

THE IMPACT OF DECISION-SHAPING FACTORS AND THE MODERATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED RISK ON INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' DESTINATION CHOICE: THE CASE OF THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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Abstract: This study examines the factors influencing international tourist's destination choices in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, using an integrated framework of four behavioral theories: Push-Pull Theory (PPT), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Rational Choice Theory (RCT), and Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT). The research focuses on key factors such as tourist attitudes, travel motivation, personal values, country and destination image, and destination information. Additionally, the study investigates the moderating role of perceived risk, which affects the relationship between tourist's attitudes and their final destination choices. A quantitative research method was employed, collecting data from 650 international tourists who visited the Mekong Delta from December 2023 to July 2024. The survey data was analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS 4.0. The analysis revealed that positive attitudes, strong motivation, and favorable perceptions of the destination significantly influence tourists' decisions to choose the Mekong Delta. However, perceived risks related to security, infrastructure, and climate negatively moderate these decisions, reducing the likelihood of choosing the destination even among tourists with initially positive attitudes. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how perceived risks shape tourist behavior, particularly during different stages of the decision-making process. The study provides valuable insights for tourism managers and local businesses to develop strategies that enhance destination appeal, address tourists' concerns, and ultimately promote sustainable tourism in the Mekong Delta.

Keywords: perceived risk, destination choice, country image, destination image, Mekong Delta

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INTRODUCTION

The destination choice decision (DCD) is a multi-stage process where tourists choose a destination based on their preferences, needs, and available information. It begins with destination awareness formed through sources like advertising and social media, which shape destination image and perception (Chaulagain et al., 2019; Choirisa et al., 2021). The DCD is influenced by both external factors (destination characteristics, attractiveness, distance, and perceived risks) and internal factors (motivation, personal values, attitudes, and knowledge) (Bayramov, 2022; Wu et al., 2023). Um and Crompton (1991) outline five stages in DCD: awareness, impression formation, belief-building, and final decision-making. Harrison-Hill (2000) divides the process into consideration, commitment, and decision stages. Recent studies highlight the growing influence of modern media and destination image in shaping tourist decisions (Choirisa et al., 2021). The Mekong Delta, located in the southwestern region of Vietnam, is known as the country's largest granary and aquaculture production area. Covering an area of approximately 40,548 km², it includes 13 provinces and Can Tho City (Figure 1). It offers vast tourism potential due to its river networks, floating markets, and cultural heritage. However, this potential is underutilized due to weak marketing strategies and insufficient understanding of international tourists' needs. Understanding the factors influencing international tourists' DCD in the Mekong Delta, including the moderating role of perceived risk, is crucial for enhancing tourism strategies. Despite its natural and cultural resources, the Mekong Delta lacks comprehensive research on DCD, particularly on how perceived risks such as safety, health, and financial concerns influence decision-making. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the factors that shape international tourists' decisions and testing the moderating effect of perceived risk.

The study will analyze how motivations, destination image, media, and risks impact the DCD process in the Mekong Delta. Recent research has explored motivations in international tourism, highlighting the role of personal and intrinsic

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factors in shaping tourist behavior (Grobbelaar, 2019; Karl, 2018). In wildlife tourism, risk perceptions are critical, especially for specific tourist groups like Chinese female travelers (Cong et al., 2021). Similarly, social media significantly influences destination choices, particularly among Millennials (Tham et al., 2020; Werenowska and Rzepka, 2020). In post-pandemic Vietnam, media and destination image are crucial factors (Wu et al., 2023).

Existing research in Hoi An and Saudi Arabia shows that infrastructure, cultural preservation, and service quality are vital for attracting tourists (Le et al., 2023; Mohammad et al., 2024). However, research in the Mekong Delta remains limited, particularly regarding personal values and perceived risks in shaping international tourists' decisions. Addressing these gaps will enhance destination marketing strategies and tourism development.

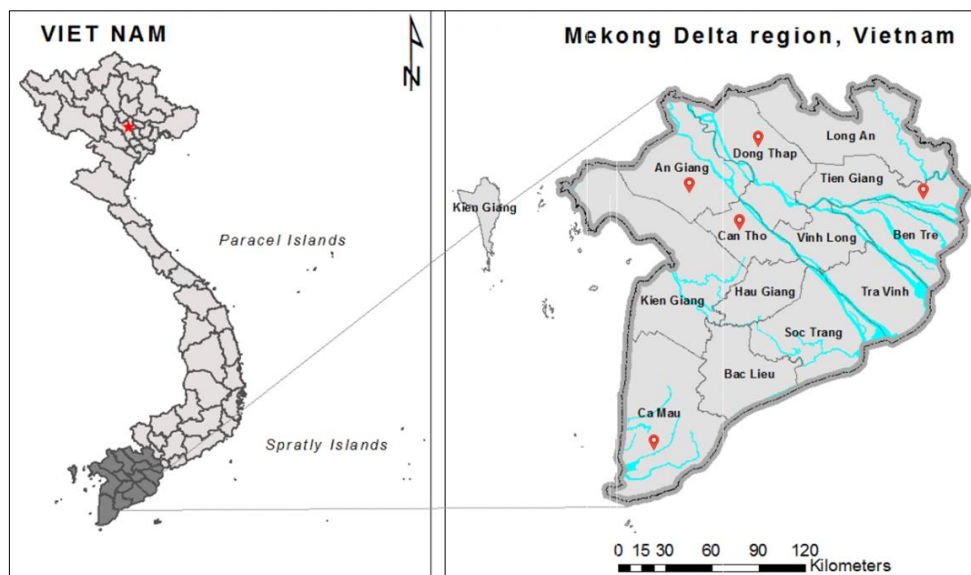


Figure 1. Map of the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam (📍 The location of the survey for the study: Tien Giang, Dong Thap, An Giang, Can Tho and Ca Mau in the Mekong Delta region, Vietnam)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

This research integrates four key theories of tourism behavior to analyze Destination Choice Decision (DCD): Push-Pull Theory (PPT), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Rational Choice Theory (RCT), and Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT). Push-Pull Theory explains how internal needs and external attractions drive tourist decisions (Lee, 1966; Dann, 1977). TPB focuses on attitudes, social norms, and perceived control in shaping intentions (Ajzen, 1991, 2020). RCT examines how tourists evaluate costs and benefits (Becker, 1976), while BDT highlights the role of emotions and biases (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). Together, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding how factors like motivation, values, risks, and destination information influence DCD.

Tourist attitudes toward a destination (ATT) consist of affective (emotions), cognitive (beliefs), and behavioral (actions) components. These attitudes shape tourists' decisions to visit, return, or recommend a destination based on how well it meets their needs (Crompton, 1979; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) explains how positive attitudes, influenced by emotions, experiences, and perceptions, lead to stronger intentions to visit (Ajzen, 1991). Research shows that positive attitudes significantly impact destination choices, with factors like personality, celebrity influence, and perceived risks playing a role (Ervina and Octaviani, 2022; Kara et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2022). Hypothesis H1: Tourist attitudes positively influence international tourists' destination choice decisions.

Travel motivation (MOT) plays a vital role in shaping tourist destination choices. Push factors, like the need to escape or relax, and pull factors, such as a destination's appeal, combine to form personal travel motivation (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981). The Push-Pull Theory suggests that internal needs and destination attributes work together to drive tourists toward destinations that align with their desires. Studies consistently show that motivation, including factors like relaxation, family activities, and safety, significantly impacts destination choices (Fieger et al., 2019; Azeez, 2022; Soldatenko et al., 2023). Hypothesis H2: Travel motivation positively influences international tourists' destination choice decisions.

Personal values (PV) defined by Rokeach (1973) as enduring beliefs guiding decision-making, significantly influence tourist behavior. Rokeach's division of values into terminal (e.g., happiness) and instrumental (e.g., honesty) has been foundational, with Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) expanding the concept to ten core values like power and achievement. Crompton (1979) linked travel motivation to personal values, showing that those who value freedom and adventure often prefer novel destinations. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), personal values shape attitudes and intentions, influencing destination choices. Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT) further explores how values guide decisions in complex situations. Push-Pull Theory (PPT) explains that personal values, as internal push factors, drive tourists toward specific destinations. Studies show personal values impact motivation, attitudes, and destination choices (Teng et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2020). **Drawing from these concepts, it is proposed that personal values positively influence international tourists' destination choices (H3a), travel motivation (H3b), and tourists' attitudes toward a destination (H3c).**

Perceived risk (PR) as defined by Slovic and colleagues, refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of potential dangers. In tourism, risks like physical, financial, or socio-psychological factors strongly influence destination choices. Studies show that risks such as terrorism, political instability, and natural disasters reduce tourists' likelihood of visiting certain places (Sönmez and Graefe, 1998; Fuchs and Reichel, 2006; Kozak et al., 2007). Perceived risks, particularly concerning safety and health, strongly impact destination choices for senior women, who prioritize security and comfort (Maiurro and Brandão, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened health concerns, further discouraging travel (Baraquil and Borbon, 2022). Increased risk perception diminishes tourists' motivations and positive attitudes, negatively influencing destination decisions (Han et al., 2020). Additionally, perceived risk moderates the relationship between positive attitudes, destination image, and revisit intentions (Wei et al., 2024). Building on this foundation, it is proposed that perceived risk negatively impacts international tourists' destination decisions (H4a), negatively moderates the relationship between travel motivation and international tourists' destination decisions (H4b), and negatively moderates the relationship between tourist attitudes toward a destination and international tourists' destination decisions (H4c).

Country image (CI) refers to the overall perception tourists hold about a country, including its culture, natural beauty, political stability, and social atmosphere. A positive CI attracts tourists and enhances the image of specific destinations within the country (Camprubí and Gassiot-Melian, 2023; Ferreira et al., 2022). According to Push-Pull Theory (PPT), a strong CI acts as a pull factor, encouraging tourists to choose the country by creating favorable impressions. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that a positive CI fosters trust and positive attitudes, making decision-making easier (Aragónés-Jericó et al., 2022; Xia and Xu, 2023). Building on this framework, it is proposed that country image positively influences international tourists' destination choices (H5a) and positively influences destination image (H5b).

Destination image (DI) encompasses tourists' perceptions, impressions, and emotions about a location, involving both tangible elements like infrastructure and safety, and intangible factors such as culture and personal experiences (Crompton, 1979). A positive destination image is key to attracting tourists, shaping expectations, and influencing satisfaction, revisit intentions, and decision-making (Aksöz and Çay, 2022; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Shatnawi et al., 2023; Suryawardani et al., 2024). According to the Push-Pull Theory (PPT), a strong destination image acts as a pull factor, motivating tourists to visit by appealing to their desires for relaxation, culture, and unique experiences (Moliner-Tena et al., 2023). Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT) further explain how a positive image highlights benefits and reduces perceived risks, promoting favorable decisions (Homer et al., 2023; Ghaderi et al., 2024). The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that cognitive and emotional factors combine to shape tourists' attitudes, influencing loyalty and intention to return (Marković et al., 2022). Based on these theories, it is proposed that destination image positively influences international tourists' destination choices (H6a), travel motivation (H6b), and tourist attitudes toward a destination (H6c).

Destination information (IS) refers to the characteristics, services, and experiences that tourists use to evaluate a location. Originating from consumer behavior theory, it plays a key role in shaping tourist perceptions and decision-making (Fodness and Murray, 1997). According to Push-Pull Theory (PPT), detailed and positive information about a destination highlights its pull factors, increasing its appeal and influencing tourists' choices (Le and Bui, 2022; Raafat et al., 2023). This information shapes destination image by reinforcing positive cognitive and emotional aspects, creating a compelling perception in tourists' minds (Yang, 2023). According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), reliable and attractive information enhances positive attitudes toward the destination, increasing the likelihood of choosing it (Srivastava et al., 2022). Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT) suggests that detailed information fosters positive emotions, shaping motivations by addressing tourists' desires and needs for safety and enjoyment (Chen et al., 2022; Wang and Park, 2023). Therefore, destination information influences international tourists' destination choices (H7a), strengthens destination image (H7b), fosters positive tourist attitudes toward a destination (H7c), and enhances travel motivation (H7d).

The proposed research model integrates key theories (PPT, RCT, BDT, TPB) and consumer behavior models to analyze international tourists' destination choices. It explores how push and pull factors, personal values, and behavior influence decisions across stages like need recognition, evaluation of alternatives, and final decision-making. Motivations and positive destination images drive favorable attitudes (H6b, H7d, H6c, H7c), while personal values and perceived risks impact choices (H3a, H4a). Information from social media and reviews shapes emotions and decisions (H5a, H7a). Ultimately, strong motivations, low risks, and positive attitudes increase destination selection likelihood (H1, H2).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In tourism research, selecting an appropriate sample size is essential for data accuracy and reliability. Following Hair et al. (2019), this study chose 650 samples, exceeding the recommended minimum of five observations per variable, with a 10:1 ratio being ideal. With 37 observed variables, the required minimum was 370, and 585 valid responses were collected from international tourists visiting the Mekong Delta from December 2023 to July 2024. Data was collected via surveys with the assistance of Vietravel, TransViet Travel, and other companies, using a convenience sampling method across four subregions. The formal quantitative research employed a structured questionnaire measuring factors such as tourist attitudes, travel motivation, personal values, perceived risk, country and destination images, and destination information. SmartPLS 4.0 and PLS-SEM were used for data analysis, as PLS-SEM better handles non-normal data, complex models, and predictive research (Hair et al., 2019; Sarstedt et al., 2016; Henseler et al., 2015). The measurement scales were adapted from reputable sources: Jalilvand et al. (2012) and Girish et al. (2021) for tourist attitudes toward a destination; Correia and Pimpao (2008), Li and Cai (2011) and Pawaskar and Goel (2016) for travel motivation; Cosme Fernandes and Lages (2002); Fritzsche and Oz (2007), and Li et al. (2016) for personal values; Cong et al. (2021) and George (2010) for

perceived risk; Chaulagain et al. (2019) for country image; Beerli and Martin (2004), Gallarza et al. (2002), Mihai et al., (2023) and Qu et al. (2011) for destination image; and Lam and Hsu (2004) and Mutinda and Mayaka (2012) for destination choice. These scales were developed through expert consultation, group discussions, and preliminary evaluation, ensuring reliability and validity for understanding international tourists' behaviors in the Mekong Delta.

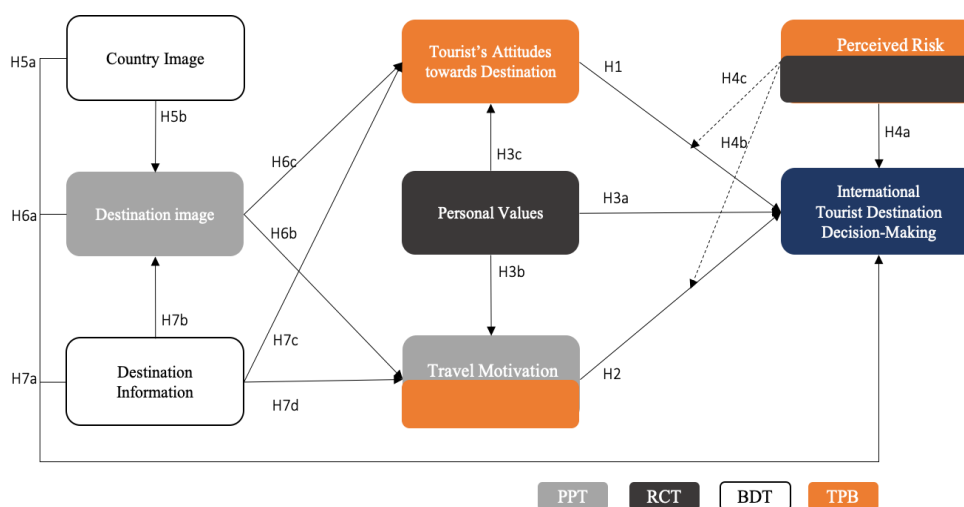


Figure 2. Conceptual framework

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Table 1, providing a clear overview of the demographic characteristics of international tourists visiting the Mekong Delta. Female tourists made up 53.7% and males 46.3%, reflecting a relatively balanced gender distribution. The majority of visitors were aged 16-30 (41.0%), followed by 31-45 (32.8%), 46-60 (16.1%), and over 60 (10.1%), highlighting the Mekong Delta's appeal across age groups, particularly among younger and middle-aged travelers. Most tourists had college or university education (62.6%) or higher (22.2%), ensuring reliable survey responses. Visitors predominantly came from Asia (44.1%), followed by Europe (23.9%), the Americas (17.4%), and Oceania (14.5%), with South Korea and China being the largest markets. Income-wise, 35.6% of tourists earned \$3000-\$4999, indicating a moderate to high spending capacity.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Criteria	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	271	46.3
	Female	314	53.7
Age	16 - 30	240	41.0
	31 - 45	192	32.8
	46 - 60	94	16.1
	Over 60	59	10.1
Education level	Below High School High	12	2.1
	School/Vocational	77	13.2
	College/University	366	62.6
	Postgraduate or higher	130	22.2
Country	Asia	258	44.1
	Europe	140	23.9
	America	102	17.4
	Oceania	85	14.5
Monthly income	Below \$1500	82	14.0
	\$1500 - \$2999	150	25.6
	\$3000 - \$4999	208	35.6
	\$5000 or more	145	24.8

Outer loading is a key indicator in exploratory factor analysis (EFA) that measures the correlation between an observed variable and its corresponding latent factor. A higher outer loading (close to 1) indicates a stronger representation of the latent factor. In this study, the acceptable threshold for outer loading is > 0.7 (Hair et al., 2017). The first analysis showed that most observed variables met this threshold, except for DI6 (0.467), DI7 (0.525), IS5 (0.373), and PV3 (0.171), which were below the acceptable limit. These low values indicate weak correlations with their respective latent factors, potentially reducing the reliability and validity of the model. Consequently, DI6, DI7, IS5, and PV3 were removed to improve the model's reliability and validity.

After removing low outer loading variables DI6, DI7, IS5, and PV3, the measurement model improved significantly. The second analysis showed all remaining variables had outer loadings > 0.7 , confirming strong correlations with latent factors and ensuring reliability and validity. ATT, CI, DCD, MOT, and RP had loadings > 0.8 , while DI, IS, and PV also

demonstrated strong alignment with their factors. This refinement enhanced the model’s fit and theoretical strength. Cronbach’s alpha (CA) values for all concepts exceeded 0.7 (Table 2), ensuring reliability. Composite reliability (CR) (> 0.7) values and AVE (> 0.5) scores were also above acceptable thresholds, confirming internal consistency and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). These results validate the measurement scales and support the model’s conclusions.

Table 2. Measurement model evaluation results

Code	Observed variables	Outer loadings	CA	CR	AVE
<i>Tourist Attitude Towards Destination (ATT)</i>			0.802	0.805	0.716
ATT1	I feel that this destination is wonderful.	0.849			
ATT2	I believe that visiting this destination is a valuable experience.	0.834			
ATT3	I trust that visiting this destination brings positive impacts.	0.856			
<i>Travel Motivation (MOT)</i>			0.876	0.892	0.734
MOT1	Exploring the destination.	0.858			
MOT2	Observing and experiencing different cultures and lifestyles.	0.917			
MOT3	Learning new things or enhancing knowledge.	0.717			
MOT4	Relaxing and reducing stress.	0.918			
<i>Personal Values (PV)</i>			0.900	0.901	0.833
PV1	I am free to make decisions according to my own will.	0.899			
PV2	My opinions are always respected by others.	0.911			
PV4	Visiting this destination helps me build and strengthen good relationships with others.	0.929			
<i>Perceived Risk (PR)</i>			0.899	0.920	0.769
RP1	I am concerned whether the climate conditions at the destination will be suitable for my health.	0.939			
RP2	I worry that the travel experience at this destination may not meet my expectations.	0.851			
RP3	I am concerned that the infrastructure at the destination may not be fully developed.	0.904			
RP4	I am worried about potential security risks to my personal safety at the destination.	0.808			
<i>Country Image (CI)</i>			0.773	0.814	0.686
CI1	Personal security is ensured in Vietnam.	0.892			
CI2	A safe country with a stable political environment.	0.802			
CI3	Vietnam has a rich and unique cultural heritage.	0.788			
<i>Destination Image (DI)</i>			0.924	0.925	0.624
DI1	Rich ecosystem and diverse landscapes.	0.786			
DI10	Peaceful and poetic landscapes.	0.719			
DI11	Floating markets, orchards, conical hats, and traditional scarves - cultural symbols associated with the Mekong Delta.	0.729			
DI2	I can choose from a variety of accommodations, entertainment, and shopping services that meet my needs.	0.741			
DI3	The Mekong Delta has a variety of rich art forms, such as “Đờn ca tài tử”, “Cải lương”, and “Hò”, reflecting the local cultural identity.	0.851			
DI4	Attractive and diverse local cuisine.	0.818			
DI5	Warm and hospitable people.	0.864			
DI8	Fresh air.	0.789			
DI9	Mild and pleasant climate.	0.802			
<i>Destination Information (IS)</i>			0.845	0.853	0.682
IS1	I often search for information on social media to learn about the destination.	0.814			
IS2	I frequently gather information from online travel reviews by previous tourists before visiting a certain place.	0.858			
IS3	I often consult family and friends to ensure my decision is wise.	0.854			
IS4	I often collect information from travel service providers and promotional materials to compare prices and services of different travel companies.	0.776			
<i>International Tourist’s Destination Choice Decision (DCD)</i>			0.884	0.924	0.809
DCD1	I have decided to choose this destination for my upcoming trip.	0.929			
DCD2	I have decided to make this destination the final stop of my upcoming trip.	0.833			
DCD3	I completely trust my decision to choose this destination without needing any further information.	0.933			

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio matrix for discriminant validity assessment

	ATT	CI	DCD	DI	IS	MOT	PV	RP	RP x ATT	RP x MOT
ATT										
CI	0.042									
DCD	0.571	0.112								
DI	0.462	0.194	0.431							
IS	0.667	0.076	0.565	0.365						
MOT	0.609	0.045	0.520	0.445	0.586					
PV	0.427	0.027	0.353	0.178	0.388	0.424				
RP	0.143	0.048	0.165	0.072	0.050	0.046	0.086			
RP x ATT	0.181	0.022	0.314	0.038	0.117	0.147	0.076	0.218		
RP x MOT	0.162	0.033	0.289	0.043	0.125	0.113	0.048	0.223	0.598	

HTMT values were used to assess discriminant validity, with all values below the 0.900 threshold, confirming distinctiveness between constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). The HTMT values for ATT and other constructs, such as CI

(0.042), DCD (0.571), DI (0.462) (Table 3), were within acceptable limits. Additionally, all other construct pairs had HTMT values below 0.85, confirming clear differentiation.

The research model and hypotheses were tested using SmartPLS 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples. The model showed a strong fit with an SRMR value of 0.048, below the 0.08 threshold (Hair et al., 2017; Henseler et al., 2015). The study also analyzed perceived risk (RP) as a moderator between tourist attitudes (ATT), motivation (MOT), and destination choice decisions (DCD), showing its impact on how these factors influence final decisions.

Table 4. The results of the assessment of the moderating role of perceived risk

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	P-value	Conclusion
H4c	RP*ATT → DCD	-0.123	0.007	Accepted
H4b	RP*DC → DCD	-0.084	0.060	Rejected

The analysis results (Table 4) show that perceived risk negatively moderates the relationship between tourist attitudes (ATT) and destination choice (DCD). The negative coefficient (-0.123) and P-value of 0.007 ($P < 0.05$) indicate that as perceived risk increases, the positive effect of attitude on destination choice weakens, meaning higher perceived risk reduces the likelihood of choosing a destination, even with a positive attitude.

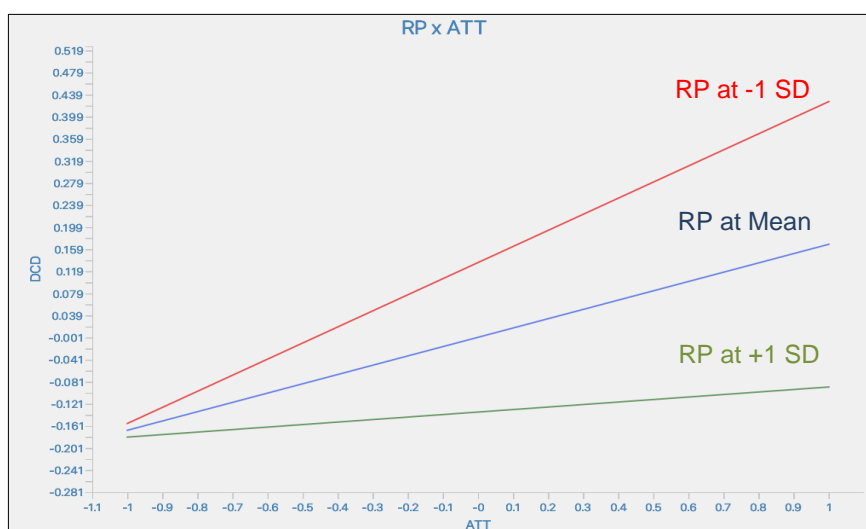


Figure 3. The negative moderating effect of perceived risk

Figure 3 shows the moderating effect of perceived risk (RP) on the relationship between tourist attitudes (ATT) and destination choice (DCD). The top line represents low risk (-1 SD), the middle line average risk (Mean), and the bottom line high risk (+1 SD). As risk increases, the impact of attitude on destination choice decreases significantly.

However, Table 5 shows that perceived risk does not significantly moderate the relationship between travel motivation (MOT) and destination choice, as indicated by a negative coefficient (-0.084) and a P-value of 0.060 ($P > 0.05$). Thus, hypothesis H4b is rejected. When mediators are considered, there is a notable increase in the overall impact of factors, indicating their key role in enhancing the influence of other variables.

Table 5. Evaluation results of relationships considering the role of mediators

Hypothesis	Relationship	β			P- value	Conclusion
		Direct	Indirect	Total		
H1	ATT → DCD	0.168	-	0.168	0.001	Accepted
H2	MOT → DCD	0.141	-	0.141	0.001	Accepted
H3a	PV → DCD	0.097	0.06	0.157	0.000	Accepted
H3b	PV → MOT	0.208	-	0.208	0.000	Accepted
H3c	PV → ATT	0.183	-	0.183	0.000	Accepted
H4a	RP → DCD	-0.136	-	-0.136	0.000	Accepted
H4b	RP x MOT → DCD	-0.084	-	-0.084	0.060	Rejected
H4c	RP x ATT → DCD	-0.123	-	-0.123	0.007	Accepted
H5a	CI → DCD	0.089	0.043	0.132	0.000	Accepted
H5b	CI → DI	0.185	-	0.185	0.000	Accepted
H6a	DI → DCD	0.160	0.075	0.235	0.000	Accepted
H6b	DI → MOT	0.248	-	0.248	0.000	Accepted
H6c	DI → ATT	0.235	-	0.235	0.000	Accepted
H7a	IS → DCD	0.241	0.199	0.440	0.000	Accepted
H7b	IS → DI	0.336	-	0.336	0.000	Accepted
H7c	IS → ATT	0.414	0.079	0.493	0.000	Accepted
H7d	IS → MOT	0.358	0.083	0.441	0.000	Accepted

Table 5 shows the mediating effects on destination choice decisions (DCD). Personal values (PV) have a stronger total effect when mediators are included (direct: 0.097, indirect: 0.06, total: 0.157, p-value = 0.000). Similarly, country image (CI) increases in total influence on DCD (direct: 0.089, indirect: 0.043, total: 0.132, p-value = 0.000). Destination image (DI) and information source (IS) also show significant increases in total effects (DI: direct 0.160, indirect 0.075, total 0.235; IS: direct 0.241, indirect 0.199, total 0.440, p-value = 0.000). IS also boosts tourist attitude (ATT) and motivation (MOT) through mediators (ATT total: 0.493; MOT total: 0.441, p-value = 0.000). Mediators significantly enhance the impact of variables on DCD, ATT, and MOT, highlighting their importance in clarifying complex relationships. According to Cohen (1988), R² values indicate the explanatory power of independent variables. In Figure 4, ATT has an R² of 0.389, DCD 0.459, DI 0.141, and MOT 0.360, all suggesting moderate to strong explanatory power. Q² values further validate predictive power (Tenenhaus et al., 2005), with Q² for ATT (0.273), DI (0.086), and MOT (0.258) all confirming strong predictive capability.

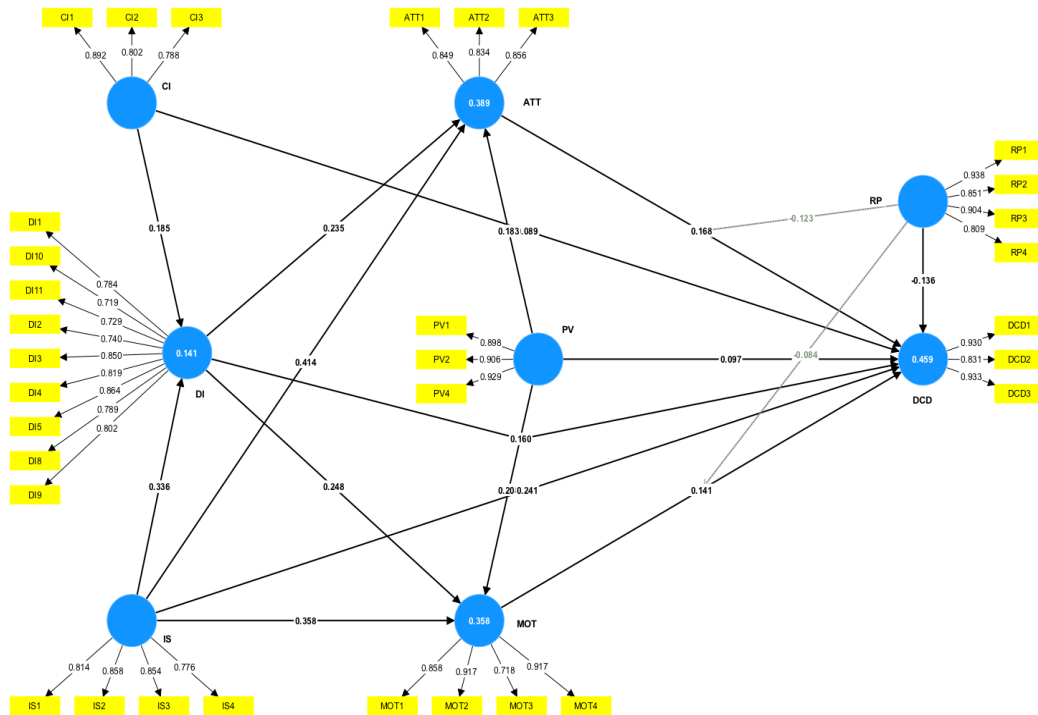


Figure 4. PLS-SEM analysis results of the research model

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

This study confirms and expands upon existing theories related to international tourists' destination choices, particularly in the context of the Mekong Delta.

The research supports the foundational theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Push-Pull Theory, and Behavioral Decision Theory (BDT), by validating the significance of key factors like tourist attitude (ATT), travel motivation (MOT), personal values (PV), perceived risk (RP), country image (CI), destination image (DI), and destination information (IS) on decision-making. The significant positive effect of tourist attitude (H1, $\beta = 0.168$, $p = 0.001$), consistent with Jiang et al. (2022), affirms the role of attitude in shaping destination choices. Similarly, the strong influence of travel motivation (H2, $\beta = 0.230$, $p = 0.000$) corroborates findings from Azeez (2022), further reinforcing the push-pull dynamics in tourism. The significant effects of personal values on destination choice (H3a, $\beta = 0.155$, $p = 0.003$), motivation (H3b, $\beta = 0.342$, $p = 0.000$), and attitude (H3c, $\beta = 0.288$, $p = 0.000$), as supported by studies like Chang et al. (2023) and Teng et al. (2023), emphasize the importance of intrinsic values in tourist behavior.

The moderating role of perceived risk (RP) is particularly noteworthy. While it negatively impacts the relationship between attitude and destination choice (H4a, $\beta = -0.236$, $p = 0.001$), it does not significantly moderate the link between motivation and destination choice (H4b, $\beta = -0.084$, $p = 0.060$). This highlights the complexity of risk perception in tourism decisions. The study also strengthens the theoretical understanding of how country image (H5a, $\beta = 0.325$, $p < 0.001$) and destination image (H6a, $\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.001$) shape destination choices, as noted by Xia and Xu (2023) and Homer et al. (2023), respectively. Furthermore, destination information (H7a, $\beta = 0.241$, $p < 0.001$) plays a critical role, aligning with research from Wu et al. (2023). Overall, the study provides a deeper theoretical understanding of the factors influencing tourist behavior, particularly in emerging destinations like the Mekong Delta, and underscores the need for further exploration into the moderating effects of perceived risk on decision-making.

Managerial Implications

To enhance the Mekong Delta's appeal to international tourists, managers should prioritize key areas such as infrastructure improvement, product diversification, cultural preservation, and risk management.

(i) *Infrastructure and Security*: Upgrading roads, waterways, and public transportation is essential for improving access to popular attractions like floating markets and garden tours. Implementing robust safety protocols and emergency systems will reduce perceived risks and boost tourist confidence; (ii) *Tourism Product Diversification*: Offering diverse tourism options, including wellness tourism, adventure activities, and cultural tours, will attract a broader range of tourists. Expanding experiences like riverboat safaris, cycling, and craft workshops can enrich visitor experiences and meet international demand; (iii) *Enhancing Visitor Experience*: Improving key attractions and incorporating immersive activities like fruit picking or craft-making will create memorable experiences, positively shaping tourist perceptions and increasing revisit intentions. (iv) *Cultural Preservation and Promotion*: Preserving local culture through festivals, art, and culinary experiences, such as cooking classes and food tours, will strengthen the region's identity and enhance its cultural appeal; (v) *Community Engagement and Feedback*: Interactive activities with local communities, such as farming or fishing, foster deeper connections, while regular tourist feedback helps refine tourism offerings to ensure satisfaction and loyalty; (vi) *Risk and Safety Management*: Clear communication of safety measures and infrastructure upgrades, particularly in flood-prone areas, is crucial for minimizing risks and enhancing the region's reputation as a safe destination; (vii) *Marketing Strategies*: A strong online presence, partnerships with international travel agencies, and up-to-date information on attractions are essential for positioning the Mekong Delta as a top international destination.

By addressing these areas, tourism managers can overcome perceived risks, improve the region's competitive advantage, and ensure sustainable growth while preserving the Mekong Delta's cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the effectiveness of an integrated model combining four tourism behavior theories (PPT, TPB, RCT, BDT) in explaining international tourist destination choices in the Mekong Delta. Key factors such as attitudes, motivation, personal values, national and destination image, and information significantly influence decisions. Perceived risk plays a moderating role, especially between attitudes and decision-making. The model highlights four critical stages: need recognition, evaluation, emotional influence, and final decision-making. For tourism managers, enhancing destination image, improving service quality, and aligning products with tourist values are crucial for attracting international visitors.

However, the study has limitations. Convenience sampling may not fully represent all tourist groups, and a few variables had lower outer loadings, potentially affecting reliability. Additionally, the focus on the Mekong Delta limits generalizability to other destinations. Future research should explore these findings in different contexts for broader validation.

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