

DETERMINANTS OF CHINESE

STUDENTS' GRADUATION TRAVEL DESTINATION INTENTION
TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA IN POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC ERA

DETERMINANTES DE LA INTENCIÓN DE DESTINO DE VIAJE DE GRADUACIÓN DE LOS ESTUDIANTES CHINOS HACIA EL SUDESTE ASIÁTICO EN LA ERA POSTPANDEMIA DE COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to explore the impact of a destination's reputation on tourists' perceived trust and their intention to travel, in addition to assessing the moderating role of fear arousal related to COVID-19 in the nexus between tourists' intention to travel and its antecedents. Data from 399 Chinese university students were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS. The results revealed that destination reputation and perceived trust positively and significantly impacted tourists' travel intentions. Moreover, destination reputation positively influenced perceived trust. Additionally, fear arousal related to health concerns served as a pivotal moderating factor in the latter part of the "destination reputation " perceived trust " travel intention" mediation path. Similarly, fear of trouble significantly moderated this mediation path. The study discusses theoretical implications, limitations, and suggests future research directions.

Keywords: Destination reputation, Students' perceived trust, Fear arousal, Chinese Students' travel intention.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación fue explorar el impacto de la reputación de un destino en la confianza percibida por los turistas y su intención de viajar, además de evaluar el papel moderador del miedo provocado relacionado con la COVID-19 en el nexo entre la intención de viajar de los turistas y sus antecedentes. Se analizaron datos de 399 estudiantes universitarios chinos utilizando SPSS y AMOS. Los resultados revelaron que la reputación del destino y la confianza percibida impactaron positiva y significativamente en las intenciones de viaje de los turistas. Además, la reputación del destino influyó positivamente en la confianza percibida. Adicionalmente, el miedo provocado relacionado con preocupaciones de salud sirvió como un factor moderador del giro en la última parte de la ruta de mediación «reputación del destino "confianza percibida" intención de viaje». De manera similar, el temor a los problemas moderó significativamente esta ruta de mediación. El estudio discute implicaciones teóricas, limitaciones y sugiere direcciones para investigaciones futuras.

Palabras clave: Reputación del destino, Confianza percibida de los estudiantes, Miedo provocado, Intención de viaje de los estudiantes chinos.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the landscape of the global tourism industry, resulting in profound shifts in both travel behavior and preferences for destinations. This disruptive event has echoed through every corner of the tourism landscape, presenting an extraordinary challenge to a sector that was, until recently, the epitome of a globalized and interconnected world. As countries grapple with these changes, governments and tourism entities have sought to understand and adapt to the new realities of travel. One of the cohorts deeply affected by these shifts are Chinese university students, a key demographic in China's substantial outbound tourism market. Prior to the pandemic, graduation trips had been a burgeoning tradition, with Southeast Asia emerging as a preferred destination due to its cultural allure, geographical proximity, and affordability. In this new era, these travel plans have been significantly affected, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of this demographic's travel intentions in the post-COVID-19 context.

The global tourism industry exhibited signs of a rebound in 2022, yet recovery rates were markedly varied across different regions. Particularly, the Asia-Pacific region demonstrated a slower recovery, with tourist numbers languishing at 77% below pre-pandemic levels (IMF, 2022). As countries, especially those in Southeast Asia, strive to resuscitate their battered tourism economies, understanding the factors influencing travel intentions becomes of paramount importance. The roles of destination reputation and perceived trust in determining travel decisions are critical considerations (Hassan & Soliman, 2021), yet existing literature provides limited insights into these dynamics within the unique contours of a post-pandemic world.

The reputation of a destination, which is a composite of its image attributes—including attractiveness, uniqueness, reliability, and safety—significantly influences tourists' perceptions, satisfaction, and their intention to visit. Trust, another pivotal determinant of travelers' intentions, has been explored in various contexts, including the tourism and hospitality sectors (Sun et al., 2022).

However, these constructs have been examined only sparingly in the post-pandemic context (Hassan & Soliman, 2021). Furthermore, previous studies, while establishing the importance of these constructs, have not explored their relevance to the changing realities of the tourism sector caused by the pandemic (Abubakar et al., 2017). In the post-pandemic world, these factors take on new dimensions and significance. For instance, the concept of destination reputation has expanded to include aspects

related to a destination's management of the COVID-19 crisis (Orden-Mejía et al., 2022). Similarly, the role of trust may be redefined in the post-pandemic context, particularly considering the anxiety and fear caused by COVID-19. Studies examining the relationship between perceived trust and the intention to return to Southeast Asian destinations in the aftermath of the pandemic are remarkably limited. Furthermore, studies highlight the considerable impact of COVID-19-related fear arousal on consumer behavior. Yet the specific impacts on tourist behavior and their relationships with other predictive factors remain largely unexplored. However, a considerable research void exists concerning how perceived trust interacts with the desire to revisit Southeast Asian destinations after the COVID-19 pandemic (Fengmin et al., 2022). Moreover, the influences of fear and anxiety, heightened by the pandemic, on tourist behavior in the post-pandemic phase not only remain inadequately explored for current but also affect the current life of students of tourism and the development of their opinion in tourism career (Vaniček & Jarolímková, 2021).

Addressing these research gaps, the present study endeavors to dissect the key determinants of Chinese university students' intentions to travel following the pandemic's conclusion. The study aims to examine three closely linked factors: destination reputation, perceived trust, and COVID-19-related fear arousal. Its objectives are to: (1) elucidate the immediate influence of destination reputation on the decision to travel for graduation ceremonies; (2) explore the intermediary function of perceived trust within the relationship connecting destination reputation and the desire to travel; and (3) assess how COVID-19-related fear arousal modifies the relationships among destination reputation, perceived trust, and travel intention.

The outcomes of this study seek to offer numerous substantial contributions to scholarly dialogue and practical application in the field. First, the study provides an integrated structural framework for dissecting the roles of destination reputation, perceived trust, and COVID-19-related fear arousal in shaping travel intentions. Secondly, it expands the relatively limited body of research on international tourist behavior in the post-COVID-19 context. Thirdly, it deepens our understanding of the effects of COVID-19 related fear arousal by investigating its moderating effects. Lastly, the study provides practical insights for tourism managers and policymakers in Southeast Asia by offering information on the factors that shape tourists' decision-making processes, thus helping to design effective destination management and promotional strategies.

In addition to these key objectives, the study also aims to address several ancillary research questions. These

include understanding how destination attributes impact destination reputation among Chinese university students and how perceived trust influences travel intention. Furthermore, it investigates how the perceived risk related to COVID-19 impacts fear arousal and how this fear arousal moderates the correlation between trust as perceived and the decision to undertake travel. This rich vein of exploration is intended to expand the horizons of the current body of knowledge and offer actionable insights for industry practitioners. The manuscript subsequently presents the literature review, hypothesis development, methodology, research findings, and conclusions.

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored in two pivotal psychological and behavioral theories: Ajzen's (1991), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the 1984 Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT) formulated by Lazarus & Folkman (1984). These theories have been frequently used in travel behaviour studies, and they provide a robust framework for understanding tourists' intentions and decision-making processes.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), proposed by Ajzen (1991), posits that an individual's behavior is driven by their intentions. These intentions are shaped by three principal elements: attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and the perceived ability to control the behavior. The theory has been applied extensively in tourism research, particularly in studies seeking to understand travel intentions and behaviour (Luc, 2020). The TPB serves as the core theoretical foundation for this research, guiding the formulation of hypotheses regarding the relationships between destination reputation, perceived trust, and the intention to travel. Within the framework of this research, the reputation of the destination is integrated into the attitude component, perceived trust is equated with the subjective norm, and the principle of perceived behavioral control is represented through the individual's capacity to decide on travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cognitive Appraisal Theory (CAT), first introduced by Lazarus & Folkman (1984), is another significant framework underpinning this research. CAT suggests that people's emotional responses to a situation are based on their cognitive evaluation of the situation, which subsequently affects their behavior.

In the backdrop of COVID-19, this theory offers a theoretical framework to comprehend how fear arousal plays a role in shaping travel intentions. Individuals assess the threat posed by the pandemic (primary assessment) and their resources or ability to cope with the threat (secondary assessment), leading to an emotional response (fear arousal) that could potentially influence their travel intentions.

The examination of fear arousal as a moderating factor in the relationship among destination reputation, perceived trust, and travel intention represents an extension of this theory.

Therefore, by integrating TPB and CAT, this research seeks to deliver a comprehensive insight into the travel intentions of Chinese university students towards Southeast Asia following the COVID-19 period. TPB helps explain how destination reputation and perceived trust influence travel intention, while CAT aids in elucidating the moderating function of fear arousal within these dynamics. This combination of theoretical frameworks provides a rich foundation for the empirical examination of travel intentions in the post-pandemic context.

The reputation of a destination plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining investments, skilled human resources, and tourists. Enhance destination competitiveness, generates positive behaviours among stakeholders, and reduces the risk in choosing a destination. Research consistently indicates that destination reputation is a key precursor to travel intention (Bonn et al., 2016). A favorable reputation of a destination influences tourists' perceptions positively and boosts their intention to visit (Widjaja et al., 2020). Furthermore, the reputation of a destination significantly and positively impacts destination identification, intention to travel, and the promotion through word-of-mouth, indirectly affecting word-of-mouth promotion through destination identification.

As the tourism industry is highly dependent on reputation, destination reputation, as created by DMOs, serves as a more stable performance indicator when compared to brand or image. Additionally, destination reputation has been identified as influential in attracting investments, skilled human resources, and tourists, and plays a crucial role in retaining them. It fosters positive behaviours among stakeholders, increases the destination's competitiveness, and reduces the risk for customers in choosing a destination.

Perceived trust in the tourism industry refers to the trust that tourists place in a destination's capability to offer a safe and dependable travel experience. Trust is pivotal in enhancing tourism and is fundamental for effectively drawing tourists to destinations. It is an essential component of the relationship between tourists and service providers, acting as a necessary condition for a successful interaction. Tourist perceived trust has been found to significantly influence their travel intentions. Trust is multifaceted, encompassing dimensions like availability, consistency, discretion, fairness, integrity, loyalty, capability, openness, commitment, and performance. In the

post-COVID-19 travel environment, perceived trust refers to tourists' trust in a destination's capacity to provide a safe and healthy travel experience. Destination managers must communicate and implement transparent and consistent safety measures to build trust among tourists. Trust is a fundamental factor that affects tourists' decision-making process, destination loyalty, and travel intentions. It also significantly contributes to boosting tourists' satisfaction and fostering loyalty towards a destination.

The COVID-19 pandemic has induced a global feeling of fear and anxiety. In the tourism industry, fear arousal has become a significant factor in tourists' decision-making processes. Tourists can avoid visiting destinations they perceive as having a higher risk of infection. Fear associated with the virus can have negative effects on tourists' attitudes, perceptions, and behavior towards a destination (Rather, 2021).

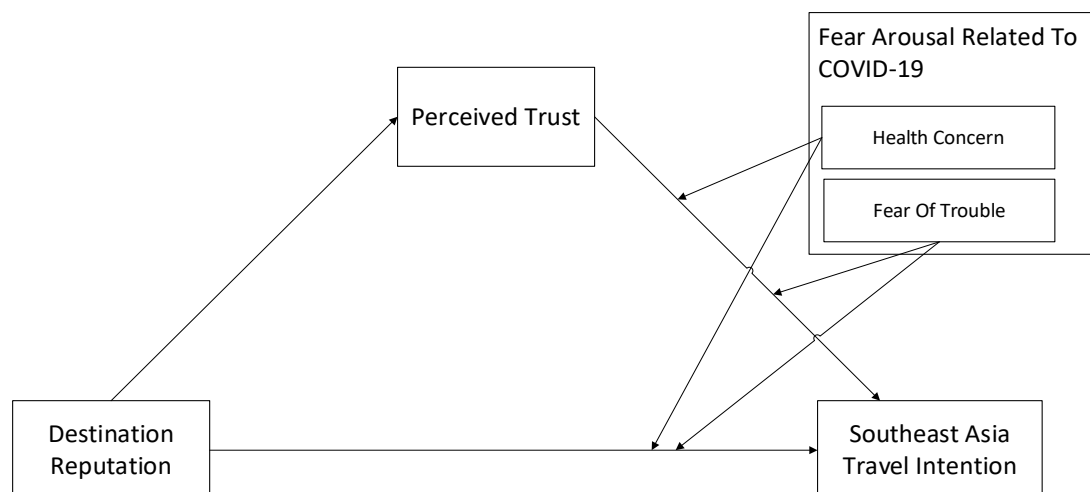
Destination managers need to ensure tourists' safety by implementing and communicating effective health and safety protocols. Providing accurate and transparent information about the local pandemic situation can alleviate tourists' fear and enhance their willingness to travel (Sun et al., 2022). Previous research has demonstrated that fear related to the COVID-19 pandemic diminishes trust in and the reputation of destinations, leading to a decreased intention to visit (Hassan & Soliman, 2021).

Travel intention denotes an individual's predisposition or readiness to travel to a certain destination or participate in a specific tourism-related activity. It is a crucial component of behavioral intention and encompasses various stages of the tourist's decision-making process encompasses pre-travel decision-making, travel experiences, experience evaluations, and post-travel behavioral intentions (Xue et al., 2022).

Several studies have explored the factors that influence travel intention, especially regarding specific destinations or tourism products. For example, research has explored how destination image, satisfaction, and perceived value influence tourists' intention to visit a specific destination. Exploring the relationship between travel intention and its influencing factors is essential for developing effective marketing and management strategies, promoting attractive destination images, and optimising destination resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced further obstacles to travel intentions, with the fear of catching the virus and the fear of lockdowns playing a significant role in shaping tourists' attitudes and behaviours. The impact of fear arousal related to COVID-19 on travel intention, particularly among Chinese tourists, has not been thoroughly investigated. Therefore, exploring the relationship between travel intention and its influencing factors, considering the moderating effect of fear arousal, can provide valuable information for destination management and marketing strategies (Figure 1).

Fig1. Hypothesised framework.



Source: own elaboration.

Past studies have uniformly highlighted the critical role of destination reputation in influencing travel intentions. Reputation influences customer loyalty by affecting customer trust and satisfaction. Another study found Destination identification, travel intention, and word-of-mouth advertising are positively affected by destination reputation. Furthermore, the study confirmed that a positive destination reputation increases the likelihood of destination tourism (Marinao et al., 2017). Additionally, Widjaja et al. (2020), examined the effect of destination reputation on the intention to visit Jakarta for Halal tourism. The influence of destination reputation on tourists' perceptions, satisfaction, and their intention to visit the destination was underscored (Phillips et al., 2011). Based on this existing research, it can be hypothesized that a positive destination reputation will directly and positively influence tourists' intention to visit Southeast Asia. Drawing from the preceding literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Destination reputation positively correlates with the intention to travel to Southeast Asia.

Research within the tourism and hospitality sectors has consistently shown a positive relationship between trust and the intention to travel. Abubakar et al. (2017), found that visit intention is significantly influenced by destination trust, indicating that in shaping tourists' intention to travel, trust plays a crucial role. A positive correlation between trust and repurchase intention was revealed by research, emphasizing the importance of trust in fostering repeat visitation. The direct link between service quality, trust, and purchase intention among frequent flyers was highlighted by research examining the relationship between trust and repurchase behavior. Moreover, Fengmin et al. (2022), showcased the positive impacts of trust on the intention of Chinese medical tourists to travel. Based on these findings, it is hypothesized that Chinese university students' perceived trust will positively influence their intention to travel to Southeast Asia. Overall, the evidence provided by these studies supports the following hypothesis:

H2. The perceived trust among Chinese university students positively correlates with their intention to travel to Southeast Asia.

In the tourism industry, comprehensive research has been conducted on the correlation between destination reputation and perceived trust. It has been discovered that perceived trust favorably impacts the destination's image, which subsequently positively affects the intention to visit the destination. Furthermore, Marinao et al. (2017), emphasized the vital importance of destination reputation in shaping perceived trust, emphasizing its significance in the tourism sector. Based on these studies, it can be

hypothesized that a positive destination reputation will improve the perceived trust of Chinese university students in the context of Southeast Asia as a destination of travel. Based on these studies, we propose the following hypothesis.

H3. There is a positive correlation between destination reputation and the perceived trust of Chinese university students.

Studies have demonstrated that not only does fear associated with COVID-19 effect on employees' mental health, stress level, and well-being (Rucska et al., 2021) but also it can impact individuals' travel intentions. Bonn et al. (2016), investigated how wine destination attributes moderate the negative impacts of travel restrictions on consumers' intentions to return to wine regions. Rather (2021), studied the effect of social networks on the engagement of the customer's brand and its impact on visit intention during the pandemic. Hassan & Soliman (2021) found that fear arousal negatively moderated the relationship between destination social responsibility, destination reputation, vacationer trust, and the intention to visit. These studies indicate that the level of fear concerning contracting COVID-19 can affect the interaction between a destination's reputation and the travel intention. It is reasonable to assume that when fear of contracting COVID-19 is elevated, the impact of destination reputation on travel intentions might diminish, as tourists may prioritize their safety over visiting a destination. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses.

H4a. Fear of contracting COVID-19 moderately influences the relationship between destination reputation and the intention to travel to Southeast Asia.

Similar to the previous hypothesis, fear of lockdown due to the pandemic may also moderate the connection between destination reputation and the intention to travel. The potential risk of being subject to lockdown measures may affect tourists' willingness to travel and their evaluation of destination reputation. The level of fear regarding lockdowns can affect the magnitude of the relationship between destination reputation and travel intentions (Orden-Mejía et al., 2022). When fear of lockdown is high, the influence of destination reputation on travel intentions can be reduced as tourists may perceive a higher level of uncertainty and disruption in their travel plans.

H4b. Fear of a pandemic-induced lockdown moderates the relationship between destination reputation and the intention to travel to Southeast Asia.

Taking into account the impact of fear arousal related to COVID-19 on travel intentions, it is reasonable to suggest

that the fear of contracting COVID-19 may influence the connection between Chinese university students' perceived trust and their intention to travel to Southeast Asia (Li et al., 2022). When fear of catching COVID-19 is high, the influence of perceived trust on travel intention may be attenuated, as safety concerns may take precedence over trust in destination-related factors.

H5a. Fear of contracting COVID-19 moderately influences the relationship between the perceived trust of Chinese university students and their intention to travel to Southeast Asia.

Fear of lockdown due to the pandemic can also influence the relationship between Chinese university students' perceived trust and their intention to travel to Southeast Asia (Tu et al., 2023).

When fear of lockdown is elevated, the effect of perceived trust on travel intentions might be reduced, as the uncertainty surrounding potential lockdown measures may undermine trust in the feasibility and convenience of travel plans.

H5b. Fear of a pandemic-induced lockdown moderates the relationship between the perceived trust of Chinese university students and their intention to travel to Southeast Asia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research utilized a quantitative methodology and collected data from Chinese university students who expressed the intention to go on a graduation trip. Due to challenges in establishing a target population framework, non-probability sampling techniques were employed for data collection.

The study utilized convenience sampling by distributing the survey link to participants via direct messaging through their personal social network accounts. This sampling method facilitated the collection of a substantial number of responses from participants and minimized non-response bias.

Between December 7th and 30th, 2022, a total of 399 university students were surveyed. After removing invalid data, 307 valid samples were retained, this resulted in a response rate of 77%. Among the participants, 65 were male, accounting for 21.2%; and 242 were female, accounting for 78.8%. Among them, 52 had been to Southeast Asia, representing 16.9%, while 255 had not, accounting for 83.1%. Only the participants who completed the survey were considered valid for further analysis.

As shown in Table 1, the measurement instruments utilized in the study were adapted from prior research. In The study and the reliability and validity of the measurement tools were analysed using the collected sample data. The composite reliability (CR) values of each measurement scale were above 0.8, the average variance extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5, and the Cronbach's alpha values were all above 0.8. The results of the fit of the confirmatory factor analysis model for the five-factor model ($\chi^2/df= 1.991$, CFI = 0.956, SRMR = 0.058, RMSEA = 0.057) showed a good model fit. Table 2 shows the results of using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) method to test the validity of the discriminant. The maximum HTMT value was 0.768, which was less than 0.85, indicating that the measurement tools used in the study had good reliability and validity.

Table 1. Contents, sources from the literature, and reliability and validity of measurement tools.

Destination reputation, (Šerić et al., 2022), CR = 0.889, AVE = 0.620, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.889
Southeast Asia has a good reputation as a tourist destination during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Southeast Asia has a better reputation than other regions during the COVID-19 pandemic.
People highly praise Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic.
People have a high evaluation of Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic.
People have a high evaluation of Southeast Asia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Perceived trust, (Šerić et al., 2022), CR = 0.878, AVE = 0.644, Cronbach Alpha = 0.877
I trust the information provided by the Southeast Asian countries on their COVID-19 infection and death rates.
I admire the transparency of Southeast Asian countries since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.
I believe that the Southeast Asian countries are honest in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

My level of trust in the information provided by Southeast Asian countries has increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Worry about health (Dayton et al., 2021), CR = 0.821, AVE = 0.539, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.812
I am very worried about getting infected with COVID-19.
I am worried about being hospitalized due to COVID-19 infection.
I am worried that I will die from COVID-19 infection.
I am concerned about infecting my friends and family with COVID-19.
Fear of getting into trouble, (Faisal et al., 2020), CR = 0.864, AVE = 0.613 Cronbach's Alpha = 0.863
I am afraid of travel restrictions and lockdowns due to COVID-19 during my trip.
I am afraid to spend a lot of extra money due to COVID-19 during my trip.
I am afraid to spend a lot of extra time due to COVID-19 during my trip.
I am afraid of not being able to obtain essential supplies (food, medicine, etc.) due to the restrictions of COVID-19 during my trip.
Travel Intention (Hassan & Soliman, 2021), CR = 0.920, AVE = 0.793 Cronbach's Alpha = 0.919
I plan to choose Southeast Asia as my graduation destination.
I am willing to choose Southeast Asia as my graduation travel destination.
I am willing to invite classmates and friends to travel to Southeast Asia for graduation.

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity Test using the HTMT Method.

	DR	FA Trouble)	TI	PT	FA (Health)
DR					
FA (Trouble)	0.028				
TI	0.397	0.068			
PT	0.768	0.033	0.451		
FA (Health)	0.209	0.585	0.067	0.168	

Source: own elaboration.

The Harman single-factor test was employed to assess the presence of common-method bias in this survey. Exploratory factor analysis identified five common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the first factor explained 31.256% of the variance, which is less than 50%. Furthermore, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis of the single-factor model were poor ($\chi^2/df = 12.499$, CFI = 0.457, SRMR = 0.194, RMSEA = 0.194). This indicates that no significant common method bias was found in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistical analysis and correlation analysis were performed utilizing SPSS version 26.0. Additionally, the bootstrap method was utilized to assess the mediating effect.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis of variables.

	Mean	Variance	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender	0.21	0.41						
2. Whether visited Southeast Asia	0.17	0.38	0.042					
3. Destination reputation	3.08	0.68	0.085	0.158**				
4. Perceived trust	3.20	0.69	0.045	0.186**	0.680**			
5. Health concern	3.89	0.78	-0.032	0.03	0.179**	0.143*		

6. Fear of trouble	4.16	0.66	-0.051	-0.08	-0.022	0.029	0.482**	
7. Travel intention	3.42	0.93	-0.033	0.209**	0.357**	0.405**	0.058	0.058

Note: ** indicates $P < 0.01$; * indicates $P < 0.05$.

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlation coefficients between gender, whether visited Southeast Asia, reputation of the destination, perceived trust, concern for health, fear of inconveniences from problems, and travel intention. As shown in the table, the intention is significantly positively correlated with whether or not you visited Southeast Asia ($r = 0.209$; $P < 0.01$), destination ($r = 0.357$; $P < 0.01$), and perceived trust ($r = 0.405$; $P < 0.01$). Visited Southeast Asia is significantly positively correlated with destination reputation ($r = 0.158$; $P < 0.01$) and perceived trust ($r = 0.186$; $P < 0.01$). Destination reputation is significantly positively correlated with perceived trust ($r = 0.680$; $P < 0.01$). Health concern is significantly positively correlated with destination reputation ($r = 0.179$; $P < 0.01$), perceived trust ($r = 0.143$; $P < 0.01$), and fear of trouble ($r = 0.482$; $P < 0.01$).

In The study, SPSS macro-PROCESS (version 3.5) was employed for hypothesis testing. Initially, Model 4 within the SPSS macro-PROCESS was applied to investigate the mediating effect of perceived trust. The results (see Table 4) showed that after controlling for gender and previous travel to Southeast Asia, the reputation of the destination significantly predicted perceived trust in a positive way ($a = 0.676$, $p < 0.001$), perceived trust significantly predicted travel intention in a positive way ($b = 0.378$, $p < 0.001$), and the reputation of the destination significantly and positively predicted travel intention ($c' = 0.206$, $p < 0.05$). The indirect effect ($ab = 0.256$, Boot SE = 0.068, 95% CI = [0.124, 0.390]) indicated that perceived trust partially mediated the connection between how a destination is perceived in terms of its reputation and the willingness of individuals to visit it. The proportion of the mediation effect ($ab = 0.256$) to the total effect ($ab + c' = 0.462$) was 55.41%.

Table 4. The Influence of Destination Reputation on Travel Intention: Moderated Mediation Model Test.

Dependent variable	PT	Travel intention		
Model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control variable				
gender	-0.027	-0.145	-0.136	-0.148
visited Southeast Asia	0.148	0.335*	0.278*	0.328*
Independent variable				
X:DR	0.676***	0.206*	0.232*	0.237*
Mediating variable				
M:PT		0.378***	0.293**	0.323**
The moderating effects				
W1: Health concern			0.005	
W2: Fear of trouble				0.125
DR×Health concern			-0.111	
PT×Health concern			0.377***	
DR×Fear of trouble				0.021
PT×Fear of trouble				0.360**
	0.469	0.198	0.234	0.234
Adj	0.464	0.187	0.216	0.216
F	89.213***	18.619***	13.077***	13.075***

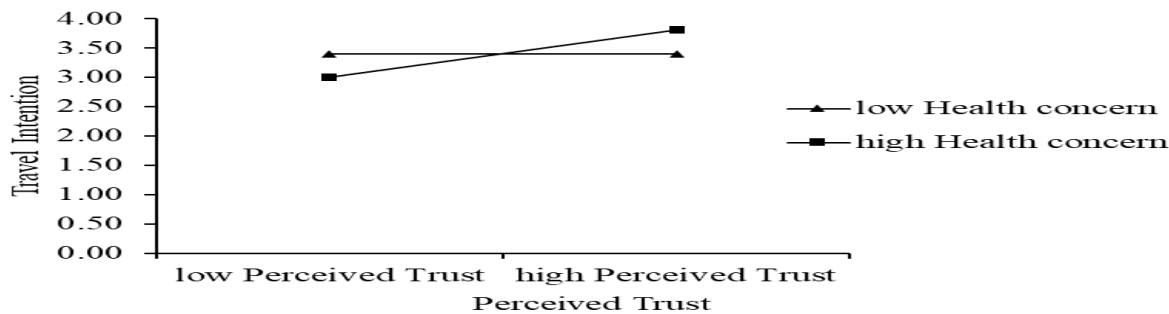
Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; all variables that produced the terms of the product were centered.

Source: own elaboration.

The study used model 15 of the SPSS macro-PROCESS to test for moderated mediation effects (see Table 4). The analysis showed that, controlling for gender and previous travel experience in Southeast Asia, the term of the product of perceived trust and worry about health significantly predicted travel intention ($\beta = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$), while the corresponding coefficient of the product of reputation of the product term of destination and worry about health was not significant ($\beta = -0.111$, $p > 0.05$). This indicates that health concerns significantly moderate the latter part of the mediation path “destination reputation $\rightarrow$ perceived trust $\rightarrow$ travel intention,” yet do not significantly affect the direct relationship between “destination reputation” and “travel intention.”

To illustrate the moderating effect of worry more clearly about health, the study plotted the interaction effect by adding and subtracting one standard deviation from the mean of worry about health and conducted mediation effect analysis for individuals with different levels of worry about health (see Table 5). As shown in Figure 2, when the concern of the people about health was relatively low ($M-1SD$), the effect of perceived trust on travel intention was not significant ($B_{\text{simple}} = -0.000$, $t = 0.001$, $p = 0.999$); when the concern of the people about health was relatively high ($M+1SD$), Perceived trust significantly positively influenced travel intention. ($B_{\text{simple}} = 0.587$, $t = 5.117$, $p < 0.001$).

Fig 2. Interaction effect plot of the modulating role of health concerns in the relationship between perceived trust and travel intention.



Source: own elaboration.

For individuals with low levels of health concerns, the mediating effect of perceived trust on the relationship between destination reputation and travel intention is insignificant, with an index of 0.000, Boot SE = 0.112, and a 95% confidence interval of [-0.213, 0.228]. For people with high levels of health concerns, the mediating effect of perceived trust on the relationship between destination reputation and travel intention is significant, with an index of 0.397, Boot SE = 0.077, and a 95% confidence interval of [0.251, 0.553].

Table 5. Mediation analysis of perceived trust on travel intention for individuals with different levels of health concern.

Health concern	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
M – 1SD	0.000	0.112	-0.213	0.228
M	0.198	0.068	0.068	0.339
M + 1SD	0.397	0.077	0.251	0.553

Note: “Boot SE” refers to the standard error of the estimated indirect effect as determined by the bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method. “Boot LLCI” and “Boot ULCI” respectively denote the lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence interval.

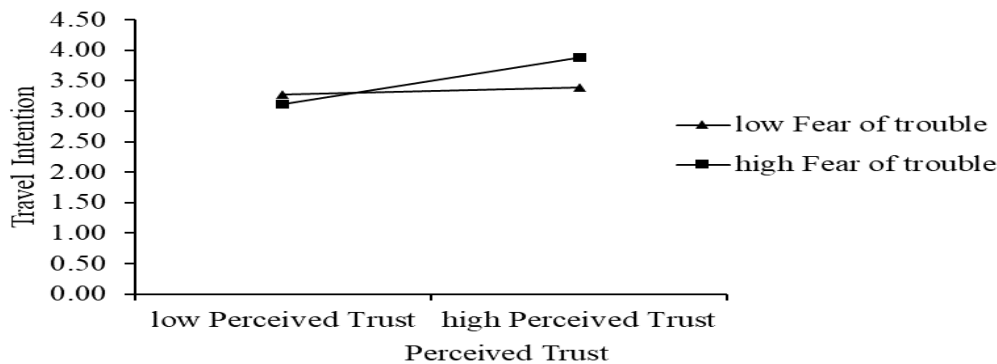
Source: own elaboration.

The findings affirm the mediating role of perceived trust in strengthening the positive relationship between the destination’s reputation and travel intention. The moderating impact of health concerns is significant in the latter part of the mediation process, yet it does not significantly influence the direct effect.

In the study, Model 15 from the SPSS macro-PROCESS was utilized to assess the moderated mediation effect (refer to Table 4). The analysis showed that, after controlling for gender and whether the participants had previously travelled to Southeast Asia, the interaction between perceived trust and fear of trouble significantly predicted travel intention ($\beta = 0.360$, $p = 0.010$); while the coefficient of the interaction between destination reputation and fear of trouble was not significant ($\beta = 0.021$, $p = 0.882$). This indicates that fear of trouble has a significant moderating effect on the second half of the “destination reputation $\rightarrow$ perceived trust $\rightarrow$ travel intention” mediation path but has no significant moderating effect on the direct effect of “destination reputation $\rightarrow$ travel intention”.

To demonstrate the moderating effect of fear of trouble more clearly, the study plotted an interaction effect diagram by adding or subtracting one standard deviation from the mean level of fear of trouble (see Figure 3), and conducted an analysis of the mediating effect for individuals with different levels of fear of trouble (see Table 6). Figure 3 demonstrates that the impact of perceived trust on travel intention was not significant for individuals with a lower level of fear of trouble ($M - 1SD$) ($B_{\text{simple}} = 0.084$, $t = 0.610$, $p = 0.543$), but had a significant positive impact on travel intention for individuals with a higher level of fear of trouble ($M + 1SD$) ($B_{\text{simple}} = 0.561$, $t = 4.467$, $p < 0.001$).

Fig 3. Interaction effect plot of the modulating role of fear of trouble in the relationship between perceived trust and travel intention.



Source: own elaboration.

For individuals with low levels of fear of trouble, the mediating effect of perceived trust on the relationship between destination reputation and travel intention is not significant with an index of 0.057, Boot SE = 0.105, and a 95% confidence interval of [-0.128, 0.278]. For people with high fear of trouble levels, the mediating effect of perceived trust on the relationship between destination reputation and travel intention is significant with an index of 0.380, Boot SE = 0.095, and a 95% confidence interval of [0.191, 0.563].

Table 6. Mediation analysis of perceived trust on travel intention for individuals with different levels of fear of trouble.

Fear of trouble	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
M – 1SD	0.057	0.105	-0.128	0.278
M	0.218	0.066	0.095	0.354
M + 1SD	0.380	0.095	0.191	0.563

Note: “Boot SE” refers to the standard error of the estimated indirect effect as determined by the bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method. “Boot LLCI” and “Boot ULCI” respectively denote the lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence interval.

Source: own elaboration.

The results suggest that the perceived trust mediation process is supported to positively predict travel intentions through the reputation of the destination. Fear of trouble has a significant moderating effect on the second half of the “destination reputation → perceived trust → travel intention” mediation path, but it does not significantly moderate the direct relationship between destination reputation and travel intention.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings enhance our comprehension of the factors affecting travel intentions among Chinese university students and offer valuable insights for tourism destinations and destination management organizations (DMOs) aiming to attract this important segment of the market. The results affirm the positive impact of destination reputation on travel intention, corroborating earlier studies by Phillips et al. (2011); and Marinao et al. (2017). This underscores the importance of destination reputation as a driver of the decision-making process. DMOs should prioritise efforts to enhance their destination's reputation by emphasising attractive features, reliability, uniqueness, and safety measures. Effective destination marketing strategies should communicate these attributes to potential travelers, thereby increasing their travel intention.

Additionally, the study validates the positive impact of perceived trust on travel intention among Chinese university students, aligning with prior research by Abubakar et al. (2017); and Fengmin et al. (2022). Establishing and maintaining trust is crucial for destinations seeking to attract Chinese university students as tourists. DMOs should prioritize transparent communication of safety measures, consistent implementation of health protocols, and reliable information provision about the destination. Strengthening trustworthiness through collaborative partnerships with reputable travel agencies, obtaining safety certifications, and featuring testimonials from previous visitors can enhance the perceived trust of Chinese university students and subsequently increase their travel intention.

Importantly, this study identifies health concerns and fear of trouble as significant moderators in the relationship between destination reputation, perceived trust, and travel intention. DMOs must recognize the impact of these factors and develop strategies to address them effectively. Clear communication about comprehensive health and safety measures is crucial in alleviating health concerns and instilling confidence in potential travelers. By providing information about preventive measures, emergency protocols, and contingency plans, destinations can mitigate anxieties and enhance trust in their ability to provide a safe and

enjoyable travel experience. Additionally, DMOs should proactively address fear of trouble by implementing well-planned travel itineraries that anticipate potential issues related to epidemics, thereby minimizing uncertainty and inconvenience during travel.

The implications of this study extend beyond theoretical contributions. The findings provide actionable insights for destination managers and policymakers aiming to attract Chinese university students. By focusing on building a strong reputation, fostering perceived trust, and addressing health concerns and fear of trouble, destinations can enhance their competitiveness and appeal to this key market segment. Implementing these strategies will not only increase travel intentions, but also contribute to sustainable tourism growth. The study highlights the importance of tailored destination management and promotion strategies that align with the unique needs and preferences of Chinese university students.

This study advances our comprehension of the variables affecting travel intentions among Chinese university students, offering invaluable insights for DMOs and destination managers. The findings emphasise the significance of perceived trust and destination reputation in shaping travel intention and highlight the moderating roles of health concerns and fear of trouble. By effectively managing these factors, destinations can improve their attractiveness, increase tourist visitation, and promote sustainable tourism growth. The findings of this study enrich the academic literature and offer practical guidance for high-impact destination management and marketing practices.

This study offers significant theoretical contributions to the field of tourism research. First, it provides empirical evidence for the significance of destination reputation in predicting tourists' travel intention. The findings confirm that destination reputation significantly influences tourists' decision-making process. This aligns with previous studies emphasizing the significance of destination reputation as a primary factor in determining travel intentions. The study reinforces the notion that destinations should prioritize efforts to build and maintain a positive reputation, as it has a positive effect on tourists' intentions to visit. This discovery enhances the theoretical understanding of the factors influencing travel intention and provides a foundation for further research in the area of destination reputation.

Second, the study confirms a positive correlation between perceived trust and travel intention among Chinese university students. This finding reinforces prior research highlighting the importance of trust in the tourism and hospitality industries. It highlights the importance of establishing and maintaining trust between tourists and

destinations, particularly in the post-COVID-19 era. The study enhances theoretical insights into trust as a crucial element affecting travel intention and provides insights into the mechanisms through which trust can be fostered to increase tourists' intention to visit.

Additionally, the study identifies the moderating roles of fear arousal related to COVID-19 and fear of trouble in the relationship between tourists' travel intention and its antecedents. This finding highlights the importance of considering the influence of fear and anxiety on travel decision-making. The study provides theoretical insights into how fear arousal can influence the relationship between perceived trust, destination reputation, and travel intention. It underscores the need for tourism destinations to address and alleviate tourists' fears by implementing effective measures to ensure their safety and well-being. This theoretical understanding of fear arousal contributes to the broader literature on tourists' risk perception and behavior.

Overall, the study enriches the theoretical knowledge within the field of tourism by empirically validating the relationships between fear arousal, perceived trust, destination reputation and travel intention. It provides a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms and interactions between these variables, advancing theoretical frameworks and models related to travel decision-making. The findings lay the groundwork for additional research and theoretical advancement in the domains of destination reputation, trust, and fear arousal, as well as their impact on tourists' travel intentions.

The findings lay the groundwork for additional research and theoretical advancement in the domains of destination reputation, trust, and fear arousal, as well as their impact on tourists' travel intentions, particularly in the Southeast Asian region. The following recommendations can guide destination managers and policymakers in their efforts to attract Chinese university students and enhance their destination's appeal:

1. **Building and maintaining destination reputation:** Destination managers should prioritize efforts to build and maintain a positive reputation for their destination. Achieving this requires deploying effective marketing and communication strategies that showcase the destination's unique attributes, attractions, and safety protocols. Engaging with travel influencers and leveraging online platforms can also help enhance destination reputation and visibility among Chinese university students.
2. **Establishing and fostering trust:** To increase tourists' travel intention, destination managers need to establish and foster trust between tourists and the

destination. This can be accomplished by implementing transparent and consistent safety measures, offering accurate and current information regarding the destination's health status and ensuring a high level of service quality. Building trust is essential in assuaging tourists' concerns and promoting their confidence in the destination.

3. **Addressing fear arousal related to COVID-19:** Destinations should proactively address tourists' fear arousal related to COVID-19 by implementing comprehensive and well-communicated health and safety protocols. This includes ensuring proper hygiene practices, conducting regular health screenings, and implementing measures to mitigate the risk of infection. By prioritizing the safety and well-being of tourists, destinations can reduce fear arousal and increase travel intention.
4. **Minimizing fear of trouble:** Tourism destinations should develop well-planned travel itineraries that anticipate potential issues related to epidemics, such as travel restrictions and disruptions. By offering comprehensive and reliable travel plans, destinations can minimize tourists' fear of trouble and uncertainty during their travels. Clear communication channels and proactive customer support can also help address any concerns or issues that may arise.
5. **Collaboration and partnerships:** Destination management organizations (DMOs) should collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including tourism businesses, local authorities, and healthcare providers, to implement effective measures and ensure a coordinated response to health and safety concerns. By working together, destinations can strengthen their overall preparedness and enhance tourists' confidence in the destination.
6. **Continuous monitoring and adaptation:** Given the dynamic nature of the tourism industry and global events, destinations should continuously monitor and adapt their strategies in response to changing circumstances. This includes staying updated on the latest developments in health and safety protocols, engaging in ongoing communication with tourists, and adapting marketing and promotional activities to address emerging concerns and trends.

By implementing these managerial recommendations, tourism destinations in Southeast Asia can position themselves as safe, trustworthy, and attractive destinations for Chinese university students, ultimately increasing their travel intention and contributing to the recovery and growth of the tourism industry.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations need to be acknowledged, which can be addressed in future research. Firstly, the study focused exclusively on Chinese university students, Restricting the applicability of the findings to other populations. Future research should aim to include participants from various countries or regions to enhance the external validity of the results. This approach would offer a more holistic insight into the factors influencing travel intention across diverse cultural contexts.

Secondly, the cross-sectional design of this study restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future research could utilize longitudinal or experimental methodologies to investigate the temporal dynamics and causal impacts of destination reputation, perceived trust, and fear arousal on travel intention. Such approaches would yield more compelling evidence and bolster the findings' robustness.

Thirdly, while this study focused on destination reputation and perceived trust as predictors of travel intention, other relevant factors, such as destination image, travel restrictions, and travel motives, should be considered in future research. Incorporating these variables would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complex decision-making process of tourists and provide additional insights into their travel intentions.

Fourthly, the moderating effect of fear arousal was examined in this study, but future research could delve deeper into understanding how different levels of fear arousal influence tourists' decision-making processes and travel behaviors. Exploring the mechanisms through which fear arousal interacts with destination reputation and perceived trust would provide valuable insights into the psychological processes underlying tourists' responses to risk and uncertainty.

Fifthly, although this study focused on the impact of COVID-19 on travel intentions, it is essential to recognize that other global events and crises can also influence tourists' perceptions and behaviors. Future research should consider investigating the effects of various events, such as political instability, natural disasters, and economic recessions, on travel intentions. Understanding how destinations adapt to these changes and manage their reputations in dynamic environments would be valuable for destination managers and policymakers.

Lastly, the data collection method in this study relied on online questionnaires, which may introduce certain biases and limitations. Future research could utilize diverse data collection methods, including self-administered surveys

and interviews, to augment the findings and achieve a deeper comprehension of tourists' travel intentions.

By overcoming these limitations in subsequent studies, researchers can enhance the knowledge of factors that influence travel intention and contribute to the formulation of effective destination management and marketing strategies.

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