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LE DUC TAM

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND TOURIST ENGAGEMENT ON DESTINATION LOYALTY AT COASTAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN THE SOUTH CENTRAL COAST, VIETNAM

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research background

1.1.1. Practical relevance

The practical imperative for this dissertation stems from the intersection of the industry's core competitive challenges and national strategic priorities amidst intense competition and robust digital transformation (Prime Minister, 2020).

First, the research addresses the pressing managerial imperative of tourist loyalty within an increasingly competitive destination landscape. Fostering and enhancing loyalty is pivotal for the industry's sustainable development (Khuong & Nguyen, 2017). The concerning reality is that the international tourist return rate to Vietnam remains at a mere 5-10%, starkly lower than Thailand's rate of over 50% (Khuong & Nguyen, 2017). This disparity signifies a critical challenge in competitive capacity, particularly in establishing sustainable tourist relationships—the bedrock of stable revenue streams (Le Chi Cong, 2017). Consequently, transforming mere repeat patronage into true attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, encompassing emotional commitment and active advocacy (Oliver, 1999), has become an urgent managerial priority.

Second, the study focuses on the specific context of coastal tourism in the South Central Coast region, a key development area designated by Resolution 36-NQ/TW of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2018). The landscape here is characterized by a multi-speed and increasingly fierce competitive environment. This is evidenced by the stark divergence between established, high-growth hubs like Da Nang (nearly 10.9 million visitors in 2024, a +32.8% increase) and Khanh Hoa (over 10.6 million visitors, a +46% increase), and emerging destinations making impressive strides, such as Phu Yen (revenue grew 1.6 times) and Ninh Thuan (attracting over 53,000 billion VND in tourism investment). This multi-faceted competitive dynamic creates immense pressure for continuous innovation and an urgent imperative for digital transformation to optimize operations and sustain a competitive edge—a strategic direction institutionalized in the "Vietnam Tourism Marketing Strategy to 2030" (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2023). To meet this demand, Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) have emerged as an indispensable strategic tool (Bartoloni & Ancillai, 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021). However, the efficacy of investments in SMMA is contingent upon a deep understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which it impacts tourists to cultivate loyalty—an aspect that remains a gap in previous research (Minazzi, 2015) and is a key objective of this dissertation.

Third, the research provides an evidence-based rationale for decision-making in a complex digital environment. In a context where tourists are susceptible to information overload (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and misinformation (Turcotte et al., 2015), purely

experience-based decisions have proven increasingly inadequate. The research findings will support managers in transitioning to data-driven strategies. Specifically, understanding the moderating role of Destination Trust (DT) will empower managers to build and leverage trust to amplify the effectiveness of marketing activities (Le Duc Tam, 2025; Tam et al., 2024). Similarly, clarifying the parallel mediating roles of satisfaction and engagement will illuminate the pre-, during-, and post-trip mechanisms, thereby providing effective solutions for simultaneously nurturing both psychological states to build sustainable loyalty (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

1.1.2. Theoretical rationale

Effectively addressing the aforementioned practical challenges necessitates a robust theoretical foundation. In the context of the global tourism industry's recovery and digital transformation (Fenitra et al., 2022), elucidating the mechanism through which SMMA impacts destination loyalty (DL) is a timely research direction (Bartoloni & Ancillai, 2024; Sohaib & Han, 2023). However, recent systematic reviews suggest the need to further investigate complex mechanisms and contextual factors (Bartoloni & Ancillai, 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021), thereby revealing critical research gaps that this dissertation aims to address:

First, a gap exists concerning contextual specificity. While the role of SMMA has been acknowledged in developed markets (Almeida-Santana et al., 2020; Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021), the generalizability of these models to a transitioning economy with unique cultural and digital consumer behaviors, such as Vietnam, remains an open question (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020; Olaniran, 2018). Although domestic studies have begun to explore SMMA (Ngo Thi Khue Thu & Vo Minh Ai Nhi, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024), no research has yet empirically tested an integrated model that assesses the impact of a multidimensional SMMA construct, SA, and TE on loyalty within the specific context of the South Central Coast's tourism sector. This need is further underscored by the call from Asyraff et al. (2023) to build a more solid theoretical foundation for applying the S-O-R model in the tourism industry of developing markets.

Second, the mediating mechanisms linking SMMA to loyalty are not yet fully elucidated (Vrontis et al., 2021). Previous research has typically examined only the single mediating role of either Satisfaction (SA) (Al-Dmour et al., 2023) or Engagement (TE) (Iqbal et al., 2023). This creates a significant gap in testing a parallel mediation model to simultaneously assess the different psychological pathways through which SMMA influences DL, responding to the call to explore the mediating role of constructs like SA and TE (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Testing these complex mechanisms is essential for a deeper understanding of the different psychological routes leading to behavior (Hayes, 2017).

Third, the most significant theoretical gap is the scarcity of systematic research on the moderating role of Destination Trust (DT) (Al-Hattami et al., 2023). In an information-intensive field like tourism where authentic sources are increasingly crucial (Hussain et al., 2024), trust is a foundational construct (Agyei et al., 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). However, while prior studies have primarily considered trust as a direct or mediating factor (Le Duc Tam, 2025; Agyei et al., 2020), its moderating role—its capacity to alter the strength or direction of other relationships—has not been systematically explored, with the exception of Elbaz et al. (2021). Although calls to investigate trust's moderating role have been made (Al-Hattami et al., 2023; Iglesias et al., 2020), no study has yet validated this role comprehensively across the entire chain of effects from SMMA to psychological states and loyalty, which is a critical step in identifying the boundary conditions for marketing effectiveness (Aguinis et al., 2017).

In summary, by simultaneously addressing pressing practical imperatives and filling critical theoretical gaps, this dissertation offers novel scientific evidence and actionable managerial implications, contributing to the enhanced competitiveness and sustainable development of the coastal tourism sector in the South Central Coast region in particular and Vietnam in general.

1.2. Research objectives

1.2.1. General objective

The overarching objective of this dissertation is to develop and empirically validate an integrated theoretical model that elucidates the mechanisms through which SMMA influence DL. Specifically, this research analyzes the indirect pathways via the parallel mediating roles of SA and TE, while also examining the moderating role of DT within the context of marine tourism in the South Central Coast of Vietnam.

1.2.2. Specific objectives

To achieve the overarching objective, this dissertation focuses on the following specific objectives:

(1) To systematize and review the theoretical foundations of DL, SMMA, SA, TE, and DT, as well as relevant underpinning theories, thereby providing a basis for justifying the research gaps and the proposed model.

(2) To test and analyze the direct and indirect effects within the proposed structural model:

− To assess the direct impact of SMMA on SA, TE, and DL, as well as the direct relationship between SA and TE.

− To elucidate the indirect mechanism of SMMA's impact on DL through the parallel mediating roles of SA and TE.

(3) To empirically examine and clarify the moderating role of destination trust

(DT) on the causal relationships within the model.

(4) To propose managerial implications for destination managers, tourism enterprises, and policymakers to enhance the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies and increase tourist loyalty at marine tourism destinations in the South Central Coast of Vietnam.

1.3. Research questions

To achieve the aforementioned research objectives, this dissertation seeks to answer the following research questions:

– To what extent do SMMA impact SA, TE, and DL?

– Do SA and TE function as parallel mediators in the relationship between SMMA and DL? And what is the nature of the relationship between SA and TE within this mechanism?

– Does destination trust (DT) exert a moderating effect, altering the strength of the causal relationships among SMMA, SA, TE, and DL?

1.4. Research object and scope

– *Research object:* The dissertation focuses on testing the relationships within the proposed theoretical model, specifically the impact of SMMA on DL, through the parallel mediating roles of SA and TE, along with the moderating role of DT.

– *Research Scope:* The study is limited to the context of coastal tourism in 4 provinces/cities in the South Central Coast region of Vietnam (Da Nang, Khanh Hoa, Phu Yen, Ninh Thuan). The survey subjects are Vietnamese domestic tourists visiting these destinations. Data were collected cross-sectionally at one point in time (From January 2024 to April 2024). The dissertation focuses on the identified variables and underlying theories, without delving into other peripheral factors.

1.5. Research methodology

This dissertation employs a mixed-methods research approach, systematically implemented through a sequential explanatory design across four main phases.

Phase 1: Exploratory Qualitative Research. This initial phase established the theoretical framework and preliminary measurement scales. It involved an exhaustive literature review and bibliometric analysis (VOSviewer) to conceptualize the initial model, followed by expert validation and refinement with 10 leading scholars to finalize the theoretical framework and draft questionnaire.

Phase 2: Pilot Quantitative Study. This phase aimed to pre-test scale psychometric properties and identify questionnaire issues. A pilot survey (N=55) with domestic tourists in Phu Yen was conducted using convenience sampling. Data analysis via SPSS 20 assessed scale reliability (Cronbach's Alpha, corrected item-total correlation) and preliminary construct validity (EFA). Based on these evaluations, items were refined or

removed, finalizing the official questionnaire.

Phase 3: Main Quantitative Study. This phase constituted the core of the dissertation, involving the collection of data from a final sample of 514 valid domestic tourists across four key marine destinations in Central Vietnam (Da Nang, Khanh Hoa, Phu Yen, Ninh Thuan) utilizing non-probability sampling methods (convenience and quota). The collected data were primarily analyzed using PLS-SEM implemented via SmartPLS 4.0. This approach was chosen for its suitability in prediction-oriented research and its capability to handle complex models incorporating second-order constructs, mediation, and moderation. The rigorous analytical process encompassed: (1) Common Method Bias (CMB) assessment via Harman's single-factor test, the Full Collinearity test, and the Partialling Out of General Factor technique; (2) Measurement model evaluation for reliability (Cronbach's Alpha, CR) and validity (convergent - AVE, discriminant - HTMT); (3) Structural model assessment to test hypotheses regarding direct, indirect (parallel mediation of SA, TE), and moderating effects of DT; (4) Assessment of model predictive power (R^2, Q^2predict); and (5) Supplementary analyses, including evaluating the influence of demographic control variables and conducting IPMA for DL.

Phase 4: Interpretive Qualitative Research. This final phase involved in-depth discussions with industry experts to interpret the quantitative findings. The primary objective was to enrich the analysis, validate the practical implications, and provide a foundation for final conclusions and future research directions.

1.6. Contributions of the dissertation

By systematically addressing the identified research gaps, this dissertation makes novel contributions to both theory and practice.

The primary theoretical contribution lies in developing and empirically testing an integrated S-O-R model that elucidates the complex mechanism through which SMMA influences DL. First, it is among the first studies to simultaneously test the parallel mediating roles of both Satisfaction (SA) and Engagement (TE) (with TE as a second-order construct), clarifying the concurrent psychological pathways to loyalty. Second, and most significantly, the research provides novel empirical evidence for the systematic moderating role of Destination Trust (DT) across the entire chain of effects, establishing trust as a critical boundary condition that amplifies the effectiveness of these relationships. Finally, by operationalizing and validating SMMA as a second-order construct in an emerging market context, the study also enriches existing theoretical models.

In practical terms, this dissertation provides an evidence-based framework that helps managers optimize SMMA strategies to build sustainable loyalty. Specifically, clarifying the parallel mediating roles of SA and TE offers a detailed roadmap for managers to

simultaneously nurture both psychological states, rather than focusing on just one. More importantly, the discovery of trust's moderating role yields a crucial strategic implication: investing in building and reinforcing destination trust is a prerequisite for maximizing the effectiveness of SMMA activities. Lastly, the validated model provides a foundation for developing a more comprehensive performance measurement system for SMMA, moving beyond superficial metrics.

1.7. Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is structured into five chapters as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction.
- Chapter 2: Theoretical background, literature review and research model.
- Chapter 3: Research methodology.
- Chapter 4: Research results and discussion.
- Chapter 5: Conclusions and managerial implications.

Chapter 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND, LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH MODEL

2.1. Key concepts in this study

2.1.1. Destination loyalty (DL)

Tourist loyalty is a core element in the tourism industry (Cong, 2021), reflecting tourists' commitment and attachment to a destination (Singh et al., 2022). Tourist loyalty can be measured through three main dimensions: behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty, and composite loyalty (Cong, 2021; Singh et al., 2022).

Tourist loyalty to a destination (referred to as destination loyalty - DL), as indicated by a literature review, has various conceptual approaches. However, the widely accepted concept is *a tourist's commitment to a destination, demonstrated by revisiting the destination in the future, recommending the destination to others, and engaging in positive and credible word-of-mouth about the destination* (Cong, 2021; Singh et al., 2022). In this study, DL is observed through 2 aspects: Revisit intention (RE) and word-of-mouth intention (WOM).

2.1.2. Social media marketing activities (SMMA)

SMMA are understood as effective marketing communication methods using social media platforms to attract awareness, build relationships, and influence consumer (tourist) behavior through specific aspects: Entertainment (ENT), Information (INF), Interactivity (INT), Personalization (PER), Trendiness (TRE), and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (EWOM) (Kim & Ko, 2012; Yadav & Rahman, 2018).

2.1.3. Tourist satisfaction (SA)

SA is understood as the overall emotional and cognitive evaluation of a tourist regarding their entire travel experience at a destination, based on a comparison between pre-trip expectations and perceived actual performance (Cong, 2021).

2.1.4. Tourist engagement (TE)

TE is understood as a multidimensional psychological state that extends beyond mere transactional purchases, characterized by the level of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment of tourists in interactions related to the destination (Huang & Choi, 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019; So et al., 2014). This state is created by interactive experiences with attractions, services, and activities at the destination. TE consists of 5 components: Identification (ID), Enthusiasm (EN), Attention (AT), Absorption (AB), and Social Interaction (SI).

2.1.5. Destination trust (DT)

DT is understood as the belief and confidence of tourists in the ability and goodwill of the destination (including service providers, management agencies) to fulfill its promises, provide services transparently and reliably, minimize risks, and resolve issues satisfactorily (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016).

2.2. Overview of factors influencing destination loyalty and research gaps

2.2.1. Overview of factors influencing destination loyalty

To establish a precise basis and gain a clearer understanding of research gaps, based on the bibliometric analysis conducted using the VOSviewer application (Section 2.1.3 of the dissertation), the author has delved into a systematic review of prominent studies (Appendix 2 of the dissertation). This review consolidates detailed factors that have been empirically proven to influence DL through their functional roles: (1) Antecedents (direct impact); (2) Mediating Factors; (3) Moderating Factors; and (4) Outcomes (DL), as illustrated in Figure 2.1 above.

2.2.2. Research gaps

Although the role of SMMA in shaping tourist behavior has been confirmed (Algharabat, 2017; Sohaib and Han, 2023), current research still reveals significant theoretical gaps, underscoring the urgency for a more integrated and in-depth investigation. This study is designed to systematically address the following four key research gaps:

First, there is a deficiency in testing the integrated and multifaceted impact of SMMA as a second-order construct, rather than examining its constituent elements in isolation (Bartoloni and Ancillai, 2024; Vrontis et al., 2021). Second, there is limited understanding of the mechanism through which SMMA influences the diverse dimensions of TE. Thirdly, research is constrained in exploring and testing complex

mediation models, particularly the parallel mediating roles of both SA and TE (Hayes, 2017). Finally, there is a lack of systematic research on the moderating role of DT as a crucial boundary condition (Al-Hattami et al., 2023; Iglesias et al., 2020). These gaps become even more pronounced when considered within the context of emerging markets such as Vietnam, which possesses unique cultural and digital behavioral characteristics (Nguyen et al., 2023, 2024), necessitating the validation and adaptation of theoretical models.

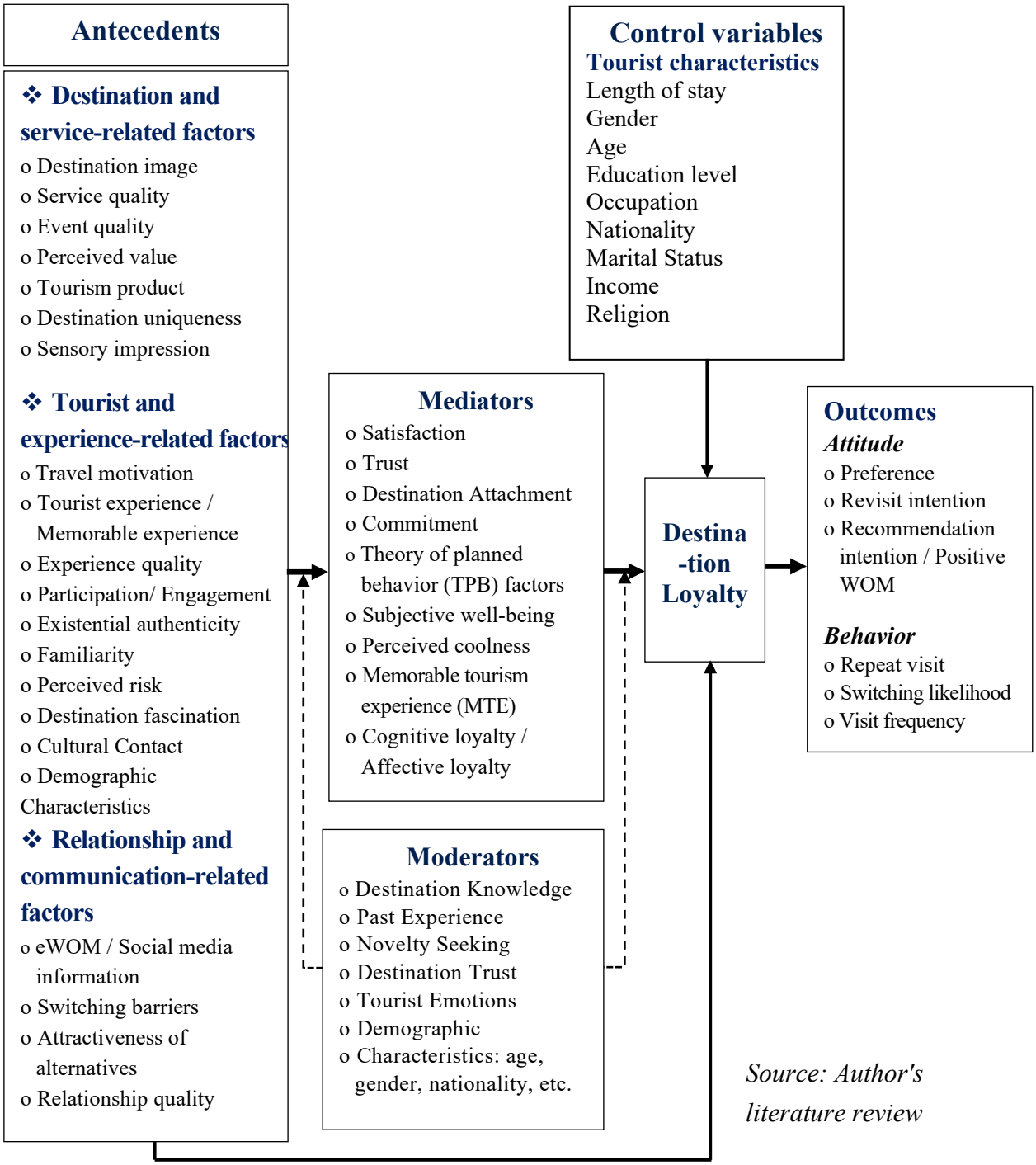

Figure 2.1: Overview of the relationships of factors to destination loyalty

2.3. Relevant theoretical underpinnings

To comprehensively and profoundly explain the intricate mechanism through which SMMA influences destination loyalty (DL), the proposed research model is constructed upon the integration of three foundational theoretical frameworks. Each theory contributes a distinct yet complementary analytical lens, forming a multifaceted and robust theoretical foundation.

(1) *The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model* (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) serves as the overarching structural framework for the entire study. This model provides a basic causal chain, commencing with environmental or marketing factors (Stimulus - S), impacting individuals' internal cognitive and affective states (Organism - O), and ultimately leading to observable behavioral responses (Response - R). Within this research model:

- Stimulus (S): Various SMMA are considered as a collection of stimuli from the digital environment.
- Organism (O): Core mediating psychological states such as SA, TE, and destination trust (DT) represent the internal responses of tourists.
- Response (R): Destination loyalty (DL), manifested through intention and behavior, is the ultimate response.

The S-O-R model helps to systematize variables and guide the causal relationships to be tested. However, to elucidate the complex mechanisms occurring within the "black box" of the Organism (O) and to explain why and how Stimuli (S) from SMMA generate these psychological states, two supplementary theories from social psychology are integrated to provide in-depth perspectives on motivation and social influence:

(2) *Social Exchange Theory (SET)* (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958) scrutinizes the motivations that drive tourist interaction and participation in the SMMA environment. SET posits that tourists engage in online "exchanges" (investing time, effort, interaction) when they anticipate receiving commensurate benefits (valuable information, social connection, entertainment, incentives). When these exchanges are perceived as positive and equitable, they foster satisfaction (SA), reinforce trust (DT), and encourage engagement (TE) as a form of reciprocation. Therefore, SET provides a solid theoretical basis for explaining the relationships of SMMA to SA, SMMA to TE, and the formation mechanism of DT (forming the basis for its moderating role).

(3) *Social Influence Theory (SIT)* (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Kelman, 1958) focuses on how social factors and norms within the SMMA environment impact tourists' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Through the mechanisms of informational influence (from eWOM, others' reviews) and normative influence (from communities, influencers), SIT explains the persuasive power of the online social environment. This

theory helps clarify why dimensions of SMMA such as eWOM and trends (TRE) have a strong impact on tourists' satisfaction (SA), trust (DT), and also engagement (TE), as they tend to trust and act in accordance with the majority or reputable individuals. SIT provides the theoretical foundation for a better understanding of the role of social factors as a crucial part of Stimulus (S) and their impact on the Organism (O).

In summary, the integration of these three theories creates a robust and multi-dimensional theoretical foundation. The S-O-R model provides the overall structure and causal logic. Meanwhile, SET and SIT collectively offer detailed explanatory mechanisms of the psychological and social processes occurring within tourists when interacting with SMMA. Specifically, SET explains individual motivations, while SIT explains influences from the community. This multi-theoretical approach not only enhances scientific rigor but is also essential for fully capturing and explaining the complex nature of the relationship between SMMA and destination loyalty in the digital era, thereby laying a solid groundwork for proposing and testing research hypotheses.

2.4. Proposed hypotheses and research model

Based on the theoretical underpinnings and a review of related empirical studies, the proposed hypotheses and research model are presented in Figure 2.2 below.

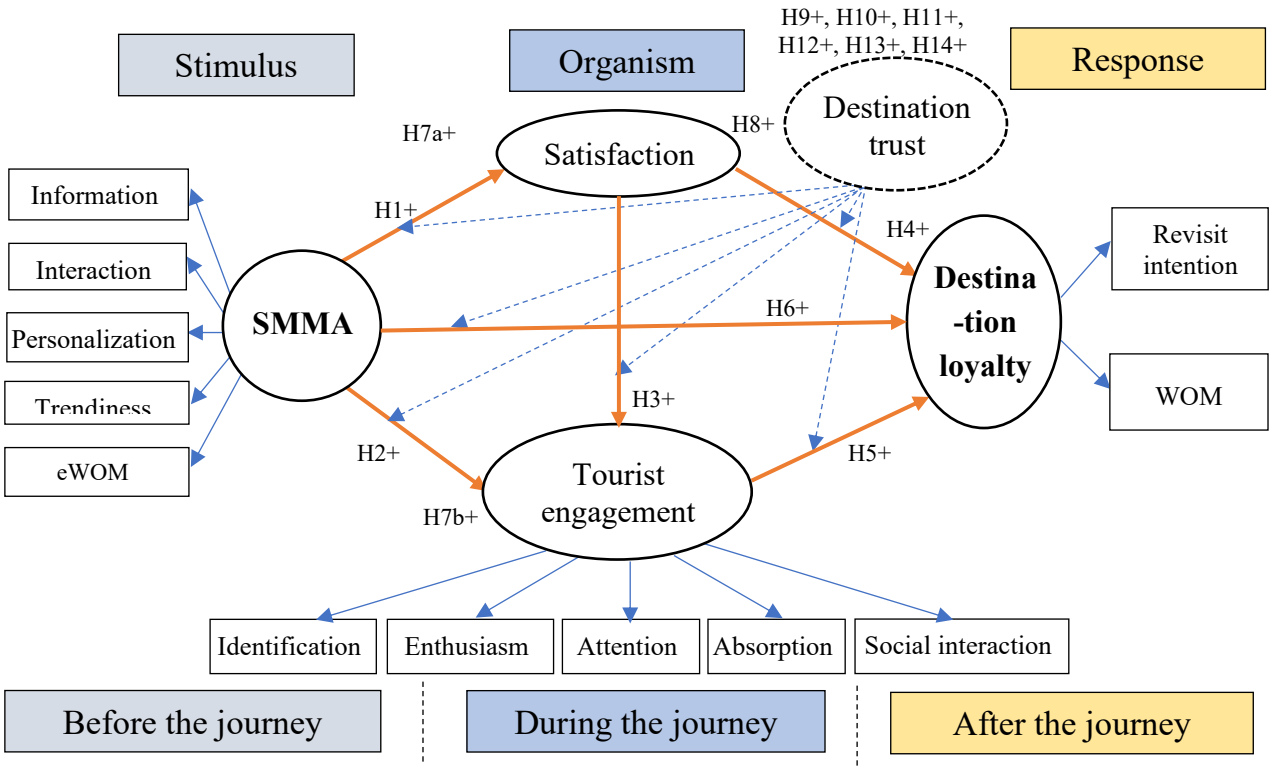

Figure 2.3: Proposed research model

The research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: SMMA has a positive impact on tourist satisfaction (SA).

H2: SMMA has a positive impact on tourist engagement (TE).

H3: SA has a positive impact on TE.

H4: SA has a positive impact on destination loyalty (DL).

H5: TE has a positive impact on DL.

H6: SMMA has a positive impact on DL.

H7: SMMA has a positive indirect impact on DL through SA (H7a) and TE (H7b).

H8: SMMA has a positive indirect impact on TE through SA.

H9: destination trust (DT) positively moderates the relationship between SMMA and SA.

H10: DT positively moderates the relationship between SMMA and TE.

H11: DT positively moderates the relationship between SMMA and DL.

H12: Higher Destination Trust strengthens the relationship between SA and TE.

H13: Higher Destination Trust strengthens the relationship between SA and DL.

H14: DT positively moderates the relationship between TE and DL.

Chapter 3. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research context

This study is conducted within the context of Vietnam's coastal tourism, with a particular focus on the South Central Coast region. This area has been identified as a strategic development hub in national planning (Prime Minister's Office, 2024). To deeply analyze the region's intrinsic diversity, the research employs a purposive sampling method, establishing a comparative analytical framework. Specifically, the study contrasts two groups of locations: established tourism centers with strong branding (Da Nang, Khanh Hoa) and emerging destinations in their formative stages (Phu Yen, Ninh Thuan). This sample structure enables a scientific analysis of the factors influencing tourist loyalty across destinations at different stages of their development lifecycle, thereby enhancing the generalizability and practical value of the findings.

3.2. Research process

The dissertation was executed following a sequential mixed-methods research design, comprising four main phases, as briefly outlined in Figure 3.1 below.

3.3. Qualitative research

The qualitative research phase serves as the foundational step in the dissertation's overall research process. Its primary objectives are to explore and clarify theoretical concepts, and to develop and refine an initial measurement instrument tailored to the specific context and research subjects in Vietnam. This phase was conducted using two mutually reinforcing methods: expert consultation and in-depth focus group discussions.

– *Expert method:* Ten experts (05 Associate Professors, 05 PhDs – Appendix 4) with extensive experience in marketing, tourism, and consumer behavior were invited

to validate the proposed research model and the preliminary draft measurement scales (Appendices 5.1, 5.2). Expert feedback on the relevance, clarity, and completeness of each item was gathered through structured evaluation forms and semi-structured interviews (Appendix 5.3). This feedback was then synthesized and analyzed using content analysis to inform the refinement of the measurement scales.

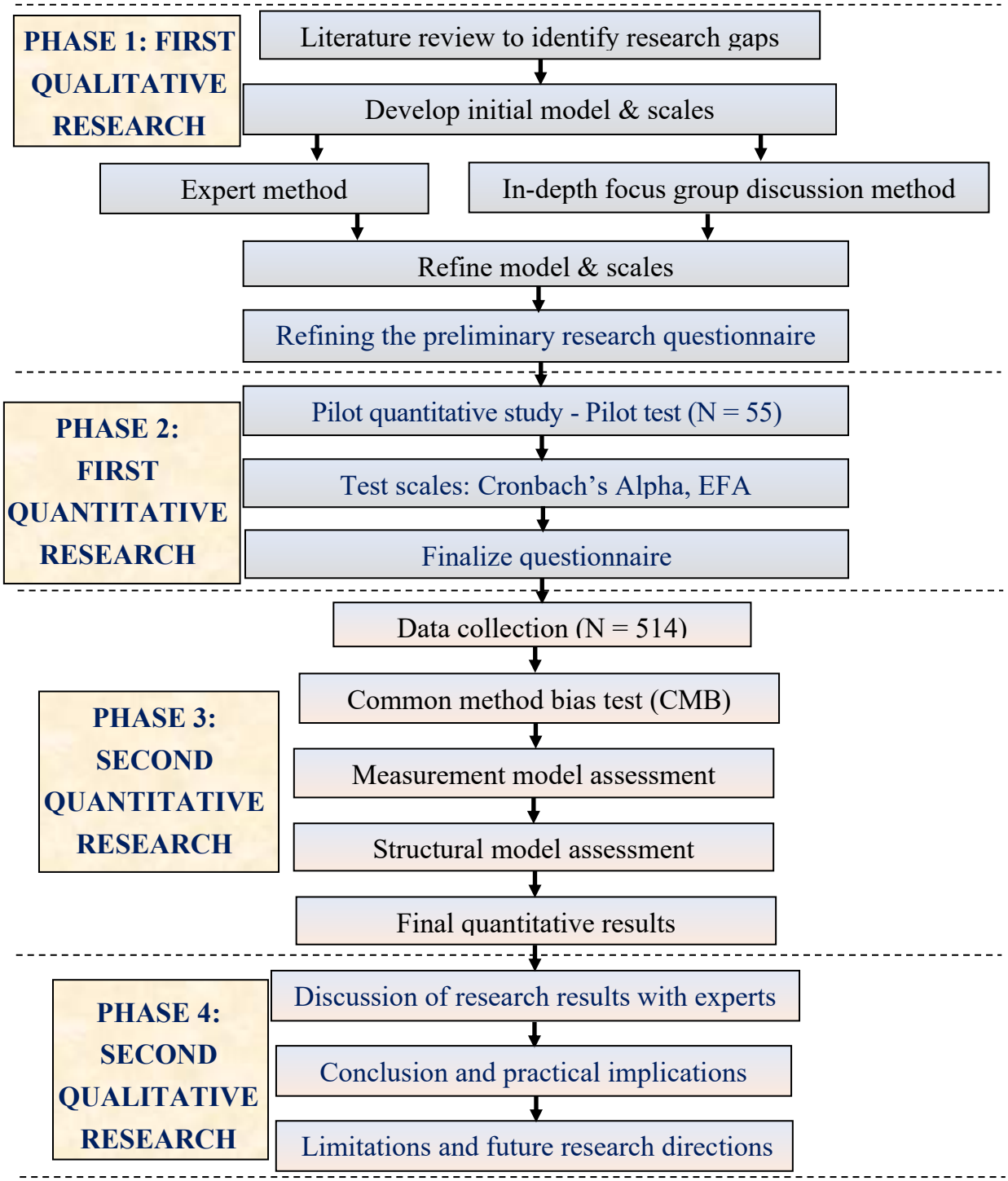

Figure 3.1: Research process

– *In-depth focus group discussion method:* Following expert-driven refinements, the measurement scales were further evaluated for clarity and comprehensibility from the perspective of potential respondents. This was achieved through in-depth focus

group discussions with 25 students (who have prior experience with coastal tourism). Transcribed discussion data were subjected to thematic content analysis to identify final adjustments to wording and structure, ensuring the scales achieved maximum clarity before the quantitative survey deployment.

This qualitative research process significantly contributed to enhancing the content validity and practical relevance of the measurement instrument used in the main quantitative research phase.

3.4. Results of scale adjustment after expert interviews and in-depth focus group discussions

After developing the initial draft scales based on a literature review and previous studies, the research proceeded to the qualitative phase to gather feedback from experts (Appendix 5.2) and the target research subjects (through in-depth focus group discussions, using the questionnaire in Appendix 5.3). The objective of this phase was to evaluate, screen, and refine the scales, ensuring that the observed variables were appropriate for the concepts to be measured, clear in meaning, non-redundant, and suitable for the cultural and tourism context of Central Vietnam's coastal destinations. The synthesized results from the feedback led to significant adjustments:

– *For the independent variable (SMMA):* The scale was refined from 6 components (18 items) down to 5 components (15 items). The "Entertainment (ENT)" component (3 items) was removed due to assessments of lacking discriminant validity and unclear direct role. The remaining components (Information, Interaction, Personalization, Trendiness, Electronic Word-of-Mouth) were retained with wording adjustments to better suit the tourism context and survey subjects.

– *For mediating and moderating variables (TE, SA, DT):*

- Tourist engagement (TE): Retained 5 components but reduced from 22 to 18 items. Variables were mainly removed due to exaggerated wording, difficulty in objective assessment, or risk of overlap. Some variables were rephrased or had their content changed to better reflect immersion.
- Tourist satisfaction (SA): Reduced from 5 to 4 items, removing a variable with high potential overlap with attitudinal loyalty.
- Destination trust (DT): Reduced from 7 to 4 items, removing variables overlapping with SA and focusing on core aspects of trust in services.

– *For the dependent variable (DL):* Both components, Revisit Intention (RE) and Word-of-Mouth (WOM), retained all 6 items with minor wording adjustments and reordering of codes for better logic.

In total, 11 items were removed from the initial draft scale. The final preliminary quantitative measurement scale (Appendix 6) includes 47 items, expected to better

ensure reliability and various types of scale validity when subjected to formal quantitative testing. This process affirms the essential role of qualitative research in perfecting measurement instruments.

3.5. Quantitative research implementation

Quantitative research was conducted in two main steps: a pilot test and the main study.

3.5.1. Pilot quantitative test

The pilot test was conducted to test the feasibility and clarity of the questionnaire refined after qualitative research (Appendix 6), to preliminarily assess the reliability of the scales, and to identify potential issues before large-scale data collection. Data from 55 valid questionnaires were collected and analyzed using SPSS 20, focusing on descriptive statistics and scale reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.7 and Corrected Item-Total Correlation (CITC) ≥ 0.3).

Preliminary analysis results (Appendix 7) showed that most scales achieved reliability. Only the initial Social Interaction (SI) scale (4 items) had a very low Cronbach's Alpha (0.134). After CITC analysis and removing item SI2 ("I enjoy discussing with people who share an interest in this destination") due to a CITC of 0.079, the SI scale (remaining 3 items) achieved good reliability (Alpha = 0.775). Based on these results and further consultation with experts, the measurement scale was finalized, with 46 items remaining, for use in the main quantitative study (Table 3.1 of the dissertation).

3.5.2. Main quantitative study

The main quantitative research phase was implemented to collect large-scale empirical data and test the theoretical model and hypotheses. The study employed a cross-sectional design, collecting data once from 514 valid domestic tourists in 4 South Central coastal provinces/cities using a convenience sampling method and paper-based questionnaires (Appendix 8). Data were primarily analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software, due to its suitability for predictive objectives, ability to handle complex models with higher-order constructs (SMMA, TE, DL), and flexibility regarding data distribution requirements. Concurrently, SPSS 20 software was used for preprocessing steps.

Data analysis process includes:

(1) *Data preparation:* This involves coding, data entry, cleaning, and preliminary assessment for Common Method Bias (CMB). To test for CMB, this study applies three techniques concurrently, as recommended by leading experts (Kock & Lynn, 2012; Tehseen et al., 2017; Kock, 2015): (1) Harman's single-factor test; (2) The full collinearity test; and (3) Partialling out of general factor.

(2) *Measurement model assessment:* This step assesses reliability (Cronbach's Alpha, CR, Outer Loadings) and validity (Convergent – AVE; Discriminant – HTMT

from the results of bootstrapping with 5,000 samples) for all first-order constructs (FOCs) and second-order constructs.

(3) *Structural model assessment:* Following the confirmation of the measurement model, multicollinearity is tested using VIF. Higher-order constructs (SMMA, TE, DL) are processed using an embedded two-stage approach. Subsequently, Bootstrapping (5,000 samples) is employed to test hypotheses concerning direct and indirect effects (mediation roles of SA, TE). The moderating role of DT is tested using the interaction term method. Finally, the model's explanatory power (R^2) and predictive capability (PLSpredict: Q^2_predict, comparison of RMSE/MAE) are evaluated.

(4) *Additional analyses:* Conduct Importance - Performance map analysis (IPMA) for destination loyalty (DL) to identify priority antecedents and assess the influence of demographic control variables (Gender, Age, Income) on key endogenous variables.

Chapter 4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Sample description and research data

4.1.1. Demographic characteristics of the survey sample

The official survey sample (N=514) had a relatively balanced gender distribution (Male: 51.17%; Female: 48.83%). In terms of age, the sample was primarily concentrated in Gen Z (18-29 years: 42.02%) and Gen Y (30-39 years: 32.10%), who are active age groups with high social media usage. The majority of respondents (approximately 90%) had an income of 5 million VND/month or more, with the group earning over 10 million VND constituting the majority (54.28%), indicating good purchasing power for tourism. Data were collected from four destinations (Da Nang, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan) with relatively even distribution, enhancing the representativeness for the research area. Overall, the sample characteristics reflect a profile of young, socially active tourists with good income, consistent with the research objective concerning the impact of social media marketing and engagement on destination loyalty.

4.1.2. Preliminary data check and common method bias (CMB)

Prior to the formal model analysis, the dataset (N=514) was rigorously examined for the risk of Common Method Bias (CMB). Three diagnostic methods were applied concurrently. Firstly, Harman's single-factor test indicated that the variance explained by a single factor (37.038%) remained below the 50% threshold, suggesting that CMB was not a significant issue (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Secondly, the full collinearity test revealed that all VIF values for the constructs were below the recommended threshold of 3.3 (Kock, 2015), confirming the empirical distinctiveness of the constructs. Thirdly, the

partialling out of general factor technique demonstrated that the R^2 values of the endogenous constructs remained largely unchanged when controlling for common variance (Tehseen et al., 2017). The consistent results from these three methods reinforced the data's reliability for proceeding with PLS-SEM analyses.

4.2. Measurement model assessment

4.2.1. First-Order measurement model assessment

The evaluation of the first-order constructs (FOCs) measurement model was conducted rigorously, with results confirming that all scales met high standards for reliability and validity, thereby laying a robust foundation for subsequent analyses.

Regarding reliability and convergent validity, all scales demonstrated superior quality. Specifically, all 46 retained observed variables exhibited outer loadings greater than 0.8. The composite reliability (CR) values, ranging from 0.859 to 0.912, were all above 0.7. Concurrently, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs, ranging from 0.605 to 0.720, exceeded the threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2022). For discriminant validity, the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) method was preferentially employed. The results showed that all HTMT values between construct pairs were below the stringent threshold of 0.85, with the highest value being only 0.785 (Hair et al., 2022). These consistent findings confirm that each scale measures a distinct concept and that there is no significant overlap.

4.2.2. Overall (Second-Order) measurement model assessment

Following the confirmation of the first-order constructs, the overall measurement model, comprising the second-order constructs (HOCs) of SMMA, TE, and DL, was evaluated using the embedded two-stage approach. The results confirmed that the model met high standards for reliability and convergent validity, with all CR and AVE indicators significantly exceeding the recommended thresholds by Hair et al. (2022). For discriminant validity, the HTMT criterion was rigorously tested. All point HTMT values fell below the stringent threshold of 0.85. Although the bootstrap confidence intervals for a few theoretically similar construct pairs (SA-DL, TE-DL) slightly exceeded this threshold at the upper bound, they remained below 0.90, which is considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2022). Therefore, the overall measurement model is confirmed to be adequate, providing strong evidence that the theoretical concepts are empirically distinct and ready for structural model analysis.

4.3. Structural model assessment and hypothesis testing

4.3.1. Multicollinearity test (VIF)

The phenomenon of multicollinearity among predictive constructs in the overall structural model was checked using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The analysis results (Appendices 10.1, 10.2) showed that all VIF values were below the limit threshold

of 3.3, confirming that multicollinearity is not a significant concern, ensuring the stability and reliability of subsequent path coefficient estimates (Hair et al., 2022).

4.3.2. Results of testing direct, indirect, and moderating effects in the model

The results of the structural model testing (Table 4.6, Figure 4.2) showed that all hypotheses regarding direct effects (H1-H6) were supported ($p < 0.05$). Specifically, SMMA had a positive impact on SA, TE, and DL. Similarly, SA positively impacted TE and DL, and TE also positively impacted DL. In addition, indirect effects (H7a, H7b, H8) were also confirmed to be statistically significant, indicating that SA and TE play important mediating roles in channeling the influence of SMMA to TE and DL. Notably, destination trust (DT) was proven to have a strong and positive moderating role on all six tested relationships (H9-H14), affirming that trust enhances the positive impacts from SMMA, SA, and TE on the outcomes (Figures 4.3 - 4.8).

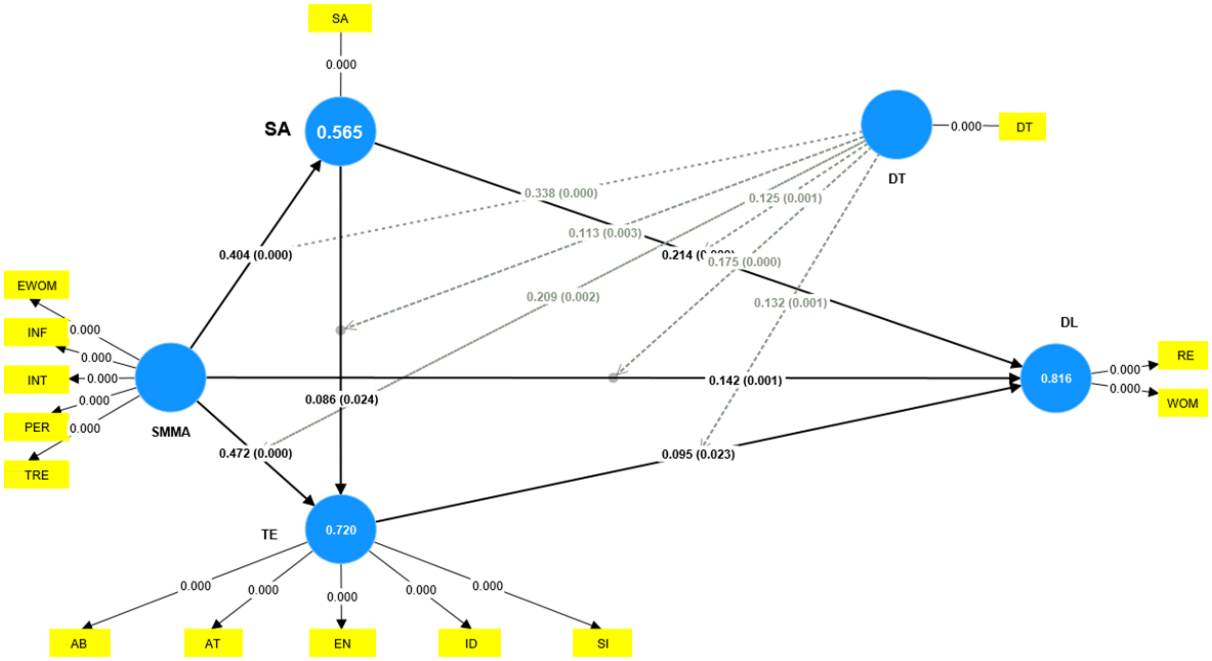

Figure 4.2: Results of impact analysis of factors in the research model

Table 4.6: Report of structural model results

Path	Hypothesis	Path Coefficient β	Standard Deviation (S.D)	t-value	p-value	Conclusion
Direct effects						
SMMA → SA	H1	0.404	0.040	10.134	0.000	Supported
SMMA → TE	H2	0.472	0.064	7.372	0.000	Supported
SA → TE	H3	0.086	0.038	2.255	0.024	Supported
SA → DL	H4	0.214	0.037	5.768	0.000	Supported
TE → DL	H5	0.095	0.042	2.278	0.023	Supported
SMMA → DL	H6	0.142	0.042	3.383	0.001	Supported

Indirect effects						
SMMA → SA → DL	H7a	0.086	0.018	4.868	0.000	Supported
SMMA → TE → DL	H7b	0.045	0.020	2.197	0.028	Supported
SMMA → SA → TE	H8	0.035	0.016	2.133	0.033	Supported
Moderating effects						
DT x SMMA → SA	H9	0.338	0.041	8.249	0.000	Supported
DT x SMMA → TE	H10	0.209	0.069	3.040	0.002	Supported
DT x SMMA → DL	H11	0.175	0.040	4.310	0.000	Supported
DT x SA → TE	H12	0.113	0.037	3.012	0.003	Supported
DT x SA → DL	H13	0.125	0.036	3.464	0.001	Supported
DT x TE → DL	H14	0.132	0.041	3.240	0.001	Supported
Explained Variance (Adjusted R^2)	R^2 (DL) = 0.813; R^2 (TE) = 0.718; R^2 (SA) = 0.562.					
Effect size (f^2)	f^2 SA → DL = 0.050; f^2 SA → TE = 0.005; f^2 SMMA → DL = 0.015; f^2 SMMA → SA = 0.064; f^2 SMMA → TE = 0.127; f^2 TE → DL = 0.006					

4.3.3. Assessment of the model's explanatory and predictive power

The overall performance of the proposed theoretical model was evaluated through its explanatory power and out-of-sample predictive capability. Regarding its explanatory power, the model demonstrated substantial strength, with adjusted R^2 values of 81.3% for DL, 71.8% for TE, and 56.2% for SA, respectively. Although the overall explanatory power is very high, the effect size (f^2) analysis revealed that most individual direct effects were small. This underscores that the model's strength stems from the complex interplay of the entire set of variables rather than from any single factor. In terms of predictive capability, the PLSpredict procedure confirmed the model's out-of-sample predictive relevance, with all Q^2predict values for the endogenous constructs being greater than zero (e.g., DL had a Q^2predict of 0.688). However, a more in-depth comparison showed that the prediction error (RMSE) of the PLS-SEM model was higher than that of the linear model (LM) for some indicators. Following the guidelines of Hair et al. (2022), this result indicates that the model possesses a medium level of predictive power, while also implying that it has successfully captured complex relationships. Overall, the model is

considered robust in terms of both its explanatory and predictive capacities.

4.4. Assessment of the influence of demographic control variables

To enhance the model's robustness, the study integrated demographic control variables (Gender, Age, Income) into the structural model. The analysis results (Table 4.7) show that all three of these control variables have direct, positive, and strongly statistically significant effects on DL. A comparison of the model before and after the inclusion of control variables (Table 4.8) reveals that, although the magnitude of some path coefficients for the main theoretical relationships and moderating effects decreased, most of them remained statistically significant, thus confirming the robustness of these effects. Notably, the R^2 of DL increased from 0.813 to 0.894 after introducing the control variables, whereas the R^2 values for TE and SA remained largely unchanged. This suggests that the demographic variables primarily explain additional variance in DL without significantly affecting the antecedents of TE and SA. Overall, the inclusion of control variables has strengthened the model and further clarified the reported effects.

4.5. Importance - Performance map analysis (IPMA)

IPMA analysis (Figures 4.10, 4.11) showed that SMMA and SA are the two factors with the highest importance (total effect) and fairly good performance for DL, identifying them as top priority areas. TE had the highest performance but lower importance, suggesting a supporting role. Destination Trust (DT) had the lowest performance and negligible importance (total linear IPMA effect); however, combined with its demonstrated strong moderating role, improving trust performance is an essential strategy to amplify the effectiveness of SMMA, SA, and TE on DL.

4.6. Discussion of research results

The empirical research findings have provided robust evidence in support of the proposed theoretical model, elucidating the complex mechanisms through which SMMA influence DL. First, the study confirms the strong role of SMMA as a Stimulus, with hypotheses H1, H2, and H6 all being supported. SMMA not only positively and directly impacts both Satisfaction (SA) and Tourist Engagement (TE) but also directly affects DL. This result is consistent with previous findings on the effectiveness of SMMA in enhancing customer awareness, attitudes, and behaviors (Chen & Lin, 2019; Yadav & Rahman, 2018).

Second, the study clarifies the role of internal states (Organism). The results support hypotheses H3, H4, and H5, showing that Satisfaction (SA) is both a strong direct predictor of loyalty and a crucial antecedent to Engagement (TE). Concurrently, TE was also confirmed to have a positive impact on DL. This finding reinforces theories of

satisfaction and engagement, affirming that cumulative satisfaction serves as a core foundation for both loyal behavior and a deeper state of engagement (Abbasi et al., 2022; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019).

Third, and as a significant contribution, the research has shed light on the complex mediating mechanisms. The results support hypotheses H7a, H7b, and H8, demonstrating that SMMA indirectly influences DL through both SA and TE, and also indirectly affects TE through SA. The successful validation of this parallel and sequential mediation model complements previous studies (Iqbal et al., 2023; Al-Dmour et al., 2023) by identifying diverse pathways of influence, emphasizing that the effectiveness of SMMA is primarily channeled through the creation of satisfaction and engagement.

The most prominent finding of this study is the strong and consistent moderating role of Destination Trust (DT). All six moderating hypotheses (H9-H14) were supported, indicating that trust amplifies the positive effects of SMMA on SA, TE, and DL; of SA on TE and DL; as well as of TE on DL. This result provides the first empirical evidence for the systematic moderating role of DT in the relationships between SMMA and psycho-behavioral outcomes, suggesting that trust acts as a "catalyst" that enhances the effectiveness of other factors.

The integration of demographic control variables (Gender, Age, Income) showed that they have a direct and significant impact on DL. Furthermore, controlling for these factors reinforced the robustness of the main theoretical relationships and significantly improved the explanatory power for DL.

Finally, the IPMA results reaffirm SMMA and SA as priority areas for improvement. They also suggest that enhancing the performance of trust (DT) is critically important, as it will amplify the effectiveness of resources invested in other factors.

Overall, the findings strongly support the extended S-O-R framework and provide new, profound insights into the formation mechanism of tourist loyalty in the digital era, particularly concerning the complex mediating roles of SA and TE and the boundary condition of DT.

Chapter 5. CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Summary of key research findings

This dissertation addresses theoretical gaps concerning the mechanism through which SMMA impacts destination loyalty (DL) in the context of Vietnam's coastal tourism by developing and successfully testing an integrated theoretical model. The key scientific contributions include elucidating a complex mediation mechanism, simultaneously validating both the parallel mediating roles of Satisfaction (SA) and Engagement (TE) as well as a more intricate sequential mediation mechanism along the path of SMMA → SA → TE. The most prominent theoretical contribution is the successful testing of the systematic moderating role of Destination trust (DT), positioning trust as a critical boundary condition capable of amplifying the effectiveness across the entire S-O-R chain of effects. Methodologically, the research also contributes by successfully operationalizing higher-order constructs (HOCs) for SMMA, TE, and DL. These findings provide a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the psychological drivers that build tourist loyalty in the digital era.

5.2. Theoretical implications

First, the research deconstructs the "black box" of the mediation mechanism by providing a multi-layered explanatory model. It demonstrates that the impact of SMMA is not a singular process but operates through two distinct psychological pathways: an affective pathway (via Satisfaction) and a relational pathway (via Engagement). Furthermore, the study clarifies the psychological progression along the SMMA → SA → TE path, establishing that satisfaction serves as a necessary prerequisite for fostering the deeper investment of engagement.

Second, the dissertation's core theoretical contribution is the reconceptualization of the role of Destination Trust (DT). This research shifts its conceptualization from an endogenous link in a causal chain to a fundamental boundary condition. It provides systematic evidence for trust's moderating role across the entire S-O-R continuum, revealing that trust functions as an "amplifying mechanism." This finding enriches Social Exchange Theory (SET) by empirically demonstrating that trust reduces psychological transaction costs, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of marketing stimuli.

Third, methodologically, the research contributes to conceptual clarity by

successfully operationalizing higher-order constructs (HOCs). Modeling SMMA, Engagement, and Loyalty as holistic constructs enables an assessment at a strategic level, rather than examining isolated tactics. This approach provides robust measurement models and enhances conceptual precision for future research in the field.

Fourth, the dissertation extends and validates the enduring relevance of the classic S-O-R framework within the contemporary digital tourism context. By successfully integrating variables from other theoretical foundations into a complex, empirically tested model, the research demonstrates the framework's robust explanatory power and flexibility in accounting for consumer behavior. This affirms that the stimulus-organism-response chain remains a potent explanatory lens, even in the intricate digital environment of an emerging market.

5.3. Practical implications and recommendations

The research findings provide important managerial implications and practical recommendations for enhancing marketing effectiveness and building sustainable tourist loyalty at coastal destinations in Central Vietnam and in similar contexts.

First, it is essential to develop an integrated and multifaceted SMMA strategy that coordinates its components (Information, Interaction, Personalization, Trendiness, and EWOM), with a particular priority on activities that create trends and encourage electronic word-of-mouth. Second, prioritizing the enhancement of overall tourist satisfaction (SA) is paramount. This requires alignment between promotional messages and the actual quality of the experience, along with the continuous improvement of touchpoints throughout the tourist journey. Third, TE should be nurtured as a foundation for long-term relationships through interactive activities, community building, and the creation of emotionally evocative content. Fourth, trust (DT) must be treated as a key strategic priority; measures to improve trust performance (e.g., ensuring safety, transparency, and responsibility) are essential for amplifying the effectiveness of SMMA, SA, and TE. Finally, an integrated performance measurement system should be established, which must go beyond superficial SMMA metrics to include assessments of SA, TE, DT, and the components of DL, in order to guide data-driven strategic decisions.

5.4. Contributions of the study

On the theoretical front, this dissertation offers multifaceted contributions. First, it deconstructs the "black box" of the mediation mechanism by providing empirical

evidence for the concurrent operation of both parallel mediation (via Satisfaction - SA and Engagement - TE) and sequential mediation (SA → TE), thus offering a more complex and realistic explanatory model of tourists' internal psychological processing. Second, its core contribution is the reconceptualization of the role of Trust (DT), establishing it not as an endogenous variable but as a fundamental boundary condition that functions as an "amplifying mechanism" across the entire S-O-R chain. Third, methodologically, the research successfully operationalizes higher-order constructs (HOCs), enabling the assessment of these multidimensional concepts at a strategic level. Finally, these findings collectively validate and extend the S-O-R framework within the contemporary digital tourism context.

On the practical front, the dissertation provides a comprehensive strategic management framework, equipping managers with an evidence-based decision-making process. Specifically, it guides managers in identifying priority investment areas based on IPMA analysis (with SMMA and SA as key levers), which then informs the development of a strategic action roadmap with phased managerial implications. Furthermore, it proposes a KPI system based on validated scales, allowing for the measurement of the true effectiveness of strategies and moving beyond superficial engagement metrics.

5.5. Limitations of the study

Despite achieving its stated objectives, this study has certain limitations. First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to infer causal relationships over time. Second, the use of a non-probability sampling method and the survey's scope, which was limited to domestic tourists at four destinations in the South Central Coast region, affects the generalizability of the findings to other segments and contexts. Third, the theoretical model, despite its high explanatory power (R^2 of DL = 0.813), may not encompass all potential factors, such as macro-level contexts or deeper individual psychological traits. Finally, the study primarily relied on self-reported survey data and did not leverage big data from social media, nor did it consider the impact of emerging technologies like AI or VR. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, expanding the sample scope, integrating new variables, and incorporating big data analytics methods.

5.6. Future research directions

Based on the findings and limitations of the current study, as well as existing theoretical gaps, several directions for future research are proposed. First, it is necessary to expand the research sample and diversify the context (e.g., by applying probability sampling, including international tourists, and examining other types of destinations) and to conduct cross-cultural comparisons (Jamaludin et al., 2018) to enhance generalizability. Second, future studies should further explore the moderating role of specific social media platforms/types and key opinion leaders (KOLs)/influencers on the relationships within the model (Rahman et al., 2023). Third, integrating new theoretical constructs such as Place Attachment (Stylos & Bellou, 2019), Value Co-creation mechanisms, Tourist Citizenship Behavior (Xu et al., 2021), as well as Emotional Synchrony and Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTE) (Jiang et al., 2022), could enrich the model. Fourth, applying technology and big data (e.g., sentiment analysis, AI, VR/AR) is recommended to gain deeper insights into and predict tourist behavior. Finally, there is a need to explore the impact of macro-environmental factors (e.g., economic conditions, policies, crises) on destination loyalty.

AUTHOR'S LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

International journals:

(1) Le Duc Tam, Ho Huy Tuu & Le Chi Cong (2024), "The Effect of Social Media Marketing on Tourist Loyalty: a Mediation-Moderation Analysis in the Tourism Sector under the Stimulus-Organism-Response Model", *Journal of Tourism and Services*, 15(29), pp. 294-319. https://doi.org/10.29036/jots.v15i29.914

(2) Pham Van Thong, Le Duc Tam ✉, Dang Thi Kim Thoa, Nguyen Thuy Linh & Tran Thi Nguyen Thao (2025), "Unveiling the impacts of eWOM on tourist revisit intention from a cognitive perspective: the moderating role of trade-offs", *Cogent Business & Management*, 12(1), 2452239. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2025.2452239

Domestic journals:

Le Duc Tam (2025), "The influence of service quality and eWOM on revisit intention to Phu Yen coastal tourism destinations: The role of trust and perceived value", *Journal of Social Sciences of Central Vietnam,* No. 02-2025, pp. 46-55.

International conferences:

(1) Le Duc Tam (2024), "The effect of social media marketing on destination loyalty: a mediation analysis", *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Contemporary Issues in Economics, Management and Business (CIEMB)*, Hanoi: National Economics University Publishing House, pp. 330-352.

(2) Le Duc Tam, Dang Hoang Xuan Huy (2024), "The impact of electric word of mouth on intention to revisit coastal tourism destinations in Phu Yen – Vietnam: an analysis of mediating and moderating roles", *Proceedings of the 3rd International Korkut Ata Scientific Research Conference*, Turkey: IKSAD Publishing House, pp. 653-660.

(3) Le Duc Tam, Dang Hoang Xuan Huy (2024), "The model of innovation and entrepreneurship in tourism in phu yen: drivers, challenges, and sustainable development solutions", *Proceedings of the 3rd International Korkut Ata Scientific Research Conference*, Turkey: IKSAD Publishing House, pp. 661-669.