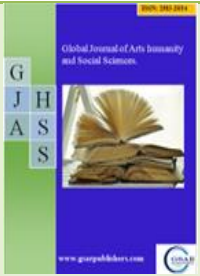
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Factors affecting the attractiveness of a rural tourism destination - The case of Phong Dien district, Can Tho city, Vietnam

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Abstract

The attractiveness of a destination is a significant perception in the field of tourism. Rural tourism is regarded as one of the emerging trends in tourism development in developing countries. The primary objective of this study is to analyze the factors influencing the attractiveness of a rural tourism destination. Utilizing various quantitative analysis methods on data collected from a survey of 120 tourists, the findings indicate that the attractiveness of a rural tourism destination has a positive relationship with security and safety, tourism services, tourism resources, pricing of services, human resources in tourism, and tourism infrastructure. The results expand the body of knowledge regarding the attractiveness of rural tourism destinations and provide practical implications that are crucial for enhancing destination appeal.

KEYWORDS: Rural tourism, tourists, destination, attractiveness, Vietnam.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, rural tourism has experienced rapid growth (Su, 2011) and is expected to continue to thrive in the future (Greffé, 1994), as many countries adopt this form of tourism as a tool to compensate for declining agricultural income (Reichel et al., 2000; Sharpley, 2002) and achieve socio-economic development and revitalization in rural areas (Sharpley, 2002). Roberts & Hall (2001) argue that rural tourism serves as a remedy for various economic and social ailments in rural regions. Other benefits of rural tourism include the effective utilization of tourism resources, the expansion of industrial agricultural chains, the development of tourism services, the promotion of non-agricultural employment, increased income for farmers, and the establishment of better economic foundations for rural development (Zhang, 2012). Therefore, developing rural tourism is viewed as a promising strategy for socio-economic diversification in underdeveloped areas (Skuras et al., 2006) and has become a priority in tourism policies and strategies across many countries (Augustyn, 1998). In Vietnam, the development of rural tourism as a catalyst for agricultural and rural growth has emerged as a top concern (Bui, 2009).

One widely accepted factor determining the competitiveness of a destination is its attractiveness (Mikulić et al., 2016). A destination with higher attractiveness is more capable of meeting tourists' needs and is more likely to be prioritized over other destinations. The primary value of destination attractiveness lies in its ability to draw tourists (Kim & Lee, 2002). To achieve competitive advantage and success in the market, destinations must ensure their attractiveness while also evaluating and managing it effectively (Dwyer et al., 2004). Destination attractiveness is closely related to tourists' emotions (Pearce, 1997), and influences their perceptions and choices regarding destinations (Yin et al., 2020). As such, destination attractiveness has become a crucial factor for both tourism researchers and destination managers (Pearce, 1997). Research on destination attractiveness is essential for understanding the factors that encourage travel (Formica, 2002) and assists destinations in organizing/managing/developing key resources (Vengesai et al., 2009).

Phong Dien is one of four rural administrative units in Can Tho City (district level), covering a total natural land area of 125.58 km², with approximately 99.55 km² designated for agricultural production (about 79.3%). Of this agricultural land area, around 83.83 km² is used for perennial crops, approximately 15.7 km² for



annual crops, with the remainder comprising other agricultural land. Due to its significant area dedicated to perennial and annual crops, Phong Dien is often referred to as the "green belt" or "green lung" of Can Tho City. The district's economic structure is evolving towards commerce, services, and tourism-high quality agriculture-industry and handicrafts. The district's primary strength lies in agricultural production (especially garden economy) combined with tourism development. In addition to its fruit orchards, Phong Dien boasts a rich system of rivers and cultural heritage. Recently, this locality has emerged as one of the prominent rural tourism destinations in Can Tho City and the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam (Nguyen & Huynh, 2024).

Research on factors influencing destination attractiveness has been conducted by numerous studies (Eusébio et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2017; Le et al., 2021; Lee, 2016; La et al., 2023; Sultana et al., 2014; Truong & To, 2021; Vengesai et al., 2009). These studies have focused on various subjects such as air quality, nature-based tourism, the COVID-19 context, industrial tourism, and medical tourism. However, research specifically addressing factors influencing the attractiveness of rural tourism destinations remains limited. To help fill this gap, this study was conducted. The findings will enrich the theoretical framework surrounding rural tourism destination attractiveness while also offering practical implications that provide empirical evidence for stakeholders making decisions to enhance rural tourism destination appeal.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Rural tourism began in the 19th century when urban residents visited peaceful rural areas (Kohl, 2006). However, commercial activities in rural tourism became more evident only after the 1950s with the expansion of transportation and communication systems (Lane, 1994). Interest in rural tourism surged after the 1980s as developed countries viewed it as a tool for rural economic recovery, leading to the implementation of supportive development policies (Lane & Kastenzholz, 2015). The first scientific articles on rural tourism were published in the 1990s (Roberts & Hall, 2001). In the early 21st century, developing countries began to see rural tourism as a developmental tool (Karali et al., 2024). Rural tourism encompasses activities that take place in rural areas (Borto, 2002). Tourists choose rural areas for their desire to relive past experiences (Christou et al., 2018), seek unique and memorable experiences (Kastenzholz et al., 2018), and fulfill spiritual needs (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Activities in rural tourism harmonize with nature, culture, and the lifestyles of local residents (Lane, 2009). The increasing number of people seeking new spaces to escape the busy urban lifestyle has driven the rapid development of rural tourism (Campón-Cerro et al., 2017). Rural tourism is seen as a form of rural development through job creation, income generation, stimulation of agricultural production, and diversification of economic activities (Chan, 2023).

In recent decades, awareness and measurement of destination attractiveness have garnered significant attention from researchers and tourism policymakers (Reitsamer et al., 2016). The

attractiveness of a tourist destination reflects tourists' perceptions of a destination and its ability to satisfy their needs (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981; Vengesai et al., 2009). Destination attractiveness is a crucial factor for tourists (Funk et al., 2004) and serves as the initial motivation for tourists to select destinations based on their preferences and trip purposes (Benckendorff & Pearce, 2003). The ability to achieve recreational, leisure, and educational goals during a trip depends on the attractiveness of the destination (Hu & Wall, 2005; Leask, 2010). Destination attractiveness not only contributes to a destination's competitiveness (Mikulic et al., 2016) but also influences tourist satisfaction (Mohamad et al., 2019; Nastabiq & Soesanto, 2021).

The attractiveness of a destination is formed by its attributes. These attributes include infrastructure, pricing, transportation networks (Middleton, 1989), attractions, infrastructure, and people (Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). Other attributes contributing to destination attractiveness are cleanliness and tranquility of the environment, quality of accommodations, family-oriented amenities, safety, accessibility, reputation, and entertainment options (Kim, 1998). These attributes are considered aligned with the perceived image of the destination. Therefore, higher quality attributes/perceived images correlate positively with increased destination attractiveness due to their interrelated nature (Kim & Perdue, 2011).

Numerous studies have been conducted to identify factors influencing the attractiveness of tourist destinations. Reviewing these works provides an essential foundation for forming hypotheses and research models. According to Vengesai et al. (2009), attractions, facilities services, and people influence destination attractiveness in Zimbabwe. Attractions, safety and security, and accessibility are factors affecting industrial tourism attractiveness in Taiwan (Lee, 2016). Research by Islam et al. (2017) indicates that tourism infrastructure, natural attractions, historical and cultural factors, accommodations, and lifestyle compatibility positively contribute to the attractiveness of nature-based tourism destinations in Bangladesh. La et al. (2023) assert that natural resources, socio-cultural aspects, recreational activities, service pricing, human resources, and infrastructure influence destination attractiveness in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. Based on this literature review, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H_1): Tourism resources positively contribute to the attractiveness of Phong Dien rural tourism destination.

Hypothesis 2 (H_2): Tourism infrastructure positively contributes to the attractiveness of Phong Dien rural tourism destination.

Hypothesis 3 (H_3): Tourism services positively contribute to the attractiveness of Phong Dien rural tourism destination.

Hypothesis 4 (H_4): Human resources in tourism positively contribute to the attractiveness of Phong Dien rural tourism destination.

Hypothesis 5 (H₅): Pricing of tourism services positively contributes to the attractiveness of Phong Dien rural tourism destination.

Hypothesis 6 (H₆): Security and safety positively contribute to the attractiveness of Phong Dien rural tourism destination.

From these hypotheses, the research model is designed as illustrated in Figure 1.

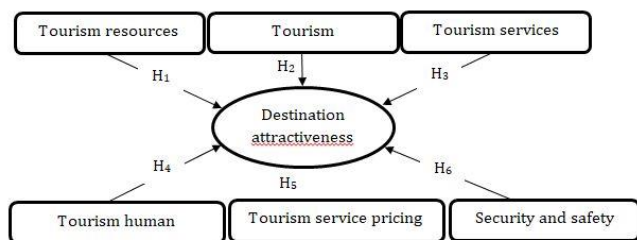


Figure 1. Research model

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Measurement

The research model consists of six independent constructs and one dependent construct. All constructs are derived from related studies. The Tourism resources construct includes five observed variables referenced from the studies by La et al. (2023) and Truong & To (2021). The Tourism infrastructure factor is measured by three observed variables adapted from the research by Islam et al. (2017) and Le et al. (2021). The latent variable Tourism services comprises four observed variables sourced from Vengesai et al. (2009). The Human resources in tourism attribute consists of three observed variables inherited from La et al. (2023). The Pricing of tourism services factor is measured by five observed variables modeled after Truong & To (2021). The Security and safety dimension includes three observed variables referenced from the studies by Lee (2016) and Truong & To (2021). In total, the model comprises six independent constructs with 23 observed variables, along with one dependent construct, Destination attractiveness, measured by three observed variables derived from La et al. (2023). All independent and dependent constructs are assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). To ensure the reliability and validity of the research, all constructs and observed variables were reviewed by four tourism experts.

Data collection and analysis

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the factors influencing the attractiveness of a rural tourism destination. Therefore, the research data must be quantitative and collected through a survey questionnaire method. Various recommendations exist regarding sample size for quantitative research. For this study, the sample size determination method is based on using five observations per variable (Hair et al., 2010). Accordingly, the minimum sample size for this research is 115 (23 * 5). To ensure that the sample size does not fall below the proposed minimum threshold, data was collected from a survey of 120 tourists. Respondents were selected using convenience sampling, and they

completed the questionnaire independently. The survey was conducted during September and October 2024. IBM SPSS Statistics 20 software was utilized for data processing. Data analysis methods included descriptive statistics, reliability testing of scales, exploratory factor analysis, and multiple linear regression analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics. The remaining data analysis methods were used to assess data quality and test research hypotheses.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of respondents

In this study, the demographic characteristics of the respondents are represented through gender, age, education level, and occupation. Regarding gender, among the respondents, there are 54 males, accounting for 45%, while the remaining are females. By age, The age distribution shows that 69 respondents are between 18 and 25 years old, representing 57.5%. There are 33 respondents aged between 26 and 35, making up 27.5%. The remaining 18 respondents, accounting for 15%, are aged between 36 and 55. The education levels of the respondents vary, with 85 individuals holding college or university degrees, which constitutes 70.8%. The remaining 35 respondents (29.2%) have completed high school, vocational training, or postgraduate education. Respondents' occupations are categorized into several groups. The business and trade sector comprises 54 individuals, representing 45%. There are also 51 students, accounting for 42.5%. The remaining 15 respondents (12.5%) include civil servants, farmers, and workers.

Reliability of the measurement scale

In quantitative research, a construct is measured by multiple observed variables. To determine the adequacy of these observed variables in measuring a construct, the reliability analysis of the measurement scale is employed. Two indices are proposed to evaluate the reliability of the scale: Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlation. The minimum thresholds for these indices are 0.7 and 0.3, respectively (Hair et al., 2010). A higher Cronbach's alpha indicates that the variables within the same factor correlate strongly with one another, thereby enhancing the reliability of the measurement scale. The results of the data analysis are presented in Table 1, which shows that five scales have good reliability: Tourism resources, Tourism infrastructure, Tourism services, Pricing of tourism services, and Security and safety. Two scales exhibit acceptable reliability: Tourism human resources and Destination attractiveness. Consequently, the measurement scales and observed variables will be utilized for exploratory factor analysis in the next step.

Table 1. Scale reliability

Measurement scale	Observed variables removed	Cronbach's alpha	Corrected item-total correlation	Quality



Tourism resources	None	0.807	0.512-0.681	Good
Tourism infrastructure	None	0.819	0.640-0.704	Good
Tourism services	None	0.867	0.648-0.751	Good
Tourism human resources	None	0.769	0.521-0.661	Acceptable
Tourism service pricing	None	0.854	0.660-0.728	Good
Security and safety	None	0.847	0.674-0.748	Good
Destination attractiveness	None	0.707	0.455-0.615	Acceptable

Factors influencing destination attractiveness

Exploratory factor analysis is a crucial step in quantitative data analysis concerning the causal relationships between independent variables and a dependent variable. The objective of this method is to reduce a large set of observed variables into more meaningful factors. Various criteria are employed to assess the suitability of data in exploratory factor analysis. According to Hair et al. (2010), the measurement of the sample adequacy via the KMO statistic should be above 0.5, the p-value from Bartlett's test of sphericity should be less than 0.05, and the cumulative percentage of total variance explained must exceed 50%. The results of the data analysis indicate that these indices are 0.863, 0.000, and 70.231% for independent factors, and 0.641, 0.000, and 63.588% for the dependent variable. Thus, the data meet the requirements for exploratory factor analysis. With Eigenvalues greater than 1 and factor loadings exceeding 0.49, 23 observed variables from independent measures were grouped into six factors. Similarly, with Eigenvalues greater than 1 and factor loadings above 0.5, three observed variables from the dependent measure were consolidated into one factor (see Table 2). To test the relationship between the six independent factors and one dependent factor, multiple linear regression analysis was employed in the subsequent step.

Table 2. Results of exploratory factor analysis

Factor number	Factor name	Observed variables	Eigenvalues	Factor loadings
1	Tourism service pricing	Pri1, Pri2, Pri3, Pri4, Pri5	8.130	0.623-0.817
2	Tourism services	Ser1, Ser2, Ser3, Ser4	2.861	0.772-0.833
3	Security and safety	S1, S2, S3	1.615	0.686-0.825
4	Tourism resources	Tr1, Tr2, Tr3, Tr4, Tr5	1.274	0.575-0.718
5	Tourism infrastructure	Ti1, Ti2, Ti3	1.226	0.783-0.807
6	Tourism human resources	Hr1, Hr2, Hr3	1.048	0.492-0.815
7	Destination attractiveness	Da1, Da2, Da3	1.908	0.737-0.855

Hypothesis testing

This study necessitates the testing of hypotheses regarding the relationship between multiple independent variables and a dependent variable, thus employing a multiple regression model. The purpose of this method is to examine the linear relationships between external structures and an internal structure. The model's fit is evaluated based on the significance value (sig.) of the F-test, the coefficient of determination (R²), the first-order autocorrelation of Durbin-Watson, and multicollinearity statistics. The data analysis results indicate that the p-value of the F-test is 0.000, R² = 0.705, Durbin-Watson = 2.119, and variance inflation factor (VIF) = 1, confirming that the multiple regression model is appropriate (Hair et al., 2010). In this analysis model, 70.5% of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variables, with no occurrence of first-order autocorrelation or multicollinearity.

Table 3. Coefficients

Factor	Hypothesis	B	β	t	Sig.	VIF	Decision
Constant		3.537E-017		0.000	1.000		
Tourism service pricing	H ₅	0.331	0.331	6.473	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Tourism services	H ₃	0.386	0.386	7.552	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Security and safety	H ₆	0.489	0.489	9.567	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Tourism resources	H ₁	0.344	0.344	6.739	0.000	1.000	Accepted

Factor	Hypothesis	B	β	t	Sig.	VIF	Decision
Tourism infrastructure	H ₂	0.184	0.184	3.607	0.000	1.000	Accepted
Tourism human resources	H ₄	0.236	0.236	4.620	0.000	1.000	Accepted

The data analysis results show that all research hypotheses are accepted. With a p-value of 0.000 and $\beta = 0.344$, tourism resources positively contribute to the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination, leading to the acceptance of Hypothesis 1 (H₁). Hypothesis 2 (H₂) is also accepted with a p-value of 0.000 and $\beta = 0.184$, indicating that infrastructure positively influences the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination. There is sufficient evidence to assert that tourism services positively impact the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination (p-value = 0.000, $\beta = 0.386$), thus accepting Hypothesis 3 (H₃). A positive relationship exists between human resources in tourism and the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination (p-value = 0.000, $\beta = 0.236$), leading to the acceptance of Hypothesis 4 (H₄). The price of tourism services positively affects the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination, resulting in the acceptance of Hypothesis 5 (H₅) (p-value = 0.000, $\beta = 0.331$). There is a positive impact of security and safety on the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination (p-value = 0.000, $\beta = 0.489$), hence Hypothesis 6 (H₆) is accepted.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Destination attractiveness is a topic that has garnered significant attention from tourism scholars. It serves as a motivating factor for individuals to visit and spend time at a destination. The attractiveness of a destination also influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Nasir et al., 2021). Generally, destination attractiveness plays a crucial role in determining its competitiveness (Buhalis, 2000). It has emerged as one of the most popular subjects in tourism research (Pike, 2002). However, this line of inquiry has not been extensively defined within the context of rural tourism. Destination attractiveness and destination image can be used interchangeably since these two perceptions are measured similarly (Xu & Zhang, 2016). In the context of this study, the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination is affected by several factors: the price of tourism services, tourism services, security and safety, tourism resources, tourism infrastructure, and human resources in tourism. Factors such as the price of tourism services, tourism resources, tourism infrastructure, and human resources are also believed to positively impact tourism destinations in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam (La et al., 2023). Research by Vengesai et al. (2009) indicates that tourism services positively influence destination attractiveness in Zimbabwe. Security and safety significantly contribute to the attractiveness of industrial tourism destinations in Taiwan (Lee, 2016). Additionally, infrastructure is identified as a positive influencing factor on the attractiveness of nature-based tourism destinations in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2017). Despite differences in destinations and contexts, our findings align with previous studies that highlight how the price of tourism services, quality of tourism services, security and safety, tourism resources/attractions,

infrastructure, and human resources all simultaneously influence destination attractiveness. Therefore, reasonable pricing for various services, high-quality tourism services, assured security and safety, diverse and interesting tourism resources/attractions, well-developed infrastructure, and friendly, kind, and professional human resources all contribute to higher destination attractiveness.

The impact levels of these factors on the attractiveness of the rural tourism destination vary. The diminishing contribution order is as follows: security and safety, tourism services, tourism resources, price of tourism services, human resources in tourism, and tourism infrastructure. To enhance the attractiveness of a rural tourism destination, these factors need to be improved according to their priority based on their impact levels. For security and safety, it is essential for destinations to establish management systems addressing issues such as theft, begging, price gouging, and superstitions. Regarding tourism services, at a minimum, the destination should offer accommodation, dining options, sightseeing opportunities, recreational activities, and transportation that ensure both quantity and quality. The diversity of tourism resources/attractions including natural landscapes, historical sites, culinary specialties, agricultural ecosystems, and environmental cleanliness is crucial. Effective management of service pricing (transportation, sightseeing, recreation, accommodation, dining, and shopping) to ensure compatibility between quality and price is necessary. Training and developing human resources in tourism at the destination to meet requirements for friendliness, kindness, and professionalism should always be prioritized. Finally, enhancing destination attractiveness will be limited without ensuring adequate road systems and public services (such as restrooms and parking) along with communication networks that meet various tourist needs.

CONCLUSION

Rural tourism and destination attractiveness have garnered significant attention from numerous tourism researchers. These two subjects play a crucial role not only in academia but also in practice. Rural tourism is one of the developing tourism trends in emerging countries, while destination attractiveness serves as a driving force for the competitiveness of tourism destinations. Analyzing the factors influencing the attractiveness of rural tourism destinations can provide valuable insights for various stakeholders interested in this topic. Based on theories related to rural tourism, destination attractiveness, and employing various quantitative data analysis methods, this study identifies that security and safety, tourism services, tourism resources, price of tourism services, human resources in tourism, and tourism infrastructure positively contribute to the attractiveness of a rural tourism destination in descending order of impact. Theoretically, this research enriches the understanding of the components constituting destination attractiveness and their effects. Several



management implications are proposed as practical contributions of the study. However, the research has limitations, including a sample structure that lacks representativeness for the broader population and an inability to comprehensively examine all factors that contribute to rural tourism destination attractiveness. Future studies should be conducted in different destinations to incorporate new factors and validate findings.

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