



Research article

Thriving on novelty: Chinese students' journey to creative travel in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersection of creative travel and flow experiences among foreign students, a topic not extensively explored in tourism research. Specifically, it examines the mediating role of flow experiences in the relationship between students' novelty-seeking behaviors and their intention to engage in creative travel. Additionally, the research investigates how familiarity with a destination moderates this relationship. Employing structural equation modeling, the study analyzes data from 704 Chinese students in Thailand. The findings reveal that flow experiences positively mediate the link between the students' pursuit of novelty and their creative travel intentions. Moreover, the extent of familiarity with the destination was found to modify the relationship between novelty seeking and flow experiences. This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of these dynamics and offers practical insights for stakeholders in creative travel marketing and management.

1. Introduction

Creative travel, characterized by participatory, authentic experiences and skill development [1], emphasizes the integration of creativity into destination development and marketing, thereby highlighting the co-creation of unique experiences [2]. This is exemplified by activities such as ceramic workshops, where tourists contribute unique elements, both local and personal. Nevertheless, perceptions of creative tourism can vary significantly, underscoring the necessity for targeted niche market research [1]. A particular niche of interest is that of Chinese students in Thailand, who are drawn to creative travel due to their novelty-seeking tendencies and desire for knowledge acquisition [1]. Despite the growing demand for authentic creative experiences, tourism strategies often do not adequately address this need. However, the presence of international students, notably those from China, provides an opportunity for engagement in creative travel and cultural exchange [2]. Therefore, this study focuses on the inclinations towards creative travel among Chinese students residing in Thailand [3].

This research delves into the concept of flow experience in the context of marketing, recognized as a key objective for marketers aiming to engage consumers in immersive and fulfilling activities [4]. Flow is identified as a desirable state for consumers, marked by

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deep absorption, a sense of control, and satisfaction in an activity [5]. Understanding the factors that facilitate flow is essential in promoting positive consumer behaviors. Novelty seeking, defined as a personality trait characterized by a desire for new experiences [6,7], can significantly influence flow. It is associated with attributes such as openness, adventure, and creativity, driving individuals towards unique travel destinations [8,9].

The study further examines the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), a central hub for creative design and intellectual entertainment [10]. TCDC distinguishes itself with high-involvement activities such as music production and street art, which are particularly attractive to novelty seekers [11]. Individuals highly engaged in such activities tend to have stronger intentions related to their experiences [12], making TCDC an ideal subject for understanding flow experiences in the realm of creative travel [13,14]. Previous research has investigated potential mediators between novelty seeking and travel intention, such as travel-related benefits and situational involvement [15,16]. This study focuses on the role of TCDC in Bangkok, evaluating its contribution to enhancing the city's creative industry and its competitiveness in the global creative economy. The impact of TCDC on creative travel, visitor satisfaction, and its unique appeal is significant [17]. However, the empirical evidence specifically linking novelty seeking, flow experience, and creative travel intention remains limited [18].

Furthermore, destination familiarity is discussed as a significant factor in the literature on novelty seeking [19]. It can modify the impact of novelty seeking on travel intentions, with flow experience playing a critical moderating role. High levels of flow can enhance the effects of novelty on travel intentions, while low flow may reduce them [20,21]. Additionally, destination familiarity influences the selection of information sources and the intention to revisit [22,23]. This study aims to elucidate the factors influencing tourists' intentions to participate in creative travel at TCDC, with a particular focus on Chinese students in Thailand. It explores how flow experience mediates the relationship between novelty seeking and creative travel intentions, and how familiarity with the destination modifies this relationship within the TCDC context.

2. Literature review

2.1. Relationship between novelty seeking, flow experience, and creative travel intention

In the realm of tourism research, novelty seeking is identified as a pivotal factor in shaping tourists' destination choices and travel intentions [24]. It has been extensively examined in tourism literature and is known to influence various aspects of the travel experience. Novelty seeking moderates the relationships between destination image, satisfaction, and revisit intentions [25], as well as between satisfaction and behavioral intentions [26]. It also mediates the relationship between chronotype and travel frequency [27], aligns with distinct travel style preferences [28], and varies across different cultures [29]. The concept of predispositional engagement, which incorporates elements of novelty, creativity, and intellectual challenge, correlates with the level of activity engagement [30]. These insights underscore the significance of novelty seeking in understanding tourists' preferences and behaviors.

Novelty seeking mediates several facets of travel intention and behavior. It affects hedonics, perceived value, and revisit intentions through satisfaction [14,24,31], while travel benefits and situational involvement mediate its impact on travel behavior and satisfaction, respectively [15,16]. Driven by curiosity, novelty seeking fosters exploratory behavior and shapes perceptions related to destinations [32], linking a sustained pursuit of novelty and stimulation to enhanced engagement and personal growth [33]. Additionally, flow experiences, which reflect personal motivation and perceived value, are influenced by novelty seeking [34].

Flow experience, characterized by deep enjoyment and engagement in an activity, is shaped by personal, environmental, and situational factors [35]. Personal traits such as clear goals, skills, confidence, and intrinsic motivation facilitate entering a state of flow [36]. Environmental factors, including social support and conducive surroundings, and situational factors like task challenge and immediate feedback, also promote flow [37]. Novelty seeking influences flow experiences by providing the necessary challenge and stimulation, which are essential for achieving focused attention, deep engagement, and a sense of control in a flow state [35].

Creative travel intention, a concept distinct from general travel intention, focuses on engaging in creative or cultural activities during travel [38,39,40]. While general travel intention concerns the desire to travel [41], creative travel intention specifically targets experiences related to art, culture, design, and creativity [38,39,40]. This distinction is crucial for understanding the specific motivations driving travel behavior.

Flow theory posits that flow experiences lead to complete immersion in an activity [42], impacting intentions and behaviors [34, 43]. For example, flow experiences in nature-based tourism relate positively to environmentally responsible behaviors and destination value co-creation [34]. When in a state of flow, individuals' deep engagement might stimulate a desire for novel and creative travel experiences [43]. Flow enhances enjoyment and satisfaction, potentially strengthening intentions for similar future travel experiences [43]. From this literature review, two hypotheses emerge.

H1. The perceived novelty seeking of Chinese students significantly and positively influences their flow experiences.

H2. The flow experiences of Chinese students significantly and positively influence their creative travel intentions.

2.2. Moderating role of destination familiarity

In tourism research, familiarity is broadly understood as the extent of an individual's accumulated destination-related experiences [21,22]. This familiarity is linked to an individual's level of involvement with a destination and their information-seeking behaviors [44,45]. Achieving a flow state, characterized by heightened physical involvement and a loss of self-consciousness and time awareness, can be influenced by this familiarity [46]. In the context of novelty seeking and flow experiences, familiarity plays a complex role,

potentially altering the impact of novelty on flow experiences.

Consider two scenarios: one involving repeated visits to a familiar destination, and another exploring a completely new location. In the first scenario, the impact of novelty seeking on flow experiences may be lessened due to the familiarity, which offers limited novelty. Conversely, in the second scenario, the unfamiliarity of the new destination may amplify the positive effects of novelty seeking on flow experiences, enhancing engagement and absorption [44].

Destination familiarity encompasses three dimensions: self-described familiarity, informational familiarity, and experiential familiarity [21,47–50]. Self-described familiarity relates to subjective knowledge of a destination [21,48], informational familiarity to knowledge acquired from external sources [21,48,49], and experiential familiarity to direct personal experience, categorized by visitor frequency [21,49,50]. These dimensions have been shown to influence visit intentions and moderate the relationship between destination image and visit intention [21,48].

In the context of this study, which focuses on a creative travel destination, the relationship between familiarity, novelty seeking, and flow experiences is further explored. The study proposes that different levels of destination familiarity significantly impact the relationship between Chinese students' novelty seeking and their flow experiences (H3), as well as the relationship between their flow experiences and creative travel intentions (H4). These hypotheses aim to deepen the understanding of how familiarity shapes the creative travel experience and intentions, particularly for a niche market like Chinese students in a creative travel setting. The research model, including these hypotheses, is illustrated in Fig. 1.

3. Methodology

3.1. Survey instrument

In this study, the concept of novelty seeking was operationalized as a multidimensional construct, comprising various aspects such as seeking thrills, change from routine, alleviation of boredom, and desire for surprise [50]. This approach aligns with prior tourism research that has employed a novelty-seeking scale to understand tourists' tendencies toward unconventional experiences and unfamiliar environments [19,50–53]. Participants evaluated specific statements related to each dimension on a Likert scale, providing a comprehensive view of their novelty-seeking characteristics.

Flow experience, a key focus of the study, was measured using a 9-item scale that captures essential aspects like concentration, immersion, clear goals, feedback, and control in an activity [34,54]. This scale has demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity in past research, effectively capturing the essence of flow experiences in various contexts. The study also included an assessment of creative travel intention, employing a 4-item scale from previous research [55]. Rated on a 7-point Likert scale, this scale has been validated in destination marketing contexts, offering insights into participants' intentions regarding creative travel activities. Destination familiarity was quantified using three distinct dimensions: self-described, informational, and experiential familiarity [21,49,56]. Each of these dimensions was evaluated using specific items, allowing for a nuanced understanding of participants' familiarity with the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC).

The research process was initiated after obtaining approval from the ethics review board of the Department of Tourism Management at Dhurakij Pundit University, ensuring adherence to ethical standards and participant rights [reference number provided]. The study complied with Thailand's ethical norms for research involving individuals aged 20 and above, negating the need for informed consent forms but ensuring informed participation through detailed explanation and voluntary involvement. This ethical consideration underscores the study's commitment to responsible and respectful research practices.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The study focused on Chinese students studying at universities in Thailand, which host a significant Chinese student population. To ensure an accurate assessment of participants' flow experiences during creative travel, only individuals who had visited the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC) at least once within the past six months were eligible to participate. The recruitment process involved students completing an online survey and sharing the questionnaire link within their social networks. The survey was distributed using snowball sampling on QQ and WeChat, popular communication apps in China. Data collection took place from December 1, 2019, to April 12, 2020. Given the Chinese preference for social networks as a source of information, this approach was deemed suitable [57]. To prevent homologous errors, data validation checks and automated tools were employed to detect and rectify duplicated or similar entries. A total of 704 valid questionnaires were received, with 59.8% from men and 40.2% from women. The largest age group was

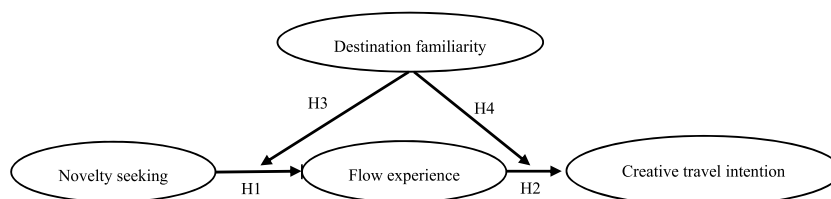


Fig. 1. Research model.

18–20 years old (32.3%, $n = 229$). The majority of participants were bachelor-level students (76.6%, $n = 539$) and engaged in creative travel with friends (83.7%, $n = 589$). Approximately a third of the respondents (32.1%, $n = 226$) had visited TCDC twice (see Table 1).

Data were analyzed using AMOS 23 software. Initially, the normality of the data and outliers were evaluated; no outliers were detected, and the data were normally distributed, as indicated by a normality test. Subsequently, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to identify the underlying dimensions of novelty seeking in the entire sample. This was followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the measurement model by combining the novelty-seeking dimensions derived from EFA with other study constructs, including flow experience and creative travel intention. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then used to test the study hypotheses, and a multi-group moderation analysis was carried out to examine the moderating role of destination familiarity. Finally, the mediating effect of flow experience was tested using accelerated-bias-corrected bootstrap estimation, and indirect effects were identified based on the most accurate confidence intervals (CIs) [58].

4. Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted first to determine the underlying dimensions of novelty seeking (see Table 2). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test, which evaluates sampling adequacy for factor analysis, returned a result of 0.931, well exceeding the 0.5 threshold for acceptability (Measure of Sampling Adequacy = 0.868). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant at 10,934 ($\alpha = 0.000$), indicating the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis. Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation was utilized for factor extraction, resulting in four factors (Table 1) that collectively explained 72.824% of the total variance. The first factor, thrill-seeking, accounted for 42.774% of the variance; change from routine explained 16.18% of the variance; boredom alleviation contributed to 8.454% of the variance; and the desire for surprise explained 5.416% of the variance. We referred to construct reliability to evaluate the reliability of our measurement scales. The scales' Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.842 to 0.935, indicating adequate reliability and surpassing the recommended benchmark value of 0.70 [59].

4.1. Measurement model analysis

Fit indices were computed to evaluate the measurement model. The results indicated an acceptable fit, as evidenced by a significant chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 2136$, $df = 512$) and other satisfactory fit indices: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.067; Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = 0.825; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.913; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.899; Relative Fit Index (RFI) = 0.833; and Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.892 [60]. Composite Reliability (CR) was employed to assess the reliability of the measurement scales, and all dimensions exhibited CR values surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.8, indicating satisfactory reliability [61]. Convergent validity was examined through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. As shown in Table 3, all item AVE values exceeded the suggested threshold of 0.5, indicating good convergent validity [61]. Additionally, the square roots of the AVEs exceeded the inter-factor correlations, thereby confirming discriminant validity among the factors.

Table 1
Sample profile.

Demographic Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	421	59.8
Female	283	40.2
Age		
18–20	229	32.3
21	173	24.6
22	126	17.9
23	57	8.1
24	48	6.8
25	25	3.6
26 and above	46	6.5
Education		
Bachelor-level	539	76.6
Master-level	165	23.4
Number of creative travel trips		
1	201	28.6
2	226	32.1
3	155	22
4	37	5.3
5 and above	85	12.1
Creative travel partner		
Alone	78	11.1
With friends	589	83.7
With family	7	1
As a couple	30	4.3

Table 2
Principal component analysis for novelty seeking.

	Factor loading	Eigenvalue	Variance explained (%)
Factor 1: Thrill		8.982	42.774
I enjoy experiencing a sense of danger on a vacation trip.	0.837		
I seek adventure on my vacation.	0.805		
I enjoy doing “daring” activities while on vacation.	0.757		
Sometimes, it is fun to be a little scared on vacation.	0.838		
I enjoy activities that offer thrills.	0.661		
I would like to be on a raft in the middle of a wild river during the spring flood waters.	0.729		
I sometimes like to do things on vacation that are a little frightening.	0.835		
I like to travel to adventurous places.	0.793		
I feel a powerful urge to explore the unknown during vacation.	0.686		
Factor 2: Change from routine		3.398	16.18
I want to experience customs and cultures different from those in my own environment when on vacation.	0.820		
I enjoy the change of environment which allows me to experience something new during vacation.	0.878		
My ideal vacation involves looking at things I have not seen before.	0.870		
I want a sense of discovery involved as part of my vacation.	0.865		
I want to experience new and different things during my vacation.	0.831		
I like to find myself at destinations where I can explore new things.	0.747		
Factor 3: Boredom alleviation		1.775	8.454
I must go on vacation from time to time to avoid getting into a rut.		0.774	
I like to travel because the same routine work bores me.		0.814	
I want to travel to relieve boredom.		0.789	
Factor 4: Surprise		1.137	5.416
I would like to take off on a trip with no pre-planned routes in mind.	0.812		
I don't like to plan a vacation trip in detail because it takes away some of the unexpectedness.	0.825		
I like vacations that are unpredictable.	0.782		

4.2. Structural model analysis

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis was conducted to test the study hypotheses. The findings indicated a good model fit, as reflected by the following indices: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.068; Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = 0.817; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.909; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.884; Relative Fit Index (RFI) = 0.876; and Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = 0.909 [60]. These results demonstrated that novelty seeking positively affected students' flow experiences (path coefficient = 0.63), and flow experience had a positive impact on their creative travel intentions (path coefficient = 0.91). Consequently, Hypotheses 1 and 2 (H1 and H2) were supported (see Table 4).

4.3. Mediating role of flow experience

The mediating role of flow experience was examined using the accelerated-bias-corrected bootstrap estimation procedure, and significant indirect effects were observed based on accurate confidence intervals [58]. The total effect of novelty seeking on creative travel intention, in the absence of flow experience, was significant ($\beta = 0.001$, $p < 0.001$). Novelty seeking positively influenced flow experience ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$), and flow experience positively influenced creative travel intention ($\beta = 0.91$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of flow experience between novelty seeking and creative travel intention was significant (indirect effect = 0.570, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.487, 0.644]). Upon accounting for the mediating role of flow experience, the direct effect of novelty seeking on creative travel intention became non-significant, with the 95% confidence intervals including zero. Hence, flow experience fully mediated the positive relationship between Chinese students' novelty seeking and their creative travel intentions.

4.4. Moderating role of destination familiarity

To measure participants' destination familiarity, we considered multiple dimensions, including self-described familiarity ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.81$), informational familiarity ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.84$), and experiential familiarity ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.28$). First, we utilized K-means clustering to categorize the average level of destination familiarity into high and low groups. Second, to validate these groups, discriminant analysis was applied to determine whether the results aligned with the K-means clustering. Third, we conducted an independent sample *t*-test to ascertain whether significant differences in destination familiarity existed between both groups. The findings, as shown in Table 5, indicated that the groups with high ($N = 314$, $M = 3.28$) and low destination familiarity ($N = 390$, $M = 2.37$) were completely consistent with the K-means clustering results. Moreover, both groups exhibited significant differences in destination familiarity, as evidenced in Tables 5 and 6.

To examine the moderating effect of destination familiarity on the structural model, a multi-group moderation analysis was

Table 3
Measurement model results.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Sstandardized Loadings	Construct Reliability	AVE
Novelty seeking (Thrill)				0.935	0.615
I enjoy experiencing a sense of danger on a vacation trip.	4.22	1.65	0.80		
I seek adventure during my vacation.	3.53	1.44	0.82		
I enjoy doing “daring” activities while on vacation.	3.43	1.36	0.78		
Sometimes, it is fun to be a little scared when on vacation.	4.04	1.51	0.81		
I enjoy activities that offer thrills.	3.30	1.36	0.71		
I would like to be on a raft in the middle of a wild river during the spring flood waters.	3.97	1.58	0.75		
I sometimes like to do things that are a little frightening during vacation.	4.23	1.51	0.85		
I like to travel to adventurous places.	4.58	1.60	0.79		
I feel a powerful urge to explore the unknown when on vacation.	3.49	1.46	0.74		
Novelty seeking (Change from routine)				0.935	0.707
I want to experience customs and cultures different from those in my own environment during vacation.	2.60	1.17	0.81		
I enjoy the change of environment, which allows me to experience something new during vacation.	2.53	1.13	0.88		
My ideal vacation involves looking at things I have not seen before.	2.35	1.15	0.87		
I want a sense of discovery involved as part of my vacation.	2.42	1.12	0.87		
I want to experience new and different things during my vacation.	2.56	1.15	0.84		
I like to find myself at destinations where I can explore new things.	2.60	1.12	0.77		
Novelty seeking (Boredom alleviation)				0.852	0.659
I must go on a vacation from time to time to avoid getting into a rut.	3.28	1.27	0.74		
I like to travel because the same routine work bores me.	3.09	1.25	0.87		
I want to travel to relieve boredom.	2.91	1.24	0.82		
Novelty seeking (Surprise)				0.842	0.640
I would like to take off on a trip with no pre-planned routes in mind.	3.58	1.46	0.77		
I don't like to plan a vacation trip in detail because it takes away some of the unexpectedness.	3.47	1.38	0.81		
I like vacations that are unpredictable.	3.62	1.40	0.82		
Flow experience				0.930	0.596
When I participate in a creative travel activity, I feel I am competent enough to meet the high demands of the situation.	3.21	1.01	0.74		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, I spontaneously and automatically do things without having to think.	3.48	1.16	0.70		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, I have a strong sense of what I want to do.	3.49	1.14	0.77		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, I have a good idea while I am performing about how well I am doing.	3.29	1.08	0.79		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, I am completely focused on the task at hand.	3.28	1.08	0.85		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, I have a feeling of total control over what I am doing.	3.19	1.04	0.81		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, I am not worried about what others may be thinking of me.	3.22	1.12	0.68		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, the way time passes seems to be different from normal.	3.22	1.12	0.79		
When I participate in a creative travel activity, the experience is extremely rewarding.	3.07	1.07	0.80		
Creative travel intention				0.918	0.736
I'll say positive things about creative travel to other people.	3.08	1.06	0.82		
I intend to join creative travels in the next one year.	3.11	1.08	0.84		
I'll recommend creative traveling to others.	3.11	1.09	0.89		
I'll encourage friends and relatives to go on a creative travel.	3.20	1.12	0.88		

Table 4
Hypothesis test results (moderation hypotheses excluded).

Structural Path	Standard Path Coefficients	<i>t</i> -value	Hypothesis Supported?
H1a: Novelty seeking → Flow experience	0.630***	11.124	Yes
H2b: Flow experience → Creative travel intention	0.910***	22.529	Yes

Notes: ****p* < 0.01; ***p* < 0.05; **p* < 0.10.

conducted in AMOS. This analysis aimed to determine whether groups with different levels of destination familiarity demonstrated significant moderation effects across the relationships of "novelty seeking and flow experience" and "flow experience and creative travel intention." The results revealed a significant moderating effect of destination familiarity on the relationship between novelty seeking and flow experience (H3). However, the effect on the relationship between flow experience and creative travel intention (H4) was found to be insignificant; see [Table 7](#).

5. Discussion

This study reveals that flow experience serves as a complete mediator in the relationship between novelty seeking and creative

Table 5
Classification results.

			Predicted Group Membership		Total
			1	2	
Original	Count	1	314	0	314
		2	0	390	390
	%	1	100.0	.0	100.0
		2	.0	100.0	100.0

a. 100.0% of original grouped cases correctly classified.

Table 6
Independent sample test.

Levene's Test			t-test for Equality of Means					
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
8.069	0.005	35.5	663	0.000	0.90911	0.02557	0.85890	0.95931

Table 7
Moderation effect of destination familiarity.

	Novelty seeking→ flow experience	Flow experience→ creative travel intention
Low	1.132	0.740
High	0.896	0.931
z-score	-2.325**	0.433
Hypothesis supported?	(H3) Yes	(H4) No

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

travel intention. This finding diverges from previous studies that posited a direct influence of novelty on travel intention. A plausible explanation for this variation lies in the unique context of the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), known for its inherent creativity and high levels of involvement and interaction. Our research indicates that individuals with a pronounced tendency towards novelty seeking are more inclined to engage in creative travel experiences when they experience a state of flow. This state, defined by deep concentration, enjoyment, and a perception of timelessness, is crucial in fostering the intention to pursue creative travel activities. It implies that individuals who are inherently drawn to novel experiences are more likely to participate in creative travel when they are fully immersed in a state of flow. Such individuals are attracted to the distinct and enriching opportunities presented by creative travel, which facilitate the expression of creativity, skill acquisition, and cultural immersion [25,26].

The implications of these findings are significant for tourism marketers and destination managers. They emphasize the necessity of designing and promoting travel experiences that foster the state of flow. By creating environments that are engaging and challenging, and which provide enjoyment, the likelihood of visitors experiencing flow during their travels can be increased. Understanding the mediating role of flow experience enables the development of marketing strategies that emphasize the potential for creative engagement and flow-inducing experiences at destinations. Moreover, these findings suggest the importance of developing creative travel offerings specifically aimed at individuals with a pronounced propensity for novelty seeking. Recognizing the significance of novelty and creativity in travel experiences allows destinations to attract a niche market of travelers who seek innovative, unique, and culturally immersive activities. This may involve the creation of specialized itineraries, the conduct of creative workshops, the promotion of local art and cultural events, and collaboration with local artists to enhance the overall experience of creative travel.

For Chinese students, the propensity to seek novelty encompasses aspects such as participation in activities, authentic experiences, the development of creative potential, and skill acquisition [1,2]. These elements can influence the intention to engage in creative travel. This finding may offer a valuable contribution to marketing literature, emphasizing the need for marketers to focus on perceived authenticity, learning-oriented features, and the process of interaction in the realm of creative travel marketing. These results also support findings from research based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory [62]: utilized the SOR theory to confirm the relationships between atmospheric cues, affective and cognitive states, and outcomes in online retail. Furthermore, involvement and atmospheric cues were found to moderate the relationships between atmospheric cues and affective and cognitive reactions [62]. In the context of this article, novelty seeking is hypothesized to affect how individuals respond to unique stimuli, which may include culturally diverse environments or other distinctive attributes of experiences. Individuals with a higher propensity for novelty seeking are likely to be more attracted to novel and unique experiences. Flow experiences, encountered during travel, play a significant role in the development of creative travel intentions. This denotes an individual's desire to actively seek and participate in travel experiences that are novel and capable of inducing a flow state.

SOR theory has been a staple in consumer behavior research for years [63]. This study contributes to the SOR theory in two significant ways. First, it presents empirical findings that support the proposed hypotheses, using quantitative data to illustrate the

influence of novelty seeking on the experience of flow and its subsequent impact on creative travel intentions. Second, it explains how these findings refine the SOR theoretical framework, potentially introducing new insights or dimensions to the theory.

Destination familiarity was found to significantly moderate the relationship between Chinese students' novelty seeking and their flow experiences. The degree of familiarity with a travel destination notably impacts the flow experiences of Chinese students who exhibit a strong inclination towards novelty seeking. This relationship between novelty seeking and flow experience can be viewed as a process of stimulus-cognitive exploration, satisfying individuals' curiosity and immersing them in a state of flow [32]. As a result, individuals who are more familiar with TCDC (through prior visits and information access) are likely to engage more easily in related activities. In a similar vein, previous experience (experiential familiarity) acts as a moderator in tourist destinations [64,65], with repeat customers who possess greater familiarity potentially placing more emphasis on the psychological significance of a destination [65,66]. Therefore, organizers of creative activities should take into consideration the travel history of participants (whether they are first-time or repeat visitors) and provide adequate support to ensure their full engagement in TCDC activities.

The level of destination familiarity significantly influences Chinese students' ability to enter a state of flow during their travel experiences. Greater familiarity with the destination facilitates better immersion and understanding of the local culture, thereby enhancing the potential for flow. Conversely, lower familiarity may pose challenges in engaging with the environment, thereby hindering the flow experience. These findings have practical implications for destination management and tourism professionals who target Chinese students. Providing information, cultural orientation, language support, and tailored itineraries can enhance destination familiarity, thereby facilitating student engagement and flow. Additionally, by leveraging the novelty-seeking tendencies of these students, destinations can design unique and immersive activities that capture their interest. Promoting hidden attractions, organizing creative workshops, and fostering interactions with local communities and artists can provide novel and enriching experiences that promote flow.

Contrary to our initial expectations, destination familiarity did not moderate the relationship between flow experience and creative travel intention. This finding diverges from previous studies [21,48]. This pattern may be attributable to the fact that an individual's perception of novelty seeking may lead to situational involvement [16] and subsequent realization of a flow experience. Regardless of one's perceived destination familiarity, this situation could lead an individual to engage in creative travel again. As such, the moderating effect of destination familiarity appears to manifest in the early stage of the TCDC experience (i.e., during participation) rather than after achieving a state of flow.

The absence of a moderating effect of destination familiarity indicates that individuals' flow experiences and creative travel intentions are not significantly influenced by their familiarity with the destination. This highlights the universal nature of flow as a psychological state that transcends the specifics of destination familiarity. While the initial hypothesis was not supported, this finding offers valuable insights for destination management and tourism professionals. It emphasizes the importance of creating conditions conducive to flow experiences, regardless of destination familiarity. Stakeholders should concentrate on designing engaging, skill-challenging, enjoyable, and immersive travel experiences. By offering a diverse array of creative activities, cultural interactions, and opportunities for personal growth, destinations can enhance the potential for travelers to enter a flow state and thereby increase their intention to engage in creative travel. By examining the relationship between these three concepts, this study provides a unique perspective on the factors that influence creative travel intention, an area that has not been extensively explored in tourism literature. It also sheds light on the psychological mechanisms underlying the formation of creative travel intention, insights that can be invaluable for tourism marketers in designing and promoting creative travel experiences that cater to the needs and preferences of travelers.

The present study, however, is not without limitations, which opens avenues for future research. Firstly, as the survey was limited to Chinese students visiting TCDC, the findings cannot be generalized to other countries or contexts. Future research should aim to ascertain the applicability of our model in different settings. Secondly, while this study focused on the effects of novelty seeking, flow experience, and creative travel intention, other factors that may affect creative travel intention should also be considered. Subsequent research in the field of creative travel could explore these additional factors and expand upon our study model. Furthermore, scholars could investigate the diverse motivations of international students through comparative studies. Finally, given the potential impact of demographic variables on travel intention, a topic of interest in tourism literature, the roles of these variables should be addressed in the domain of creative travel.

6. Conclusion

In this research, we conducted an in-depth exploration of the intricate dynamics between novelty seeking, flow experience, and creative travel intentions among Chinese students visiting the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC). The study's primary objective was to examine the mediating role of flow experience in the relationship between novelty seeking and creative travel intentions. Additionally, it aimed to investigate the moderating effect of destination familiarity on two critical relationships: first, between novelty seeking and flow experience, and second, between flow experience and creative travel intention.

Our investigation delved into the interconnectedness of three distinct concepts—novelty seeking, flow experience, and creative travel intention—drawing upon theoretical foundations from diverse disciplines such as psychology, tourism, and marketing. Novelty seeking, a concept rooted in psychology, pertains to individuals' propensity to pursue new and unfamiliar experiences. This trait is particularly relevant in the context of tourism, where it influences destination choice and engagement in travel activities. Flow experience, another psychological construct, describes a state of deep immersion and enjoyment in an activity, often resulting in a sense of timelessness and heightened engagement. In the realm of tourism, flow experience can significantly enhance the quality of the travel experience, leading to greater satisfaction and the intention to reengage in similar activities. Creative travel intention, a concept

emerging from tourism and marketing literature, refers to the desire to engage in travel experiences that are not only recreational but also foster creativity and cultural immersion.

In examining these concepts, the study specifically focused on Chinese students at TCDC, a creative and cultural hub in Thailand, as a case study. The choice of this particular demographic and location provided a unique opportunity to explore how cultural and educational backgrounds might influence travel behavior and intentions in a creative setting. The study also sought to expand the understanding of how destination familiarity—how well travelers know a destination—moderates the relationships between novelty seeking, flow experience, and creative travel intention.

The research employed quantitative methods to assess the relationships between these variables. By gathering data from Chinese students visiting TCDC, the study aimed to contribute to the broader understanding of travel behavior in the context of creative tourism. The findings were anticipated to offer valuable insights for tourism practitioners and marketers in tailoring experiences that cater to the needs of travelers seeking novel and immersive experiences. Additionally, the study aimed to contribute to the academic discourse by bridging gaps between different fields and offering a more comprehensive understanding of how psychological factors influence travel intentions and behaviors in specific cultural and destination contexts.

Overall, the study sought to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between novelty seeking, flow experience, and creative travel intention, with a particular focus on the influence of destination familiarity. This approach aimed to enrich the theoretical frameworks in psychology, tourism, and marketing by integrating insights from these diverse disciplines, thereby offering a multifaceted perspective on the motivations and experiences of travelers in creative and cultural destinations like TCDC.

Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are included within the article.

Ethics statement

- 1) This material is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- 2) The paper is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.
- 3) The paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- 4) The paper properly credits the meaningful contributions of co-authors and co-researchers.
- 5) The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- 6) All sources used are properly disclosed (correct citation).
- 7) All authors have been personally and actively involved in substantial work leading to the paper, and will take public responsibility for its content.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Cheng-Yi Kuo: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Angela Ya-Ping Chang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e25632>.

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