



Emotional Impact of Cultural Tourism: A Case Study of Domestic Visitors to the Cu Chi tunnels

Nguyen Thi Thanh Tuyen ^{1*}, Nguyen Thi Thao Vy ²

^{1,2} University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: Nguyen Thi Thanh Tuyen

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Abstract

As the tourism industry shifts toward a visitor-centered model, growing attention has been paid to the emotional dimensions of tourism experiences. Within this shift, cultural tourism plays a dual role: preserving heritage while offering emotionally rich encounters that shape tourists' identities and perceptions. Despite its significance, research on the emotional impact of cultural tourism remains limited, particularly in the Vietnamese context. This study investigates how cultural tourism experiences influence the emotions of domestic tourists at the Cu Chi Tunnels, a nationally significant historical site in southern Vietnam. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 domestic visitors who had recently visited the site, the study reveals that emotional responses—such as pride, admiration, nostalgia, gratitude, and being moved—are central to how tourists make sense of their experiences. These emotions not only shape memory formation but also influence post-visit behaviors including storytelling, destination recommendation, and revisit intentions. The findings affirm the importance of emotion as a mediating factor between cultural experience and tourist behavior. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of emotional engagement in heritage tourism and offers practical implications for designing and managing emotionally resonant, human-centered, and sustainable cultural tourism experiences in Vietnam and beyond.

Keywords: Tourist Emotions, Tourism Experience, Cultural Tourism, Cu Chi Tunnels

1. Introduction

Since the emergence of the experience economy as a formal field of research, the concept of the tourism experience has garnered growing scholarly attention. Tourism is now widely regarded as an experience-centered activity, with scholars emphasizing its transformative and emotional dimensions (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015) ^[22]. As a result, increasing focus has been placed on the experiential aspects of tourism, particularly as a pathway toward more sustainable practices (Habibi & Rasoolimanesh, 2020). Given that tourism experiences are inherently complex and formed through on-site interactions, understanding them requires attention to the cognitive and emotional processes of tourists (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) ^[42]. Chandralal *et al.* (2015) ^[7] further emphasize that tourism experiences encompass a range of psychological emotions that individuals perceive while engaging in destination activities, highlighting the intrinsic link between experience and emotion.

Emotions, however, are inherently subjective and multifaceted. Tourists' emotional responses often involve a blend of both positive and negative feelings during their travel experiences (Hosany & Gilbert, 2009). Despite their centrality to experience formation, emotions have received relatively limited attention in tourism research, particularly regarding their influence on revisit intentions and post-trip behavior (Bastiaansen *et al.*, 2019; Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015; Knobloch *et al.*, 2017) ^[3, 7, 23].

Among various tourism forms, cultural tourism stands out as a domain that profoundly engages visitors on emotional and cognitive levels. Cultural tourism not only aids in preserving and promoting national heritage, but also facilitates deep, emotionally resonant experiences that foster personal identity and historical awareness (Richards, 2018)^[38]. By enabling connections between individuals and the past, cultural tourism nurtures national pride and the appreciation of local values (Chronis, 2012)^[8]. In an increasingly globalized world where travelers seek authentic, personalized, and emotionally rich experiences, cultural tourism has become a strategic focus for sustainable tourism development worldwide (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015; Richards, 2018)^[22, 38].

In Vietnam, the national tourism development strategy toward 2030 explicitly prioritizes the advancement of cultural tourism, integrated with heritage preservation and the promotion of national cultural identity (Prime Minister, 2020)^[41]. Key destinations such as the ancient capital of Hue, the Dien Bien Phu battlefield, and the Cu Chi Tunnels exemplify this vision, serving as spaces where cultural heritage and tourism objectives intersect.

Within this broader context, understanding the emotional impact of cultural tourism on domestic visitors is both timely and essential. Modern tourists no longer travel solely to observe; they seek to engage, participate, and connect with destinations in meaningful and memorable ways (Labrador, 2017)^[24]. At cultural heritage sites, these interactions often involve immersive storytelling and historical interpretation, which can evoke strong emotional responses. Such emotional states are crucial for encoding experiences into long-term memory and shaping behaviors such as destination loyalty, social sharing, and repeat visitation (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015)^[22].

Yet, in Vietnam, empirical qualitative research exploring the emotional dimensions of domestic tourists at cultural heritage sites—particularly those associated with war history—remains limited. These sites are not only repositories of collective memory but also deeply personal spaces where visitors' emotions and identities are often challenged and reshaped.

In response to this gap, the present study investigates the emotional impact of cultural tourism experiences on domestic visitors to the Cu Chi Tunnels, a renowned historical site in southern Vietnam. By exploring the emotional states elicited during visits, this research aims to identify how such emotions contribute to memory formation, tourist evaluation, and post-visit behavior. Beyond contributing to theoretical understandings of emotion in cultural tourism, the findings offer practical implications for the design, management, and communication of emotionally resonant and sustainable tourism experiences.

2. Literature Review

Understanding the emotional impact of cultural tourism on domestic tourists requires an in-depth engagement with prior research on the relationship between tourism experiences and emotional responses. A growing body of literature affirms that emotions are not peripheral to tourism experiences but rather central to how tourists encode memories, form satisfaction, and engage in post-visit behaviors such as recommendations or revisits (Hosany *et al.*, 2005; Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015; Bastiaansen *et al.*, 2019)^[20, 7, 3]. These emotional responses are shaped not only by physical

attributes of a destination—such as landscapes or exhibition spaces—but also by intangible elements like narratives, symbolism, and personal identification with the content presented (Hosany & Gilbert, 2009; Ghazali *et al.*, 2021)^[11]. In the context of cultural-historical tourism, emotions take on an even deeper meaning. Sites associated with history, memory, and national identity often elicit complex emotional responses that go beyond mere enjoyment. Emotions such as pride, reverence, admiration, or even sorrow are commonly reported, particularly when tourists confront representations of war, sacrifice, or resilience (Baniya *et al.*, 2023; Piedade *et al.*, 2024)^[2, 33]. These emotional intensities contribute to the formation of lasting memories and have been shown to enhance destination image and behavioral intention (Rasoolimanesh & Lu, 2023).

A nuanced understanding of how these emotions emerge has been proposed by scholars such as Stanovcic *et al.* (2021)^[40], who distinguish between cognitively driven emotions—triggered by information, stories, or historical facts—and socially driven emotions, which stem from interaction with guides, local communities, or co-visitors. While both types contribute to tourist satisfaction, socially driven emotions are more often linked to behaviors like social sharing and destination advocacy, emphasizing the interpersonal dimension of tourism affect.

Technological interventions have also been explored as means of intensifying emotional engagement. Han *et al.* (2019)^[12] demonstrated that tools like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) can heighten emotional arousal by immersing tourists in reconstructed historical settings. Similarly, Jiang *et al.* (2025)^[21], through large-scale sentiment analysis, found that war-related heritage sites often evoke emotions such as pride, gratitude, and awe, underscoring the power of sensory immersion and storytelling in emotional activation.

In the Vietnamese context, recent research has started to foreground the role of emotion in domestic tourism, although still at a nascent stage. For instance, Phan Minh Duc and Le Tan Buu (2016) established a conceptual model linking destination image, emotional value, satisfaction, and loyalty. Their findings confirmed that emotional value not only mediates the effect of destination image but also significantly influences revisit behavior. Other studies, such as that of Ha Nam Khanh Giao *et al.*, have reinforced the notion that emotional resonance—particularly feelings of safety, relaxation, and curiosity—is essential for satisfaction, and recommended greater attention to designing emotionally evocative tourism products.

Bui Thi Tam *et al.* (2020) further emphasized the diversity and contextual variability of tourist emotions, suggesting that each destination carries a unique emotional signature. Their findings underscore the need to shift from a purely functional view of tourism services toward an emotion-centered framework for tourism experience management.

These insights collectively inform the current study's conceptualization of emotion as a product of tourist interaction with the space–time–story dimensions of a cultural site. In particular, the Cu Chi Tunnels—a site imbued with historical gravity and collective memory—provide fertile ground for exploring emotional responses such as being moved, proud, haunted, or inspired. This study not only investigates which emotional states are most prevalent among domestic tourists but also seeks to understand how specific

environmental and narrative elements activate them.

Despite these contributions, existing studies in Vietnam have largely remained descriptive, with limited analytical depth in classifying emotional types or identifying key drivers of emotional impact. Moreover, few studies have adopted qualitative approaches capable of capturing the richness and subjectivity of tourists' emotional narratives. To address these gaps, this research employs in-depth interviews with domestic tourists to gain a more nuanced and authentic understanding of how cultural tourism experiences at the Cu Chi Tunnels shape emotional responses and influence post-visit behavior.

3. Conceptual foundations: Tourist experience, cultural engagement, and emotional response

Understanding the emotional impact of cultural tourism requires a multi-dimensional theoretical foundation that integrates concepts from experience economy, cultural tourism, and emotional psychology. This section outlines the key constructs that inform the present study and presents a conceptual framework based on Kim and Fesenmaier's (2015) [22] emotional experience model.

Tourist experience as an experiential and co-created phenomenon

Since the 1970s, tourism has increasingly been recognized not merely as a service sector but as a provider of experiences (MacCannell, 1976; Dann, 1977; Cohen, 1979; Noel Scott *et al.*, 2017). Theoretical developments across disciplines have contributed to nuanced

understandings of tourism experiences, especially through the lenses of service marketing and consumer psychology. Scholars highlight that tourism experiences are co-created through interactions between tourists and various destination elements—including physical spaces, narratives, services, and social actors—each influencing the emotional and cognitive meaning derived from the journey (Noel & Le, 2017) [31].

Noel Scott *et al.* (2017) categorized tourist experiences into three main types: lived and memorable experiences, staged experiences, and participatory experiences. Of these, lived experiences—marked by authenticity and multisensory engagement—are particularly relevant for cultural tourism. Tourists often seek real, uncontrived interactions that stimulate emotional and intellectual responses, leading to what Csikszentmihalyi describes as the “flow state” of deep absorption (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2014). This emphasis on emotional immersion positions the experience itself as both the end-product and the value core of tourism consumption (Andersson, 2007) [1].

In this study, tourist experience is understood as a subjective and dynamic process formed through the interaction between the individual and the cultural, spatial, and social environment of the destination. These experiences engage the senses, evoke emotions, shape cognition, and ultimately produce lasting impressions and behavioral outcomes.

Cultural tourism as emotional and identity-laden engagement

Cultural tourism offers a particularly fertile ground for emotionally charged experiences. From the tourist's standpoint, it involves purposeful travel to engage with the distinct cultural values of another place—be it through food,

festivals, crafts, history, or everyday life. From the supply side, it entails the development and delivery of tourism services that harness local cultural assets for experiential consumption (Nguyen Pham Hung, 2017) [30].

Beyond sightseeing, cultural tourism experiences often invite deep immersion. Culinary experiences foster sensory and symbolic learning (Henderson, 2009) [16]; festivals create shared social moments (Popescu *et al.*, 2012) [34]; indigenous tourism opens avenues for inter-cultural understanding (Whitford & Ruhanen, 2009) [43]; and homestays allow for personal engagement with local traditions (Poria, 2013) [35]. These elements not only enrich the visitor experience but also contribute to long-term outcomes such as destination image, emotional resonance, and behavioral intention (Nanggong & Mohammad, 2024) [29].

In the present research, cultural tourism experience is viewed as an immersive process in which tourists participate in meaningful cultural interactions to interpret, feel, and internalize the identity of the local community. This experiential depth is especially pronounced at heritage sites like the Cu Chi Tunnels, where history, memory, and place intersect.

Emotions in tourism: mechanism and impact

Emotion is defined as a subjective psychological state involving intense responses to specific stimuli—be it people, objects, or events (Cohen & Areni, 1991) [9]. Within tourism, emotions significantly shape experience quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and decision-making (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Machleit & Eroglu, 2000) [27, 28]. Tourist emotions have been studied across various settings—festivals (Lee, 2014; Lee & Kyle, 2011) [25, 26], shopping (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2007) [45], gastronomy (Han & Jeong, 2013), amusement parks (Bigné *et al.*, 2005), heritage sites (Prayag *et al.*, 2013) [36], and resorts (Hosany & Prayag, 2013; Lin *et al.*, 2014) [19]—all affirming the pivotal role emotions play in tourism experiences and subsequent behaviors such as satisfaction (del Bosque & Martin, 2008), destination attachment (Yüksel *et al.*, 2010), and loyalty (Han & Jeong, 2013; Bigné *et al.*, 2005) [13].

The concept of emotional value refers to the emotional states—positive or negative—that arise during the consumption of services and that leave a lasting impression (Sheth, 1991) [39]. For tourism, this value is often expressed through feelings of safety, excitement, curiosity, and fulfillment (Williams & Soutar, 2009) [44].

Kim and Fesenmaier (2015) [22] proposed a comprehensive framework for understanding tourist emotional experiences. According to their model, emotions are shaped by the interaction of three core components:

Emotional stimuli: These include both internal factors (e.g., motivations, empathy, prior knowledge) and external triggers (e.g., destination environment, local people, storytelling).

Emotional response: Tourists undergo a range of emotional states during the experience, such as awe, pride, gratitude, or even discomfort.

Post-experience behavior: These emotional reactions influence memory encoding, storytelling, destination attachment, and intentions to revisit or recommend.

This triadic model aligns with the nature of cultural tourism, where the emotional charge often transcends immediate pleasure and fosters deeper personal and social meaning.

4. Research framework

Grounded in the theoretical constructs above, this study adopts Kim and Fesenmaier's (2015) [22] emotional experience model as its analytical lens to explore how domestic tourists experience and process emotions at the Cu Chi Tunnels. The conceptual framework posits those emotional responses—such as being moved, proud, or awed—are the result of an interaction between tourists' subjective predispositions and external stimuli at the site. These emotions, in turn, influence evaluative processes and post-visit behaviors such as sharing, recommending, or returning to the destination.

By investigating this interactional process, the research aims to elucidate how cultural tourism experiences foster emotional engagement and what implications this holds for sustainable destination management, experience design, and heritage interpretation.

5. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore the emotional experiences of domestic tourists at the Cu Chi Tunnels Historical Site. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the study's focus on subjective perceptions

and emotional responses—phenomena that are context-dependent, nuanced, and not easily captured through standardized quantitative instruments. This method allows for a deeper understanding of how tourists interpret and emotionally engage with cultural heritage settings.

A total of 20 participants were interviewed, all of whom had visited the Cu Chi Tunnels within the past six months. The sampling strategy combined purposive sampling with snowball sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases while also expanding the participant pool through referrals. Initial participants were recruited through personal networks, and subsequent interviewees were identified based on recommendations from those already interviewed. This approach helped to diversify the sample in terms of gender, age, occupation, and travel motivations (see Table 1 for demographic details).

Due to logistical constraints, the research team was not able to conduct on-site recruitment at the Cu Chi Tunnels. Instead, the participant pool was limited to domestic tourists who had recently visited the site and could be contacted via social networks or through referrals. While this may have limited immediate post-visit recall, it allowed for the inclusion of reflective perspectives based on fresh but processed emotional experiences.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics Of The Interview Sample

No.	Gen- der	Age	Occupation	Form Participation	Purpose of visit
1	Female	23	Office Worker	Group Tour	Study
2	Female	28	Office Worker	Independent	Exploration Experience to learn about history
3	Female	45	Office Worker	Independent	Sightseeing
4	Female	56	Housewife	Independent	Sightseeing
5	Female	60	Retired	Independent	Sightseeing
6	Female	21	Student	Independent	Learn about history, experience reality
7	Male	31	Ride-hailing driver	Independent	Sightseeing
8	Male	30	Skin care	Independent	Learn about history
9	Male	49	Tour guide	Group Tour	Taking visitors on a tour
10	Male	24	Office Worker	Independent	Exploration Experience to learn about history
11	Female	35	Teacher	Independent	Exploration Experience to learn about history
12	Female	24	Office Worker	Independent	Sightseeing
13	Female	20	Student	Group Tour	Study
14	Female	39	Trading	Independent	Sightseeing
15	Female	42	Office Worker	Independent	Sightseeing
16	Female	59	Retired	Independent	Sightseeing
17	Male	19	Student	Group Tour	Study
18	Male	37	IT	Independent	Sightseeing
19	Male	29	Programmer	Independent	Sightseeing

Source: Interview results from this research

The interviews were conducted in person at convenient and quiet locations such as cafés, workplaces, and educational institutions, with one interview carried out via an online platform to accommodate participant availability. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interview protocol was developed based on a thorough review of existing literature and grounded in the emotional tourism experience framework proposed by Kim and Fesenmaier (2015) [22]. Questions were designed to elicit rich narratives around participants' motivations, emotional reactions, and reflections during and after their visit to the Cu Chi Tunnels. The interview guide was also contextually adapted to align with the cultural and historical specificity of the research site. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, when no new themes or insights emerged and participant responses began to repeat. All interviews

were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants, transcribed verbatim, and then prepared for analysis.

For data analysis, qualitative content analysis was employed to systematically interpret the emotional dimensions embedded in the interview data. Transcripts were entered into Microsoft Excel, where each relevant statement or expression was treated as a separate data unit. The data were manually coded to identify key phrases and recurring emotional themes. Analytical procedures included filtering, frequency counts, and thematic grouping, ensuring a structured and transparent approach to interpreting the qualitative data. Codes were developed inductively based on content similarity and prominence across the dataset. Given the scope and resources of the study, the research focused exclusively on domestic tourists and did not include international visitors.

While this limits the generalizability of the findings to other tourist populations, the study nonetheless provides meaningful insights into how cultural tourism experiences—particularly at historically and emotionally significant sites like the Cu Chi Tunnels—shape the emotional responses of local visitors.

6. Results

a. Emotion-Stimulating Factors

1. Subjective Reception Process

According to the results of data coding, frequently occurring words, phrases, and themes were synthesized. Based on this, fundamental factors that shape tourists' subjective reception processes were identified, including reasons for visiting, initial mental images, and information access channels (Table 2). These factors act as cognitive premises that directly influence how tourists perceive and emotionally respond throughout their experience at the Cu Chi Tunnels.

Table 2: Interview Data Coding – Theme 1

Coded words and phrases		Frequency	rate%
Theme 1: Subjective Reception Process		36	100%
Reasons for Visiting	Learning about history, relics, and culture	5	13.89%
	Visiting with school/class	1	2.78%
	Accompanying friends/being invited	2	5.56%
	Desire to see the natural scenery	1	2.78%
	Remembering and expressing gratitude to ancestors and predecessors	1	2.78%
	Desire for a practical experience/Curiosity	1	2.78%
	A regional highlight	1	2.78%
Initial perception	Abundant trees, expansive space	1	2.78%
	Intricate, challenging maze	2	5.56%
	Untamed, arduous	1	2.78%
	Underground tunnel	1	2.78%
	Not clearly visualized, unspecific	4	11.11%
Information channel	YouTube videos	4	11.11%
	Current affairs and the press	4	11.11%
	Books and history	3	8.33%
	Sharing from friends and acquaintances	3	8.33%
	Internet and television	1	2.78%

Source: Tourist interview data

Among the coded reasons for visiting, the most prominent motivation was “to learn about history, heritage, and culture.” Many tourists affirmed that they came to the tunnels with the desire to better understand the past, the war, and the stories surrounding the resilient spirit of the Vietnamese people.

“I studied history a lot, but only when I saw these tiny tunnels with my own eyes did, I truly feel it. My emotion at that moment was admiration and gratitude.” (Female, 23 years old)

In addition, some visitors came rather spontaneously, such as being “invited by friends,” “going with a group,” or “on a school-organized trip,” reflecting a segment of tourists whose visit was not initially driven by a clear learning objective, but rather by social or institutional connections. However, the actual experience at the Cu Chi Tunnels led many of them to change their perception and re-evaluate the importance of the visit.

“At first, I joined just because my friends invited me, but once I got there, I realized this place was worth visiting. The space was completely different from what I had imagined.” (Male, 31 years old)

Another noteworthy point is the presence of nostalgic or commemorative motivations such as “remembering grandparents or ancestors,” indicating that visitors were not merely receiving historical information but were also internalizing it through personal and family connections. This

element deepens emotional experiences at cultural destinations (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015) ^[22].

Regarding initial mental images, most tourists had no clear expectations before arriving. Many said they “couldn't picture it well” or only had vague ideas such as “a lot of trees,” “underground tunnels,” or “a difficult maze.” At this stage, emotions were largely unformed, neutral, or only anticipatory. Strong emotional responses were typically triggered through direct interaction with the site—during or after the actual experience (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2015) ^[22].

“I didn't think I'd have to crouch through such a tight tunnel. From the outside, it just looked like dirt and forest—I didn't expect the inside to feel so suffocating.” (Female, 28 years old).

In terms of information access channels, tourists primarily learned about the Cu Chi Tunnels via YouTube, news media, and history books. The popularity of modern media platforms such as YouTube highlights the role of technology in shaping destination imagery and sparking initial interest.

“After watching review videos online, I thought I would just go there to see the tunnels. But once I went inside, the actual experience felt completely different—intense and thrilling.” (Male, 24 years old).

From the coding results, it is clear that tourists' subjective reception at the Cu Chi Tunnels is shaped by a combination

of motivations for visiting (intentional or spontaneous), initial mental imagery, and information sources prior to the trip. These elements lay the foundation for emotional connection, serving as the first stage of a meaningful tourist experience (Oh *et al.*, 2007) ^[32].

2. External Stimuli

External stimuli were coded based on recurring and thematically significant words, phrases, and topics identified during the interviews (Table 3).

Table 3: Interview Data Coding – Theme 2

Coding of words and phrases		Frequency	Rate%
Theme 2: External Stimuli		27	100%
Most Impressive Elements	Tunnels (small size, cramped conditions, darkness, difficult navigation, solidity)	7	25.93%
	Explanations and historical information	2	7.41%
	Space (forest, soil, and sand)	3	11.11%
	Underground living area	2	7.41%
External factors affecting emotions	Dark and crowded space	2	7.41%
	Lack of oxygen	3	11.11%
	Natural environment (forest, soil, sand)	3	11.11%
	Hot, sunny weather	2	7.41%
	Soundtrack during documentary screening	1	3.70%
	Feeling scared because this is the actual site. Many soldiers sacrificed themselves in the past.	2	7.41%

Source: Tourist interview data

One of the most emphasized factors is the structure of the Cu Chi tunnels, described as “narrow” and “dark,” which makes movement difficult. This space is not only a visual and tactile element but also the starting point for emotions such as tension, suspense, and empathy with history.

“The tunnel was so dark, I had to crouch while walking, and at some points I could barely breathe. Thinking about how people lived here day after day made me emotional and gave me chills.” (Male, 49 years old).

Additionally, the lack of “oxygen” and the oppressive feeling experienced while underground were described as both physical sensations and emotionally intense triggers. According to visitors, this discomfort allowed them to immerse themselves in the experience and feel deeper empathy for the harsh survival conditions during the war.

Other factors such as “the untouched natural environment” (trees, sandy soil), “dark and crowded spaces”, or “sound effects during the documentary screening” were also noted as enhancing immersion, contributing to a realistic and thought-provoking experience.

“After watching the documentary, I stepped out of the room and still felt haunted. The gunfire, the screaming—it all sounded so real. I felt more grateful once I understood the sacrifices of the past.” (Female, 21 years old).

According to the data coding results, tourists’ experiences at

the Cu Chi Tunnels are heavily influenced by physical environmental factors and sensory stimuli. These elements act as emotional triggers, aligning with the tourism emotion framework of Kim & Fesenmaier (2015) ^[22], which posits that environmental stimuli at the destination can evoke immediate emotional responses, leading to deep emotional connection and lasting memories.

b. Emotions Formed During the Experience

At the Cu Chi Tunnels, tourists may undergo a wide range of emotions, from being moved, grateful, and proud, to curious and thrilled. The unique combination of historical context, vivid storytelling, and hands-on interaction has created an emotionally rich experience.

The most frequently reported positive emotions were “moved,” “proud,” and “grateful.” Negative emotions such as “fear” and “overwhelm” were also present, but most visitors regarded them as acceptable or even “worth it” considering the historical value they received.

“I was deeply moved by how smart and resilient our people were to come up with a way to go underground using just such a tiny tunnel.” (Female, 56 years old).

“It was exhausting but meaningful—not a leisurely kind of tourism, but definitely memorable. Only after experiencing it did I truly feel thankful for the hardship our ancestors endured.” (Male, 30 years old).

Table 4: Interview Data Coding – Theme 3

Coding of words and phrases		Frequency	Rate%
Theme 3: emotional state		21	100%
Dominant Emotions	Emotion	5	23.81%
	Fear	4	19.05%
	Pride, Gratitude	4	19.05%
	Overwhelmed, Admiration	3	14.29%
	Tiredness, shortness of breath, suffocation	4	19.05%
	Surprise	1	4.76%

Source: Tourist interview data

Phrases related to satisfaction were recorded, including: “pleasant memories,” “eating cassava,” “chatting,” “going with friends,” and “nothing to complain about.” Although some tourists mentioned unpleasant factors such as “hot

weather,” “extra fees,” “trash,” “concrete paving,” and “short tunnels,” they generally assessed the trip as “both fun and tiring,” and considered these negative aspects to be only “minor flaws” that “did not affect the overall experience.”

Most visitors stated that they were “always willing to overlook unpleasant things,” reflecting an ability to positively regulate their emotions during cultural experiences.

Table 5: Interview Data Coding – Theme 4

Theme 4: Complex and negative emotions, and reputation destination		41	100%
Experiences creating satisfying and unsatisfying emotions	Positive memories (eating cassava, going with friends, chatting)	5	12.20%
	Dissatisfaction (hot weather, extra fees for some services, littering, concrete construction, short tunnels)	6	14.63%
	Overall satisfaction/No dissatisfactions	4	9.76%
Capacity for overlooking Unpleasant aspects	Joyful, <i>yet also tiring</i>	2	4.88%
	Always willing to overlook shortcomings	8	19.51%
	There were a few minor dissatisfactions, but overall they were insignificant and did not detract from the trip.	4	9.76%
Comparison of preconceived notions versus reality	As imagined and consistent with YouTube videos	2	4.88%
	Discrepancies exist: more horrific, complex, arduous, and cramped than anticipated	5	12.20%
	Surprise regarding the construction, survival, and combat capabilities of the soldiers.	2	4.88%
	Not disappointed	2	4.88%
	Better than expected	1	2.44%

Source: Tourist interview data

Finally, when comparing their initial mental imagery with the actual experience, most tourists reported a noticeable shift in their emotions. Some mentioned that the experience was “just as imagined” or “similar to YouTube videos,” but the majority noted differences using phrases such as “more complex,” “more challenging,” “more intense than expected,” or “much narrower than I thought.” Many visitors expressed surprise and admiration for the fighting spirit and survival skills of the Cu Chi soldiers and civilians, indicating a transformation from cognitive understanding to emotional connection a hallmark of cultural-historical tourism

experiences.

c. The Impact of Emotions on Tourists’ Post-Experience Behavior

The emotions evoked during the experience at the Cu Chi Tunnels did not end at the moment of the visit they persisted and continued to influence post-experience behavior. Data coding revealed three prominent groups of behaviors and attitudes: (1) Changes in historical and national values and perceptions, (2) post-experience sharing behaviors, and (3) Level of destination loyalty (Table 6).

Table 6: Interview Data Coding – Theme 5

Words, phrases		Frequency	Rate%
Theme 5: the transformation from emotions to behavior		57	100%
Changes in perception, historical values, and national identity	Increased patriotism	1	1.75%
	Strive to study and emulate	1	1.75%
	Greater gratitude	1	1.75%
	Pride in our heroic history	2	3.51%
	Appreciation for present life	1	1.75%
	Understanding of ancestral sacrifices	2	3.51%
Sharing behavior	Perception unchanged (having already studied history)	3	5.26%
	Encouraging others to visit	2	3.51%
	Sharing on social media (images, thoughts)	3	5.26%
	Relaying experiences to family, friends, and relatives	5	8.77%
	Direct emotional communication	2	3.51%
Intention to return and recommend	Abstaining from social media sharing	2	3.51%
	Intention to return	6	10.53%
	Intention to recommend	5	8.77%
	Especially recommend to international friends	4	7.02%
	Want to take children and grandchildren there	4	7.02%
Level of loyalty	Depends on special occasions or invitations	2	3.51%
	Fondness and intention to return	5	8.77%
	Visit periodically (every 5 years, when having children)	1	1.75%
	A priority for recommendation	1	1.75%

First, many tourists expressed that they felt “more patriotic” and “more grateful” after the visit, and expressed a desire to “study harder” and “follow the example of their ancestors.” These cognitive changes reflect the transformation of emotions into personal values a phenomenon described by Kim & Fesenmaier (2015) [22] as emotional imprinting, in

which intense emotional experiences leave lasting impressions and alter one’s perception of self and society. Second, sharing behavior represents the transformation of emotions into social actions. Phrases such as “telling family members,” “sharing on social media,” and “encouraging others to visit” were frequently mentioned. This supports the

argument by Hosany & Gilbert (2010)^[18] that strong positive emotions often stimulate a desire to share as a way of expressing identity, expanding social connection, and naturally promoting the destination.

“When I got home, I told my child what our ancestors went through living underground.” (Female, 45 years old).

“I took some pictures and posted a few on Facebook. I wanted to show my friends and nieces and nephews. Anyone who asks—I tell them everything, because it’s such a worthwhile place to visit.” (Female, 60 years old).

Third, destination loyalty was shown through intentions such as “wanting to return,” “bringing my children/grandchildren,” and “recommending to international friends.” This emotional attachment is the result of strong positive feelings, often referred to as affective loyalty—a key factor in sustainable tourism development (Prayag *et al.*, 2017). Unlike behavioral loyalty, which refers to repeated purchases, affective loyalty is tied to trust and emotional affinity, leading to spontaneous word-of-mouth promotion and a lasting mental image of the destination.

6. Discussion

This study offers compelling evidence of how cultural tourism experiences at heritage sites can shape not only the emotional states of domestic tourists, but also their cognitive transformations and behavioral intentions. By examining the case of the Cu Chi Tunnels, the research sheds light on the mechanisms through which emotions are activated, internalized, and translated into long-term engagement with cultural destinations. In doing so, it moves beyond abstract theorizing to provide concrete insights into the affective dynamics of cultural heritage tourism in Vietnam—an area that remains underexplored.

First, the findings underscore the multi-sensory and layered nature of emotional activation in cultural settings. Emotional responses were not solely triggered by the tangible environment—such as the constricted tunnel spaces, dim lighting, and ambient sounds—but also by intangible elements like historical narratives, immersive storytelling, and the symbolic meaning of sacrifice and resilience. This complex interaction aligns with Kim and Fesenmaier’s (2015) framework, which views tourism emotions as emerging from the synergy between subjective reception and environmental stimuli. However, this study adds depth by showing how such synergy is particularly potent in war-related heritage contexts, where historical memory intersects with personal reflection to evoke empathy, pride, and reverence.

Second, the research provides empirical support for the idea that strong emotional responses have behavioral consequences. Emotions such as being moved, grateful, or proud did not remain at the level of momentary affect; instead, they were channeled into post-visit behaviors such as sharing experiences with family, posting on social media, recommending the site to others, and planning return visits. These actions align with what Hosany and Gilbert (2010) describe as spontaneous promotional behavior driven by emotional intensity, and reflect the construct of affective loyalty (Prayag, 2017), where emotional connection—not just satisfaction—anchors a long-term bond with the destination. This suggests that emotion, not just cognition, plays a central role in sustaining cultural tourism demand and destination branding.

Third, a particularly noteworthy insight from this study is the transformative potential of on-site emotional experience, even among tourists with low initial motivation. Some participants visited the Cu Chi Tunnels for pragmatic or social reasons—such as school trips or group invitations—rather than from an intrinsic desire to engage with history. Yet, once immersed in the site’s physical and symbolic atmosphere, they experienced deep emotional responses that reconfigured their understanding of the past and instilled new meaning into the visit. This suggests that cultural heritage sites hold the capacity to convert passive visitors into emotionally engaged participants, an area that prior research has largely overlooked. In this sense, emotional experience acts as a catalyst for value transformation, turning a casual visit into a reflective, identity-shaping encounter.

Taken together, these findings contribute significantly to the literature by reframing emotion not as a peripheral reaction to tourism experiences, but as a mediating force between experience and post-visit behavior. While previous Vietnamese studies have tended to focus on satisfaction or destination image at a general level, this study elevates the role of emotion as a central psychological mechanism that bridges experience and loyalty. This has theoretical implications for future models of cultural tourism engagement and practical implications for how destinations are designed, narrated, and managed.

Moreover, the findings lay groundwork for future research—particularly quantitative investigations—to examine the strength and structure of relationships between types of emotion and specific behavioral outcomes. They also highlight the value of qualitative methodologies in capturing the nuance, texture, and meaning of emotional experiences that might otherwise be flattened in survey data.

In sum, this study not only demonstrates how cultural tourism at emotionally charged sites like the Cu Chi Tunnels affects domestic tourists, but also offers a framework for understanding how emotion drives engagement, memory, and long-term loyalty—a critical consideration in the sustainable development of heritage tourism.

7. Managerial implications for cultural tourism product development

The findings highlight that emotion plays a central role in shaping profound experiences and post-visit behavior at cultural-historical destinations. To maximize this impact, local authorities and site managers should implement specific strategies to enhance emotional experiences and strengthen visitor engagement.

First, emotional depth should be prioritized in experience design. Historical recreations, simulations of wartime life, and the application of virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) to tell historical stories can enhance immersion and empathy. These tools allow tourists to “live in the historical context,” thereby evoking genuine and lasting emotions.

Second, tour guides should be well-trained in storytelling and emotional facilitation. Rather than simply conveying facts, guides should serve as inspirational storytellers, connecting visitors emotionally with historical values. Stories told with empathy and passion significantly enhance the experience compared to mere data presentation.

Third, multi-sensory experiences should be enhanced. Activities like tasting cassava, sound and light simulations in exhibition areas, visits in the dark, or on-site lectures can

deepen emotional involvement. Additionally, post-visit sharing sessions should be encouraged, providing a space for emotional reflection and promoting word-of-mouth engagement.

Fourth, preserving authenticity and avoiding over-commercialization is essential. Historical sites should maintain a solemn, raw, and quiet atmosphere to provoke reflection and avoid distractions like noise and advertising signs. Preserving the site's identity helps ensure a sacred and memorable experience.

Finally, local community involvement should be increased. Locals can act as guides, storytellers, or providers of traditional food and crafts, offering authentic, personalized experiences. This also supports sustainable tourism, ensuring that tourism benefits are shared with the local population.

These recommendations are not only applicable to the Cu Chi Tunnels but can also be adapted to other cultural sites across Vietnam to improve experience quality, strengthen emotional connections, and promote a more sustainable, human-centered, and meaningful tourism approach.

8. Conclusion

This study confirms that cultural tourism experiences at the Cu Chi Tunnels have a strong emotional impact on domestic tourists. Through interaction with the physical space, historical context, and sensory stimuli, visitors experience a broad range of emotions, notably being moved, grateful, and proud. These emotions not only shape their on-site experience but also extend beyond the trip, influencing their perceptions, sharing behaviors, and loyalty to the destination. Although the study offers a comprehensive view of how cultural experiences affect tourist emotions, several limitations remain. First, the research is limited to domestic tourists at a single site—Cu Chi Tunnels—so findings cannot be generalized to all cultural destinations in Vietnam or to international tourists. Second, since most data came from those who had completed the visit and voluntarily shared their experience, there may be a positive emotional bias, while negative or dissatisfied responses may have been underrepresented. Third, the qualitative method used does not quantify the specific impact levels of each emotional type on post-visit behaviors. Lastly, contextual factors such as the timing of the visit (e.g., hot weather, crowds, lack of guides) could influence emotions but were not fully controlled in the research design.

To address these limitations, future studies could expand the scope to include different types of cultural destinations and adopt quantitative methods to measure the impact of specific emotional factors. Further research should also examine the role of technology, the trend of personalized experiences, and the socio-cultural context in shaping emotional experiences in tourism.

The findings and recommendations of this study provide practical value for destination managers, tourism product designers, and businesses seeking to enhance the emotional quality of cultural tourism. Focusing on emotional dimensions not only increases tourist satisfaction but also promotes destinations through personal sharing, thus contributing to the sustainable growth of Vietnam's tourism industry.

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