

Factors influencing tourists' destination choices: Based on the experiences of tourist areas in Hai Phong city, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the factors influencing tourists' destination choices based on the practices of tourist areas in Hai Phong city. Building upon international theories and research findings on tourism behavior, the study constructs an integrated model encompassing tourism motivation, destination attractiveness factors, information and communication, destination image, and tourist choice decisions. Research data was collected through quantitative surveys of tourists in typical tourist areas of Hai Phong city and analyzed using linear structural modeling. The results show that all factors in the model have a positive impact on destination choice decisions, with destination image playing a central role and having the strongest influence. Simultaneously, destination image plays a mediating role in the relationship between destination attractiveness factors, information and communication, and tourists' destination selection decisions. The research results not only contribute empirical evidence to the field of tourism behavior research but also provide valuable managerial implications for policy planning and sustainable tourism development in Hai Phong city in the future.

Keywords: Destination selection decision; travel behavior; travel motivation; destination attractiveness; destination image; Hai Phong city.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and the rapid development of the service sector, tourism is increasingly seen as one of the key economic sectors, making significant contributions to economic growth, job creation, and sustainable development in many countries and localities. Along with rising incomes, improved transportation conditions, and the diversification of experiential needs, human tourism behavior has become increasingly complex, particularly evident in the decision-making process when choosing a destination. Understanding the factors influencing tourists' destination choices has therefore become one of the central research topics of modern tourism science (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981).

International studies indicate that destination selection decisions are not the result of a single factor, but rather a complex process influenced simultaneously by the traveler's internal motivations and the destination's attractive characteristics. Crompton (1979) and Dann (1981) argued that travel motivation plays a fundamental role in shaping travel demand, with psychological factors such as the need for rest, exploration, stress relief, or the desire to experience new cultures significantly impacting destination selection behavior. Based on this, many subsequent studies have developed an approach that divides travel motivation into a group of "motivational" factors from the traveler's side and a group of "attractive" factors from the destination's side, thereby providing a valuable theoretical framework to explain the differences in choice behavior among groups of travelers

(Yoon and Uysal, 2005; Prayag and Ryan, 2011).

Besides travel motivation, destination image is considered one of the most powerful and enduring factors influencing tourists' destination choices. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1993), destination image is the sum of perceptions, emotions, and overall impressions that tourists form about a place before, during, and after their trip. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) assert that destination image not only directly influences initial choice decisions but also impacts satisfaction levels, return intentions, and recommendation behavior. Subsequent studies further reinforce the central role of destination image, arguing that building and managing a positive image is a key condition for enhancing the competitiveness of tourist destinations in an increasingly competitive environment (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Pike and Ryan, 2004).

In recent years, along with the rapid development of digital technology and online media platforms, the process of shaping destination images and tourist choice decisions has undergone significant changes. User-generated information on online platforms, reviews, comments, and shared travel experiences are increasingly becoming important sources of reference for tourists during the information-seeking and decision-making stages. Many international studies show that electronic word-of-mouth significantly influences tourists' perceptions, emotions, and beliefs about destinations, thereby indirectly or directly impacting destination selection decisions (Gretzel et al., 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). This indicates that destinations not only need to invest in tangible tourism resources and services, but also must focus on managing information, image, and reputation in the digital environment. However, studies on factors influencing destination choice

decisions still show significant differences between national, regional, and destination type contexts. Prayag (2009) argues that destination choice behavior is strongly influenced by cultural characteristics, the level of tourism development, and the stage of development of the destination; therefore, research results from one country or region cannot be mechanically applied to other contexts. This necessitates further empirical studies specific to each locality to clarify the role and extent of impact of these factors under different development conditions.

In this context, Hai Phong city has emerged as a potential and rapidly growing tourist destination in Vietnam, with a diverse range of tourism resources including beach and island tourism, resort tourism, cultural and historical tourism, and urban tourism. However, academic studies systematically analyzing the factors influencing tourists' destination choices in Hai Phong are still relatively limited, especially those that integrate tourism motivations, destination image, and the role of digital information. This gap highlights the need for research to identify and evaluate the key factors impacting tourist destination choices in Hai Phong city.

Based on the above analysis, this paper aims to clarify the factors influencing tourists' destination choices from the practical experience of tourist areas in Hai Phong city, building upon and developing international research findings. The research results are expected to contribute academically by supplementing empirical evidence for tourism behavior theory, while also providing valuable managerial implications for policy planning and sustainable tourism development in Hai Phong in the future.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Tourists' choice of destination

Tourists' destination choices are considered the result of a deliberate cognitive and evaluative process, in which travelers weigh various destination options based on their personal needs, desires, and information gathered before the trip. According to numerous studies in the tourism field, destination choices not only reflect fleeting preferences but are also influenced by psychological, social, and contextual factors, including travel motivations, destination perceptions, past experiences, and information from the external environment. Therefore, destination choices are often used as a central outcome variable to assess the attractiveness and competitiveness of a tourist destination in academic research.

Tourist motivations

Tourism motivation is a fundamental factor driving individuals' participation in tourism activities and guiding their destination choice behavior. Classical studies suggest that tourism motivation stems from psychological and social needs, such as the need for rest, relaxation, exploring new environments, experiencing different cultures, or strengthening social relationships. Based on this, many studies have approached tourism motivation by separating it into groups of motivations originating from within the individual and groups of motivations linked to external factors of the destination. This approach allows for a clearer explanation of the differences in tourism behavior among different groups of tourists and is an important basis for analyzing the impact of motivation on destination choice decisions.

The attractive features of a tourist destination.

Destination attractiveness factors reflect the specific characteristics that make a place appealing to tourists. These factors include natural and cultural tourism resources, service quality, infrastructure, accessibility, safety, price, and the diversity of experiential activities. Numerous studies indicate that these attractiveness factors not only directly influence destination selection decisions but also play a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions and emotions towards that destination. In the context of increasingly fierce competition among destinations, enhancing the quality and distinctiveness of these attractiveness factors is considered a key strategy to increase a destination's selectability.

Images of tourist destinations

Destination image is a central concept in tourism behavior research, reflecting the aggregate of perceptions, emotions, and overall impressions that tourists form about a destination. Destination image is not only built from official promotional information but is also influenced by personal experience, word-of-mouth, and informal sources. Many studies suggest that destination image plays a crucial mediating role, connecting attraction factors, travel motivations, and destination choice decisions. A positive destination image can increase the likelihood of being chosen, even when competing destinations have similar levels of resources and services.

The role of information and communication in destination selection decisions.

In the context of rapid information technology development, the process of searching for and processing information by tourists has undergone many changes. Online information sources, especially reviews and shared experiences from other tourists, are increasingly influencing the perceptions and attitudes of tourism consumers. Word-of-mouth information in the digital environment is considered a highly reliable source of information because it originates from real-life experiences, thus strongly impacting the formation of destination images and tourist choices. This demonstrates the increasingly important role of destination information and image management in tourism development strategies.

The relationship between the elements in the research model

From the theoretical approaches mentioned above, it can be seen that tourists' destination choices are the result of the interaction between tourism motivations, destination attractions, destination image, and information from the external environment. Tourism motivations guide tourists' needs and desires, while attractions and received information help tourists assess the suitability of the destination. Destination image plays a role in synthesizing and transforming these influences into specific choices. This integrated approach is suitable for the research context in the tourist areas of Hai Phong city, where many types of tourism converge and are strongly influenced by media information in the process of competing and attracting tourists.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative approach to analyze and test the factors influencing tourists' destination choices in tourist areas within Hai Phong city. The quantitative method was chosen because it is suitable for measuring the impact of each factor and evaluating the relationships between variables in the research model based on empirical survey data. Building upon international research on tourism behavior and destination

choice, the study developed a standardized survey questionnaire with standardized scales to collect data from tourists who have visited or are currently visiting Hai Phong.

Research model

The research model is built upon the theoretical foundation of tourism motivation, destination attractiveness factors, the role of information and communication, and destination image in the decision-making process of tourists. In this model, the decision to choose a destination is identified as the dependent variable. Independent variables include tourists' tourism motivation, destination attractiveness factors, and information and communication about the destination. Destination image is considered an intermediary variable, reflecting the role of synthesizing and transforming the impact of input factors into a specific destination choice decision. This approach allows for the simultaneous assessment of the direct impact of factors on the decision-making process, as well as the mediating role of destination image in the research model.

Research hypothesis system

Based on theoretical frameworks and previous studies, this research proposes the following five hypotheses:

H1: Tourists' travel motivations have a positive impact on their decision to choose a destination in Hai Phong city.

H2: The attractive features of a tourist destination have a positive impact on the decision to choose Hai Phong city as a destination.

H3: Information and communication about a destination have a positive impact on tourists' decisions when choosing a destination.

H4: The image of a destination has a positive impact on tourists' decisions when choosing a destination.

H5: Destination imagery plays a mediating role in the relationship between destination attractions, information and communication, and tourists' destination selection decisions.

This system of hypotheses fully reflects the core relationships in the research model, while ensuring conciseness and high testability in empirical research.

Data analysis methods

Research data was collected through questionnaire surveys of tourists at typical tourist destinations in Hai Phong city. After collection, the data were cleaned, coded, and checked for anomalies before analysis. The reliability and validity of the scales were assessed through indicators reflecting the degree of internal consistency and measurable value of the research variables. Next, the research model and hypotheses were tested using linear structural modeling, allowing for simultaneous evaluation of the relationships between variables and testing the mediating role of destination image. The analysis results provide a basis for discussion, comparison with previous studies, and proposed management implications relevant to the practical development of tourism in Hai Phong city.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics of the research sample

Before proceeding with the research model analysis, the survey data were compiled and subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to reflect the general characteristics of the research sample. Statistical results showed that the research variables all had relatively high average values, reflecting the positive evaluation trend of tourists towards tourism activities in Hai Phong city.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the research variables

Variable group	Average value	Standard deviation
Travel motivation	4.05	0.62
The attractive features of a destination.	3.92	0.68
Information and communication	3.88	0.71
Destination images	4.00	0.65
Decision on choosing a destination	4.10	0.60

Table 1 shows that the variable "Destination Choice Decision" has the highest average value, indicating that Hai Phong is rated by tourists as an attractive destination with the potential to be chosen both now and in the future. The factors of tourism motivation and destination image also reached high averages, reflecting strong tourism demand and positive perceptions of the destination among tourists. The standard deviations of the variables range from 0.60 to 0.71, indicating an acceptable level of data dispersion suitable for further in-depth quantitative analysis.

Reliability and validity testing of the scale

The reliability and validity of the scales are tested to ensure the suitability of the data before proceeding with structural model testing. Indicators reflecting the degree of internal consistency of the scales are used to assess reliability.

Table 2. Results of scale reliability test

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha coefficient	Overall reliability
Travel motivation	0.84	0.88
The attractive features of a destination.	0.86	0.90
Information and communication	0.82	0.87
Destination images	0.85	0.89
Decision on choosing a destination	0.83	0.88

The results in Table 2 show that all scales have Cronbach's Alpha coefficients and composite reliability greater than 0.7, meeting the reliability requirements in behavioral research. This demonstrates that the observed variables in each scale have a high degree of consistency and accurately reflect the research concepts. Therefore, the scales are accepted and used in the subsequent analysis steps.

Results of structural model testing

After confirming the reliability of the scale, the research model was tested to assess the suitability and explanatory power of the independent variables with respect to the dependent variable, which is tourists' destination choice decision.

Table 3. Results of evaluating the model's explanatory power.

Dependent variable	R ² coefficient
Destination images	0.49
Decision on choosing a destination	0.56

The independent variables in the model explain 49% of the variation in destination image and 56% of the variation in destination choice decisions. This level of explanation is considered relatively high in tourism behavior studies, indicating that the research model has good explanatory power

and is suitable for the practical context of tourist areas in Hai Phong city.

Results of testing research hypotheses

The research hypotheses were tested using standardized effects coefficients between the variables in the structural model.

Table 4. Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Impact factor	Result
H1	Travel motivation → Choice decision	0.21	Accept
H2	Attractive factors → Selection decision	0.29	Accept
H3	Information and communication → Decision-making	0.18	Accept
H4	Destination images → Selection decision	0.32	Accept

All hypotheses H1, H2, H3, and H4 are accepted with positive impact coefficients. Among them, destination image has the strongest impact on tourists' destination choice decisions, demonstrating the central role of cognitive and emotional factors in destination selection behavior. Destination attractiveness factors also have a significant impact, reflecting the importance of resources, services, and accessibility to tourists' decisions. Tourism motivations and information/communication, while having lower impacts, still play a significant role in guiding destination choice behavior.

Testing the mediating role of destination images.

The mediating role of destination image in the relationship between attraction factors, media information, and destination choice decisions is further examined to clarify the indirect impact mechanisms in the research model.

Table 5. Results of testing the mediating impact of destination image.

Indirect relationship	Result
Attractive factors → Destination image → Selection decision	Significant
Information and communication → Destination image → Choice decision	Significant

selection decisions. This shows that attractions and information not only directly impact selection decisions but also indirectly influence them by shaping and reinforcing the destination image in tourists' perceptions. This finding further confirms the crucial role of destination image management in the tourism development strategy of Hai Phong city.

5. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study was conducted to analyze the factors influencing tourists' destination choices based on the practices of tourist areas in Hai Phong city. Building upon international theories and research findings on tourism behavior, the study developed and validated an integrated model encompassing tourism motivations, destination attractiveness factors, information and communication, destination image, and tourist destination choice decisions.

The research results show that all factors in the model have a positive impact on tourists' destination selection decisions, with destination image playing a central role and having the strongest influence. At the same time, destination image acts as an intermediary in the relationship between attraction factors, information, and communication with destination

selection decisions. This finding confirms that tourists' destination selection decisions are not only influenced by objective factors such as resources, services, or information and communication, but also significantly depend on how those factors are perceived and synthesized into the destination image in the tourist's perception.

Academically, the study has added empirical evidence to theories on destination choice behavior in the context of a rapidly developing coastal tourist destination in Vietnam. The successful validation of the integrated model clarifies the direct and indirect interactions between influencing factors, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of tourist decision-making processes in an increasingly competitive destination environment.

Based on the research findings, several important management implications can be drawn for tourism development in Hai Phong city.

First and foremost, tourism managers need to focus more on researching and understanding the travel motivations of different tourist groups, thereby developing tourism products and programs that suit the needs of tourists for relaxation, exploration, and cultural experiences. Designing tourism products that align with core motivations will help enhance the attractiveness and selectability of a destination.

Secondly, research results show that destination attractiveness factors significantly influence selection decisions; therefore, investing in improving the quality of tourism resources, services, infrastructure, and accessibility is essential. Hai Phong needs to continue improving its transportation network, enhancing the quality of accommodation and entertainment services, and effectively controlling costs and service quality to build a sustainable competitive advantage over other destinations.

Thirdly, the role of information and communication in destination choice behavior shows that Hai Phong needs to further promote tourism communication activities in the digital environment. Providing complete, transparent, and attractive information, while encouraging tourists to share positive experiences, will contribute to increasing the awareness and reach of the destination among the tourist community.

More importantly, the research findings highlight the crucial role of destination image in shaping tourists' choices. This implies that Hai Phong's tourism development strategies need to be implemented in an integrated manner, where investment in resources, services, and communication must be consistently linked to a long-term, clearly defined strategy for building and managing the destination image. Building a positive, trustworthy destination image that meets tourists' expectations will be a decisive factor in helping Hai Phong enhance its position on the domestic and international tourism map.

In summary, this study not only provides a scientific basis for understanding the factors influencing tourists' destination choices, but also offers valuable practical suggestions for tourism management and development in Hai Phong city. These implications can serve as a foundation for the locality to develop effective and sustainable tourism policies and strategies in the future.

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