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Transformative Trends Shaping
the Future of Sustainable Tourism



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THÁI BÌNH DƯƠNG

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INTERNATIONAL JOINT CONFERENCE ON HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM 2024

NHÀ XUẤT BẢN TÀI CHÍNH

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEES	3
LIST OF ORGANIZING COMMITTEES	5
TABLE OF CONTENTS	9
SERVICE DESIGN THINKING FOR RESTAURANT KITCHENS WITH A DUAL REPRESENTATION OF KITCHEN ACTIVITIES AND FUNCTIONS	17
Yong Se Kim	
TRANSFORMING HOTEL MARKETING: LEVERAGING HOTEL VIRTUAL TOURS TO ENHANCE BOOKING INTENTION	19
Ain Munirah Mohd Tarmizi and Anderson Ngelambong	
TECHNOLOGY MEETS TRADITION: THE ROLE OF MOBILE AUGMENTED REALITY IN ENHANCING YOUNG ADULTS' MUSEUM EXPERIENCES.....	21
Muhammad Hanif Hashim and Anderson Ngelambong	
ECO-CONSCIOUS TREKKERS - EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMATIVE ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE TREKKING	23
Anjusha P P, and Aiwa Romy²	
THE ROLE OF MOBILE 360-DEGREE VIDEO IN AUGMENTING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM EDUCATION.....	25
Anderson Ngelambong, Silverina Anabelle Kibat, Dahlan Abdullah, Nur'Hidayah Che Ahmat and Noel Scott	
THE GUIDELINE OF GSTC FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF CBT IN PHUKET, THAILAND	27
Benjamaporn Chumnanchar, Chidchanok Anantamongkolkul, and Nitipong Tonnam	
TRAVEL INTENTION: A CASE STUDY OF THAI EV CONSUMER.....	29
Chidchanok Anantamongkolkul, Benjamaporn Chumnanchar and Nitipong Tonnam	
USING DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A MARKETING APPROACH TO PROMOTE PLACE BRANDING AND DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE MARKETING IN EMERGING MARKETS: THE CASE OF SAUDI.....	31
Hanan AlDammās	
A SUSTAINABLE TALENT PIPELINE OF VIETNAMESE LUXURY HOSPITALITY MANAGERS. INDIGENIZING FROM CLASSROOM TO LEADERSHIP	34
Karl A. Russell and Olivier de Chauliac	
SCREEN TO GREEN: THE POWER OF K-DRAMA AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM BEHAVIORS	38
Kim Chau Anh, Maren Viol, and Karl Russell	
MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS' PARTICIPATION IN ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT FOR FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY AT ROYAL BELUM.....	39
Kok Onn Kwong, Velan Kunjuran, and Jayaraj Vijaya Kumaran	

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATION AGRITOURISM OF FISH FARMING LEARNING CENTER: A CASE STUDY OF CHIANG RAI, THAILAND	42
Kornkanok Nindum, Sermsiri Nindum and Paripan Keawnet	
EXAMING THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE CHOICES OF WELLNESS TOURISM DESTINATIONS AMONGS VIETNAMESE TOURISTS	45
Nguyen Thanh Thao and H Tra Nie	
ENHANCING OUR SPIRITUAL HEALING THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREST BATHING	46
Peachaya Kongjampa and Ann Suwaree Ashton	
HALAL- FRIENDLY WELLNESS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THAILAND CASE STUDY	48
Rasmee Islam, and Ann Suwaree Ashton	
TREKKING/HIKING TOURISM IN VIETNAM: SHIFTS IN NEEDS AND INTENTIONS TO BUY PRODUCTS AND SERVICES.....	50
NCS. ThS. Trương Thị Hà, TS. Trịnh Lê Anh, ThS. Nguyễn Đức Việt, ThS. Ngô Thị Hoài Thương	
THE RELATIONSHIP OF DESTINATION REPUTATION, DESTINATION TRUST, AND REVISIT INTENTION. A CASE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS IN HO CHI MINH CITY	63
Dang Minh Tri, Pham Thai Son	
CULTURAL HERITAGE FACTOR IN THE COMPETITIVENESS OF CRUISE TOURISM DESTINATION IN HO CHI MINH CITY	75
Tran Trong Thanh	
THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT THROUGH WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION	85
Bui Thi Trang, Lai Xuan Thuy, Phan Thi Minh Ly	
THE ROLE OF CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS IN CREATING CULTURAL TOURISM EXPERIENCES IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS	94
Hien Nguyen Phuoc	
SMART TOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF INDUSTRY 4.0 OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR TOURISM IN TAY NINH PROVINCE	102
Loan, Duong Thi	
IMPACT OF AUSTRALIAN WORKING HOLIDAY EXPERIENCES ON PLACE ATTACHMENT, REVISIT INTENTIONS, AND ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS	106
Ying-Wei Wu, Ting-Hsiu Liao, Hao-Chen Huang	
EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION, TOURISM, AND SUSTAINABILITY IN LANYU: THE CASE OF OTUS ELEGANS BOTELENSIS	117
Ying-Wei Wu, Ting-Hsiu Liao, Hao-Chen Huang	
DETERMINING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMART TOURISM DESTINATIONS: CASE STUDY IN KHANH HOA - VIETNAM	128
Nguyen Thi HongCam, Le AnhTuan, Nguyen NgocDung	

CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND FOOD WASTE MANAGEMENT IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY	139
Nguyen Thi Ngan Anh	
AN OVERVIEW OF AGRITOURISM AND THE INSIGHTS GAINED FOR VIETNAM.....	145
Van TT Tran, Anh Le Trinh	
REGENERATING HERITAGE URBAN AREAS THROUGH HERITAGE TOURISM – CASE STUDY OF FRENCH ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IN HUE	155
Nguyen Vu Quynh Thi	
STAKEHOLDERS’ ANALYSIS: THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS AND FUNDING PROCESS OF TIAHOU RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL IN BINH DUONG PROVINCE, VIETNAM	162
Nguyễn Phương Hồng Phúc	
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CORPORATION SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND BRAND VALUE FROM THE EMPLOYEE’S VIEW: CASE STUDY OF SMES IN HOSPITALITY IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM.....	168
Doan Dang Phi Hung, Vuong Quoc Hung, Nguyen Thanh Ngoc Thach	
LINKING BETWEEN DESTINATION MANAGEMENT, DESTINATION IMAGE AND DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS: A CASE OF DA LAT, CENTRAL HIGHLANDS	182
Tạ Tường Vi	
APPLICATION OF DIGITALIZATION IN TOURISM SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT IN VIETNAM.....	192
Nguyen Thi Khanh Linh	
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK ON FACTORS AFFECTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF LUXURY RESORTS IN VIETNAM	203
Dung Nguyễn Ngọc, Vinh Mã Xuân	
RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT BASED ON INDIGENOUS AND CULTURAL VALUES IN BAC AI DISTRICT, NINH THUAN PROVINCE.....	214
Dang Thi Phuong Anh, Chu Khanh Linh	
THE EFFECT OF GREEN INCENTIVES AND TRAINING ON STAFF HAPPINESS AND JOB OUTPUT AT A FEW FOUR- AND FIVE-STAR HOTELS AND CRUISE SHIPS IN HA LONG.....	221
Nhung Hong Thi Pham, Loan Thi Duong	
SOLUTIONS FOR DEVELOPING GREEN TOURISM PRODUCT IN NHA TRANG - KHANH HOA	233
Phan Thi Minh Thao, Ha Minh Phuoc	
SWOT ANALYSIS OF WELLNESS TOURISM IN THANH HOA AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT	244
Duong Thi Hien, Trinh Thi Phan, Nguyen Viet Hoang	
APPLICATION BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY TO MEDICAL TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM.....	253
Do Hien Hoa	

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING AI-DRIVEN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM SOLUTIONS IN VIETNAM	259
Vo Phuoc Tai, Ta Hoang Giang, Nguyen Huu Tinh	
FACTORS AFFECTING LOCAL CUISINE ON TOURIST SATISFACTION IN NHA TRANG	267
Phan Thi Bich Hang, Thai Thi Kim Luyen	
VITAL JOURNEYS: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY ON THE SATISFACTION OF INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL TOURISTS IN INDIA	277
Ms. Joyce Thabitha Shirley, and Dr. Prem Kumar	
HOTEL COMPETITIVENESS RESEARCH – A CASE STUDY OF HOTEL IN KHANH HOA, VIETNAM.....	283
Huynh Cat Duyen, Dao Anh Thu	
AN OVERVIEW OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS.....	294
Le Tran Phuc, Dao Anh Thu	
THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT IN THE RELATIONSHIP OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPLOYEE TASK PERFORMANCE	306
Dang Thi Phuoc Toan	
A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL OF INTERNATIONAL TOURIST’S DESTINATION DECISION-MAKING: DECODING THE INFLUENCE OF PUSH-PULL-VALUE-BEHAVIOR FACTORS	316
Nguyen Anh Loi & Nguyen Thi Le Huong	
CURRENT STATUS OF INDUSTRIAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BINH DUONG PROVINCE.....	336
Phan Van Trung	
FACTORS AFFECTING TOURISTS’ BOOKING INTENTIONS ON ONLINE TRAVEL AGENTS (OTAS) IN VIETNAM.....	345
Huyen Thanh Pham, Tho Truong	
FACTORS AFFECTING CUSTOMERS’ PURCHASE INTENTION ON FOOD DELIVERY APPS: A CONSUMER VALUE PERSPECTIVE	356
Huyen Thanh Pham, Tam Nguyen	
BARRIERS TO BOOKING INTENTION THROUGH ONLINE TRAVEL AGENCIES: A CASE STUDY OF VIETNAM.....	370
Huyen Thanh Pham, Xuan Nghinh Tran	
INDUSTRY 4.0 TECHNOLOGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE HOTEL OPERATIONS: A SWOT ANALYSIS.....	386
Neeta Israni & James Hanrahan	
ANALYZING BALINESE BEHAVIOUR POST-PANDEMIC: THE PHENOMENON OF STAYCATION.....	397
Dewa Ayu Made Lily Dianasari, Dewa Ayu Nyoman Aridayanti, Hanugerah Kristiono Liestiadre	
Ni Made Tirtawati, Ida Bagus Putra Negarayana, I Gede Made Sukariyanto	

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHOICE OF WELLNESS TOURISM BY VISITORS FROM HO CHI MINH CITY	405
Vo Chi Linh	
DISCONNECTED BLISS: EVALUATING THE TRAVEL SATISFACTION OF DIGITAL DETOX HOLIDAY (DDH).....	415
Krishma Rana, Dr. Amit Gangotia	
THE MARKETING MIX FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DECISION OF THAI TOURISTS IN CHOOSING 4 - STAR HOTELS IN KHAO KHO DISTRICT, PETCHABUN PROVINCE, THAILAND.....	428
Atchara Woraprasongphol, Sangkae Punyasiri	
THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION AND JOB SATISFACTION IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKPLACE OSTRACISM, CUSTOMER INCIVILITY, AND TURNOVER INTENTION: A CASE STUDY OF HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN VIETNAM	437
Huyen Thanh Pham, Anh Dang, Ha Dinh	
HARNESSING SMART TECHNOLOGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE ADVENTURE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN SABAH: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS	449
Nabilah Mohammad, Shariff bin Pauzi, Tressy Belly, Quratul Ain Syahirah	
STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: A STUDY OF THE SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM, HUE UNIVERSITY	456
Đào Thị Minh Trang, Nguyễn Hoàng Tuệ Quang, and Phan Minh Trung	
THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE ON HOUSEKEEPING TECHNOLOGY ATTACHMENT IN HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY	464
Nina Farisha Isa, Anderson Ngelambong, Azmin Azliza Aziz, Woo Pak Yuan and Fadhlina Mahat	
EXPLORING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS AND EMPOWERMENT IN COMMUNITY-LED CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN PULAU KUKUP NATIONAL PARK: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM.....	476
Siti Aisah Abas, Norhazliza Abd Halim, Mohd Hafiz Mohd Hanafiah, Maimunah Abd Aziz, Samshul Amry Abd Latif	
THE IMPACT OF SMART TOURISM SERVICE ECOSYSTEM ON TOURISTS' REVISIT INTENTION: THE CASE OF HO CHI MINH CITY, VIET NAM	483
Huynh Diep Tram Anh, Ha Nam Khanh Giao, Ho Thi Huong Lan	
THE IMPACT OF AIR ASIA ON SRI LANKA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY: OPPORTUNITIES AND REALITIES	495
Pathirana, M.T, Warnakula, U. S.	
HOMESTAY SERVICE QUALITY AT AGRICULTURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN THE CENTER OF THE MEKONG DELTA, VIETNAM.....	506
Truong Tri Thong, Nguyen Trong Nhan, Phan Thanh Dat	
MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS JOINING NIGHT TOURS: A CASE STUDY OF HERITAGE SITES IN HANOI, VIETNAM.....	519
Xuyen Nguyen Thi	

DESTINATION ATTRACTION THROUGH GASTRONOMY: THE CASE OF VIETNAM.....	528
Duong Thi Thuy HA, Tai Anh Kieu	
EXPLORING DIVERSE EXPERIENCES IN THE RURAL TOURISM PRODUCTS OF THE SOUTHWEST REGION OF VIETNAM: A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH BETWEEN CON CHIM ISLET AND VAM HO BIRD SANCTUARY	532
Hanh Thi My Doan, Thuy Thi Trinh, Hue Dinh Phan	
EVALUATING TOUR GUIDES' COMPETENCES AT HERITAGE TOURISM DESTINATIONS (A CASE STUDY IN BOROBUDUR)	540
Saryani, Hardani, Putu, Enny Mulyantari	
STRATEGIC ISSUES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF GEO-TOURISM DESTINATION IN BAWEAN ISLAND, INDONESIA	554
Eko Budi Santoso, Amrih Eka Pratiwi, M. Haris Miftakhul Fajar	
RELIGIOUS OVERTOURISM: A TALE OF TWO CITIES	565
Snigdha Singh and Pallavi Srivastava	
COGNITIVE APPRAISAL THEORY: A NEW LENS ON GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY	573
Silverina Anabelle Kibat, Anderson Ngelambong	
INNOVATION IN TOURISM FROM A RESOURCE-BASED APPROACH AT PHUOC TICH HERITAGE VILLAGE IN VIETNAM.....	578
Duong Giang, Nguyen	
PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT OF ECO-CULTURAL TRAILS FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM	591
Thomas Panagopoulos, Goda Lukoseviciute	
EFFECTS OF PERCEIVED AUTHENTICITY OF A CULTURAL HERITAGE SITE ON TOURISTS' MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE, EMOTIONAL SOLIDARITY AND DESTINATION LOYALTY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS APPROACH.....	595
Huynh Van Da, Duong Hai Long	
STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN MAI CHAU TOURIST DESTINATION: UNVEILING THE JOURNEY FROM TAI'S CULTURAL BACKGROUND TO ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCY	606
Achariya Choowonglert, Pham Tran Thang Long	
EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY ON VISITOR EXPERIENCE AND TOURIST SATISFACTION IN COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM: A CASE STUDY OF HMONG INDIGENOUS VILLAGES IN HA GIANG	613
Le The Hien, Yi-Ju, Lee	
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS AND THE DEMAND FOR WATER TOURISM IN THE MEKONG RIVER BASIN, LUANG PRABANG PROVINCE, LAO PDR.....	625
Assoc. Prof. Sakkarin Nonthapot, Cheewanan Wuttiapan	

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE STUDENTS' CHOICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE DEEP SOUTH OF THAILAND IN THE POST-COVID-19 OUTBREAK	633
Morakot Ditta-Apichai, Ekkapon Phairot, Asma A. Qureshi	
THE IMPACT OF DESTINATION IMAGE ON TOURISTS' RETURN INTENTION AND SOCIAL WORD-OF-MOUTH BEHAVIOUR TOWARD THE DESTINATION TRAVEL TO NHA TRANG.....	640
Tran Thi Xuan Vien, Ha Nam Khanh Giao, Ta Van Thanh	
MOSQUITO BITES PREVENTION BEHAVIOR DURING TRAVELING: A STUDY OF BIOLOGY TEACHERS AS ROLE MODELS AND LEARNING RESOURCES	652
Hebert Adrianto, Bracovanca Diwayestara Bravimasta, Jemima Lewi Santoso	
Mellyanawati, Imelda Ritunga	
EMBARK TOGETHER ON MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCE: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF TRAVEL COMPANIONSHIP FROM SENIOR TOURISTS' PERSPECTIVES	657
Sien-Leong Liew, Jo-Ann Ho, Bee-Lia Chua	
FACTORS IN RISK PERCEPTION AFFECT THE DECISION TO PURCHASE FOREIGN TRAVEL INSURANCE FOR THAI TOURISTS IN BANGKOK.....	669
Pattarapong Noommahan, Watsida Boonyanmethaporn	
IMPACT OF DESTINATION ATTRACTIVENESS ON TOURIST SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY: A CASE STUDY OF KOREAN TOURISTS IN KHANH HOA PROVINCE.....	678
Dinh Thi Nga, Dinh Thi Thu Ha, Nguyen Dang Bac, Le Huu Tuan, Dinh Thanh Huy	
THE ROLE OF INDIAN CUSTOMER AWARENESS IN FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN VIETNAM: A CASE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS.....	690
Aemin Nasir, Justin Pang, Jackie Ong	
BALANCING GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY: THE IMPACT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ON MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCES AND ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOURS	708
Muhammad Zulhilmi Zulkurnain, Nor Asmalina Mohd Anuar and Ameleya Muhammad Ghazali	
EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF WELLNESS TOURISM PRODUCTS: A CASE STUDY OF KHANH HOA PROVINCE, VIETNAM.....	720
Phi-Anh Tran Thi, Tuyet-Suong Nguyen Thuan, and Minh-Quoc Tran Dang Phi	
DEVELOPING WELLNESS TOURISM IN HOA BINH PROVINCE	729
N P Thao, D H Trang, P L Huong, N V Tien and P T Thao	
GREEN PATH: UNRAVELLING THE INFLUENCE OF TRUST AND SOCIAL NORMS IN PULAU TIGA NATIONAL PARK, SABAH.....	738
Tressy Belly, Mohd Hafiz bin Hanafiah, Spencer Hedley Mogindol, Quratul Ain Syahirah Awang Ali	
A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP TO ENHANCE HOSPITALITY SERVICES OFFERED TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.....	750
Johanna Janse van Rensburg-Welling, Susina Jooste, Jean Mitchell	

ASSESSING SAFETY AND RISK PERCEPTION AMONG EUROPEAN TOURISTS VISITING THE ALGARVE (PORTUGAL).....	761
Maria	
THE STUDY OF PASTRY CHEF COMPETENCIES	775
Hsu-hua Lee, Peir-Yuan Patrick Li	
A SKETCH FOR CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE DATA PLATFORM FOR HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM INNOVATION.....	779
Yong Se KIM	
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE CREATIVE TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN KHUNG BANG KACHAO, SAMUT PRAKARN PROVINCE	783
Nipaporn Sangsawang, Tabanporn Yipsumpoomipijit	
DEVELOPING CREATIVE TOURISM IN TERMS OF TOURIST ROUTES AND TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN SONGKHLA PROVINCE, THAILAND	790
Ketwadee Madden, Panatda Siriphanich	
TASTING TRADITIONS: INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCES ON CULTURAL TOURISM IN TERENGGANU	797
Nabilah Mohammad, Shariff Pauzi	
Nor Asmalina Mohd Anuar, Khairun Najiah Ahmad	
DESTINATION DISTRIBUTIONS AND MOTIVATIONS THAT INFLUENCE LOYALTY IN STUDYING MUAY THAI AMONG FOREIGN TOURISTS CASE STUDY OF TIGER MUAY THAI SCHOOL PHUKET, THAILAND.....	806
Tattanaphich Channa, Paithoon Monpanthong	

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: A STUDY OF THE SCHOOL OF HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM, HUE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Internships have become a key part of the college curriculum. In the context of tourism and hospitality education, internships are viewed as a crucial activity for students due to the wealth of benefits they provide. This research aims to examine tourism students' perspectives on professional internship programs, particularly students at the School of Hospitality and Tourism at Hue University (HUHT). To gather research data, the study employed in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 16 students selected through stratified random sampling from four specialized departments at HUHT. The results indicate that the internship programs at HUHT have both advantageous and disadvantageous elements in the students' perceptions. Students generally feel satisfied with the compulsory internship programs as they understand the benefits for their future career path, while some reveal their dissatisfaction deriving from the lack of connection between their academic training and internship placements and the impact of the internship duration on their regular coursework.

Keywords: *Professional internship programs, tourism industry, student's perception, Hue University, HUHT*

Introduction

An internship is generally defined as working under supervision as part of professional training (Guile & Lahiff, 2013, cited in Kroon & Franco, 2022). In the context of the tourism industry, an internship is described as an educational experience that involves undertaking work, either paid or unpaid, in a relevant department or organization related to the student's field of study under the direct supervision of a practicing expert and a faculty member. By completing internship programs, students earn academic credits (Zopiatis, 2007, as cited in Zopiatis & Theocharous, 2013).

Internships provide advantages to students, educational institutions, and industry. From the learners' perspective, according to Kroon and Franco (2022), there are two significant benefits that the interns would achieve by participating in this programs, namely 1) developing knowledge, skill, judgement, entrepreneurial flair, and identity, and 2) the establishment of networks to assist them in securing permanent/contract-based employment or self-employment. First, Internships give students valuable experience and skills that complement their academic learning (Chen, 2012). As explained by Zopiatis and Theocharous (2013), this experience facilitates the application of theoretical values that students learn in the classroom to real-world scenarios, thereby closing the chasm between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Second, by engaging in internship experiences, students gain invaluable firsthand exposure to the operational realities of the tourism industry. The transition from student to professional life, often fraught with challenges, presents a significant life stage change (Anjum, 2020). Thus, through internships, students are empowered to make career decisions by actively exploring various tourism specializations. These internships serve as a crucial training ground for developing essential job-related competencies, such as time management, task prioritization, effective teamwork, and adept interpersonal communication skills – all of which are fundamental for achieving optimal job productivity (Anjum, 2020; Singh & Dutta 2010; Mihail, 2006). Moreover, the interaction between the students and the internship host forms a network of sharing knowledge and information (Ruhanen et al., 2012).

On the other hand, through professional internship programs, the relationship between trainers and employers is tightened (Kroon & Franco, 2022; Chang & Chu, 2009). In response to the tourism and service economy's rapid expansion, educational organizations in this field have become indispensable in providing the sector with the necessary manpower by training qualified employees (Mensah et al., 2024). Therefore, internships are considered a fundamental component of the employability policies of numerous governments and postsecondary institutions worldwide, with some requiring them as a prerequisite for graduation (Hora et al., 2020). For example, all students

in the Hospitality and Tourism (H&T) Management field must participate in an internship program that lasts two to six months at industry-related enterprises, either independently or as recommended by the academy (Vo et al., 2022).

Mensah et al. (2024) state a surge in research interest in hospitality and tourism internships research. Nevertheless, the extent of research conducted on this subject in Vietnam is relatively restricted. The number of studies is relatively scarce due to the novelty of this topic, which has only gained attention in recent years (e.g. Khuong, 2016; Nghia & Duyen, 2018; Vo et al., 2022). Previous studies frequently concentrate on elucidating the satisfaction and outcomes of internships among students. In fact, the Vietnamese government has implemented legal regulations regarding professional internships in universities. In May 2023, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh approved Resolution No. 82/NQ-CP, which outlines strategies for the recovery and long-term growth of the tourism industry. The 6th solution in this resolution explicitly outlines the directions for enhancing personnel training and improving the quality of advanced training. It also emphasizes the importance of developing and disseminating training program standards in the tourism sector. As Vietnam's economy transitions, its tourism sector has boomed over the past decade (Bui et al., 2022). As a result, the number of tourism training units is increasing. Currently, there are bachelor's training institutions dedicated to tourism and services in all three regions of the country. Therefore, this topic needs more research to be able to solve the above problems.

Objectives

In the central region, the School of Hospitality and Tourism at Hue University (HUHT) is a key university for the training of human resources in the tourism industry. From its inception, the school has prioritized the establishment of the Practice and Corporate Partnership Center which dedicated to cultivating business relationships and facilitating student internships. The centre annually arranges the professional internship course for several hundred HUHT students. The criteria for selecting and arranging the internship classes include the training program, the number of internship units, the internship recruitment quotas of each internship unit, the number of students per class, the majors, and the student's internship experience or recruitment interviews. Given the large number of students each year, arranging and scheduling internship locations and timings are very challenging and complex. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge that there are also limitations and difficulties for all parties involved in this internship program.

By selecting the HUHT as a case study, this research aims to elucidate student perceptions of internship programs within their academic journey and their satisfaction with the existing internship curriculum. Internship programs are an activity that accounts for a large proportion of the student's curriculum. Many previous studies only stopped at evaluating students' contributions to businesses without clearly assessing students' perceptions of the internship program they participate in. These results bring potential to interested researchers, university administrators and business managers with the quality of internship programs. Concurrently, this study provides novel empirical evidence for the theoretical foundation underpinning the internship practices of hospitality and tourism students.

Research Methodology

1. Populations and Sample

The student's training program at HUHT consists of two main groups of compulsory internship modules, including professional internships and graduation internships. The Practice and Corporate Partnership Center of HUHT offers professional internships for students. Depending on their majors, students need to complete two or three course of these internships. Graduation internships are conducted during the final year, and students are responsible for identifying appropriate internship units. Within the scope of this research, only compulsory professional internship modules (known as internship programs) are explored.

This study used an in-depth semi-structured interview method to gather research data. With its flexibility in nature, semi-structured interviews enable the emergence of unanticipated topics that are relevant to the topic (Berg, 2007). In this study, the interviewees are students who had completed at least one three-month professional internship program. The authors employed the stratified random sampling technique to select participants from the four established majors at HUHT: Tourism studies, Hospitality management, Event management and communication technology, and Travel and tour operation. In qualitative research, there are no established guidelines regarding the size of the interviewing sample. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggest that the largest possible sample size should not be greater than 17 respondents, but Dworkin (2012) states that a research size of 5 to 50 respondents is appropriate. Thus, this investigation used the phenomenon of information saturation, which occurs when the data collection

process ceases to generate any new or pertinent information (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), to ascertain the final number of respondents.

2. Research Tools

The interview questionnaire is segmented into three sections. The initial section aims to elucidate student demographic information. The second part focuses on examining (1) internship experience, (2) benefits of internships and (3) students' satisfaction with the internship programs. The final part revolves around comprehending the remaining constraints within the internship programs. All students were informed and consulted about the interview recording for ethical purposes. The interviews were captured using an audio recorder combined with notes taken by both authors. Throughout the entire interview process, no photographic evidence was obtained.

3 Data Collection

The authors conducted face-to-face interviews with one student in each major. The homeroom teachers and the Center for Practical Training and Business Cooperation nominated these students for participation. The authors explained the goals and importance of this research to the students before starting the interview. The interviews were taken place in the quiet corner of the canteen area to make the students feel relaxed. These students were encouraged to provide feedback on the process of their internships. The interviews lasted 20 minutes on average, depending on the respondent's willingness to share their opinions. The research team terminated the research sample of 16 respondents after four rounds of interviews due to information saturation. After completing the interview, each student received a small gift.

4. Data Analysis

The records were transcribed verbatim as a text file on Microsoft Word software and analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The author employed the 6-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for conducting thematic analysis. The analysis commenced with the authors acquainting themselves with the data through note-taking and multiple re-readings of the transcripts and noting down any initial ideas. Subsequently, the authors conducted a meticulous line-by-line coding with all the obtained data. Based on the coding results, the authors identified themes by grouping codes with similar or closely related meanings. Finally, the group thoroughly examined the complete content, clarified the topic created, and delivered the analysis findings. Figure 1 presents the data analysis process in this study.

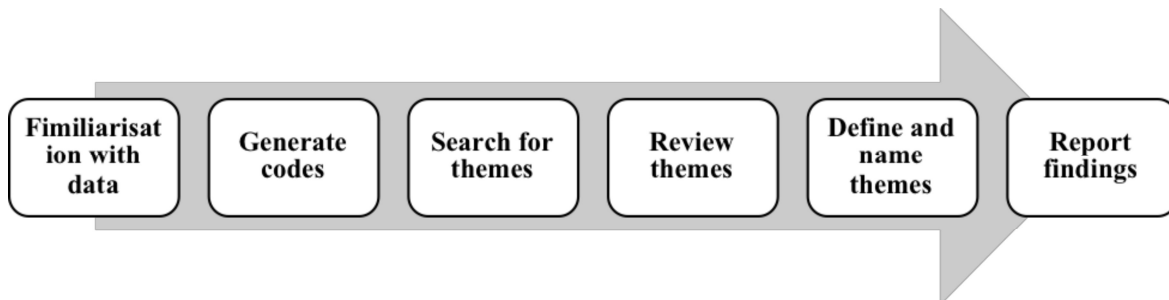


Figure 1. The six steps of thematic analysis

(Source: Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Conclusion and Discussion

1. Conclusion

1.1. Sample characteristics

This study included 16 students for the semi-structured in-depth interviews. Table 1 below presents the research sample characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics		Frequencies (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	4	25.0
	Female	12	75.0
Year of Study	Second-year	6	37.5
	Third-year	10	62.5
Department	Hospitality Management	6	37.5
	Travel and Tour Operation	5	31.3
	Event Management and Communication Technology	2	12.5
	Tourism Studies	3	18.7
Residential Status	With family	10	62.5
	Alone	6	37.5

(Source: Authours' own construction)

Table 1 reveals that most of the students are female, with only four respondents being male. In terms of year of study, there are no first-year or senior students in this sample. Most respondents are from the department of Hospitality Management and Travel and Tour Operations. Regarding the respondents' residential status, the majority of the group (62.5%) reside with their family, while the remaining 37.5% live alone.

1.2 Finding Results

1.2.1 The importance of internship in tourism education

In general, students recognized the necessity of HUHT's internship programs. All respondents mentioned the necessity and significance of internship programs during the study period to help them understand their majors and future careers. Although they have to face challenges, the students admit the importance of internship programs. Students often use keywords such as important, necessary, and valuable to emphasize their points.

The first benefit many interviewees answered is the comprehensive understanding of the nature of the tourism and hospitality industry due to the compulsory internship modules. As a result, the students can choose a suitable or relevant career for their majors. This deep understanding, achieved through a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience, is a significant accomplishment. It is a realization that no matter how many theoretical lessons they have learnt, the essence of the industry can only be grasped through personal experience in reality.

"I understood much more about the future jobs I would do. If there is no compulsory internship modules, I cannot know what my future work will be" (R7)

"I am equipped with more practical knowledge about the work in tourism industry, and I am no longer vague about the jobs I will pursue in the future" (R2)

"After doing the internship, I know more about my future job, who I would work with, and how I would do it. I have determined that the job I will do after graduation is the job at the hotel where I had my internship" (R16)

After completing internship programs, students can understand the operation and management of a business, specifically tourism and hotel businesses, through learning and complying with the company's regulations, interacting with colleagues, seniors, and supervisors, and serving customers during the internship period. From there, students could gain proficiency in meeting working requirements such as *"...work continuously in a shift or overtime, and understand the pressure of work with the high standards"* (R2), operating and managing teams, and understanding customer needs because the interns *"have chances to communicate and serve many different types of customers..."* (R12), which provides a great opportunity for students to gain practical knowledge in all aspects.

"Every day, I serve many different guests. They are domestic guests from the North to the South and international guests from Southeast Asia, Asia, Europe, or America... I was explained by the staff about the habits of each different customer group. Subsequently, I can distinguish them through their requests and behaviour, from

which I can serve them better" (R14)

The second benefit the respondents claimed they have learnt is their confidence and self-development to better suit the tourism industry's human resource requirements in the job market. Actually, students have not only gained practical knowledge but have also significantly enhanced their soft skills during the internship. 12 out of 16 respondents shared that one of important soft skills they have developed after their internships is time management skill. R11 said that he is able to plan out his work, determine which tasks are most or least important and spend his time accordingly, while R10, R12, and R15 can handle multiple responsibilities simultaneously during peak time. R5, R8, R9, and R14 also mentioned they tried to arrive on time and be punctual, such as *"...showing up for shifts, meetings, and events on time"* (R5). It is a basic time management skill but really difficult for Vietnamese students because they *"get familiar with showing up several minutes late when going to school"* (R9).

In addition to time management skills, internships can allow interns to demonstrate teamwork, problem-solving, and emotion management skills as a result of interviews. This growth in soft skills is significant for the comprehensive learning experience provided by the internship.

"...collaborating effectively with colleagues in Front Office and other departments including housekeeping, food and beverage, sales and marketing" (R7)

"I learned how to communicate clearly and professionally with team members, which leads to high work efficiency" (R13)

"Regarding resolving guest's complaints, I learned how to identify issues or challenges that arise and analyze the root causes, then gather relevant information to understand the problem fully. I also tried to remain calm and composed when dealing with stressful situations, exercise patience and empathy when interacting with frustrated guests. Sometimes, I had to manage my emotions to provide excellent customer service" (R12)

1.2.2 Students' satisfaction with the internship programs

Students expressed their level of satisfaction through various issues related to the internship supervisors, the internship position, the internship duration, and some difficulties encountered while participating in internships at the enterprises.

Students highly appreciate the care, support, and guidance provided by the lecturers and the school's internship organization unit, specifically the HUHT Practice and Business Linkage Center. Their readiness to answer students' questions and help them resolve complex issues during the internship is deeply valued. Unlike other tourism training programs, HUHT organizes student internship programs according to assigning specific schedules and locations for each student. Additionally, each internship group has a lecturer, known as a supervisor, who closely monitors and supports the students during the internship period. Students are usually briefed by the Center's staff and the supervising teachers on the school's and the host organization's internship regulations and specific information to prepare for the internship at each enterprise. R3 indicated that *"The lecturer has already informed me in detail about the work regimes and what I need to prepare for the internship"*. The lecturers also consistently motivate and support the students throughout the internship and address any difficulties they face, such as health issues, internship rights, or excessive overtime work. R3 continued to share her classmates and she had their questions answered regarding the work. Based on the interviews, most students feel more at ease knowing that they have attentive lecturers supporting them throughout their internship experience. Other respondents demonstrated:

"Although there were not many difficulties during my internship, I know that the lecturers are always attentive and supportive at any time, so I still feel completely at ease" (R7)

"The lecturer shared specific step-by-step guidance for me, from the internship preparation to the work process, and supported me in completing the procedures after the internship" (R9)

On the other hand, the differences in students' perspectives from different majors about the internship work were pointed out after in-depth interviews with the respondents. Students from the Hospitality Management department positively evaluate their internship positions in enterprises, while students from other departments, such as Travel and Tour Operation and Tourism, consider the assigned tasks to have little relevance to their field of study. The main reason could be that the student internship positions are mainly in hotels, restaurants, resorts, and entertainment centres. These are enterprises with a significant demand for student interns, with many positions that do not require high qualifications and which students can handle without significantly affecting the work results. Therefore, students from the Hospitality Management department would feel delighted with the internship program

as they can practice tasks related to their field of study, such as front desk officers, restaurant servers, and housekeeping staff. In contrast, some students are unsatisfied with their assigned tasks, as they are not directly related to their major.

"I got to intern in the positions I wanted, which were in front office and housekeeping. I learned a lot of knowledge and skills in my field" (R6)

"I'm studying Tour Operation Management but I wasn't offered to work as a tour guide or tour operator. My internship job was a restaurant waitress" (R11)

"I learned Tourism Studies so that I hoped that I could have an intern at governmental agencies to understand macro-level tourism development activities. However, I couldn't" (R12)

"I hoped I would get to intern at a travel company and participate in customer trips, but for all my internships, I've worked in hotels and entertainment centers" (R13)

In addition, many students believe that the internship period affects the study time at the school during the academic year. Due to the schedule of the training program of each major, there are two to three modules of professional internships considered compulsory courses in the first three years of the training program, and the number of students participating in internships each year is enormous. Moreover, the demand for internship recruitment is year-round and is not fixed at any particular time of the year. Therefore, the internship time of students is arranged in many different periods from January to December, which leads to the fact that class schedules are shifted and differ from the regular study period from May to June of the following year. Students feel disrupted and need help to arrange time for other courses such as English, physical education, and even personal matters.

"I did not know the specific time of the internship, which makes it difficult for me to balance the internship with our other academic and personal commitments" (R8)

"I took internships from April to June 2023 and November 2023 to January 2024. My learning schedule lasted until the end of August, and then I did not have any summer holidays for the last two years" (R15)

Regarding the difficulties HUHT students have to overcome within the internships, the students who live with their families before taking internships face more challenges than students living alone away from their families. Eight out of ten respondents living with family said they miss home and find it challenging to take care of themselves. R13 said that she felt tough when she had to be away from her family for three months of the internship; in the first few weeks, she often had a poor appetite due to the different eating habits and felt sad because she missed home. In contrast, the students who are used to living away from their family all said that when they went for the internship away from home, they felt *"easy to get used to the new living environment"* (R3) and *"could take care of themselves"* (R7). Therefore, students living with their families usually cannot adapt well to the new environment and find the university's internship program unsatisfactory.

2. Discussion

This research makes substantial contributions to both the theoretical and practical domains. This study aligns with numerous prior research. Essentially, students perceive internships as a valuable chance to acquire knowledge and skills. Students would apply the theoretical knowledge they acquire at university to practical use, thereby enhancing their comprehension (Ruhanen et al., 2013). At the same time, employees and supervisors exchange an extensive amount of novel knowledge based on their collective experiences (Ruhanen et al., 2012). Within this study, students acknowledged the value of internships in fostering personal development and enhancing their understanding of their prospective career path. This has been confirmed by Hora et al. (2020), as students find themselves in a real professional setting, distinct from their daily environment during the internship. Students communicate with other employees and their supervisors, and interact face-to-face with customers within a service industry workplace. For tourism students in Vietnam, they see these as challenges during their internship (Vo et al., 2022) but also as an opportunity to reevaluate themselves. Consequently, students enhance their communication and interaction abilities, their capacity to manage circumstances and cultivate teamwork while working shifts. Consistent with Daugherty's (2011) research, students claimed to have increased maturity, improved confidence, and a deeper comprehension of their life responsibilities, especially for students living with family. Students living with their families, due to the specific characteristics of Asian culture, receive attention and care from their parents and grandparents (Hoang & Kirby, 2020) in many aspects of their daily lives. Therefore, the internship process is an entirely new life experience, making them feel difficult. This is a significant addition to the literature on internship programs in Vietnam, as

previous studies have yet to address the influence of family on students' evaluation and perception of these programs. Holdsworth (2006) states that residential status plays a crucial role in determining the extent to which students feel they can adjust to university life. Hence, it is imperative to conduct additional investigation into this aspect while studying the subject of internships. In addition, when students are given practical assignments, they gain a more distinct understanding of their prospective careers within the service and tourism sector. Students gain a broader understanding of work culture and the real-life situations they have to encounter. Subsequently, they can make informed decisions regarding selecting an appropriate job position. According to the research conducted by Ramaprasad et al. (2022), students who have more internship experiences and are content with those experiences find it easier to adapt and become more aware of the job.

In practical contribution, the research results point out the difficulties and concerns of students about the relationship between their field of study and the internship position, as well as the internship timing throughout the year. This further enable tourism and hospitality universities to refine internship program strategies. The internship periods should be planned earlier so students can proactively arrange their other personal and academic commitments. The university should strengthen connections with local businesses to create opportunities for students to intern without significantly impacting their schedules. Additionally, expanding cooperation with tourism and travel companies would allow students to intern in roles more closely aligned with their field of study. For business, the managers also understand students' expectations and thereby provide policies for efficient internship programs. By doing this, organizations would lower the cost on finding and recruiting potential future employees.

The results of this study also provide a crucial basis for increasing awareness among students, families, and communities regarding the significance of internships in the educational system's learning process. This can result in an increased number of students actively pursuing internships, thereby enhancing their academic experience and better preparing them for their future careers. Universities and entrepreneurs should design programs that are more aligned with student needs and learning outcomes.

Research recommendations

This study acknowledges three limitations. First, the authors limited this investigation to students of HUHT at Hue University. Second, the research sample did not include final-year students since the data collection period coincided with the time at which students completed their studies and departed the school to pursue internships and complete their dissertations. Finally, this study only assesses students' perceptions and identifies factors influencing their satisfaction with the professional internship program. However, the study does not discuss the extent of the influence of the factors mentioned above.

Future research, in light of the aforementioned constraints, is crucial to address the identified limitations. In terms of research subjects, the authors should include all students, from first-year to senior, as well as broaden the research area geographically. The perspectives of students from various regions can vary as a result of cultural differences. In relation to research methods, apart from carrying out qualitative methods with the aforementioned research sample, it is possible to employ quantitative or mixed-method studies. The research topic should explore the correlation between factors that influence students' perceptions of the internship program, while also delving deeper into the psychological factors and outcomes associated with the internship program.

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