

Exploring perceived value attributes toward spiritual tourism in Vietnam: A qualitative approach.

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Abstract

Customer perceived value (CPV) has recently attracted a lot of interest in the tourism industry, both academically and empirically. To succeed in the tourist business, managers in the sector need a comprehensive understanding of how visitors' perceptions of value dimensions connect to trip outcomes, such as overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions. This study aims to explore the tourists' perceptions of the value of spiritual tourism services in Vietnam. A qualitative method was employed, which included nine in-depth interviews with tourism providers and representatives of spiritual sites, as well as a brief survey of 127 travelers who had already experienced spiritual tourism services. The findings revealed that tourists in this research context consider functional value, emotional value, educational value, social value, and spiritual worth (which includes both concrete and intangible components) as important value qualities. The study also provides implications for both researchers and tourism service providers.

Keywords: perceived value attributes, spiritual tourism, Vietnam

1. Introduction

With a steady shift from mass marketing, the tourism industry is adopting a more sophisticated marketing strategy - one that aims to better understand the mindset of travelers in a specific market segment. Explicitly, by providing added value and service to customers, tourism providers can maintain their competitive advantage (Ardani et al., 2019). The challenge for tourism providers has always been forecasting future behavioral intentions based on visitors' perceived value of a destination or an experience (Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2021; Gill et al., 2007). As a result, customer-perceived value (CPV) has gained much attention in the tourism sector, theoretically and empirically. Managers in the tourism industry need to understand better customers' perceptions of value dimensions and how they relate to travel outcomes. Thus, to be successful in the tourism market, crucial dimensions include overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Caber et al., 2020; Duman & Mattila, 2005).

Subsequently, CPV research has grown significantly in recent years, and it is now a widely used marketing concept. A growing array of studies examine theoretical frameworks for measuring CPV in various tourism and service fields, such as health (Chahal & Kumari, 2011; Moliner, 2009); cruise (Duman & Mattila, 2005; Petrick, 2004); reception (Al-Sabbahy et al., 2004); golf (Petrick, 2002); heritage (Chen & Chen, 2010); dining (Oh, 2000); shopping (Sánchez et al., 2006); restaurant (Tam, 2004); adventure (Williams & Soutar, 2009); community-based homestay (Jamal et al., 2011); rural (Peña et al., 2012); and religion (Eid, 2015; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015). However, conceptualizing and measuring CPV across different kinds of tourism

and service remains a long-term challenge. CPV, in the context of spiritual tourism, suffers worldwide lack of consideration from the experience stance. Specifically, research to investigate the CPV concerning spiritual tourism in Vietnam's context is rare.

Vietnam is well-known for having the potential for spiritual tourism because of the richness of its culture, customs, and traditions developed throughout the country for thousands of years. Vietnam hosts 40,000 tangible and 60,000 intangible cultural heritage elements (Nguyen, 2018), most of which are tied to temples, pagodas, monuments, and churches and generally take the shape of religious ceremonies, traditional festivals, and creative expressions.

Unlike Western countries where the spiritual life of the people is mainly Christian, or Arab countries where Islam is the national religion (Roszko, 2012), Vietnam is a multi-religious and belief country, and Vietnamese spirituality is characterized by openness, tolerance, plurality, and diversity (Nguyen et al., 2020). This spirituality includes Confucianism with its rationalistic thinking, Buddhism, the supernatural consciousness derived from Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi, as well as the traditional religion of the rural population, which is considered the "traditional heritage" of Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2020). Therefore, spiritual activities in Vietnam also have distinctive features such as pilgrimage to spiritual sites to pray for livelihood, health, and healing; religious rituals; spiritual activities based on the traditional culture of "when drinking water, remember its source" and the moral principle of "ancestral worship," as well as meditation practices to achieve inner peace and self-discovery such as meditation, Qigong and yoga (Schmidt & Little, 2007). Hence, the aforementioned spiritual activities can be designed in various forms to cater to the needs of groups or individuals according to the preferences of the visitors.

For many years, spiritual tourism programs/tours in Vietnam have received attention and marketing from the local government and tourism companies. In recent years, travel companies such as Datviet, Viettourist, Huetourist, Thien Phu Travel, Vietnamtourism Hanoi, and Tam Chuc Tourism Company have designed and deployed an array of spiritual tours for both domestic and international audiences. In practice, however, the spiritual tourism element in most tours mainly involves visiting a sacred place and centre on religion. For example, engaging to learn about religious belief structures; attending cultural events/festivals; pilgrimage tourism associated with tourists' expression of belief and faith; and increasingly, meditation. A growing and overlooked concern is the tourists' motivations for those travel programs. That is, are the programs adequately addressing customer desires? Are the spiritual tourism service providers truly cognizant of customer needs, and what are the critical characteristics of a spiritual tourism experience, specifically in terms of the tourism service?

This paper examines the main CPV characteristics in the context of spiritual tourism in Vietnam through the lens of three groups: tourism operators, representatives of spiritual sites, and travelers. This allows us to determine the attributes of CPV concerning spiritual tourism. Such attributes include function, emotion, social, education, and spirituality.

The rest of the paper flows as Section 2: a review of related literature; Section 3: description of methodology; Section 4: discussion of findings; Section 5: conclusion and discussion; and Section 6: acknowledging the significance, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature

2.1. Spiritual Tourism

Spirituality is a well-known and widely used term in our daily lives. However, it is difficult to explain its meaning in the context of tourism fully. The hazy perception of “spirituality” can be traced back to its root meaning - “spirit”. In its most basic form, spirit refers to a God. It means that spiritual people frequently believe in their relationship with their God or the Sacred. Another interpretation of “spirit” is the human capacity to seek a life transcending material well-being. Spirituality is a collection of venerations of the human self. In other words, spirituality is the search for fundamental, deep-rooted human values, as well as a relationship with a universal source of power or divinity that transcends material well-being (Mitroff, 1997). Thus, spirituality is defined broadly as how people seek, create, celebrate, and apply its meaning in their lives’ (Schmidt & Little, 2007).

Furthermore, the practice of rituals, ceremonies, or religious activities is no longer limited to each religious framework, and it has become a popular and widespread movement worldwide recognized as meeting human spiritual needs (Rogers, 2005). Essentially, “spirituality” and “religion” do not have the same meaning. Even though both terms frequently interchange, there is a distinction between them. People can have what they consider to be “spiritual” experiences without holding religious beliefs. In other words, spirituality is a personal experience that exists independently of religious beliefs. As a result, a person may see themselves as spiritual but not religious, and vice versa.

Spiritual tourism, according to (Norman, 2012), is a type of travel characterized by a deliberate search for spiritual benefits that coincide with religious practices. Spiritual tourism can, thus, be viewed as a journey of tourists to a sacred place or temple of great importance to their beliefs or religions to achieve spiritual improvement (Hassan et al., 2016). According to recent studies, pilgrimage and religious tourism are essential components of spiritual tourism (Haq et al., 2009; Norman, 2014; Sharpley & Sundaram, 2005). Spiritual tourism is the precursor to religious tourism. However, spirituality is broader in context and meaning. Spiritual tourism does not necessarily include prayer or sacred ritual practices but rather tourist activities aimed at discovering and contributing to the elements of life beyond oneself. It is related to the balance of body-mind-spirit and may or may not be religious (Smith et al., 2010). These activities include visiting spiritual sites, learning about religious beliefs, participating in theology and religious activities, participating in social charity activities, earning merit, and engaging to relieve stress. The latter may involve meditation and conversations with high monks or people knowledgeable about humanity, the world, and religion. As a result, spiritual tourism is a broad category associated with providing spiritual value to visitors through the intangible and tangible attributes of products or services.

2.2. Customer Perceived Value (CPV)

The most common concept of perceived value first mentioned by (Zeithaml, 1988) is what is ‘spent’ versus what is ‘gained’. He defines it as ‘the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given’ (Zeithaml, 1988).

Because CPV is linked to the *use* of products and services, measuring it from product providers alone is not an appropriate goal. In other words, customers' viewpoints are also critical for capturing the value of a product or service. Subsequently, two approaches to determining CPV are widely used: the unidimensional concept and the multidimensional concept (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). The perceived value approach is a unidimensional concept that considers the customers' perceived value against benefits received and sacrifices made (Grewal et al., 1998; Song et al., 2015; Zeithaml, 1988). Some empirical studies have taken this approach alone (Duman & Mattila, 2005; Oh, 2003), whereas others have taken the second approach, which is to view customer perceived value as a multidimensional concept (De Ruyter et al., 1997; Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Ganesh et al., 2000; Gounaris et al., 2007; Sánchez et al., 2006; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). The latter conceptualize CPV from a broader perspective, notably demonstrating that perceived value as a multidimensional construct is sound (De Ruyter et al., 1998; De Ruyter et al., 1997; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Woodruff, 1997). This approach overcomes some of the shortcomings of the unidirectional perspective to CPV, which overemphasizes economic factor bias. This is important as the characteristics of services in general and services in the field of tourism and hotel business are intangible and unstable, making it difficult to determine customers' perceptions of the value they receive at the expense of spend alone. Specifically, perceived value is a subjective and flexible construct, one that varies across different customers, cultures, and times (Duman & Mattila, 2005; Havlena & Holbrook, 1986; Lee et al., 2011; Prebensen et al., 2013). Subsequently, in the context of service-related research, CPV approached from a multidimensional perspective is frequently deemed more appropriate (Duman & Mattila, 2005; Jamal et al., 2011; Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017; Petrick, 2002; Prebensen et al., 2013; Sánchez et al., 2006).

CPV attributes

The first study on CPV by (Sheth et al., 1991) investigated several elements linked to the perceived value to clients of the tobacco sector: functional, epistemic, social, emotional, and conditional value (Petrick, 2002; Sánchez et al., 2006; Schiffman et al., 2013; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Recent confirmatory research in the tourism sector viewed under the multidimensional approach (Sánchez et al., 2006 - GLOVAL scale) explores the functional value of the establishment, the contact personnel, the service purchased, the emotional value and the social value. Further, Prebensen et al., (2013) found that functional value, social value, and epistemic value are the key CPV attributes in the context of tourists' destination experiences. Eid & El-Gohary (2015) shows the CPV components of Muslim tourists, including the functional value (perceived quality), the functional value (perceived price), emotional value, social value, and Islamic value (tangible and intangible). Gallarza et al., (2015) evaluate tourists' perceptions of hotel services comprising external value (efficiency and quality of service) and intrinsic value added (playful and aesthetic). Kim & Thapa (2018) found the attributes of perceived quality, emotional value, perceived price, and social value pertinent to nature-based tourism. Under a multidimensional approach, the CPV attributes in different tourism industries synthesize as follows (see Table 1).

Table 1: Multidimensional approaches to CPV in tourism and services.

Author	Research context	Attributes
(Duman & Mattila, 2005)	Cruise vacation	Hedonics

		Novelty Control
(Sánchez et al., 2006)	Tourism sector	Functional value of the establishment (installations) Functional value of the contact personnel (professionalism) Functional value of the service purchased (quality) Functional value: price Emotional value Social value
(Chen & Chen, 2010)	Heritage tourists	Intrinsic value (Visual appeal, escapism, entertainment value, intrinsic enjoyment) and Extrinsic value (Efficiency, economic value, Excellence)
(Jamal et al., 2011)	Community-based homestay	Experiential value (activity, culture and knowledge) Experiential value (host-guest interaction) Emotional value Functional value (esta) Affective component (social value) Affective component (educational value)
(Peña et al., 2012)	Rural tourism	Functional component (staff attention) Functional component (appropriately adapted facilities) Functional component (convenience) Affective component (emotional value) Affective component (social value) Affective component (educational value)
(Prebensen et al., 2013)	Destination experience	Functional value Social value Epistemic value
(Chang et al., 2014)	Creative tourism	Quality Emotional value Price Social value
(Pandža Bajs, 2015)	Tourist destination	Quality of tourist services Destination appearance Emotional experience Reputation Monetary costs Non-monetary costs
(Eid, 2015; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015)	Tourism services for Muslim customers	Functional value (perceived quality) Functional value (perceived price). Emotional value Social value Islamic value (tangible and intangible)
(Rasoolimanesh et al., 2016)	Community-based homestay	Functional value (Price, Host provider, Service, Establishment) Emotional value (Novelty, Hedonism)

		Social value
(Schoeman et al., 2016)	Scuba diving experience	Emotional value Risk value Functional value Social value Epistemic value
(Kim & Park, 2017)	Community-based tourism	Emotional value Economic value Functional value Social value
(Jamrozy & Lawonk, 2017)	Ecotourism	Functional value Social value Emotional value Epistemic value Conditional value
(Awang Razli et al., 2017)	Airbnb	Emotional value Social value Novelty value Functional value Value for money
(Rasidah et al., 2017)	Malaysian Green Hotels	Quality value Social value Price Emotional value Epistemic value
(Kim & Thapa, 2018)	Nature-based tourism	Quality Emotional value Price Social value
(Han & Yoon, 2020)	Ethnic minority groups' restaurant experience	Entertainment Education Esthetic Escapist Service excellence Economic Emotional value
(Caber et al., 2020)	Youth tourism	Functional value Social value Epistemic value

Source: Authors

3. Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to understand spiritual tourism comprehensively. The method involved conducting nine in-depth interviews, six with tourism providers and three with representatives of spiritual/sacred places, respectively, followed by an open-ended questionnaire with 127 tourists. We believe that the qualitative approach is more exploratory, thus, suited to the preliminary nature of examining CPV's attributes in the context of spiritual tourism in Vietnam. As guided by (Lewis et al., 2005), the approach is suitable for an analysis that starts with a

theory or relevant research findings to inform initial codes. Based on the model proposed by (Sánchez et al., 2006), as specifically applied to the tourism sector, the interview findings facilitated refinement of the proposed conceptual framework in the context of Vietnam spiritual tourism.

This study utilized scales of several concepts related to the perceived value components of spiritual tourism to establish a comprehensive understanding of their underlying dimensions and conducted content analysis in the subsequent analysis phase. The scale for the components of "functional value", "emotional value," and "social value" were adopted from the GLOVAL scale developed by Sánchez et al. (2006). The scale for "spiritual value" was adopted from the research conducted by Eid & El-Gohary (2015) while the scale for "educational value" was adopted from the scale developed by Jamroz & Lawonk (2017).

Data collection

We conducted nine in-depth interviews with various stakeholders related to the supply side of this study. According to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), an in-depth interview is an appropriate technique for collecting primary data during the exploratory phase. Due to the nature of spiritual tourism as a relatively new form of tourism being developed in Vietnam in recent years, accessing relevant supply-side companies has not been easy. Therefore, we proactively selected and approached companies that demonstrated a willingness to cooperate and had practical experience in operating spiritual tourism in Vietnam. According to the perspective of Creswell & Creswell (2017), qualitative research does not rely on large or small sample sizes but rather on achieving data saturation, which means we stop collecting data when no new aspects are discovered within the explored them. As a result, the nine key informants selected for the interviews included managers of six travel companies: VietTourist Company, Tam Chuc Tourism Service Company, Hue Tourist Company, Vietnamtourism Hanoi SJC - Hue branch, Zenflower Travel, and Cat Tuong Quan Zen House, and three representatives of spiritual sites: Truc Lam Bach Ma Zen Monastery, Bai Dinh Pagoda and Sam Mountain National Tourist Area (Ba Chua Xu Temple). We made appointments with these entities in advance through email and phone communication. On average, each in-depth interview lasted approximately one hour. A semi-structured interview protocol comprising open-ended questions guided the interviews to elucidate free-flowing comments from the informants. For tourism providers, the questions focused on key information such as their awareness of spiritual tourism, perspectives on providing spiritual tourism services, the benefits and values of spiritual tourism tours and programs to tourists, and suggestions for developing spiritual tourism in Vietnam. For the representatives of spiritual sites, we explored their concepts of spirituality and perspectives of spiritual tourism, views on cooperation regarding spiritual tourism development, the advantages and disadvantages of partnering to provide spiritual tourism service, and further, suggestions for developing spiritual tourism. The interviewees from the travel companies and spiritual sites represent the three regions of Vietnam (South, Central, and North).

Guided by the interview findings, we conducted a face-to-face open-ended survey with 127 tourists who had previous or present visit history to familiar spiritual places such as Tam Chuc Pagoda, Bai Dinh Pagoda, Ba Chua Xu Temple, Truc Lam Monastery, and Cat Tuong Quan Zen House by using convenience sampling technique. These places attract large numbers of domestic

and international visitors. As an exploratory survey, it consisted of three open-ended questions designed to probe visitors' experiences with spiritual activities while traveling. It aimed to gather insights on three perspectives: motivations for participating in spiritual tourism, perceptions of the value of spiritual tourism in terms of service: and any suggestions for improving the spiritual tourism experience. This survey was conducted in 2019 and extended through to the Spring of 2020. The respondents exhibited in Table 2 were convenience-selected, and company tour guides delivered the survey.

Table 2. Description of interviewed representatives of travel companies and spiritual sites

Interview	Informant	Description of the informant's work position and organization
1	Tourism company	Manager of Cat Tuong Quan Zen House
2	Travel company	Director of Hue Tourist Comapny
3	Travel company	Director of Vietnamtourism Hanoi SJC - Hue branch
4	Travel company	Tour guide of Zenflower Travel (Travel Company)
5	Travel company	Tour guide of VietTourist Company
6	Travel company	Manager of Tam Chuc Tourism Service Company Limited
7	Spiritual site	Vice Director of Sam Mountain National Tourist Area (Ba Chua Xu Temple)
8	Spiritual site	Abbot of Bai Dinh Pagoda
9	Spiritual site	Abbot of Truc Lam Bach Ma Zen Monastery

Data analysis

The analysis divides into two sections; first, thematic analysis for in-depth interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2013); and second, content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) for open-ended survey data. While thematic analysis provides detailed interpretations and nuanced data accounting, content analysis uses a descriptive approach to code the data and interpret the quantitative counts of codes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

According to Vaismoradi et al. (2013), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting on key themes within a given dataset. The coding process is carried out through in-depth interviews and inter-coder reliability to improve the coding quality (Castelló & Galang, 2014)) using two trained coders. We began by working on the detailed interviews where the researcher could develop topics through data familiarization, the identification of initial codes (categories), the search for broader issues, the review of subjects, and defining and identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers, who discuss and reconcile differences, gain mutual understanding before arriving at a definitive coding scheme.

For the tourist survey, we used content analysis, with interview data coded through NVivo 10 software. The data, encompassed in multiple visitors' words, provided underpinning evidence to support emerging themes. Given the exploratory purpose of this study to identify specific attributes in Vietnamese spiritual tourism, content analysis was an appropriate technique. Combined with the service provider interviews and respective coding plan, and acknowledgment of multidimensional CPV attributes more generally for tourism and services (synthesized in Table 1), we identified and categorized the visitor data specifically relating to awareness and benefits of the spiritual tourism experience in Vietnam. Using the deductive approach based on prior knowledge of CPV theory and tourism more generally, combined with the developing

categories and themes from the interview data, facilitated the further inductive approach welcoming new insights emerging from the data – insights specific to spiritual tourism in Vietnam. Although this method helps identify the CPV attributes at the root of any issues arising from the interview data, it also supports detecting new conceptual relationships and possibilities of new emerging themes during the data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Regarding this technique, Krippendorff's alpha is a rigorous common coefficient of agreement used in content analysis to evaluate intercoder reliability. According to (Krippendorff, 2004), an alpha value above 0.80 ensures an acceptable level of data analysis consistency. Our K-alpha values ranged from 0.813 to 0.849 for two coding schemes.

4. Results

The results section similarly divides into two sections. The first section provides a concise overview of spiritual tourism in Vietnam based on in-depth interviews with key spiritual tourism providers and representatives of spiritual sites. It highlights the spiritual resources available in Vietnam and the forms of spiritual tourism offered. The second section outlines the important themes of CPV of spiritual tourism as gleaned from the survey with visitors, those who have already engaged in spiritual tourism in Vietnam.

4.1. Provider (supply-side) perspectives, with discussion on spiritual tourism resources

The interviews with tourism providers and representatives of spiritual sites revealed a wide range of travelers participating to various degrees in four main types of spiritual tourism in Vietnam. The first participation type is the narrowest form of spiritual tourism, involving sightseeing and visiting religious and belief establishments without explicitly expressing the tour's activities. This form of spiritual tourism, though popular, mostly involves “non-faith-based” activities such as mere sightseeing around sacred places or watching locals and monks perform personal rituals at these spiritual sites. The second participation type is more expansive as visitors seek places where belief or religious institutions can help them heal their souls or overcome their problems. This type of spiritual tourism involves participating in rituals or religious practices at pagodas, churches, or temples and is popular with those seeking spiritual value for healing or experimentation. This type of spiritual tourism is suitable for participants who follow a religion or belief, with all interviewees from travel companies similarly opining to Participant 3:

Most pagodas are just for religious purposes, so it is impossible to offer spiritual services. We only give tourists some main activities at these places, such as visiting the pagodas and observing the local's rituals and religious practices.

The third type of spiritual tourism in Vietnam is visiting historical sites to commemorate people who have made meritorious contributions to the nation, such as Con Dao (Ba Ria Vung Tau) or Truong Son Martyrs' Cemetery, Huyen Tran Princess. The last type centers on learning the philosophies and teachings that could calm people, relax their minds, improve their health, and make them feel good about themselves. In this form, the core value of spiritual tourism is to help visitors achieve life balance and gain emotional insights and spirituality through the experience of spiritual activities, such as meditation retreats, yoga, qigong, and other services that include accommodation and vegetarian cuisine. According to Participant 1, the manager of Cat Tuong

Quan Zen House, tourists need to be experienced in spiritual activities' to 'obtain the perceived spiritual value' instead of 'visiting some spiritual sites only'. Additionally, 'spiritual tourism needs to be performed in the fully quiet space', where 'tourists immersion of themselves in spiritual activities will help them escape the hustle and bustle in daily life and turn to the self'. Participant 4, a representative from Zenflower Travel Company, shared via the interview:

Some major spiritual tourism trends in Vietnam that could be exploited include: First, spiritual tourism in Vietnam is linked to religion, with Buddhism being the most popular faith. Second, spiritual tourism is linked to gratitude and worship of Vietnamese national heroes or the belief in honoring ancestors and those who gave birth to them Third, spiritual tourism is linked to meditation following Buddha Emperor Tran Nhan Tong. And the last one, spiritual tourism, is with the local rituals - the worship of mothers.

This study identified two ways of deploying spiritual tourism in Vietnam. The first way is by emphasizing Vietnamese traditional cultural values connecting to religious and ritual practices. In this approach, spiritual tourism is engaged in sacred sites where visitors can gain spiritual inspiration by healing their souls, praying for peace, or commemorating those who have made significant contributions to the nation. Key activities include visiting pagodas, churches, and temples and observing the locals or monks performing rituals or self-praying at these spiritual sites. Spiritual sites typically involve a tour or program engagement as complementary only in combination with other tourist attractions. However, the time allotted for participating in spiritual activities usually only amounts to about half a day. Such brevity may be sufficient for the non-faithful traveller or perhaps the companion traveller to the faithful. Still, it may not be adequate for the true spiritual tourist in comparison to the overall duration of the tour.

The second way of deploying spiritual tourism focuses on practising spiritual activities to help participants gain mindfulness and spiritual well-being. This approach focuses on providing private programs or tours at specific spiritual locations for tourists seeking a deeper and more extensive spiritual experience. These tours offer a variety of spiritual practices to help visitors find a balance between their spiritual and daily lives. Some main activities include meditation, yoga, qigong retreats, learning to cook vegetarian meals, and making spiritual products, as well as additional services such as lodging, food and beverage, transportation, and spiritual consultation. Standard spiritual tours usually last around two days, providing ample time for tourists to engage in multiple spiritual activities and immerse themselves in the experience.

In a most meaningful comment, a Truc Lam Bach Ma Zen Monastery's representative, Participant 9, shared that:

Spirituality is often associated with sacred things, worship, and sanctuaries. Thus, spiritual tourism must be organized in sacred locations helping people practice serious rituals, worship, religions, and praying.

4.2 Key demand-side CPV themes of spiritual tourism.

Visitors experience different feelings during their tours or activities. A majority of respondents chose to visit sacred sites such as pagodas, temples, and churches located throughout the country. In the north, the Perfume Pagoda, Bai Dinh Pagoda, and Truc Lam Yen Tu are the most popular

locations, particularly during spring festivals. In Central Vietnam, the Truc Lam Monastery Zen sites and pagodas such as Tu Dam, Thien Mu, and Linh Ung were the most frequently visited, with respondents experiencing typical spiritual activities at these sites. Southern visitors mostly engaged at Sam Mountain National Tourist Area such as Ba Chua Xu Temple, Thoai Ngoc Hau Tomb, Tay An Pagoda and Hang Pagoda. The findings organize into five value attributes: emotional, educational, social, spiritual, and functional. Factors identified in the survey served to demonstrate each dimension's significance.

Emotional value

Based on the descriptive statistics gathered from the visitor survey, it is evident that one of the unique themes was the emotional value that travelers received from their spiritual tourism experiences in Vietnam. According to the respondents, engaging in spiritual tourism activities played a crucial role in helping them attain inner peace and balance. Many individuals described the experience as a life-changing and unforgettable moment that helped them release tension, overcome challenges, achieve peace and gain insight into the meaning of life. The survey responses revealed that spiritual tourism provided a 'beneficial and concrete value' to travelers' lives, often leaving them with lasting feelings of serenity, gratitude, and emotional fulfillment. Many visitors felt touched by the Buddhist monks' sharing and highly valued the opportunity to immerse themselves in various spiritual practices, including meditation and yoga, which helped them achieve a sense of calmness and relaxation.

One visitor from Belgium aged 51, shared his thoughts on spiritual tour at Cat Tuong Quan Zen House as follows:

Spiritual tours allow us to partake in various spiritual activities based on different customs and cultures. This allows us to relax and achieve spiritual harmony. When we are engaged in the warm and open atmosphere of traditional festivals, for example, we are able to communicate more effectively. We understand that we may individually maintain our own cultural identity while still being exposed to a variety of other civilizations. This brings us joy!

Spiritual tourism is cultural tourism that caters to travelers' spiritual needs, allowing them to achieve inner peace and fulfillment. By engaging in a wide range of spiritual activities and visiting sacred locations, travelers can attain a sense of emotional well-being and comfort that benefits their bodies and minds.

Educational value

The findings also revealed an educational value that many travelers cherish. Respondents wanted to understand the roots of history, culture, and local rituals. They appreciated the opportunity to learn how to balance their lives, be patient, accept differences between themselves and others, live slowly, appreciate blessings, and more. Many also noted that visiting religious or spiritual sites helped them broaden their knowledge of Vietnamese culture and people and better understand Buddhism and its teachings. Through spiritual tourism, travelers gain practical lessons and insights about the culture, beliefs, customs, and history of the country. They can also apply their knowledge from these experiences to their daily lives. Such concepts support monk teachings at Truc Lam Monastery through the *Four Immeasurables of Buddhism*. These include

loving-kindness, compassion, appreciating delight, and equanimity; each believed to help people attain balance and ecstasy in their souls via the perception and experience of spiritual ideals. Overall, spiritual tourism provides a unique opportunity for travelers to develop their consciousness and knowledge of different cultures, beliefs, customs, and history. It helps promote good behavior, a calming disposition, and a strong sense of solidarity and builds a harmonious and positive society.

Social value

The social value of spiritual tourism is another aspect that influences visitors' opinions. Social value can be understood as societal acceptance and the improvement of one's own image in comparison to others. It pertains to the benefits that tourists perceive based on maintaining and enjoying their social relationships with other tourists and the people around them (Petrick, 2002; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). This study showed that most travelers who engage in spiritual tourism join tours organized by travel agencies. During these tours, they meet a diverse range of people who share similar interests and seek spiritual fulfillment. This shared experience creates a sense of community and connection among travelers, evident in the survey responses. Respondents mentioned feeling like they were not alone in their travels and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to meet friendly staff and make new friends.

Spiritual tourism is a type of tourism that goes beyond the usual sightseeing or leisure activities. Its value lies in its spiritual benefits, considered an inevitable societal trend. Respondents expressed their appreciation for being able to connect with brilliant and friendly people and cultivate feelings of self-connection with others.

Spiritual value

Spiritual space is often associated with a specific place (a sacred place, a place with supernatural energy, a place with religious significance, connected to worship, devotion, prayer, etc.) (Schmidt & Little, 2007). It can be seen that spiritual tourism is a unique form of tourism in which its own distinct value is created through the experiences of travelers at specific spiritual sites. Therefore, when referring to the spiritual value of a specific tourism program, this value originates from the spiritual attributes (both tangible and intangible) of a spiritual place (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015). This means that the perception of spiritual value may vary for each traveler depending on the existence of spiritual attributes at the visited location.

The purpose of spiritual tourism varies among travelers and categorizes into different levels. However, what ties them all together is their belief in a supernatural force associated with a sacred threshold space. Their encounters with these holy sites may have significant implications for increasing awareness, understanding, or self-belief. Sacred sites, such as pagodas, churches, cathedrals, religious houses, communal houses, temples, shrines, and other spiritual landmarks, are viewed as having cultural and spiritual qualities by travelers.

Respondents in the survey expressed their awareness and reverence for spiritual sites they visited as solemn and ceremonial spaces compared to other tourist attractions. The visible features and intangible attributes around sacred sites are essential in shaping their spiritual value. As a result,

many phrases in the survey responses described the spiritual value of these sacred spaces, such as being a holy site to pray and worship, a peaceful space suitable for meditation practices, an amazing place to visit, surrounded by nature, zen and great space, and love for the meditation and delicious vegetarian food. Some respondents also expressed the value of spiritual areas with the model of ‘garden-pagoda’ in Central Vietnam, allowing them to ‘feel peaceful in their minds’ and ‘feel the silence in the natural environment with the sound of pagoda bells’.

Functional value (quality and price)

The last CPV attribute gleaned from participants is the functional value of tourism companies. Some comments repeatedly mentioned things such as: ‘inspiring, relaxing and interesting tour’; ‘a highlight tour’; ‘truly wonderful trip’; and ‘quality and affordable tour’. Following is a remarkable opinion from a 52-year-old female tourist from HCM city (Vietnam):

A good break from the busy and chaotic life, we learnt much from meditation, to take a step back from work and the stresses of daily life and to appreciate what we already have. That is the worth of a tour.

However, some critical participant comments identified areas where tourism companies could improve their functional value. For example, participants noted that the duration of each spiritual activity was too short and that there were not enough diverse activities beyond just visiting spiritual sites.

Leaving one’s home to engage in spiritual travel can ultimately result in a return to one’s spiritual life, as spiritual travelers can take part in their profitable things as transcending experiences. These experiences may fall under spiritual values, which include emotional, social, educational, and spiritual values, and quality or perceived price values (functional value).

5. Alignment (or not) of findings to previous work

Theoretically, the emotional dimension of perceived value identified in this study aligns with the perspectives of previous researchers, such as (Petrick, 2002) and (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001), who emphasize the importance of emotional value in the context of service. This finding also supports the study of (Salazar, 2005), which claimed that research on religion and spirituality must be seen in a specific local context and describe the usual spiritual value of that setting.

In practice, the current finding is consistent with earlier empirical investigations conducted by several researchers including (Eid, 2015; Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Jamal et al., 2011; Peña et al., 2012; Sánchez et al., 2006) who found that emotional and social values are important components of perceived value. Similarly, (Chen & Chen, 2010; Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Prebensen et al., 2013; Sánchez et al., 2006) identified social value as a crucial component of perceived value. The significance of spiritual value in spiritual tourism has also been emphasized by Eid (2013). In addition, the study of ecotourism by Jamrozy & Lawonk (2017) and the experiences of ethnic minority groups’ restaurants by Han & Yoon (2020) provide evidence that educational value is a significant component of perceived value.

Convincingly, this study found additional attributes of CPV (emotional, educational, social, spiritual, and functional values) that contribute to the conceptual framework of CPV in the tourism industry (see Figure 3). These findings are considered new evidence and may be unique to spiritual tourism in Vietnam. This highlights the significance of welcoming new attributes into the overall understanding and management of spiritual tourism experiences in the country.

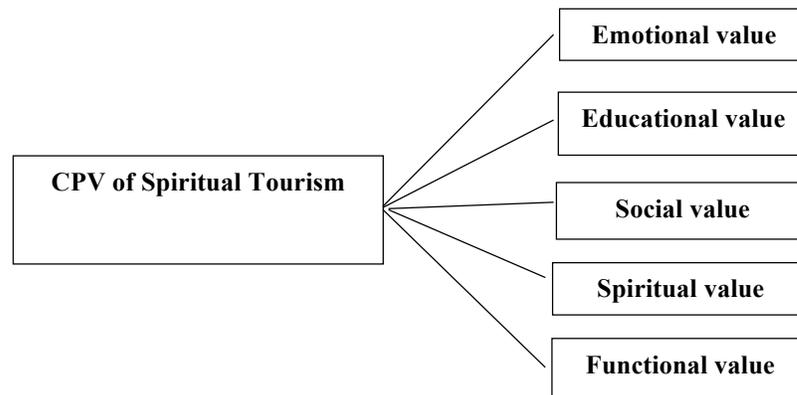


Figure 3. The five attributes of CPV of spiritual tourism in Vietnam

6. Conclusions, limitations and future research

Spiritual tourism has emerged as a growing trend in modern tourism, providing economic benefits to local communities while promoting their spiritual values. In Vietnam, which has a rich spiritual heritage embodied in various aspects of nature, spiritual tourism has gained popularity, particularly in the context of Buddhism. This study proposes a "new" conceptual framework of CPV, which focuses on spiritual tourism in Vietnam and identifies emotional, educational, social, spiritual, and functional values as key components of tourists' perceptions of spiritual tourism services.

However, the study has certain limitations, as Vietnam is still in the exploratory stages of understanding the CPV attributes of spiritual tourism. Therefore, it is recommended to use a quantitative method and administer random sample questionnaires to both domestic and international visitors who have experienced sacred sites in Vietnam, as well as other countries, to further test the framework and validate the findings.

Moreover, it is crucial for researchers and practitioners to conduct studies on tourists' insights into spiritual tourism experiences to better understand their needs and behaviors in different tourist segments and stages of their spiritual tourism journey. It is also useful to develop spiritual tourism products that cater to the needs of each spiritual tourist segment and their non-faithful companion travelers, as well as each sacred and religious site.

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