

# Research on factors affecting **brand awareness** of **natural heritage tourism destinations** and **tourists' intention** to choose Trang An scenic landscape complex

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**Abstract** | This study examines the factors influencing brand recognition and the intention to choose the Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex as a destination. This UNESCO World Heritage site is renowned for its unique cultural, historical, and natural significance in Vietnam. Trang An has become a prominent tourist destination with its intricate karst landscapes, ancient temples, and rich historical heritage. It faces the dual challenge of preserving its heritage while promoting sustainable tourism. The research seeks to understand how these dynamics shape tourists' brand perceptions and intention to choose heritage destinations. Data for the study was collected from January to April of 2024 through a structured survey, yielding 385 responses from domestic tourists visiting Trang An. By combining exploratory factor analysis and multiple regression analysis, the study identifies key determinants of brand recognition and their impact on tourists' destination choices. The findings reveal that visitor experience is the most influential factor, emphasising the importance of high-quality services, including transportation, accommodations, dining, and guided tours by local experts. Communication efforts, particularly through social media and digital platforms, are the second most impactful factor, enhancing brand recognition by reaching broader

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audiences and providing engaging content. Natural beauty also plays a crucial role, underscoring the importance of preserving the site's scenic landscapes. Practical implications highlight the need to strengthen communication capabilities, design targeted marketing campaigns, preserve Trang An's historical and natural attributes, and enhance the quality of tourist experiences. The study also addresses the tension between heritage conservation and tourism promotion, emphasising the importance of collaborative management involving stakeholders such as local communities, businesses, and tourists to ensure the sustainable development of this heritage destination.

**Keywords** | brand awareness, intention, heritage destination, experience

## 1. Introduction

In the context of globalisation and the rapid development of the tourism industry, brand recognition and destination choice intention have become crucial factors for tourist areas (Kim, 2018). Recent studies emphasise the crucial role of brand identity in enhancing the appeal and competitiveness of natural heritage destinations (Lo et al., 2017). Destination image plays a vital role in shaping tourists' perceptions (Remoaldo et al., 2014). Research often explores how a destination builds its brand through media, cultural symbols, or stories related to the heritage.

The Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex is located in Ninh Binh Province, northern Vietnam, approximately 90 km south of Hanoi. Situated near the southern edge of the Red River Delta, this area is part of the Trang An limestone massif, covering about 6,226 hectares and surrounded by fertile agricultural lands and rice fields. It is a unique location that harmoniously combines natural landscapes, majestic limestone terrain, and rich cultural and historical heritage. This destination has been developed for local tourism activities, leveraging its natural scenery, diverse and vibrant indigenous culture, and comprehensive tourism infrastructure, which attract visitors (Bui et al., 2018). However, each heritage site approaches brand identity differently. For instance, Ha Long Bay focuses on spectacular island landscapes and cultural experiences, whereas Trang An emphasises its natural scenery, grand limestone terrain, and rich historical and cultural heritage (Galla, 2002). This leads to variations in the brand identity of heritage destinations and tourists' intentions to visit. Ha Long Bay attracts both domestic and international tourists due to its diverse beauty of rocky islands, while Trang An appeals to visitors with its natural landscapes and local

culture (Hoang, 2019). Additionally, factors such as media and social networks play a significant role in shaping brand identity and influencing tourists' decisions to visit heritage destinations (Ekinici et al., 2006). While all UNESCO natural heritage sites share global value, differences in branding strategies, management, and tourism exploitation result in varying levels of success in attracting visitors. Measuring brand identity and tourists' intention to visit heritage destinations requires studying the factors influencing these elements. This is essential for enhancing competitiveness and ensuring the sustainable development of the region.

Tourism brand recognition is not only related to the awareness of a destination's name but also includes tourists' perceptions and associations with its prominent features, cultural, historical, and natural values. A strong tourism brand helps create a positive image, establishes the destination's position on the international tourism map, and attracts an increasing number of tourists (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). Meanwhile, destination choice intention is closely related to the decision-making process of tourists, including factors such as travel motivation, information search, perceptions of service quality, and value of experience (Chi, 2020). This study focuses on exploring the factors influencing brand recognition and the intention to choose the Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex as a tourist destination. Specifically, we will examine factors such as destination image, service quality, actual experiences, advertising, and communication, as well as the impact of cultural and social factors on tourists' decisions. By analysing these factors, the study will provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of how to build and strengthen the Trang An tourism brand, thereby offering specific recommendations to enhance its appeal and encourage tourist choice. Researching the factors affecting brand recognition and the intention to choose Trang An as a destination not only contributes to local tourism development but also provides valuable lessons for other tourist destinations. It is hoped that the results of this study will help raise awareness of the important role of tourism branding and promote the sustainable development of tourism in Ninh Binh in particular and the tourism industry in Vietnam in general.

The study builds upon the theoretical foundation of Aaker's (1992) brand recognition theory and Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior. It combined expert interviews with managers from Vietnam's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to develop the measurement scales and research model. The questionnaire was designed based on theoretical factors related to brand recognition and destination choice intention, incorporating the specific characteristics of Trang An. The study collected data from 385 survey responses, which were analysed using SPSS 20 for descriptive

sample analysis. Smart PLS 4.0 was then employed to test the measurement and structural models, aiming to identify the groups of factors influencing brand recognition and assess their impact on tourists' intention to choose the destination. Based on the results of these methods, the study discusses the influence of factors such as visitor experience, communication, and natural beauty on brand recognition of the heritage destination and tourists' destination choice intention. During the discussion, notable findings emerged regarding the tension between heritage conservation and tourism development at the destination, opening up new research directions on balancing the value and benefits of heritage tourism activities among stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, businesses, and tourists.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Research Framework**

### ***2.1. Destination Brand Theory***

Destination branding is a crucial concept in the tourism industry, playing a key role in creating and maintaining the image of a tourist destination. According to Richie (1998), a destination brand is not merely a name or a symbol but a set of values, attributes, and experiences that the destination offers to tourists. This theory focuses on elucidating the components and impacts of a destination brand on tourists' perceptions and behaviours. The components of a destination brand encompass the following: (i) Name and Symbol: The most basic element, including the destination's name and distinctive symbols such as logos, colours, and slogans. The name and symbol help tourists easily recognise and remember the destination; (ii) Destination Image: The image of a destination is formed through tourists' impressions, perceptions, and associations with its outstanding features. It can be built through media channels, advertising, and tourists' actual experiences; (iii) Values and Experiences: A crucial element that determines the attractiveness of a destination. Cultural, historical, and natural values and the unique experiences a destination offers create differentiation and attract tourists; (iv) Service Quality at the Destination: Includes accommodation, cuisine, guides, transportation, and has a strong impact on tourists' perceptions and satisfaction. High service quality enhances the destination brand's value; (v) Emotions and Positive Associations: The positive emotions and associations tourists have when thinking about a destination increase its attractiveness and the intention to return or recommend it to others.

The impacts of a destination brand include the following: (i) Recognition and Memorability: A strong destination brand helps tourists easily recognise and remember the place among thousands

of other destinations. This creates a competitive advantage and attracts more tourists; (ii) Loyalty and Satisfaction: When tourists have good experiences and are satisfied with the destination brand, they become loyal and tend to return in the future. This trust also makes them more receptive to new information about the destination; (iii) Marketing and Communication: A strong destination brand makes it easier to carry out promotional and communication campaigns. The brand's beautiful image and high value will be widely disseminated through media and social networks; (iv) Competitive Differentiation: A unique and strong destination brand creates differentiation from other destinations, enhancing competitiveness in the tourism market (Pritchard & Morgan, 1998).

According to Hosany et al. (2006), branding theories were applied to tourism, focusing on destination image and destination personality. Destination image encompasses both cognitive and affective elements, while destination personality refers to human-like traits associated with a destination through promotion or experience. These two concepts are closely linked, with destination personality serving as the emotional extension of the destination image. The study reveals that destination personality significantly impacts tourist satisfaction and their intention to return. Therefore, building a destination brand by creating a unique personality enhances competitiveness and effectively attracts tourists.

## **2.2. *Destination Brand Identity and Behavioural Intentions Theory***

### **2.2.1. *Destination Brand Identity Theory***

Aaker's (1992) brand recognition theory presents a brand equity management model focused on the key components that create brand value. This author defines brand equity as a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and its symbol, which can either add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a company and its customers. The main components in Aaker's model are: (i) Brand Awareness, which is the extent to which customers recognise and remember the brand. Brand awareness includes two aspects: recall and recognition; (ii) Brand Associations, which are the images, associations, and perceptions that customers link to the brand. These associations can be product attributes, benefits, lifestyles, emotions, or experiences; (iii) Perceived Quality, which measures customers' perceptions of the overall quality of a product or service compared to competitors. Perceived quality strongly influences customer choice and loyalty; (iv) Brand Loyalty, which reflects the degree to which customers continue to purchase a

brand's product or service. Brand loyalty includes customer satisfaction and commitment to the brand; (v) Other Brand Assets, including factors like patents, trademarks, distribution channel relationships, and other assets that help protect the brand from competition.

Keller's (1993) brand identity theory developed a model focusing on measuring and managing brand equity from the customer's perspective. Keller posits that brand equity is built from customers' perceptions and reactions to the brand and emphasises the importance of brand awareness, including both recall and recognition. Brand image is formed from brand associations in customers' minds. This author classifies brand associations into three main types: (i) Specific attributes of the product or service; (ii) Functional, emotional, or self-expressive benefits that customers receive from the brand; (iii) Overall perceptions and evaluations of the brand. Brand knowledge helps build a solid knowledge base in customers' minds, influencing their purchasing behaviour and loyalty.

Both brand identity theories provide important and complementary perspectives on building and managing brand equity. While Aaker (1992) provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for the factors that create brand value, Keller (1993) delves into understanding and measuring brand perception from the customer's perspective. Both theories emphasise the importance of building a strong brand to create competitive advantage and maintain customer loyalty in an increasingly competitive market. Destination brand identity is the extent to which tourists recognise and remember a specific destination. Destination brand identity includes two aspects: recall and recognition. Recall consists in the ability of tourists to think of the destination when prompted with a specific type of tourism. Destination recognition is represented by visual cues such as names, symbols, or slogans. The destination brand image is built from the associations that tourists have with the destination. The perceived quality of a destination is tourists' perception of the overall quality of the destination compared to other destinations. Perceived quality includes evaluations of factors such as safety, cleanliness, service professionalism, and the friendliness of local people. Destination brand loyalty is the extent to which tourists intend to return to or recommend the destination to others. Destination brand loyalty is reflected in behaviours such as repeat visits, satisfaction levels, and willingness to recommend the destination (Gonzaga-Vallejo & Guaman-Camacho, 2023).

### 2.2.2. *Behavioural Intentions Theory*

Ajzen (1991) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding and predicting tourists' intentions to choose a travel destination. By considering the factors of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, tourism managers and marketers can develop effective strategies and programs to attract and retain tourists (Ajzen, 2011). Tourists may have specific beliefs about choosing a destination, such as the destination offering an enjoyable, relaxing experience or the opportunity to explore a new culture. Tourists will evaluate these outcomes based on personal values, such as satisfaction, joy, or learning from the trip. Tourists' beliefs about what others, such as family, friends, or influencers, think they should choose as a destination. The favourable and unfavourable factors that tourists believe they will encounter when selecting and traveling to the destination, such as costs, time, transportation, or safety. The degree to which tourists perceive that they have the ability to overcome these favourable and unfavourable factors to perform the behaviour of choosing the destination (Djeri et al., 2014).

## 2.3. *Research Framework*

### 2.3.1. *Factors Affecting Brand Awareness of Heritage Tourism Destinations*

**Historical Value:** According to Konecnik (2007), historical value creates positive associations, which are the attributes and benefits perceived by tourists. Monuments, historical stories, and significant events help build a unique and distinct image for the destination. The historical value of a destination can evoke a sense of pride and respect from tourists, increasing their positive attitude towards the destination. Historical stories, monuments, and important events allow tourists to gain a deeper understanding of the place they are visiting, thereby forming positive beliefs about the trip's outcomes. A destination with high historical value is often viewed as valuable and of high quality in the eyes of tourists, especially when historical monuments are well-preserved and professionally presented (Mohammed et al., 2022a). The relationship between historical value and tourists' brand awareness of heritage destinations can be hypothesised as follows:

*Hypothesis H1: Historical Value (HV) positively affects tourists' Brand Awareness (BR) towards heritage destinations.*

**Natural Beauty:** According to Rasoolimanesh et al. (2017), natural beauty can evoke strong positive emotions, such as feelings of relaxation, excitement, and satisfaction. These perceptions help form

positive beliefs about the trip, thereby enhancing the attitude towards the destination. Natural beauty is an important attribute in the brand image of a destination (Qu et al., 2011). Stunning landscapes, nature reserves, and wild nature experiences are positive associations that increase the attractiveness of the destination (Thin, 2011). Destinations with natural beauty are often perceived as high-quality, particularly when natural elements are protected and sustainably managed, providing a good experience for tourists. The relationship between natural beauty and tourists' brand awareness of heritage destinations can be hypothesised as follows:

*Hypothesis H2: Natural Beauty (NB) positively affects tourists' Brand Awareness (BR) towards heritage destinations.*

**Communications:** Communications have a powerful influence on subjective norms by providing information and opinions from influencers such as celebrities, travel bloggers, or friends and family on social media. This increases positive social pressure, encouraging the intention of choosing the destination (Rahman et al., 2021). Communications enhance brand awareness of the destination through advertising campaigns, articles, videos, and images on mass media and social media platforms. They can build and reinforce brand image by highlighting the destination's highlights and unique experiences. This helps form and strengthen positive associations in tourists' minds (Pritchard & Morgan, 1998). The relationship between the media factor and tourists' brand awareness of heritage destinations can be hypothesised as follows:

*Hypothesis H3: The Communications factor (CM) positively affects tourists' Brand Awareness (BR) towards heritage destinations.*

**Visitor Experience Factor:** Visitor experiences affect tourists' perceptions of their ability to control their travel behaviour. Positive experiences, high-quality accommodation and dining services, and comprehensive information will increase perceived behavioural control and the intention to revisit the destination. Positive tourist experiences are key to building brand loyalty (Kempiak et al., 2017). When tourists have good experiences, they tend to return and recommend the destination to others. Travel experience is a decisive factor in tourists' perceived quality of the destination. Good services, amenities, and a safe environment will increase perceived quality and tourist satisfaction. The relationship between the visitor experience factor and tourists' brand awareness of heritage destinations can be hypothesised as follows:



*Hypothesis H4: The Visitor Experience factor (VE) positively affects the tourists' Brand Awareness (BR) towards heritage destinations.*

### *2.3.2. The Relationship Between Brand Awareness and Destination Choice Intention*

Brand awareness of heritage destinations, including measures such as memorability, recognisability, familiarity, and popularity, significantly impacts tourists' destination choice intentions (Wang et al., 2021). The memorability of a heritage destination strongly influences tourists' attitudes. When a destination is memorable, tourists often have deep and positive impressions, increasing the likelihood of choosing that destination. Memorable experiences and images not only enhance positive attitudes but also boost subjective norms, as the destination is frequently mentioned and widely shared in society, creating positive social pressure. This also enhances perceived behavioural control, making tourists more confident in planning and undertaking the trip (Ferns, 2012).

Recognisability is another crucial factor affecting the intention to choose a heritage destination. A recognisable heritage destination creates a sense of familiarity and safety, fostering a more positive attitude among tourists. Additionally, recognisable destinations often receive support and encouragement from influencers, increasing subjective norms. The ease of recognising the destination also helps tourists feel more confident in gathering information and planning, enhancing perceived behavioural control (Chi, 2020). The familiarity of a heritage destination also plays an important role. When tourists are familiar with or have prior experience with a destination, they tend to have positive perceptions based on known information and experiences, enhancing their positive attitude towards the destination. Familiar destinations often receive support from friends and family, creating positive social pressure. This increases perceived behavioural control as tourists feel more confident in planning and undertaking the trip (Phung, 2019).

The popularity of a heritage destination brand also has a significant impact. Popular destinations are often associated with positive experiences and high prestige, enhancing tourists' positive attitudes. Popularity also means the destination receives many positive recommendations and reviews, creating positive social pressure and encouraging choice intentions. Popular destinations often have abundant information and support readily accessible, making tourists more confident in planning and undertaking the trip, thus increasing perceived behavioural control (Richie, 1998).

Therefore, brand awareness of heritage destinations, through factors like memorability, recognisability, familiarity, and popularity, all have significant positive impacts on tourists' destination choice intentions. These factors not only directly influence attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control but also play a crucial role in shaping tourists' decisions to choose heritage destinations (Mohammed et al., 2022). The relationship between the brand awareness factor and tourists' destination choice intention towards heritage destinations can be hypothesised as follows:

*Hypothesis H5: The Brand Recognition (BR) factor positively influences tourists' Destination Selection Intention (DSI) for heritage sites.*

The proposed research hypothesis model:

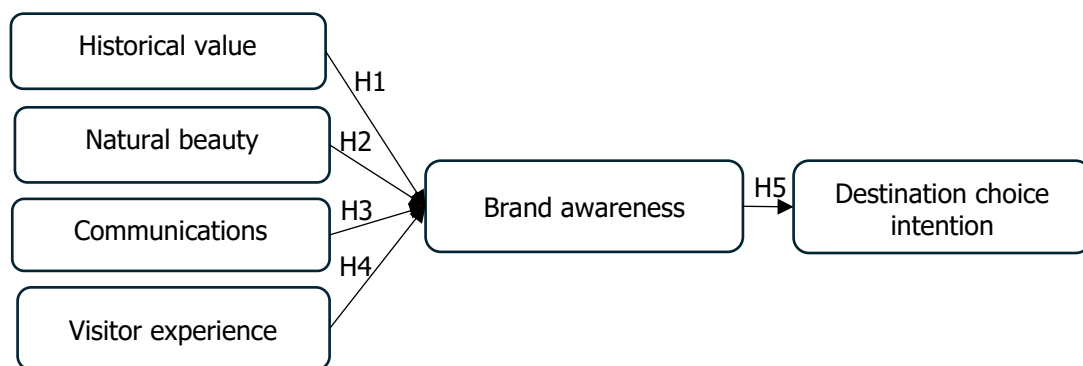


Figure 1. Proposed research model

Source: Authors' Elaboration

### 3. Data Collection and Analysis

#### 3.1. Data Collection

In the study on factors affecting brand awareness and destination choice intention of domestic tourists for Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex, we used the brand theory of Aaker (1992) and Keller (1993) as a foundation to build research hypotheses, scales, and research models based on interviews with tourism research experts from the management agency of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam. Data were collected from domestic tourists who visited Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex during the peak season from January to April 2024. This is the time

after the Lunar New Year in Vietnam, when domestic tourists increased significantly and were interested in heritage destinations, including Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex. The survey was implemented online on Google Office for tourists who arrived and distributed the survey form directly at the destination to tourists. A total of 385 valid survey responses were collected. This quantitative data was entered into SPSS 22 software for descriptive analysis of the research sample, and we used Smart PLS 4.0 software to conduct measurement model analysis and linear structural model to test the research hypothesis and research model based on the discussion of the results from the test. The main variables in the study include factors affecting brand awareness and destination choice intention, such as historical value, natural beauty, communication, and tourist experience. These factors were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

### **3.2. *Data Analysis***

The data analysis process consists of three main steps: (1) First, descriptive analysis of the sample results was conducted to assess the suitability and reliability of the survey data through multiple stages. (2) Next, the measurement model was tested by analysing the quality indices of the observed variables, examining the reliability and convergent validity of the scales in the research model. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker criterion as well as the HTMT ratio. (3) Finally, the structural model was tested using PLS-SEM analysis to examine and estimate the relationships between variables in the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This involved analysing indicators such as collinearity of independent variables (inner VIF) and the significance of the path coefficients in the model.

The research hypotheses related to the factors affecting the competitiveness of smart tourism urban destinations were tested. The analysis results, including the reliability and validity of the scales, the structural model, and the relationships between variables, were evaluated and discussed. These results were compared with previous studies to draw conclusions. This data analysis will provide insights into the factors influencing brand awareness and destination choice intention for the Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex.

## 4. Research Results

### 4.1. Results from the Research sample Description

Descriptive analysis of the survey sample is an important part of the research process on the impact of factors on destination brand awareness and tourist intentions at Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex. Characteristics such as gender, age, education level, area of residence, and number of visits all contribute to the relevance and reliability of the observed variables in the research model.

Table 1: Sample Description

Item	Frequency	Percent %	Item	Frequency	Percent %
<b>Gender</b>			University	269	69.9
Female	150	39.0	Postgraduate	68	17.7
Male	235	61.0	Other	1	0.3
<b>Age</b>			<b>From</b>		
18 - 24	187	48.6	Northern Midlands and Mountains	22	5.7
25 - 34	81	21.0	Red River Delta	107	27.8
35 - 44	63	16.4	North Central and Central Coast	39	10.1
45 - 54	29	7.5	Central Highlands	36	9.4
55 - 64	15	3.9	Southeast	130	33.8
Over 65	10	2.6	Mekong River Delta	51	13.2
<b>Education level</b>			<b>Number of visits</b>		
High school	13	3.4	1 - 2 times	156	40.5
Intermediate	6	1.6	3 - 4 times	204	53.0
College	28	7.3	More than 5 times	25	6.5

Source: Authors' Elaboration

From the results in table 1, the valid collected sample reflects the reliability of domestic tourists' evaluations, with 69.9% of respondents having a university degree and the age group from 18 to 24 accounting for 48.6% of visitors to the Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex. The number of tourists visiting 3 to 4 times accounts for 53.0%, which is a very high rate for a tourist destination.

Among the six regions of Vietnam, the rate of tourists coming to Trang An is concentrated from the Red River Delta at 27.8% and from the Southeast at 33.8%. These indicators help to consolidate and affirm the reliability of the survey sample used for analysis and testing of the measurement model and structural model of the research topic.

#### ***4.2. Testing the Measurement Model***

##### *Quality of Observed Variables in the Research Model:*

The evaluation of the quality of the observed variables in the research model (Figure 1) aims to check whether any observed variable weakly explains the four independent variables: historical value, natural beauty, communication, visitor experience, and the two dependent variables: heritage destination brand awareness and destination selection intention. Hair et al. (2017) suggest that for an observed variable to be considered significant, the outer loading coefficient should be 0.7 or higher.

Table 2: Outer Loadings - Matrix

	BR	CM	DSI	HV	NB	VE
BR1	0.812					
BR2	0.788					
BR3	0.846					
BR4	0.843					
CM1		0.851				
CM2		0.831				
CM3		0.841				
CM4		0.835				
CM5		0.742				
DSI1			0.814			
DSI2			0.822			
DSI3			0.856			
DSI4			0.834			
HV1				0.813		

	BR	CM	DSI	HV	NB	VE
HV2				0.836		
HV3				0.839		
HV4				0.843		
NB1					0.844	
NB2					0.844	
NB3					0.828	
NB4					0.837	
VE1						0.835
VE2						0.847
VE3						0.848
VE4						0.842

Source: Authors' Elaboration

The results from table 2 show that all the observed variables in the research model have outer loading coefficients greater than 0.7, indicating good significance and explanatory power for both the independent and dependent variables in the research model.

*Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement scale in the research model:*

Cheah et al. (2018) identified two indicators for measuring the reliability of the measurement scale: Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), with optimal values for research ranging from 0.7 to 0.9. The convergent validity of the measurement scale is based on the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) index, which should be 0.5 or higher.

Table 3. Construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
BR	0.840	0.893	0.677
CM	0.879	0.912	0.674
DSI	0.851	0.900	0.691
HV	0.853	0.900	0.693
NB	0.859	0.904	0.703
VE	0.865	0.908	0.711

Source: Authors' Elaboration

The results from table 3 show that all the constructs of the factors have good reliability, with Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) coefficients all greater than 0.7, ranging from 0.840 to 0.912. The convergent validity index of all the constructs of the factors in the research model (AVE) is greater than 0.5, ranging from 0.674 to 0.711.

*Discriminant validity assessment using the fornell and larcker criterion:*

Table 4. Discriminant validity Fornell and Larcker

	BR	CM	DSI	HV	NB	VE
BR	<b>0.823</b>					
CM	0.722	<b>0.821</b>				
DSI	0.695	0.623	<b>0.831</b>			
HV	0.649	0.613	0.600	<b>0.833</b>		
NB	0.706	0.643	0.623	0.753	<b>0.838</b>	
VE	0.758	0.740	0.643	0.716	0.766	<b>0.843</b>

Source: Authors' Elaboration

The results from table 4 show that the correlation between BR and CM is 0.722, which is less than the square root of the AVE for BR (0.823) and the square root of the AVE for CM (0.821), thus ensuring discriminant validity between BR and CM. The correlation between CM and DSI is 0.623, which is less than the square root of the AVE for CM (0.821) and the square root of the AVE for DSI (0.831), thus ensuring discriminant validity between CM and DSI. The correlation between DSI and HV is 0.600, which is less than the square root of the AVE for DSI (0.831) and the square root of the AVE for HV (0.833), thus ensuring discriminant validity between DSI and HV. The correlation between HV and NB is 0.753, which is less than the square root of the AVE for HV (0.833) and the square root of the AVE for NB (0.838), thus ensuring discriminant validity between HV and NB. The correlation between NB and VE is 0.766, which is less than the square root of the AVE for NB (0.838) and the square root of the AVE for VE (0.843), thus ensuring discriminant validity between NB and VE.

### 4.3. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Testing

#### *Collinearity of Independent Variables*

The results from table 5 show that the independent variables for BR and DSI do not exhibit collinearity, as all VIF values are below 3. This indicates that the independent variables CM, HV, HB, and VE are distinct in nature and meaning, providing an important basis for analysing regression coefficients, significant p-values, and concluding the impact relationships within the research model (Kock, 2015).

Table 5. Collinearity statistics (VIF)

	VIF
BR → DSI	1.000
CM → BR	2.311
HV → BR	2.623
NB → BR	2.087
VE → BR	2.432

Source: Authors' Elaboration

#### *Testing hypotheses for the significance of impact relationships:*

The significance of the impact relationships between the factors CM, HV, HB, VE with BR and DSI is determined using the Bootstrapping method, which involves identifying the standardised impact coefficients and the p-values for the paths in the structural model (Figure 2).



Path model on Smart PLS 4.0:

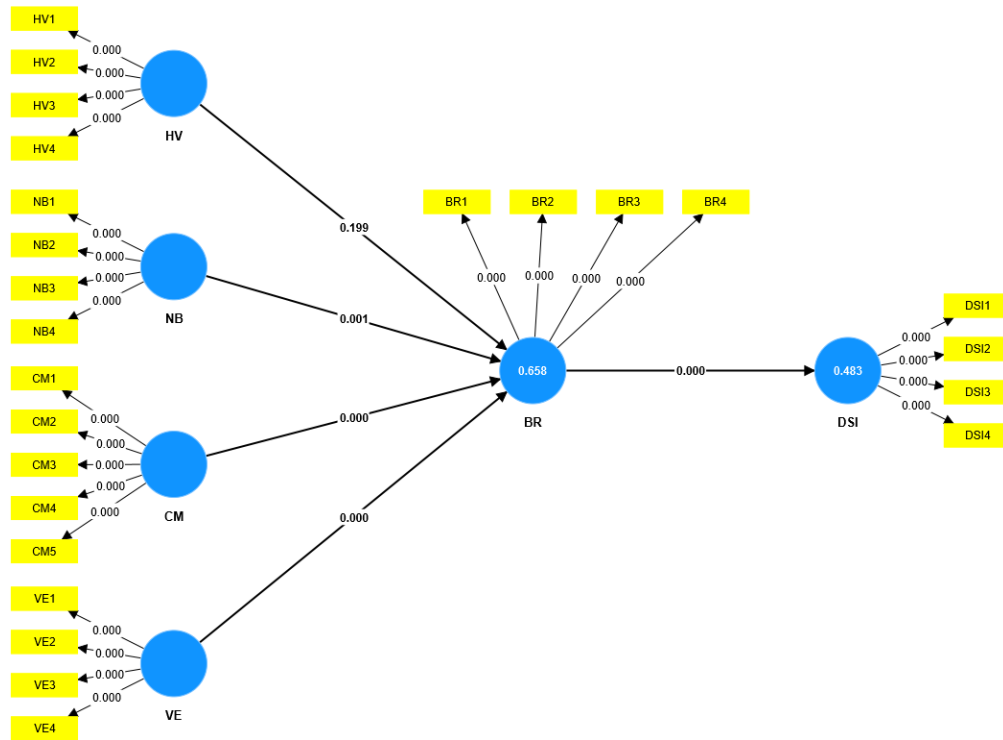


Figure 2: Research path model on Smart PLS 4.0

Source: Authors' Elaboration

Table 6: Path coefficients - O original sample, P values

Hypothesis	Impact relationship	Original sample (O)	T statistics ( O/STDEV )	P values	Result
H5	BR → DSI	0.695	21.203	0.000	Accept
H3	CM → BR	0.306	5.130	0.000	Accept
H1	HV → BR	0.078	1.286	0.199	Unacceptable
H2	NB → BR	0.210	3.227	0.001	Accept
H4	VE → BR	0.314	5.431	0.000	Accept

Source: Authors' Elaboration

The results from table 6 show that the first hypothesis - H1: Historical Value (HV) - has a positive impact on Brand Awareness (BR) of tourists towards the heritage destination) is not statistically significant as P values = 0.199 > 0.05, so hypothesis H1 is not accepted. Hypotheses H2, H3, H4, and H5 are accepted, as their P values are all less than 0.05.

Table 6 shows that all impact coefficients are positive, indicating that the relationships in the model are all in the same direction. The strength of the impacts on DSI (Destination Selection Intention) and BR (Brand Awareness) are as follows:  $BR (0.695) > VE (0.314) > CM (0.306) > NB (0.210)$ .

## 5. Discussion of Research Results

The results of this study have supplemented the theoretical framework of natural heritage destination brand awareness through the inheritance from the underlying theories of Aaker (1992), Keller (1993), and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991). Specifically, the study tested the measurement and structural models, indicating the positive impact of tourist experience, communication factors, and natural beauty factors on destination brand perception and tourists' destination choice. This result strengthens the theoretical basis of destination brands and provides important practical suggestions for developing tourism promotion and management strategies. Accordingly, the tourist experience is identified as a central factor, helping to enhance positive feelings about the destination brand. In addition, the role of communication is proven to be a key factor in building a strong brand image, while natural beauty is confirmed to be an important attractive factor in tourists' decision to choose a destination. These findings contribute to emphasising the importance of sustainable development of natural heritage destinations, and at the same time create a basis for further research to expand and perfect the theoretical model of destination brand awareness.

The hypothesis H1 testing results from the structural model analysis indicate that the Historical Value factor was not accepted in the Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex research context. This reflects, in practical terms, that the historical value of this destination has not been effectively leveraged to create a strong impression on tourists' brand awareness. In reality, Trang An is more widely recognised as an ecological or natural scenic destination, while its distinctive historical aspects have not been sufficiently emphasised. Historical narratives associated with the area, such as those about the Hoa Lu Ancient Capital or the Dinh - Le - Ly dynasties, may not have been presented in an engaging and impactful manner. Moreover, historical experiences at the destination, such as visiting historical sites, historical reenactments, or interactive activities, have not been adequately developed, making it difficult for tourists to fully appreciate Trang An's outstanding historical value.

The hypothesis testing results for H2, H3, H4, and H5 demonstrate a positive relationship between the factors of Visitor Experience (VE), Communication (CM), Natural Beauty (NB), and Brand Awareness (BR). Among these, VE has the strongest impact, emphasising the critical role of actual experiences in building brand awareness at the destination. Positive experiences, such as high-quality services, diverse sightseeing activities, and overall visitor satisfaction, not only leave a strong impression but also enhance brand recall. Following this, the CM factor highlights the importance of effective communication strategies, especially on digital platforms, which help spread brand messages through compelling visuals and engaging content, thereby attracting tourists' attention. The NB factor underscores the unique natural beauty of Trang An, with its distinctive cave system, majestic natural landscapes, and biodiversity, serving as an indispensable foundation for shaping the destination's brand value. These factors not only play a significant role in increasing brand awareness but also positively influence tourists' intention to return. Practical research in the context of the Trang An Scenic Landscape Complex reveals that the integration of improving visitor experiences, enhancing communication strategies, and preserving natural beauty contributes to building strong brand awareness.

## 6. Conclusions

The research results have identified the strong, positive, and direct impact of the BR (Brand Awareness) factor on the DSI (Destination Choice Intention) factor of tourists. This not only reinforces the theory of destination brand recognition but also provides important theoretical and practical contributions to the tourism field. The research results confirm that destination brand recognition positively influences tourists' destination intent. This reinforces the theory that a strong destination brand can significantly affect tourists' decisions, supporting researchers in developing new and more accurate theoretical frameworks on brand management in tourism. The research has tested and measured the impact of factors in the model, providing important empirical data to evaluate the validity and reliability of the research hypotheses. These results help clarify the role of each factor in forming tourists' destination choice intention.

Local authorities should organise comprehensive communication campaigns to introduce and promote the historical and cultural relics of the Hoa Lu ancient capital, such as King Dinh Temple, King Le Temple, Co Am Pagoda, Kim Ngan Pagoda, Duyen Ninh Pagoda, Nhat Tru Pagoda, Vuon Thien Palace, Princess Phat Kim Temple, and Thien Ton Cave. Regularly organise cultural events,

festivals, and historical seminars at these relics to attract tourist interest. Invite historians, researchers, and artists to participate in these events to increase their appeal and academic value. Collaborate with major media outlets, television channels, and famous newspapers to broadcast programs and documentaries about the Hoa Lu ancient capital and its historical and cultural relics. Tourism businesses should develop themed tours focusing on the historical value of the Hoa Lu ancient capital, including visits to temples, pagodas, and important relics. Combine these tours with guides who have extensive knowledge of history and culture to provide detailed and engaging information to tourists.

Local authorities need to upgrade tourism infrastructure, improve facilities such as parking lots, public restrooms, lighting systems, and walkways, and ensure that tourist spots are well-maintained, clean, and safe for visitors. Additionally, professional training courses should be organised for tourism industry employees, covering communication skills, customer service, and site knowledge, while encouraging a sense of responsibility and dedication to leave a good impression on tourists. Developing regular cultural, artistic, and entertainment activities and events to enrich tourists' experiences is also important. Creating interactive tour programs where tourists can participate in and directly experience traditional and local cultural activities is essential. Tourism businesses should improve service quality, offering high-quality services from reception to guiding and supporting tourists throughout their visit. Developing additional services such as professional guides, dining, shopping, and special tours is crucial. Designing flexible service packages and tours that meet the diverse needs and preferences of tourists and offering promotional packages and special incentives to attract and retain customers, are necessary. Utilising modern technologies such as mobile applications, websites, and social media to manage services and interact with customers and creating automatic tour guide applications that provide detailed and updated information about tourist attractions, is also recommended.

Tourism businesses should develop creative and engaging communication content to attract customer attention. Using modern communication tools such as videos, blogs, and social media to display unique experiences and highlight attractions at Trang An is essential. Creating multi-channel advertising campaigns that combine traditional and digital media to reach and interact with a large number of potential customers is also recommended. Investing in creating mobile applications and websites that provide detailed, updated, and interactive information about activities and events at Trang An can make it easier for tourists to plan their trips. Collaborating

with bloggers, vloggers, and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in the travel field to promote the image and brand of Trang An to a wider and more diverse audience is beneficial.

Local authorities and tourism businesses need to cooperate closely to preserve and develop Trang An's unique natural landscapes. It is crucial to invest in environmental protection, maintain the cleanliness of the ecosystem, and preserve the area's inherent natural beauty. Educational and awareness programs on environmental protection should be implemented to ensure that everyone is aware of and acts correctly to protect the natural landscape. It is also essential to build environmentally friendly tourism infrastructure, such as walkways, scenic viewing areas, and reasonably designed rest stops, to minimise negative impacts on nature.

The study has certain limitations regarding its survey subjects, as it focuses solely on domestic tourists to measure and evaluate the factors influencing brand awareness of heritage destinations. This approach excludes perspectives from international tourists and key stakeholders, such as businesses and local communities. However, the findings pave the way for future research exploring the co-creation dynamics between tourists and residents in shaping perceptions and preserving natural and cultural heritage destinations. Moreover, future studies could delve into the tensions between heritage conservation management and promotional activities aimed at attracting tourists, offering insights on how to harmonise these conflicts to foster sustainable development for heritage destinations.

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