

FACTORS INFLUENCING TOURIST DESTINATION LOYALTY TOWARD THOI SON ISLET: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN DONG THAP PROVINCE, VIETNAM

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Abstract – *In the context of intense competition among ecotourism and community-based destinations in the Mekong Delta, this study focuses on Thoi Son Islet (Dong Thap Province, Vietnam) to examine the factors influencing satisfaction and destination loyalty and investigate the mediating role of satisfaction. Data were collected from 391 tourists during the peak tourist season from June to August 2025 through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale and analyzed using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method. The research model comprised eight latent constructs: destination image, service quality, perceived cost, communication and promotion, sustainable tourism awareness, social and experiential factors, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. The analysis results revealed that all factors positively affect satisfaction, with service quality and promotion–communication exerting medium effects, whereas destination image, perceived cost, sustainability awareness, and social experience demonstrated smaller effects. Notably, satisfaction had a very strong impact on destination loyalty ($\beta = 0.711$; $f^2 = 1.024$), served as a partial mediator, amplifying the overall effects of the antecedent factors. This study contributes additional empirical evidence on tourist behavior in the context of local ecotourism, while also providing important managerial implications, including prioritizing service quality improvements, strengthening promotional activities, and reinforcing destination image to enhance sat-*

isfaction and sustainably attract tourists. Furthermore, the outcome variable is reconceptualized as destination loyalty to ensure conceptual clarity and alignment between theory and measurement.

Keywords: *destination loyalty, service quality, Thoi Son Islet, tourist destination.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is playing an increasingly important role in socio-economic development, enhancing destination competitiveness an urgent requirement [1]. In Vietnam, the Mekong Delta region, with its natural advantages of waterways and a distinctive cultural identity, has gradually established itself as a prominent ecotourism and experiential destination. Although previous study has extensively demonstrated the role of service quality and destination image in tourism in general [2], empirical evidence remains fragmented regarding how these commercial factors interact with perceptions of sustainability in hybrid ecotourism models like Thoi Son Islet. Unlike purely protected areas, Thoi Son represents a ‘living museum’ model linked to local livelihoods (One Commune One Product (OCOP) products). This study aims to address the conflict between ‘expectations of enjoyment’ (services, costs) and ‘altruistic values’ (sustainability) in fostering tourist loyalty in this unique riverine context [3]. However, the growing competition among destinations within the region and nationwide highlights the need to clearly identify the core factors influencing tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty decisions.

Previous research on tourist behavior has indicated that destination image and service quality significantly influence revisit intention, with satisfaction serving as a mediating factor in certain

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relationships [4]. However, in local tourism contexts such as Thoi Son Islet, empirical evidence remains limited. In particular, the mediating role of satisfaction in transforming the effects of latent factors into destination loyalty decisions has not been clearly established. This represents not only a research gap but also a practical necessity for informing policy-making and strategies to promote sustainable tourism development in the locality.

Therefore, this study was conducted to test a theoretical model of the factors influencing tourists' destination loyalty for Thoi Son Islet, with tourist satisfaction as a mediating latent variable. By employing the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method, the study not only contributes additional empirical evidence to the literature on tourist behavior in the context of ecotourism and community-based tourism but also provides valuable managerial implications for local authorities and tourism enterprises in formulating strategies to enhance satisfaction, increase destination loyalty intention, and strengthen destination competitiveness.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Theory of decision loyalty*

Unlike isolated eco-resorts or strictly protected wilderness areas often discussed in previous literature, Thoi Son Islet represents a 'hybrid' model of riverine orchard tourism typical of the Mekong Delta. The destination's appeal relies heavily on the integration of tourism into the local agricultural value chain, with activities such as fruit harvesting, honey farming, and performances of Don Ca Tai Tu. This creates a unique 'living' ecosystem where tourist activities overlap with the daily livelihoods of residents. Consequently, the host-guest interaction here is frequent but highly commercialized through the sales of OCOP items. This specific context presents a theoretical puzzle: tourists in Thoi Son are exposed to a tension between the rustic authenticity of a community destination and the commercial nature of mass tourism services. Therefore, testing the impact of service quality and sustainability

awareness in this transitional setting provides new insights into whether 'eco-tourists' in such hybrid destinations primarily value environmental norms or functional service attributes.

Tourists' destination loyalty behavior is influenced not only by external factors but also closely linked to internal perceptions, particularly their level of satisfaction with the travel experience. Foundational theories such as Dann's push-pull model [5], the destination loyalty behavior model [6], and the theory of planned behavior [7] all emphasize that destination loyalty is the outcome of a complex evaluation process involving personal motivations, perceptions of the destination, social influences, and experiential expectations. In this study, factors including destination image, service quality, reasonable cost, communication and promotion, sustainable tourism awareness, as well as social factors and prior experiences, are considered determinants of satisfaction, a mediating variable that ultimately leads to the destination loyalty of Thoi Son Islet as a tourist destination. First of all, destination image plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and guiding tourist behavior. According to Echtner et al. [8], destination image is a composite of visual impressions and psychological perceptions that tourists construct from information, communication, and personal experiences. Baloglu et al. [9] mentioned that a positive image of a destination will raise expectations and lay the foundation for satisfaction, thereby influencing tourists' loyalty to the destination.

In parallel, service quality is an important factor influencing tourism satisfaction. According to the service quality (SERVQUAL) model [10], service quality is evaluated across five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. In the tourism industry, this is reflected in the quality of accommodation, food services, tour guides, transportation, and the availability of information support. In addition, reasonable cost is also an indispensable factor in tourism decision-making. As noted by Zeithaml [11], cost is understood as the trade-off between the benefits received and the monetary price

paid. Particularly in domestic and community-based ecotourism, affordable pricing is associated with perceptions of fairness, thereby contributing to tourists' overall satisfaction. Destinations that offer prices aligned with customers' budgets are more likely to be chosen over comparable destinations with higher costs.

Communication and promotion are indirect factors but exert a strong influence on destination perception. Research by Kotler et al. [12] suggested that effective communication enhances awareness, creates positive impressions, and stimulates consumer behavior. When customers receive reliable and engaging information, they are more likely to experience greater satisfaction with their initial expectations upon visiting a destination. In the context of sustainable development as a global trend, sustainable tourism awareness has become a critical factor in destination loyalty. As suggested by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) [13], sustainable tourism is defined as development that balances economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Today's tourists not only value natural beauty or service quality but also appreciate destinations that demonstrate responsibility toward the environment and local communities. Commitments to protecting natural resources, preserving local culture, or managing waste, when clearly communicated, foster greater trust and higher satisfaction in the minds of tourists [14].

In addition to the above factors, social influence from family, friends, and online communities can strongly shape tourism consumption behavior [7]. At the same time, positive past travel experiences may create lasting impressions that stimulate revisit behavior and word-of-mouth recommendations [15]. Although these factors are personal in nature, they exert profound impacts on the formation of satisfaction and decision-making processes. Ultimately, satisfaction plays the role of a mediating variable that links all the aforementioned factors to destination loyalty. Satisfaction results from the comparison between pre-trip expectations and actual experi-

ences. When tourists feel satisfied with their overall experience at a destination, including services, costs, communication, environment, and social factors, they are more likely to revisit, recommend to others, or prioritize that destination in the future [16].

In summary, factors such as destination image, service quality, reasonable cost, communication and promotion, sustainable tourism awareness, social influences, and prior experiences do not exist in isolation but interact through the mediating variable of satisfaction, collectively influencing tourists' destination loyalty decisions. This theoretical model serves as the foundation for proposing the research framework and conducting empirical validation in the context of Thoi Son Islet, a distinctive community-based tourism destination in the Mekong Delta region.

B. Review of previous research

Previous studies on tourism behavior have consistently emphasized that traveler motivation, satisfaction, and post-visit behavioral outcomes are key factors in understanding traveler decision-making and loyalty formation. Research based on classical motivational frameworks, such as Dann's push-pull model [5] and Pearce's tourism career model theory [17], indicates that basic traveler motivations such as escape, relaxation, and novelty remain dominant regardless of their level of concern for sustainability. Empirical evidence from sustainable destinations suggests that destination-based attractants, including favorable climate and natural attractions, continue to play a significant role in shaping traveler experience and satisfaction, while deeper value-driven motivations become more prominent in travelers with stronger sustainability engagement [18].

Based on this motivational perspective, a large body of empirical research has examined the relationship between destination image, service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. In the context of sustainable and ecotourism destinations, several studies highlight the role of natural value, emotional attachment, and perceived sustainability in driving satisfac-

tion and loyalty. Andjarwati et al. [19] found that destination image does influence tourist loyalty indirectly through perceived natural value and emotional attachment. Similarly, research on ecotourism destinations in Uganda highlighted that destination image, including natural beauty, sustainable initiatives, and cultural authenticity, significantly increases tourist satisfaction, which in turn leads to destination loyalty [20]. These findings suggest that, in the context of ecotourism, satisfaction often operates through mechanisms based on emotions and values rather than a direct antecedent of loyalty.

Conversely, studies conducted in the context of commercialized or mass tourism tend to report stronger and more direct associations between functional attributes of the destination and post-visit behavioral intentions. Research examining the role of sustainability in shaping perceived value showed that socio-cultural and institutional sustainability aspects have a significant influence on tourists' perceived value, while environmental sustainability may have a more limited impact [21]. Another empirical study indicates that service quality, destination image, and perceived risk are key determinants of tourist satisfaction and return intentions, particularly for international tourists [22]. Similarly, service quality has been shown to have a positive impact on return intentions both directly and indirectly through destination image [23]. These findings are consistent with a study reporting that destination image and service quality generally have a stronger overall impact on return intentions than experiential or emotional factors in the context of mass tourism [2].

Although previous studies [4, 22, 23] have consistently affirmed the mediating role of satisfaction in tourism behavior, their findings remain fragmented across destination types. While studies conducted in the context of protected ecotourism and heritage tourism emphasize sustainability values, institutional governance, and emotional attachment as key drivers of tourist satisfaction [2], research in the mass tourism environment emphasizes the dominance of func-

tional attributes such as service quality, destination image, and perceived cost. More importantly, relatively few studies have considered destinations that integrate community tourism with commercial service provision, where tourists can simultaneously seek authentic local experiences and standardized tourism services. Studies in protected ecotourism emphasize sustainability values and emotional attachment as key drivers, whereas those in mass tourism highlight service quality and destination image. However, hybrid destinations that combine community-based tourism with commercial service provision have received less attention.

Therefore, it remains unclear whether tourist satisfaction at transitional destinations aligns with the logic of ecotourism or mass tourism. This study addresses the theoretical gap by empirically examining how satisfaction operates at a hybrid riverside destination, thereby extending beyond context-specific validation and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of tourism behavior across destination types.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

A. *Methods of data collection*

This study uses primary data collected from tourists visiting Thoi Son Island, a popular river tourism destination located in Dong Thap Province (formerly Tien Giang Province before the administrative merger in July 2025), during the peak tourist season from June to August 2025.

In the first stage, tourists were classified using a stratified method, including (1) domestic and international tourists and (2) individual/small group travelers and package tour participants.

In the second stage, tourists were selected for direct interviews using a convenience, non-probability sampling technique. The sample size was determined based on the formula for estimating proportions with an unknown population, as proposed by Hoang Trong et al. [24].

The study adopted a convenience sampling method due to constraints in time and resources. However, to ensure reliability and relative representativeness, the sample size was determined

based on Cochran's [25] formula for quantitative research with a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence level. According to Formula (1), the minimum required sample size was 385. In addition, following the recommendation of Hair et al. [26], for measurement scales with 25 or more observed variables, at least 250 observations are necessary to ensure the reliability of factor analysis and regression analysis.

Therefore, the study surveyed 400 tourists visiting Thoi Son Islet during the peak season to meet statistical requirements and enhance the level of generalization. After data screening, 391 valid observations were retained for analysis.

B. Data analysis method

Assessment of the reliability of the scale

The study used a 5-level Likert scale and tested the reliability of the data using Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient. At the same time, the study examined the corrected item-total correlation coefficients to evaluate the internal consistency and contribution of each item to the overall scale. If the alpha coefficient of each variable is above 0.6, the overall alpha coefficient is above 0.7, and the variables have a corrected item-total correlation coefficient above 0.4, the data ensures reliability.

Partial least squares structural equation modeling

In this study, the PLS-SEM method was used with SmartPLS software. The choice of PLS-SEM was primarily driven by the study's prediction-oriented objective, which was to maximize the explained variance (R^2) of the principal objective structure, namely destination loyalty [27]. Unlike covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), which emphasizes theory validation and model fit, PLS-SEM is particularly well-suited for research aimed at extracting specific management implications by identifying the most important drivers of tourism behavior in a complex model. Furthermore, this method is favored due to its robustness in handling non-normal data distributions, a common feature in social science survey research where strict normal assumptions are often violated [28]. Before

analyzing the structural model, the study assessed the measurement model to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs, including internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha, ρ_A , CR), convergent validity (AVE, outer loadings ≥ 0.7), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker and HTMT). The latent variables in the model include destination image, service quality, perceived cost, communication and promotion, sustainable tourism awareness, social and experiential factors, satisfaction, and destination loyalty, which were measured using multiple observed indicators on a five-point Likert scale. The measurement model is considered acceptable when $CR \geq 0.7$, $AVE \geq 0.5$, outer loadings ≥ 0.7 , and $HTMT < 0.85$.

After the measurement model was validated, the structural model was estimated using the PLS algorithm in SmartPLS 3.0. The model evaluation criteria included R^2 (coefficient of determination), Q^2 (predictive relevance), and f^2 (effect size), along with overall model fit indices such as SRMR (< 0.08) and NFI (> 0.80). In addition, the bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples was applied to assess the statistical significance of the path coefficients, thereby testing the direct, indirect, and total effects within the model.

The results of the PLS-SEM analysis confirm the reliability and validity of the measurement scales and provide comprehensive empirical evidence to test the theoretical model and research hypotheses regarding the mediating role of satisfaction in destination-loyalty decisions.

C. Research model

This study focuses on six latent variables, consisting of destination image, service quality, perceived cost, communication and promotion, sustainable tourism awareness, and social and experiential factors, to examine their influence on destination loyalty through the mediating role of tourist satisfaction in the context of Thoi Son Islet, Dong Thap Province. These variables were selected based on a comprehensive literature review and their practical relevance to the decision-making process in destination loyalty. Each latent

variable is defined and operationalized through the eight observed indicators.

Destination image (DI): Destination image refers to the set of perceptions, impressions, emotions, and expectations that tourists form about a location through personal experiences, media information, or word-of-mouth recommendations [8, 9]. It is measured through observed variables such as tourists having a favorable impression of the destination (DI1), perceiving the destination as outstanding in terms of natural beauty and cultural uniqueness (DI2), and feeling that the destination provides a sense of safety and friendliness (DI3). This construct is hypothesized to have a positive impact (+) on tourist satisfaction [4, 19–23].

Service quality (SQ): Service quality reflects the extent to which the actual services provided meet or exceed customer expectations. It is typically assessed through dimensions such as reliability, assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangibles, as conceptualized in the SERVQUAL model by Parasuraman et al. [10]. This construct is measured using indicators such as services at the destination are delivered reliably and as promised (SQ1), facilities (hotels, restaurants, sanitation) at the destination are modern, clean and easily accessible (SQ2), tourists feel cared for and understood during the service experience (SQ3), and staff responsiveness and support are prompt and effective (SQ4). A positive relationship (+) with tourist satisfaction is expected [4, 22, 23].

Perceived cost (PC): Perceived cost represents tourists' evaluation regarding appropriateness of the price paid and the value received from products or services at the destination. This construct is measured using indicators such as: tourists perceive that the travel expenses at the destination are reasonable relative to the quality of services received (PC1), the prices at the destination are consistent with their budget (PC2), and the services at the destination are offered at fair and transparent prices (PC3). A favorable perception of cost is expected to have a positive impact (+) on tourist satisfaction [4, 11, 21].

Communication and promotion (PR): Communication and promotion indicate the set of activities, such as social media, television, newspapers, public relations, and word-of-mouth, that provide information and create positive impressions of a destination, thereby influencing tourists' perceptions and expectations [12]. This latent construct is measured through observed variables including tourists become aware of the destination through media channels such as social media, television, newspapers, etc. (PR1); promotional information about the destination is clear, understandable and useful for travel decision-making (PR2); the destination's image is positively promoted, leading to favorable first impressions among tourists (PR3); and tourists are attracted by creative promotional content, appealing visuals and engaging information about the destination (PR4). Communication and promotion are expected to have a positive impact (+) on tourist satisfaction, as they facilitate tourists' access to and understanding of the destination [4, 18, 19, 22].

Sustainable tourism awareness (SA): Sustainable tourism awareness is the level of tourists' recognition and concern for environmental protection, cultural preservation, and community responsibility when selecting and experiencing tourism activities. This latent construct is measured through observed variables: concern for environmental issues when choosing a destination (SA1); support for destinations that implement policies on nature conservation, cultural preservation, and local community well-being (SA2); and tourists' appreciation of destinations that provide transparent information on environmental protection and sustainable development practices (SA3). Sustainable tourism is expected to have a positive impact (+) on tourist satisfaction, as it reflects responsible tourism that ensures a balance between economic, social, and environmental benefits [2, 18, 20, 21].

Social and experiential factors (SE): This construct is based on the influence of family, friends, social media communities, and past experiences at the destination, factors that shape tourists' attitudes and destination loyalty behavior. It is mea-

sured through three observed variables: tourists choose the destination because it was recommended by relatives or friends (SE1); positive evaluations from online communities increase trust in the destination (SE2); and favorable past experiences motivate tourists to revisit the destination (SE3). Social and experiential factors are expected to have a positive impact (+) on tourist satisfaction [4, 15, 18, 20].

Tourist satisfaction (TS): Satisfaction is defined as tourists’ overall perception of whether their travel experience meets, exceeds, or falls short of their initial expectations; it serves as a key mediating factor between antecedent variables and revisit behavior. This construct is measured using observed indicators: tourists feel satisfied with their overall experience at the destination (TS1); services at the destination meet or exceed tourists’ expectations (TS2); and tourists are satisfied with the professionalism and attitude of the staff at the destination (TS3). Satisfaction acts as a mediating variable influenced by other latent constructs and is expected to have a positive impact (+) on tourists’ destination loyalty decisions [2, 4, 20, 22].

Destination loyalty (DL): It relates to tourists’ favorable behavioral intentions toward a destination, including revisit intention, positive word-of-mouth and preference over alternative destinations. Destination loyalty is formed based on cumulative travel experiences and overall satisfaction and reflects a long-term attitudinal and behavioral commitment to a destination. This latent construct is measured through observed indicators such as: tourists intend to revisit Thoi Son Islet in the near future (DL1); tourists will recommend the destination to relatives, friends, or through social media (DL2); and among equivalent travel options, tourists would prioritize Thoi Son Islet (DL3) [2, 4, 18, 20].

The selection of these eight latent variables is grounded in both theoretical frameworks and the specific characteristics of tourism activities in Vietnam. They represent prominent aspects influencing destination loyalty in the tourism sector of Dong Thap Province, and delimiting the

scope enables a deeper investigation and a more reliable validation of the proposed model within this research context (Figure 1).

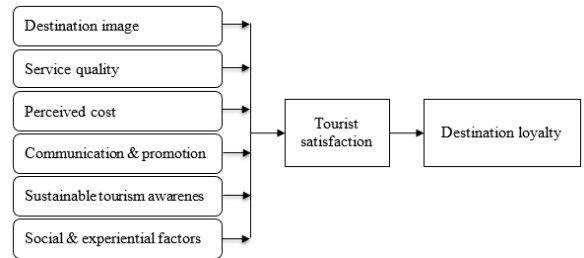


Fig. 1: Proposed research model

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Descriptive statistics

The frequency analysis results from 391 observations indicate that female tourists account for 52.9%, which is higher than male tourists (47.1%). Regarding age, the majority of surveyed tourists are between 20 and under 40 years old, representing the highest proportion (59.9%). In terms of educational level, most participants had completed high school (32.2%), followed by college or vocational training (22.8%) and university (23.8%), while the postgraduate group accounted for a smaller proportion (10.2%). Concerning occupation, small business and trade made up the largest group (24.0%), followed by general laborers (21.2%) and farmers (16.4%), whereas other groups, such as office workers, armed forces, and housewives, accounted for lower percentages. In addition, domestic tourists constituted the majority with 60.9%, while international tourists accounted for 39.1% (Table 1).

B. Scale reliability assessment

To evaluate the reliability of the measurement scales in this study, the indicators employed include Cronbach’s alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability (CR). The results presented in Table 2 show that all Cronbach’s alpha values range from 0.786 to 0.894, exceeding the threshold of 0.70; likewise, the CR values of the constructs range

Table 1: Survey sample characteristics

Content	Statistics	
	Frequency (person)	Relative (%)
Sex		
Male	184	47.1
Female	207	52.9
Age		
< 20 years old	54	13.8
From 20 to < 30 years old	132	33.8
From 30 to < 40 years old	102	26.1
From 40 to < 50 years old	80	20.5
From 50 years old and up	23	5.9
Education level		
Elementary	43	11.0
Secondary, high school	126	32.2
Intermediate, college	89	22.8
University	93	23.8
Postgraduate	40	10.2
Job		
Small business, trade	143	24.0
General laborers	109	21.2
Farmer	89	16.4
Office worker	13	21.7
Armed forces	14	8.2
Retired, housewife	13	6.6
Other	19	1.8
Tourists		
Domestic	238	60.9
Foreign	153	39.1

from 0.874 to 0.927, all above the recommended level of 0.70. These findings demonstrate that the measurement scales used in the study achieved satisfactory reliability.

In addition, convergent validity was assessed using the rho_A coefficient and the average variance extracted (AVE). The results indicate that rho_A values range from 0.809 to 0.898, all meeting the required threshold. The AVE values range from 0.680 to 0.810, all exceeding 0.50, suggesting that the observed variables explain a substantial proportion of the variance of their respective latent constructs, thereby ensuring convergent validity. Thus, the measurement scales in the research model demonstrate adequate reliability and convergent validity, making them suitable for subsequent analyses (Table 2).

To assess discriminant validity, the study employed the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Table 3).

Table 2: Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient

	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE
DL	0.833	0.835	0.900	0.750
DI	0.882	0.885	0.927	0.810
PC	0.813	0.817	0.889	0.728
PR	0.843	0.845	0.895	0.680
SA	0.786	0.809	0.874	0.698
SE	0.851	0.852	0.910	0.770
SQ	0.894	0.898	0.926	0.758
TS	0.846	0.847	0.907	0.764

The results show that the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs, thereby confirming that the constructs in the model are conceptually distinct. In addition, all HTMT values are below the threshold of 0.85 [27], further reinforcing the evidence of discriminant validity for the measurement scales.

Table 3: Fornell – Larcker value analysis measurement criteria

	DL	DI	PC	PR	SA	SE	SQ	TS
DL	0.866							
DI	0.465	0.900						
PC	0.301	0.244	0.853					
PR	0.452	0.352	0.147	0.824				
SA	0.323	0.202	0.169	0.138	0.836			
SE	0.347	0.298	0.176	0.231	0.225	0.878		
SQ	0.438	0.235	0.223	0.165	0.211	0.166	0.871	
TS	0.709	0.584	0.411	0.515	0.375	0.37	0.501	0.874

Multicollinearity was examined using the variance inflation factor (VIF). According to Hair et al. [27], VIF values for observed variables should be less than 5, and those for latent constructs should be less than 3 to avoid multicollinearity. The analysis results indicate that all observed variables have VIF values below 3 and all latent constructs have VIF values below 2, confirming that no multicollinearity exists in the model. Furthermore, generalized methodological bias was assessed using Harman’s one-factor test. A non-rotational exploratory factor analysis encompassing all measures showed that the first factor accounted for 25.8% of the total variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50%. This result suggests that generalized methodological bias is unlikely to be a serious concern in this

study [24].

In summary, the assessments of reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and multicollinearity all meet the required standards. Therefore, the measurement model in this study is appropriate and can be employed to test the hypotheses in the subsequent structural model.

C. Structural model PLS-SEM

The study employed the PLS-SEM model to test the hypotheses regarding the relationships among factors influencing tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty towards Thoi Son Islet as a travel destination. Specifically, the measurement model includes the following components: (1) destination image (DI), (2) service quality (SQ), (3) perceived cost (PC), (4) communication and promotion (PR), (5) sustainable tourism awareness (SA), and (6) social and experiential factors (SE). These factors are hypothesized to affect the mediating variable of tourist satisfaction (TS), which in turn influences the dependent variable, destination loyalty (DL) for Thoi Son Islet.

The analysis results using the PLS algorithm indicate that the adjusted coefficient of determination (R^2) for the mediating variable ‘satisfaction’ is 0.639, and for the dependent variable ‘destination loyalty’ is 0.501. This implies that the independent variables in the model explain 63.9% of the variance in satisfaction and 50.1% of the variance in destination loyalty. The path coefficients (β) in the model were estimated and tested using the bootstrapping procedure to evaluate the magnitude of effects and the statistical significance of each hypothesis.

The hypothesis testing results reveal that: (i) destination image (DI), service quality (SQ), perceived cost (PC), communication and promotion (PR), sustainable tourism awareness (SA) and social and experiential factors (SE) all exert positive effects on tourist satisfaction (TS), although the magnitude of their impacts varies; (ii) tourist satisfaction (TS) has a positive and statistically significant influence on the destination loyalty for Thoi Son Islet as a tourist destination (DL). Accordingly, the proposed research model is

validated, with tourist satisfaction serving as a crucial mediating variable between destination quality factors and destination loyalty decisions (Figure 2).

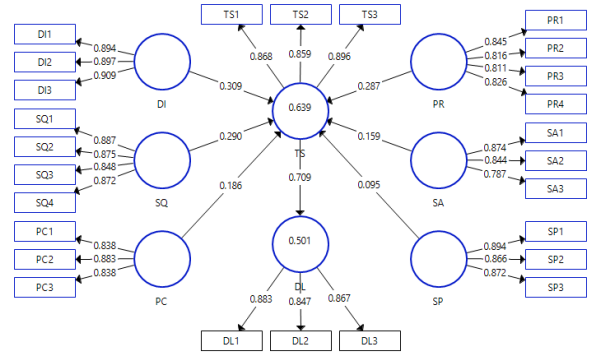


Fig. 2: PLS-SEM structural model results

Source: Authors’ survey data analysis, 2025

The overall model fit assessment shows that the model achieves an acceptable level of fit. Importantly, the SRMR = 0.051 < 0.08 indicates a very good model fit. The indices d_ULS = 0.926 and d_G = 0.396 reflect a high degree of similarity between the observed data and the theoretical model. In addition, the NFI = 0.831 demonstrates an acceptable level of fit according to the recommended threshold. Although the Chi-Square value = 944.469 is relatively high, this is a common phenomenon in studies with large sample sizes and does not affect the overall conclusion. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the research model achieves a satisfactory overall fit and provides a sufficient basis for further interpretation of the hypothesis testing results.

The results in Table 4 show that all hypotheses are supported at the statistical significance level ($p < 0.05$). In particular, the factors destination image ($\beta = 0.309$), perceived cost ($\beta = 0.186$), communication and promotion ($\beta = 0.287$), sustainable tourism awareness ($\beta = 0.159$), social and experiential factors ($\beta = 0.095$), and service quality ($\beta = 0.290$) all have positive effects on tourist satisfaction. Notably, tourist satisfaction (TS) has a very strong influence on destination loyalty (DL) with $\beta = 0.709$, $t = 21.830$, and p

= 0.000. This finding highlights the pivotal role of satisfaction in determining tourists' destination loyalty to Thoi Son Islet as a destination. Therefore, all hypotheses H1–H7 in the research model are accepted, thereby confirming the validity of the proposed model.

As presented in Table 5, all indirect relationships are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) and accepted. Notably, destination image ($\beta = 0.219$), perceived cost ($\beta = 0.132$), communication and promotion ($\beta = 0.203$), sustainable tourism awareness ($\beta = 0.113$), social and experiential factors ($\beta = 0.067$), and service quality ($\beta = 0.206$) all exert indirect effects on destination loyalty through satisfaction. The largest total effect belongs to destination image (0.528), followed by service quality (0.496) and promotion and communication (0.490), while social and experiential factors show the lowest impact (0.162). These findings confirm the partial mediating role of satisfaction in the proposed research model.

Table 6 indicates that all Q^2 values are greater than 0, demonstrating the model's predictive relevance for the latent constructs. More specifically, the constructs with the highest Q^2 values are service quality ($SQ = 0.583$) and destination image ($DI = 0.583$), followed by destination loyalty ($DL = 0.479$), social and experiential factors ($SE = 0.514$), and satisfaction ($TS = 0.504$). The remaining constructs, including communication and promotion ($PR = 0.458$), perceived cost ($PC = 0.442$), and sustainable tourism awareness ($SA = 0.390$), also yielded positive Q^2 values, reflecting a moderate level of predictive accuracy. Therefore, the analysis confirms that the proposed research model possesses substantial predictive power, particularly with respect to service quality and destination image.

In addition, based on the f^2 results, it can be observed that satisfaction exerts (TS) exerts a very large effect on destination loyalty (DL) with $f^2 = 1.011$. Among the factors influencing satisfaction, service quality (SQ, $f^2 = 0.210$) and communication and promotion (PR, $f^2 = 0.197$) demonstrate medium effects and play important roles. In contrast, destination image (DI, $f^2 =$

0.209), perceived cost (PC, $f^2 = 0.087$), sustainable tourism awareness (SA, $f^2 = 0.064$), and social and experiential factors (SE, $f^2 = 0.022$) exhibit only small effects. These findings confirm that satisfaction serves as a key mediating variable in the model, while also emphasizing the prominent role of service quality and promotional activities in enhancing tourists' satisfaction.

To address potential differences between domestic and international tourists, multi-group analysis was performed using SmartPLS software. The results showed that most structural relationships remained stable between groups. Service quality and destination image had a strong and significant impact on satisfaction for both domestic and international tourists. Promotional and communication activities had a relatively stronger impact on international tourists, while awareness of sustainable tourism played a more prominent role for domestic tourists. Importantly, the impact of satisfaction on destination loyalty remained consistently strong in both groups, confirming the robustness of the proposed model.

D. Discussion and managerial implications

This study contributes to the literature on tourism behavior by expanding the understanding of tourist satisfaction beyond its traditional role as a universal mediator. While previous studies in the context of ecotourism often suggest that satisfaction is primarily driven by sustainability-related values and environmentally friendly motivations, this study reveals a different behavioral mechanism in hybrid, community-based destinations like Thoi Son Islet. Specifically, satisfaction in this context is primarily shaped by functional and hedonistic attributes, including service quality, promotion, and communication, while awareness of sustainable tourism plays a relatively weaker role. This evidence challenges the prevailing view of satisfaction in ecotourism and shows that, in the transition of riverine destinations characterized by commercialization and strong interaction between locals and tourists, visitors behave more like mass tourists than value-driven ecotourists. Accordingly, satisfaction should be

Table 4: Hypothesis testing results

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values	Hypothesis testing
DI → TS	0.309	0.306	0.038	8.111	0.000	Accepted
PC → TS	0.186	0.186	0.034	5.378	0.000	Accepted
PR → TS	0.287	0.288	0.036	8.002	0.000	Accepted
SA → TS	0.159	0.161	0.032	4.953	0.000	Accepted
SE → TS	0.095	0.094	0.036	2.639	0.007	Accepted
SQ → TS	0.290	0.291	0.034	8.473	0.000	Accepted
TS → DL	0.709	0.708	0.032	21.830	0.000	Accepted

Table 5: Analysis of indirect relationships

Relationship	Indirect Effect	P Values	Type of Effect	Total Effect	Result
DI → TS → DL	0.219	0.000	Partial	0.528	Accepted
PC → TS → DL	0.132	0.000	Partial	0.318	Accepted
PR → TS → DL	0.203	0.000	Partial	0.490	Accepted
SA → TS → DL	0.113	0.000	Partial	0.272	Accepted
SE → TS → DL	0.067	0.007	Partial	0.162	Accepted
SQ → TS → DL	0.206	0.000	Partial	0.496	Accepted

Table 6: Q² values

	SSO	SSE	Q ² (=1-SSE/SSO)
DL	1173	611.411	0.479
DI	1173	488.666	0.583
PC	1173	654.903	0.442
PR	1564	847.813	0.458
SA	1173	715.714	0.390
SE	1173	569.515	0.514
SQ	1564	652.934	0.583
TS	1173	581.761	0.504

reconsidered as a context-dependent construct rather than a homogeneous mediator between destination types. By empirically demonstrating this shift, the study expands the theory of tourism satisfaction and provides a more nuanced explanation of how hybrid destinations generate destination loyalty.

The research findings provide important empirical evidence regarding the factors influencing tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty at Thoi Son Islet. First, the hypothesis testing results indicate that all factors, including destination image, service quality, perceived cost, promotion and communication, sustainable tourism awareness, and social and experiential factors, exert positive effects on tourist satisfaction. Among these, destination image ($\beta = 0.309$), service quality

($\beta = 0.290$), and promotion and communication ($\beta = 0.287$) demonstrate the strongest impacts, underscoring the importance of building an attractive destination image, delivering high-quality services, and enhancing communication activities in improving tourist experiences. The remaining factors, perceived cost, sustainable tourism awareness, and social experiential factors, also show positive effects, albeit at lower levels.

The findings reveal a paradox of satisfaction in river ecotourism. While the mediating role of satisfaction has been affirmed in tourism literature, the specific configuration of factors driving satisfaction in the context of Thoi Son Islet offers a fresh theoretical perspective. The results reveal a stark contrast: pragmatic and commercial factors such as service quality ($\beta = 0.290$; $f^2 = 0.210$) and communication-promotion ($\beta = 0.287$; $f^2 = 0.197$) have a moderate to strong impact on satisfaction. Conversely, perception of sustainable tourism ($\beta = 0.159$; $f^2 = 0.064$) and social experience factors ($\beta = 0.095$; $f^2 = 0.022$) show a significantly weaker impact. This finding challenges the common assumption that tourists visit primarily ecotourism destinations. Environmental values or altruistic motives do not drive this. Instead, tourists in Thoi Son exhibit

more typical behavior of mass tourists, prioritizing comfort, professional service, and destination image over commitments to sustainability. This study suggests that Thoi Son is operating as a ‘soft ecotourism’ destination, where the ‘ecological’ label serves as a landscape context rather than a core behavioral driver. Therefore, the study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting that in transitioning destinations like the Mekong Delta, satisfying tourists requires meeting their ‘enjoyment’ needs, such as services, fun, and scenery, rather than relying solely on nature conservation factors.

The additional f^2 values indicate that satisfaction has a very large effect on destination loyalty ($f^2 = 1.011$), while service quality (0.210) and promotion–communication (0.197) exert medium effects on satisfaction. In contrast, social and experiential factors (0.022) play only a marginal supplementary role. This finding confirms that destination development strategies should prioritize improving service quality and strengthening promotional activities rather than relying solely on social experience factors, which are more supportive in nature.

The results of the Q^2 and model fit analyses also demonstrate that the model exhibits strong predictive capability (Q^2 values for all dependent variables > 0.35 , SRMR = 0.051 < 0.08 , NFI = 0.831). Therefore, the proposed model is not only theoretically sound but also holds practical value for forecasting and destination management.

Based on the research findings, several managerial implications for tourism development at Thoi Son Islet are proposed. Firstly, destination image is the key factor driving visitor satisfaction and loyalty. For Thoi Son Islet, this underscores the need to strengthen its image by ensuring guests leave with a strong, positive impression through reliable service, while highlighting its natural beauty and distinctive cultural features tied to its orchards and riverside way of life. In addition, fostering safety and warmth through clear communication, essential safety measures, and welcoming interactions with locals is vital for building visitor confidence and comfort. In

summary, these targeted actions help establish a more memorable and trusted destination image, ultimately enhancing visitor satisfaction and promoting loyalty.

Secondly, service quality is a crucial factor determining tourist satisfaction. In the case of Thoi Son Islet, improving service quality requires ensuring that tourism services are provided consistently and as promised, especially regarding tour itineraries, price transparency, and service content. Tourists’ perceptions of facilities can be enhanced by maintaining the cleanliness and accessibility of restaurants, guesthouses, and sanitary facilities that meet basic amenity standards rather than expecting luxury. In terms of experience, tourists’ feelings of being cared for and understood largely depend on personalized interactions with service providers, especially guesthouse owners. Furthermore, prompt responses and effective support in handling tourist requests or complaints contribute significantly to the overall service rating, thereby reinforcing satisfaction and encouraging repeat visits.

Thirdly, communication and promotion have both direct and indirect impacts on destination loyalty, highlighting the role of information exposure in shaping tourists’ perceptions and behavioral responses. Research results show that tourists’ perceptions of a destination are primarily formed through media channels, demonstrating the importance of ensuring promotional information is clear, understandable, and helpful in travel decision-making. Positive and consistent promotion contributes to a good first impression before a visit, while creative content and engaging visuals increase tourists’ interest and emotional connection to the destination. When promotional messages accurately reflect the characteristics of the destination, they not only attract tourists but also help align expectations with the experience, thereby reinforcing satisfaction and encouraging destination loyalty.

Fourthly, perceived cost has a relatively lower impact, but it remains a crucial factor in terms of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. In the context of Thoi Son Islet, tourist cost as-

assessments are primarily shaped by the fit between travel costs and the quality of services experienced, rather than simply low prices. When prices for tours, meals, and local activities are perceived as fitting within a tourist's budget and communicated fairly and transparently, tourists feel more financially comfortable during their visit. Such perceptions of value for money and price fairness contribute to building trust in local service providers, thereby reinforcing satisfaction and supporting destination loyalty.

Finally, although awareness of sustainable tourism and social impact has a relatively small impact, they play a crucial complementary role in shaping destination loyalty. Tourists' concern for environmental issues and their support for destinations that prioritize nature conservation, cultural preservation, and community well-being contribute to a more positive assessment of the destination's long-term sustainability. Transparent communication about environmental protection efforts and sustainable development activities further enhances tourist appreciation and trust. Simultaneously, destination choice and intention to return are reinforced through social influence mechanisms, such as recommendations from family and friends, positive reviews in online communities, and positive past experiences, all of which together strengthen tourist confidence in the destination. These trust-based perceptions, while not having an immediate impact, support the accumulation of loyalty over time by strengthening prestige and social validation.

In summary, this study highlights the pivotal role of satisfaction in determining destination loyalty, while reaffirming the importance of destination image, service quality, and promotional activities in enhancing the attractiveness of Thoi Son Islet. The proposed managerial implications are highly practical, providing guidance for local authorities and tourism enterprises in formulating sustainable development strategies, strengthening competitiveness, and attracting more tourists in the future. These findings are generally consistent with prior studies that emphasize the central role of satisfaction in shaping tourists' behav-

ioral intentions. Nguyen et al. [22] confirmed that satisfaction significantly influences revisit intention, while destination image and perceived risk serve as important antecedents. Similarly, Manyangara et al. [23] demonstrated that service quality affects revisit intention both directly and indirectly through destination image, highlighting the importance of functional service attributes in driving tourist behavior. In the context of ecotourism, Mbira [20] and Andjarwati et al. [19] found that destination image and natural value contribute to satisfaction and loyalty primarily through emotional attachment and experiential value. Moreover, McKercher et al. [18] argued that although sustainability-related motivations are relevant, traditional factors such as relaxation and novelty remain dominant in shaping tourist satisfaction. In addition, Halpern et al. [21] suggested that sustainability influences perceived value, but its impact may vary depending on the type of destination and tourist expectations. Compared to these studies, the present research reveals a distinct pattern in a hybrid, community-based river tourism context, where functional attributes such as service quality and promotion exert stronger effects on satisfaction than sustainability-related factors. This finding both aligns with mass tourism literature and contrasts with studies emphasizing sustainability-driven behavior in ecotourism settings. Therefore, the results extend previous research by demonstrating that the relative importance of satisfaction drivers is highly context-dependent, particularly in transitional destinations like Thoi Son Islet.

V. CONCLUSION

Applying PLS-SEM to examine the determinants of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty at Thoi Son Islet, this study provides empirical evidence on the behavioral mechanisms shaping tourist loyalty in a river ecotourism context. The findings confirm that tourist satisfaction plays a central mediating role linking key antecedent factors to destination loyalty. Among the examined determinants, destination image,

service quality, and promotion–communication emerge as the most influential drivers of tourist satisfaction, while perceived cost, sustainable tourism awareness, and social experiential factors contribute to satisfaction to a lesser extent. Overall, the findings highlight that enhancing destination competitiveness in Thoi Son Islet should primarily focus on improving service quality, strengthening destination image, and implementing effective communication and promotional strategies to increase tourist satisfaction and foster long-term destination loyalty. In contrast, factors related to perceived cost, sustainability awareness, and social experiences play a complementary role and should be optimized as supporting elements rather than primary drivers.

This study collected data during the peak tourist season, a period characterized by higher tourist numbers and stronger service interactions. Therefore, perceived tourist satisfaction and loyalty may differ from the off-season, when service pressures, pricing strategies, and experience quality may vary. While peak season data provides valuable insights into tourist behavior under high-demand conditions, future studies are encouraged to utilize time series or multi-seasonal data collection methods to capture seasonal variability in tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

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