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Factors Influencing Tourists' Choice of Ecotourism Destinations in Thanh Hoa Province

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Abstract

This study examines the factors influencing tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam. Drawing on destination-choice theory and tourism consumer-behavior literature, the proposed research model includes seven determinants: destination image, tourism resources, infrastructure and services, travel cost, communication, social influence, and safety. Data were collected from 268 valid questionnaires completed by tourists who had visited, were visiting, or were interested in ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability testing, exploratory factor analysis, Pearson

correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression. The results show that the model explains 52.82% of the variance in destination-choice decisions. Among the seven tested factors, safety has the strongest positive and statistically significant effect, followed by social influence. Destination image, tourism resources, infrastructure and services, travel cost, and communication do not show statistically significant direct effects in the regression model. Based on these findings, the paper proposes managerial implications for strengthening perceived safety, leveraging positive social influence, and promoting sustainable ecotourism development in Thanh Hoa.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Destination Choice, Tourist Behavior, Thanh Hoa, Multiple Linear Regression

1. Introduction

As sustainable development has become a central orientation in tourism, ecotourism has attracted increasing attention because it combines resource use, environmental conservation, awareness raising, and livelihood generation for local communities. Unlike mass tourism, ecotourism emphasizes nature-based experiences, the authenticity of destinations, and tourists' environmental responsibility. Post-pandemic changes in tourism demand, together with the rise of social media and green travel trends, have made destination-choice behavior more complex and more relevant for empirical investigation.

Thanh Hoa Province has considerable potential for ecotourism development owing to its diverse natural and cultural resources, which extend from mountainous and midland areas to plains and coastal zones. Destinations such as Pu Luong Nature Reserve, Ben En National Park, Cam Luong Fish Stream, May Waterfall, and community-based tourism villages in mountainous areas provide the province with important advantages for developing ecotourism products. During the 2021–2025 period, tourism in Thanh Hoa recovered and grew rapidly, as reflected in marked increases in tourist arrivals and tourism revenue. However, growth in tourist numbers does not necessarily imply sustainable development unless the province identifies the factors that actually drive tourists' destination-choice decisions.

In practice, ecotourism in Thanh Hoa still faces several limitations. Products are not sufficiently differentiated; infrastructure and services remain uneven across destinations; communication activities have not yet created a strong destination brand; and issues related to environmental sanitation and experiential safety still require improvement. Therefore, examining the factors influencing tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa has both theoretical and practical significance. The findings contribute empirical evidence to the literature on tourism behavior and provide a basis for policymakers, businesses, and local communities to develop more appropriate destination strategies.

This paper aims to identify and measure the extent to which different factors influence tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa Province. On this basis, it proposes managerial implications for enhancing destination attractiveness and competitiveness in a sustainable manner.

2. Theoretical Background and Research Model

2.1 Ecotourism and destination-choice behavior

Ecotourism is generally understood as a responsible form of tourism in natural areas that contributes to environmental conservation and improves the welfare of local communities. Its core elements include natural resources, local culture, environmental education, and sustainable development principles. In the current context, ecotourism is not merely nature sightseeing; it is also a process of experiencing, learning, and consuming tourism services responsibly.

Destination-choice behavior refers to the process through which tourists recognize travel needs, search for information, evaluate alternatives, make a destination decision, and assess the experience after the trip. According to travel motivation theory, destination choice is shaped by both push factors arising from tourists' internal needs and pull factors associated with destination attributes (Crompton, 1979) [4]. In the case of ecotourism, pull factors often include natural scenery, a clean environment, safety, local culture, service quality, and access to information.

Studies on destination image indicate that tourists' cognitive and affective perceptions of a destination play an important role in destination choice (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004) [2, 3]. In addition, the theory of planned behavior highlights the roles of attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control in shaping intentions and behavior (Ajzen, 1991) [1]. In the digital communication environment, social influence through online reviews, electronic word of mouth, and social media increasingly affects tourists' perceptions, trust, and decisions (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) [7, 8].

2.2 Determinants and research hypotheses

Based on previous domestic and international studies and the specific characteristics of ecotourism in Thanh Hoa, this study proposes seven groups of factors influencing destination-choice decisions. First, destination image reflects tourists' overall impressions of the landscape, environment, services, and experiences in Thanh Hoa. Second, tourism resources represent the attractiveness of natural scenery, ecosystems, and local cultural values. Third, infrastructure and services determine accessibility, convenience, and the quality of tourists' experience. Fourth, travel cost reflects the balance between tourists' ability to pay and their perceived value. Fifth, communication refers to the capacity to provide information, promote destination image, and create awareness of the destination. Sixth, social influence captures the impact of family, friends, communities, online reviews, and the friendliness of local residents. Seventh, safety includes security, environmental safety, food safety, safety in tourism activities, and tourists' sense of reassurance.

On this basis, the study proposes the following hypotheses: H1: Destination image has a positive effect on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations. H2: Tourism resources have a positive effect on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations. H3: Infrastructure and services have a positive effect on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations. H4: Travel cost has a negative effect on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations. H5: Communication has a positive

effect on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations. H6: Social influence has a positive effect on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations. H7: Safety has a positive effect on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa.

Table 1: Variables in the research model

Code	Factor	Expected direction	General content
DI	Destination image	+	Positive impressions, perceptions, and emotions regarding Thanh Hoa as an ecotourism destination
TR	Tourism resources	+	Landscape, ecosystems, natural environment, and local cultural values
IS	Infrastructure and services	+	Transport, accommodation, services, amenities, and service quality
TC	Travel cost	-	Transportation, accommodation, food, entrance fees, and incidental costs
COM	Communication	+	Online information, promotion, images, videos, and destination communication content
SI	Social influence	+	Influence of family, friends, communities, social media, and local culture
SAF	Safety	+	Security, hygiene, environment, safety of experiential activities, and tourists' sense of reassurance
DC	Destination-choice decision	Dependent variable	Intention to choose, recommend, and revisit ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a quantitative approach to measure the effects of different factors on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The respondents were tourists who had visited, were visiting, or were interested in ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa. The questionnaire referred to destinations such as Pu Luong, Ben En, Cam Luong Fish Stream, and other ecotourism and community-based tourism sites in the province.

Due to constraints in time and resources, the study employed convenience sampling. A total of 289 questionnaires were distributed. After data screening and cleaning, 268 valid responses were retained for analysis. The data were processed using Excel and SPSS through the following analytical steps: descriptive statistics of the sample, descriptive statistics of the research variables, Cronbach's alpha reliability testing, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression.

The general regression model is specified as follows: $DC = \beta_0 + \beta_1DI + \beta_2TR + \beta_3IS + \beta_4TC + \beta_5COM + \beta_6SI + \beta_7SAF + \epsilon$. In this model, DC denotes tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations; DI, TR, IS, TC, COM, SI, and SAF represent the independent variables; and ϵ is the random error term.

4. Research Results

4.1 Profile of the survey sample

The survey sample shows a relatively balanced gender structure: female respondents account for 50.3%, male respondents for 48.7%, and other gender identities for 1.0%. In terms of age, the 18–25 age group accounts for the largest proportion (approximately 39.7%), followed by the 26–35 age group (30.0%). This indicates that the sample is concentrated among young and dynamic tourists who tend to be interested in new tourism experiences.

Regarding occupation, students account for 36.0%, business owners or traders for 26.0%, office employees for 18.3%, civil servants/public employees for 13.0%, and other occupations for a smaller share. In terms of income, respondents earning less than VND 5 million per month account for 29.7%, those earning VND 10–15 million account for 27.3%, those earning more than VND 15 million account for 25.0%, and those earning VND 5–10 million account for 18.0%. Notably, 59.0% of respondents had previously experienced ecotourism, while 41.0% had not, thereby reflecting both actual experience and potential demand.

4.2 Descriptive statistics of research variables

The descriptive statistics show that all variables in the model are rated at a high level, with mean values ranging from 4.0084 to 4.1206. The destination-choice decision variable has the highest mean value, indicating a positive tendency among tourists toward choosing ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa. Communication, infrastructure and services, safety, travel cost, tourism resources, social influence, and destination image all have mean values above 4.0, reflecting respondents' positive evaluations of these factors. The standard deviations range from 0.5226 to 0.5810, suggesting that the data are relatively concentrated and that respondents' assessments do not differ substantially.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of research variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
DI	4.0084	0.5226	2.7500	5.0000
TR	4.0622	0.5582	2.3333	5.0000
IS	4.1007	0.5337	2.6667	5.0000
TC	4.0672	0.5810	2.3333	5.0000
COM	4.1119	0.5465	2.6667	5.0000
SI	4.0569	0.5403	2.7500	5.0000
SAF	4.0858	0.5614	2.7500	5.0000
DC	4.1206	0.5249	3.0000	5.0000

4.3 Reliability testing and exploratory factor analysis

Cronbach's alpha results indicate that several scales achieve acceptable reliability for exploratory research, including safety (0.6732), social influence (0.6461), destination image (0.6223), and travel cost (0.6024). Some other scales have alpha values below 0.6, including tourism resources (0.5688), communication (0.5306), destination-choice decision (0.5228), and infrastructure and services (0.5037). Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution: the scales may be used for exploratory purposes but should be refined, expanded with additional observed variables, and revalidated in future studies.

For the dependent variable, EFA results show that the KMO coefficient is 0.6087 and Bartlett's test is statistically significant (Chi-square = 53.023; p-value < 0.0001), indicating that factor analysis is appropriate. The three

observed variables DC1, DC2, and DC3 converge into a single factor. For the independent variables, the overall KMO coefficient is 0.9163 and Bartlett's test is statistically significant (Chi-square = 1940.848; p-value < 0.0001), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. EFA extracts four factors according to the Eigenvalue > 1 criterion. However, the cumulative extracted variance is 37.20%, below the commonly recommended threshold of 50%. Thus, the factor structure should be treated as preliminary exploratory evidence rather than as a conclusive confirmation of the measurement structure.

Table 3: Summary of scale reliability testing

Scale	Cronbach's alpha	Assessment
DI	0.6223	Acceptable for exploratory research
TR	0.5688	Scale improvement is needed
IS	0.5037	Scale improvement is needed
TC	0.6024	Acceptable for exploratory research
COM	0.5306	Scale improvement is needed
SI	0.6461	Acceptable for exploratory research
SAF	0.6732	The strongest reliability among the scales
DC	0.5228	The dependent-variable scale needs improvement

4.4 Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression

Pearson correlation analysis shows that all independent variables are positively correlated with the dependent variable (DC). The highest correlation is observed for safety (r = 0.683), followed by social influence (r = 0.632), communication (r = 0.527), infrastructure and services (r = 0.505), travel cost (r = 0.491), tourism resources (r = 0.480), and destination image (r = 0.446). Correlations among the independent variables are all below 0.8, providing initial evidence that serious multicollinearity is unlikely.

The multiple linear regression results show that R² = 0.5405 and adjusted R² = 0.5282, meaning that the model explains approximately 52.82% of the variance in tourists' destination-choice decisions. The Durbin–Watson statistic is 1.9644, which falls within the acceptable range and indicates no autocorrelation of residuals. The F-test value is 43.6958 with p-value < 0.0001, demonstrating that the regression model is statistically significant overall. The VIF values of the independent variables range from 1.9261 to 2.3841, below common warning thresholds, confirming the absence of serious multicollinearity. The Breusch–Pagan test yields p-value = 0.9258 and the Jarque–Bera test yields p-value = 0.6521, suggesting that the model does not seriously violate the assumptions of homoscedasticity and normality of residuals.

Table 4: Multiple linear regression results

Variable	Hypothesis	Coefficient	p-value	Conclusion
DI	H1 (+)	0.0040	0.9488	Not supported
TR	H2 (+)	0.0589	0.3461	Not supported
IS	H3 (+)	0.0511	0.4062	Not supported
TC	H4 (-)	0.0623	0.2712	Not supported; direction differs from expectation
COM	H5 (+)	0.0237	0.7075	Not supported
SI	H6 (+)	0.2479	0.0002	Supported
SAF	H7 (+)	0.4129	0.0000	Supported

The results indicate that only two factors have positive and statistically significant effects on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa: safety and social

influence. Safety has the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.4129$), showing that perceived safety is a critical condition in destination choice. Social influence has a coefficient of $\beta = 0.2479$, indicating that family, friends, communities, and social evaluations play a significant role in shaping tourists' behavior. Although destination image, tourism resources, infrastructure and services, travel cost, and communication are positively correlated with destination-choice decisions, they do not have statistically significant direct effects in the regression model when other variables are controlled simultaneously.

5. Discussion

The most important finding of this study is that safety has the strongest influence on tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa. This result is consistent with the contemporary tourism context, in which tourists increasingly consider security, health, environmental sanitation, food safety, and risks in outdoor activities. For ecotourism, experiences often take place in forests, mountains, streams, lakes, or villages far from urban centers; therefore, a sense of safety becomes a prerequisite for destination selection.

Social influence also plays an important role. In choosing a destination, tourists do not rely solely on their own evaluations but are also influenced by family, friends, colleagues, online communities, and digital reviews. This is especially evident among young tourists, who make up a large share of the survey sample and tend to use social media frequently. They are therefore more likely to be influenced by travel trends, shared images, and other people's experiences. The finding suggests that word of mouth, user-generated content, and community-based experiences may be more effective than formal communication channels if they are properly organized.

A notable point is that traditional factors such as tourism resources, infrastructure and services, destination image, travel cost, and communication are not statistically significant in the regression model. This does not mean that these factors are unimportant in practice. Rather, it may reflect three possibilities. First, tourists may regard these factors as basic conditions that are necessary but not sufficient to determine the final choice. Second, the current measurement scales may not fully capture the depth of each construct, as indicated by several relatively low Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Third, these factors may have indirect effects through destination image, satisfaction, perceived value, or trust, rather than direct effects on destination choice.

The findings also highlight the need to distinguish between factors that are highly evaluated and factors that exert statistically significant direct effects. Variables such as communication and infrastructure receive high mean scores, but they become statistically insignificant when included in the regression model together with other variables. This is a common issue in tourism behavior research because tourists' decisions are shaped by psychological perceptions, social contexts, and multiple interacting factors. Therefore, managerial conclusions should prioritize statistically significant factors while still recognizing the foundational role of other destination attributes.

6. Managerial Implications

6.1 Strengthening perceived safety at destinations

Because safety has the strongest effect, Thanh Hoa should develop a destination image associated with being green, safe, friendly, and responsible. Tourism authorities should review the system of signboards, maps, first-aid points, rescue teams, emergency-response procedures, and safety instructions at ecotourism sites such as Pu Luong, Ben En, Cam Luong Fish Stream, and areas used for trekking, boating, and stream bathing. Food and beverage services, accommodation, transportation, and guiding services should be inspected periodically to ensure hygiene, security, and service quality.

For ecotourism destinations in mountainous or remote areas, coordination among local authorities, businesses, communities, healthcare units, and security forces should be strengthened to manage risks. Community-based accommodation providers should be trained in first aid, fire prevention, food safety, waste management, and visitor guidance under adverse weather conditions. When tourists' perceived safety is improved, they are more likely to trust and choose the destination.

6.2 Leveraging social influence and positive word of mouth

The findings show that social influence significantly affects destination choice. Thanh Hoa should therefore encourage tourists to share positive experiences on social media through guided check-in activities, photo and video contests, green-travel diaries, and community-based communication campaigns. Communication content should emphasize authenticity, real tourist experiences, and local residents' stories rather than relying only on general promotional messages.

Tourism businesses and local communities can collaborate with travel bloggers, local guides, trekking groups, green-tourism clubs, and online review platforms to strengthen social trust. However, the use of influencers should be linked to environmental responsibility, avoiding over-promotion that may lead to destination overcrowding or undermine the authenticity of ecological spaces.

6.3 Improving foundational destination attributes

Although tourism resources, infrastructure, travel cost, communication, and destination image are not statistically significant in the regression model, they remain foundational conditions that require continuous improvement. Thanh Hoa should conserve natural resources, control waste, limit excessive concretization at ecological sites, and develop products based on local characteristics. In terms of infrastructure, priority should be given to transport connectivity to mountainous ecotourism sites, public toilets, parking areas, tourist information points, and basic medical services.

Regarding cost, transparency, reasonableness, and consistency with experience quality should be ensured. Tourism packages should be designed for multiple market segments, including students and young groups, families, high-end leisure tourists, and international visitors. In terms of communication, the province should shift from

fragmented promotion to clear brand positioning, emphasizing “authentic nature - local culture - safe experiences - responsible tourism.”

7. Conclusion and Research Limitations

This study developed and tested a model of factors influencing tourists' choice of ecotourism destinations in Thanh Hoa Province. Based on 268 valid survey responses, the regression model explains 52.82% of the variance in destination-choice decisions. Among the seven factors included in the model, safety and social influence have positive and statistically significant effects, with safety exerting the strongest influence. Destination image, tourism resources, infrastructure and services, travel cost, and communication do not show statistically significant direct effects in the model.

Theoretically, the study adds empirical evidence to the literature on destination-choice behavior in the context of ecotourism in a province with diverse resources that is still in the process of positioning its destination brand. Practically, the findings suggest that to attract ecotourists more effectively, Thanh Hoa should prioritize perceived safety, leverage social influence, and improve the foundational conditions of the destination in an integrated manner.

This study has several limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling may reduce the generalizability of the findings. Second, several scales have relatively low Cronbach's alpha coefficients and the cumulative variance extracted in EFA is modest, indicating the need to refine the measurement scales in future research. Third, the model does not examine potential mediating or moderating variables such as satisfaction, perceived value, destination trust, travel experience, and personal motivation. Future studies should expand the sample size, combine quantitative analysis with qualitative interviews, and test the model using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling to clarify the relationships among factors influencing ecotourism destination-choice behavior.

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