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Article

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Cogent Business & Management

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Suggested Citation: Le, Thanh Tiep (2024) : Influences of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta – Vietnam: The mediating role of Tourist Satisfaction, Cogent Business & Management, ISSN 2331-1975, Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, Vol. 11, Iss. 1, pp. 1-15,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2353570>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/326287>

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To cite this article: Thanh Tiep Le (2024) Influences of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta – Vietnam: The mediating role of Tourist Satisfaction, Cogent Business & Management, 11:1, 2353570, DOI: [10.1080/23311975.2024.2353570](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2353570)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2353570>



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Influences of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta – Vietnam: The mediating role of Tourist Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine those factors that can affect the performance of the ecotourism industry in Vietnam. The well-known influencing and mediating factors are identified with strong connections in the ecotourism industry. Based on an extended literature review on travel service, safety and nature for tourist satisfaction, while the culture, facilities, native people, food, beverage and experience factors. The collected data was analyzed by using the structural equation system. The current work presents the exploratory survey with data collection technique through different surveys. One of the surveys relates to tourist destination and tourism companies in Mekong Delta. The tourist satisfaction has the strongest impact on the performance of ecotourism industry and has a strong impact to sustain the development of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The obtained results indicate that the impacts of travel service, safety and nature for tourist satisfaction, while the culture, facilities, native people, food, beverage and experience factors also play an important role in the tourist satisfaction. These findings indicate that by improving the performance of the ecotourism industry, the tourist satisfaction must be enhanced. To the best of our knowledge, these findings help the managers tourism sector, tourism companies, the local authorities, etc., to review the overall matrix to see the what and the how to enhance the performance of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta. Accordingly create the most suitable and practical policies and strategies for sustainable development of ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta.

IMPACT STATEMENT

The tourist satisfaction has the strongest impact on the performance of ecotourism industry and has a strong impact to sustain the development of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The obtained results indicate that the impacts of travel service, safety and nature for tourist satisfaction, while the culture, facilities, native people, food, beverage and experience factors also play an important role in the tourist satisfaction. These findings indicate that by improving the performance of the ecotourism industry, the tourist satisfaction must be enhanced. Those findings help the managers tourism sector, tourism companies, the local authorities, etc., to review the overall matrix to see the what and the how to enhance the performance of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta. Accordingly create the most suitable and practical policies and strategies for sustainable development of ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta, Vietnam.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 February 2022

Revised 22 February 2024

Accepted 29 April 2024

KEYWORDS

Eco-tourism; tourist satisfaction; sustainable tourism; ecotourism industry performance; Vietnam

REVIEWING EDITOR

Huifen (Helen) Cai,
Middlesex University
Business School, United
Kingdom

SUBJECTS

Economics of Tourism;
Tourism Geography;
Tourism Management;
Tourism Planning and
Policy

1. Introduction

Tourism is a key industry due to its significant contribution to the overall development of national economy (Gössling & Michael Hall, 2019). In an emerging country as Vietnam, its contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) accounts for about 10%, and this proportion is forecasted to increase to 12% to 14% in 2025 and continue to increase to 15% to 17% in 2030 (RMIT, 2022). In 2019, Vietnam was one of the 10 countries with the fastest tourism growth in the world (RMIT, 2022). Therefore, its growth is subjected to not only contribute to the nation's socio-economic development and political stability but also to that

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of the region and the world at large. In this respect, the sustainability of the tourism industry is of great significance.

Refers to a context in which climate change is an issue of high concern by humanity and particularly sensitive to those who seriously care about the environment, sustainable tourism models receive considerable attention. In this regard, ecotourism is a suitable model for sustainability (Nguyen, 2018). Ecotourism is known as a type of tourism that encounters the growing needs of the key and high-paying tourist markets to contribute positively to the conservation of natural and diverse values (Wondirad et al., 2020). According to the tourism development strategy of Vietnam, there are many factors that can be used like biology, community development and indigenous culture and ecotourism (Thuy et al., 2020). In the past, ecotourism was one of the best sources to attract the attention of the tourists due to the responsible nature tourism, which support the objectives to preserve the natural environment, community development and indigenous cultural values (Amoamo et al., 2018). Likewise, according to Dima et al. (2020); Sultana (2021), concept of ecotourism aims to conserve the natural atmosphere, particularly indigenous cultural values, biodiversity and socio-economic development based on the context of the natural situation, biodiversity has a direct impact on the human due to the economic development policies.

Vietnam is advantageous for ecotourism development. For instance, climate (humid tropical monsoon, Kuznetsov & Kuznetsova, 2013); ecosystems, according to Khai and Yabe, (2014), Vietnam is one of the largest biodiversity centers in the world and sources of various unique traits especially in the Southeast Asia (Matalin, 2020; Szczepanowska & Ploeger, 2019); resources (Lipscombe & Thwaites, 2003). In particular, Mekong Delta has abundant tourism resources in terms of nature, culture, cuisine and can develop the major trends in the world such as: exploring nature, cultural and ecological diversity, health tourism, and agritourism experience (Gia, 2021). For instance, Mekong Delta has covered an area around 40,000 km, in which 2700 km of coastline and around 18 million population (Li et al., 2020). The whole region currently has 3 biosphere reserves, 5 national parks, 3 nature reserves, 3 species conservation areas, 7 habitat conservation areas and a scientific experimental research forest. Mekong Delta is not only a key area for rice, fruits, aquaculture and fishing, but also one of the 7 tourist regions of the country, with potentials and strengths for tourism development. In 2017, the number of tourists to Mekong Delta reached over 34 million visitors, up 18.7% over the same period in 2016. In recent years, provinces and cities in Mekong Delta have paid attention to ecotourism development (Giao et al., 2021). These efforts led to impressive achievements. However, the investment and exploitation have not been connected to the regional perspective, lacking a market strategy for promoting high paying guests and long stays. The tourism development speed of the Mekong Delta region is very modest compared to the key tourist areas in the country. Despite such opportunity for development; facilitating and supportive conditions, literature on how to boost ecotourism performance in Mekong Delta is scarce.

In addition, during Covid 19 pandemic, the tourism industry as a whole and ecotourism sector in the Mekong Delta in particular were adversely affected. Such challenges fueled the stakeholders of this value chain to innovate in tourism products, supportive activities and policies to attract tourists back to the area. Though but the extant tourism literature has not sufficiently examined tourist satisfaction and inadequately supported by empirical evidences. Given this literature gap, providing an understanding of how to boost tourist satisfaction and its association with ecotourism performance is critical. In response, the present study aims to bridge this gap through addressing the following questions:

RQ1. What are the factors that affect the satisfaction of tourists to Mekong Delta?

RQ2. How does tourist satisfaction impact the ecotourism industry performance in Mekong Delta?

This study therefore provides significant implications to ecotourism literature in some ways. First, it expands the extant literature on tourism by providing empirical evidence on the way by which visitors' satisfaction can be enhanced. Furthermore, it contributes to expanding the existing literature on tourism by integrating ecotourism performance in the model. Second, this study provides insight into how to boost ecotourism performance in emerging countries. It suggests that implementing ecotourism is feasible in a way that boosts identified satisfaction-promoting factors in a constant manner. Beyond, the findings of this study contribute to sustaining tourism industry efficiency not only for Vietnam but also for other countries those contextual background is similar to that in Vietnam. The findings of this study have significant contributions to stakeholders such as academics, experts, and practitioners in the

tourism industry. This study accordingly proposes directions for future researches to further contribute to deepening literature on tourism industry sustainability.

2. Literature review

This section provides the detail of the ecotourism, a few factors that has some impacts on the tourist satisfaction and the relationship between the tourist's satisfaction and the performances of the ecotourism industry.

2.1. Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a nature-based kind of tourism, which describes the tourism activities with the use of natural resources, such as natural and cultural heritages, scenery, waterways, vegetation and wildlife. Hence, the definition of ecotourism is always diverse from different contexts and perspectives by the researchers of all over the world. Boo (1990) defined that ecotourism is one of the tourism forms, which is consistent to travel relatively uncontaminated or undisturbed natural regions with the aim of admiring and enjoying with the animals and wild plants, as well as any cultural activities in such areas. According to Tretyakova et al. (2017), the ecotourism term is defined in 1980 by a Mexican economist named as Hector Ceballos-Lascurain. He defined that the ecologists traveling to the intact natural areas for the research, observation of wild fauna and flora to enjoy with nature, as well as modern and ancient cultural values, controlled by these regions. In spite of this, the international union for the natural resources and nature conservation defined the ecotourism as environmentally accountable visitation and travel to relatively uninterrupted natural to study, enjoy and praise the nature to promote the conservation, which has a low impact on the visitors to provide the benefits of the active socio-economic participation through the local population. Based on this definition, three major participants are found in order to participate the ecotourism, tourists, local population and service providers. Hence, the ecotourism industry can be successful with these mentioned points to confirm all actions with same thoughts, prospect limit of discrepancy or conflict. Moreover, the definition of ecotourism is according to the international society of ecotourism as 'accountable travel to natural regions that preserves the atmosphere, tolerates the comfort of the local community and involves education and interpretation'. Consequently, a number of ecotourism characteristics have been found, including natural locations, travel, environmental awareness, reducing impacts, respects culture the financial benefits of local community and assuring empowerment and advocates democratic actions. Based on this, some standards are important for the visitors to obey some rule during travelling. Ecotourism is designated as an action that generate communication among the local environment and tourists. Moreover, the ecotourism society shows the ecotourism as 'an accountable journey towards the region, which donates the natural heritage conservation and the local population welfare. Whereas, White et al. (2006) specified that the discriminate ecotourism by some gages, such as (1) non-polluted terminuses, (2) enclosed biodiversity, (3) the ecotourism should donate not only the local economy, but the supportable situation for the local community, comprises promoting actions and protecting the environment. Grabara and Bajdor (2013) described the ecotourism as a typical natural form of tourism, such as health, travel, cycling, culture and the sustainable tourism concepts should comprise all tourism forms. Accordingly, ecotourism is a visiting area relatively unaffected by human activities, with little impact on the environment, which has an important educational component and offers an economical benefit directly to the economy and the local population.

Meanwhile, other authors have various definitions of natural-based tourists, in which the most general description was the natural-based tourists, who are interested in exploring and experiencing the new natural areas of still wild, fresh, untouched, undisturbed, physically engaging and active the outdoor actions (Fennell et al., 1990). In addition, Ryel and Grasse, (1991) added the above nature-based concept of tourists with a strong interest in exploring the natural phenomena of the world, but also appreciation for natural history, traditional culture and preserve wildlife. According to Motavalli and Ivanko (1995), ecotourism industry is reported a fastest growth rate in the travel market as more people increase their intentions to be back to the nature, it means that people love to experience the natural pure environments, discover the wilderness and be happy to be an explorer.

2.2. Tourist satisfaction factors

The concept of tourist's satisfaction was diversified by different angles and perspectives of the creators. According to Chen et al, the concepts of tourist satisfaction are perceived, who generate the experience of trip ability to realize their expectations, needs and desires. Chon (1989) observed that the tourist satisfaction is performed using the relationship between his/her prospects related to the destination before traveling to get the experience performance at the destination'. While, Hosany and Prayag, (2013) found the tourist satisfaction as a perception of the matching between their expectations and quality of the trip related services and products based on their general evaluation of destination. In addition, it is found the most powerful predictors of tourist with overall satisfaction of attractiveness, perceived quality of service and value for money they spent in relation to their trip. Kozak and Rimmington, (2000) determined that satisfied tourists will be inclined to recommend and come back to the destination [33].

Kobina Armoo (2005) supposed that perception of accommodation, service provides the quality, which must be in line with the guests to meet their satisfaction. Accommodation is considered as a part of travel service that any tourist experiences during their journey. Thus, guests would feel satisfied when they find a place, they stay comfortable, clean, secured, convenient, friendly and fresh that they can enjoy and relax during their accommodation period. This is one of the motivating factors that would promote their intention to revisit later. Besides that, according to Hanqin and Lam (1999), understanding tourists' motivations is important that helps the tourism organizers be able to enhance tourists' satisfaction as well motive them to come back in the future. The rationale of this viewpoint is based on tourists' behaviors as they travel to satisfy their needs and desires. There are 5 major factors that motive tourists to travel, such as:

- Knowledge, which someone got to travel the new places
- Enhancement of human relations by meeting new people in the new places
- Relaxation as they want to refresh their body and mind
- Novelty as they expect new experiences of thrills or excitement
- Prestige as they will visit their relatives and friends.

All are about the reasons behind the tourist selection of destination. Further, according to Jang and Wu (2006), explained that there are 3 pull and 5 push motivation factors that influence tourist decision of travel such as, self-esteem, ego-enhancement, knowledge-seeking, push factors relaxation, socialization, while pull factors including ecology, culture, safety, cleanliness, facilities, cost, historical and natural sight. In addition, Voon and Lee (2008) identified the dimension of tourist satisfaction included traveling services, local heritage sites, local people, adventure, culture, nature, journey, beverages and food, price, safety, communication, experience and accessibility.

On the other side, other researchers had different approaches on the crucial factors that influence the success of the tourism industry overall and the ecotourism industry in particular. Accordingly, Tien et al. (2019) suggests that 'the success of the industry is dependent upon the positive attitude between the community and hospitality towards tourists, crucial factors that influence the satisfaction and loyalty level of visitors to the destination'. It means that the component of success of tourism industry contributed not only by external side as guests, but also internal side as its local residents. In other words, tourism residents play an important role in making guests satisfaction with outstanding service of quality, friendliness, secured feeling, home experiences, energy recharging, etc. In general, those criteria contribute not only to guests' satisfaction, but also to guests' motivation to revisit and introduce the other potential tourists. This way is known as word-of-mouth marketing method, which is very efficient in terms of building trust to the potential tourists.

Another study conducted by Tran et al. (2018) about those factors, which are affected by the tourist satisfaction. These results indicated that the destination of social responsibility is playing a significant impact on the tourist satisfaction with a significant role of tourist emotions. The social responsibility dimensions are the economic accountability, legal, ethical, environmental, and philanthropic tasks. The satisfactory results authenticate the mediating performances of emotions between tourists and

destination social responsibility. Most countries in the world have been paying their best to attract the international tourists. But, the overall manipulation of natural possessions and over growth of the tourism, manufacturing can have the negative impacts on the society, environment and economy. Thus, the challenging question is found here that strategy and policy should be developed to promote the tourism industry along with the natural resources. According to Sheldon and Park (2011), social accountability is an efficient method to attract the tourists. The perception of social responsibility was introduced by Bowen (1999) in business to cooperate with the community, where it functions as a legal object in the society. The concept of contribution to the community is very diversified by the nature of business industry and context. Business takes social responsibility with the proper manners to contribute the perceptions of a good destination image. Prayag and Ryan (2012), Chi and Qu (2008) and Chen and Phou (2013) defined that process of can affect the satisfaction of the tourists. Hence, it can be supposed that socially accountable actions in the destination may have an impact on the satisfactions of the tourists. Alternatively, at the level of destination, social responsibility performs a lifting role for the residents.

2.3. The relationship between the tourists' satisfaction and ecotourism industry performance

According to Andereck et al. (2005), tourism generates and increases the employment opportunities. In addition, it also energizes the local economy (Perdue et al., 1990), improves the income and quality of life (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019) and attracts the investor and new business twists (Cheng et al., 2019). When the tourists feel satisfactions, they can revisit with their relatives or friend next time. As a result, it would be a great economy to contribute to the enhancement of overall ecotourism industry performance of the localities, meanwhile creating more opportunities to enhance the income of the local residents somehow. The organization based on the UN world tourism brought into attention of experts and researchers that the development of sustainable tourism is defined as 'the needs of host regions can be fulfilled by the present tourists, while enhancing and protecting the future opportunities. It is predicted as a leading part in the organization of all possessions in the way of economic, aesthetic and social requirements can be satisfied, whereas maintaining essential ecological procedures, life support systems, cultural integrity and biological diversity'. Accordingly, the overall goals of doing ecotourism business are meeting guests' satisfaction, bringing economic values to the local residents, while protecting natural resources for sustainable development of ecotourism industry. Satisfying guests' needs does not mean that to use each source without the proper management or sacrifice the natural and cultural resources. It is important to have adjusted the standards for guests to comply and properly communicate for their awareness in order to achieve sustainability. According to society of the ecotourism, the sustainable based ecotourism is defined as 'focused travel to the natural regions is use to understand the natural history and culture of the atmosphere with the care not to change the ecosystem integrity, while making economic opportunities using the protection of natural resources that is valuable for the local people'. Therefore, the notion of sustainable tourism should be treated with the internal vision using the cooperation of each aspect linked to the environment, economy and society to reach its goal.

3. Research model and hypothesis development

According to Jang and Wu (2006) and Voon and Lee (2008), the tourist satisfaction is considered as the outputs of the satisfaction levels of tourists on the traveling services, local people, culture, nature, adventure, journey, beverages, price, safety, communication, ecology, experience, cleanliness, event, facilities, natural and historical sight, specialty, accessibility and friendliness of the local population. Further, according to Andereck et al. (2005), Perdue et al. (1990) and Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019), tourists' satisfaction would contribute to the enhancement of overall ecotourism industry performance of the localities, meanwhile creating more opportunities to enhance the income of the local residents somehow at the sustainability basis.

The dimensions of the tourist satisfactions were majorly defined based on the prior works of Jang and Wu (2006), while the industry performances were based on the prior works of few researchers. Figure 1 presents the proposed research model and hypothesis was built as:

- H₁: Travel Service has a positive impact on the tourist satisfaction.
- H₂: Facilities has a positive impact on the tourist satisfaction.
- H₃: Safety has a positive impact on the tourist satisfaction.
- H₄: Nature has a positive impact on the tourist satisfaction.
- H₅: Experience has a positive impact on the tourist satisfaction.
- H₆: Native people has a positive impact on the tourist satisfaction.
- H₇: Food and Beverage has a positive impact on the tourist satisfaction.
- H₈: Culture has a positive influence on the satisfaction of tourist.
- H₉: Tourist Satisfaction has a positive influence on the ecotourism industry performance (EBP)

4. Research methodology

This section is presented both the quantitative and qualitative schemes to recognize the visitor fulfillment on their way in Mekong Delta. The key determination of the qualitative schemes is comprehensively documented to get the extreme satisfaction and dissatisfaction to the visitors during their journey in Mekong Delta. This helped to produce the objects of different surveys. Twenty visitors are required to blueprint or document their visits by retaining the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), with writing their respective at very satisfied/dissatisfied experiences that happen before, during and after their visit. As a result, 8 dimensions were identified along with their particular substances. In addition, constructs of tourist satisfaction and performance of the ecotourism industry were also figured out accordingly.

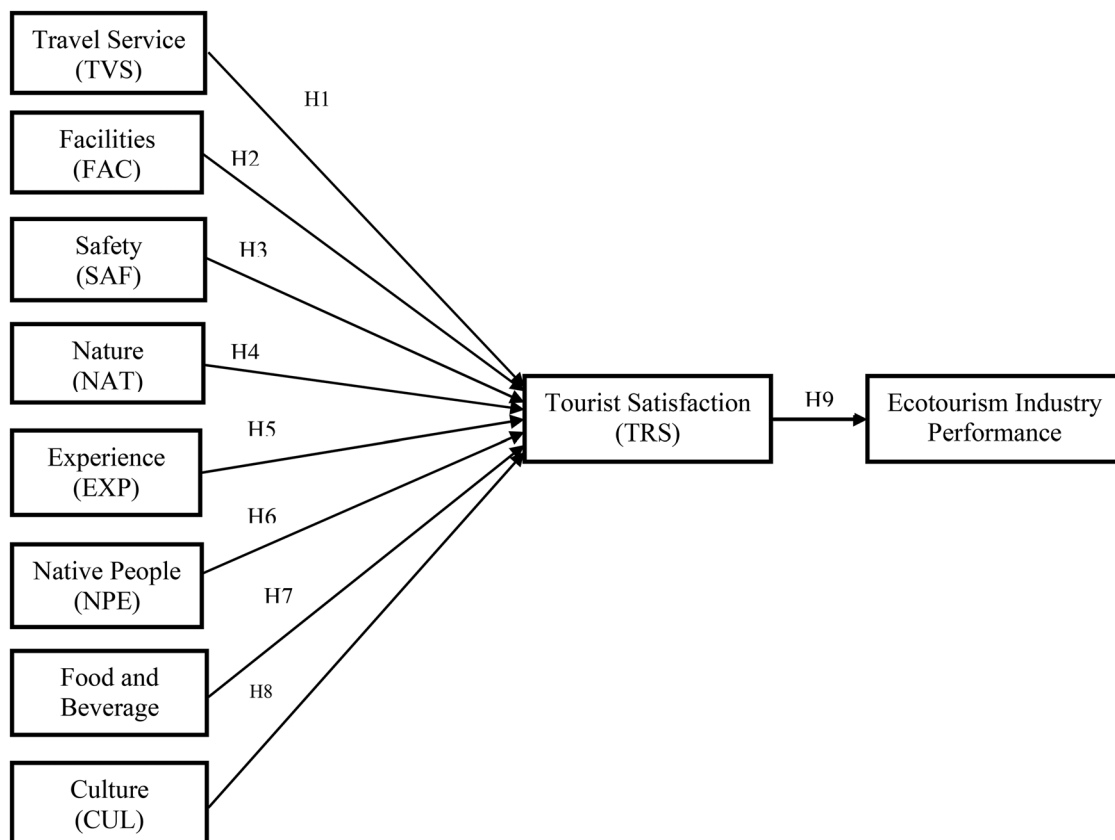


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

The variables and measures were based on the extant literature. In this regard, Travel Service (TVS) is a six-item variable that adopted from Caro and Garcia (2008); Parasuraman et al. (1988); Facilities (FAC) is a five-item variable that adopted from Hassan and Iankova (2012); Safety (SAF) has four items that adopted from Dolnicar and Grün (2013); Nature (NAT) and Experience (EXP) are respectively four & five-item scale variables that adopted from Fossgard and Fredman (2019); Native People (NPE) has four items that adopted from Walker and Moscardo (2016) and Carr et al. (2016); Food and Beverage (FNB) has five items that adopted from Nield et al. (2000); Culture (CUL) has four items that adopted from Ferguson and Burkhalter (2015); Lee and Yoo (2004); and Phinney (1992); Tourist Satisfaction (TRS) is a four-item variable that adopted from Alegre and Garau (2010). Lastly, Ecotourism Industry Performance (EBP) is a five-item variable that adopted from Bahar et al. (2016). For this process, visitors were asked whether they do agree or do not agree on the factors associating with their satisfaction and items associated with factors. In case of disagreement, they will raise their own opinion otherwise.

The quantitative section of the study to present a questionnaire survey using the items produced by the previous qualitative examination. Accordingly, the above measures were evaluated by ten experts those are professionals in the tourism industry. This process resulted in finalizing variables and items for questionnaire development. The survey was initially built in Vietnamese, translated into English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean by the fluent speakers. These investigations were carefully rechecked by different native speakers to make sure that all the questions were clear in meaning. The measurement substances were assumed from the prior investigations as mentioned above and modified the research system and the present context of this work. In general, the investigations were presented in 5 languages, making use of the existing tourist data that most visitors came from those speaking language countries. By doing this, it is created the friendliness to tourist and avoid the barrier potential of language gap, which is very important to make them feel respected and comfortable to take part in the survey. This approach is especially crucial in the service industry. Besides, it could allow the data collection as well and closed to the real experiences and the expectation of tourists whom took the survey. This was expected as the good inputs of this study that helps to generate the outstanding result, which is close to the reality and high practicality. The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts included a brief demographic question and almost fifty satisfaction and industry performance related questions as in Appendix. In addition, the questions were added to the sheet, which are related to the overall satisfaction of visitors and their intention to recommend and revisit to others as word of mouth also their willingness to appear as a public reviewer on the social networks. Besides, there were open lines available on the questionnaire for them to freely add in as their recommendation, comments related to any of those of ecotourism activities in overall, environment, nature, culture, people, security and so on that were not included yet in the main questions and answers in 5 points Likert scale. The exploratory factors were continuously performed to determine the factors for tourist satisfaction and industry performance. Regarding the goodness of the measures, the validity and reliability checks were performed accordingly.

5. Data analysis and results

A survey was conducted in the 1st quarter of 2021 using the direct survey method at the tourism companies and destinations. The survey is presented based on the tourists, who travelled at the tourist sites, tour guides, permanently and part-time contracted with the tourism companies, tour organizers, marketing managers, tour operators and managing directors at tourism companies in the Mekong Delta area. The purpose of diversification of respondents allows the authors to approach the matter from different perspectives to deeply understand the matter as insight for the tourism practitioners, tourism strategic makers and tourism policy makers. The total of responding participants was 685, in which 620 were tourists, 20 were tour guides, 15 tour organizers, 15 tour operators, 10 marketing managers and 5 managing directors. The collected questionnaires were 100% satisfied. As a result, tourists contributed almost 91% of respondents.

The construct reliability analysis was directed using Cronbach's Alpha. The result shows that one of the scales of the variable 'Culture' (coded CUL) needs to be eliminated, which was CUL5 as its total correlation is < 0.3 . The second time reliability analysis was implemented for CUL and this time result found that CUL4 should be omitted as its total correlation is < 0.3 . Then, the third time analysis for reliability

of CUL was conducted and this time result generated perfectly. The following table shows the overall summary of this analysis. These results indicated that those scales are reliable as its Cronbach's Alpha are all > 0.7 . It means that the construct analysis for the next step analyze further as presented in Table 1.

5.1. Exploratory factor analysis

The further analysis was obtained through the exploratory factor analysis. Accordingly, all the items of all scales were fully analyzed. The result showed that the items on each scale remained the same and KMOs are 0.923, which is > 0.7 and at the significant level 0.000 as in Table 2. It means that the EFAs are valid.

5.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

The initial step was investigated in CFA model as shown in Figure 2 through some indicators, such as CMIN/df, CFI, GFI, RMSEA, PCLOSE. According to Hair et al. (2010) and Hu and Bentler (1999), the acceptance threshold of indicators of model fit in CFA varies resulting from different sample sizes, group of factors, variances, scales, etc. In this study, the authors refer to the research findings of Hu and Bentler (1999) and Hair et al. (2010) in interpreting those indicators' results. Accordingly, CMIN/df is good as it achieves 2.356 which is lower than 3; CFI is 0.909 good too as it's > 0.9 while GFI is 0.878 as it's > 0.8 and lower than 0.9; additionally, RMSEA result is 0.045 as good as it's < 0.06 and finally PCLOSE is 1.00 as it's > 0.05 . Those results indicated that the proposed model is accepted for its validity. Besides that, all of the coefficients are statically significant, which indicate the validity of the proposed model. In general, the further step of analysis to be taken is structural equation modeling (SEM) as in Figure 3.

Table 3 shows the relationships of the factors of the proposed research model, which was verified with the test of coefficients. Additionally, the indicated coefficients are statistically significant as its P value are all < 0.05 . The results indicate that there are eight factors that significantly affect the satisfaction of tourists visiting the Mekong Delta including travel service; facilities; safety; nature; experience; native people; food and beverage; and culture. Amongst, the 3 factors that have the strongest impact on tourist satisfaction in descending order are travel service; safety; and nature. In addition, culture and facilities have a similar impact on tourist satisfaction. Finally, native people; experience; food and beverage have a slight impact on tourist satisfaction. Although the β of these factors towards tourist satisfaction is quite low (< 0.1), however, p-values are all smaller than 0.05. This posits the impact of these factor on tourist satisfaction. The stated results suggest the priority of factors that impact tourist satisfaction which is useful for applying into practice to enhance tourist satisfaction. Beyond, the results indicate that tourist satisfaction has a strong influence on the performance of the ecotourism industry in the Mekong Delta.

Table 1. Reliability statistics.

| No | Scales | No. of items | Cronbach's alpha |
|----|---------------------------------------|--------------|------------------|
| 1 | Travel Service (TVS) | 6 | 0.856 |
| 2 | Facilities (FAC) | 5 | 0.754 |
| 3 | Safety (SAF) | 4 | 0.873 |
| 4 | Nature (NAT) | 4 | 0.795 |
| 5 | Experience (EXP) | 5 | 0.832 |
| 6 | Native People (NPE) | 4 | 0.811 |
| 7 | Food and Beverage (FNB) | 5 | 0.864 |
| 8 | Culture (CUL) | 3 | 0.817 |
| 9 | Tourist Satisfaction (TRS) | 4 | 0.744 |
| 10 | Ecotourism Industry Performance (EBP) | 5 | 0.780 |

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's test.

| | | |
|---|--------------------|------------|
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy | | .923 |
| Bartlett's test of sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square | 14,072,873 |
| | df | 990 |
| | Sig. | .000 |

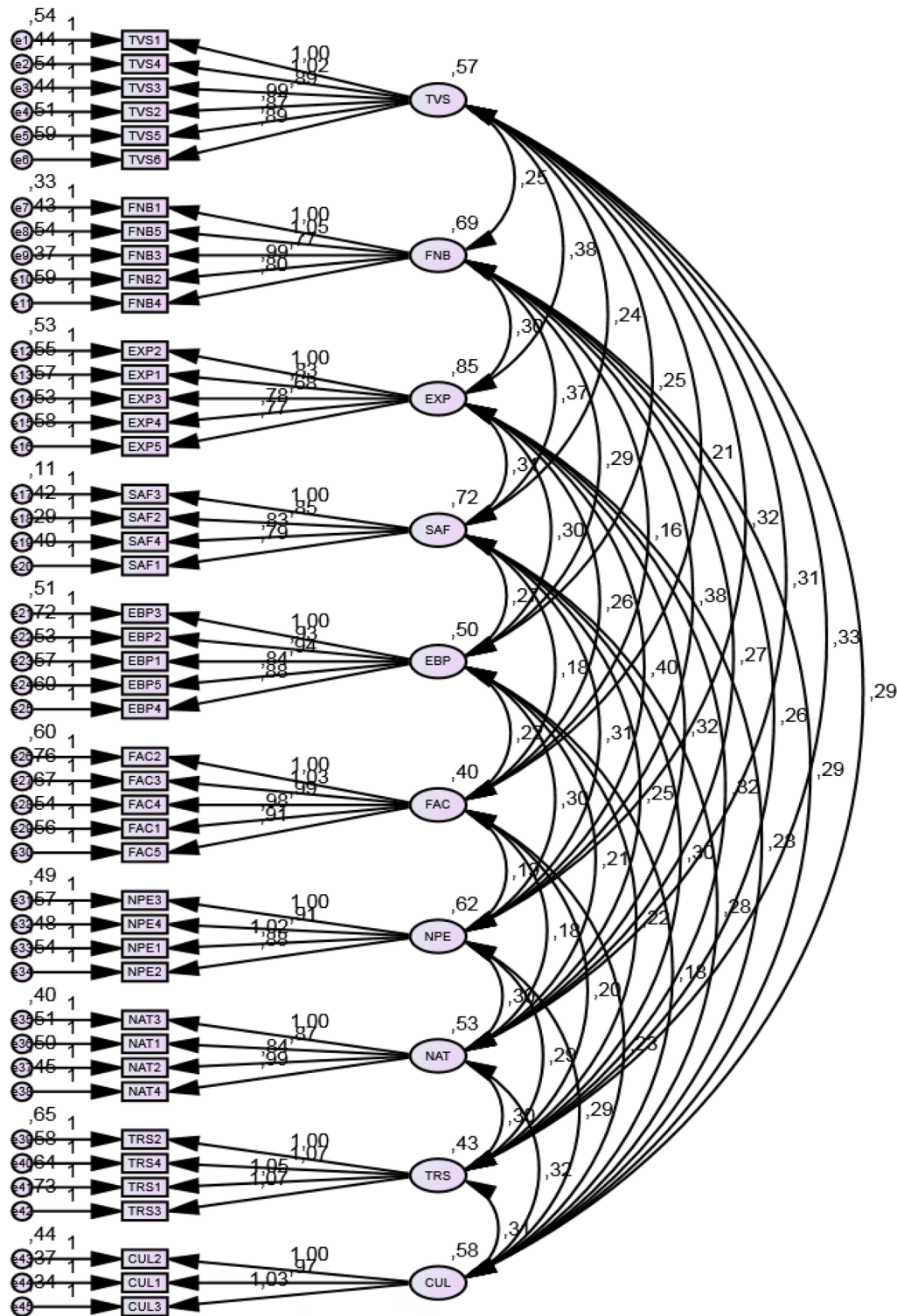


Figure 2. CFA analysis results.

6. Conclusions

Based on the current gap on tourism literature, this study provides several novel contributions in some ways. First, it contributes to bridging this gap by providing empirical evidence on factors affecting the satisfaction of tourists visiting the Mekong Delta for ecotourism purposes. The findings of this study therefore address the initially defined research questions. Specifically, by concluding the eight factors affecting tourist satisfaction, the first research question has been resolved which is What factors affect

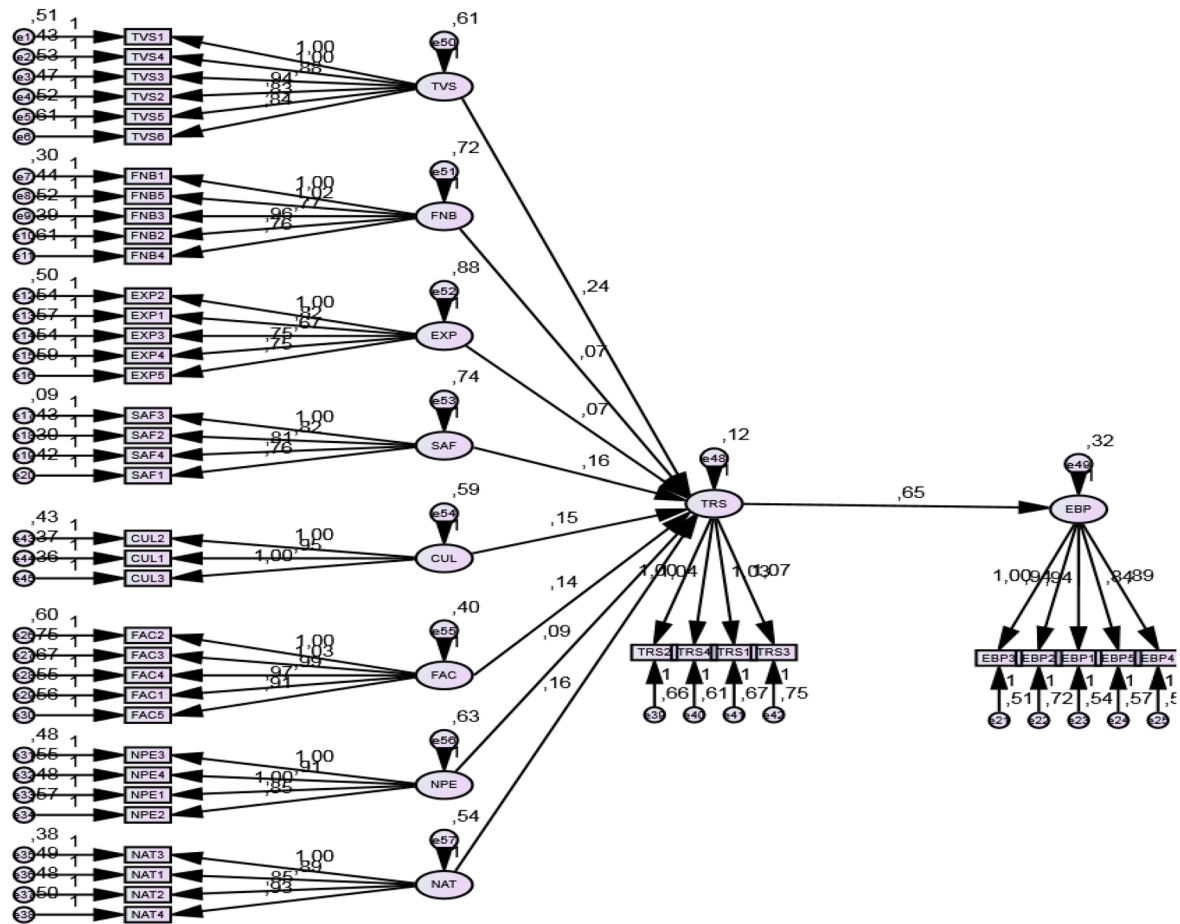


Figure 3. SEM model analysis.

Table 3. Hypothesis test results.

| No | Relationship | Estimate | P-value |
|----|----------------------|----------|---------|
| 1 | TRS \leftarrow TVS | 0.245 | 0.000 |
| 2 | TRS \leftarrow FNB | 0.066 | 0.010 |
| 3 | TRS \leftarrow EXP | 0.073 | 0.002 |
| 4 | TRS \leftarrow SAF | 0.160 | 0.000 |
| 5 | TRS \leftarrow CUL | 0.149 | 0.000 |
| 6 | TRS \leftarrow FAC | 0.143 | 0.000 |
| 7 | TRS \leftarrow NPE | 0.090 | 0.002 |
| 8 | TRS \leftarrow NAT | 0.160 | 0.000 |
| 9 | EBP \leftarrow TRS | 0.651 | 0.000 |

the satisfaction of tourists to the Mekong Delta? Further, by concluding the impact of tourist satisfaction on the ecotourism industry performance, the second research question has been answered which is How does tourist satisfaction impact the ecotourism industry performance in Mekong Delta?

Second, this study contributes to expanding the body of knowledge of literature on tourism by providing empirical evidence-based mechanism on how to enhance visitor satisfaction that associated with ecotourism performance for Mekong Delta region. Among the eight factors affecting tourist satisfaction, the findings indicate that service quality has a strongest impact on tourist satisfaction, followed by culture; safety; and nature. Continuously, experience; facilities; and native people are factors that have relative equal level of influence on tourists' satisfaction but less than the four factors listed above. Food and beverage factor has a smallest impact on tourist satisfaction. Beyond, this study thus responds to the notion of Karatepe et al. (2005); Mattila (1999) positing that developing measures for different context is critical because measures developed for a certain context may not be applicable to another.

The present research is slightly different from the related work based on the hypothesizing visitor examining and constructing different level of influence of the tourist dimensions. The findings

represented the positive relationships of the tourist dimensions and overall satisfaction of the industry performance. According to Su and Swanson (2017), the perspective of service consumers, tourists can be treated with equality and respect with the relation to service the quality deliverable. This should be approached in the sensitive manner as the acceptance and satisfaction level that vary from each visitor. On the other hand, the expectations of different visitors are not same in terms of their own characteristics, their position in society, their background and different culture. It is very crucial in relation to form the initial impression creation and emotional creation, which is considered as one of the important predictors of the success in the service industry. Besides, tourists might feel satisfied as they perceive that their choice of well destination. Such perception came only with the fully enjoyment of the visitors, including journey, travel services during their trip, facilities, accommodation, security, safety, environment, nature, native people and most important thing is their experiences, feelings and reasons to visit. In brief, tourists can only get satisfaction, when their personal interests or expectations are achieved.

In short, to enhance the performance of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta, it is considered compulsory to increase the tourist satisfaction through positive enhancement of the travel services included but not limited to the service quality of the tour operators, tour guides, tour organizers, who directly or indirectly connect with the tourists, facilities, qualification likely accommodation and tourist destination, safety and security ensured throughout the journey of tourists, nature conservation, including natural sites, environment and natural ecosystem, innovation and creativity to enhance and renew experiences of visitors so that every revisit will create the new feeling, new experience to the visitor, this is very important to bring them back and to attract new visitors by utilizing word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing tips, retain the honesty and the friendliness of the native people while develop their professional skills to enhance the service quality level, creative and clever at upgrading traditional dishes to become unique that could make guests specially remember, taking the local specialty into account, retain and renew the traditional culture at the sensitive manner so that it keeps appearing new to the revisited tourists and attractive and elegant to the new ones. All those things would bring up the tourist satisfaction. As a result, it would generate the beneficial values to enhance the performance of the local ecotourism industry, including financial and non-financial indicators such as, revenue growth, increase in quantity of revisiting tourist, increase in quantity of new tourist, enhance the positive review of the visited tourists, increase in global ranking as the recommended destination and so on. The development of the ecotourism industry also contributes to enhance the income of the local residents by some means such as creating employment opportunity and individual business and service providers. In short, the growth is crucial in generating the industrial-based value and the social-based value. These findings help the managers tourism sector, tourism companies, the local authorities, etc., to review the overall matrix to see the what and the how to enhance the performance of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta. Accordingly create the most suitable and practical policies and strategies for sustainable development of ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta.

Beyond, this study is an attempt to trigger the development of this field of research as a way to continuously contribute to the tourism literature and practice of ecotourism development in emerging countries as Vietnam in particular and other potential countries in Southeast Asia at large. In this sense, this research therefore contributes to creating value not only for the economy but also for the sustainability of the environment and thus development of the society at large. Although this study provides significant contributions as stated above, it still leaves room for new research in the future. First, this study primarily focused on Mekong Delta region, while contextual variances may lead to variations in variables and measures. This suggests that future research should consider other contextual settings that are the world cultural heritage and wonders such as Ha Long Bay (Hai Phong), Phong Nha Cave (Quang Binh), and other regions that are potential for ecotourism development. Second, future research may consider incorporating moderators or control variables for more profound implications.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

About the author



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Appendix – Questionnaire

We are carrying out empirical research on 'Influences of the ecotourism industry in Mekong Delta – Vietnam: The mediating role of Tourist Satisfaction'. The objective of this study is to provide the understanding of how to boost visitors' satisfaction and how it associates with ecotourism performance in Mekong Delta, a special region in the south of Vietnam. Therefore, we would like to invite you to participate in this study by responding to the following questions. Your participation and information provision are at our appreciation, thus treated confidentially.

If you have any concern or question, please kindly contact Dr. Thanh Tiep Le, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance. E-mail: tieplt@uef.edu.vn. Mobile phone: +84 906 946 968.

Part I. Personal information of respondents

Instruction: Please tick the box (only one) that matches your answer.

1. Your gender

- ☐ Female
☐ Male

2. Your age

- ☐ Less than 30
☐ Above 30 to less than 40
☐ Above 40 to less than 45
☐ Above 45 to less than 50
☐ Above 50

3. Your nationality

Please tick the box (only one) that matches your answer. In case you check the 'Other' box, please provide specific information in the line starting with 'Please specify.....':

- ☐ Japanese
☐ Korean
☐ Chinese
☐ Vietnamese
☐ Others

Please specify:.....

Part II. Survey questions

Instruction: The following questions are built on a 5-point Likert scale. Points from 1 to 5 show the level (ascending) of your agreement with each statement. Specifically, '1' represents 'totally disagree'; '2' represents 'not sure'; '3' represents 'likely'; '4' represents 'agree'; '5' represents 'totally agree'. Therefore, for each of the following statement, please select a point (only one) that is as accurate as your response to each corresponding question.

| Code | Statement | Response | | | | |
|------|---|----------|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| TVS1 | Timeliness: My demands are met timely | | | | | |
| TVS2 | Responsiveness: My demands are responded fully | | | | | |
| TVS3 | Sufficiency: I was sufficiently informed | | | | | |
| TVS4 | Convenience: My trip was convenient | | | | | |
| TVS5 | Problem solving: Problems happened were resolved properly | | | | | |
| TVS6 | Outcome: Values derived from my trip were worth what I spent | | | | | |
| FAC1 | Facilities do not disturb the overall ecology | | | | | |
| FAC2 | Facilities are well invested and fully functional in response to visitors' demand | | | | | |
| FAC3 | Facilities are also available for disabled people and family with infants | | | | | |
| FAC4 | Facilities are well installed with multilingual directional signage | | | | | |
| FAC5 | Facilities are sanitary and safe for visitors | | | | | |
| SAF1 | The political environment in the region is likely stable | | | | | |
| SAF2 | The social environment in the region is likely stable | | | | | |
| SAF3 | The natural environment in the region is likely fresh | | | | | |
| SAF4 | The overall security in the region is likely good | | | | | |
| NAT1 | The ecosystem is likely to be well preserved | | | | | |
| NAT2 | The natural landscape is wonderful and impressive | | | | | |
| NAT3 | Locations for visiting are arranged harmoniously and orderly | | | | | |
| NAT4 | The overall nature of the region is interesting and peaceful | | | | | |
| EXP1 | Feeling returning to nature | | | | | |
| EXP2 | Feeling beneficial by connecting to nature | | | | | |
| EXP3 | Feeling being a part of a new community | | | | | |
| EXP4 | Felling being taken care better than ever | | | | | |
| EXP5 | Felling re-energized | | | | | |
| NPE1 | The indigenous people are hospitable | | | | | |
| NPE2 | Delivering indigenous value through guidance by indigenous people | | | | | |
| NPE3 | Recognizing self-identity of indigenous people through their behaviors and acts | | | | | |
| NPE4 | Indigenous people are equipped with good knowledge and capacity | | | | | |
| FNB1 | Diverse items | | | | | |
| FNB2 | Quality worth the money | | | | | |
| FNB3 | Uniqueness (presentation, very distinctive taste) | | | | | |
| FNB4 | Service speed | | | | | |
| FNB5 | Foods and beverages served were in harmony with gastronomic trends | | | | | |
| CUL1 | The culture of the region makes me feel proud. | | | | | |
| CUL2 | The culture of the region makes me feel interested. | | | | | |
| CUL3 | The culture of the region makes me feel attached. | | | | | |
| TRS1 | This trip overall creates spiritual value for me | | | | | |
| TRS2 | This trip overall regenerates fresh energy for me | | | | | |
| TRS3 | The places that I have visited give me peace of mind | | | | | |
| TRS4 | Overall, I really enjoyed this trip | | | | | |
| EBP1 | Satisfied tourists | | | | | |
| EBP2 | Ability to attract tourists to come back in the future | | | | | |
| EBP3 | A happy and dynamic community | | | | | |
| EBP4 | Attractive and impressive tourism products and services | | | | | |
| EBP5 | A sustainable ground for the sustainable development of ecotourism | | | | | |