FACTORS INFLUENCING TOURIST SATISFACTION WITH AGRITOURISM IN THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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Abstract: The Mekong Delta, Vietnam possesses great potential and advantages for developing agritourism. To ensure the sustainable development of agritourism, enhance service quality, and improve tourist satisfaction are essential. This study aims to identify the factors influencing tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Data were collected using a quota sampling method, with a sample size of 228 tourists who had visited and experienced agritourism in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. A mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative research was used to test research hypotheses. By applying structural equation modeling (SEM), the study demonstrated that local culture, natural landscape, novelty, assurance, tourism human resources, and perceived value positively influenced tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Among these factors, the natural landscape had the most impact on tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta.

Key words: satisfaction, agritourism, tourist, Mekong Delta

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world and plays a crucial role in the economy, stimulating growth in various sectors (Osman and Sentosa, 2013). In the context of climate change, rising food prices, and global and regional economic crises, the interconnection between agriculture and tourism can provide fundamental solutions for many countries (Torres and Momsen, 2011). Agritourism, a form of tourism based on agricultural resources and activities, is developed based on key elements such as natural landscapes, local life, agricultural production, and agricultural products (Sznajder et al., 2009). Rural tourism development helps preserve traditional cultural values, reduce poverty, bring economic benefits, protect the environment, and improve infrastructure and technical facilities (Dua et al., 2022). Agritourism serves as a form of environmental and land resource conservation (Dewandini and Dananto, 2021). Agritourism has brought significant value, which has attracted considerable attention from researchers in the field of rural tourism (Getz and Page, 1997). In tourism studies, tourist satisfaction has been explored from various perspectives, focusing on the antecedents of satisfaction, the process of achieving satisfaction, measuring satisfaction, and the importance of satisfaction for loyalty and behavioral intentions of tourists (Engeset and Elvekrok, 2015).

The Mekong Delta has enormous potential and advantages for developing agritourism based on favorable geographical conditions, fertile soil, climate, and biodiversity. In recent decades, agritourism development in the Mekong Delta has been closely linked to the sustainable and efficient exploitation of resources, development in harmony with environmental protection, and biodiversity conservation. It has made significant contributions to shaping agritourism products, including tangible and intangible cultural heritage, rural spaces encompassing traditional villages engaged in agricultural, forestry, and fisheries production, as well as handicrafts. Through these efforts, unique agritourism products have been created, such as observing rice paddies, experiencing a day as a farmer, engaging in organic vegetable cultivation, and participating in agricultural harvests. However, there are still limitations and challenges in the development of agritourism in the Mekong Delta, including inadequate infrastructure, duplicated products/services. Most tourist attractions only meet the basic needs of visitors. Issues related to marketing and advertising agritourism shows that most of the studies focus on measuring visitor satisfaction with service quality. In the field of agricultural tourism, few studies have identified the factors affecting the satisfaction of tourists with agricultural tourism in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, this study was carried out to demonstrate the factors affecting the satisfaction of tourists with agricultural tourism in the Mekong Delta. Vietnam.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES Theoretical framework Agritourism

Agritourism, also known as agricultural tourism, is a term that has been around for a long time worldwide. There have been various definitions proposed by researchers regarding agritourism. According to the OECD (1994), agritourism is a form of tourism that takes place in rural areas. Agritourism includes visits to farms and rural communities but excludes activities in outdoor recreational areas such as national parks, forests, or wilderness areas (Oppermann, 1996). According to Sharpley and Sharpley (1997), agritourism involves tourism products directly related to the environment, agricultural products, and agritourism accommodation. Agritourism is an activity that involves visiting a farm or any agricultural establishment for relaxation, recreation, and gaining knowledge, with the possibility of participating in farm activities (Lobo et al., 1999). According to Barbieri and Mshenga (2008), agritourism encompasses any activity that takes place on farms to attract tourists. The diversity of agritourism stems from the rich resources available in rural areas, including heritage tourism, cultural tourism, traditional craft village tourism, community-based tourism, eco-tourism, and agro-biological tourism (Katsushiro and Sieu, 2013).

Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the evaluation of customers regarding a product or service that meets their needs and expectations (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000; Kotler and Keller, 2006). Customer satisfaction is the overall attitude of customers towards a service provider, a perception of the gap between what customers predicted and what they received to fulfill their needs, goals, or desires (Hansemark and Albinsson, 2004). As presented by Baker and Crompton (2000), satisfaction is the emotional state of tourists after experiencing a trip. Customer satisfaction is the difference between the expected value and perceived value that tourism products have on the emotional state of tourists (Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Tourist satisfaction is a positive perception or feeling that tourists have when participating in leisure and entertainment activities and is expressed through the level of enjoyment from those experiences (Chen and Tsai, 2007).

Tourist satisfaction can be defined as the evaluation of tourists regarding the quality of the destination and the fulfillment of tourists' needs and expectations (Fu et al., 2019). Satisfaction with a tourist destination will influence the likelihood of tourists returning to the destination or spreading positive word-of-mouth about it (Lee et al., 2012). The success of tourist destinations is often attributed to tourist satisfaction (Nowacki, 2009).

Research hypotheses

The relationship between local culture and tourist satisfaction

Local culture is a core element that lays the foundation for the development of agritourism in the Mekong Delta region (Chau et al., 2016). Each tourism type has its own history and unique characteristics of the local culture, which helps tourists gain a deeper understanding of the significance of different tourism types in each locality (Nghi, 2013). Agritourism is a product of the intelligence and experience of an entire community (Burkheiser, 1969). Several studies have demonstrated that local culture positively influences tourist satisfaction (Tribe and Snaith, 1998; Shahrivar, 2012; Jayasinghe et al., 2015; Carvache-Franco et al., 2018; Chia et al., 2021). Therefore, the study proposes hypothesis H1: Local culture has a positive impact on tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region.

The relationship between natural landscapes and tourist satisfaction

The natural landscape is an essential component of tourism resources (Chau et al., 2016). The natural landscape not only influences tourists' destination choices but also impacts the flow of tourists at the national and global levels (Nghi and Ngọc, 2009). The natural landscape has a certain impact on the attractiveness of a destination (Vuong and Huyen, 2021). The more beautiful, captivating, and novel the natural landscape is, the higher tourist satisfaction (Ngoc and Trinh, 2015; Giang and Ngoc, 2021; Dung et al., 2023). Therefore, the study suggests hypothesis H2: Natural landscape positively affects tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region.

The relationship between novelty and tourist satisfaction

Product differentiation refers to the ability of a product to create differences and outperform competing products in the market (Best, 2013). Understanding customer needs and applying them to create a differentiated product enhances its competitive advantage (Dalrymple and Parsons, 2000). Novelty creates attractiveness and special impressions about the product and enhances tourist satisfaction, and willingness to pay (Trinh and Nghi, 2018). Therefore, the study proposes hypothesis H3: Novelty positively influences tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region.

The relationship between assurance and tourist satisfaction:

Assurance is a crucial criterion for tourism service quality and impacts the development of tourism at a destination (Cavlek, 2002; Garg, 2015). Safety and security concerns related to destinations have become increasingly significant for tourists (Poon and Adams, 2000). During the tourism service experience, tourists are particularly concerned about personal safety and security (Dung et al., 2023). Safety and security are important factors that influence tourist satisfaction at a tourist destination (Tuan, 2015; Carvache-Franco et al., 2018; Vuong and Huyen, 2021). So, the study proposes hypothesis H4: Assurance has a positive impact on tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region.

The relationship between tourism human resources and tourist satisfaction

The enthusiasm, friendliness, willingness to assist, and promptness in addressing tourist-related issues of tourism staff

at the destination positively impact tourist satisfaction (Nhan and Dua, 2015). The role of tourism human resources is crucial in improving the quality of services and enhancing tourist satisfaction. Several studies have demonstrated that the quality of staff at the destination positively influences tourist satisfaction (Nhan and Khanh, 2014; Tuan, 2015; Vuong and Huyen, 2021; Dung et al., 2023). Therefore, the study suggests hypothesis H5: Tourism human resources positively influence tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region.

The relationship between perceived value and tourist satisfaction

Perceived value is the emotional relationship established between customers and suppliers after customers have used the services and realized that the services create added value (Butz and Goodstein, 1996). Additionally, Woodruff (1997) suggests that perceived value is the customer's love, perception, and positive evaluation of the product's characteristics. Perceived value facilitates the customer's usage goals and intentions.

In the field of tourism, several studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between perceived value and tourist satisfaction (Hoa and Hang, 2017; Trang and Lan, 2019; Vuong and Huyen, 2021; Dewandini and Dananto, 2021; Hossain et al., 2021). Thus, the study sets out hypothesis H6: Perceived value positively affects tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region.

Based on the literature review and the research hypotheses formulated, the research model for the factors influencing tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region is established as figure 1 follows:



Figure 2. Flowchart of the research methods (Source: authors)

Factor	Easter Charles Coole Defense a rescard variable					
	Observed variable	Scale	Reference resources			
Local Cultural (LC)	 Agritourism in the Mekong Delta is associated with river culture. Agritourism in the Mekong Delta represents a typical community cultural life. The cultural aspect of agritourism activities in the Mekong Delta is interesting. 		Tribe and Snaith (1998), Shahrivar (2012)			
Natural Landscape (NL)	 River landscapes are new and attractive for agritourism experiences in the Mekong Delta. Rice field landscapes are impressive, especially for the agritourism experiences in the Mekong Delta. The landscape of fruit-laden orchards is an attractive factor of agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. 	Likert 1-5	Ngoc and Trinh (2015), Vuong and Huyen, (2021)			
Novelty (NO)	 Agritourism in the Mekong Delta has distinctive features compared to other places. Activities in agritourism in the Mekong Delta are novel and attractive. Activities in agritourism in the Mekong Delta offer a special experience. 	Likert 1-5	Best (2013), Dalrymple and Parsons (2000)			
Assurance (AS)	 The experience of agritourism services is accurate with the introduction information /advertisement. Security is always well guaranteed during the experience of agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Food safety and hygiene are focused on during the experience of agritourism in the Mekong Delta. 	Likert 1-5	Tuan (2015), Dua et al. (2022)			
Tourism Human Resources (HR)	 Tourism staff show friendliness, politeness, and enthusiasm. Tourism staff can communicate and behave well. Tourism staff have knowledge and skills in organizing and providing tourism services. 	Likert 1-5	Nghi (2013), Tuan (2015)			
Perceived Value (PV)	 Feel the value of quality after experiencing agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Feel the emotional value after experiencing agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Feel the social value after experiencing agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Feel the value by the price after experiencing agritourism in the Mekong Delta. 	Likert 1-5	Hoa and Hang (2017), Trang and Lan (2019)			
Satisfaction (SA)	 Compared to expectations, I feel satisfied with the experience of agritourism in the Mekong Delta. I do not regret choosing to use/participate in agritourism in the Mekong Delta. I enjoy participating in agritourism activities in the Mekong Delta. Overall, I am satisfied with agritourism activities in the Mekong Delta. 	Likert 1-5	Dua et al. (2022), Hong et al. (2022)			

Table 1. Interpretation of observed variables in the research model

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Analytical method

To test the research hypotheses, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was applied (Figure 2). The participatory rural appraisal helps identify appropriate measurement scales for the research model. The discussion occurred with 7 experienced agritourism tourists and 3 experts in agritourism research. Quantitative analysis methods were

used to test the research hypotheses, including testing the reliability of the measurement scales by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM).

Data collection method

In the SEM model, a reasonable sample size should reach a minimum of 200 observations (Hoelter, 1983). However, a larger sample size increases the reliability of the study, and the CB-SEM model requires a large sample size (Raykov and Widaman, 1995). Therefore, the study aims to survey a minimum of 200 observations to test the research model.



Figure 3. Location map of the Mekong Delta (Source: authors)

The research data were collected through an online survey method. This survey method was chosen because of several advantages, notably eliminating the cost of paper, and data entry, and the ability to reach survey participants beyond geographical boundaries (Cobanoglu et al., 2021). An official survey was conducted from December 2022 to January 2023. The sample was selected from famous agritourism sites in Tien Giang Province, Dong Thap Province, and Can Tho City (Figure 3). The study utilized quota sampling to collect data, with criteria for grouping including tourist type, gender, occupation, education level, and age. The number of survey questionnaires obtained was 235, and after removing unsuitable questionnaires (lack of reliability), a total of 228 valid questionnaires were used to test the research hypotheses.

Tourist type	Frequency	%	Education level	Frequency	%
International	78	34.21	Junior high school	24	10.53
Domestic	150	65.79	High school	67	29.39
Gender	Frequency	%	College	28	12.28
Male	118	51.75	University	84	36.84
Female	110	48.25	Postgraduate	25	10.96
Age	Frequency	%	Occupation	Frequency	%
16 - 30	42	18.42	Manager	43	18.86
31 - 45	73	32.02	Office staff	78	34.21
46 - 60	65	28.51	Public sector labor	52	22.81
Above 60	48	21.05	Freelancer	55	24.12

Table 2. Structure of the research sample (n = 228) (Source: authors)

Based on the statistical results of the demographic characteristics in Table 2, out of the 228 valid questionnaires, domestic tourists accounted for 65.79% and international tourists accounted for 34.21%. The gender distribution of the respondents was relatively balanced, with males accounting for 51.75% and females accounting for 48.25%. The majority of the participating tourists were in the age range of 31 to 45 years old, accounting for 32.02%. Most of the respondents had completed high school education (29.39%), and university education (36.84%). In terms of occupation, office workers had the highest proportion of respondents, accounting for 34.21%.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION Analytical results Scale reliability

The Cronbach's alpha test result in Table 3 shows that all research scales meet the requirements (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.802 to 0.907. All observed variables in the survey were related to tourists who had previously visited and experienced agrotourism services in the Mekong Delta region, especially agritourism destinations. Particularly, all scale items had item-total correlations greater than 0.3 (Nunnally, 1978; Peterson, 1994; Slater, 1995). The EFA results indicated that the observed variables converged into 7 factors, with factor loadings of observed variables exceeding 0.5 (Table 2). The KMO coefficient of 0.895 (>0.5) confirmed that the

factor analysis was suitable for the research data. The total variance extracted reached 75.59%, indicating that the 7 factors accounted for 75.59% of the data variation (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Hair et al., 1998).

The result of the CFA in Table 3 demonstrated that the measurement scales are appropriate for the market data (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Hu and Bentler, 1999), as indicated by the following statistical indices: CMIN/Df = 1.524 (\leq 3); TLI = 0.955 (\geq 0.9); CFI = 0.963 (\geq 0.9); RMSEA = 0.048 (\leq 0.08). Besides, all unstandardized regression weights were statistically significant (p < 0.05), confirming the convergent validity of the observed variables.

Based on Table 4, the values of composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) meet the criteria, with CR values (ranging from 0.807 and above) and AVE values (ranging from 0.513 and above) satisfying the requirements (Jöreskog, 1971; Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Therefore, the research data is suitable for the market data, exhibiting convergent validity, unidimensionality, discriminant validity, and reliability.

Observed variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha
Local Culture (LC)	0.846			
LC1	3.54	0.698	0.781	
LC2	3.70	0.785	0.842	
LC3	3.45	0.835	0.755	
Natural Landscape (NL)				0.849
NL1	3.71	0.719	0.685	
NL2	3.68	0.760	0.808	
NL3	3.63	0.725	0.845	
Novelty (NO)				0.836
NO1	3.86	0.684	0.811	
NO2	3.89	0.748	0.785	
NO3	3.85	0.673	0.757	
Assurance (AS)				0.810
AS1	3.82	0.835	0.833	
AS2	3.75	0.760	0.738	
AS3	3.81	0.718	0.703	
Tourism Human Resources (HR)				0.867
HR1	3.75	0.757	0.871	
HR2	3.72	0.745	0.864	
HR3	3.83	0.817	0.674	
Perceived Value (PV)				0.802
PV1	3.43	0.708	0.568	
PV2	3.58	0.744	0.855	
PV3	3.48	0.736	0.815	
PV4	3.50	0.765	0.522	
Satisfaction (SA)	0.907			
SA1	3.99	0.650	0.839	
SA2	3.90	0.643	0.644	
SA3	3.88	0.639	0.820	
SA4	3.92	0.588	0.852	

Table 3. Evaluation of scale reliability (Source: authors)

Table 4. Research scale validation results

Factor	Number of observed variables	Composite reliability CR	Average Variance extracted AVE	Resources
Local Culture (LC)	3	0.849	0.653	
Natural Landscape (NL)	3	0.850	0.655	Jöreskog
Novelty (NO)	3	0.838	0.634	(1971),
Assurance (AS)	3	0.812	0.590	Fornell and
Tourism Human Resources (HR)	3	0.875	0.701	Larcker
Perceived Value (PV)	4	0.807	0.513	(1981)
Satisfacion (SA)	4	0.907	0.711	

Hypothesis testing

Based on the structural equation modeling (SEM) result, the research model is suitable for the market data. This is indicated by the following outcomes: Chi-square/df = $1.468 (\le 3)$; TLI = $0.960 (\ge 0.9)$; CFI = $0.967 (\ge 0.9)$; RMSEA = $0.045 (\le 0.08)$. The hypothesis testing result is presented in Table 5.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standardized estimated value	P-value	Result
H1	$SA \leftarrow LC$	0.154	0.023	accepted
H2	$SA \leftarrow NL$	0.232	0.001	accepted
H3	SA ← NO	0.146	0.025	accepted
H4	$SA \leftarrow AS$	0.182	0.003	accepted
H5	$SA \leftarrow HR$	0.206	0.002	accepted
H6	$SA \leftarrow PV$	0.225	0.000	accepted

Table 5. Research hypothesis test

Based on Table 5, hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6 are all accepted with a 95% confidence level. This shows that the factors of local culture, natural landscape, novelty, assurance, tourism human resources, and perceived value are positively correlated with the satisfaction of tourists with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. Among these factors, the natural landscape factor has the most impact on the satisfaction of tourists with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region.

Discussion of Results

Hypothesis **H1:** Local culture has a positive influence on tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. The estimated result in Table 5 shows that local culture positively impacts the satisfaction of tourists with agritourism, with a standardized estimated coefficient of 0.154 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.023. When participating in agritourism in the Mekong Delta region, tourists can experience the cultural characteristics of the region, such as the waterway culture and the rice civilization, and the distinctive community culture of the Southwestern region. This experience brings many interesting and new things for tourists, thereby enhancing their satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. The research result continues to affirm that local culture is a core factor and foundation for the development of agricultural tourism in the Mekong Delta region (Chau et al., 2016). The research result is consistent with some studies proposed by Tribe and Snaith (1998), Shahrivar (2012), and Jayasinghe et al. (2015), Carvache-Franco et al., 2018, Chia et al., (2021).

Hypothesis **H2**: Natural landscapes have a positive effect on tourist satisfaction with agricultural tourism in the Mekong Delta region. Hypothesis H2 is accepted after considering the standardized estimated value of 0.232 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.001. When visiting agritourism sites in the Mekong Delta, tourists can admire and enjoy the impressive natural landscapes, such as the river landscapes, the beautiful rice fields, and the attractive fruit gardens. This creates a sense of excitement and special impressions in the minds of tourists, thereby improving their satisfaction with the tour. The research finding is consistent with studies proposed by Ngoc and Trinh (2015), Vuong and Huyen (2021), Giang and Ngoc (2021), Dung et al. (2023).

Hypothesis **H3**: Novelty positively affects tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. The estimated result in Table 5 shows that novelty positively impacts the satisfaction of tourists with agritourism, with a standardized estimated coefficient of 0.146 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.023. This indicates that when tourists perceive the novelty and attractiveness of agritourism products in the Mekong Delta compared to other places, their satisfaction will increase. Activities such as experiencing the ripe rice season, a day as a farmer, and participating in the harvest season have created unique and distinctive impressions in the minds of tourists. The research result confirms the value of novelty in creating attractiveness and special impressions of products, enhancing tourist satisfaction (Trinh and Nghi, 2018).

Hypothesis **H4:** Assurance positively influences tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. The estimated result in Table 5 shows that assurance has a standardized estimated value of 0.183 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.003. Security and food safety are always well-ensured during the agritourism experience in the Mekong Delta. Furthermore, the tourism destinations consistently deliver on the provided information and advertisements, which builds trust among tourists. Therefore, tourists feel reassured during the tour, leading to an improvement in their satisfaction. The research results further confirm that assurance is a crucial criterion for the development of tourism in a destination (Garg, 2015; Cavlek, 2002). This finding aligns with studies in the field of tourism proposed by Tuan (2015); Carvache-Franco et al., 2018; Vuong and Huyen (2021), Dung et al. (2023).

Hypothesis **H5**: Human resource positively impacts tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. Hypothesis H5 is accepted after considering the standardized estimated coefficient of 0.206 and a statistically significant pvalue of 0.002. When visiting tourist sites in the Mekong Delta, tourists are welcomed with friendliness, politeness, and enthusiasm by tourism staff. Additionally, tourism staff knows how to communicate and interact well with tourists. Especially, tourists will find that the organization of services meets their needs in the best possible way. The research result emphasizes the important role of tourism human resources in tourist satisfaction. The finding aligns with several studies proposed by Nhan and Khanh (2014), Tuân (2015), Vuong and Huyen (2021), and Dung et al. (2023).

Hypothesis **H6:** Perceived value positively influences the satisfaction of tourists with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region. Table 5 shows that the perceived value has a standardized estimated value of 0.225 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.000. After experiencing agritourism in the Mekong Delta, tourists perceive positive values in terms of quality, emotional value, social value, and especially value for money. When tourists positively evaluate the perceived value after their experience in the Mekong Delta, their satisfaction with agritourism will be higher. This research finding is similar to studies proposed by Hoa and Hang (2017), Trang and Lan (2019), Vuong and Huyen (2021), and Dewandini and Dananto (2021), Hossain et al., (2021).

CONCLUSION

Overall, the research results have achieved the set goal of demonstrating the factors influencing tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta region (Vietnam). The research findings indicate that local culture, natural landscape, novelty, assurance, tourism human resources, and perceived value positively affect tourist satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Among these factors, natural landscapes are evaluated by tourists as having the most impact on their satisfaction with agritourism in the Mekong Delta. The research results provide useful reference materials for destination managers in agritourism and researchers in this tourism sector.

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