

The Impact of Travel Companionship and Self-identification on Tourist Satisfaction: A Case Study of Ha Long Bay, Vietnam

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Abstract

This study examines how travel companionship and self-identity influence tourist satisfaction at Ha Long Bay, with memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) as mediators. By integrating the self-identity concept and travel companionship with memorable tourism experiences, it proposes that travel companionship and self-identification have both direct and indirect influence on satisfaction through MTEs. Based on online survey data from 592 tourists who visited Ha Long Bay and analysed by using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The results show that travel companionship has a significant influence on MTEs ($\beta = 0.419$) and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.303$), while self-identification has a significant influence on MTEs ($\beta = 0.385$) and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.252$). MTEs also significantly influence satisfaction ($\beta = 0.398$) and partially mediate the effects of travel companionship and self-identification on satisfaction. The study also discusses how social and identity-related mechanisms interact to shape satisfaction in a UNESCO World Heritage coastal destination. The results recommend that tourism products or services be designed to encourage meaningful, relevant social interaction and engagement, representing an important strategy for tourism managers in Ha Long Bay. Such strategies can therefore go a long way toward making the experience memorable, improving visitor satisfaction and enhancing Ha Long Bay's competitiveness in an increasingly crowded coastal and island tourism market.

Keywords: Ha Long Bay, Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs), Travel Companionship, Satisfaction, Self-identification.

Introduction

Memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) have been identified as an essential construct of experience and behaviour tourism research (1, 2). Tourists are motivated to travel to create memories and subsequent memory processes play a significant role in shaping tourism experiences (3). MTEs are described as the moments that travellers encounter, including what they do, how they feel and the impressions of the destination (4). The concept also refers to visitors' recollections, particularly the emotions and affective responses evoked by tourism activities (5). Self-concept is fundamental to understanding consumer behaviour, as perceptions of the self-shape decision-making (6). Self-congruity explains how consumers evaluate and select products or brands whose symbolic attributes align with their perceived self-image and this perspective has been applied to tourist behaviour (7, 8). Social identity theory also provides a foundation for understanding self-identification in marketing (9).

The idea of self-identification is that consumers use their brand choices as symbolic resources to construct and communicate their self-identity to others (10). In the tourism context, self-identification reflects tourists' perceptions of destinations as congruent with or representative of their personality (11). Accordingly, tourists' actions may express and reinforce their self-image through destination-related behaviours and preferences (12). Travel companionship is a critical topic in tourism research (13, 14). The core meaning of having companionship is interaction and cooperation for survival and thriving and it plays a crucial role in human functioning (15, 16). In the context of tourism, travel companionship is an important determinant of an individual's leisure preferences and involvement in leisure activities (17). Some scholars suggest that not only the presence and nature of travel companionship play a significant role in shaping the positive outcomes associated with travel experiences, but it

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can also shape negative experiences (4, 14). Others have asserted the crucial role of travel companionship in shaping tourist experiences (18). The originality of this study lies in the development of an integrated framework that examines the social and identity-related mechanisms underlying tourist satisfaction. Although prior research has investigated travel companionship and self-identification in relation to tourism experiences and behavioural outcomes, limited attention has been given to how these antecedents influence satisfaction through experiential mechanisms (19-21). Previous studies have examined the direct effects of self-identification on MTEs and satisfaction (22). There are also a limited number of studies have assessed the direct effects of travel companionship on MTEs and satisfaction (21). By positioning MTEs as a mediating mechanism between these antecedents and satisfaction, this study extends prior direct-effect approaches toward an indirect explanation of tourist satisfaction. It also broadens the empirical scope of tourism experience research by testing the proposed model in Ha Long Bay, Vietnam, an internationally recognised heritage and coastal destination that remains underexplored in MTE research, providing evidence from an underexplored context. Based on these identified gaps and contributions, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- Do self-identification and travel companionship influence tourists' satisfaction in Ha Long Bay?
- Do MTEs mediate the relationship between self-identification and tourist satisfaction and between travel companionship and tourist satisfaction?

MTEs are generally described as positive experiences that are retained in long-term memory and readily recalled after travel (23). Their effects on behavioural outcomes can be explained through the cognitive-affective-conative sequence, whereby experiential evaluations shape satisfaction and subsequent behavioural responses (24). Memorable and positive destination experiences foster favourable evaluations, increasing satisfaction and revisit intentions (25). Satisfaction reflects a positive response to favourable evaluations of consumption (26). It encompasses emotional states arising from tourism experiences (27, 28). Thus, prior studies have shown that MTEs significantly influence satisfaction (22, 29).

Social psychology recognises companionship as essential to reducing loneliness-related emptiness and despair through social support and enhanced well-being (30, 31). In tourism and leisure research, social relationships are integral to travel experiences (32). Travel companionship refers to individuals or groups travelling together through reciprocal support, interaction and co-created experiences (33). It is one of three socialisation influences shaping MTEs, alongside travel planning and interpersonal interaction (34). Meanwhile, prior studies have highlighted the important influence of travel companionship on the total trip experience (33). Travel companions may include friends, family members, romantic partners, or intentionally formed groups (18). Social relationships developed through companionship can enhance MTEs and satisfaction (18). Additionally, shared leisure activities generate greater satisfaction than solitary participation (35). Travel companionship also significantly strengthens MTEs and revisit behaviour (36).

Self-identification has received increasing scholarly attention and become an important topic in destination marketing (19). In tourism, it refers the psychological process through which individuals reinforce their self-image by aligning their identity with a destination (7). Destinations become more meaningful when experiences facilitate greater understanding of self-identity (10). Furthermore, a tourism destination is not merely a location for tourists to visit but also holds personal significance for self-related matters, based on their experiences at destination (37). Identification also offers a useful theoretical lens for explaining diverse customer outcomes, including overall satisfaction (38). Accordingly, tourists' self-identification may emerge when psychological needs are fulfilled through emotional associations with destinations (19). Existing research has demonstrated a relationship between self-concept, experience and satisfaction. In sports tourism, stronger self-identification with activities is associated with higher levels of overall satisfaction (11). Moreover, MTEs significantly enhance satisfaction (22, 29). Self-congruity is also an effective predictor of MTEs (8).

Collectively, prior research identifies self-identification and travel companionship as key antecedents of MTEs and tourist satisfaction.

However, direct-effect approaches provide limited insight into their underlying relationships. MTEs have been established as mediators between antecedents and post-travel outcomes (39). This study examines whether MTEs mediate the effects of self-identification and travel companionship on tourist satisfaction in Ha Long Bay, Vietnam. The following research model is shown in Figure 1. Accordingly, the hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Travel companionship has a significant influence on tourist satisfaction

H2: Travel companionship has a significant

influence on MTEs

H3: MTEs have a significant influence on tourist satisfaction

H4: Self-identification has a significant influence on MTEs

H5: Self-identification has a significant influence on tourist satisfaction

H6: Travel companionship has a significant indirect influence on satisfaction through MTEs

H7: Self-identification has a significant indirect influence on satisfaction through MTEs

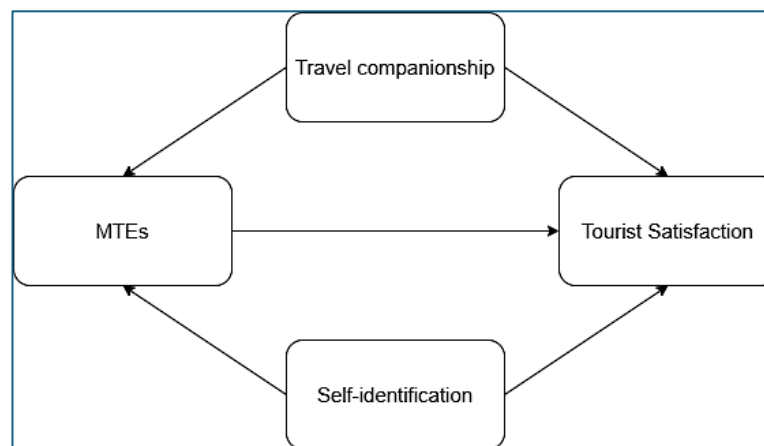


Figure 1: Research Model

Methodology

The Context of the Study

Ha Long Bay in Quang Ninh City, northeastern Vietnam, is the empirical context for this study. The destination is internationally recognised for its exceptional natural scenery. Since Vietnam reopened to international tourism in the early 1990s and Ha Long Bay was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1994, the area has emerged as one of the country's most prominent tourism destinations, generating substantial economic and cultural value. In line with this prominence, Quang Ninh welcomed millions of visitors, indicating the destination's strong and sustained tourism appeal. Few studies have examined memorable tourism experiences at Ha Long Bay, despite its growing popularity and strategic importance as a tourist destination. This idea of a research gap is significant because of how competitive the coastal/island destinations are in Vietnam; there are many places to visit, which has created much pressure on existing/established destinations to create memorable experiences for their guests through the quality of the experiences

offered and retaining guests to return to the destination. Therefore, Ha Long Bay provides an excellent empirical context for research on how memorable tourism experiences develop and affect tourist outcomes.

Scale Measurement

Constructs within the proposed theoretical approach were measured with multiple-item scales adapted from prior research and refined to fit the content of this study better. Each variable was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'. The two sections of the survey instrument collected demographic information and included the multiple-item measures of the constructs for this research.

Memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) were assessed using 24 items across 7 dimensions (hedonism, novelty, locals, refreshment, meaning, involvement and knowledge) (4). Self-identification was measured with 7 adapted items (40). Travel companionship was measured with 3 items (34). Tourist satisfaction was measured using 3 items (23).

Data Collection and Sample

The proposed research model was empirically tested using a convenience sampling approach. An online survey was developed and administered via Google Forms to collect data in March 2026. The data were collected directly from tourists who visited Ha Long Bay and were staying in Ha Long Ward (approximately 20.949180°N, 107.103007°E), Tuan Chau Ward (approximately 20.930718°N, 106.979238°E) and Bai Chay Ward (approximately 20.942749°N, 107.040975°E) to test the research model.

Due to the unknown exact number of tourists that had visited Ha Long Bay, the analysis determined that a minimum sample size of 385 respondents was required (41). Additionally, a minimum of 300 samples is necessary for SEM analysis (42). Therefore, a total of 592 valid questionnaires were used after removing unanswered items and those with serious non-answers.

PLS-SEM Method

Across hospitality and tourism studies, structural equation modelling is considered one of the most remarkable research methods (43). Structural equation modelling (SEM) has been widely adopted in research because of its capacity to simultaneously estimate multiple interrelated dependence relationships among latent constructs measured by several observed variables (44).

Two principal approaches to SEM are commonly employed: covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) and partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). The fundamental philosophical difference between CB-SEM and PLS-SEM lies in their research purposes: CB-SEM is used to confirm theory, whereas PLS-SEM is better suited for prediction and theory building. Covariance-based SEM typically uses maximum likelihood estimation, which assumes the data are approximately normally distributed for reliable results. Conversely, PLS-SEM uses iterative ordinary least squares regressions to

maximise explained variance and is appropriate for non-normal or asymmetric data sets (45).

In this study, PLS-SEM was selected over CB-SEM. PLS-SEM is appropriate for predictive research and explaining variance, especially in complex model structures (45). In contrast, CB-SEM emphasises overall model fit to achieve reliable results. PLS-SEM focuses on maximising explained variance and evaluating measurement models through reliability and validity assessments.

The analysis first involved evaluating the measurement model to assess its validity and reliability. Subsequently, the structural model was examined to test the proposed hypotheses. The study used SmartPLS software version 4 to evaluate the measurement model and assess its validity and reliability. The structural model was then examined to test the proposed hypotheses.

Results

Respondent's Profile

Before the formal analysis, the dataset was screened and cleaned, resulting in a final sample of 592 valid responses. Female respondents accounted for 59.3% of the sample ($n = 351$), while male respondents represented 40.7% ($n = 241$). In terms of age, the largest group was aged 25 years or below (39.72%, $n = 235$), followed by those aged 26–35 years (32.77%, $n = 194$) and 36–45 years (22.62%, $n = 134$), while only 4.89% ($n = 29$) were aged 46 years or above. Regarding educational attainment, most respondents held a bachelor's degree (71.79%, $n = 425$), followed by a master's degree (10.64%, $n = 63$), while respondents with a college degree and a PhD each accounted for 8.79% ($n = 52$) and 8.78% ($n = 52$), respectively. In terms of trip duration, more than half of the respondents (53.7%, $n = 318$) reported trips lasting 1–2 days, 32.5% ($n = 192$) stayed for 3–4 days and the remaining 13.8% ($n = 82$) spent 5 days or longer in Ha Long Bay. The detailed respondent's profile is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Characteristics

Attributes	Value	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	241	40.70
	Female	351	59.30
Age	< 25	235	39.72
	26-35	194	32.77
	36-45	134	22.62
	>46	29	4.89
Education Level	A college degree	52	8.79

Length of Trip	Bachelor's degree	425	71.79
	Master's degree	63	10.64
	PhD's degree	52	8.78
	1-2 days	318	53.70
	3-4 days	192	32.50
	>5 days	82	13.80

Measurement Model Evaluation

Table 2 presents the results of the PLS-SEM measurement model assessment for the 37 reflective indicators. All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, ranging from 0.735 to 0.920, indicating satisfactory indicator reliability. In addition, Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs were

above 0.70, confirming acceptable internal consistency reliability.

The results also show that the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.614 to 0.824, while composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.895 to 0.918. These values surpass the commonly accepted cut-off levels of 0.50 for AVE and 0.70 for CR (46, 47), indicating adequate convergent validity and strong construct reliability.

Table 2. Convergent Validity Results

Construct	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	VIF
Travel companionship (COM)	COM1	0.866	0.856	0.912	0.777	1.974
	COM2	0.884				2.221
	COM3	0.893				2.269
Self-identification (SEL)	SEL1	0.735	0.896	0.917	0.614	1.684
	SEL2	0.804				2.158
	SEL3	0.801				2.194
	SEL4	0.826				2.795
	SEL5	0.741				3.182
	SEL6	0.754				3.171
	SEL7	0.815				2.294
Hedonism (HED)	HED1	0.822	0.844	0.895	0.682	1.860
	HED2	0.844				2.009
	HED3	0.798				1.689
	HED4	0.838				2.080
Novelty (NOV)	NOV1	0.815	0.855	0.902	0.697	1.956
	NOV2	0.850				2.047
	NOV3	0.845				2.058
	NOV4	0.829				2.046
Local culture (CUL)	CUL1	0.873	0.823	0.895	0.739	1.959
	CUL2	0.842				1.914
	CUL3	0.863				2.101
Refreshment (REF)	REF1	0.851	0.856	0.903	0.699	2.081
	REF2	0.812				1.808
	REF3	0.829				1.932
	REF4	0.852				2.080
Meaningfulness (MEAN)	MEAN1	0.894	0.866	0.918	0.788	2.315
	MEAN2	0.885				2.202
	MEAN3	0.885				2.214
Involvement (INV)	INV1	0.855	0.826	0.896	0.741	1.807
	INV2	0.875				2.150
	INV3	0.852				1.994
Knowledge (KNOW)	KNOW1	0.886	0.852	0.910	0.771	2.172
	KNOW2	0.889				2.363
	KNOW3	0.860				2.122
Satisfaction (SAT)	SAT1	0.901	0.893	0.934	0.824	2.557
	SAT2	0.920				2.970
	SAT3	0.902				2.564

Note: CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted, VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.

Table 3 further indicates that the shared variance between each pair of constructs is lower than the square root of the corresponding AVE values. This result provides additional support for discriminant validity and confirms the adequacy of the measurement model's convergent validity (48). In addition, Table 4 presents the results of the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) assessment. All HTMT values were below the recommended

threshold of 0.90 (49), indicating that the discriminant validity assumption was not violated in the present study.

Furthermore, variance inflation factors (VIFs) were examined to assess the potential for common-method bias and multicollinearity. The VIF values ranged from 1.689 to 3.182, all below the recommended threshold of 3.3, indicating no potential multicollinearity (50).

Table 3: Discriminant Validity - Fornell-Larcker Criterion

	COM	CUL	HED	INV	KNOW	MEAN	NOV	REF	SAT	SEL
COM	0.881									
CUL	0.409	0.86								
HED	0.563	0.444	0.826							
INV	0.345	0.42	0.379	0.861						
KNOW	0.353	0.406	0.352	0.504	0.878					
MEAN	0.398	0.537	0.422	0.476	0.418	0.888				
NOV	0.575	0.429	0.54	0.347	0.409	0.393	0.835			
REF	0.435	0.541	0.412	0.454	0.412	0.564	0.414	0.836		
SAT	0.683	0.487	0.591	0.537	0.525	0.515	0.575	0.476	0.908	
SEL	0.527	0.421	0.528	0.350	0.372	0.446	0.518	0.376	0.653	0.783

Note: COM = Travel Companionship, CUL = Local Culture, HED = Hedonism, INV = Involvement, KNOW = Knowledge, MEAN = Meaningfulness, NOV = Novelty, REF = Refreshment, SAT = Satisfaction, SEL = Self-identification.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity - heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT)

	COM	CUL	HED	INV	KNOW	MEAN	NOV	REF	SAT	SEL
COM										
CUL	0.487									
HED	0.662	0.532								
INV	0.410	0.509	0.454							
KNOW	0.413	0.485	0.414	0.601						
MEAN	0.462	0.636	0.494	0.563	0.487					
NOV	0.670	0.510	0.636	0.412	0.477	0.455				
REF	0.507	0.645	0.484	0.540	0.481	0.655	0.481			
SAT	0.781	0.568	0.681	0.626	0.601	0.585	0.657	0.544		
SEL	0.586	0.471	0.590	0.398	0.409	0.492	0.576	0.416	0.713	

Note: COM = Travel Companionship, CUL = Local Culture, HED = Hedonism, INV = Involvement, KNOW = Knowledge, MEAN = Meaningfulness, NOV = Novelty, REF = Refreshment, SAT = Satisfaction, SEL = Self-identification.

Structural Model Assessment and Path Coefficient Analysis

To assess the statistical significance of the proposed model, a bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples was conducted to evaluate the relationships at the 5% significance level (45).

As shown in Table 5, the standardised path coefficient between travel companionship and MTEs was $\beta = 0.419$ ($p = 0.000$), indicating that travel companionship has a significant direct impact on MTEs. Travel companionship also has a significant direct impact on satisfaction, with a path coefficient value of $\beta = 0.303$ ($p = 0.000$). The

results show significant direct effects of Self-identification on MTEs and satisfaction, with standardised path coefficients of $\beta = 0.385$ ($p = 0.000$) and $\beta = 0.252$ ($p = 0.000$), respectively. Furthermore, MTEs had a significant direct impact on satisfaction, with a standardised path coefficient of $\beta = 0.398$ ($p = 0.000$). Therefore, hypotheses from H1 to H5 were supported.

In addition, the effect size of travel companionship on MTEs and Satisfaction, MTEs on Satisfaction and Self-identification on MTEs were medium ($0.15 \leq f^2 \leq 0.35$). In contrast, the effect size of Self-identification on Satisfaction was small ($0.02 \leq f^2 < 0.15$).

Table 5: Testing Direct Effects

Hypotheses	Path Coefficients	S. E	T-value	P-value	f ²	Result
H1: COM → MTEs	0.419	0.034	12.252	0.000	0.251	Support
H2: COM → SAT	0.303	0.034	8.866	0.000	0.158	Support
H3: MTEs → SAT	0.398	0.040	9.869	0.000	0.239	Support
H4: SEL → MTEs	0.385	0.032	11.944	0.000	0.211	Support
H5: SEL → SAT	0.252	0.032	7.816	0.000	0.113	Support

Note: COM = Travel Companionship, SAT = Satisfaction, SEL = Self-identification, MTEs = Memorable Tourism Experiences, S.E = Standard Error.

In this study, the R² value for MTEs was 0.494, explaining 49.4% of the variance in travel companionship and Self-identification. Additionally, the R² value for satisfaction was 0.665, explaining 66.5% of the variance by MTEs, travel companionship and Self-identification. In social science, R² values are acceptable when most of the explanatory variables are statistically significant (51).

This study also examines how travel companionship and Self-identification influence Satisfaction indirectly through memorable tourism experiences (MTEs). As shown in Table 6, MTEs mediate the relationship between travel companionship and satisfaction ($\beta = 0.167$, $p = 0.000$). In addition, MTEs mediate the relationship between Self-identification and Satisfaction ($\beta = 0.153$, $p = 0.000$). Therefore, H6 and H7 were supported.

Table 6: Testing Indirect Effects

Hypotheses	Path Coefficients	S. E	T-value	p-value
H6: COM → MTEs → SAT	0.167	0.021	7.769	0.000
H7: SEL → MTEs → SAT	0.153	0.021	7.394	0.000

Note: COM = Travel Companionship, SAT = Satisfaction, SEL = Self-identification, MTEs = Memorable Tourism Experiences, S.E = Standard Error.

Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence on tourists' perceptions and explains the development of tourist satisfaction. Although prior research has explored the effects of travel companionship and self-identification on tourist satisfaction (1, 19, 22), the potential mediating role of MTEs in linking these constructs to satisfaction remains underexplored.

Therefore, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of the roles of self-identification, travel companionship and memorable tourism experiences in the context of Ha Long Bay. The findings suggest that tourists visiting Ha Long Bay are motivated not only by the pursuit of pleasure and refreshment associated with its natural attractions, but also by opportunities to affirm their self-identity and derive meaning through shared travel experiences with companions.

Memorable tourism experiences can be profitable for destination development. In this regard, enhancing tourists' self-identification and travel companionship experiences not only contributes to a high-quality consumption experience but also strengthens tourism activities and attracts more investment into Ha Long Bay's economy, thereby

advancing tourism destination development and improving locals' lives. By highlighting these matters, this study attracts scholarly attention to Ha Long Bay and reveals its importance in addressing socialisation (companionship), emotion and reflection (self-identification). Moreover, despite its considerable tourism potential, Ha Long Bay remains underexplored in the academic literature. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes an integrated model that incorporates self-identification, travel companionship, memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) and tourist satisfaction in the context of Ha Long Bay, thereby advancing scholarly interest in this destination.

Travelling with companions is often positive in social and collaborative experiences that facilitate value co-creation (21). As shown by the H1 result, the better companionship when travelling, the more memorable experiences. The results of H2 indicate that travel companionship also enhances satisfaction. Therefore, the travel companionship influences MTEs and tourists' satisfaction. In addition, the results for H6 indicate that MTEs serve as a mediating mechanism in the

relationship between travel companionship and tourists' satisfaction.

The results of H3 suggest that tourists with more positive, memorable tourism experiences are more likely to experience higher satisfaction. In other words, MTEs exert a significant positive effect on tourist satisfaction. In the context of Ha Long Bay, visitors who accumulate favourable and memorable experiences at the destination are more likely to develop a stronger sense of satisfaction with their overall trip (22).

Consistent with previous research and in line with H4 and H5, the findings highlight that self-identification had a significant impact on MTEs and satisfaction. Finally, the findings indicate that MTEs mediate the relationship between self-identification and satisfaction (H7).

Implications

This study thus makes theoretical contributions by enhancing existing conceptual discussions about self-identification and travel companionship, both of which have received limited attention in heritage tourism destination research. Thus, the study enhances the existing literature by examining the constructs within the context of Ha Long Bay as a heritage destination and by presenting broader scholarship on self-identification and travel companionship in the tourism context. By demonstrating that self-identification and travel companionship significantly influence MTEs, this study supports prior studies (11, 19, 36). The study further develops and tests a model linking self-identification, travel companionship, MTEs and tourist satisfaction. Theoretical contributions are thus seen in the finding that self-identification and travel companionship significantly affect tourist satisfaction through the mediating effect of MTEs. The stronger the tourists' identification with a heritage site, the more memorable they perceive their experiences to be and the greater their satisfaction. The more that tourists travel with companions rather than alone, the more memorable their experiences and the greater their satisfaction. These findings contextualise the importance of self-identification, travel companionship and the role of MTEs in heritage tourists' satisfaction.

Furthermore, the substantial effect of travel companionship on MTEs and satisfaction highlights the potential impact of designing

services and tour programmes that encourage visitors to bond with one another as part of the experience. Because tourism experiences are sometimes chosen for their ability to reinforce closer ties with social groups rather than live up to expectations on their own, that means considering how experiences can be designed for "shared participation". Accordingly, managers must invest time in creating products that prompt collective experiences and encourage interaction between group members. They may do this by contrasting programmes with beach-based team-building activities, cruises with group games, group culture-oriented exploration activities in Ha Long Bay, etc. Furthermore, tourism marketers should propose group offers and pricing according to the number of visitors. Appropriately pricing travel activities may make the destination product accessible to visitors, making it more attractive/acceptable to tourists.

Conclusion

This research expands existing studies of the tourism experience by demonstrating that travel companionship and self-identification are antecedents of tourists' satisfaction in Ha Long Bay and that MTEs partially mediate these relationships. In doing so, it reinforces the notion that tourism experiences at heritage destinations contribute to shape satisfaction through how tourists experience the destination with others and how strongly identity is connected to the destination experience itself. For Ha Long Bay, the research proposes that products and services that support sharing the experience, enable engagement through meaningful interaction and offer identity-relevant use may help enhance visitor satisfaction and improve the destination's competitiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be addressed. First, convenience sampling and an online self-administered survey are not representative of the entire population and are prone to self-selection. Second, the study of a single destination limits the generalisability of the results to other contexts (e.g., heritage, coastal, or island tourism). Finally, because the data were collected using self-reported measures of perceptions and cognitions, common method bias cannot be entirely ruled out, despite acceptable diagnostic scores.

Future research should follow suit by adopting mixed-methods designs to explore the psychological processes underlying how these visitor MTEs are formed, recalled over time and translated into postvisit (or postexperience) outcomes. Comparative studies across different destination types and sections of visitors to the destination, whether domestic or international tourists and solo versus group travellers, for example, would further assist in testing the robustness of the visitor MTE model. Future work could explore moderators such as purpose of travel and type of companion (family, friend, or colleague responsible for the actual journey as discussed) and examine whether visitor MTEs are positively associated with revisit intention, word-of-mouth, loyalty, well-being and destination attachment.

Abbreviations

AVE: Average Variance Extracted, CB-SEM: Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modelling, CR: Composite Reliability, MTEs: Memorable Tourism Experiences, PLS-SEM: Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling, VIF: Variance Inflation Factor.

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Author Contributions

Duy Ba Tran: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Analysis, Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Supervision, Project Administration, Hao Van Hoang: Analysis, Data Collection, Review and Editing of the Manuscript, Yen Thi Hai Pham: Data Collection, Review and Editing of the Manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data Availability

The data are available from the corresponding author on a reasonable request

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The author(s) used Grammarly tools to assist with language editing, improving readability and structural phrasing. The authors take full responsibility for the content, originality, accuracy and scientific integrity of this manuscript.

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