

RESIDENTS' SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: EVIDENCE FROM MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The Mekong Delta provinces are recognized as a destination that possesses the necessary and sufficient conditions to develop community-based tourism effectively. This study explores the mechanisms underlying residents' support for community-based tourism development by examining the relationships among key latent variables: community involvement, community attachment, perceived benefits, and perceived costs. The study employs a quantitative research approach, utilizing a structured survey distributed to 210 local residents actively involved in community tourism across the Mekong Delta provinces. Data were analyzed using SPSS 22 software to validate the research hypotheses. The results confirm that all hypotheses are supported, providing empirical evidence for the proposed relationships. The findings highlight that perceived benefits and community involvement have the most significant influence on residents' support for tourism development. Furthermore, perceived benefits and costs serve as critical mediators, linking community attachment and involvement to support for tourism development. Based on the findings, the study proposes actionable solutions to enhance local participation in community tourism and foster the sustainable development of tourism in the region. These include solutions related to local human resource development, management policies, the diversification of local tourism products, and strategies for promoting and marketing tourism offerings effectively.

Keywords: Mekong Delta, community attachment, perceived benefits, perceived cost, community involvement, resident support, community-based tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Community-based tourism has made notable contributions to Vietnam's tourism industry, bringing significant socio-economic benefits and opening new development opportunities in many localities [1]. This type of tourism leverages Vietnam's diverse and rich resources, including natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and local crafts, making it an ideal strategy for sustainable tourism development [2]. Particularly in the Mekong Delta provinces, favorable conditions such as ecosystems, natural landscapes, cultural and historical values, agriculture, cuisine, spirituality, and resource accessibility position [3] these areas as prime locations for community tourism. The friendliness, sociability, and hospitality of local residents, coupled with their willingness to participate in tourism activities [4], provide additional advantages for effectively developing community-based tourism.

Despite these advantages, local residents' support remains a crucial factor in the success of community-based tourism. Residents' participation is vital for enhancing the quality and sustainability of tourism activities, yet several barriers and challenges hinder their involvement [5]. Community tourism models generate socio-economic benefits, improve livelihoods, and contribute to preserving cultural values and protecting ecological and natural landscapes. However, the benefits are not always evenly distributed. Many residents do not fully benefit from tourism due to insufficient attention from tourism companies and local authorities to service quality and residents' well-being [6]. Additionally, the critical role of residents as direct participants in tourism services is often overlooked.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been widely employed as a primary framework for examining residents' attitudes toward tourism development. According to this theory, residents are expected to support tourism activities if they perceive the benefits to outweigh the associated costs [7]. Lee proposed an extended SET model to examine the mechanisms underlying support for tourism development, interpreting perceived costs and benefits through community attachment and involvement [8]. However, Lee also suggested the need for further empirical studies applying his theoretical framework across diverse social contexts. This research aims to analyze and evaluate the level of residents' participation in tourism activities in the Mekong Delta provinces. It seeks to identify existing challenges and propose solutions to enhance community involvement in tourism, as community involvement is strongly correlated with perceived benefits and support for tourism development [9]. These solutions include addressing mechanisms, policies, community characteristics, and economic benefits, ultimately fostering greater consensus and active participation among local residents in developing sustainable community-based tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Community-based tourism is a form of tourism in which the local community serves as the primary stakeholder in decision-making and implementing tourism development processes. This approach is considered essential for ensuring balanced and sustainable tourism development [10]. Residents' perceived costs and benefits related to tourism development can be evaluated based on economic, socio-cultural, and environmental concerns [11]. Meanwhile, support for tourism development is described as residents having positive attitudes or behavioral intent toward tourism development activities in their locality [12].

Community attachment reflects the emotional bond that residents feel toward their local area, including a sense of pride, belonging, and identification with their community [13]. Research has consistently shown that individuals with a strong attachment to their community tend to perceive tourism in a positive light, often associating it with improved public services, enhanced economic opportunities, and the preservation of cultural heritage [14]. This is because emotionally invested residents see tourism as a mechanism for enhancing the overall quality of life in their community. For instance, tourism's ability to showcase the unique characteristics of a region may resonate deeply with residents who feel connected to their community's identity. Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H1: Community attachment positively affects perceived benefits to residents.

While community attachment can amplify positive perceptions, it may also make residents more attuned to the potential costs associated with tourism development. Residents with strong community attachment may be particularly concerned about issues such as overcrowding, environmental damage, cultural commodification, and strain on local infrastructure [15]. These concerns arise because attached residents often have a deep understanding of their community's limitations and vulnerabilities. Previous research suggests

that these individuals are more likely to perceive tourism as a double-edged sword, bringing both benefits and challenges to the local area [16]. Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H2: Community attachment positively affects perceived costs to residents.

Community involvement is defined as the active participation of residents in local decision-making processes, including those related to tourism development. Such involvement often increases residents' awareness of the potential downsides of tourism, including economic inequality, resource depletion, and social tensions [17]. Studies have found that residents who actively engage in discussions about tourism are more likely to identify its drawbacks, as they are exposed to diverse perspectives and deeper insights into the complexities of tourism planning [11]. This heightened awareness may lead residents to critically assess tourism's impact, even as they remain involved in its development. Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H3: Community involvement positively affects perceived costs to residents.

At the same time, community involvement fosters a sense of empowerment and ownership that enhances residents' awareness of tourism's benefits. Participation in tourism-related activities allows residents to better understand how tourism can contribute to economic development, job creation, and cultural exchange [18]. Involved residents often view tourism as a collaborative effort that aligns with the community's broader goals, such as improving living standards and fostering local pride [19]. This dual role of involvement—raising awareness of both benefits and costs—underscores its importance in shaping balanced perceptions of tourism. Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H4: Community involvement positively affects perceived benefits to residents.

Perceived benefits, such as increased economic opportunities, enhanced infrastructure, and cultural preservation, are among the strongest predictors of residents' support for tourism development. When residents recognize tangible and intangible benefits that improve their quality of life, they are more likely to advocate for tourism initiatives [15]. For example, communities that experience job growth, better public facilities, or heightened cultural exchange due to tourism are more inclined to view it favorably [12]. This relationship underscores the importance of showcasing tourism's positive outcomes to gain public support. Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H5: Perceived benefits positively affect residents' support for tourism development.

Interestingly, perceived costs do not always diminish support for tourism. In some cases, recognizing potential costs can encourage residents to adopt a more proactive and solution-oriented approach to tourism development. For instance, residents who identify risks such as environmental harm, cultural disruption, or social inequality may still support tourism if they believe these challenges can be managed effectively through strategic planning and community collaboration [20]. Research suggests that this nuanced relationship stems from residents' desire to balance tourism's benefits with its costs, ensuring that its growth aligns with the community's sustainability goals [21]. Therefore, we propose the hypothesis:

H6: Perceived costs positively affect residents' support for tourism development.

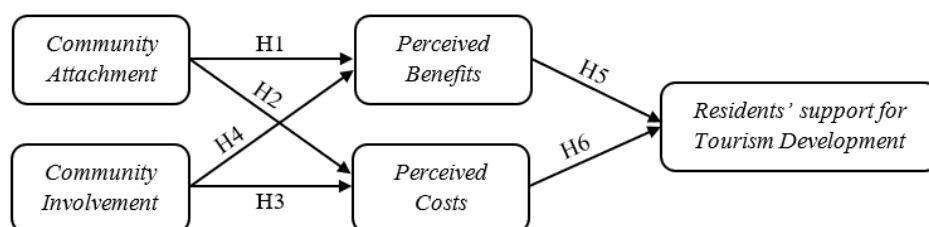


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework, where perceived benefits (PB) and perceived costs (CP) mediate the relationships between community attachment (CA) and community involvement (CI) with residents' support for tourism development (STD).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data sources

The data for this study were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to local residents across provinces in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Data collection activities were conducted between October and November 2023 by the research team using surveys. A total of 210 completed and valid responses were obtained and included in the analysis.

The questionnaire was developed based on validated measurement scales from previous research, particularly Nugroho & Numata [9]. It comprised five constructs: Community Attachment (3 items), Community Involvement (4 items), Perceived Benefits (5 items), Perceived Costs (3 items), and Support for Tourism Development (4 items). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, preliminary analyses including descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha were conducted using SPSS software. To minimize potential common method bias, all items were measured using uniform formatting and wording. Given the predictive nature of the study, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the proposed research model and hypotheses.

3.2. Sample size and design

The study adopted the sampling guidelines proposed by Hair et al. [22], which recommend that the minimum sample size should be at least five times the total number of variables included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 19 items representing 5 key variables. Following this formula, the minimum required sample size was calculated as: $\text{Sample size} = 5 \times 19 = 95$. To ensure robustness and account for potential non-response or incomplete data, the study targeted a larger sample size of 200 participants. The survey was conducted online via Google Forms, ensuring accessibility and efficiency in data collection. After a three-week data collection period, a total of 210 responses were received.

Out of the 210 responses, all were complete and deemed suitable for analysis. The dataset was filtered to retain these responses, resulting in a final sample size of 210. The sample included participants from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, place of residence, and other demographic factors. The majority of respondents were aged between 20 and 40 years, reflecting a broad age distribution. Additionally, the participants were evenly distributed across all 13 provinces in the Mekong Delta, ensuring geographic representation in the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were rigorously evaluated using established criteria from Henseler, Ringle, and Sinkovics [23]. Composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating strong internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values ranged between 0.879 and 0.913, further confirming the reliability of the constructs (Table 1). Factor loadings for the observed variables were all above 0.70, demonstrating strong correlations between the items and their respective latent

constructs. These findings ensure that the constructs were measured accurately and consistently.

Table 1. Construct reliability and validity

| | Items | Loading | Alpha | CR | Rho | AVE |
|---------------------------------|---|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Community Attachment | | | 0.879 | 0.989 | 0.921 | 0.795 |
| | Belonging to the Mekong Delta itself | 0.934 | | | | |
| | Attachment to home | 0.833 | | | | |
| | Willing to do their best for their homeland | 0.905 | | | | |
| Community Involvement | | | 0.902 | 0.946 | 0.931 | 0.770 |
| | Into decision making and tourism and development planning | 0.851 | | | | |
| | Into tourism management | 0.897 | | | | |
| | Into decision-making and conservation of the Mekong Delta | 0.897 | | | | |
| | Into planning and supporting future tourism development | 0.865 | | | | |
| Perceived Cost | | | 0.878 | 0.947 | 0.918 | 0.789 |
| | Disrupted by tourism development | 0.844 | | | | |
| | Travel increases noise | 0.946 | | | | |
| | Causes overpopulation | 0.871 | | | | |
| Perceived Benefits | | | 0.913 | 0.940 | 0.934 | 0.739 |
| | Increasing the number of tourists will increase the economy | 0.880 | | | | |
| | Tourism encourages people to do more business | 0.829 | | | | |
| | Tourism improves income and living standards | 0.881 | | | | |
| | Generate significant tax revenue for the government | 0.834 | | | | |
| | Improving people's quality of life | 0.872 | | | | |
| Support for Tourism Development | | | 0.896 | 0.941 | 0.925 | 0.756 |
| | Support community-based tourism | 0.889 | | | | |
| | Want to see more travelers | 0.812 | | | | |
| | Supporting tourism matters | 0.873 | | | | |
| | Tourism should be encouraged in the Mekong Delta | 0.902 | | | | |

Source: Data analysis

To validate the model, convergent and discriminant validity were assessed. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs were above the recommended level of 0.5,

confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was established by ensuring that the correlations between different constructs were below 0.85. These results confirm that the constructs were both distinct and robustly measured, supporting the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

The results revealed significant and positive relationships between key variables. Community attachment (CA) positively influenced perceived benefits (PB) with a path coefficient of 0.180 (p -value = 0.049), supporting Hypothesis 1. Additionally, CA had a strong positive influence on perceived costs (CP), as evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.527 (p -value = 0.000), supporting Hypothesis 2.

Community involvement (CI) also demonstrated significant effects. It positively influenced CP with a path coefficient of 0.475 (p -value = 0.000), supporting Hypothesis 3. Similarly, CI positively affected PB, as shown by a path coefficient of 0.298 (p -value = 0.012), supporting Hypothesis 4. These results highlight the role of community involvement in shaping residents' perceptions of both the benefits and costs of tourism.

Perceived benefits (PB) and perceived costs (CP) were found to be significant drivers of support for tourism development (STD). PB had a strong positive impact on STD with a path coefficient of 0.481 (p -value = 0.002), supporting Hypothesis 5. Meanwhile, CP also significantly influenced STD with a path coefficient of 0.215 (p -value = 0.002), supporting Hypothesis 6. These findings underscore the dual role of benefits and costs in shaping residents' attitudes toward tourism development.

Table 2. Result for the structural equation model

| Hypothesis | Path | Coefficients | t- value | p-value | Hypothesis support |
|------------|----------|--------------|----------|---------|--------------------|
| H1 | CA → PB | 0.180 | 1.968 | 0.049 | Supported |
| H2 | CA → CP | 0.527 | 10.040 | 0.000 | Supported |
| H3 | CI → CP | 0.475 | 7.410 | 0.000 | Supported |
| H4 | CI → PB | 0.298 | 2.506 | 0.012 | Supported |
| H5 | PB → STD | 0.481 | 3.032 | 0.002 | Supported |
| H6 | CP → STD | 0.215 | 1.800 | 0.002 | Supported |

Source: Data analysis

The explanatory power of the model was high, with R-squared values of 0.894, 0.926, and 0.943 for CP, PB, and STD, respectively (Table 4). These results indicate that the independent variables accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in the dependent variables. Adjusted R-squared values further confirmed the robustness of these findings.

Table 3. R-squared results

| | R-square | R-square adjusted |
|---------------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Cost Perceived | 0.894 | 0.893 |
| Perceived Benefits | 0.926 | 0.925 |
| Support for Tourism Development | 0.943 | 0.942 |

Source: Data analysis

The F-squared values provided additional insights into the importance of each construct in the model. Perceived Benefits (PB) and Perceived Costs (CP) exhibited the highest F-squared values, highlighting their critical role in driving support for tourism development. In contrast, Community Attachment (CA) and Community Involvement (CI) demonstrated relatively lower contributions, but their mediating effects through PB and CP were significant.

Table 4. f-square results

| | Community Involvement | Cost Perceived | Perceived Benefits | Support for Tourism Development |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Community Attachment | | 0.082 | 0.538 | |
| Community Involvement | | 0.110 | 0.144 | |
| Cost Perceived | | | | 0.866 |
| Perceived Benefits | | | | 0.829 |

Source: Data analysis

5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical roles of perceived benefits, perceived costs, community involvement, and community attachment in shaping residents' support for tourism development in the Mekong Delta provinces. The findings reveal that residents' support is primarily driven by their perceptions of benefits and costs, which are, in turn, influenced by their levels of community attachment and involvement.

The research findings enhance understanding of behavioral patterns based on the extended Social Exchange Theory (SET), specifically within the context of community-based tourism in the Mekong Delta. The specific results fundamentally confirm the robustness of the principles in the SET model while also uncovering several new theoretical contributions. Firstly, this study reaffirms the findings of prior research, namely that if residents perceive sufficient benefits from tourism, they will support its development locally [8, 13]. However, an intriguing finding is that perceived costs also positively influence support for tourism development, albeit to a lesser extent. Community-based tourism remains relatively novel in the surveyed areas, which may partially explain this result. Residents tend to accept perceived costs as an inevitable part of tourism development—during this nascent phase, possibly as an expression of curiosity and anticipation for long-term overall outcomes. Therefore, we recommend that the stage of tourism development be seriously considered when evaluating residents' support for tourism activities.

Furthermore, path analysis results indicate a significant influence of community attachment and community involvement on perceived costs. In contrast, prior studies have shown either negligible or even negative impacts of community attachment or involvement on perceived costs [8]. This result may be related to the socio-economic characteristics of the surveyed region. Specifically, the Mekong Delta experiences higher outward migration than inward migration [24] - meaning that most residents have lived there for multiple generations and have deeper emotional connections. The primary “push” factors driving migration are poverty and challenges in agricultural production, prompting residents to seek better economic opportunities [24]. This may partly explain why community involvement significantly affects perceived costs. Given the low economic baseline, investments in tourism development, even if relatively minor compared to the national economic average, may still impose a certain burden on residents participating in tourism activities in this region. Subsequent studies should

also consider the level of economic development of a region, in relation to neighboring areas or the national average, before evaluating residents' perceived benefits and costs regarding tourism development activities.

Community-based tourism has significant potential to contribute to local economic development, but ensuring long-term sustainability and effectiveness requires garnering community support for tourism development [25]. However, not all community members are willing or able to participate in community-based tourism development, as various barriers or personal choices influence their decisions [26]. Nevertheless, perceived benefits and costs play a crucial role in shaping residents' support for tourism development. By analyzing the factors affecting perceived benefits and costs, local tourism managers can address fundamental issues to foster residents' support for community-based tourism activities.

Based on the research findings, tourism managers should leverage community attachment as a powerful resource to promote tourism development, rather than ignoring it. Greater attention should be given to raising awareness about the benefits brought by tourism, ensuring that individuals with the strongest community attachment clearly perceive the perceived benefits outweighing the perceived costs in tourism development. Residents with strong community attachment are also those who most vividly showcase the community's identity through tourism products and services offered to visitors. This will contribute to enhancing positive experiences and satisfaction levels among tourists visiting the locality. The issue of initial support for community members participating in tourism development should also be prioritized to minimize barriers related to perceived costs, as highlighted in the research results. Active community involvement will help ensure respect for local values, contributing to enhancing the quality of local tourism governance [27].

The current study is limited to indirectly assessing the influence of community attachment and community involvement on support for community-based tourism development, highlighting the need for future studies to directly evaluate these impacts. While the convenience sampling method through online surveys offers several advantages, it also introduces potential biases in the survey results. Due to the broad survey scope, the areas surveyed exhibit varying levels of community-based tourism development, leading to differences in perceived benefits and costs among respondents. Future studies should categorize respondents to ensure a certain degree of similarity in tourism development levels across localities before conducting surveys. Another issue is that the survey inadvertently filtered respondents to those capable of completing online questionnaires—typically younger individuals with a certain level of education. Meanwhile, many participants in community-based tourism activities, predominantly farmers, often have limited formal education and face constraints in engaging with online interactions. Future research should address this limitation by combining in-person surveys or in-depth interviews to ensure more representative survey results.

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TÓM TẮT

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TÓM TẮT

Các tỉnh Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long được công nhận là một điểm đến sở hữu nhiều điều kiện cần và đủ để phát triển du lịch cộng đồng một cách hiệu quả. Nghiên cứu này khám phá các cơ chế ảnh hưởng đến sự ủng hộ của cư dân địa phương đối với phát triển du lịch cộng đồng thông qua việc xem xét mối quan hệ giữa các biến tiềm ẩn chính: sự tham gia của cộng đồng, sự gắn kết với cộng đồng, lợi ích cảm nhận và chi phí cảm nhận. Phương pháp nghiên cứu định lượng được áp dụng, sử dụng bảng hỏi cấu trúc phân phát cho 210 cư dân địa phương đang tham gia tích cực vào hoạt động du lịch cộng đồng tại các tỉnh Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long. Dữ liệu được phân tích bằng phần mềm SPSS 22 để kiểm định các giả thuyết nghiên cứu. Kết quả xác nhận rằng tất cả các giả thuyết đều được ủng hộ, cung cấp bằng chứng thực nghiệm cho các mối quan hệ được đề xuất. Các phát hiện nhấn mạnh rằng lợi ích cảm nhận và sự tham gia của cộng đồng có ảnh hưởng đáng kể nhất đến sự ủng hộ của cư dân đối với phát triển du lịch. Hơn nữa, lợi ích và chi phí cảm nhận đóng vai trò là các yếu tố trung gian quan trọng, kết nối sự gắn kết và tham gia của cộng đồng với sự ủng hộ đối với phát triển du lịch. Dựa trên các kết quả, nghiên cứu đề xuất các giải pháp khả thi nhằm tăng cường sự tham gia của cộng đồng địa phương vào du lịch cộng đồng và thúc đẩy sự phát triển bền vững của du lịch trong khu vực. Các giải pháp bao gồm phát triển nguồn nhân lực địa phương, chính sách quản lý, đa dạng hóa các sản phẩm du lịch địa phương, và các chiến lược quảng bá và tiếp thị các sản phẩm du lịch một cách hiệu quả.

Từ khóa: Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, Gắn bó cộng đồng, Lợi ích cảm nhận, Chi phí cảm nhận, Sự tham gia của cộng đồng, Sự ủng hộ của người dân, Du lịch dựa vào cộng đồng.