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**FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL
TOURISTS' DESTINATION CHOICE: A CASE
OF THE MEKONG DELTA**

Major: **TOURISM**

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**SUMMARY OF TOURISM DOCTORAL
DISSERTATION**

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PART I. INTRODUCTION

1. THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Theoretical necessity in destination choice behavior research

Research on tourism destination choice has clarified the roles of push factors (travel motivation, perceived risk) and pull factors (destination image, destination information) in tourist behavior (Karl, 2018; Chaulagain et al., 2019). However, in the context of rapidly changing global and domestic tourism landscapes, especially post-COVID-19, incorporating new factors such as personal values and national image into the theoretical framework is essential (Soldatenko et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2017). This dissertation integrates the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) model with the Push-Pull Theory (PPT) to analyze the destination choice behavior of international tourists in the Mekong Delta, aiming to fill theoretical gaps regarding the relationship between socio-cultural factors and travel behavior. Existing studies in Vietnam and internationally have not comprehensively examined the moderating role of perceived risk or the interactions between traditional and new variables (Girish et al., 2021; Xinh, 2023). The use of advanced analytical tools like SmartPLS 4.0 and the PLS-SEM method helps elucidate complex relationships, contributing to the enhancement of theoretical foundations and providing a scientific basis for effective destination marketing and management strategies.

Practical necessity

The Mekong Delta, with its unique riverine ecosystem and diverse culture, is a key tourism region in Vietnam, yet the number of international visitors remains disproportionate to its potential (only 2.81 million visits before 2024). In the context of the government's goal to enhance national tourism competitiveness (Resolution 08-NQ/TW, 82/NQ-CP), studying the destination choice behavior of international tourists in the Mekong Delta holds strategic significance. This dissertation addresses practical gaps, ranging from the lack of in-depth data on international visitor segments to limitations in product design and market positioning across sub-regions (Eastern Coastal, Đồng Tháp Mười, Long Xuyên Quadrangle, Cà Mau Peninsula). The research findings support: (i) prioritizing investment and developing distinctive products; (ii) refining marketing messages based on motivations and perceived risks; (iii) strengthening intra-regional and inter-regional linkages, contributing to sustainable tourism development as per Decision 509/QĐ-TTg (2024).

In conclusion, the necessity of the topic "Research on Factors Influencing Destination Choice of International Tourists: The Case of the Mekong Delta"

stems from theoretical gaps and practical needs in explaining the destination choice behavior of international tourists in the Mekong Delta. Current studies have not fully integrated Push-Pull motivations and the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) framework to explain the mechanism from personal values to motivations, destination image, attitudes, and behaviors (choice, intention to return, recommendation). This dissertation proposes an integrated VAB and Push-Pull model, where personal values act as the initiating factor, influencing motivations and destination image, which in turn affect attitudes and choice behaviors, with perceived risk as a moderating variable. The expected outcomes aim to contribute theoretically by expanding the application of the integrated framework in the context of riverine tourism, clarifying the role of personal values, while also providing a practical basis for developing international tourism strategies in the Mekong Delta through segment differentiation, optimized communication, and minimization of perceived risks to enhance positive attitudes and post-consumption behaviors.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

a. General objective

The general objective of the dissertation aims to systematically analyze factors affecting international tourists' destination choice in the Mekong Delta, while clarifying the moderating role of perceived risk in tourists' destination choice. Based on this, propose policy implications to improve factors promoting international tourists' choice of this destination.

b. Specific objectives

Systematize theoretical foundations and literature review on factors affecting tourists' destination choice, thereby identifying research gaps on related topics.

Develop a model based on the Value-Attitude-Behavior (V-A-B) theoretical framework in research on international tourists' destination choice in the Mekong Delta.

Analyze factors affecting international tourists' choice of the Mekong Delta destination.

Analyze the moderating role of perceived risk in international tourists' choice of the Mekong Delta destination.

Propose policy implications to improve factors contributing to promoting international tourists' choice of the Mekong Delta destination.

c. Research questions

1. What theories and empirical research relate to factors affecting tourists' destination choice? What research gaps exist on this topic currently?

2. How can the Value-Attitude-Behavior (V-A-B) model be developed to suit research on international tourists' destination choice in the Mekong Delta?

3. How do factors in the research model affect international tourists' choice of the Mekong Delta destination?

4. How does perceived risk play a moderating role in international tourists' choice of the Mekong Delta destination?

5. What policy implications can be proposed to improve factors contributing to promoting international tourists' destination choice in the Mekong Delta?

3. RESEARCH SUBJECT AND SCOPE

a. Research subject

Research subject: theoretical and practical issues regarding factors affecting international tourists' destination choice in the Mekong Delta.

Survey subject: The survey subjects include international tourists who have visited and experienced tourism services at destinations in the Mekong Delta region. The selection of "international tourists" as the research survey subject is because they are a group with complex destination choice behavior, influenced by many factors such as culture, travel motivation, destination image, and perceived risk, thereby contributing to expanding and applying foundational V-A-B theories in multicultural contexts. Meanwhile, the Mekong Delta possesses great potential with distinctive natural resources and culture, but the proportion of international tourists visiting here remains low, requiring deeper research on their needs and expectations to develop effective marketing strategies and enhance tourism experiences. Particularly, international tourists are an important resource in creating foreign currency, promoting regional economic development and enhancing the Mekong Delta's position on the international tourism map. Research on this subject not only fills research gaps but also contributes to guiding sustainable development, strengthening the Mekong Delta's competitiveness in the global tourism industry.

b. Research scope

(i) Spatial scope: The Mekong Delta, prior to the merger, consisted of 13 provinces and cities with diverse tourism potential, including cultural, ecological, and riverine orchard landscapes. This dissertation focuses on research in 5 representative provinces across 4 key sub-regions: Tien Giang (Eastern Coastal), Đong Thap (Dong Thap Muoi), Can Tho and An Giang (Long Xuyen Quadrangle), and Ca Mau (Cà Mau Peninsula), selected based on geographical location, prominent tourism resources, and developed infrastructure. Following the merger on July 1, 2025, as per

Resolution 60-NQ/TW, the Mekong Delta was consolidated into 5 provincial-level administrative units: Vinh Long, Dong Thap, An Giang, Ca Mau, and Can Tho. The research scope falls within 4 of these new units—Dong Thap (including the former Tien Giang and Dong Thap), An Giang, Ca Mau, and Can Tho—still ensuring representativeness in terms of geography, culture, and tourism potential of the sub-regions, while focusing on areas with distinctive appeal to analyze the destination choice behavior of international tourists.

(ii) Time scope: Secondary data was collected from 2018 to 2024, covering tourism trends before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a comprehensive view of the tourism situation in the Mekong Delta. Primary data was gathered from December 2023 to November 2024, focusing on direct feedback from international tourists to support quantitative analysis.

(iii) Content scope: The research focuses on analyzing the factors influencing the destination choice of international tourists in the Mekong Delta, including personal values, attitudes, national image, perceived risk, motivations, destination image, and destination information..

4. NEW CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION

a. Theoretical contributions

First, the dissertation develops the V-A-B model by combining it with Push-Pull theory and perceived risk in tourism behavior research, clarifying the transformation process from Value to Attitude to Behavior. This model integrates perceived risk as an important moderating variable, aiming to illuminate the relationship between personal values, country image, destination image, destination information, travel motivation, attitude toward destination, and destination choice. This is a useful contribution, adding a new perspective to international tourism behavior research.

Second, the dissertation contributes to clarifying the central role of personal values (freedom, respect, positive relationships) in shaping motivation, attitude toward destination, and destination choice behavior. Meanwhile, the research clarifies the moderating role of perceived risk, showing that when risk increases, the positive impact of destination image, travel motivation, and positive attitude is weakened. This contribution provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding the multidimensional impact of factors in volatile international contexts.

b. Practical contributions

First, optimizing tourism development strategies in the Mekong Delta: The research provides a scientific basis for analyzing factors affecting international tourist behavior such as personal values, country image, and

destination information, thereby supporting the development of personalized tourism products, enhancing loyalty and connection with international tourists.

Second, minimizing perceived risk and building the Mekong Delta brand: The research clarifies the moderating role of perceived risk in destination choice behavior, proposing policy implications on improving service quality, ensuring security, and developing infrastructure. This not only helps the Mekong Delta become a safe, friendly destination but also enhances the region's position on the international tourism map.

Finally, supporting sustainable development policy implementation: Research results contribute to implementing the government's major policies, such as Decision 201/QD-TTg, Decision 2227/QD-TTg, and Resolution 82/NQ-CP, by proposing effective promotion strategies, improving infrastructure and sustainable destination management, enhancing Vietnam tourism's competitiveness.

5. DISSERTATION STRUCTURE

The dissertation is coherently structured into three main parts: introduction, research content, conclusions and recommendations. The research content is designed with 4 chapters as follows:

Chapter 1. Theoretical foundations on factors affecting international tourists' tourism destination choice

Chapter 2. Research area characteristics and research methodology

Chapter 3. Research results

Chapter 4. Discussion of research results and policy implications

PART II. RESEARCH CONTENT
CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS ON FACTORS
AFFECTING INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' DESTINATION
CHOICE

1.1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS ON FACTORS
AFFECTING DESTINATION CHOICE

1.1.1. Tourism destination

This research approaches destinations with clear physical and administrative boundaries. A destination must meet infrastructure conditions, where tourists stay at least one night, have attractive and complementary elements to attract and satisfy tourist needs, and have image recognition to determine market competitiveness (UNWTO, 2007; Kiralova & Pavlicecka, 2015).

1.1.2. Destination choice

Destination choice is defined as the process by which tourists make final decisions about a specific tourism location, based on the interaction between internal factors (personal characteristics, motivation, values, attitudes), external factors (destination characteristics, advertising, social impacts) and perceptual factors (awareness and memorable images of the destination) (Um & Crompton, 1991).

1.1.3. Factors affecting destination choice

1.1.3.1. Personal values

Personal values are core beliefs that guide behavior. According to Rokeach (1973), they include terminal values (happiness, peace) and instrumental values (honesty, responsibility). Schwartz & Bilsky (1987) added 10 basic values. In tourism, personal values influence motivation and destination choice (Crompton, 1979; Lee & Crompton, 1992).

1.1.3.2. Country image

Country image is the overall perception of a country, including factors such as culture, politics, and economics. According to Anholt (2008), positive country image helps increase tourist numbers and national prestige. Camprubí & Gassiot-Melian (2023) and Sheth (1991) emphasize the importance of country image in promoting sustainable tourism and international standing.

1.1.3.3. Destination image

Destination image is tourists' overall perception of a location, including knowledge, impressions and emotions formed from tangible factors (cultural heritage, infrastructure) and intangible factors (friendliness, security) (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). A positive image not only guides expectations but also stimulates desire to explore, increasing

destination attractiveness. According to Baloglu & McCleary (1999), positive destination image directly impacts tourist satisfaction and intention to return.

1.1.3.4. Destination information

Destination information includes data about characteristics and services of a location, helping tourists make informed travel decisions. Cohen (2013) emphasizes the role of advertising and personal experience in destination choice. Mayo & Jarvis (1981) argue that information forms perceptions and influences travel behavior, while Fodness & Murray (1997) confirm that information helps compare and shape tourist expectations. Current online sources such as travel reviews and social media are increasingly replacing traditional media, helping analyze tourist behavior more effectively (Hu & Geng, 2024; Wang et al., 2023).

1.1.3.5. Travel motivation

Travel motivation refers to factors that drive individuals to participate in tourism activities, divided into two main groups: "push" and "pull" factors (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981). "Push" factors stem from internal needs such as escaping daily life, relaxation or discovering new things, while "pull" factors relate to destination attractiveness such as landscapes, culture, or entertainment activities. The combination of these two factors not only shapes travel behavior but also influences destination loyalty (Fodness & Murray, 1997).

1.1.3.6. Tourist attitudes toward destinations

Tourist attitudes toward destinations is a multidimensional concept, including emotional, cognitive and behavioral components. The emotional component reflects feelings when thinking about the destination (Crompton, 1979), cognition relates to evaluating factors such as scenery and services (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), and behavior is reflected through decisions to visit, return or recommend the destination (Ajzen, 1991). Factors such as attractiveness and familiarity greatly influence positive attitudes (Ahmad & Kamran, 2023; Fazili et al., 2023).

1.1.3.7. Perceived risk

Perceived risk in tourism is tourists' subjective assessment of negative risks at destinations, including health, financial, social, psychological, and political factors (Slovic, 2016). Research shows that risk perception greatly influences tourism attitudes and behavior, from destination choice to trip cancellation decisions (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). To minimize negative impacts, strategies such as providing transparent information and promoting safety are proposed to improve tourist decisions (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006).

1.2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON FACTORS AFFECTING INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS' DESTINATION CHOICE

Factors affecting tourists' destination choice decisions include travel motivation, destination characteristics, destination image and information, personal values, as well as risk perception. Travel motivation, such as cultural exploration, relaxation, and escape from daily life, plays a strong driving role, especially among different age groups (Pestana et al., 2018). Destination image, including infrastructure, safety levels, and natural attractiveness, is an important factor in shaping intention to return and recommend destinations (Karl, 2018; Giang, 2022). Additionally, personal values such as self-actualization and sense of security directly influence tourism attitudes and behavior (Li et al., 2016). Social media information also plays a decisive role, as visual content like images and videos creates strong inspiration (Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019). However, risk perception regarding safety and experience quality can hinder tourist decisions (Cong et al., 2021). Research in Vietnam emphasizes the role of cultural specificity and marketing strategies in enhancing destination image and attracting international tourists (Xinh, 2023; Bé & Trinh, 2022). Overall, integrating these factors into tourism development strategies can optimize tourist experiences and enhance destination sustainability.

1.3. Research gaps

Research on destination choice behavior in the Mekong Delta has revealed many gaps that need to be explored. Theoretically, factors such as personal values and country image have not been deeply studied in Vietnam, despite their strong impact on tourism perceptions and behavior (Chaulagain et al., 2019; Li et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) model, which is effective in analyzing international tourist behavior, has not been widely applied in the Mekong Delta context (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2017). Practically, key provinces such as Tien Giang, Dong Thap, An Giang and Ca Mau – with unique cultural and ecological resources – have not been fully studied, leading to lack of foundation for building sustainable tourism development strategies. Moreover, the role of perceived risk, including financial and safety aspects, needs to be considered as a moderating factor in the relationship between travel motivation and behavior (Karl, 2018). Expanding research in Mekong Delta sub-regions, combining foundational theories and modern analytical tools like PLS-SEM, will bring important contributions both theoretically and practically, while enhancing the region's competitiveness on the international tourism map.

1.4. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT, MODEL PROPOSAL AND RESEARCH SCALES

The proposed research hypotheses are based on theoretical and empirical foundations to analyze international tourists' destination choice behavior. According to Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) theory, personal values (PV) positively influence travel motivation (MOT), attitudes (ATT) and destination choice (DC) (Homer & Kahle, 1988; Li et al., 2016). Meanwhile, country image (CI) positively impacts destination image (DI) and destination decisions (Zhang et al., 2018; Camprubí & Gassiot-Melian, 2023). Destination image, including cognitive and affective image, not only shapes travel motivation but also promotes attitudes and intention to return (Ghaderi et al., 2024). The role of destination information (IS) is also emphasized, as reliable information enhances destination image, motivation and tourist attitudes (Yang, 2023). Travel motivation is identified as a core factor driving attitudes and travel decisions (Fieger et al., 2019). Finally, perceived risk (RP) plays a negative moderating role, weakening the relationship between destination image, motivation, attitudes and destination decisions (Karl, 2018). Hypotheses including H1a-H7d are proposed to test these relationships, contributing to enhanced understanding of international tourism behavior.

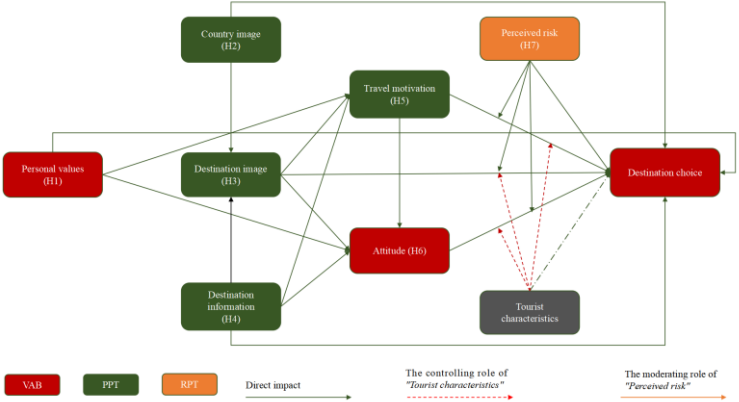


Figure 1.1. Research model of factors influencing destination choice
(Source: Proposed by the author)

The author inherits and develops key measurement scales including personal values (PV), country image (CI), destination image (DI), destination information (IS), travel motivation (MOT), perceived risk (RP), attitude toward destination (ATT), and destination choice (DC), to study international tourism behavior. The PV scale includes values such as freedom and adventure (Li et al., 2016). CI measures security, political

stability, and cultural heritage (Chaulagain et al., 2019). DI reflects perceptions of landscapes, cuisine, and hospitality (Qu et al., 2011). IS focuses on information sources such as social media and online reviews (Jalilvand et al., 2012). MOT measures motivation for exploration and cultural experiences (Correia & Pimpão, 2008). RP assesses concerns about safety and infrastructure (Cong et al., 2021). ATT reflects positive emotions and perceived value about the destination (Girish et al., 2021). Finally, DC measures intention to visit and top destination choice (Mutinda & Mayaka, 2012). These scales will be validated through preliminary research with 200 international tourists to ensure validity, reliability and discriminant validity.

CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH AREA CHARACTERISTICS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. RESEARCH AREA

The Mekong Delta (MD) is the main research area with key provinces including Tien Giang, Dong Thap, An Giang, Can Tho, and Ca Mau. This is a fertile region with an area of over 40,000 km², population of over 20 million people (Ngan, 2024), notable for its diverse ecosystem and unique cultural identity. The MD is not only Vietnam's agricultural center, providing 50% of rice production and 65% of aquaculture products (General Statistics Office, 2023), but also an attractive tourist destination with Ramsar sites, national parks, floating markets, and orchard culture. Transportation infrastructure is being improved with expressways and international airports such as Can Tho and Phu Quoc (Nhan Dan Newspaper, 2023). However, this region faces challenges from climate change, lack of high-end accommodation facilities, and tourism human resources that do not meet requirements (VCCI, 2023). With sustainable development strategies and potential optimization, the MD can establish its position on the international tourism map.

2.2. RESEARCH PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

Research process: rigorously constructed following Churchill's (1979) methodology with four steps: (1) Theory synthesis and research model development; (2) Scale identification and refinement through consultation with 28 experts and focus group discussions; (3) Preliminary testing with 200 international tourists to check scale reliability and validity through indicators such as Cronbach's Alpha, CR, and AVE; (4) Formal model testing with 750 tourists using SEM analysis on SmartPLS 4.0 software.

Data collection methodology: implemented through two phases: preliminary and formal. The preliminary phase focused on surveying 200 international tourists at prominent locations such as Cai Rang Floating

Market, Thoi Son Islet (Tien Giang), and Tra Su Cajuput Forest (An Giang), using semi-structured questionnaires to test feasibility. The formal phase expanded to 750 tourists at representative locations in the MD, such as Tram Chim National Park (Dong Thap) and Ca Mau Cape. Convenience sampling method was applied to save costs and ensure feasibility, with a total of 696 valid survey questionnaires included in the analysis.

Data processing and analysis methodology: used PLS-SEM on SmartPLS 4.0 software to evaluate measurement and structural models. Indicators such as Outer Loading (>0.700), Cronbach's Alpha (>0.700), and AVE (≥ 0.500) were checked to ensure scale reliability and convergent validity. Variance Inflation Factor ($VIF < 5$) and HTMT (≤ 0.900) were used to assess multicollinearity and discriminant validity. Additionally, f^2 , R^2 , and Q^2 indicators were applied to examine the level of influence, explanatory power, and predictive capability of the model.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. RESEARCH SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Among 750 international tourists participating in the survey on tourism behavior in the MD, 696 valid questionnaires were used, with distribution by province: Tien Giang (22.3%), Dong Thap (18.2%), Can Tho (23.1%), An Giang (19.0%), and Ca Mau (17.4%). The gender balance between male (47.6%) and female (52.4%) along with diverse age groups from 16-30 (41.1%) to over 60 (9.9%) clearly reflects various tourist groups. Notably, 62.5% of respondents have college/university education and 22.3% have postgraduate education, ensuring reliable data. Furthermore, 79.2% of visitors are first-time visitors to the MD and 59.8% choose individual travel joining group tours, showing the destination's appeal to both new and returning visitors. The diverse nationality distribution with 44.1% from Asia, 24% from Europe, and other regions contributes to clarifying the universality in tourism behavior.

3.2. MEASUREMENT MODEL EVALUATION

The measurement model was evaluated through criteria of unidimensionality, reliability, and convergent validity, achieving positive results after removing variables DI6 and DI7. The remaining observed variables all have factor loadings above 0.7, ensuring good representativeness (Hair et al., 2017). Scale reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) coefficients both exceeding the 0.7 threshold, such as the "Destination Information" (IS) scale with CA = 0.843 and CR = 0.895. Convergent validity, through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), also achieved above 0.5, such as the "Travel Motivation" (MOT) scale with AVE = 0.820. Additionally, HTMT values lower than 0.9 show clear distinction between factors. VIF analysis also detected no multicollinearity issues (VIF < 3), confirming the model's stability and reliability.

3.3. STRUCTURAL MODEL EVALUATION

The study using SmartPLS 4 performed 5,000 Bootstrap samples to ensure reliability and stability of results, with SRMR coefficient achieving 0.047, lower than the 0.08 threshold, proving high model fit with actual data. Direct relationships between variables show that personal values (PV) strongly influence travel motivation (MOT) ($\beta = 0.218$), attitude (ATT) ($\beta = 0.137$), and destination choice (DC) ($\beta = 0.110$). Country image (CI) and destination image (DI) also have significant positive impacts on these factors. Particularly, destination information (IS) has the strongest influence on DI ($\beta = 0.337$), MOT ($\beta = 0.333$), ATT ($\beta = 0.335$), and DC ($\beta = 0.242$), emphasizing the importance of information in tourism decisions.

Indirect relationship analysis results show that the impact of factors such as CI and IS on MOT and ATT through mediating chains is very clear. Country image (CI) has indirect influence on travel motivation (MOT) ($\beta = 0.048$) and attitude (ATT) ($\beta = 0.039$), while destination information (IS) strongly influences both MOT ($\beta = 0.095$) and ATT ($\beta = 0.147$). This confirms that providing accurate information and building positive country image are important factors in promoting tourism motivation and attitude. Perceived risk (RP) has negative impact on DC ($\beta = -0.103$), showing the importance of risk management to maintain destination attractiveness.

Table 3.1. Results of evaluating relationships considering the role of mediating and moderating variables

Hypothesis	Relationship	Impact Coefficient (B)			P- value	Conclusion
		Direct	Indirect	Total		
H1a	PV → MOT	0,218	-	0,218	0,000	Chấp nhận
H1b	PV → ATT	0,137	0,046	0,183	0,000	Chấp nhận
H1c	PV → DC	0,110	0,059	0,169	0,000	Chấp nhận
H2a	CI → DI	0,171	-	0,171	0,000	Chấp nhận
H2b	CI → DC	0,133	0,041	0,174	0,000	Chấp nhận
H3a	DI → MOT	0,283	-	0,283	0,000	Chấp nhận
H3b	DI → ATT	0,171	0,059	0,230	0,000	Chấp nhận
H3c	DI → DC	0,163	0,074	0,237	0,000	Chấp nhận
H4a	IS → DI	0,337	-	0,337	0,000	Chấp nhận
H4b	IS → MOT	0,333	0,095	0,428	0,000	Chấp nhận
H4c	IS → ATT	0,335	0,147	0,482	0,000	Chấp nhận
H4d	IS → DC	0,242	0,189	0,431	0,000	Chấp nhận
H5a	MOT → ATT	0,209	-	0,209	0,000	Chấp nhận
H5b	MOT → DC	0,132	0,034	0,166	0,000	Chấp nhận
H6	ATT → DC	0,163	-	0,163	0,000	Chấp nhận
H7a	RP → DC	-0,103	-	-0,103	0,002	Chấp nhận
H7b	RP × DI → DC	-0,124	-	-0,124	0,000	Chấp nhận
H7c	RP × MOT → DC	-0,119	-	-0,119	0,006	Chấp nhận
H7d	RP × ATT → DC	-0,117	-	-0,117	0,003	Chấp nhận

(Nguồn: Kết quả phân tích dữ liệu)

Finally, R^2 and Q^2 indices show strong explanatory and predictive power of the model. Destination choice (DC) has $R^2 = 0.512$ and $Q^2 = 0.423$, showing very good explanatory and predictive capability. Travel motivation (MOT) and attitude (ATT) also have high R^2 and Q^2 indices, reflecting balance between explanation and prediction. Destination image (DI), though having lower indices, still provides important information about image impact on tourist decisions. These results not only confirm the model's validity but also provide a solid foundation for effective tourism development strategies.

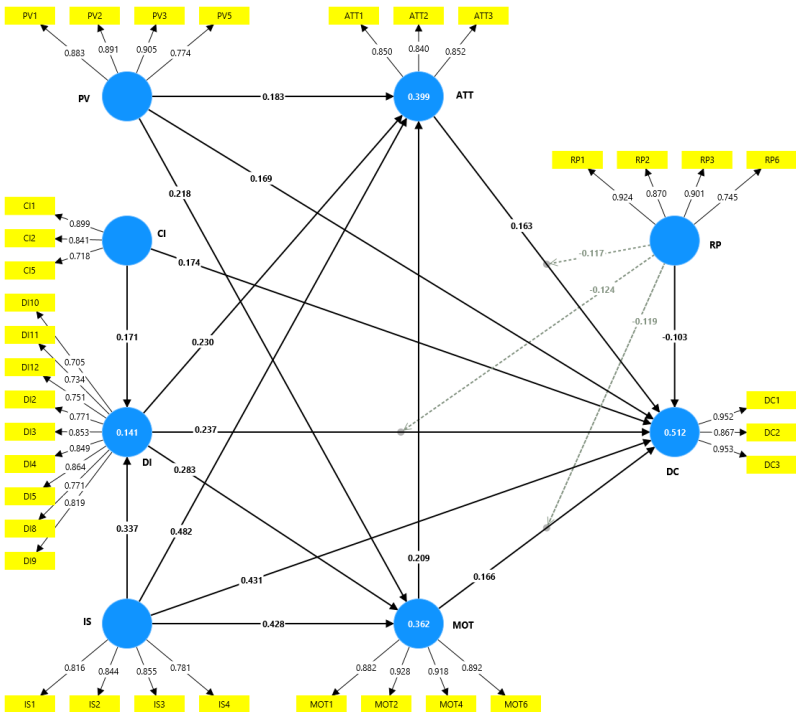


Figure 3.1. Results of PLS-SEM analysis of the research model

(Source: Compiled by the author)

3.4. RESULTS OF TESTING DIFFERENCES IN TOURIST CHARACTERISTICS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INFLUENCING FACTORS AND DESTINATION CHOICE

Multi-group analysis results show significant differences between tourist groups based on gender, age, education level, nationality, number of visits, and trip organization type. Males are more strongly influenced by attitude (ATT) and country image (CI) on destination choice (DC), with difference coefficients of -0.072 and -0.106 ($p = 0.000$). Females prioritize safety more with the impact from perceived risk (RP) to DC being 0.142 ($p = 0.000$). Older groups are sensitive to negative information, with RP strongly affecting DC (-0.268, $p = 0.000$). Highly educated tourists evaluate country image more strictly (CI → DC: -0.144, $p = 0.000$), while lower-educated groups are more sensitive to RP. First-time visitors are strongly influenced by RP (-0.364, $p = 0.000$), and self-organized travelers are more sensitive to CI and DI. The results emphasize the role of information, destination image, and safety in tourism behavior.

CHAPTER 4. DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH RESULTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1. DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH RESULTS

The research results in the Mekong Delta (ĐBSCL) have confirmed the factors influencing the destination choice of international tourists, including personal values (PV), national image (CI), destination image (DI), destination information (IS), travel motivation (MOT), attitude (ATT), and the moderating role of perceived risk (RP). All hypotheses were accepted with high statistical significance (P-value ranging from 0.000 to 0.002), as presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Summary table of research results

Factor	Relationship and impact	Comparison with other studies	New contributions
Personal Values (PV)	H1a: PV → MOT (β=0.218, p=0.000) H1b: PV → ATT (β=0.183, p=0.000) H1c: PV → DC (β=0.169, p=0.000)	- Compared to Maghrifani et al. (2024): PV in the Mekong Delta creates a combined effect, unlike discrete value-motivation pairs. - Compared to Mimi Li et al. (2016): PV simultaneously impacts ATT and DC, with no "shortcut" channel. High reliability scale (AVE=0.748; CR=0.922).	- A "hybrid" value framework (soft autonomy + social connection) explains both ATT and DC, fitting the Mekong Delta's cultural context. - Improved measurement standards, elimination of irrelevant paths, providing a stable model for regional cultural tourism research.
National Image (CI)	H2a: CI → DI (β=0.171, p=0.000) H2b: CI → DC (β=0.174, p=0.000)	- Compared to Chaulagain et al. (2019): Impact of CI → DI and CI → DC is weaker in the Mekong Delta (β=0.171; 0.174) than in Cuba (β=0.702; 0.446), due to differing historical contexts.	- Rare study in Vietnam integrating CI into the DC model, clarifying direct (β=0.133) and indirect (β=0.041) impacts of CI.
Destination Image (DI)	H3a: DI → MOT (β=0.283, p=0.000) H3b: DI → ATT (β=0.230, p=0.000) H3c: DI → DC (β=0.237, p=0.000)	- Compared to Chaulagain et al. (2019): Impact of DI → DC is weaker (β=0.163 vs 0.468). - Compared to Tuyết & Mạnh (2023): Stronger impact (β=0.237 vs 0.042). - Compared to Hiệp (2016): Weaker impact (β=0.237 vs 0.571).	- Clarifies direct (β=0.163) and indirect (β=0.074) impacts of DI. - Identifies relationships DI → MOT and DI → ATT, providing a comprehensive view of DI's influence mechanism in the Mekong Delta.
Destination Information (IS)	H4a: IS → DI (β=0.337, p=0.000) H4b: IS → MOT (β=0.428, p=0.000)	- Compared to Hiệp (2016): Direct impact IS → DC is strong (β=0.431) compared to only indirect impact in Hiệp. - Compared to Jalilvand et al. (2012):	- IS has the strongest impact on DC (β=0.431), clarifying multidimensional relationships with DI, MOT, ATT. - Provides a basis for marketing

Factor	Relationship and impact	Comparison with other studies	New contributions
	H4c: IS → ATT (β=0.482, p=0.000) H4d: IS → DC (β=0.431, p=0.000)	Weaker impact than eWOM (β=0.337-0.482 vs 0.868-0.914). - Compared to Bê & Trịnh (2022): Similar role of information (β=0.431 vs 0.510).	strategies tailored to the Mekong Delta.
Travel Motivation (MOT) & Attitude (ATT)	H5a: MOT → ATT (β=0.209, p=0.000) H5b: MOT → DC (β=0.166, p=0.000) H6: ATT → DC (β=0.163, p=0.000)	- Compared to Hiệp (2016): MOT → DC is strong (β=0.166 vs 0.439). - Compared to Tuyết & Mạnh (2023): MOT and ATT have stronger impacts (β=0.166; 0.163 vs 0.040). - Compared to Jalilvand (2012): ATT is weaker (β=0.163 vs 0.494).	- Clarifies the relationship MOT → ATT (β=0.209), the influence mechanism of MOT and ATT. - Analyzes mediation (DI, MOT → ATT), contributing a comprehensive perspective on tourist behavior in the Mekong Delta.
Moderating Role of Perceived Risk (RP)	H7a: RP → DC (β=-0.103, p=0.002) H7b: RP × DI → DC (β=-0.124, p=0.000) H7c: RP × MOT → DC (β=-0.119, p=0.000) H7d: RP × ATT → DC (β=-0.117, p=0.000)	- Compared to Han et al. (2020): Impact of RP → DC is similar, but the Mekong Delta uses general measurement, not group-specific. - Compared to Wei et al. (2024): Similar negative moderating role (β=-0.117 to -0.124 vs -0.205). - Compared to Xinh (2023): Opposite impact direction (β=-0.103 vs 0.304).	- Provides evidence of the negative impact and comprehensive moderating role of RP on DI, MOT, ATT → DC. - Offers a specific perspective on RP in the Mekong Delta, distinct from other contexts like Hoi An or international settings.

(Source: Compiled by the author)

Impact of personal values: Personal values (PV) have a positive impact on travel motivation (MOT), attitude (ATT), and destination choice (DC), with the effect decreasing across stages (P-value=0.000). PV serves as a foundational factor in stimulating the desire to explore, particularly in the Mekong Delta with flexible experiences like floating markets and homestays, which meet the needs for freedom and community connection. Compared to Maghrifani et al. (2023, 2024), this study integrates personal values to create a combined effect, differing from the segmented value-motivation approach. Additionally, the PV scale achieved high reliability (Cronbach Alpha=0.887), surpassing Mimi Li et al. (2016), reducing conceptual noise and increasing inference reliability.

Impact of country image: Country image (CI) positively influences destination image (DI) and destination choice (DC) (P-value=0.000), though the level of impact is moderate. CI, with elements such as security and Vietnam's cultural heritage, acts as an initial "guarantee," helping the Mekong Delta—a less standardized region build trust among tourists. Compared to Chaulagain et al. (2019), the impact of CI in the Mekong Delta is lower due to a less prominent historical context, but it still reinforces positive perceptions, especially among older tourists, as shown in multi-group analysis results.

Impact of destination image: destination image (DI) has a strong impact on travel motivation (MOT), attitude (ATT), and destination choice (DC) (P-value=0.000), with relatively consistent levels of influence. Factors such as the rich ecosystem, floating market culture, and reasonable pricing in the Mekong Delta stimulate the desire to explore and build positive emotions. Compared to Moliner-Tena et al. (2023), this study further emphasizes the role of tranquil landscapes, creating a competitive advantage over large urban areas like Ho Chi Minh City (Hiep, 2016).

Impact of destination information: destination information (IS) has a strong and multidimensional impact on destination image (DI), travel motivation (MOT), Attitude (ATT), and destination choice (DC) (P-value=0.000), especially during the emotion-building phase. Social media and online reviews serve as a bridge, helping the Mekong Delta a relatively new destination increase its appeal. Compared to Jalilvand et al. (2012), the impact of IS in the Mekong Delta is lower in terms of electronic word-of-mouth, but it stands out for its comprehensiveness, synchronously influencing multiple aspects of tourist behavior.

Impact of travel motivation: Travel motivation (MOT) positively affects attitude (ATT) and destination choice (DC) (P-value=0.000), with a

moderate level of impact. Unique experiences such as fruit gardens and festivals in the Mekong Delta meet the needs for exploration and relaxation, particularly for young and international tourists. Compared to Tuyet & Manh (2023), the impact of MOT in the Mekong Delta is more pronounced, thanks to the combination of nature and local culture, creating an ideal space for motivation to manifest.

Impact of tourist attitude: Attitude (ATT) has a positive impact on destination choice (DC) (P-value=0.000), though the level of influence is moderately low. Close and safe experiences in the Mekong Delta evoke positive feelings, reinforcing the decision to choose the destination. Compared to Bé & Trĩnh (2022), the impact of ATT in the Mekong Delta is weaker, but it remains notable due to the emotional connection derived from the region's unique characteristics, as multi-group analysis with international tourists indicates.

Impact of perceived risk: Perceived risk (RP) has a direct negative impact on destination choice (DC) and negatively moderates the relationships between DI, MOT, ATT, and DC (P-value ranging from 0.000 to 0.002). Risks related to climate and infrastructure in the Mekong Delta weaken its attractiveness, especially for international tourists. Compared to Xinh (2023), which noted a positive impact of RP in Hoi An, this study shows a negative impact, reflecting the region's unique characteristics and sensitivity to natural risks, as Wei, Zhou & Li (2024) also highlight the negative moderating role of RP.

The research in the Mekong Delta not only reinforces existing theories but also clarifies the role of each factor in destination choice behavior. The region's unique ecological and cultural experiences create a competitive advantage, but strategies to mitigate perceived risks are needed to optimize its appeal to international tourists.

4.2. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.2.1. Enhancing personal values of international tourists

The research confirms that personal values such as decision freedom, respect, and building good relationships play important roles in influencing international tourists' motivation, attitude, and destination choice decisions in the MD. To optimize tourism potential, strategies such as developing personalized online tourism platforms, "Local Storyteller" programs, and interactive cultural events are proposed to enhance personal experiences and community connections. Simultaneously, market segmentation based on personal values and artificial intelligence applications to analyze behavior will help design suitable tourism packages, meeting diverse needs

of tourists from different regions, thereby improving satisfaction, creating competitive advantages, and promoting sustainable development.

4.2.2. Enhancing country image

The research emphasizes the role of country image in shaping destination image and influencing international tourism decisions. Strategies such as developing the "Vietnam 360°" program with virtual reality experiences, organizing the international forum "Peace and Heritage," cooperating with airlines, and global cultural exchange campaigns are proposed to enhance MD recognition. Simultaneously, multi-dimensional communication with personalized messages for each demographic group, from safety factors for older people to creative experiences for youth, will optimize promotional effectiveness. Applying AI and Big Data technology to analyze tourist behavior will help design appropriate messages, enhance national position, and attract global tourists to Vietnam.

4.2.3. Developing MD destination image

The research confirms the role of destination image in promoting travel motivation and positive tourist attitudes. To develop MD tourism, initiatives such as the "5 Senses Journey" program with multi-sensory experiences, repositioning MD brand as "Southeast Asia's Nature Gateway," and developing "Night Culture Discovery" tours at floating markets and orchards need to be implemented. AI application through tourism chatbots helps personalize journeys, while integrated online platforms with information and VR allow tourists to experience before traveling. Simultaneously, social media and influencer marketing will attract international visitors, especially from America, Europe, and Australia. This policy not only enhances awareness but also creates sustainable competitive advantages, increasing MD's attractiveness in the international market.

4.2.4. Elevating MD destination information

Destination information plays an important role in shaping image, promoting motivation, positive attitudes, and tourist choice. To enhance MD tourism attraction, smart tourism information portals with interactive maps, real-time information, and integrated community reviews need to be built. Initiatives such as the "Mekong Delta Through Your Eyes" contest and "Story of Mekong" campaign will promote vivid regional images. AR/VR technology helps tourists explore independently with virtual guides, while smart digital platforms personalize experiences based on user preferences and behavior. Combining engaging digital content and

influencer marketing, this policy not only increases awareness but also promotes tourism behavior, especially from international markets.

4.2.5. Promoting international tourists' travel motivation to MD

The research confirms that travel motivation strongly influences tourists' attitudes and destination decisions, while proposing policies to optimize MD tourism. Ideas include "Discovery and Self-care" tours combining yoga and meditation; "MD Experience Academy" with cooking and handicraft courses; and "Mekong Explorer" membership cards for frequent visitors. Personalized tourism product strategies are emphasized, such as designing cultural and historical discovery tours for young international visitors, and relaxation and pilgrimage packages for older groups or Asian visitors. AR/VR technology and digital communication will help enhance experiences, while social media campaigns ensure reaching the right audience, meeting diverse needs and promoting sustainable tourism.

4.2.6. Enhancing tourists' positive attitudes toward MD destination

The research has proven that tourist attitudes greatly influence destination choice, opening directions for MD tourism development. The "MD in Your Heart" program promotes cultural exchange with local life experiences. Real-time evaluation systems encourage positive feedback through gifts. The "Your Story" campaign encourages social media sharing, increasing experience value. Emotional experience spaces at prominent tourist sites help connect tourists with destinations. "Mekong Life" academy provides distinctive cultural courses. Promotional strategies use modern technology for young tourists and traditional information for older tourists, ensuring destination image suits each customer group.

4.2.7. Minimizing perceived risk in MD tourism

The research indicates that perceived risk negatively affects destination choice while moderating factors such as destination image, travel motivation, and tourist attitudes. To improve safety in MD, developing the "Mekong Safety Hub" application providing real-time information and installing smart security systems at tourist sites are needed. Comprehensive insurance tours and guide training programs on safety will increase tourist confidence. Upgrading friendly infrastructure, promoting safety through digital media, and providing 24/7 emergency support services are important solutions. Additionally, building appropriate policies for each tourist group, such as mobile applications for young people and multilingual information for international visitors, aims to increase trust and destination attractiveness.

PART III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

The dissertation studies factors influencing international tourists' destination choice in MD, contributing to supplementing tourism behavior theory and sustainable tourism development practice. By integrating the V-A-B (Value-Attitude-Behavior) model and Push-Pull Theory, the dissertation clarifies the role of personal values, destination image, destination information, and travel motivation in forming positive attitudes and promoting destination choice behavior. Results show that personal values, country image, and destination information have strong impacts on tourism perception and decisions, while perceived risk plays a significant moderating role, affecting tourism attitudes and motivation. Factors such as security, infrastructure, and information transparency help minimize concerns and enhance tourist confidence. The dissertation proposes strategies such as developing the "Mekong Safety Hub" application, smart security systems, comprehensive tourism insurance, and MD image promotion campaigns through digital media, aiming to enhance competitive advantages and build sustainable tourism brands for this region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for National Assembly and Government: Priority should be given to developing transportation and tourism infrastructure in MD through investment in highways, seaports, and waterway transportation systems, aiming to minimize perceived risk and enhance destination image. Simultaneously, building policies to preserve cultural and natural heritage such as floating markets, traditional craft villages, and Don Ca Tai Tu, contributing to sustainable tourism development. The government also needs to support green tourism, reduce environmental impact, and train professional human resources in security, tour guides, and tourism management.

Recommendations for National Tourism Administration: Promote MD image through international channels (CNN, BBC) and social media, while developing distinctive tourism products such as orchard tourism, eco-tourism, and cultural festivals. Coordination with localities is needed to improve accommodation, dining, and transportation service quality, as well as studying tourist behavior to improve marketing strategies.

Recommendations for MD provinces: Provinces need to synchronize tourism development strategies, organize annual cultural events, and attract public-private investment to develop infrastructure. Investment in public services such as restrooms, multilingual signs, and digital technology

applications will enhance tourist experiences. Simultaneously, preserving and promoting local cultural values, combined with information technology applications, will create sustainable competitive advantages for MD.

Research limitations and future research directions Although the research has contributed significantly to understanding factors influencing international tourists' destination choice in MD, some limitations need to be addressed. First, the research only focuses on MD without expanding to other regions in Vietnam or internationally, which limits the generalizability of results since each destination has unique cultural, economic, and infrastructure characteristics. Second, using only English to interview international tourists may cause data bias, as not all international visitors are fluent in English; therefore, considering multilingual use or native interviewers should be considered to increase accuracy. Finally, although the research has indicated that perceived risk is an important moderating factor, it has not deeply explored specific risk types such as financial, health, or social risks; more detailed classification will help better understand the impact of each risk type and how they affect tourist decisions. Overall, future research should expand scope, diversify survey languages, and classify risks in more detail to improve quality and applicability of results.

**LIST OF PUBLISHED RESEARCH WORKS BY THE AUTHOR
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