

WHY ARE INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS SATISFIED WITH ECOTOURISM IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM?

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Abstract: The satisfaction of tourists plays a crucial role in the success of a tourist destination. This study aims to demonstrate factors influencing the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The study employs a convenient sampling combined with direct interviews of 256 international tourists who have experienced ecotourism services in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. Quantitative analysis methods used in the study include testing the reliability of the scale using Cronbach's alpha, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM). The research results have proven 06 factors influencing the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta, including trust, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangible facilities, and local characteristics. Among these, the local characteristic factor has the most impact on the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta. The research results will provide managerial implications to enhance service quality and improve the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam.

Keywords: satisfaction, service quality, international tourists, ecotourism, destination, Mekong Delta

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries globally, playing a crucial role in the economy (Osman and Sentosa, 2013), contributing positively to the economic, social, cultural, and international integration processes of Vietnam (Hong et al. 2022). Alongside the rapid development of the tourism industry, competition among tourist destinations has become increasingly fierce (Nguyen and Mai, 2021). The success of tourist destinations is often gauged through tourist satisfaction (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000; Nowacki, 2009). Enhancing tourist satisfaction not only positively affects the reputation of destinations but also increases tourist loyalty, reduces operational costs, and enhances operational efficiency (Chen et al., 2013). In tourism studies, tourist satisfaction is investigated from various perspectives, such as focusing on the antecedents of satisfaction, the process of achieving satisfaction, measuring satisfaction, the importance of satisfaction in tourist loyalty and behavioral intentions (Engeset and Elvekrok, 2015).

In recent decades, many studies have demonstrated that tourist satisfaction is influenced by various factors such as trust (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Cilliers et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2018; Long, 2019; Masrurul, 2019), responsiveness (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Cilliers et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2018; Long, 2019; Masrurul, 2019; Thi et al., 2020), assurance (Shah et al., 2018; Thuy, 2020; Hong et al., 2022; Cheraghzadeh et al., 2023; Sapkota et al., 2023; Son et al., 2023), empathy (Shah et al., 2018; Long, 2019; Masrurul, 2019; Thanh and Ha, 2021), tangible elements (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Shah et al., 2018; Long, 2019; Masrurul, 2019; Thi et al., 2020; Thuy, 2020; Hong et al., 2022; Cheraghzadeh et al., 2023; Sapkota et al., 2023; Sugiama et al., 2024), and local characteristics (Thanh and Ha, 2021; Son et al., 2023).

In Vietnam, the Mekong Delta region possesses impressive tourism development potential, characterized by its ecological landscape, coastal areas, attractive river systems, fruitful orchards, pristine environment, and abundant natural resources (Mai et al., 2023). Various forms of tourism have emerged and flourished here, attracting tourists, especially international visitors (Dung et al., 2023), with ecotourism being the most distinctive and favored by many international tourists when coming to the Mekong Delta region. In recent decades, the tourism industry in the Mekong Delta has consistently experienced high growth rates. The image and service quality of ecotourism areas are continuously improving to meet the growing demands of international tourists.

However, there are limitations in ecotourism areas, such as environmental pollution, inadequate quality of tourism human resources, lack of diversity and creativity in tourism products, etc., thereby negatively affecting the experiences

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of international tourists. Therefore, this study is conducted to demonstrate the factors influencing the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer satisfaction is their response to the perceived difference between their experiences and their expectations (Spreng and Mackoy, 1996; Parasuraman et al., 1998). In the tourism context, tourist satisfaction is defined as the quality of service experience achieved after a tour (Baker and Crompton, 2000), or when tourists feel satisfied after a vacation due to results that exceed their pre-travel expectations (Altunel and Erkurub, 2015). Tourist satisfaction is the evaluation of the destination's service quality, meeting the needs and expectations of tourists (Severt et al., 2007; Fu et al., 2019). The success of tourist destinations is often measured through tourist satisfaction (Nowacki, 2009).

Ibrahim et al. (2015) evaluated the impact of service quality on tourist satisfaction in the Maldives tourism industry. The study identified three factors positively influencing tourist satisfaction: responsiveness, tangible facilities, and reliability. Cilliers et al. (2018) demonstrated positive factors influencing tourist satisfaction in a resort in South Africa, including accessibility, service style, responsiveness, and reliability. Shah et al. (2018) identified factors positively correlated with tourist satisfaction in the hotel industry in Pakistan, including reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible facilities. According to Masrurul (2019), reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and tangible facilities positively influence tourist satisfaction in the tourism industry in Bangladesh. Sapkota et al. (2023) investigated and demonstrated that price, infrastructure, safety, and security are factors influencing tourist satisfaction with Gandaki, Nepal as a destination. Cheraghzadeh et al. (2023) indicated that safety and security are the most significant factors affecting tourist satisfaction with the quality of ecotourism services at Bisheh Waterfall, Iran. Additionally, tourist satisfaction is influenced by other factors including infrastructure, transportation costs, culinary quality, accessibility, natural beauty, hospitality, guidance, and accommodation management. Talukder et al. (2024) established a positive relationship between the quality of ecological services (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibles) and tourist satisfaction with Kuakata destination in Bangladesh. Sugiama et al. (2024) identified that attractiveness, accessibility, and facilities are significant predictors of satisfaction and intention to revisit water parks among young tourists.

In Vietnam, the topic of tourist satisfaction has garnered significant attention from scholars. Dai and Quynh (2019) demonstrated three factors positively influencing tourist satisfaction with the service quality of the Xeo Quyt ecotourism area: empathy, reliability, and tangible facilities. Thi et al. (2020) showed factors influencing international tourist satisfaction with the quality of tourism services in Vietnam, including responsiveness and tangible facilities. Thuy (2020) measured the influence of service quality on tourist satisfaction with attractions in Ho Chi Minh City. The research results showed that five service quality factors influence tourist satisfaction: reliability, responsiveness, service capacity, empathy, and physical facilities. Thanh and Ha (2021) pointed out that tourist satisfaction with the service quality in tourist areas of Ha Giang Province is affected by six factors: empathy, responsiveness, reliability, service capacity, local characteristics, and tangible facilities. According to Hong et al. (2022), five factors influencing tourist satisfaction with river tourism in Danang City: tangible facilities, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and attractiveness. Son et al. (2023) showed that local culture, natural landscape, local characteristics, assurance, and tourism human resources positively influence tourist satisfaction with agricultural tourism in the Mekong Delta region (Vietnam).

The literature review indicates that most studies focus on demonstrating the components of tourism service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibles) that affect tourist satisfaction. Few studies explore local characteristic factors to explain tourist satisfaction with tourist destinations. For ecotourism, local characteristic factors are an important component shaping the image of a local ecotourism destination. Therefore, this study combines the components of service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibles) with local characteristics to broaden the explanatory power of tourist satisfaction with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam.

RESEARCH MODEL

Research hypotheses

Based on the literature review, it is evident that service quality components (trust, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangible facilities) and local characteristics are factors influencing tourist satisfaction with tourist destinations. Therefore, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Trust positively influences the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region;

H2: Responsiveness positively affects the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region;

H3: Assurance positively impacts the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region;

H4: Empathy positively influences the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region;

H5: Tangibles positively influence the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region;

H6: Local characteristics positively impact the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region. Thus, the research model of factors influencing the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region is established as follows (Figure 1).

Research scale

The research scales were referenced from related studies and adjusted to fit the context of this research. The trust scale (4 observed variables), responsiveness scale (4 observed variables), assurance scale (4 observed variables), empathy scale (4 observed variables), and tangible facilities scale (4 observed variables) were referenced from studies of

Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Cronin and Taylor (1992). The local characteristic scale (4 observed variables) was preferred from studies of Thanh and Ha (2021), and Son et al. (2023) with 4 observed variables. The satisfaction scale (4 observed variables) was referenced from studies by Mai et al. (2021), and Nguyen and Mai (2021). All scales in the research model were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5).

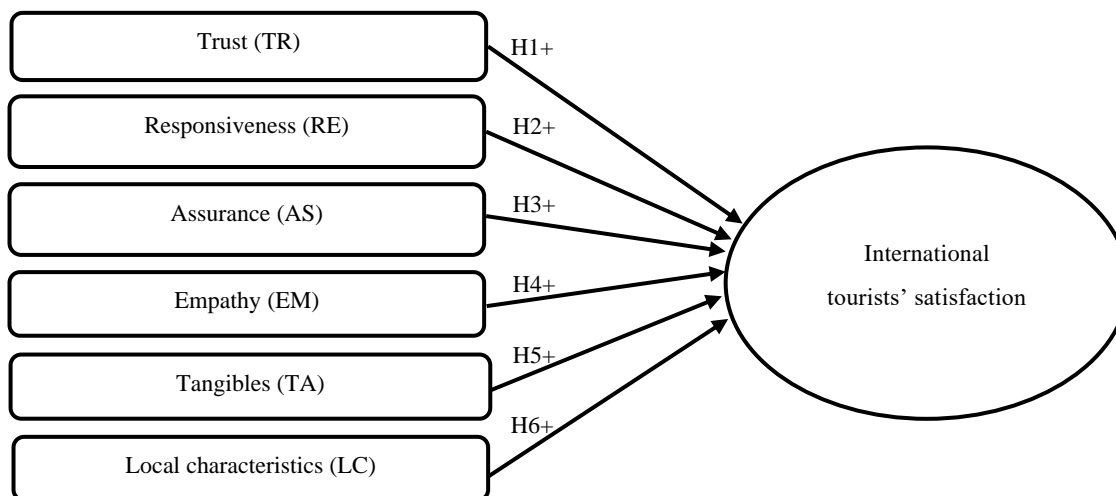


Figure 1. Proposed research model (Source: Compiled by the authors)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Analytical methods

To demonstrate the factors influencing the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region, the following quantitative analysis methods were used in the following order (Figure 2): Step 1: Testing the reliability of the scales using Cronbach’s alpha; Step 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA); Step 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA); Step 4: Covariance-based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM).

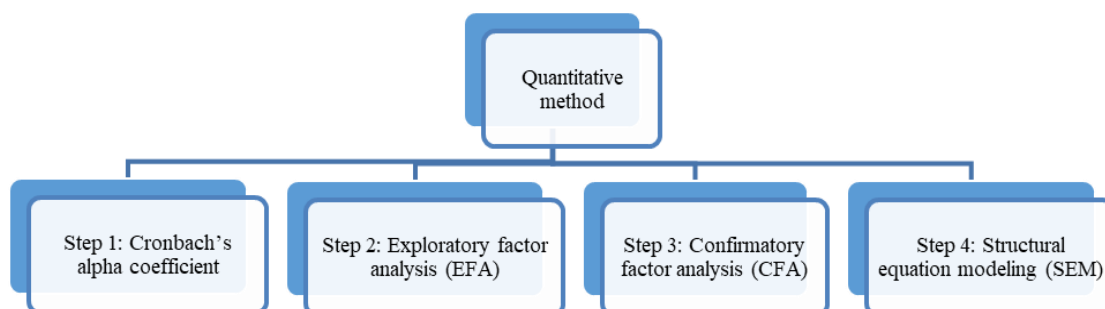


Figure 2. Research methodology flowchart (Source: Compiled by the authors)

Data collection method

In this study, convenient sampling was employed due to the difficult accessibility of the survey subjects. Direct interviews were used to collect data. The survey participants were international tourists who had experienced ecotourism services in the Mekong Delta region (Vietnam). The survey was conducted from November 2023 to December 2023. Several representative ecotourism sites in the Mekong Delta region were selected for the survey, including Vam Xang Ecotourism Area (Can Tho City), Gao Giong Ecotourism Area (Dong Thap Province), Tan Lap Floating Village Ecotourism Area (Long An Province), Con Phung Ecotourism Area (Ben Tre Province), and Thoi Son Ecotourism Area (Tien Giang Province). The sample size of the study reached 260. After excluding unsuitable survey responses (due to lack of reliability), a total of 256 valid survey responses were used to test the research hypotheses.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evaluating scale reliability

Based on the test results in Table 1, Cronbach’s alpha of all scales meets the requirements, with values ranging from 0.835 to 0.897 (Nunnally, 1978; Peterson, 1994). The EFA analysis results meet the requirements based on statistical indices as follows: The suitability test of the model is ensured ($0.5 < KMO = 0.898 < 1.0$) with the Bartlett test achieving significance level ($Sig. = 0.00 < 0.05$); Factor loadings of observed variables > 0.5 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Hair et al., 1998). The analysis results have formed 07 factors with 28 observed variables similar to the proposed research model.

The CFA analysis results are ensured with statistical indices as follows: Chi-square/df = $1.574 < 2.0$ with P-value = $0.000 \leq 0.05$; TLI and CFI have values of 0.949 and 0.955, respectively, both > 0.9 ; RMSEA = $0.047 < 0.08$ (Bentler and Bonett, 1980; Carmines and McIver, 1981). This indicates that the model fits the market data. According to the calculated composite

reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) in Table 2, all scales meet the conditions (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Additionally, the test results show that the correlation between the conceptual structures achieves discriminant validity. Therefore, the data meets the requirements for conducting Structural Equation Modeling (SEM).

Table 1. Results of reliability test of scales

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Factor loading
Trust (TR)			
TR1	0.849	0.665	0.706
TR2		0.716	0.824
TR3		0.703	0.787
TR4		0.670	0.741
Responsiveness (RE)			
RE1	0.897	0.784	0.862
RE2		0.771	0.748
RE3		0.765	0.762
RE4		0.760	0.877
Assurance (AS)			
AS1	0.894	0.774	0.817
AS2		0.779	0.845
AS3		0.753	0.774
AS4		0.756	0.811
Empathy (EM)			
EM1	0.885	0.784	0.831
EM2		0.696	0.744
EM3		0.755	0.829
EM4		0.763	0.808
Tangibles (TA)			
TA1	0.835	0.619	0.645
TA2		0.676	0.773
TA3		0.707	0.808
TA4		0.661	0.748
Local characteristics (LC)			
LC1	0.856	0.718	0.768
LC2		0.668	0.788
LC3		0.717	0.736
LC4		0.692	0.792
Satisfaction (SA)			
SA1	0.891	0.766	0.729
SA2		0.762	0.690
SA3		0.745	0.704
SA4		0.772	0.760

Table 2. Correlation matrix between conceptual structures

	CR	AVE	EM	AS	TR	RE	TA	LC	SA
EM	0.886	0.660	0.812						
AS	0.894	0.679	0.491	0.824					
TR	0.850	0.586	0.253	0.232	0.766				
RE	0.896	0.684	0.225	0.376	0.486	0.827			
TA	0.836	0.561	0.383	0.452	0.146	0.403	0.749		
LC	0.856	0.598	0.322	0.370	0.370	0.492	0.463	0.773	
SA	0.892	0.673	0.506	0.551	0.516	0.632	0.558	0.680	0.820

Testing research model and research hypotheses

According to the test results in Table 3 and Figure 3, all research hypotheses are accepted with 95% confidence. This indicates that the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region is influenced by 06 factors, including trust, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangible facilities, and local characteristics.

Table 3. Results of estimating relationships in the SEM model

Hypothesis	Relationship	Estimate	P-value	Result
H1	TR → SA	0.189	0.001	accepted
H2	RE → SA	0.227	0.000	accepted
H3	AS → SA	0.148	0.011	accepted
H4	EM → SA	0.172	0.002	accepted
H5	TA → SA	0.161	0.009	accepted
H6	LC → SA	0.314	0.000	accepted

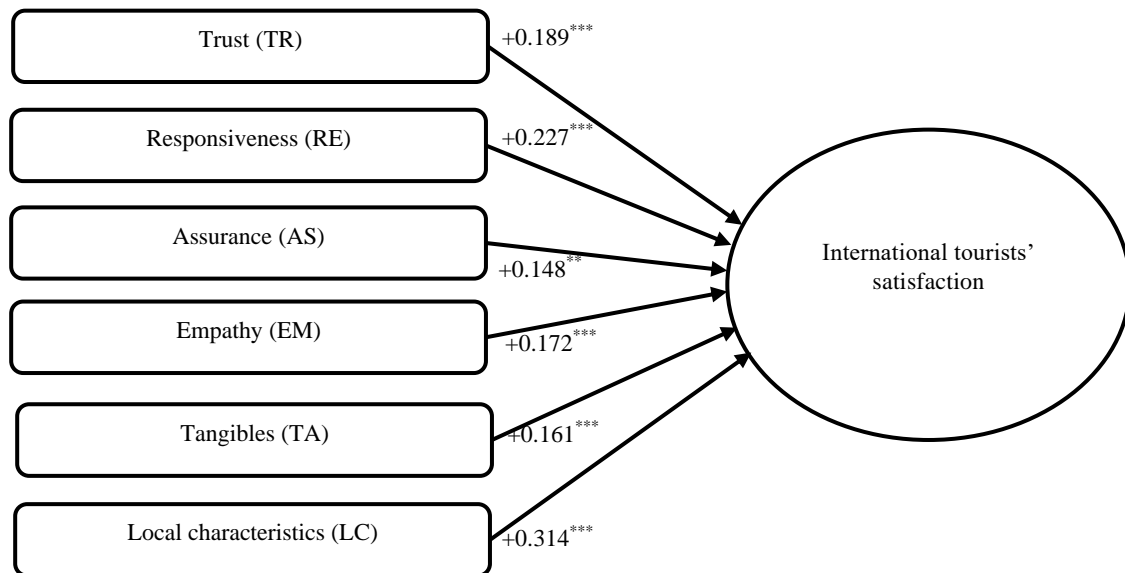


Figure 3. Research model testing result (Source: Compiled by the authors)
 Note: *** statistical significance level 1%, ** statistical significance level 5%

DISCUSSION

Based on the estimation results in Table 3, trust positively influences the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region with a standardized estimation value of 0.189 and a statistical significance p-value of 0.001. This indicates that when ecotourism destinations ensure reliability in providing services on time, service quality, and service commitments, the satisfaction level of international tourists will be higher. The research result further affirms that trust is an important component of service quality, positively affecting customer satisfaction (Ibrahim et al., 2015; Cilliers et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2018; Long, 2019; Masrurul, 2019).

The result in Table 3 indicates that responsiveness positively influences the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region. This hypothesis is accepted after considering the standardized estimation value of 0.227 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.000. The willingness to respond to the requests of international tourists, especially exceptional requests, enhances their satisfaction with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region. The study results demonstrate that responsiveness is an important component of service quality, positively impacting customer satisfaction. The finding is consistent with several studies in the tourism field proposed by Ibrahim et al. (2015), Cilliers et al. (2018), Shah et al. (2018), Long (2019), Masrurul (2019), Thi et al. (2020).

Based on the test results in Table 3, assurance positively impacts the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region, with a standardized estimation value of 0.148 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.011. This indicates that safety and security during the tourism service experience are of great concern to international tourists. If ecotourism destinations ensure safety and security for international tourists, their satisfaction will be higher. The research result continues to affirm that assurance is a very important criterion of service quality, influencing customer satisfaction with service quality. This result is similar to several studies proposed by Shah et al. (2018), Thuy (2020), Hong et al. (2022), Cheraghzadeh et al. (2023), Sapkota et al. (2023), Son et al. (2023).

The research results from Table 3 show that empathy positively influences the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region, with a standardized estimation value of 0.172 and a statistical significance p-value of 0.002. The empathy of staff during service delivery and their understanding of the psychological needs of tourists contribute to higher satisfaction with service quality. Additionally, the hospitable attitude of residents is also an important factor leading to the satisfaction of international tourists. This finding is consistent with several studies in the tourism field proposed by Shah et al. (2018), Long (2019), Masrurul (2019), and Thanh and Ha (2021).

Based on the estimation result in Table 3, tangible factors are positively correlated with the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region. This hypothesis is accepted after considering the standardized estimation value of 0.161 and a statistical significance p-value of 0.009. Therefore, investment in infrastructure, facilities, and equipment by ecotourism destinations will improve service quality and enhance the satisfaction of international tourists. Indeed, tangible factors contribute positively to the quality service experience of tourists (Hai et al., 2023). The finding is consistent with studies proposed by Ibrahim et al. (2015), Shah et al. (2018), Long (2019), Masrurul (2019), Thuy (2020), Hong et al. (2022), Cheraghzadeh et al. (2023), Sapkota et al. (2023), and Sugiyama et al. (2024).

Table 3 indicates that local characteristics positively affect the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region, with a standardized estimation value of 0.314 and a statistical significance p-value of 0.000. This factor has the most impact on the satisfaction of international tourists. The novelty, attractiveness, and uniqueness (culinary, natural landscapes, indigenous products) of destinations provide a special experience for international tourists, thereby increasing their satisfaction. The research result confirms that local characteristics are the factors that create differentiation and leave an impression on tourists, enhancing their satisfaction (Thanh and Ha, 2021; Son et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Satisfaction is an important factor contributing positively to the success of tourist destinations. The research results have demonstrated the factors influencing the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam. The study has shown that the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism is positively influenced by 06 factors, including trust, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangible factors, and local characteristics. Among these, local characteristics have the most impact on the satisfaction of international tourists with ecotourism in the Mekong Delta region. The research results provide useful reference materials for destination managers in the Mekong Delta region and researchers in the tourism field. Despite the achieved results, the study still has certain limitations.

First, this is a cross-sectional study, thus its generalizability is limited; Second, the study only selected a few typical ecotourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region for investigation, which somewhat affects the representativeness of the service quality of ecotourism in the region; Third, although the sample size ensures statistical power to test the research model, it is limited in terms of the diversity of international tourists (focused only on English-speaking tourists); Fourth, the study did not assess differences in international tourist satisfaction based on demographic characteristics.

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