The role of emotional experience and destination image on ecotourism satisfaction

El papel de la experiencia emocional e imagen del destino en la satisfacción con el ecoturismo

情感体验和目的地形象对生态旅游满意度的影响

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to analyze the influence of the emotional experience (EE) and the image of the tourist destination on the satisfaction of the domestic tourist and his behavioral intentions, represented through the word of mouth (WOM) and his revisit intention.

Design/methodology/approach – The information obtained through a personal survey to 382 local tourists was refined and subjected to structural equation analysis. Analyses conducted with SPSS 20.0 and AMOS 20 software confirmed the existence of interesting significant relationships.

Findings – The results show that positive destination image and different experiences are considered to be the main elements that promote positive emotions and satisfaction for tourists, leading to a higher eagerness to spread WOM recommendations and to revisit a destination. The results also verify that interactions with the difficult-

replacement services and with residents create strong positive EEs for female visitors, so that they are more willing to revisit a destination than males.

Research limitations/implications – Eco-destination managers should provide more difficult-replacement services and create an enjoyable and unique experience for tourists to enhance their satisfaction and positive behavioral intentions.

Originality/value – The results provide some important implications and insights about the marketing theory groundwork of EE and satisfaction, such as how they are to be conceptualized and established and how interactive relationships are formed among them in the ecotourism context.

Keywords Destination image, Emotional experiences, Satisfaction, WOM, Ecotourism

Paper type Research paper

Resumen

Objetivos – El propósito del estudio es analizar la influencia de la experiencia emocional y la imagen del destino turístico sobre la satisfacción del turista nacional y sus intenciones de comportamiento, representadas a través del WOM y su intención de reinterpretación.

Metodología – La información obtenida a través de una encuesta personal a 382 turistas locales fue refinada y sometida a análisis de ecuaciones estructurales. Los análisis realizados con el software SPSS 20.0 y AMOS 20 confirmaron la existencia de interesantes relaciones significativas.

Resultados – Los resultados exponen que la imagen positiva de los destinos y las experiencias varias se consideraron como los elementos principales que les promueven las emociones y satisfacciones positivas a los turistas, lo que llevan a un gran deseo de difundir boca a boca y de volver a visitar. Además, verifican los resultados que las interacciones de turistas con los servicios de reemplazo diferente y con los residentes locales les han creado las experiencias de emoción fuerte a los visitantes femeninas, entonces desean que vuelven a visitar los destinos que los masculinos.

Implicaciones prácticas – Los directores de eco-destino deben proveer más servicios disponibles de reemplazo diferente a los turistas lo que les generan maravillosa diversa experiencia a ellos, así empodean la satisfacción y intenciones de conducta.

Originalidad/Valor – Los resultados proveen algunas implicaciones importantes y visiones del fundamento de la teoría del marketing de la experiencia emocional y la satisfacción como en cuál manera que se establecen o conceptualizan y como las relaciones interactivas son formada en el contexto de eco-turismo.

Palabras claves – Imagen de destinos, experiencias emocionales, satisfacción, boca a boca, Eco-turismo

Tipo de artículo – Trabajo de investigación

摘要

目的 – 本研究旨在分析情感体验和旅游目的地形象对国内游客满意度及其行为意向的影响, 行为意向通过口碑推荐和目的地重游意向来表示。

研究方法 – 通过调研382名当地游客, 对获取信息进行提炼, 进行了结构方程分析。使用SPSS 20.0和AMOS 20软件进行分析, 证实了存在着有趣的显著关系。

研究结果 – 结果显示, 积极的目的地形象和不同的体验被认为是促进游客积极情绪和满意度的主要因素, 从而使游客更热衷于传播口碑、推荐和重游目的地。结果还表明, 与困难置换服务机构的互动, 以及与居民的互动会为女性游客带来强烈的正向情感体验, 使得女性游客相比于男性更愿意重游目的地。

实践意义 – 生态旅游目的地管理者应提供更多的困难置换服务, 并为游客创造愉快、独特的体验, 以提高游客的满意度和积极的行为意向。

原创性/价值 – 研究结果为情感体验和满意度的营销理论基础工作提供了一些重要的启示, 例如, 在生态旅游背景下, 如何对它们进行概念化和建立, 以及它们之间如何形成互动关系。

关键词 – 目的地形象, 情感体验, 满意度, WOM, 生态旅游

文章类型: 研究型论文

1. Introduction

The declaration of the United Nations “International Year of Ecotourism” in 2002 contributed to sustainable ecotourism development (Ebsco, 2009). Globally, it is the biggest

and most proliferate industry, accounting for 10% of the world's gross domestic product, 7% of the global tourism market and is responsible for 10% employment overall (UNWTO, 2018). With respect to the total numbers of general tourism, one-third of these represent ecotourists (UNWTO, 2018). Local and rural populations can acquire greater opportunities for employment through the development of ecotourism activities (Das and Chatterjee, 2015). As a result, the growth of ecotourism can reduce the unemployment that causes relocation of workers to urban centers from their rural homes (Çalışkan, 2018).

According to the world trend, ecotourism is also becoming quite popular in Vietnam where there are many attractive and diverse ecological zones. In particular, Hoi An ranked third in the 25 most amazing cities in the world and was ranked in the top 15 most amazing cities in Asia, according to a poll of readers of the American travel magazine *Travel and Leisure* 2020. Hoi An has become a land of interesting things, helping travelers choose to experience, to find a balance in life. Ecotourism is derived from the available potential of the region by using the natural landscape to provide unique and interesting activities such as rice field plowing, rice transplanting, buffalo riding, lychee picking, crab fishing and participate in art performances with indigenous people. All these opportunities have created unique values for Hoi An, attracting a large number of both domestic and international tourists.

There is fierce competition among destination managers to provide appealing services for tourist destinations. Attracting new visitors and retaining old customers is a comprehensive, essential strategy for the survival and development of businesses in the tourism service industry. Contributing to the success of a tourist destination is customer satisfaction, considered the most imperative indicator of behavioral intentions for any attraction (Chiu *et al.*, 2016). Destination image (DI) is also one of the vital foundational factors for a particular traveling behavior, making an important contribution to tourists' decision-making process when selecting a destination, as well as evaluating their satisfaction, expectation and behavioral intentions (Pratminingsih *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, the experience that incorporates both aspects including cognition and emotion (Han and Jeong, 2013) could contribute to shedding light on tourists' psychological state. This has led to many studies that explored the experience concept more deeply, specifically its emotional aspect, and determined that it is another important element in enhancing the likelihood that customers will return to and recommend a destination in various contexts, such as shopping (Yüksel and Yüksel 2007), festivals (Grappi and Montanari, 2011) and restaurants (Han and Jeong, 2013), but rare studies have been conducted in the ecotourism environment.

This study attempts to contribute a deeper insight into emotion evoked by different experiences within a specific context – the Hoi An ecotourism. Practical experiences stem from interactions between customers and unique tourism products, or between customers and local residents through traditional games such as Bai Choi, riding in basket boats, learning to cook with traditional organic foods. Activities such as these are believed to stimulate emotional engagement (Quynh *et al.*, 2018; Quynh, 2019). The primitive and irreplaceable nature of this service type has created not just distinctive emotional tourism experiences that are considered powerful determinants of tourist satisfaction (SAT) and that also influence tourists' post-consumption behavioral intentions, but also a different resource for increasing successful competitiveness for Hoi An. In other words, a review of the literature reveals how emotional experience (EE) is defined and its outcomes seem to be quite nebulous in the ecotourism industry context, even it remains scarce in the Vietnamese ecotourism context (Hosany *et al.*, 2014; Trinh *et al.*, 2018).

According to previous literature (San *et al.*, 2013), visitors who have satisfactory and interesting experiences at a destination are likely to try to persuade their relatives and friends to go there, and they will also likely revisit the destination themselves. There are,

however, still significant concerns about the relationship among these constructs (Yang, 2017). Besides, the data analyzed in this paper show that, in the tourism sector, it is important to recognize that the likelihood tourists will revisit a specific destination depends on their past experience there and a positive DI (Osman and Sentosa, 2013). However, not only is DI a multifaceted structure that depends on many factors (e.g. time and the field of study: Melo *et al.*, 2016), but EE is also a complex structure depending on time, experience services and visitors' preferences and age. Adding to that, the diversity of travel services and the borderless competition in this market has motivated managers to create differentiated value experiences (Baka *et al.*, 2016) to enhance customer satisfaction and improve future behavioral intentions. The satisfaction element also should not be ignored as it significantly influences their revisit intention (RI) and word-of-mouth (WOM) suggestions (Chi and Qu, 2008). Others also proposed that it is important to further explore the meaningfulness of WOM in tourism (Filieri and McLeay, 2013). In response to Bigné *et al.*'s (2005) call for further research, Pestana *et al.* (2020) assessed the integrated role of EE, satisfaction and behavioral intentions of Portuguese tourists. However, cultural differences can lead to different behaviors (Hanel *et al.*, 2018) and achieve generalization of the proposed models (Sepulcri *et al.*, 2020), so these relationships need to be explored more deeply in different cultural contexts (e.g. Vietnam). Therefore, the present study offers a theoretical model for investigating how EE and DI explain SAT and intentions. The study also extends the theoretical framework to supply empirical evidence on the proposed causal relationships among EE, DI, satisfaction, WOM and RI. Also, the different effects of tourist gender on these relationships are explored.

Following the reviews of the literature and discussions of these concepts in the tourism context, hypotheses were formulated and the research model was used to test.

2. Literature review

2.1 Ecotourism

The noticeable growth of new tourism destinations, the facilitation of low-cost carriers and rising income and leisure time (Bornhorst *et al.*, 2010) have given people more choices in the travel decision-making process. However, the noise and industrialization found in urban places have given rise to a new trend in tourism – the ecotourism experience. There is a fair similarity in the ecotourism concepts of researchers and organizations, of which the two most widely accepted definitions are from The International Ecotourism Society and The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The former has defined ecotourism as “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people,” analogically, the latter considered that ecotourism is a type of “environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past, and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples.” Besides, researchers have recently further defined ecotourism as having a lower impact within the industry in comparison to regular tourism, owing to its involvement mainly with often remote or off-the-beaten-path destinations (Chand *et al.*, 2015) as well as creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the eco-tourist and the tour provider in which the tourist obtains a unique and educational travel experience while the provider receives vital economic gains, making ecotourism superior in ethic, moral and cultural aspects (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2018). Stemming from these definitions, it can be generalized that ecotourism is a tourism activity that takes place in a natural environment with the orientation of raising environmental protection consciousness, cultural conservation and the responsibility for sustainable social-economic development.

2.2 Emotional experience

The tourist destination sector is a fully challenging and dynamic one. Therefore, it is believed that attention should be paid to tourists' different experiences because of the importance of those experiences in respect of their satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Maroofi and Dehghan, 2012). However, it is an extremely complex construct (Xiang *et al.*, 2015). While Walter *et al.* (2010) suggested that experience, as the direct and indirect experience of the customer of the service process, stems from how the customer interacts with a provider's service, important components of tourism experiences are positive and pleasurable feelings and emotions (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). Further, McIntosh and Siggs (2005) supposed that experienced emotions are an extremely essential element of a memorable destination experience, and the intensity of emotions can alter during the whole service experience (Lee and Kyle, 2012). In the context of ecotourism, the EE is generated by the interaction between tourists and local people, especially derived from the process of experiencing unique services at the destination. During this process, a perception is created when tourists' senses are stimulated, and positive EEs will occur when their evoked emotions exceed their expectations (e.g. they weave a hat/clothing for loved ones, go sailing alone, transplant rice, enjoy the art of Bi Chi, etc.). Also, service encounters between tourists and locals can evoke positive emotions and create unforgettable memories. This emotion is personal and depends on the tourist's personality, the level of their involvement and the interaction process. In summary, positive EEs are a positive and persistent experience owing to evoked emotions during interactions between tourists and residents and/or services at a destination that exceeded their expectations. On the other hand, for some visitors, at certain destinations, the interaction process with providers can also lead to unexpected emotions. However, this study only looked at the positive side of EE.

Since the very early days of marketing research, the causal relationship between EE and behavior constructs has been well documented (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2016; Romero and Ruiz-Equihua, 2020). Regarding the tourist's EE, some authors claimed that there is a positive relationship between it and SAT and/or future behavioral intentions (Han and Jeong, 2013; Grappi and Montanari, 2011). In particular, according to Tribe and Snaith (1998), visitors' satisfaction with a destination like a holiday getaway could be measured by comparing the results of their expectations and their actual experiences. The present EE at the destination is a positive predictor as well as a crucial determinant of satisfaction levels (Yoon and Uysal, 2005). In a shopping tourism context, the types of benefits gained from tourists' experience can be considered a reference point in specifying overall satisfaction and intention to give positive WOM (Yuksel and Yuksel, 2007; Tsao and Hsieh, 2012). Furthermore, Prayag *et al.* (2017) have proven that EE derived from social and physical interactions of tourists within a specific destination plays a crucial role in forming their satisfaction and promoting behavioral intentions. Analogically, in the ecotourism context, Roseta *et al.* (2020) provided more evidence identifying positive EEs of tourists during their journey is one of the most important premises in determining their satisfaction and future behaviors. However, according to Boo *et al.* (2009), although tourists may have an interesting experience at a destination, they may not return there as they prefer instead to discover new destinations, but they are still likely to recommend it to friends or relatives. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. The emotional experience of tourists influences their satisfaction with the destination.

H2. The emotional experience of tourists with a tourist destination influences their WOM intentions towards that destination.

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2.3 Destination image

Since the 1970s, academicians have perceived that DI is an indispensable element in tourists' decision-making process (King *et al.*, 2015) and destination selection (Carballo *et al.*, 2015) and that it also influences their intention to visit or revisit a place (Chen and Tsai, 2007). In particular, the process of selecting a tourist destination is very complicated because it depends on several factors such as images, free time, season and budget (Bornhorst *et al.*, 2010). Although much effort has been devoted to studying DI-related issues, there still is a lack of consensus in how it is defined, formed and measured (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Kim and Richardson, 2003). Differences in the way it is formed, defined and measured seem to depend on the field and time of the research (Melo *et al.*, 2016), target groups of tourists (domestic or foreign, urban or rural, younger or older) and travel motivation (adventure or resort travel).

In the past, many research efforts have been conducted to explore relationships between DI and tourists' satisfaction levels (Puh, 2014; Naidoo *et al.*, 2015) and intention to revisit a destination (Pratminingsih *et al.*, 2014; King *et al.*, 2015), but the results were contradictory.

In the events and festivals settings, Lee *et al.* (2005) tested the effect of the affective aspect of DI, such as international sporting events, on tourist behavioral intention. The results indicated that tourists' positive emotions derived from favorable DIs and positive service quality significantly influenced their satisfaction and willingness to recommend, but they do not intend to visit again. In the context of cultural tourism, Schaar (2013) claimed that if the destination is a product, its success lies in the number of tourist revisits, relatively more than the number of first-time visitors. Huete Alcocer and López Ruiz (2019) focused on a heritage destination and analyzed the relationship between DI and SAT. Analysis of the results of this study has identified that the above relationship is significant. Analogically, it is recognized that positive DIs are more likely to achieve high satisfaction levels and, conversely, negative images achieve high dissatisfaction levels, which means that satisfied visitors will come back to a favorable destination (Shafiee *et al.*, 2016; King *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, boosting an attractive DI is necessary to enhance intentions to revisit a place (Agustina, 2018). Based on these discussions, the next hypotheses formulated are as follows:

H3. The destination image influences tourist satisfaction with the destination.

H4. The destination image influences the intention to revisit the destination.

2.4 Tourist satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has emerged as an important psychological structure that facilitates interactions between customers and brands and is often considered the center of a business's marketing activities (Machleit and Mantel, 2001). It contributes to the financial value of businesses (Quynh *et al.*, 2020a), such as decreasing customer-related transaction costs, increasing revenues and reducing price elasticity among repurchasers (Lewin, 2009). Furthermore, according to Anderson *et al.* (1994), higher consumer satisfaction levels have the potential to increase customer loyalty, reduce the cost of failure, isolate existing market share from competitors and help enhance the reputation of an organization in the market, thus expanding market share (Vuuren *et al.*, 2012).

In relationship marketing theory, customer satisfaction is considered an indispensable antecedent of long-term relationships through which customers achieve their expectations and norms (Kotler, 2009). According to Olive (1981), customer satisfaction is an emotional reaction derived from any particular transaction. Likewise, it is suggested as an emotional response by customers when assessing the discrepancy between expectation and the perception of real performance (Vuuren *et al.*, 2012). That means that the customer is satisfied when the results of the consumption process are consistent with or exceed their expectations. In contrast, if the results are below par, the customer is dissatisfied. In tourism literature, satisfaction is a positive feeling derived from tourists' experience process at a destination (Meng *et al.*, 2008).

Empirical evidence from previous studies has indicated that a tourist's satisfaction is a significant predictive indicator of their RI and willingness to recommend the destination to others (Beerli and Martin, 2004; Chi and Qu, 2008; Coban, 2012). Exploring the role of SAT in the tourism services context in different countries has shown various results. SAT increased customer retention in the United Kingdom (Adu *et al.*, 2000), increased RI to a destination in Thailand (Rittichainuwat *et al.*, 2002) and raised the likelihood of engaging in positive WOM in Spain and Macau (Lai *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the results of most studies suggest that once tourists are satisfied with a provided service, they are likely to revisit the same destination and are willing to encourage others to become customers. In other words, when a certain level of satisfaction within an environment is reached, tourists' RIs are enhanced and it contributes to positive word of mouth. Logically, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5. Tourist satisfaction positively influences their revisit intention.

H6. Tourist satisfaction positively influences their WOM intention.

2.5 Multigroup effect of gender

Many research efforts of academics and practitioners examine gender differences based on social role theory proposed by Eagly *et al.* (2000). The studies further elucidate the distinct influence of men and women in product evaluations (McDaniel and Kinney, 1998), decision-making processes (Venkatesh and Morris, 2000), solving a problem (Mitchell and Walsh, 2004) and hospitality service selection (Mattila, 2000). Furthermore, Belanche *et al.* (2020) point out that customer gender has been explored frequently as a moderating variable that influences the relationships among marketing structures (Ladhari and Leclerc, 2013; Khan and Rahman, 2017; Mosquera *et al.*, 2018).

Although many studies have attempted to estimate the different effects of gender on the relationships among marketing constructs, there is still inconsistency in the results. For example, in the financial services industry, Ladhari and Leclerc (2013) reported that women are attributed to higher levels of loyalty, satisfaction, service quality and trust than men. In the retail banking context, the impact of reliability and empathy dimensions on satisfaction is higher for male customers than female customers (Karatepe, 2011). Further, for internet service, according to Sanchez-Franco *et al.* (2009), the relationships between customers' trust and loyalty and between satisfaction and commitment were stronger for males than for females. In the context of this study, therefore, it is also predicted that the tourist gender will have a distinct influence on the relationships among the proposed constructs.

Hence, on the platform of the above discussion, the integrated conceptual framework was formed and is shown in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample

The study selected Hoi An as a tourist destination. This city was designated by UNESCO as a world cultural heritage site and was named one of “The Top 15 Cities in the World” by *Travel and Leisure* magazine (The 2019 World’s Best Cities). Hoi An provides so much variety for tourists with its unique and famous tourism areas. In addition to the renowned modern tourist areas such as Vinpearl, the poetic beach of Cua Dai, and An Bang, it is also a land of many imprints of cultural mixing and interference. Chinese guilds and temples are located next to traditional Vietnamese townhouses and houses built in the French architectural style. In particular, Hoi An, a small geographic area, has many unique and distinct ecotourism areas. This is the perfect choice for gaining an understanding of different EEs, tourists’ satisfaction and likelihood to promote positive WOM and tourists’ intention to revisit.

Tests were performed using samples of tourists who have visited ecotourism areas in Hoi An. Eco-tourists were selected as participants as ecotourism is considered to have a valuable “different experience” sector which can be easily associated with emotion. The interviewers picked out random tourists in different destinations. Only Vietnamese customers who had visited an eco-destination could participate in the project. The study sample was limited to Vietnamese tourists to follow the program “Vietnamese go traveling Vietnam” by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. More importantly, the results of this sample will give destination managers an overview of the role of domestic tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel between countries is restricted. The direct survey was performed over the last two months of 2019. To ensure comfortability for each tourist, the location of the surveys was decided following the individual’s desire (at a coffee shop, at a restaurant or in the mall). The total number of participants was 415. The tool for collecting the necessary information was a full questionnaire containing 35 questions which were based on the attributes of related structures. A total of 30 items were derived from the literature review and adopted for further analysis in the current research context (Appendix). Using a seven-point Likert scale, tourists were asked to answer all questions by indicating degrees of agreement (from strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Data collection was conducted in Vietnamese, and the back-translation method was used to convert the responses into the study language following the method proposed by Brislin (1986).

Figure 1.
Proposed conceptual
framework

3.2 Measures
Modification of the instrument for ecotourism settings is supported by the previous instrument developers: DI (Chi and Qu, 2008); EE (Hosany *et al.*, 2014; Han and Jeong, 2013); satisfaction (Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011); RI (Quintal and Polczynski, 2010); and WOM (Bhattacharjee, 2001). This study's measurement items of the related variables included in the causal model have been adopted from the above studies. The research data and hypotheses were tested using SPSS 20.0 and AMOS 20.0.

4. Results

4.1 Profile of respondents
The descriptive analysis indicates the demographic characteristics of the target tourists. After removing invalid and incomplete answers, 382 out of 415 survey responses were used for further analysis. The demographic characteristics of these respondents are summarized in Table 1. While nearly three-quarters of the sample were female (72.5%), only 27.5% were male. In terms of tourists' age, over half of the sample (57.6%) was aged 30–40, 23.8% were under 30 and the remaining 18.6% were above 40. Also, the majority of the tourists ($n = 273$, 71.5%) were first time visitors to Hoi An. Finally, most of the tourists stayed in Hoi An for three to five days ($n = 200$, 52.4%).

4.2 Reliability and validity of measurement
To estimate the composite reliability of the different constructs (DI, EE, SAT, WOM and RI) included in the analysis, the criteria of Fornell and Larcker (1981) was followed.

According to Hair *et al.* (1998), the composite reliability of the above constructs should be higher than 0.70. As shown in Table 2, after removing the invalid items, the CR values for all five constructs were adequate, including DI (0.913), EE (0.885), SAT (0.856), WOM (0.880) and RI (0.900). Also, the coefficient alpha value of the proposed constructs exceeded 0.80, higher than the recommended level (0.70) suggested by Nunnally (1978). Further, convergent and discriminant validity helps to examine the validity of measures. Convergent validity was estimated by factor loading and the average variance extracted (AVE) values. All the constructs' factor loadings and AVE values were higher than the value suggested (0.50) by Hair *et al.* (1998). Additionally, based on criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999), the CFA results revealed that all fit indices of the measurement model were within the recommended level. Specifically, $\chi^2 = 553.906$, $df = 241$ and $\chi^2/df = 2.298$, CFI = 0.945, GFI = 0.891, TLI = 0.937, IFI = 0.945 and RMSEA = 0.058. This outcome implies that an adequate fit between the measurement model and its observed data has been proven.

To examine a measure's meaning, it is crucial to determine discriminant validation (Heeler and Ray, 1972). Discriminant validity is determined when a measure has not been highly correlated with another (Campbell, 1960). The discriminant validity can be evaluated by comparing values between AVE for each construct and the r^2 value (squared correlation between two constructs). Also, according to Fornell and Larker (1981), discriminant validity

Table 1.
Sample demographic characteristics

Characteristics	Gender		Age			Length of stay (days)			Past experience	
	Male	Female	Under 30	30–40	above 40	1–2	3–5	>5	First	Revisit
Frequency	105	277	91	220	71	26	200	156	273	109
%	27.5	72.5	23.8	57.6	18.6	6.8	52.4	40.8	71.5	28.5

is accepted when r^2 is less than the AVE value of each construct. As shown in Table 3, the model constructs' discriminant validity is supported.

4.3 Testing the structural model

To test the proposed hypotheses that relate to the causal relationship among DI, EE, SAT and behavioral intentions, SEM analysis with AMOS 20 software was used. Studying the proposed research model with the specific fit indices, the results indicated that the structural model seems to come in line with the observed data (Figure 2).

Specifically, the IFI, TLI and CFI scores (0.940, 0.932 and 0.940, respectively) achieved the requirement, manifesting closeness to good fit indicators. The values of the GFI and RMSEA were 0.886 and 0.061, respectively, also suggesting a good fit between the data and the proposed structures. The relative chi-square/df (2.399) was within the accepted level. Considering the sample size, the above fit indices indicated sufficiency and supported that

Indicator	Standardized loading	SE	<i>t</i> -value	<i>P</i>	CR	AVE
DI3	0.89				0.913	0.678
DI4	0.873	0.041	23.615	***		
DI1	0.814	0.044	20.707	***		
DI5	0.768	0.046	18.733	***		
DI2	0.764	0.047	18.578	***	0.900	0.645
RV3	0.842					
RV2	0.902	0.046	21.91	***		
RV1	0.812	0.045	18.879	***		
RV4	0.699	0.046	15.161	***		
RV5	0.744	0.047	16.57	***	0.885	0.607
EE5	0.79					
EE1	0.769	0.059	15.72	***		
EE3	0.796	0.06	16.385	***		
EE2	0.781	0.057	16.027	***		
EE4	0.759	0.056	15.494	***	0.856	0.545
SAT1	0.792					
SAT3	0.731	0.063	14.462	***		
SAT2	0.747	0.065	14.839	***		
SAT4	0.672	0.064	13.158	***		
SAT5	0.742	0.064	14.725	***	0.880	0.646
WOM3	0.841					
WOM2	0.794	0.056	17.4	***		
WOM4	0.783	0.054	17.094	***		
WOM1	0.797	0.056	17.508	***		

Table 2.
CFAs' results within
the five latent factors

Research constructs	DI	RV	Correlations EE	SAT	WOM
1. DI	0.68				
2. RV	0.31	0.65			
3. EE	0.35	0.42	0.61		
4. SAT	0.37	0.41	0.43	0.55	
5. WOM	0.37	0.36	0.45	0.43	0.65

Table 3.
Discriminant validity
of constructs

Figure 2.
Results of hypotheses
test

Notes: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$ level of significance

the proposed research model revealed pertinent data and could be used for explaining the hypotheses of the study.

Table 4 summarizes the findings of the SEM analysis that DI and EE have significant positive effects on SAT, which in turn has a significant positive impact on WOM and RI. Further, the findings show that while positive DI encourages intentions to revisit a place, different EE promotes intentions to recommend it to relatives and friends. The results also indicate that the difference in gender has a direct and positive impact on some proposed relationships.

Specifically, as expected, the results indicate that $H1$ and $H2$ ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < 0.01$ and $\beta = 0.280$, $p < 0.01$, respectively) are detected to be insignificant, so these hypotheses are supported. Analogically, supporting $H3$ and $H4$ are also found, that is, DI is also significantly related to satisfaction and RIs ($\beta = 0.328$, $p < 0.01$ and $\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). Finally, similar to the result proposed by Coban (2012), the results show that $H5$ and $H6$ ($\beta = 0.391$, $p < 0.01$ and $\beta = 0.408$, $p < 0.01$, respectively) are detected to be significant. This shows that the results recognize the role of emotions in consumer attitudes and behaviors (Tsao and Hsieh, 2012; Pestana *et al.*, 2020), as well as the importance of DIs for visitor satisfaction (Naidoo *et al.*, 2015).

4.3.1 Verification of multigroup effect. In this study, a multigroup analysis was conducted through AMOS to examine distinct influences of tourist gender on the

Table 4.
Hypotheses
verification result

Hypotheses		Path coefficient	<i>p</i> -value	SE	Results
<i>H1</i>	EE-> SAT	0.421	***	0.059	Supported
<i>H2</i>	EE->WOM	0.280	***	0.070	Supported
<i>H3</i>	DI-> SAT	0.328	***	0.045	Supported
<i>H4</i>	DI->RV	0.160	0.008	0.068	Supported
<i>H5</i>	SAT -> WOM	0.391	***	0.072	Supported
<i>H6</i>	SAT ->RV	0.408	***	0.091	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.01$

relationships among proposed constructs. According to the method proposed by Matsuno and Mentzer (2012), first, it is important to estimate the fit indicators of each multigroup. The next crucial step is to compare the path coefficient between the constrained model and the unconstrained model. Finally, computing the critical ratio for pair comparisons between two groups is indispensable to recognize the different effect levels of gender on proposed relationships.

According to Hair *et al.* (1998), it is essential to check whether each group can attain an adequate fit separately by comparing the fit indicators of the male group ($N = 105$) with the female group ($N = 277$). The fit indices of the male tourist group were as follows: relative chi-square = 585.286 ($p = 0.00$, $df = 244$); CFI = 0.940; TLI = 0.932; GFI = 0.886; RMSEA = 0.061. The fitness of the female tourist group was relative chi-square = 503.146 ($p = 0.000$, $df = 244$), IFI = 0.933, TLI = 0.924, CFI = 0.933, RMSEA = 0.062. The results showed a good fit indicator.

One of the results of multigroup factor analysis is the manifestation of significant chi-square ($\chi^2 = 930.357$; $p < 0.001$; $df = 507$) in the measurement weights model and also a significant chi-square ($\chi^2 = 901.102$; $p < 0.001$; $df = 488$) in the unconstrained model. The fit of the former model was detected to be more powerful than that of the latter model (difference = 29.255) with a p -value of 0.062.

The critical ratio for the groups' pair comparisons was tested to determine the variation between groups and identify the considerably different pairs. The result is presented in Table 5 below.

Two out of six hypotheses were found to be influenced by tourists' gender as their absolute values of z -score were higher than the critical of ± 1.65 , which was proposed by Bollen (1990). For the relationship between EE and SAT where female tourists yielded higher coefficients ($\beta = 0.182$) than the male tourists ($\beta = -0.063$), the difference is significant (z -score = 2.4112 $> \pm 1.96$, $p < 0.05$), which reveals that the female tourists' EE factor accounts for more influence than the male tourists on their satisfaction level. Similarly, for the relationship between SAT and WOM intentions where female tourists also yielded higher coefficients ($\beta = 0.165$) than male tourists ($\beta = 0.052$), the difference is significant (z -score = 1.656 $> \pm 1.65$, $p < 0.1$), which demonstrates that the female tourists' satisfaction accounts for more influence than the male tourists on the level of their WOM. In other words, the results show that gender differences have an influence on EE, satisfaction level and WOM. In particular, female experiences created during interactions with locals and with services have a stronger impact on their moods, stimulating their emotions and feelings more than men's. Finally, there is no significant difference detected for the remaining relationships between the two tourist groups, male and female tourists.

Hypotheses	Path coefficient		Z-score	Result
	Male	Female		
EE $\rightarrow$ WOM	0.222***	0.152*	-0.670	No difference
EE $\rightarrow$ SAT	-0.063*	0.182**	2.4112**	Difference
DI $\rightarrow$ SAT	0.048*	0.200*	0.411	No difference
DI $\rightarrow$ RV	0.192**	0.109	-0.424	No difference
SAT $\rightarrow$ WOM	0.052*	0.165***	1.656*	Difference
SAT $\rightarrow$ RV	0.284*	0.158	-0.379	No difference

Notes: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Table 5.
Gender hypotheses
comparison

		Constructs	Items
Table 6. Measurement scales	Word of mouth (Bhattacharjee, 2001)	Emotional experience (Han and Jeong, 2013)	This destination has stimulated my emotions This destination has been memorable to me I have experienced distinctive and exciting situations This destination has allowed me to forget about the daily routine This destination is exceptional Distinctive history and heritage Friendly and helpful local people Breathtaking scenery and natural attractions The unspoiled and fascinating landscape Tempting cultural events and festivals Safe and secure environment Exciting activities (boating, fishing, etc.) Enormous opportunities for outdoor recreation
			Good bargain shopping Wide choice of accommodations I intend to return to this destination in the future I consider this destination my first choice as selecting a destination in the future I would be willing to pay a higher price for this destination over other
		Destination image (Chi and Qu, 2008)	I like this destination more so than others Overall, given the other choices of destination, I will remain using this destination If I had the choice, I would again decide in favor of this destination This destination is the right decision This destination satisfies my needs I am very satisfied with this destination In my view, this destination is customer-oriented I am satisfied with the price and performance ratio of this destination
			The overall feeling I got from this destination put me in a good mood I would recommend this destination to others I intend to encourage relatives and friends to study with this destination I spread great words about this destination in the Internet environment
		Satisfaction (Walsh <i>et al.</i> , 2009; Loureiro and Kastenholz, 2011)	I uploaded photos on social networks about this destination

5. Conclusion

Recent research efforts have shown a strong interest in exploring the role of experiences in enhancing satisfaction and promoting behavioral intentions in the tourism context (Maroofi and Dehghan, 2012). Variety in choice of destinations and reasonable transportation costs has created favorable conditions for travelers, but there is also stronger competition among destination managers. A growing number of tourists look for services that offer not only new, pleasurable and memorable experiences but also unique ones. Therefore, they increasingly appreciate the role of different EEs rooted in their interactions with local residents and other tourists. However, previous studies seem to ignore this factor in the ecotourism context.

The results show that providing positive EEs to tourists during their journey is one of the most important premises in determining the level of SAT in ecotourism. These provide

more evidence supporting the results in the marketing literature (Walsh *et al.*, 2011), tourism context (Pestana *et al.*, 2020; San Martin *et al.*, 2019; Maroofi, and Dehghan, 2012) and are in accordance with the results explored by Roseta *et al.* (2020) in an ecotourism destination context. Moreover, the products of travel services are intangible, which results in the consumption process of producing recollections, memories and experiences. Therefore, we expect that, in addition to the efforts of the service provider, the interactive participation of tourists will create high self-relevance, leading to high cohesion and future behavioral intentions.

The findings also confirm that tourists' perception of the DI and the different experience value of the ecotourism destination influences their satisfaction and behavioral intention. Further, EE has more of an influence than DI on tourists' satisfaction, which in turn has more influence on RI than WOM recommendation. Therefore, it is expected that once tourists are satisfied with the travel service provider, they will share their unique and interesting experiences. Moreover, they can recommend the destination to their relatives and friends and post positive comments on that destination's website. This will stimulate the RI of many potential customers, especially tourism enthusiasts, but the restrictive measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic have prevented them from doing so.

Contrary to proposals of Swanson and Hsu (2009) and Yang (2017) who proposed that customer satisfaction does not guarantee WOM generation, the current research study indicates the positive relationships between satisfaction and WOM and are in line with the research results of Coban (2012) and Pestana *et al.* (2020). This is because of, within the ecotourism context, a sense of warmth created by the relationships and interactions between tourists and residents, and as this also reinforces tourists' satisfaction, they will convey that sense to others. Therefore, this study has provided more empirical evidence that a destination that was developed on existing resources will create services that are difficult to imitate and which provide sustainable tourist value. This in turn leads to the creation of unique and different experiences for tourists, thereby increasing the competitive advantage for this destination.

Regarding the different effects of gender on proposed relationships, the results show that female tourists' EE factor accounts for more influence than the male tourists on their satisfaction level. Similarly, the female tourists' satisfaction accounts for more influence than male tourists on RIs. Therefore, it is argued that tourists' interactions with locals and with the different-replacement services have created stronger EEs in the minds of female visitors than in male ones, pleasing them so much that they are more willing to revisit the destination than males.

6. Implication and limitations

6.1 Implication

Some implications can be provided based on the results of this study that contribute to improving the success rate for consolidating and enhancing the tourist–destination relationship in the ecotourism context in Vietnam. Building a dependable model that can explain the effects of certain factors on satisfaction or dissatisfaction levels and future behavioral intentions of tourists is one of the important research objectives of the current study.

EE and destination are two crucial factors that predict the level of satisfaction and behavioral intentions regarding a specific service. It is recommended that eco-destination managers (e.g. local people) should be actively creative to make a difference in the service process. This will make for an engaging and exciting experience for tourists, leading to enhanced satisfaction and behavioral intentions. While various methods may be

controversial, one may initiate unique and difficult-replacement service strategies to improve tourists' perceptions of socially responsible value. Sometimes, making a difference in the service process comes from warm behavior or emotions, such as public environmental protection consciousness or green product/service use, and it also contributes to enhancing profound EE values for tourists.

However, with the current pandemic situation, visitors' EE depends not only on their experience in the interactive process with the available landscapes of the destination but also on the thoughtful preparation at destinations, creating a sense of security and peace of mind. More importantly, destination managers also need to be more active in promoting communication, expanding tourism markets to areas less affected by the disease, supporting international visitors. Destination managers can also propose to the government that they are responsible for travelers who have a health certificate from their country of origin before entering Vietnam. Further, a link between destinations in the same area is necessary to create maximum enjoyment for visitors and to facilitate ease of control of their routes and health situation. Also, they need to make the most of the government's tourism stimulus policies to assist tourists in reducing the costs of sightseeing, travel and shopping. All of this will create experiences that are memorable and completely different for visitors. In addition, Vietnam has emerged as a safe destination after the COVID-19 pandemic, which will enable destination managers to more easily introduce new services to tourists.

The empirical results of the study show that visitor satisfaction is one of the most important factors that determine the level of WOM, and the main factor leading to this relationship is the provision of different experiences. This significant finding implies that providing positive experiences for visitors is the basis of driving positive WOM intentions, thereby strengthening long-term relationships with old customers and attracting new customers. However, in addition to traditional WOM, online WOM is becoming an effective marketing tool for businesses as it becomes more influential owing to its convenience, speed and its nonattendance of face-to-face human pressure (Phelps *et al.*, 2004). In addition, with the current situation of COVID 19, when online travel is becoming an effective form of entertainment, an interesting channel for searching for information and knowledge to give ideas, planning to explore new lands after the COVID-19 epidemic is over and the application of information technology promoting services very necessary for the business strategy of each enterprise. Online booking has now become the standard for the global tourism industry. All over the world, tourists are primarily using websites for purchasing flights, making hotel reservations, interacting with customer service and addressing other billing matters (Standing *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, in the ecotourism context, destination managers need to understand the important role of modern technology, along with highly interactive physical-virtual connections forming novel types of hybrid experiences (Flavián *et al.*, 2019a). By uploading interesting stories about destination, managers can also stimulate positive emotions of tourists helping themselves achieve better findings in their relationships with their customers (Casaló *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, destination managers should use more social media networking sites to reinforce and enhance a positive image in the minds of customers. This is greatly because of the presence of the many high-profile social influencers that have become trusted sources of information and advice to potential travelers in the online sector (Casaló *et al.*, 2009, 2020) and the impressions, opinions and reviews shared on social media have a strong impact of the mindset of the future tourist or potential customer (Casaló *et al.*, 2015). Further, paying attention to customer feedback is also a service personalization method which will create a good impression in the minds of customers, resulting in an increasing number of positive reviews and enhancing the sharing of website links from which to optimize the search engine

optimization of the business's website (Quynh *et al.*, 2020b). In short, ecotourism destination managers need to keep up with the current trends in technology to spread their destination widely.

In addition to the micro values that ecotourism offers to tourists and residents, greater economic values can be obtained. The ecotourism model contributes to improving the value chain of local products, thereby contributing to increasing incomes for people, opening a new tourism business model – a green tourism model combining cultural experiential tourism – and especially reducing the pressure for the Hoi An Ancient Town. Hence, to attain such values, it is essential to enhance positive images and generate different experiences (formed during the process of enjoying a service) to ensure that the tourist achieves the expected emotion.

6.2 Limitations

Besides the research contributions, some limitations still exist. Although DI is a multidimensional and complex concept (Zhang and Lin, 2014), the present research has not estimated the influence of each dimension of DI on its outcome factors. In the tourism context, past experiences are against present EEs at the destination (Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Therefore, it is expected that future conceptual models could solve these limitations by integrating these two factors into a new model to evaluate their effect on tourists' satisfaction and future behavioral intentions. An additional obstacle to the clarity of the data provided by the research is the small sample size of tourists that participated in the study compared to the total amount of tourists present in the area. The biggest factor affecting tourist participation numbers is the feeling of the inconvenience they feel when surveyed. The tourists felt as if their time was being wasted when answering the questions asked by the researcher. Therefore, it is important to investigate further with a larger and more geographically diverse sample to enhance the generality of the proposed model. Likewise, it would be important to emphasize that the study has been conducted in a specific geographical context with different particularities. Therefore, future studies should contrast this model for other tourist destinations and cultural contexts. Finally, the findings of this study will contribute to extending the literature on EE and behavioral intentions in a general tourism context – in particular, ecotourism.

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