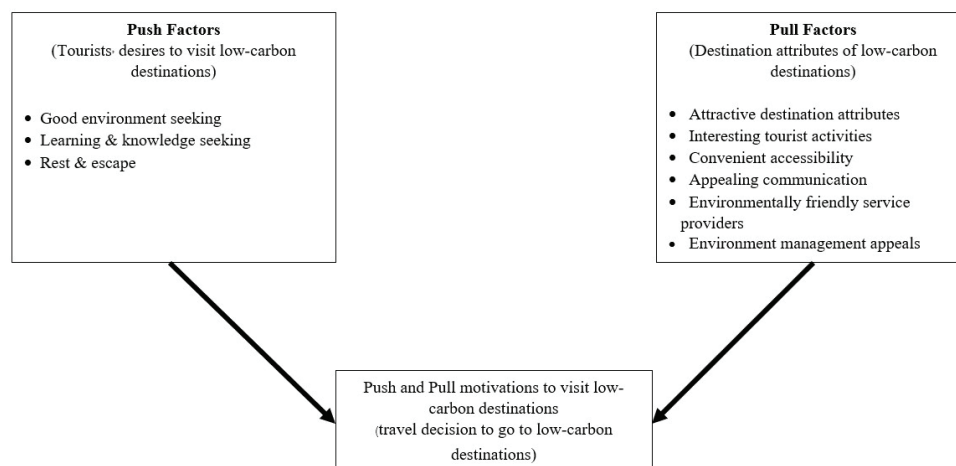
4. Appealing communication: media generally plays a significant role in attracting travelers to tourist destinations by creating awareness and perceptions. This is also true for low-carbon destinations. Most participants acknowledged that the media is a key factor influencing their decision to travel to low-carbon destinations, either modern or traditional media, can have an impact, as shown by one participant’s response: *“If low-carbon tourism is promoted through appealing social media such as Tik Tok, Line, or Facebook, these media can influence me to make travel decision to low-carbon destinations. In particular, if the media show beautiful pictures showing the environment of low-carbon destinations, this would be great”* (a female participant, 34 years old). Similar responses were provided regarding other forms of media, such as tourist reviews, word-of-mouth, and traditional media (e.g., television, magazines). Like other forms of tourism, the current findings enhance our understanding of how various types of media can influence participants’ decisions to travel to low-carbon destinations. Based on the analytical process, appealing communication emerged as the fourth pull factor.

5. Environmentally friendly service providers: travelers are more likely to choose a destination that offers a wide range of service providers that meet their needs. For low-carbon destinations, many participants also expect the availability of environmentally friendly service providers, as these services help promote the image of low-carbon destinations. This is reflected in some responses, such as, “*I prefer visiting a low-carbon destination if that place provides a wide range of facilities at the destination such as a beautiful resort, fresh fruit and local food, and the rental of bicycles because our family likes taking a bicycle around a village*” (female participant, 40 years old). Another participant shared “*At a low-carbon destination, there should be environmentally friendly business to provide tourists with the experience of low-carbon environment. For me, I want to try local fresh food with pesticide free. Organic food would be great for me to stay at a low-carbon destination*” (male participant, 48 years old). The findings demonstrated that multiple service provider attributes influenced destination selection. Thematic synthesis consolidated these factors under the core theme of environmentally friendly service providers.

6. Environmental management appeals: in the context of low-carbon destination, tourists expect to experience the practices that help the communities to reduce carbon emissions. Several participants mentioned that they are particularly interested in destinations that implement low-carbon or low-impact practices. For example, one male participant (51 years old) said, “*I often see several travel documentaries about low-carbon tourism on TV and Internet. I want to go there to see how they reduce carbon emissions in the daily life*”. Other participants expected to experience less energy consumption practices, low-carbon emission practices, garbage management, and recycling activities at low-carbon destinations. Like the availability of environmentally friendly service providers, many participants also expect the presence of low-carbon practices, as they contribute to the image of low-carbon destinations. Through the analytical process, these elements collectively formed the sixth pull factor: environmental management appeal.

Overall, the findings are summarised and presented in Figure 1 as a model of push and pull motivations for visiting low-carbon destinations, based on the naturalistic inquiry method. According to the model, three push factors (needs/desires) motivate participants to travel to low-carbon destinations: seeking a good environment, seeking learning and knowledge, and seeking rest and escape. Additionally, six destination attributes may attract them to these destinations: attractive destination attributes, interesting tourist activities, appealing communication, convenient accessibility, environmentally friendly service providers, and environmental management appeals. Both push and pull factors, as outlined in the framework, are essential components of low-carbon travel motivations, providing a deeper understanding of people’s decisions to visit low-carbon destinations within the context of Thailand.

Figure 1: A model of push and pull motivations for visiting low-carbon destinations, based on the naturalistic inquiry method



4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

4.1. Discussions

This study identifies three key push factors motivating participants to visit low-carbon destinations in Thailand: good environment seeking, learning & knowledge seeking, and rest & escape. These motivations align with existing literature on travel motivations, where learning and relaxation are frequently cited as common drivers of tourism (e.g., Kozak, 2002; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Similar to other forms of tourism, people travel to gain new experiences, acquire knowledge, and relax in peaceful settings. However, this study contributes to the literature by identifying good environment seeking as a new push factor, previously undocumented in the push motivation literature. While prior research (e.g., Wu et al., 2017; Du & Wang, 2017; Dai et al., 2022; Shie et al., 2022) has emphasised experience seeking and escape as key motivators, the desire for better climate has not been explicitly recognised as a primary motive. This finding extends the current understanding of low-carbon travel motivations by introducing a new construct to the push factor framework. In contrast to prior research that predominantly focuses on seeking experiences or

escaping from everyday life, this study introduces the need for cleaner air and less polluted environment as a primary motivator. This finding offers a new perspective on how climate-related concerns are increasingly influencing tourism decisions, specifically in the context of low-carbon destinations in Thailand. The concept of good environment seeking, which has not been explored in previous literature, thus enhances the theoretical understanding of low-carbon travel motivations by revealing environmental quality (air quality) as a key driver. One possible explanation for the prominence of good environment seeking among participants in this study could be the media representation of low-carbon destinations in Thailand. Many Thai media often present low-carbon destinations with better air quality and natural attractions, particularly in rural and forested areas (Sangpikul & Sivapitak, 2025). These representations likely influence public perceptions, framing low-carbon destinations as cleaner and more peaceful alternatives to urban, polluted environments. By identifying good environment seeking as a key motivator, it highlights a growing trend where travellers are not only seeking rest or new experiences but are also driven by an increasing desire for better air quality. This research extends the existing literature by adding a new dimension to our understanding of the push factors influencing low-carbon tourism, particularly within the context of Thailand.

With regard to pull factors, the findings of this study reveal both similarities and differences compared to the existing literature on travel motivations in a general context. Common pull factors, such as attractive destination attributes, interesting tourist activities, convenient accessibility, and appealing communication, align with those identified in prior studies (e.g., Yousof et al., 2018; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). These studies generally highlight the significance of destination features, such as scenic environment, a variety of engaging activities, and ease of access, on tourists' decision-making. The present findings suggest that, like in other forms of tourism, these traditional attributes remain crucial in motivating travel to low-carbon destinations. However, this study introduces a key distinction by identifying environmentally friendly service providers and environmental management appeals as important pull factors for low-carbon destinations. These factors were not commonly emphasised in existing travel motivation literature, which typically focuses on general destination attributes or activities (e.g., Yousof et al., 2018; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). The present findings imply that the attractiveness of low-carbon destinations is not solely dependent on traditional attributes but also requires the integration of low-carbon practices and environmentally friendly services. This is a significant contribution to literature as previous studies have not discussed or addressed the importance of pull factors regarding low-carbon destinations. This suggests that low-carbon destinations must balance both conventional tourism appeals and sustainable practices to attract special interest tourists. For example, a destination that offers scenic beauty and engaging activities but lacks environmentally friendly services may not fully appeal to environmentally conscious travelers. Conversely, a destination that prioritises low-carbon practices but lacks basic amenities or accessibility may also fail to attract tourists. This finding extends the existing literature by highlighting the need for a more holistic approach to developing low-carbon destinations, one that combines traditional tourism attributes with sustainable practices. These findings help to extend our understanding of pull factors in regard to low-carbon destinations in the real settings based on Thailand context. Overall, the discussions above collectively help answer research questions 1 and 2.

4.2. Theoretical implications

In terms of theoretical implications, this research has extended the push-pull motivation theory (Dann, 1981) to low-carbon tourism. It represents the first qualitative investigation to apply this theory specifically to low-carbon destinations in a real-world context. While the push-pull framework has been widely used to understand general travel motivations (Kozak, 2002; Yoon & Uysal, 2005), its full application to low-carbon destinations has been largely overlooked. By identifying three internal push factors and six destination-specific pull factors as earlier mentioned, this study extends the theoretical boundary (perspective) of the push-pull model, particularly in low-carbon tourism context. Specifically, it demonstrates how this framework can be adapted to explain motivations for visiting low-carbon destinations.

A key contribution is the identification of good environment seeking as a new push motive, which has received little attention in prior research. This motive reflects tourists' desire for destinations with cleaner air, more comfortable climate conditions, and overall better environmental quality (personal benefit-drive), rather than a focus on environmental protection or ecological consciousness motivations typically found in past studies' frameworks (e.g. Dai et al., 2022; Shie et al., 2022). This suggests that beyond conventional motivations like learning or relaxation, the pursuit of improved climate condition has emerged as a significant driver for visiting low-carbon destinations in today's situation, particularly in Thailand context. This finding extends the traditional push-factor model (Dann, 1981; Yoon & Uysal, 2005), which has primarily focused on socio-psychological motives (e.g., escape, novelty, social interaction), by introducing an environmental quality-driven motive that reflects contemporary climate concerns.

In addition, the study identifies multidimensional pull factors (six pull factors) in the context of low-carbon destinations. These factors include not only environmental practices and sustainability initiatives but also other destination attributes such as scenic appeal, interesting tourist activities, appealing communication, and convenient accessibility. This suggests that the attractiveness of low-carbon destinations derives not only from their eco-features but also in the integration of traditional destination appeals with sustainability attributes. Such multidimensional pull factors highlight the need for destinations to balance environmental management with a variety of appealing attributes, thereby refining the theoretical understanding of what makes low-carbon destinations attractive. The success of low-carbon destinations may depend on multi-attribute attractiveness, not just eco-features or environmental factors as indicated in most studies (e.g. Fakfare & Wattanacharoensil, 2023; Shie et al., 2022).

Finally, by conceptualising low-carbon travel motivations as a multidimensional construct (as illustrated in figure 1), this study proposes a comprehensive framework that explains how push and pull factors jointly influence tourists' decisions to visit low-carbon destinations. This framework not only contributes to push–pull motivation theory but also provides a theoretical basis for future research into tourist satisfaction, travel experiences, behavioral intentions, and destination loyalty in low-carbon tourism. Furthermore, it offers a foundation for developing and validating measurement scales to assess low-carbon travel motivations.

4.3. Practical implications

For practical implications, this study identifies three key push factors and six pull factors motivating tourists to low-carbon destinations. The combined insights from both push and pull factors offer valuable guidance for policymakers aiming to understand and respond to tourists' internal motivations (Uysal & Hagan, 1993; You et al., 2000). These insights can also advise the development of destination features that align with tourists' preferences and expectations. To strategically promote low-carbon destinations, policymakers can integrate push and pull factors into their marketing efforts (You et al., 2000). For example, they may tailor messages across various media channels to align tourists' internal desires, such as seeking a better climate, learning about local sustainability efforts, and pursuing relaxation, with external destination features such as a natural environment, low-impact activities, convenient travel, and eco-friendly services. The findings can further support the positioning of low-carbon destinations as providers of unique and meaningful travel experiences distinct from mass tourism, by tactically emphasising the core push motivations and key pull factors identified in this study.

4.4. Limitations and future research opportunities

This study employed a naturalistic inquiry approach (qualitative methodology) with a small sample of participants, and it was conducted within the specific context of Thailand. As a result, the generalisability of the findings may be limited. Additionally, the interviews were conducted at a tourism fair in Bangkok, where participation was voluntary. This setting may have limited interview length. Given some limitations, further research in diverse settings is needed to better understand tourists' travel-related behaviors and motivations in relation to low-carbon destinations. People from different cultural backgrounds and geographical locations may exhibit distinct travel preferences and environmental attitudes, suggesting that motivations related to environmental tourism could vary across countries. Therefore, future studies should consider broader and more varied participant pools to enhance the robustness and applicability of findings.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

In preparing this paper, the authors used ChatGPT and DeepSeek for improving the readability and language of the manuscript. Following the use of this tool/service, the authors have reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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