Segmentation of Ethnic Tourists and Their Interaction Outcomes with Hosts in the Central Highlands, Vietnam

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Emphasizing interactions with ethnic minority hosts, this paper segments domestic tourists visiting Vietnam's Central Highlands based on their travel motivation. Three PERSONAS summarize profiles of *Explorers*, *Seekers*, and *Enjoyers* based on their socio-demographic and trip characteristics, especially differences in host-tourist interactions and perceptions of ethnic tourism outcomes. Such data informs decisions about what type of tourists villagers want to serve to achieve community aspirations. *Explorers* and *Seekers* were identified as the most suitable target groups to attain better interaction outcomes and make positive contributions to the local community. Tourism marketers and policymakers can use PERSONAS to develop campaigns to attract the targeted segments.

Keywords: Ethnic Tourists; Host-tourist Interaction Outcomes; Personas; Segmentation; Vietnam's Central Highlands

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INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2011) strongly suggests that no destination can establish a product development portfolio without an extensive system for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting visitor statistics, regular market research, and ad hoc studies into the scale, structure, profile, characteristics, and trends in major source markets. For successful destination management and planning, the destination management organization (DMO) needs to analyze markets, profile existing tourists, and identify potential tourists (Morrison, 2019).

Ethnic tourism is a vital tool to alleviate rural poverty (Lor et al., 2019) by helping to improve the local economy and assist in cultural heritage preservation and natural conservation (Sun et al., 2018; Yang, 2012; Yang & Wall, 2009). It also enhances social interaction between hosts and tourists by creating a space for mutual understanding (Su et al., 2014). Ethnic tourists play central roles in

minimizing negative cultural impacts and constructing a rewarding cross-cultural experience between themselves and ethnic minorities (Yang, 2012). However, positive outcomes only happen if tourists actively participate in on-site activities and are aware of cultural differences and how they respond to locals in different tourism settings (Fan et al., 2020a). Travel motivation is closely linked to tourist behaviors (MacInnes et al., 2022) and affects on-site experiences (Pearce, 2005). Therefore, tourist segmentation based on travel motivation helps local stakeholders understand what tourists seek and their preferences when prioritizing ethnic tourism markets (Yang, 2012).

Despite the rise of ethnic tourism in Asia, Cohen (2016) claims that existing studies of this topic are dominated by the Chinese context, while there is a lack of examination of ethnic tourism in other parts of mainland Southeast Asia – such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. The Central Highlands (*Tây Nguyên*) in the West and Southwest of Vietnam are well-known for their pristine natural resources and exotic ethnic culture but poor socioeconomic conditions. The region has been conventionally regarded as a 'remote', 'backward', or 'primitive' area (*vùng sâu vùng xa*) (Salemink, 2018). The percentage of ethnic minorities comprises 37.5% of the regional population, while within the Vietnamese population, ethnic minorities make up 14.6% (Government Electronic Information Portal, 2023). More specifically, this region has the highest diversity of ethnicities in Vietnam. However, there have been challenges in the region due to socio-political concerns since serious land and socio-economic conflicts between ethnic minority groups and Kinh people occurred after 1975 (*see* Dang & Nguyen, 2023). Diversity among ethnic minority groups is a core element of the *Master Plan for Tourism Development to 2020 with Vision to 2030* in the Central Highlands (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT), 2013), which aims to increase visitor numbers and preserve ethnic culture.

Recent research on ethnic tourism has focused on residents' perspectives to examine the process of (dis)empowerment between government, tourism developers, and villagers (Tian et al., 2021) or explore how ethnic communities respond to resilience in a tourism context (Tian et al., 2023). Most prior studies of host-tourist interactions have primarily concentrated on cultural differences between hosts and foreign tourists (Fan et al., 2020b; Loi & Pearce, 2015; Pearce et al., 1998; Reisinger & Turner, 1997, 2002). Reisinger and Turner (2003) argue that the degree of cultural difference between hosts and tourists varies from very little to extreme. In ethnic tourism, tourists interact with ethnic minorities who differ culturally, socially, or politically from the majority population (Cohen, 2001). Ethnic minority hosts and domestic tourists see each other as culturally different (Trupp, 2014). Furthermore, despite sharing a nation, hosts and domestic visitors from different subcultures may react differently to the same encounters (Loi & Pearce, 2015). Therefore, this study shifts attention to interactions between hosts and domestic tourists in ethnic tourism.

Domestic visitors dominate the Central Highlands' tourism market, accounting for 92.5% of all tourist arrivals (Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2022). After the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of domestic visitors made a remarkable recovery, with 8 million in 2022, nearly reaching the pre-pandemic level of 8.9 million recorded in 2019. The current state of the Central Highlands' tourism industry depends much on the domestic market. However, regional tourism is still

under-developed despite great potential (Duong et al., 2022). By profiling the existing domestic market, this study aims to identify ethnic tourist segments visiting the Central Highlands to inform decisions about the type of visitors villagers want to prioritize. In this vein, tourism marketers and local policymakers can design ethnic tourism products that best suit domestic market preferences and match the local community's capacity and aspirations. Two research questions drove the present study;

1. What travel motivation-based segments can be identified within the domestic ethnic tourist market to Vietnam's Central Highlands, and
2. Which segment(s) should be selected as target market(s) in developing ethnic tourism that contribute(s) to improved interaction outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic Tourists as the Other

Ethnic tourism is marketed as a form of tourism motivated by the search for 'quaint' customs and 'exotic' cultural experiences through interaction with a distinctive ethnic minority (Smith, 1989; Yang, 2012). Tourists expect to pursue tourism activities that bring them closer to the ethnic host's values (Lama & Sarkhel, 2022). However, Yang and Wall (2009) argue that ethnic tourists are not only traveling to observe and explore 'exotic' culture but that the category of ethnic tourists includes those who consume ethnic products and services at visitor attractions. Similarly, Moscardo and Pearce (1999) found that ethnic tourist groups behave differently at a destination regarding cross-cultural interactions and preferred tourism experiences.

According to the 'host gaze' concept, ethnic people gaze at tourists as the *Other* visiting their villages. There is always a distance between hosts and tourists due to their cultural backgrounds (Fan et al., 2017; Pearce et al., 1998). The distance influences how both groups gaze at each other and how they interact (Moufakkir & Reisinger, 2013; Tasci & Severt, 2017). For the scope of this study, information about tourist markets can be useful in portraying a full picture of the *Other* that helps the hosts answer: *"who are the Others visiting our village?"* As a result, the hosts may have a better understanding of which market segments to prioritize and which ethnic tourism products best meet the needs of these tourists, thus maximizing the benefits from ethnic tourism.

Internationally, a few studies present brief characteristics of ethnic tourists and their preferences and ethnic tourism satisfaction (Table 1), but the body of research is still limited. Earlier research (e.g., Moscardo & Pearce, 1999; Smith, 1989; Xie & Wall, 2002) showed that tourists seemed less interested in direct interactions with hosts, whereas later studies indicate an increase in tourist desire for interacting and participating in different ethnic tourism activities. However, some tourists are disappointed with those interactions, which were most likely caused by a mismatch between the information tourists received prior to arrival and what they encountered at the ethnic destination (Bott, 2018; Trupp, 2014). By focusing on host-tourist interactions, the current study attempts to understand how different tourist groups interact with the hosts in the ethnic tourism context and whether tourist experience outcomes

differ between these groups. Empirically, this study will assist both ethnic villagers and DMOs in better understanding the market in order to provide greater experience outcomes for both tourists and the destination community.

Year	Author	Destination	Ethnic minority groups	Methodology	Ethnic tourist characteristics/profile
1989	Smith	Alaskan Arctic	Eskimo	n/a	• Seldom demanding or critical • Few tourists have face-to-face interaction with Eskimos
1999	Moscardo and Pearce	Australia	Tjapukai Aboriginal people	Quantitative method (1,556 surveys)	• Four ethnic tourist groups: the *Ethnic Tourism Connection*, the *Passive Cultural Learning*, the *Ethnic Products and Activities*, and the *Low Ethnic Tourism* group of all ages; • Both international and domestic tourists; • High levels of interest in ethnic tourism products and experiences across all four groups; • Little interest in direct interaction with Aboriginal people.
2002	Xie and Wall	Hainan, China	Li	Quantitative method (586 surveys)	• Both international and domestic tourists: Over 95% of respondents are Han (from mainland China); • Mostly in package tours and pay most expenses prior to the trip, visit the folk village as a part of recreational programme; • Brief interaction with the hosts; • Interested in ethnic cultures but little knowledge of ethnicity.
2012	Yang	Yunnan, China	Mousuo	Qualitative (55 interviews) and quantitative (274 surveys) methods	• Only domestic tourists: 97.1% are Han Chinese; • Majority of tourists' ages ranged 20-40, 60.2 % married, 67.9% had university or higher degrees, almost all respondents stayed overnight in the area; • Cultural authenticity is not generally a concern for tourists who are mainly in search of enjoyment or relaxation; • High satisfaction rating for natural environment, ethnic villages, architecture, cultural shows and guesthouses/inns
2013	Pratt et al.	North East Fiji	Indigenous Fijians	Qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews,	• Only international tourists; • Be adventurous, desire interaction, seek education and want authenticity; • Tourists experienced a unique in-

				personal observation, and review of personal travel blogs	sight into indigenous Fijian culture, feels life-changing, knew the difference between a *'need'* and a *'want'*.
2014	Trupp	Thailand	Akha and Karen	Qualitative: 28 villager interviews and participant observation	• Akha village (Jorpakha): • Entirely international tourists; • Most tourists participate organised tour, average length of visiting: 15 minutes; • Tourism activities: photographing, souvenir purchasing, excursion tour or tribal village tours. • Karen village (Muang Pham): • Both Thai tourists and international; • Average length of visiting of several hours; at least 90% of tourists stay overnight; • Tourism activities: elephant riding, bamboo rafting, visiting the caves, weaving products observing, homestay, multiple-day trekking or jungle tours.
2018	Bott	Sapa, Vietnam	Ethnic/ Indigenous women (e.g., Red Dao, Hmong)	Mixed methods: ethnographic fieldwork, review online publications, participant observation, semistructured interviews (12 participants)	• Tourist market: domestic, Asian (predominantly Chinese) and Western tourists; • Tourism activities: handicraft purchasing, homestay, and trekking tours; • Tourists experienced disappointment because of the loss of 'authentic' lifestyles and behaviours of Indigenous women who were not faithfully replicating their portrayals as passive and innocent as in advertisements and guidebooks.
2023	Zhang and Xu	Yunnan, China	Naxi	Qualitative: in-depth interviews (42 participants) and on-site observation	• Tourist market: only domestic (Han) tourists • Ethnic tourism activities occurred at home businesses in Baisha Village: homestays, home restaurants, home visits. • Focusing on power dynamics in host-tourist interactions rather than tourist experiences. Role relationship between hosts and tourists varied in different settings: host-guest in the home setting, provider-consumer in the commercial setting, and insider-outsider in the ethnic culture setting.

Table 1. Selected studies about ethnic tourists. *Source*: Compiled by the authors

Travel Motivation

Motivation is fundamental in tourism studies and acts as a driving force behind all tourist behaviors (Pearce, 2019). Predicated on the premise that visitors have more than one level of travel motivation and that their motivational patterns will change with travel experience, Pearce and Lee (2005) developed the Travel Career Pattern (TCP) model. According to the concept of TCP, travel motivation encompasses three layers. The core motivation layer includes *novelty, escape/relaxation*, and strengthening *relationships*. The middle motivation layer is moderately important, including external (e.g., *nature* seeking and *host-site involvement*) and internal (e.g., *self-actualization, personal (self) development*, and *stimulation*) motivations. In the outer layer are the least important motivations; *romance, autonomy, security, recognition, isolation*, and *nostalgia*. It is noted in the TCP that tourists are driven to travel by multiple biological and socio-cultural motives, and the patterns of travel motivations shift within a layer and/or among layers as the travel experience increases (Pearce, 2005).

Travel motivation is linked to preferences for tourism activities, subsequently affecting destination choice and on-site visitor experiences (Li et al., 2021). In the ethnic tourism context, 'true' ethnic visitors are motivated to actively interact with locals and experience the local way of life (Xie & Wall, 2002), while other visitors may travel to enjoy local scenery, ethnic architecture, and local lodging (Yang, 2012). With multiple travel motivations, the order of importance influences how involved visitors interact with hosts at ethnic sites (Pearce, 2019; Wall & Mathieson, 2006).

Interacting with Hosts as Travel Motivation

Pearce (2005) showed that *host-site involvement* is one of four central motivation factors that can be understood as the 'skeleton' of travel motivation. Host-tourist interaction is a core element of ethnic tourism (Wong et al., 2019). Su et al.'s work (2014) indicated that an ethnic encounter is a primary motivation for tourists to visit an ethnic destination and contributes to a satisfactory on-site experience.

The interaction occurs in different physical settings with diverse content reflecting a range of intensity levels (de Kadt, 1979; Su et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017). The greater the cultural distance, the more tourists are motivated to interact with the locals (Fan et al., 2017). Yet, the more contact tourists have, the more negative feelings can be generated due to interaction difficulties (Nguyen et al., 2023; Reisinger & Turner, 2003). While 'quaint' customs and 'exotic' culture may satisfy tourists' motivations of *novelty seeking* and *host-site involvement,* they can cause adverse outcomes in host-tourist interactions, thereby influencing tourists' attitudes as well as behavioral intentions towards the hosts and the destination.

A mismatch between ethnic resources and the targeted market has often been reported, leading to a gradual loss of authenticity in ethnic cultural resources, overcrowding, over-commercialization (Yang & Wall, 2009), and misunderstanding of ethnic resources being promoted (Wong et al., 2022). Therefore, identifying tourist segments based on travel motivations is necessary to better understand the extent of tourists' on-site experiences and outcomes among different segments. Concerning host-tourist interaction, motivation-based segmentation also helps to explore

whether there are differences in tourists' interaction outcomes between those who are motivated to interact with the locals and those who are not. Such information can be used by the villagers and DMOs to develop a market segmentation strategy that maximizes positive tourist experiences and minimizes negative tourism impacts on the hosts and the destination.

Segmentation

As Dolnicar stated, "tourists are not all the same" (2008, p. 129); therefore, the tourist market to an ethnic destination can and will be heterogeneous. Market segmentation is used as a strategic tool to better understand the characteristics of tourism market segments, whether they are labeled as geo-travelers (Boley & Nickerson, 2013), ecotourists, sustainable tourists, environmentally friendly tourists (Dolnicar et al., 2008), cultural tourists (McKercher, 2002), or ethnic tourists (Pearce & Moscardo, 1999). Without a clear understanding of the target markets' characteristics and their travel motivations to a particular destination, marketing efforts are less effective (Morrison, 2019).

There are two main categories of tourist market segmentation: a *priori* (common sense) and *posteriori* (post hoc, data-driven) (Formica & Uysal, 2001). According to Dolnicar (2008), a *priori* segmentation splits tourists into segments based on selected descriptors that are known in advance and can be driven by experience with the local market or practical considerations. By contrast, *post hoc* segmentation uses multivariate analyses to seek similar response rating patterns across a range of variables. Although a *priori* approach is the most common form of segmentation (Dolnicar, 2008), Haley (1995) criticizes this approach as being merely descriptive and common variables used (e.g., geographic, demographic) are poor predictors of behavior.

To date, research on tourist segmentation in the ethnic tourism context is still scarce, with the exception of Moscardo and Pearce's work (1999). By conducting *post hoc* segmentation, this study will classify different tourist groups on the basis of the importance they place on various motivations for visiting an ethnic destination, especially interacting with the locals. Furthermore, this study will explore whether tourist experience outcomes differ among these groups.

METHODOLOGY

The study applied a quantitative approach to collect data from domestic tourists visiting the Central Highlands via both on-site and online (QR code via Qualtrics platform) questionnaires. Apart from the introduction, the questionnaire consisted of four sections: general visit information (including travel motivation), characteristics of host-tourist interaction, evaluation of overall ethnic tourism experiences, and personal information. All items were adapted from relevant studies. More specifically, 13 items related to travel motivation of the general visitation information were adapted from the Travel Career Pattern (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Items regarding host-tourist interaction include physical settings (10 items) (Bott, 2018; Carneiro et al., 2018; Carneiro & Eusébio, 2012; Zhang et al., 2017), the content of interaction (21 items) (Bott, 2018; de Kadt, 1979; Fan et al., 2017; Su et al., 2014; Su & Wall, 2010; Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2013), interaction difficulties (32 items) (Loi & Pearce, 2015; Oktadiana et al., 2016;

Pearce et al., 1998; Pearce & Cronen, 1980), and quality of interaction (5 items) (Fan et al., 2017). Items regarding overall ethnic tourism experiences include tourists' attitudes and intentional behaviors (4 items) (Stylidis, 2020; Su & Wall, 2010; Wong et al., 2019) and their perceptions of long-term ethnic tourism outcomes (8 items) (Redicker & Reiser, 2017; Su & Wall, 2010; Xie & Wall, 2002; Yang et al., 2013).

The questionnaire was translated from English to Vietnamese to reach the target population. Back-translation was undertaken by two Vietnamese scholars to validate the questionnaire. The first author conducted a fieldtrip in Vietnam's Central Highlands from December 2020 to March 2021. The Central Highlands is a multi-ethnic region with a diverse culture and customs. Four ethnic places in the region (Kon Ko Tu, Buon Don, Lak, and Lac Duong) (Figure 1) were chosen based on their different ethnicities, levels of community participation in local tourism, and tourism development stages.

A convenience sampling method was employed by approaching domestic visitors in the four ethnic sites, specifically home-visits, homestays, local food and beverage establishments, gong venues, tourist attraction points, and public areas. All respondents were gifted a key chain with a unique ethnic culture design and a mini 'thank you' card. Respondents who could not undertake the on-site survey still received the key chain and a QR code to link to the online version of the questionnaire via Qualtrics platform for completion later. After approaching 520 domestic visitors, a total number of 474 questionnaires were collected, of which 438 (192 on-site and 246 via QR code) were valid and used for data analysis.

Figure 1. Map of four ethnic sites in the Central Highlands, Vietnam. *Source*: Drawn by the first author and Le Nguyen Vu, 2023

The importance ratings for the travel motivation question were used to segment respondents. The k-means cluster analysis in SPSS Statistics 28.0 was used to group domestic visitors based on their travel motivations. Chi-square and one-way ANOVA tests were undertaken to examine differences between clusters regarding demographic and trip characteristics, their interactions with hosts, and tourism experience outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tourist Segments based on Travel Motivations

This study employed direct *k*-means clustering of original travel motivation items to carry out market segmentation. The study used 13 out of 14 TCP motivations (Pearce & Lee, 2005) relevant to the ethnic tourism context. More specifically, *relationship (security)* used in the original work (Pearce & Lee, 2005) was excluded from the questionnaire because the authors considered its potential sensitivity to cultural differences. It can be problematic to ask domestic visitors about "feeling personally safe and secure" when travelling to ethnic villages in the intra-national context as it may reinforce stereotypes held by the majority population, who may view ethnic minority villagers as inferior (Nguyen, 2021).

By running *k*-means cluster analysis, two, three, and four cluster solutions were examined. The three-cluster solution was selected because it provided a relatively even spread of respondents and the clearest interpretation. The three clusters were named *Explorers*, *Seekers*, and *Enjoyers* based on the mean scores on travel motive items (Table 2). The *Explorers* were the smallest segment (27.9%) and rated the middle layer of travel motivations (*self-actualization, self-development, nature* and *host-site involvement*) highest. This segment was labelled as *Explorers* because they can be described as 'true' ethnic visitors based on their strong motives for exploring local natural and cultural values.

Seekers were the second largest segment (35.8%), with high ratings for most motivations, including core (4.59 – 4.61), middle (3.97 – 4.45), and outer layers (3.4 – 4.55) of travel motivations. Their ratings were higher than the other segments in all motivations, reflecting that they sought many things in their trip. They were especially motivated by "taking a rest or escaping daily routine" (*escape,* 4.69) and "viewing local natural scenery" (*nature*, 4.67). Notably, they rated the importance of "learning about ethnic minority culture" (4.04) and "interacting with local people" (3.95) as high as *Explorers* and significantly higher than *Enjoyers*.

The last group – *Enjoyers* – is the largest segment (36.3%) and they rated core motives as most important – such as *escape* (4.69), strengthening *relationship* (4.61), and *novelty* (4.59). "Interacting with local people" (*host-site involvement)* and "learning about ethnic minority culture" (*self-development)* were both rated as the least important (2.93) and significantly lower than the other two segments.

Who are the Others visiting the Central Highlands?

There were no statistical differences across the three segments in gender and ethnicity variables, but significant differences were found in other demographic variables (Table 3).

	Motivation	Total	Clusters			
				Mean rating		Post hoc
	Items	100%	1 (27.9%)	2 (35.8%)	3 (36.3%)	
			Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	
Core motivation	Strengthening relationships with others (family, friends, colleagues)	4.39	3.61	**4.61**	**4.78**	SE & EN > EX
	Experiencing something new and different	4.29	3.68	4.59	4.46	SE & EN > EX
	Taking a rest or escaping my daily routine	4.22	3.54	**4.69**	**4.30**	SE > EN > EX
Middle layer	Viewing local natural scenery	4.39	**4.03**	4.67	4.38	SE > EN > EX
	Learning about ethnic minority culture	3.68	**4.04**	**4.13**	2.93	SE & EX > EN
	Interacting with local people	3.60	**3.95**	3.97	2.93	SE & EX > EN
	Gaining a new perspective on life	4.03	**4.11**	**4.45**	3.50	SE > EX > EN
	Experiencing thrills and excitement	3.96	3.52	**4.37**	3.82	SE > EN > EX
Outer layer	Having others know that I have been here	3.25	2.55	3.4	3.64	SE & EN > EX
	Experiencing something romantic	2.72	2.35	3.79	1.88	SE > EX > EN
	Doing things my own ways	3.13	3.28	**4.19**	1.92	SE > EX > EN
	Feeling at peace and calm	3.96	3.65	**4.55**	3.56	SE > EX & EN
	Thinking about and reflecting about good times and past memories	3.05	2.83	**4.12**	2.09	SE > EX > EN

Note. *Rating scale ranged from 1 = Very unimportant to 5 = Very important*
Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

Table 2. Motivation-based segments of ethnic visitors to the Central Highlands. *Source*: Elaborated by the authors

Explorers were aged 21-30 years (38.8%) and well-educated (with 55.2% holding undergraduate and 21.6% postgraduate degrees). They were mostly students or employed in small-scale family businesses or by the government, with low (under 5m VND/month) (25.9%) to medium income (5-10 m VND/month) (22.1%). They had a moderate level of previous travel experience.

Seekers were mostly between the ages of 21 and 30 (45%) and had undergraduate-level education (66.4%). Most of this group were employed in small-scale family businesses or as office staff with a high income of 10-18m VND/month (34.2%). They had a lot of previous travel experience.

Enjoyers were in an older age group of 31 – 40 (43.7%) and had lower education levels (under/high school with 47%). They were mostly employed in small-scale family businesses and as casual workers, with a medium income of 5-10m VND/month (58.3%). They tended to have less travel experience.

Profile variable	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	x^2	p-value
	Percentage				
Gender				5.256	.511
Male	38.8	43.0	45.7		
Female	59.5	55.0	54.3		
Non-binary/third gender	1.7	1.3	0.0		
Prefer not to say	0.0	0.7	0.0		
Age				19.272	0.037
Under 20 or 20	2.6	2.7	0.0		
21-30	38.8	45.0	31.1		
31-40	32.8	40.3	43.7		
41-50	19.0	8.7	17.9		
51-60	6.0	2.0	6.0		
Over 60	0.8	1.3	1.3		
Marital status				41.316	<.001
Married	41.4	43.6	64.9		
Living with another	37.9	24.8	9.9		
Single	13.8	28.2	19.2		
Divorced/Separated	4.3	2.7	4.6		
Widowed	2.6	0.7	1.3		
Place of origin				75.483	<.001
Hanoi	7.8	10.7	11.3		
Ho Chi Minh	20.7	34.9	15.9		
Da Nang	4.3	4.7	0.0		
Khanh Hoa/Nha Trang	4.3	4.7	5.3		
Kon Tum/Kon Tum	2.6	2.7	9.9		
Gia Lai/Plaiku	4.3	2.0	5.3		
Dak Lak/Buon Ma Thuot	11.2	6.0	21.2		
Dak Nong/Gia Nghia	1.7	2.7	9.9		
Lam Dong/Da Lat	23.3	14.1	10.6		
Other	19.8	17.5	10.6		
Ethnicity				19.219	.378
Kinh	95.7	91.3	90.1		
Other	4.3	8.7	9.9		

Profile variable	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	x^2	p-value
	Percentage				
Education level				103.164	<.001
Primary, secondary school, or high school	11.2	11.4	47.0		
Diploma	12.1	12.1	22.5		
Undergraduate	55.2	66.4	27.8		
Graduate and higher	21.6	10.1	2.6		
Occupation				80.087	<.001
Governmental/Provincial employee	12.9	9.4	10.6		
Office staff	18.1	25.5	14.6		
Small-scale family business	25.0	29.5	37.7		
Causal workers	3.4	4.0	20.5		
Farmers	1.7	2.0	6.0		
Students	25.0	17.4	2.0		
Retired	0.9	1.3	4.6		
Other (Please specify)	12.9	10.7	4.0		
Income per month (VND)				45.646	<0.001
Less than 5,000,000 or 5,000,000	25.9	22.1	9.3		
5,000,001 - 10,000,000	37.9	28.9	58.3		
10,000,001 - 18,000,000	16.4	34.2	26.5		
Above 18,000,000	19.8	14.8	6.0		
Travelling experience within last 3 years				39.275	<.001
No any trip	2.8	2.9	4.6		
1-3 Trips	33.0	28.8	29.1		
4-6 Trips	29.2	18.0	39.7		
7-10 Trips	22.6	20.9	17.9		
11-15 Trips	4.7	12.2	6.6		
16-20 Trips	2.8	9.4	2.0		
21 or more	4.7	7.9	0.0		

Table 3. Segments' profile by demographic informations. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Trip Planning Characteristics

Most respondents in the *Explorers* group visited for holiday/leisure (50.9%), and they were most likely of all three segments to be on a business/professional trip (23.3%). They are more likely to visit Lam Dong (86.2%) with friends (41.4%) or alone (19%) (Table 4). While *Seekers* and *Enjoyers* were most likely to travel for holiday/leisure (65.1% and 66.2%, respectively), Enjoyers were significantly more likely than the other two segments to visit friends/family (27.8%). *Seekers* were more likely to visit Lam Dong (85.2) with a group of friends (55.7%), while *Enjoyers* were more likely to travel to Dak Lak (88.7%) with family (54.3%). *Seekers* were more likely to buy tour packages (27.5%), whereas *Enjoyers* (94.7%) were most likely to have arranged the trip to the Central Highlands by themselves.

While all three segments tended to use social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Tripadvisor, personal blog) as one of the main sources of information, *Enjoyers* (79.5%) were more likely to do so than *Explorers* (56.9%) and *Seekers* (67.1%). Additionally, *Explorers* and *Enjoyers* were significantly more likely to have traveled to the region based on their previous experience and word-of-mouth. Meanwhile, *Seekers* were more likely to search for information via advertising, travel articles or documentaries (42.3%) and travel agents (10.7%).

Variables (N = 416)	Variables	Explorers	Seekers (Percentage)	Enjoyers	$\chi2$	p-value
					52.461	<.001
	Holiday/leisure	50.9	65.1	66.2		
	Business/professional	23.3	11.4	4.6		
Main purpose of visit	Events	4.3	0.7	1.3		
	Visit friends and family	11.2	14.8	27.8		
	Other	10.3	8.1	0.0		
	Kon Tum (N=152)	26.7	40.9	39.7	6.729	.035
	Gia Lai (N=61)	8.6	18.1	15.9	4.991	.082
Visited place	Dak Lak (N=289)	57.8	59.1	88.7	41.557	<.001
	Dak Nong (N=31)	5.2	7.4	9.3	1.600	.449
	Lam Dong (N=332)	86.2	85.2	69.5	15.556	<.001
Source of information	Been here before (N=228)	45.7	53.7	62.9	7.975	.019
	Word of mouth (N=259)	53.4	46.3	84.8	52.525	<.001
	Travel agents or tour wholesalers (N=25)	6.0	10.7	1.3	11.766	.003
	Advertising, travel article or documentaries (TV, radio, movies) (N=143)	32.8	42.3	27.8	7.145	.028
	Travel book, guide or brochure (N=25)	9.5	9.4	0	15.157	<.001
	Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Trip advisor, personal blog) (N=286)	56.9	67.1	79.5	15.849	<.001
	Online websites (N=33)	11.2	8.7	4.6	4.078	.130
Travel companion	Alone (N=40)	19.0	8.7	3.3	18.71	<.001
	With family (N=163)	28.4	32.2	54.3	23.135	<.001
	With incentive trip (company) (N=47)	19.8	10.1	6	12.939	.002
	With a group of friends (N=197)	41.4	55.7	43.7	6.634	.036
	With tour group (N=24)	9.5	8.1	0.7	11.617	.003
Trip arrangement [a]					33.281	<.001
	Independent	74.1	70.5	94.7		
	Package	22.4	27.5	5.3		

Note. [a] The *'Other'* variable was excluded since 3 cells (50%) have expected count less than 5.

Table 4. Trip planning. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

In terms of trip characteristics (Table 5), *Explorers* most often used a bus to get to their destination (45.7%) and traveled around by taxi (25%) or on foot (26.7%). Even though most respondents stayed overnight when visiting ethnic sites, *Explorers* (85.3%) and *Seekers* (87.2%) were most likely to stay overnight. Particularly, *Explorers* usually stayed 1-2 nights (75.8%), with more opting for two-night than one night. During the trip, they mainly spent on meals and transportation instead of accommodation.

Seekers also used bus as the most common mode of transportation to the Central Highlands. They were more likely than the other segments to travel around by bus (22.8%). They usually stayed 2-3 nights and mainly spent money on meals and accommodation during their trip. Importantly, they tended to have higher expenditure on various on-site tourism services than the other two segments.

Enjoyers mostly traveled by private/rental car (40.4%). Understandably, more than one-half of the *Enjoyers* (53%) used private/rental cars to get around the destination. *Enjoyers* mostly stayed one night (38.1%) and spent most of their money on accommodation. This can be explained by our fieldtrip observations, which showed that *Enjoyers* were more inclined to stay either at a local resort or drive into the town center to stay at a modern, luxury hotel.

Information (N = 416)	Variables	Explorers	Seekers (Percentage)	Enjoyers	$x2$	p-value
					41.942	<.001
Transportation mode to the Central Highlands (N = 416)	Airplane	11.2	15.4	10.6		
	Bus	45.7	48.3	23.8		
	Private/Rental Car	25.9	16.8	40.4		
	Motorbike	13.8	18.8	25.2		
	Other	3.4	0.7	0		
Transportation mode within the Central Highlands [a] (N = 416)	Bus (N=56)	18.1	22.8	0.7	34.579	<.001
	Private/rental car (N=158)	30.2	28.9	53.0	22.688	<.001
	Taxi (N=71)	25.0	16.8	11.3	8.766	.012
	Motorbike (N=211)	54.3	52.3	46.4	1.906	.386
	On foot (N=79)	26.7	20.1	11.9	9.543	.008
Stay overnight (N = 416)	Yes	85.3	87.2	69.5	17.465	<.001
	No	14.7	12.8	30.5		
Length of stay (N=333)	1 night	26.3	14	38.1	39.156	<.001
	2 nights	49.5	48.1	27.6		
	3 nights	9.1	28.7	25.7		
	4-6 nights	8.1	4.7	7.6		
	7-10 nights	2.0	2.3	1		
	11 nights or above	5.0	2.2	0		
Tour package (VND) (N=72)	Less than 3,000,000 or 3,000,000	37.5	10	12.5	14.06	.080
	3,000,001 - 5,000,000	33.3	32.5	25		
	5,000,001 - 7,000,000	16.7	40	25.0		
	7,000,001 - 10,000,000	8.3	17.5	37.5		
	Above 10,000,000	4.2	0	0		
Separated expenditure (Average expenditure of the whole group in thousand VND)	Accommodation, including any meals & drinks where you are staying and any amount (N = 270)	804	1,145	1,335	F = 4.017	.019
	Meals, drinks, and food (N = 333)	1,249	1,463	869	F = 10.202	<.001
	Tourism, entertainment, events and other leisure activities (N = 333)	446	780	410	F = 10.117	<.001
	Tour guides/tour services (N = 334)	109	143	81	F = 1.588	.206
	Transport, such as taxis, public transport, petrol, car hire and vehicle repair (N = 337)	944	799	629	F = 2.843	.060
	Retail Shopping - such as souvenirs, gifts, books, clothing, etc. (N= 335)	525	739	533	F = 2.428	.090
	Any other Expenses (N = 336)	259	308	201	F = 1.350	.261

Note. [a] The 'Bike' variable was excluded since 3 cells (50%) have expected count less than 5.

Table 5. Trip characteristics. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

## Characteristics of Host-visitor Interactions

Physical settings in which visitors interacted with the hosts

Explorers and *Seekers* were significantly more likely than *Enjoyers* to interact in settings which were associated with ethnic culture (Figure 2). For instance, 55% of *Seekers* and 48.3% of *Explorers*, visited traditional dancing/Gong venues, compared to only 8.6%

of *Enjoyers*. Similarly, 42.3% of *Seekers* and 32.8% of *Explorers* interacted with hosts at a traditional communal house, while only 10.6% of *Enjoyers* did. Notably, no significant differences were found in the likelihood of visiting a private house across the three segments.

The proportion of *Enjoyers* interacting with local people was significantly higher in commercial settings; food and beverage establishments (80.8%) vs. 54.3% for *Explorers* and 71.1% for *Seekers*, tourist attraction points (82.1%) compared to 59.5% for *Explorers* and 68.5% for *Seekers*, and local commercial shops (67.5%) compared to 49.1% for *Explorers* and 58.4% for *Seekers*.

More than one-half of *Enjoyers* (57.6%) interacted with the locals on tours. *Seekers* and *Explorers* seemed to interact more frequently with ethnic people at local markets (46.3%, 38.8% respectively) or on the street (48.3%, 44.8% respectively) than the *Enjoyers* (both around 19%).
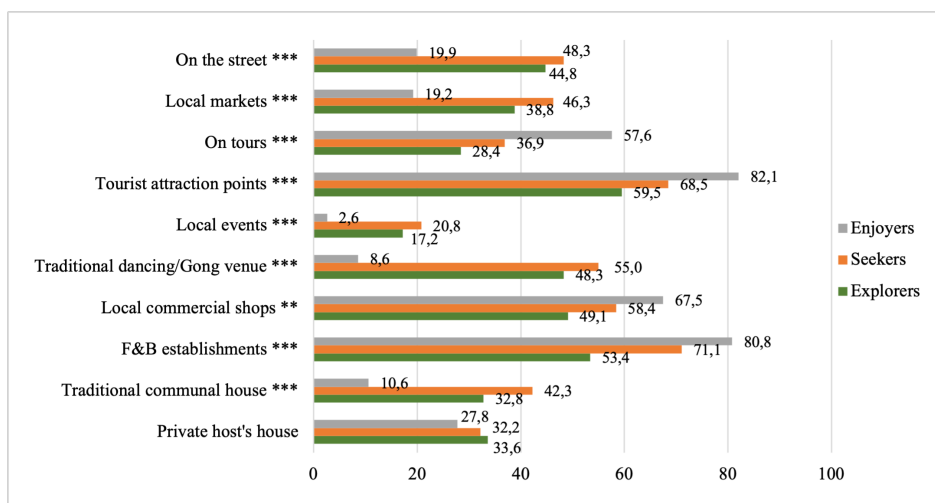
Note. n = 416, ** p = .01, *** p < .001

Figure 2. Physical settings in which visitors interacted with hosts. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Content of interactions that visitors had with the hosts

Table 6 compares three segments on the content of, and satisfaction with, interaction with the hosts. *Explorers* tended to interact with the locals at all ranges of intensity levels. Remarkably, they tended to have more intense interactions, e.g., exchanging personal contact with hosts (43.4%), than the other two segments. They were most likely to interact with locals in commercial encounters, e.g., tasting food and beverages (91.3%), participating in Gong performances (46.6%) or local events (29.6%) but were less satisfied with these encounters. A possible explanation can be that *Explorers* were well-educated and focused on host-site involvement as a motivation. Thus, they might be more demanding of the hosts when engaging in such interactions.

No significant differences were found in terms of interactions with hosts when purchasing goods and services and talking to local guides during tours. Yet, more than

90% of each segment interacted with hosts when purchasing goods and services. In such commercial interactions, *Seekers* were more satisfied than *Explorers* and *Enjoyers*.

Seekers were more likely to interact with hosts at all ranges of intensity levels like *Explorers,* yet they were mostly pleased with all interaction activities. Interestingly, they were even satisfied with low-intensity interactions, such as observing the local way of life (mean = 4.04), photographing with hosts (4.02), or observing Gong performances and local events (4.14).

Enjoyers were the least likely to interact with locals at all intensity levels. Their on-site tourism activities were similar to those of 'excursion tourism' or 'tribal village tour' groups found in Jorpakha, Thailand (Trupp, 2014). They were slightly satisfied with these interactions except for those occurring in Gong performances, local events, or handicraft-making venues. They have the lowest satisfaction ratings for short chats with villagers (3.35) and seeking local travel recommendations (3.49).

	Content of interactions	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	χ^2	p-value	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	ANOVA F	p-value	Post Hoc[b]
		Percentage					Average satisfaction (Mean)[a]					
Fulfilling long-term social needs	Exchanging personal contact details with the host for future communication (N=388)	43.4	43.1	29	7.617	.022	4.09	4.00	3.32	F(2,147) = 11.930	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Exchanging gift with the host (N=387)	34.5	35.3	21.7	7.353	.025	4.10	4.21	3.77	F(2,115) = 3.076	.050	SE > EN
	Making friends with ethnic people (host) (N=387)	40.2	33.3	26.3	5.427	.066	4.19	4.15	3.61	F(2,127) = 6.609	.002	EX & SE > EN
Seeking mutual understanding	Staying at the host's house (N=115)	59.4	64.4	76.3	2.464	.292	4.16	4.37	4.42	F(2,76) = 1.618	0.205	No difference
	Enjoying meals with the host (N=120)	66.7	55.6	57.1	1.082	.582	4.54	4.48	4.46	F(2,72) = .109	0.897	No difference
	Having a long conversation with the host for learning and sharing together (N=121)	84.8	82.2	88.4	.659	.719	4.30	4.37	3.95	F(2,102) = 4.265	.017	SE > EN
	Learning to speak ethnic language via the host (N=118)	57.6	68.2	51.2	2.588	.274	4.04	4.00	3.69	F(2,69) = 1.049	0.356	No difference
Purchasing goods and services	Interacting with the host when they provide me goods and services (N=411)	94.8	95.9	90.5	3.980	.137	3.79	3.94	3.40	F(2,380) = 19.821	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Tasting ethnic food & beverages (N=408)	91.3	88.5	81.4	6.120	.047	4.07	4.29	3.95	F(2,249) = 8.434	<.001	SE > EX & EN
	Talking together with local guide during tours (N=396)	71.3	65	61.6	2.661	.264	3.80	4.05	3.69	F(2,255) = 4.786	.009	SE > EN
	Participating in traditional musical/dancing/Gong performance) (N=398)	46.6	40.1	21.4	19.647	<.001	4.11	4.38	4.38	F(2,133) = 2.452	.090	No difference
	Participating in local events (N=394)	29.6	26.6	14.3	9.799	.007	3.92	4.33	5.00	F(2,85) = 4.906	.010	SE > EX
	Participating in the production of handicrafts and/or coffee, local specialties (N=391)	26.3	24.8	9.6	14.185	<.001	3.97	4.47	4.00	F(2,73) = 4.760	.011	SE > EX
Seeking information or direction	Having short chats with the host when searching information about the village/local services (N=406)	73.0	82.3	69.4	6.817	.033	3.59	3.83	3.35	F(2,300) = 12.845	<.001	SE > EX & EN
	Asking for/sought a help (N=394)	43.5	44.7	28.3	9.581	.008	3.96	4.12	3.49	F(2,149) = 10.911	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Seeking local travel recommendation or travel itinerary (N=393)	50.0	54.6	32.6	14.895	<.001	3.73	4.02	3.35	F(2,176) = 9.151	<.001	SE > EX & EN
Presence of hosts and visitors without active interactions	Observing traditional musical/dancing/Gong performance) (N=393)	60.0	48.9	27.3	28.859	<.001	3.73	4.14	3.67	F(2,123) = 5.360	.006	SE > EX
	Observing the local events (N=386)	43.4	38.7	18.4	20.665	<.001	3.66	4.14	3.42	F(2,124) = 12.936	<.001	SE > EX & EN
	Observing how to make handicrafts, and/or coffee, local specialties, traditional food (N=406)	56.1	59.2	40.7	11.237	.004	3.59	4.08	4.05	F(2,204) = 9.596	<.001	SE & EN > EX
	Taking photos with host (N=406)	71.9	70.1	54.7	10.943	.004	3.86	4.02	3.52	F(2,259) = 10.780	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Observing local way of life (N=407)	79.1	89	84.4	4.747	.093	3.79	4.04	3.40	F(2,341) = 24.762	<.001	SE > EX > EN

Note. [a] Values were measured via 5-point Likert scale, 1 = *completely dissatisfied* to 5 = *completely satisfied*

[b] Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

Table 6. Content of and satisfaction with interaction with hosts. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Difficulties that visitors encountered in the interaction with hosts

There was no significant difference in the likelihood of experiencing most interaction difficulties across the three segments (Table 7). However, it is important to note three key points: first, the respondents strongly agreed that they found it difficult to understand local customs and taboos, demonstrated by average ratings of 4.03 (*Explorers*, *Seekers*) and 4.13 (*Enjoyers*). Second, they also reported some challenges in language

	Interaction difficulties	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	ANOVA	p-value	Post Hoc
			Mean rating		F		
Verbal and Non-verbal behaviours	I misunderstood/misinterpreted because of different dialects, regional accents, or jargons.	3.69	3.78	3.74	F(2,255) = .199	.820	No difference
	I felt confused in the communication because of the host's way to express in Vietnamese.	3.73	3.84	3.74	F(2,333) = .611	.543	No difference
	I felt uncomfortable when the host avoided to look at me or looked at somewhere when we were talking.	3.28	3.24	3.47	F(2,253) = 1.331	.266	No difference
	I did not know what was happening when the host frowned	3.33	2.55	3.64	F(2,156) = 1.128	.326	No difference
	I misunderstood because of host's postures and/or gestures.	3.62	3.68	3.62	F(2,256) = .142	.868	No difference
Speech acts	I did not know the appropriate physical distance I should keep between the host and me in our interaction.	3.47	3.44	3.32	F(2,268) = .598	.551	No difference
	I did not know whether I should introduce myself to the host casually or formerly.	3.40	3.61	3.41	F(2,281) = 1.176	.310	No difference
	I did not know how to show my respect to the host in our interaction.	3.10	3.47	3.21	F(2,259) = 2.515	.083	No difference
	I did not know how to behave appropriately with different hosts who had different social statuses.	3.31	3.44	3.21	F(2,226) = .993	.372	No difference
Episodes	I felt confused when the host refused to hold or shake my hands.	3.25	3.29	3.72	F(2,146) = 2.461	.089	No difference
	I felt confused when the host avoided to answer or kept silent.	3.32	3.58	3.85	F(2,221) = 4.103	.018	EN > EX
	I could not respond quickly in different situations during our interaction because I was confused.	2.94	3.17	2.74	F(2,237) = 2.678	.071	No difference
	I could not recognise well between serious speaking and joke telling.	2.75	3.30	3.12	F(2,196) = 3.542	.031	SE > EX
	I felt uncomfortable in the way the host talked over other people (their neighbourhoods, other ethnic people and/or tourists).	3.13	3.21	3.27	F(2,127) = .161	.852	No difference
	I did not know what I should say/do to the host at the end of our interaction.	2.98	3.31	3.17	F(2,244) = 1.469	.232	No difference
	I felt to be misunderstood when tipping ethnic hosts.	3.08	2.95	2.97	F(2,167) = .292	.747	No difference
	I felt uncomfortable with the set-up of the room/stage.	2.56	2.82	2.83	F(2,254) = 1.470	.232	No difference
	I did not know how to respond well to the greetings and farewells that fit into the local way.	2.95	3.23	2.84	F(2,229) = 3.255	.040	SE > EN
	I was not familiar with local eating practices (kinds of food, amount of food, time of eating, way of eating).	3.50	3.36	3.49	F(2,265) = .527	.591	No difference
	I did not know how to get involved in religious events/practices.	3.72	3.75	3.83	F(2,236) = .287	.751	No difference
Relationships	I felt I was not trusted by the host as I was an outsider of the village.	2.88	2.97	3.12	F(2,277) = .986	.374	No difference
	I felt to be distant because I was a customer/buyer/tourist.	3.10	3.19	3.39	F(2,322) = 1.604	.203	No difference
	I felt uncomfortable when the host considered our interaction as material relationship.	2.89	3.04	3.36	F(2,179) = 2.325	.101	No difference
Life scripts	I felt the host's interaction with us was unnatural.	3.20	3.37	3.54	F(2,313) = 2.062	.129	No difference
	I felt the host seemed to be shy in our interaction.	3.40	3.47	3.59	F(2,315) = .779	.460	No difference
	I felt the host tended to be dominant in our interaction.	2.14	2.01	2.20	F(2,235) = .788	.456	No difference
	I felt less confident in the first conversation or meeting with the host.	2.58	2.82	2.64	F(2,298) = 1.141	.321	No difference
Cultural patterns	I felt uncomfortable when the host tried to talk about his/her personal problems.	2.54	2.96	3.16	F(2,192) = 4.295	.015	EN > EX
	I felt uncomfortable when the host asked about some very personal questions.	3.18	3.33	3.25	F(2,147) = .251	.779	No difference
	I did not know how to refuse host's request politely (be invited to drink local wine, taste 'exotic' food, dance, try traditional costumes, or purchase souvenir).	3.50	3.52	3.31	F(2,248) = .913	.403	No difference
	I was not familiar with host's daily routine (e.g., time to go to bed/wake up, working time, meals time, …)	3.30	3.33	3.52	F(2,242) = 1.340	.264	No difference
	I felt difficult to understand host's customs and taboos.	4.03	4.03	4.13	F(2,290) = .388	.679	No difference

Note: Values were measured via 5-point Likert scale, 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree
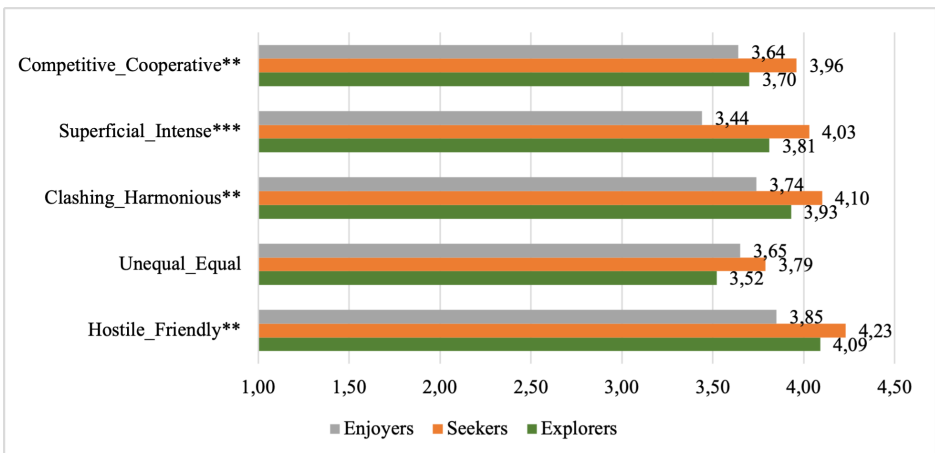Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

Table 7. Interaction difficulties that tourists encountered. *Source*: Elaborated by the authors

barriers, including different dialects, regional accents, or jargon (3.69 – 3.74) and host's expressions in Vietnamese (3.73 – 3.84). Lastly, all three segments moderately agreed that they did not know how to get involved in religious events/practices (3.72 – 3.83).

For those variables with significant differences across the three segments, *Explorers* were least likely to have experienced interaction difficulties with hosts. *Seekers* were somewhat likely to have experienced some interaction difficulties and *Enjoyers* were more likely to have experienced interaction difficulties than others. For example, *Seekers* (3.30) were more likely than *Explorers* (2.75) to agree that they could not distinguish between serious speaking and joke-telling. While *Enjoyers* tended to agree more that they got confused when the host avoided answering or kept silent (3.85) and were more likely to find it difficult when the host tried to relate to his/her personal problems (3.16), compared to *Explorers* (3.32, 2.54, respectively).

How did visitors feel about their interactions with hosts?

Respondents in the three segments were likely to evaluate the quality of interaction as positive in general, with *Seekers* tending to rate their interaction quality with hosts higher (Figure 3). *Seekers* (4.23 and 4.10, respectively) reported higher scores than *Enjoyers* (3.85 and 3.74), rating interactions as 'friendly' and 'harmonious'. *Seekers* also found interactions to be more 'cooperative' (3.96) than *Explorers* (3.70) and *Enjoyers* (3.64). Interestingly, both *Explorers* (3.81) and *Seekers* (4.03) rated the interactions as more 'intense' than *Enjoyers* (3.44). There was no significant difference across the three segments in the 'unequal–equal' rating.

Note. Values were measured via 5-point semantic scale, 1= negative sentiment (e.g., superficial) to 5 = positive sentiment (e.g., intense)
Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN
** p < .01, *** p < .001
Competitive – Cooperative: SE > EX & EN
Superficial – Intense: EX & SE > EN
Clashing – Harmonious: SE > EN
Unequal – Equal: No significance
Hostile – Friendly: SE > EN

Figure 3. Quality of interaction. *Source*: Elaborated by the authors

What did visitors think after the trip?

Each segment's overall trip experiences and perception of long-term ethnic tourism outcomes were consistent with their interactions (Table 8). Overall, *Explorers* rated the quality of interaction as moderately positive. Subsequently, they expressed neutral opinions on ethnic tourism outcomes contributing to the destination community. *Seekers* rated the interaction quality high and were significantly more likely to have positive attitudes and future behaviors. They agreed that ethnic tourism makes positive social, cultural, and economic contributions. By contrast, *Enjoyers* rated the interaction quality as the lowest and were least likely to agree with the positive contribution of ethnic tourism. For instance, *Seekers* were more likely to return to the ethnic destination (4.39) vs. *Explorers* (3.90) and *Enjoyers* (3.77). Generally, *Seekers* more strongly agreed that ethnic tourism contributes to the local quality of life (4.56) vs. *Explorers* (4.22) and *Enjoyers* (4.08).

Overall ethnic tourism experience outcomes	Explorers	Seekers Mean rating	Enjoyers	ANOVA F	Post hoc
My attitude toward ethnic people is more positive compared to pre-visit	3.70	4.09	3.66	$F_{(2,413)} = 8.607$	SE > EX & EN
I will share my positive experiences about the Central Highlands on social media.	3.65	4.31	3.73	$F_{(2,411)} = 14.719$	SE > EX & EN
I would like to return to the Central Highlands in the future.	3.90	4.39	3.77	$F_{(2,409)} = 14.468$	SE > EX & EN
I would recommend visiting the Central Highlands to others.	3.90	4.43	3.74	$F_{(2,406)} = 19.415$	SE > EX & EN
I want to learn more about ethnic language.	3.35	3.49	2.51	$F_{(2,411)} = 43.285$	SE & EX > EN
I want to learn more about ethnic minority culture.	3.91	4.15	3.09	$F_{(2,412)} = 62.634$	SE & EX > EN
I want to establish/maintain an ongoing mutual relationship with the host.	3.46	3.67	2.83	$F_{(2,411)} = 27.623$	SE & EX > EN
I would like to express my gratitude to ethnic people by exchanging or presenting gifts to the host.	3.57	3.72	2.80	$F_{(2,411)} = 31.397$	SE & EX > EN
I found my interaction with ethnic people in the village to be rewarding and satisfying.	3.58	3.85	3.36	$F_{(2,411)} = 10.255$	SE > EX & EN
I believe tourism can make positive contribution to the ethnic people's income in the future.	4.11	4.47	3.93	$F_{(2,411)} = 20.720$	SE > EX & EN
I believe tourism provide more meaningful employment/jobs.	4.19	4.53	4.02	$F_{(2,411)} = 18.114$	SE > EX & EN
I believe tourism will contribute positively to the quality of life of this ethnic village.	4.22	4.56	4.08	$F_{(2,411)} = 16.834$	SE > EX & EN

Note. Values were measured via 5-point Likert scale, 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*

$p < .001$

Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

Table 8. Tourist experience outcomes among three segments. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Table 9 summarizes additional open-ended responses describing the two best features of the ethnic destinations identified by each segment and two things that need to be improved to deliver better tourism experiences and achieve long-term ethnic tourism outcomes.

Explorers and *Seekers* were impressed by ethnic and cultural assets and local architecture. *Seekers* also admired the positive personal qualities of villagers. Improvements in local human resources were suggested, including knowledge/awareness of tourism, communication and hospitality skills, proficiency in the Kinh/Vietnamese language, and better working attitudes and performance. Moreover, while *Explorers* suggested the recruitment of more villagers to work at local tourism enterprises and guaranteeing fair benefit distribution to the locals involved in ethnic tourism activities, *Seekers* further emphasized the need for cultural preservation.

Enjoyers were more interested in natural and cultural assets associated with entertaining activities such as elephants, the bamboo suspension bridge, dugout canoes, or

village sightseeing. They tended to recommend improvements in food hygiene and sanitation, attitudes and hospitality skills of local tourism staff.

Segments	Two best features	Two things need to be improved
Explorers	Gong performance, cuisine, *Cần* wine	Local human resources - communication skills, hospitality skills, language, working attitudes, local guide, knowledge/awareness of tourism, expertise in tourism
	Village architecture, stilt house, local housing architecture, traditional handicrafts, traditional costumes	Recruiting and training local villagers to participate in tourism, fair financial/benefit distribution to the locals
Seekers	Personal characteristics of local villagers: honest, friendly, sociable and humorous, kind, lovely, meek, naïve, hospitable	Host-tourist interaction, language, communication skills, working attitudes/performance at work
	Stilt house, housing architecture, village architecture, handicrafts, brocade weaving	Cultural preservation - ethnic identity, traditions, Gong culture, traditional food, traditional architecture
Enjoyers	Elephant, bamboo suspension bridge (hanging bridge), dugout canoe	Food hygiene and sanitation
	Stilt house, housing architecture, village architecture, traditional costumes	Attitudes and hospitality skills of staff

Table 9. Summary of two best features of ethnic destinations and two things that need to be improved across three segments. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study collected data from 438 responses of domestic visitors to Vietnam's Central Highlands. By employing the Travel Career Pattern (TCP) approach (Pearce & Lee, 2005), three segments of ethnic visitors were identified: *Explorers*, *Seekers*, and *Enjoyers* presented in three PERSONAS (Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6, respectively). The main features of each segment are summarized to answer the following questions: Who are they, where and how do they interact with ethnic hosts, how do they feel about such interactions, and what do they think about long-term ethnic tourism outcomes? The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the ethnic tourist market, particularly in the Southeast Asian context, proving that travel motivation is clearly associated with how visitors interact with ethnic hosts.

This study addresses the ADB and UNWTO's (2022) remarks to travel products and segments emphasizing authentic cultural and community-based experiences in Asia and the Pacific. While reinforcing the importance of examining host-tourist interactions in ethnic tourism (e.g., Su et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017), the study also contributes to existing research on a niche market of Asian domestic tourism which is more resilient and sustainable post-COVID-19 (Nyaupane et al., 2020; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020).
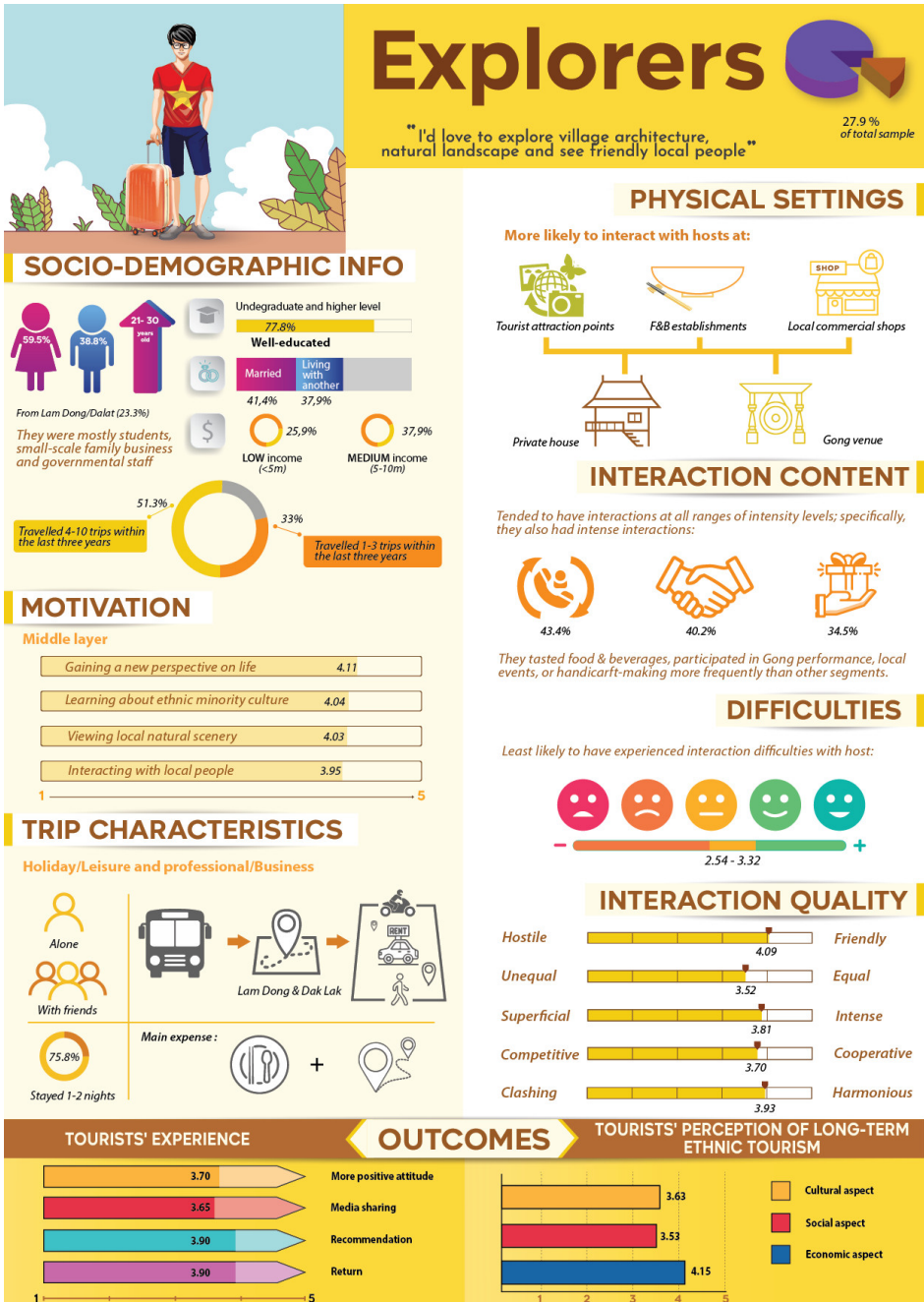
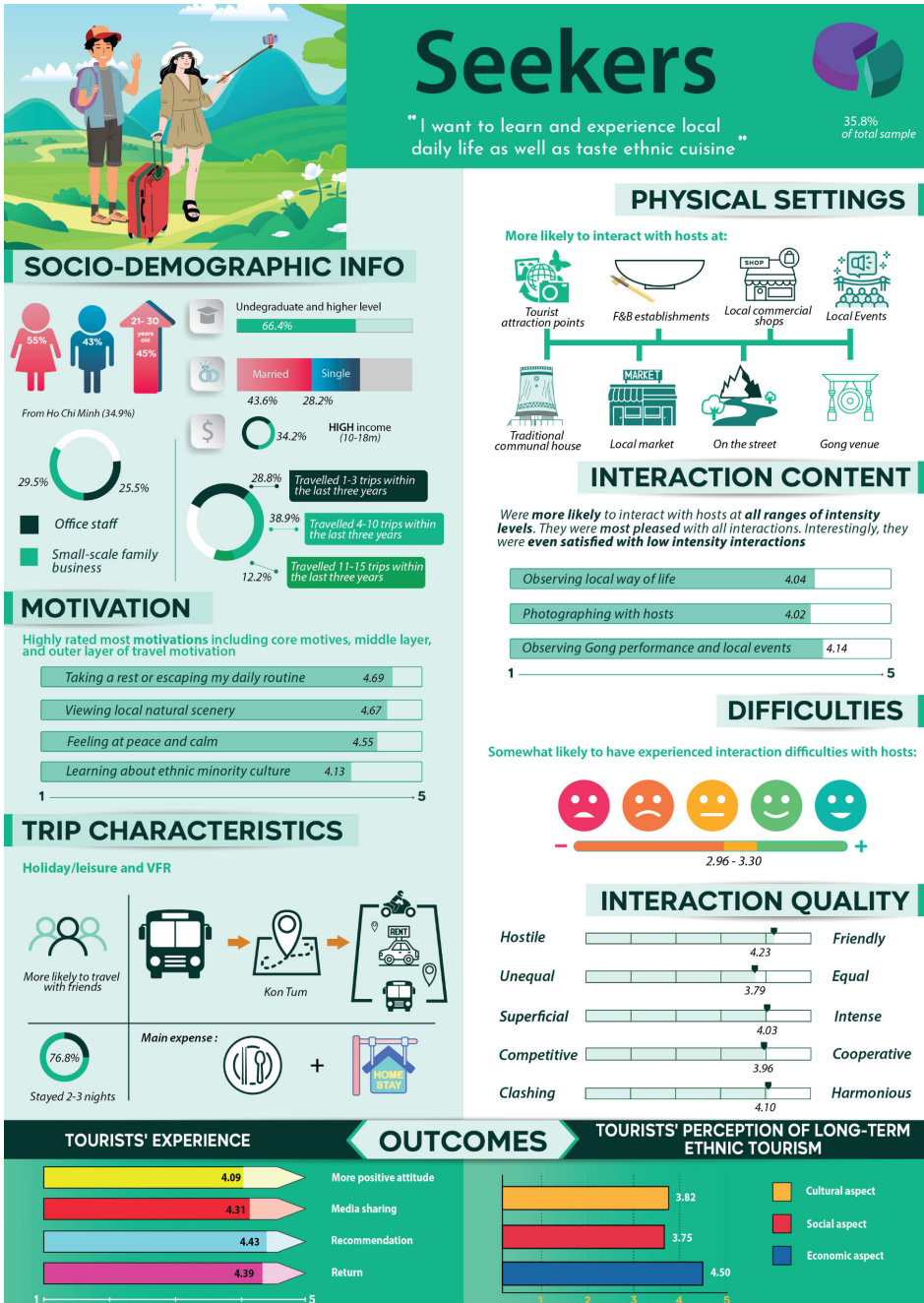**Figure 4.** Explorers' Personas. *Source*: Designed by the first author and KStudio

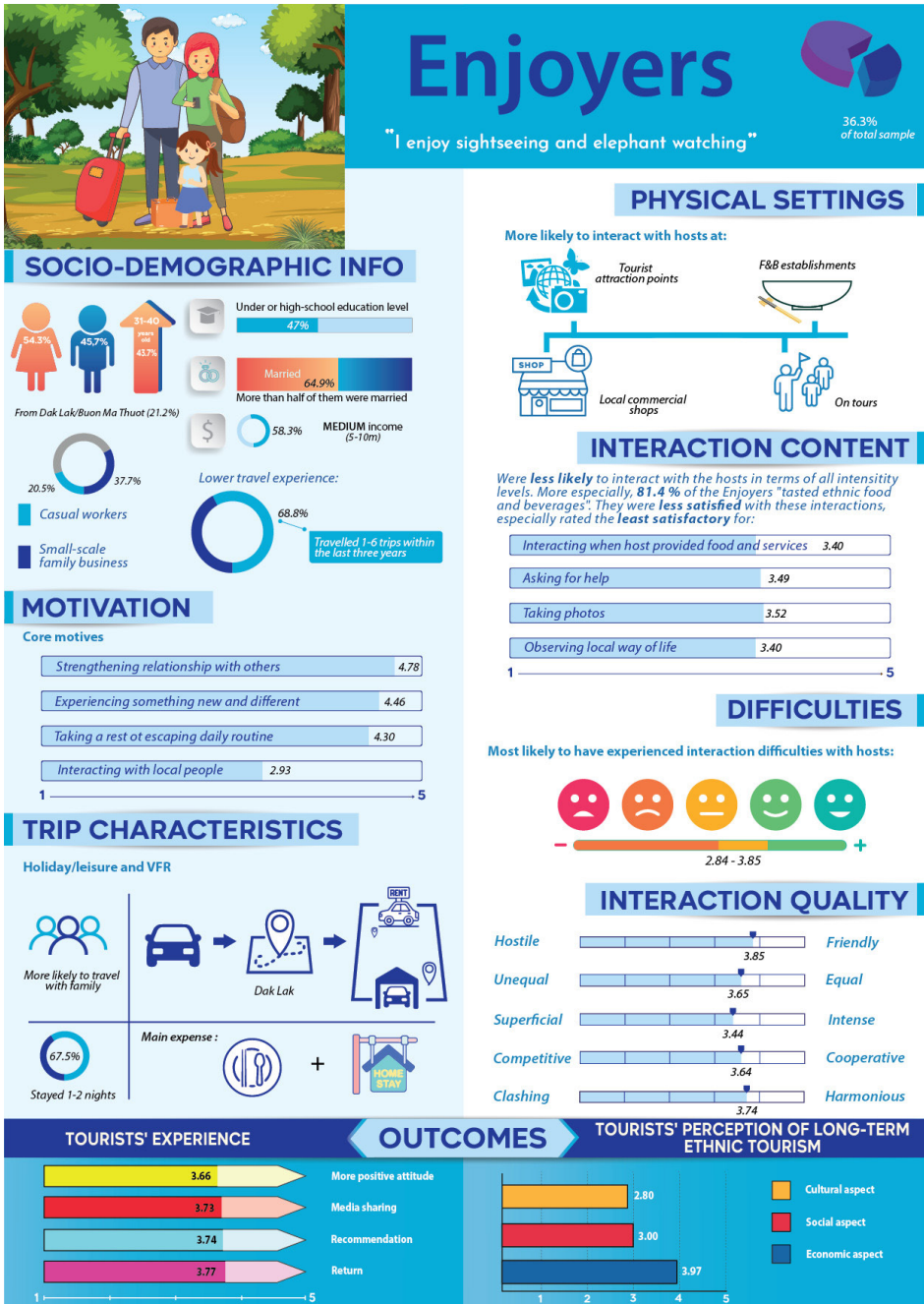**Figure 5.** Seekers' Personas. *Source*: Designed by the first author and KStudio

Figure 6. Enjoyers' Personas. *Source*: Designed by the first author and KStudio

Explorers and *Seekers* seem to be the most suitable target groups for the Central Highlands to achieve better interaction outcomes and positively contribute to the ethnic community. Both segments were motivated by local scenery, ethnic culture, and interaction with hosts, which are core components of ethnic tourism (Su et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2019). They were more likely to get involved in various interactions at ethnic destinations. This finding supports Pratt et al.'s (2013) study on tribal tourists interested in interacting with locals, having cultural exchange experiences, and sustainable development, which benefit the local Fijian community beyond the resorts.

Importantly, as depicted in Table 9, both *Explorers* and *Seekers* emphasized improving communication skills. More specifically, villagers offering hospitality services at the ethnic destination, the tour guides, and the mahouts need to improve active listening and observing, oral communication, and Kinh language proficiency. They must also learn hospitality skills and improve their attitudes and performance in the tourism workplace. Furthermore, both ethnic villagers and tourists must raise awareness of tourism impacts and cultural differences to achieve greater interaction outcomes. The two segments suggested the preservation of traditional culture and fair distribution of socioeconomic benefits to the ethnic communities. For example, at the lowest government level, the Commune's People Committee should directly support the villagers, who are directly involved in ethnic tourism, in terms of finance and policy to open special classes related to ethnic culture such as Gong performances, handicrafts, traditional food and beverage, allowing local artists to teach and transmit their knowledge and skills to village children. There should be a clear policy for recruiting and remunerating artists participating in the classes. The Commune's People Committee can consult higher-level government officials to allocate an adequate budget for paying these artists when they deliver the classes.

Explorers are more interested in "learning about ethnic culture" and "interacting with locals" than in other motivations. They tend to interact with the hosts at all intensity levels; specifically, they taste food and beverages and participate in local events or handicraft-making procedures more frequently than *Seekers*. However, *Explorers* are less satisfied with these interactions than *Seekers,* who interact with hosts at all intensity levels and tend to be satisfied with all interactions. Therefore, adding storytelling to ethnic tourism offerings is needed to encourage visitors to become more active in interactions and better understand the local way of life. As a result, *Explorers* may have "gained a new perspective on life" which is their most important motivation for visiting the village, and can ultimately lead to more positive interaction outcomes.

To attract more *Explorers* and *Seekers*, local tourism providers should diversify the range of food and beverage products, especially traditional ethnic cuisine (e.g., *Cần* wine, bamboo sticky rice, and charcoal-roasted chicken). Furthermore, seasonal farming specialties, souvenirs, and tourism entertainment activities could be provided in both greater variety and quantity to meet tourist demand, particularly for *Seekers* who had higher expenditure on shopping. To capitalize on the fact that roughly 90% of each segment interacted with locals when tasting ethnic cuisine, providing more opportunities and variety to taste traditional food will help to increase visitor expenditure and preserve ethnic culinary heritage. Traditional food recipe transmission

from senior females in the community to local restaurant chefs or even recruiting these ladies to work at restaurants can be encouraged. Cooking workshops or guided food tours are proposed to enhance visitors' engagement in learning ethnic culture and enjoying local gastronomy.

It is worth noting that all segments spent little money on tour guides/tour services. Villagers can be encouraged to get involved in ethnic tourism as local guides. Due to their local knowledge and genuine hospitality, they may encourage tourists to engage more in host-tourist interactions. Educating or training programs are required for these villagers to better communicate with tourists and to have well-equipped tourism skills when providing services.

Local transportation providers need to increase the number of daily bus trips to the Central Highlands region and improve the quality of bus services, especially the route from Ho Chi Minh City to the region. Increased opportunities for motorbike or car rental should be considered within each locality.

Both tourism marketers and practitioners should use social media marketing techniques, which are the primary source of information for these segments. The best features of the Central Highlands destination described in Table 9 imply that the focal point of marketing and advertising should be on ethnic cultural assets (Gong performance, cuisine, and *Cần* wine), local architecture, and the friendly and honest nature of the villagers. Facebook and Zalo (a Vietnamese platform) should be the leading social media platforms in this marketing strategy since Vietnam ranks seventh worldwide regarding the number of Facebook users, with over 80 % of Generation X and over 90% of Generation Y and Z using Facebook and Zalo (Statista Research Department, 2023). Strategies should be employed to encourage visitors to share their photos and comments about ethnic tourism experiences on social media as well as review platforms with gift vouchers or promo codes.

Segmentation results are useful for DMOs to understand current ethnic tourism markets and direct marketing efforts (Morrison, 2019). Importantly, the information becomes an input to community empowerment, enabling villagers to actively target which segment(s) they desire in order to foster positive interaction outcomes rather than placing tourist expectations as the core drivers of tourism planning, with the villagers playing a minimal role (Lor et al., 2019). Further, this step is necessary to develop specific ethnic tourism products to attract the target markets aligned with and more likely to contribute to community aspirations for the future (Moscardo & Murphy, 2016).

Theoretically, this study re-affirms the application of TCP in the existing tourism literature on tourist motivation and segmentation. Consistent with the key principle of TCP theory (Pearce, 2005), less important motives in the middle- and outer- layer are influenced by the levels of previous travel experience. The study further expands the body of knowledge on the ethnic tourist market since the early work done by Moscardo and Pearce (1999). It offers a more comprehensive understanding of the value and role of cluster analysis (Jopp et al., 2022). More specifically, the findings analyze the differences between three groups of ethnic tourists, focusing on their interactions with local villagers in non-Western tourism. The current study also provides insightful information on the ethnic tourism market in the context of Southeast Asian domestic tourism, contributing to enabling a prosperous, inclusive, and

resilient region (Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2022).

The main limitation of this study is that data were collected at times outside of the traditional festive period in several ethnic communities when many Gong performances typically take place. Tourists, who are highly motivated by participating in ethnic festivals and Gong performances, were absent from this work. Future studies can expand on these research findings to propose an appropriate marketing strategy for a single market. Open-ended responses from three segments, particularly *Explorers* and *Seekers,* will be useful for future research to consider improving interaction quality and long-term ethnic tourism outcomes from a tourist perspective. A focus on the relationship between interaction content and tourist intentional behaviors would also be suggested to increase tourist revisitation and attract potential tourists.

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