Original Article

Tourist Behavioral Intentions towards Spiritual Tourism - The Case of Ha Tien City Destination, Kien Giang Province, Vietnam

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Abstract - Spiritual tourism is an increasingly popular form of tourism and plays an important role within the tourism sector. The emergence and development of spiritual tourism contribute to meeting the diverse needs of tourists. Tourist behavioral intention is a significant indicator of the development of spiritual tourism destinations. However, the factors influencing tourists' behavioral intentions towards spiritual tourism have not been extensively studied. This study, conducted in Ha Tien City (Vietnam), aims to contribute to a better understanding of this research area. Data analysis from a survey of 150 tourists reveals that spiritual tourism is created and simultaneously influenced by factors such as natural and cultural characteristics, tourism environment, facilities and services, spiritual beliefs, and people. This paper contributes to expanding knowledge about the factors influencing tourists' behavioral intentions towards spiritual tourism and provides some management implications for spiritual tourism destinations.

Keywords - Behavioral intention, Ha Tien City, Spiritual tourism, Tourists, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, spiritual tourism has become a popular form of tourism and plays an important role in the tourism industry of many countries worldwide. Spiritual tourism arises when tourists undertake trips driven by non-material motivations (Halim et al., 2021). A journey searching for the sacred/holy and truth by tourists is referred to as spiritual tourism (Vukonić, 1996). The benefit of spiritual tourism is that it contributes to the balance of tourists' mind-spirit-body (Halim et al., 2021). Locations that can provide opportunities to satisfy the spiritual needs of tourists are called spiritual tourism destinations. These may include monasteries, churches, cathedrals, pagodas, temples, mausoleums, tombs, caves, and rocks - places tourists believe to be sacred/holy. When visiting spiritual sites, tourists visit the scenery, offer worship, pray, and seek peace and tranquillity in their souls.

Behavioral intention is the highest level of commitment and can be used to predict best an individual's behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Oliver, 1999). In light of the theory of planned behavior, actual behavior has a positive relationship with behavioral intention (Moutinho, 1987). Another concept

often used interchangeably with behavioral intention by many scholars is loyalty. Behavioral intentions include intentions to revisit and willingness to recommend (Palau-Saumell et al., 2013). Therefore, repeat visits and positive recommendations occur when tourists have positive experiences. Repeat visitors participate more actively in consumption, stay longer, contribute positively to word-of-mouth promotion, and reduce destination advertising costs (Abbasi et al., 2021; Marinkovic et al., 2014). Tourists' trip shares are considered the most important and reliable source of information for potential tourists (Williams & Soutar, 2009).

The intention of behavior is one factor that plays an important role in developing spiritual tourism. From the intention of behavior, visitors gradually form true behavior, creating a continuous and stable customer supply for spiritual tourist destinations. There have been some findings regarding the relationship between tourists' behavioral intentions and spiritual tourism. Zheng et al. (2024) argue that the intention of the behavior of tourists has a positive and significant relationship with spiritual tourism. The authentic experience in spiritual tourism affects the visit of

tourists (Sukaatmadja et al., 2023). Both religious orientation and patriotism have a positive relationship with tourists' return to the spiritual tourist destination (Nguyen-Viet et al., 2025). Word-of-mouth communication, satisfaction, and spiritual belief significantly affect tourists' loyalty (Than, 2019; Hai & Thuong, 2019). Experience quality, perceived value, and satisfaction have been shown to positively relate to tourist loyalty (Suhartanto et al., 2020). The above findings are useful and macroscopic; however, the relationship between spiritual tourism destination attributes/destination image and tourists' behavioral intentions has not been addressed.

To help fill the above gap, this study was conducted in Ha Tien City. It is one of the three cities in Kien Giang province (the other two cities are Rach Gia and Phu Quoc). It converges many ethnicities, cultures, religions, and beliefs. Many sacred spaces in Ha Tien City have become important spiritual tourism destinations (Da Dung Mountain Scenic, Mac Family Temple, Thach Dong Scenic, Tam Bao Pagoda, Phu Dung Pagoda, Thanh Hoang Temple, Thien Truc Pagoda, Ha Tien church, and Mac Mi Co tomb). These places have a long history, containing a certain sacredness/holiness (according to belief), mystery, and illusion. Compared with other spiritual destinations in the Mekong Delta (Vietnam), Ha Tien is more diverse regarding spiritual types and locations. Choosing Ha Tien as an empirical case can truly reflect the research topic. The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between tourists' behavioral intentions and spiritual tourism. The research results not only expand the knowledge about the subject but also provide implications for spiritual tourism destination management.

2. Literature Overview and Research Hypotheses Formation

2.1. Spiritual Tourism

Since ancient times, in the traditions of many religions, adherents have been required to undertake pilgrimages to sacred sites, an activity that serves as the precursor to spiritual tourism. The term "spiritual tourism" has emerged in recent decades to refer to a journey searching for personal meaning and purpose in life (Halim et al., 2021). Activities related to spiritual tourism include exploring cultural, historical, and doctrinal aspects, as well as praying, performing rites, worshipping, meditating, practising, and sightseeing by both religious devotees and secular tourists who are motivated partially or entirely by spiritual reasons (Terzidou et al., 2008). Tourists participate in spiritual tourism for various motivations (religious, personal, social), with religious faith/belief being considered the strongest motivation (Drule et al., 2012). Spiritual tourism contributes to the search for life's meaning, enhances awareness and spiritual development, creates transcendent experiences, fosters tourists' spirits, promotes mental well-being, aids self-

reflection, purifies the soul, and offers perspectives to overcome difficulties, thereby enhancing an individual's spiritual life (Halim et al., 2021). In recent decades, spiritual tourism has become a popular and highly attractive form of tourism. The values of religion and belief are important foundations for spiritual tourism. A common characteristic among spiritual tourists is their reverence/belief in a supernatural force associated with a specific cultural space (Nguyen & Hoang, 2022).

2.2. Behavioral Intentions of Tourists

The behavioral intention of tourists has become one of the focal topics for many researchers in recent decades (Bayih & Singh, 2020). Numerous terms are used to denote behavioral intention, such as future behavior and post-visit behavior. It reflects tourists' assessment of their likelihood to revisit a destination or their willingness to recommend it to others (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Tourists' behavioral intentions manifest through repeat visits, recommendations, and positive word-of-mouth (Bayih & Singh, 2020). The intention to revisit indicates tourists' interest in returning to a particular destination (Szymanski & Henard, 2001). Willingness to recommend is also known as word-of-mouth communication that reflects tourists' intention to share their positive experiences about a destination with friends and family (Maxham, 2001). Many tourism business managers value tourist behavioral intentions as they align with the concept of tourist loyalty. Indicators of a destination's or product's success include the level of repeat visits/purchases or recommendations/shares by tourists regarding that destination or product.

2.3. The Relationship between Tourists' Behavioral Intentions and Spiritual Tourism

In the study titled "Factors Influencing Tourist Loyalty at Spiritual Tourism Destinations in Vietnam," it was found that word-of-mouth communication, satisfaction, and spiritual belief significantly affect tourists' loyalty (Than, 2019). Factors such as experience quality, perceived value, and satisfaction have been shown to relate positively to tourist loyalty regarding experiences in Halal tourism (Suhartanto et al., 2020). Research by Hai & Thuong (2019) indicates that spiritual belief, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth influence tourists' intentions to revisit.

Indirectly, the environment and tourism activities, natural and cultural conditions, infrastructure, and government support positively impact tourist satisfaction; in turn, satisfaction contributes positively to tourist loyalty (Hai & Thuong, 2019; Than, 2019). The study "Tourist Experience in Halal Tourism: What Leads to Loyalty?" shows that experience quality affects tourist loyalty while experience quality is influenced by factors such as facilities and services and people (Suhartanto et al., 2020). Based on this literature overview, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H$_1$): Natural and cultural characteristics at spiritual tourism destinations in Ha Tien City positively influence tourists' behavioral intentions.

Hypothesis 2 (H$_2$): The tourism environment at spiritual tourism destinations in Ha Tien City positively influences tourists' behavioral intentions.

Hypothesis 3 (H$_3$): Facilities and services at spiritual tourism destinations in Ha Tien City positively influence tourists' behavioral intentions.

Hypothesis 4 (H$_4$): Spiritual beliefs regarding spiritual tourism destinations in Ha Tien City positively influence tourists' behavioral intentions.

Hypothesis 5 (H$_5$): People at spiritual tourism destinations in Ha Tien City positively influence tourists' behavioral intentions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Measurement Scales and Observational Variables

The research model examining the factors influencing tourists' behavioral intentions toward spiritual tourism in Ha Tien City consists of five independent measurement scales and one dependent measurement scale.

The scales for natural and cultural characteristics, tourism environment, and spiritual beliefs are adapted from studies by Hai & Thuong (2019) and Than (2019).

The scales for facilities and services, people, and behavioral intention are derived from the research conducted by Suhartanto et al. (2020). The measurement scales and observational variables for this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Measurement scales and observational variables

Measurement scale and observational variables	Symbol	Reference from
Natural and cultural characteristics	*NCF*	Hai & Thuong (2019) and Than (2019)
Point of tourist X has many beautiful landscapes	NCF1	
Point of tourist X has many beautiful cultural constructions	NCF2	
Point of tourist X has an impressive culture/history/heritage	NCF3	
Tourism environment	*TE*	Hai & Thuong (2019) and Than (2019)
I feel safe when traveling at the point of tourist X	TE1	
The environment at the point of tourist X is clean	TE2	
Tourism activities at the point of tourist X are well-managed	TE3	
Facilities and services	*F & S*	Suhartanto et al. (2020)
The availability of restaurants and eateries for tourists	F & S1	
Accommodation is full, clean and convenient	F & S2	
Point of tourist X has many characteristic souvenirs	F & S3	
The availability of information services at the point of tourist X	F & S4	
Spiritual belief	*SB*	Hai & Thuong (2019) and Than (2019)
I choose to travel at point of tourist X because of religious/belief	SB1	
I come to travel at point of tourist X because of family tradition	SB2	
I come to travel at point of tourist X because of the beliefs/religion of the community	SB3	
I visit the point of tourist X to fulfill religious/belief obligations	SB4	
People	*P*	Suhartanto et al. (2020)
The agility and flexibility of the staff	P1	
The honesty and politeness of the staff	P2	
Communication and behavior skills of the staff	P3	
The enthusiasm and hospitality of the local people	P4	
Behavioral intention	*BI*	Suhartanto et al. (2020)
In the future, I will revisit the point of tourist X	BI1	
Point of tourist X will be my first choice	BI2	
I will introduce the point of tourist X to my relatives and friends	BI3	

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This research is quantitative and explanatory, so data was gathered using a questionnaire survey. In addition to questions measuring respondents' demographic characteristics (gender, age, education level, and occupation), the main part of the questionnaire consists of 5 independent scales with 18 observational variables and 1 dependent scale with 3 observational variables. Nominal and ordinal scales are used to measure general information about respondents,

while the main content of the questionnaire is measured using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree). With 18 independent observational variables, the minimum sample size is 90 (18*5) (Hair et al., 2010). The actual sample size is 150, which meets the requirement. Respondents were directly surveyed at typical spiritual tourism destinations in the study area (Da Dung Mountain Scenic, Thach Dong Scenic, Tam Bao Pagoda, Phu Dung Pagoda, and Mac family temple) in December 2024. Sample elements are tourists who agreed to participate in the survey. Data storage and analysis ensure anonymity and do not have any influence on respondents. Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20. Respondents' demographic characteristics were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Techniques such as scale reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and multiple linear regression were used to assess scale reliability, identify factors of spiritual tourism, and test hypotheses, respectively. These analytical techniques are appropriate to the type of data, as well as the goal and style of research.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1. Results
4.1.1. Sample Description

For this study, the variables used in measuring the demographic characteristics of respondents included gender, age, education level, and occupation. Regarding gender, the sample consisted of 83 males and 67 females, accounting for 55.3% and 44.7%, respectively. The ages of the respondents participating in the study varied, with the age groups under 18, from 18 to 30, from 31 to 55, and over 55 accounting for 0.7%, 74%, 17.3%, and 8%, respectively. The education level of the respondents was mainly college and university graduates, with 102 people accounting for 68%. The number of people with a high school education was 25, accounting for 16.7%. The remaining 23 respondents, accounting for 15.3%, had education levels below high school, intermediate, and postgraduate. Students accounted for the largest number and proportion in the study sample with 80 people, corresponding to 53.3%. Respondents with occupations as civil servants and employees numbered 26, accounting for 17.3%. Those with occupations such as business and trade, farmers, and workers accounted for 20 (13.3%) and 18 (12%), respectively. There were 6 retirees, accounting for 4%. The research data represents the views of many components of the population because of the diversity of respondents' gender, age, education level, and occupation.

4.1.2. Reliability Testing of Measurement Scales

In quantitative research, a research model consists of multiple measurement scales, and each measurement scale is measured by multiple observational variables. Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlation are used to test the level of contribution of the observational variables within a scale or the correlation between the observational variables. According to Hair et al. (2010), a measurement scale ensures unidimensionality/internal consistency and reliability when Cronbach's alpha is at least 0.7, and the corrected item-total correlation of the variable is at least 0.3. The data analysis results show that the natural and cultural characteristics scale has a Cronbach's alpha = 0.731, and the corrected item-total correlation of the 3 variables is lowest at 0.507 and highest at 0.647; Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlation of the tourism environment scale are 0.875 and 0.691-0.849, respectively; Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlation of the facilities and services scale are 0.852 and 0.608-0.768, respectively; values of 0.896 and 0.674-0.844 for Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlation (respectively) for the spiritual beliefs scale; the people scale has a Cronbach's alpha = 0.870 and corrected item-total correlation of the variables from 0.641 to 0.777; Cronbach's alpha and corrected item-total correlation of the behavioral intention scale are 0.793 and 0.545-0.766, respectively. Thus, the tourism environment, facilities and services, spiritual beliefs, and people scales are classified as good; the natural and cultural characteristics and behavioral intention scales are classified as satisfactory. The corrected item-total correlation of the variables is satisfied. Therefore, the measurement scales and observational variables ensure unidimensionality and reliability and are used for exploratory factor analysis.

4.1.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis

This study used multiple observational variables to measure respondents' perceptions. Exploration factor analysis was used to group these observational variables into more meaningful factors. The purpose of this method is to group observational variables with similar characteristics and closely correlate them with each other into factors reflecting different content. When the KMO coefficient ≥ 0.5 and the significant value of Bartlett's test < 0.05, the data is suitable for factor analysis. The number of factors extracted when Eigenvalues are greater than 1, the minimum cumulative variance percentage is 50%, and the minimum factor loading is 0.5 (Hair et al., 2010). The data analysis results for the independent measurement scales show that the KMO measure of sample adequacy = 0.878 and the significant value of Bartlett's sphericity test = 0.000, so the data is suitable for exploratory factor analysis. With Eigenvalues greater than 1, the cumulative variance percentage is 74.161, and the factor loading ≥ 0.5, the data is grouped into 5 factors: spiritual beliefs, facilities and services, people, tourism environment, and natural and cultural characteristics. In addition, the KMO measure of sample adequacy = 0.640 and the significant value of Bartlett's sphericity test = 0.000 for the dependent scale. With an Eigenvalue greater than 1, the cumulative variance percentage is 71.51, and the factor loading ≥ 0.5, the data is grouped into 1 factor, named behavioral intention. Thus, through exploratory factor analysis, the observed variables in each factor are stable, as proposed by the model. The results of the exploratory factor analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis results

	Factor					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
I choose to travel at point of tourist X because of religious/belief	.868					
I come to travel at point of tourist X because of family tradition	.800					
I come to travel at point of tourist X because of the beliefs/religion of the community	.859					
I visit the point of tourist X to fulfill religious/belief obligations	.725					
The availability of restaurants and eateries for tourists		.712				
Accommodation is full, clean and convenient		.785				
Point of tourist X has many characteristic souvenirs		.795				
The availability of information services at the point of tourist X		.698				
The agility and flexibility of the staff			.803			
The honesty and politeness of the staff			.626			
Communication and behavior skills of the staff			.824			
The enthusiasm and hospitality of the local people			.712			
I feel safe when traveling at the point of tourist X				.864		
The environment at the point of tourist X is clean				.773		
Tourism activities at the point of tourist X are well managed				.748		
Point of tourist X has many beautiful landscapes					.772	
Point of tourist X has many beautiful cultural constructions					.832	
Point of tourist X has an impressive culture/history/heritage					.704	
In the future, I will revisit the point of tourist X						.773
Point of tourist X will be my first choice						.910
I will introduce the point of tourist X to my relatives and friends						.848
Kaiser-Meyor-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy					.878	.640
Bartlett's test of sphericity (Sig.)					.000	.000
Eigenvalues					1.101	2.14
% of cumulative (total variance explained)					74.16	71.51

4.1.4. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

The relationship between the independent factors and the dependent factor is tested based on multiple linear regression analysis. This method helps predict the impact of independent factors on the dependent factor. Data is suitable for regression analysis when: $R^2 \geq 0.3$, $1 <$ Durbin-Watson $<$ 3, significant value of F test < 0.05, VIF < 2 (Hair et al., 2010). The data analysis results show that $R^2 = 0.401$, Durbin-Watson $= 1.742$, the significant value of F test $= 0.000$, and VIF $= 1$, so the data is suitable for multiple linear regression analysis.

Table 3. Multiple linear regression analysis results

Factor	Hypothesis	B	β	t	Sig.	VIF	Decision
Constant		-5.122E-017		0.000	1.000		
Spiritual belief	H_4	0.136	0.136	2.102	0.037	1.000	Accepted
Facilities and services	H_3	0.138	0.138	2.140	0.034	1.000	Accepted
People	H_5	0.210	0.210	3.262	0.001	1.000	Accepted
Tourism environment	H_2	0.212	0.212	3.285	0.001	1.000	Accepted
Natural and cultural characteristics	H_1	0.524	0.524	8.124	0.000	1.000	Accepted

The data analysis results in Table 3 indicate that all hypotheses are supported. With a *p*-value = 0.000 and β = 0.524, natural and cultural characteristics positively correlate with tourists' behavioral intentions; therefore, Hypothesis 1 (H_1) is supported. Hypothesis 2 (H_2) is supported, with the tourism environment contributing positively to tourists' behavioral intentions (*p*-value = 0.001, β = 0.212). Facilities and services positively influence tourists' behavioral intentions (*p*-value = 0.034, β = 0.138); thus, Hypothesis 3 (H_3) is supported. A positive relationship exists between spiritual beliefs and tourists' behavioral intentions (*p*-value = 0.037, β = 0.136), so Hypothesis 4 (H_4) is supported. People are found to have a positive impact on tourists' behavioral intentions (*p*-value = 0.001, β = 0.210); thus, Hypothesis 5 (H_5) is supported.

4.2. Discussion

Spiritual tourism is a cultural tourism component, relying on spiritual culture to attract tourists. The main purpose of tourists participating in this type of tourism is to satisfy spiritual needs. Many tourists seek mental and physical health and explore the mysteries of life, which motivates them to participate in spiritual tourism. This type of tourism can help tourists form the values of truth, goodness, and beauty for themselves. With these benefits, spiritual tourism has become one of the developing trends and an important market segment in the global tourism industry.

Spiritual tourism comprises many factors; in this study, natural and cultural characteristics, tourism environment, facilities and services, spiritual beliefs, and people create spiritual tourism. Natural and cultural characteristics relate to aspects of scenery, cultural structures, and history/heritage. The tourism environment is an aspect that reflects the safety, cleanliness, and management of tourism activities at the destination. Facilities and services demonstrate the extent to which the destination meets the needs of tourists for dining, accommodation, shopping, and information. Spiritual beliefs reflect tourists' faith in the religion/beliefs at the destination. People demonstrate the competence of staff and the kindness of local people. These factors are found to positively influence tourists' behavioral intentions. This finding supports research by Hai & Thuong (2019), Suhartanto et al. (2020) and Than (2019). Among the influencing factors, natural and cultural characteristics, tourism environment, people, facilities and services, and spiritual beliefs have a decreasing impact on tourists' behavioral intentions in the study area.

The research results indicate that the more attractive the natural and cultural characteristics, the better the tourism environment, the more diverse and quality the facilities and services, the higher the spiritual beliefs, and the more professional and kind the people at the destination, the more positive the behavioral intentions of tourists. There are many management implications for spiritual tourism destinations to enhance tourists' behavioral intentions. Selecting destinations with landscapes and typical cultural components combined with protecting and creating them will ensure the destination's attractiveness. A destination where tourism activities are managed appropriately ensures tourist safety, and cleanliness is essential. Spiritual tourists have many needs, including the destination's need to meet the needs of tourists for dining, accommodation, shopping, and information. The more a tourist destination is believed to be sacred (a place believed to have deities capable of bestowing blessings), the more it is associated with by tourists. Service staff and local people are the people who are often in contact with tourists. Good qualities such as politeness, friendliness, kindness, and professionalism need to be equipped for these individuals.

5. Conclusion

Satisfying spiritual beliefs is one of the essential needs of every human being. Therefore, spiritual tourism is always one of the important tourism trends in the global tourism industry. Participating in spiritual tourism can help tourists accumulate noble values and relieve troubles. Spiritual tourism is created by many factors, such as natural and cultural characteristics, tourism environment, facilities and services, and people creating the destination's attractiveness. In contrast, spiritual beliefs motivate tourists to choose the destination. These factors simultaneously affect the behavioral intentions of tourists. Each factor has a certain role in shaping tourists' behavioral intentions; implementing multiple related measures will make an important contribution to the development of the destination. To increase tourists' behavioral intentions towards spiritual tourism destinations in Ha Tien City, local managers should actively protect the landscape and relics and invest in exploiting cultural elements associated with spirituality. In addition, environmental sanitation and ensuring safety and order at spiritual destinations are necessary. People are one of the factors that play a decisive role in tourists' behavioral intentions; therefore, the local need to build human factors with the motto of friendliness-kindness-politeness-professionalism. To create convenience for tourists during their travel, services and facilities related to food, accommodation, shopping, and information need to meet the quantity and ensure quality. Finally, exploiting spiritual stories associated with each destination without superstition will significantly attract tourists. This study has clarified the proposed objective and is different from related studies, which analyze the direct relationship between spiritual tourism destination attributes (natural and cultural characteristics, tourism environment, facilities and services, and people) and spiritual beliefs with tourist behavioral intentions. Thereby contributing to expanding knowledge about the relationship between the two structures of destination image and spiritual beliefs with tourist behavioral intentions. Conducting research in this direction can provide useful evidence for local tourism managers because of its specificity and applicability. Besides these contributions, this study has some limitations. One is that the research model certainly omits some other factors. Two, the research only stops at quantitative research. These limitations will be opportunities for future research.

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