

EMOTION, MEMORY, AND ATTACHMENT IN FESTIVAL TOURISM: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Cultural festivals are not just events; they act as emotional catalysts that shape how visitors perceive and remember a destination. This qualitative study explores the experiences of international visitors attending cultural festivals in Southern Vietnam, analyzing how these experiences evoke emotions, create lasting travel memories, and form attachments to the destination. Through semi-structured interviews with international tourists and reflexive thematic analysis, the study identifies emotional touchpoints such as music, rituals, cuisine, symbolic atmosphere, and community interaction that contribute to memorable festival experiences. Thematic analysis revealed that cultural immersion is often associated with strong emotional responses such as awe, joy, nostalgia, or contemplation. These emotions play an important role in forming long-term memories and establishing symbolic connections with the destination. The study contributes to expanding the understanding of the emotional and symbolic aspects of festival tourism, while providing practical implications for sustainable cultural tourism development and strategies to attract returning visitors.

Keywords: Cultural festival, tourist emotions, travel memories, destination attachment.

CẢM XÚC, KÝ ỨC VÀ SỰ GẮN KẾT TRONG DU LỊCH LỄ HỘI: TRẢI NGHIỆM CỦA DU KHÁCH QUỐC TẾ TẠI CÁC LỄ HỘI VĂN HÓA NAM BỘ

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TÓM TẮT

Lễ hội văn hóa không đơn thuần là các sự kiện mà còn đóng vai trò như những chất xúc tác cảm xúc, định hình cách du khách nhận thức và ghi nhớ về một điểm đến. Nghiên cứu này khám phá trải nghiệm của du khách quốc tế khi tham gia các lễ hội văn hóa tại Nam Bộ, qua

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đó phân tích phương thức các trải nghiệm này khơi gợi cảm xúc, kiến tạo những ký ức du lịch bền vững và hình thành sự gắn kết với điểm đến. Thông qua phương pháp phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với khách du lịch quốc tế và phân tích chủ đề mang tính phản tư, nghiên cứu đã xác định các điểm chạm cảm xúc như âm nhạc, nghi lễ, ẩm thực, bầu không khí biểu tượng và sự tương tác cộng đồng là những yếu tố cốt lõi cấu thành nên trải nghiệm lễ hội đáng nhớ. Kết quả phân tích của nghiên cứu cho thấy sự thâm thấu văn hóa thường gắn liền với các tương tác cảm xúc mạnh mẽ như sự kinh ngạc, niềm vui, hoài niệm hoặc sự chiêm nghiệm. Những cảm xúc này đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc hình thành ký ức lâu bền và tạo ra những biểu tượng liên kết với điểm đến. Nghiên cứu góp phần mở rộng hiểu biết về các khía cạnh cảm xúc và biểu tượng trong du lịch lễ hội, đồng thời đưa ra những ý nghĩa thực tiễn góp phần phát triển du lịch văn hóa bền vững và hình thành các chiến lược thu hút du khách quay trở lại.

Từ khóa: *Lễ hội văn hóa, cảm xúc du khách, kỷ niệm du lịch, gắn bó với điểm đến.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has increasingly shifted from standardized consumption to personal, emotional, and culturally meaningful experiences. Tourists do not merely seek attractions to visit; they also look for experiences that allow them to feel, remember, and connect with the places they encounter. In this context, cultural festivals have become important tourism settings because they combine rituals, music, cuisine, performance, community interaction, and local identity in a concentrated experiential space. Unlike conventional tourism products, festivals allow visitors to engage with living cultural practices and to experience destinations through emotion, memory, and symbolic meaning.

Cultural festivals are particularly relevant to the study of tourist experience because they can create strong emotional impressions and lasting memories. Prior studies on memorable tourism experiences have shown that emotions, novelty, social interaction, and active participation are important factors shaping how tourists remember their trips (Kim et al., 2012). Similarly, research on tourist emotions

and destination attachment suggests that emotional experiences may influence how visitors recall destinations and whether they develop a desire to revisit or recommend them to others (Hosany et al., 2015; Prayag et al., 2017). However, these concepts are often discussed in general tourism contexts, while the specific emotional and memory-based experiences of international tourists in cultural festival settings remain less fully understood, especially in Vietnam.

Southern Vietnam offers a meaningful empirical context for examining this issue. The region has a rich and diverse festival landscape associated with different ethnic communities, belief systems, coastal livelihoods, folk music traditions, and local food cultures. Festivals such as Nghinh Ong, Ok Om Bok, Southern folk music events, and folk cake festivals are not only cultural performances but also living expressions of community identity, spirituality, hospitality, and collective memory. For international tourists, participation in these festivals may create distinctive emotional that go beyond sightseeing and foster a deeper sense of connection with the destination.

Despite the cultural richness of Southern Vietnam, existing studies on Vietnamese festivals have tended to focus mainly on festival organization, community tourism development, cultural preservation, or socio-economic impacts (Nguyen & Tran, 2020; Pham, 2019). Less attention has been given to how international tourists personally experience these festivals, what emotional moments they remember, and how such memories may contribute to destination attachment. This represents an important gap because emotions and memories are subjective and narrative-based processes that require qualitative exploration. A closer understanding of these processes can help explain not only what tourists do at festivals, but also what they feel, remember, and carry with them after the trip. Based on this gap, the present study aims to explore the emotional experiences, travel memories, and destination attachment of international tourists participating in cultural festivals in Southern Vietnam. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do international tourists emotionally experience cultural festivals in Southern Vietnam?
2. Which elements of these festivals contribute to memorable tourism experiences and lasting travel memories?
3. How do festival-related emotions and memories contribute to destination attachment and revisit intentions?

By using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study contributes to tourism research in three ways. First, it provides qualitative insight into how international tourists emotionally interpret cultural festival experiences in the Southern

Vietnamese context. Second, it clarifies how specific festival elements—such as rituals, music, cuisine, symbolic spaces, and community interactions—become memory anchors in tourists’ post-trip narratives. Third, it offers practical implications for festival organizers, destination managers, local communities, and tourism businesses seeking to design cultural festival experiences that are authentic, emotionally engaging, and capable of strengthening tourists’ long-term attachment to destinations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Cultural festivals and tourist emotional experiences*

Recent research has increasingly conceptualized cultural festivals as emotionally charged experiential spaces rather than merely planned tourism events. In this perspective, festivals offer visitors opportunities to encounter local culture through storytelling, rituals, performances, food, music, and host–guest interaction. Ko et al. (2022) demonstrated that storytelling in local festivals enhances tourists’ revisit intention through authenticity and positive emotion, suggesting that emotional responses are shaped not only by festival activities but also by the cultural narratives embedded in them. Zhang et al. (2022) further showed that authenticity, experience quality, and perceived value contribute to tourists’ subjective well-being in festival tourism, confirming that festival experiences generate psychological and emotional benefits beyond immediate entertainment. Similarly, Huang (2024) found that festival tourism experiences influence tourists’ satisfaction, well-being, and revisit intention, while Tan et al. (2023) highlighted the role of flow experience and festival satisfaction in shaping festival revisitation.

Tiwari et al. (2023) also emphasized that tourists' emotional experiences are important antecedents of memorable tourism experiences and future behavioral intention.

These recent studies indicate that tourist emotions in festival contexts should be understood as dynamic, culturally situated, and experience-based. However, most existing studies remain quantitative and focus on the relationships among emotion, satisfaction, authenticity, and revisit intention. Less attention has been paid to how international tourists describe their emotional encounters with unfamiliar cultural practices in their own words. This limitation is particularly relevant to Southern Vietnam, where festivals such as Ok Om Bok, Nghinh Ong, and the Southern Folk Cake Festival are embedded in ethnic traditions, maritime beliefs, culinary heritage, community rituals, and local hospitality. Therefore, a qualitative exploration of tourist emotions in these festival settings is necessary to understand how cultural unfamiliarity, symbolic practices, and community participation generate emotional meaning. In Southern Vietnam, cultural festivals such as Nghinh Ong, Ok Om Bok, Southern folk music events, and folk cake festivals provide a rich context for examining these processes. These festivals are embedded in coastal livelihoods, Khmer cultural traditions, folk performance, local cuisine, and community-based rituals. For international tourists, participation in such festivals may create distinctive emotional encounters because the experience involves both cultural unfamiliarity and direct interaction with local symbolic practices. However, the emotional experiences of international tourists in these Southern Vietnamese festival settings have received insufficient qualitative inquiry.

2.2. Memorable tourism experiences and post-trip emotions

Recent studies have extended the literature on a memorable tourism experiences by emphasizing that tourism memories are not formed only during the trip but are reconstructed after the trip through nostalgia, storytelling, digital sharing, and social interaction. Lu et al. (2022) found that the memorability of prior travel experiences influences revisit intention through nostalgia and destination attachment, indicating that remembered experiences can become emotionally active after the trip. Wang (2023) further examined memorable tourism experiences from the perspective of long-term memory and showed that recalled tourism experiences are closely associated with emotions and destination-related meaning. Tiwari et al. (2023) also confirmed that human emotions significantly influence memorable tourism experiences and revisit intention. In nature-based tourism, Sthapit et al. (2022) demonstrated that memorable experiences contribute to place attachment and environmentally responsible behavior, showing that memory can shape not only loyalty but also value-oriented behavior. Chen et al. (2021), in a study of coffee tourism in Vietnam, extended the memorable tourism experience model by examining the relationships among motivation, co-created experience, MTEs, satisfaction, word of mouth, and revisit intention. More recently, studies in Ha Long Bay and Ho Chi Minh City have shown that memorable tourism experiences can mediate the relationship between tourist interaction, destination attachment, social media sharing, and revisit intention. These studies are relevant to the present research because they indicate that memory formation in Vietnamese tourism

contexts is shaped by interaction, sensory experience, cultural meaning, and post-trip communication. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese literature remains dominated by quantitative designs. There is still a limited qualitative understanding of which specific festival moments international tourists remember, how sensory and symbolic details become memory anchors, and how these memories are narrated after the trip.

2.3. Destination attachment and revisit intentions

Recent research has increasingly treated destination attachment as an affective and symbolic bond that connects tourists to places through authenticity, memory, social interaction, and personal meaning. Zhou et al. (2022) showed that authenticity in heritage tourism affects revisit intention through memorable tourism experiences and place attachment, confirming the mediating role of attachment in transforming cultural experience into future behavioral intention. Lu et al. (2022) similarly found that destination attachment mediates the relationship between memorable travel experiences and revisit intention. Zou et al. (2022) conducted a broader review of place attachment and tourist loyalty and confirmed that place attachment is positively associated with tourists' attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Nursyamsiah et al. (2023) also demonstrated that place attachment can mediate the relationship between visitor experience and revisit intention. In religious tourism, Obradović et al. (2024) further showed that emotional experience and place attachment are closely connected in sacred and culturally meaningful destinations.

Vietnam-based studies provide further support for the relevance of attachment in

cultural and destination-related behavior. Nguyen-Viet and Nguyen (2023) found that authentic experience, tourist satisfaction, place attachment, word of mouth, and revisit intention are closely connected in Vietnamese religious tourism. Luong (2025) also demonstrated that destination image influences satisfaction, place attachment, and destination loyalty among Vietnamese domestic tourists. Recent research on Ha Long Bay further shows that destination attachment and social media sharing mediate the relationship between memorable tourism experiences and revisit intention. These findings confirm that attachment is a meaningful construct in Vietnamese tourism research. However, existing studies have largely examined attachment through survey-based models. They provide less insight into how attachment is expressed in tourists' own narratives, especially in relation to cultural festivals, local people, ritual atmosphere, food, music, and symbolic memory. The present study addresses this limitation by exploring destination attachment as a post-trip emotional outcome emerging from international tourists' remembered festival experiences.

2.4. Research gap

Overall, the updated literature shows that recent tourism scholarship has made important progress in explaining the relationships among festival experience, emotion, memorable tourism experience, destination attachment, and revisit intention. However, three gaps remain. First, many studies continue to rely on quantitative models, thereby providing limited insight into how tourists narrate, interpret, and reconstruct emotional festival experiences. Second, although Vietnam-based studies have examined authentic experience, place attachment, destination loyalty, memorable

tourism experiences, and revisit intention, these studies have mainly focused on religious tourism, coffee tourism, ecotourism, urban tourism, or general destination contexts rather than cultural festivals in Southern Vietnam. Third, limited attention has been given to international tourists' subjective and remembered experiences in festivals associated with Khmer traditions, coastal worship, folk cuisine, music, and community-based rituals. Therefore, the present study contributes to the literature by offering a qualitative, phenomenological account of how international tourists emotionally experience Southern Vietnamese cultural festivals, how specific sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments become memorable, and how these memories contribute to destination attachment and revisit intention.

3. METHODS

3.1. *Research approach*

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore how international tourists describe, interpret, and make sense of their emotional experiences, travel memories, and destination attachment after participating in cultural festivals in Southern Vietnam. Rather than testing predetermined relationships among variables, the study focused on participants' subjective accounts and the meanings they assigned to specific festival moments, such as rituals, music, food, local interaction, symbolic atmosphere, and post-trip recollection. Although the study is concerned with lived and remembered experiences, it does not claim to follow a strict phenomenological design. Instead, it

uses an interpretive qualitative orientation to examine recurring patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. The emphasis is therefore placed on identifying and interpreting themes that explain how festival experiences become emotionally meaningful, memorable, and attachment-forming. This design is consistent with the exploratory nature of the research questions and with the use of thematic analysis to generate analytically coherent themes from interview data.

3.2. *Research location and subjects*

The study was conducted in three selected localities in Southern Vietnam: Can Tho, Tra Vinh, and Bac Lieu. These localities were chosen because they represent cultural, ethnic, and geographical characteristics of the Southern region and host traditional festivals accessible to international tourists. To keep the research scope focused and analytically manageable, the study selected one representative festival in each locality rather than examining multiple festivals in the same place. In Can Tho, the study focused on the Southern Folk Cake Festival. This festival was selected because it represents the culinary heritage of the Mekong Delta and offers international tourists opportunities to experience local food culture, folk performances, and direct interaction with local communities. In Tra Vinh, the study focused on the Ok Om Bok Festival of the Khmer community. This festival was selected because it reflects the distinctive ethnic, religious, and ritual practices of Khmer culture in Southern Vietnam, including moon worship, traditional performances, and community-based celebration. In Bac Lieu, the study focused

on the Nghinh Ong Festival in Ganh Hao town, Dong Hai district. Although whale worship festivals are common in many coastal areas of Vietnam, the Nghinh Ong Festival in Ganh Hao was selected because it is a representative coastal festival of Southern Vietnam, associated with maritime beliefs, fishermen's livelihoods, ritual practices, and local community identity.

Thus, the final study scope included three localities and three representative festivals: Can Tho – Southern Folk Cake Festival; Tra Vinh – Ok Om Bok Festival; and Bac Lieu – Nghinh Ong Festival in Ganh Hao. This selection ensured contextual diversity while avoiding an overly broad or unclear research scope. The study did not include Soc Trang or any unspecified “temple festival” in the final research design.

The research participants were international tourists who had attended at least one of the three selected festivals within the previous 12 months. International tourists were defined as non-Vietnamese visitors who came to Vietnam temporarily for tourism, cultural exploration, leisure, study-related travel, volunteer activities, or other short-term purposes. The 12-month criterion was used to ensure that participants still had sufficient recall of their festival experiences while allowing the study to include tourists who had already reflected on their post-trip memories. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. In addition, snowball

sampling was used, with participants who were interviewed introducing other eligible international tourists who had attended one of the selected festivals. The inclusion criteria were as follows: participants had to be at least 18 years old; be non-Vietnamese citizens; have attended at least one of the three selected festivals; be able to participate in an interview in English or with translation support; and agree to participate voluntarily after receiving information about the study. To increase the richness and diversity of the data, the study also considered supplementary criteria during participant selection, including gender, age group, nationality or region of origin, travel purpose, and festival attended. This helped the research avoid reliance a single type of tourist experience and reliance enable the study to capture diverse perspectives on emotions, memories, and destination attachment.

A total of 18 international tourists participated in the study. The number of participants was not determined statistically but was guided by the principle of thematic saturation. After the fifteenth interview, no substantially new codes or themes emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the repetition of the main themes. Since interviews with P16–P18 mainly reinforced existing patterns in emotional experience, memory formation, and destination attachment, the research team stopped data collection at 18 participants.

Table 1. Profile of interview participants

Characteristic	Category	Number
Gender	Male	9
	Female	9
Age group	18–25	3
	26–35	7
	36–45	5
	Above 45	3
Region of origin	Europe	7
	North America	4
	Asia-Pacific	5
	Other regions	2
Travel purpose	Leisure / cultural exploration	11
	Study / volunteer / short-term work-related travel	4
	Visiting friends or relatives / mixed purpose	3
Festival attended	Southern Folk Cake Festival, Can Tho	6
	Ok Om Bok Festival, Tra Vinh	6
	Nghinh Ong Festival, Ganh Hao, Bac Lieu	6

Source: *From the author's research.*

3.3. Data collection procedures

Data were collected between April 2024 and February 2025. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the participants had attended the selected festivals. Of the 18 interviews, 10 were conducted face-to-face at or near the festival destinations, while eight were conducted online through Zoom or Google Meet after participants had left the destination. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. All interviews were conducted using an interview guide that focused on three main areas: emotional experiences during the festival, memorable festival elements, and post-trip destination attachment. Participants were asked to describe their first impressions, emotionally significant moments, remembered sensory

details, interactions with local people, post-trip sharing, revisit intention, and willingness to recommend the festival or destination to others.

With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim for analysis. When participants used short expressions in languages other than English, the meanings were clarified during the interview and translated into English during transcription. Field notes were also prepared after each interview to record contextual observations and initial analytical reflections. Participants were invited to share photos or short travel notes if they wished, but these materials were used only as recall prompts and were not treated as primary data.

Participants were also invited to share supporting materials, such as festival photos, short videos, travel notes, or social media posts, if they were willing. These materials were used only as recall prompts during the interview process and were not treated as primary data. The main interview questions are provided in Appendix A.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached. In this study, thematic saturation was defined as the point at which additional interviews yielded no substantially new codes or themes. After the fifteenth interview, no major new codes emerged; therefore, three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the emerging coding structure. Since interviews P16 to P18 mainly reinforced existing patterns, data collection was concluded at 18 participants. The data saturation grid is provided in Appendix B.

Appendix A. Main interview questions

1. Could you briefly describe the festival you attended and why you decided to participate in it?

2. What was your first impression when you arrived at the festival?

3. Which moment at the festival made the strongest emotional impression on you? Why?

4. Did you experience feelings such as surprise, joy, curiosity, confusion, nostalgia, or cultural connection during the festival? Please explain.

5. Which festival elements did you remember most clearly after the trip, such as rituals, music, food, performance, local people, or atmosphere?

6. Was there any specific image, sound, smell, taste, or interaction that stayed in your memory?

7. Did you share your festival experience with others after the trip? If yes, what did you tell them?

8. Did the festival change your perception of the destination or local community?

9. Did the experience make you feel connected to the destination or local people? In what way?

10. Would you like to revisit the destination or recommend the festival to others? Why or why not?

11. Is there anything else about the festival experience that you consider personally meaningful?

Appendix B. Data saturation grid

Interview code	New codes identified	Cumulative codes	New themes identified	Cumulative themes
P01	5	5	2	2
P02	3	8	1	3
P03	2	10	0	3
P04	1	11	0	3
P05	0	11	0	3
P06–P10	0	11	0	3
P11–P15	0	11	0	3
P16–P18	0	11	0	3

Interpretation: The saturation grid indicates that most codes emerged during the first four interviews. From P05 onward, the interviews mainly confirmed and enriched existing codes. By P15, the main themes had become stable, and the final three interviews were used to verify saturation.

3.4. Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. This method was selected because it allows researchers to identify, interpret, and organize recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data while remaining sensitive to participants’ subjective narratives. The analysis followed six main phases. First, all interview transcripts were read several times to develop familiarity with the data and to record initial analytical notes. Second, meaningful segments of text were coded inductively, with particular attention to descriptions of emotions, sensory impressions, symbolic interpretations, interpersonal encounters, memory anchors, and expressions of destination attachment. Third, related codes were grouped into potential themes

that captured broader patterns across participants’ accounts. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the coded data and the full transcripts to ensure that they were internally coherent and analytically distinct. Fifth, each theme was defined and named according to its central meaning. Finally, the themes were written up with illustrative quotations to show how tourists experienced, remembered, and interpreted Southern Vietnamese cultural festivals.

The coding process was primarily inductive, although it was informed by the study’s conceptual focus on tourist emotions, memorable tourism experiences, and destination attachment. To enhance analytical trustworthiness, the research team discussed coding decisions, compared interpretations, and refined the thematic structure through several rounds of review. NVivo 15 was used to organize transcripts, codes, and thematic categories. The final themes were not treated as direct representations of all participants’ experiences, but as interpretive patterns constructed through systematic engagement with the interview data.

3.5 Ensuring research reliability and ethics

Research ethics were addressed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Before each interview, participants received information about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the expected interview duration, the use of audio recording, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews began. Participants also gave permission for audio recording. To protect confidentiality, all participants were anonymized using codes from P01 to P18. Identifying information such as names, contact details, and specific personal circumstances was removed from the transcripts. Audio files and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Direct quotations were used only in anonymized form. To strengthen trustworthiness, the study used verbatim transcription, field notes, peer discussion between the researchers, and transparent reporting of the coding process. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached. After the fifteenth interview, no substantially new codes or themes emerged. Three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the thematic structure, after which data collection was concluded.

4. RESULTS

The reflexive thematic analysis of 18 semi-structured interviews generated 11 codes, which were grouped into three major themes: (1) emotional encounters with unfamiliar cultural practices, (2) memory formation through sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments, and (3) destination attachment as a post-trip emotional outcome. These themes reflect a progressive process

through which international tourists first encountered unfamiliar cultural practices, then transformed selected emotional moments into lasting memories, and finally developed different forms of attachment to the destination and local community. The first theme emerged from 16 interviews and was most strongly associated with participants' responses to ritual atmosphere, cultural unfamiliarity, perceived authenticity, and local hospitality. The second theme emerged across all 18 interviews, suggesting that memory formation was a central feature of participants' festival experiences. Participants did not usually remember the entire festival program; instead, they recalled specific sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments such as music, smells, ritual gestures, shared food, smiles, conversations, and explanations from local residents. The third theme emerged from 14 interviews and highlighted how emotional memories contributed to post-trip attachment, including revisit intention, recommendation behavior, emotional connection with local people, and a desire to maintain or extend the relationship with the destination. The following sections present each theme in detail. Longer interview excerpts illustrate how participants described their emotional experiences, reconstructed festival memories, and how these memories shaped their attachment to Southern Vietnamese destinations.

4.1. Emotional encounters with unfamiliar cultural practices

The first theme concerns the emotional responses generated when international tourists encountered unfamiliar cultural practices during the festivals. Many participants described their initial experience as a mixture of surprise, curiosity, admiration,

and mild confusion. These emotions were especially strong when tourists observed rituals, music, processions, communal prayers, or symbolic performances that they had not previously encountered. For several participants, the emotional impact came from entering a cultural space that felt both unfamiliar and welcoming. Rather than interpreting unfamiliarity negatively, many tourists described it as part of the festival's appeal. The lack of full cultural or linguistic understanding did not prevent emotional engagement. On the contrary, it often increased the sense of mystery and fascination.

“It was completely overwhelming. I did not understand the chants, but I felt like I was part of something sacred.” (P07, Germany, Ok Om Bok Festival, Tra Vinh). This quotation illustrates how emotional participation can occur even without full cognitive understanding. The participant did not understand the ritual language, yet the atmosphere, collective participation, and symbolic setting created a sense of sacredness. Similar accounts were found among participants at the Nghinh Ong Festival in Ganh Hao, where ritual activities related to whale worship left a strong impression of respect, belief, and community solidarity.

“I had seen festivals before, but this one felt different. People were not performing only for tourists. They were doing something important for themselves, and that made me respect it more.” (P11, Australia, Nghinh Ong Festival, Ganh Hao, Bac Lieu). This response indicates that tourists distinguished between staged cultural performance and living cultural practice. Participants were more emotionally affected when they perceived the festival as an authentic community event rather than a

tourism spectacle. In this sense, the festival's emotional value came not only from visual performance but also from the perceived sincerity of local participation. At the Ok Om Bok Festival, participants frequently mentioned the atmosphere of collective celebration, the presence of Khmer cultural symbols, and the visual impression of ritual and performance. Some tourists described the festival as “colorful,” “spiritual,” “energetic,” and “unexpectedly moving.” These responses suggest that the festival generated layered emotions: enjoyment at the surface level, curiosity at the cultural level, and emotional respect at the symbolic level.

“At first, I was just curious because it looked colorful and exciting. But later, when I saw families gathering and people explaining the meaning of the moon ceremony, I felt something deeper. It was not just entertainment.” (P04, France, Ok Om Bok Festival, Tra Vinh).

In Can Tho, emotional responses were more strongly associated with food culture, friendliness, and informal interaction. Tourists attending the Southern Folk Cake Festival often described their emotions as warm, comforting, and surprising. The festival created emotional engagement not through solemn ritual, but through taste, smell, hospitality, and the everyday cultural meaning of food. “I did not expect food to make me emotional, but it did. The way people explained the cakes and invited me to try them made me feel welcomed.” (P09, Canada, Southern Folk Cake Festival, Can Tho)

Across the three festival contexts, emotional experience was therefore not uniform. Ritual-based festivals produced emotions such as awe, respect, and

sacredness, while food and folk culture festivals produced feelings of warmth, familiarity, and social closeness. However, all three contexts shared one common feature: tourists' emotions were shaped by direct contact with local cultural practices and community participation.

4.2. Memory formation through sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments

The second theme shows that tourists did not remember the festivals as complete programs or schedules. Instead, their memories were organized around specific moments that carried strong sensory, symbolic, or interpersonal meaning. Participants often recalled small but emotionally charged details, such as the sound of traditional music, the smell of local cakes, the movement of a ritual procession, the smile of a local resident, or a brief conversation with a festival participant.

This finding suggests that memorable tourism experiences are often constructed through selective memory. Tourists do not retain every part of the event equally. They remember fragments that are emotionally intense, sensorially vivid, or personally meaningful. “What I remember most is not the whole festival, but the smell of the cakes and the woman who smiled when she gave me one. It was a very small moment, but I still remember it clearly.” (P13, *Italy, Southern Folk Cake Festival, Can Tho*). This quotation demonstrates how memory can be anchored in a combination of sensory and interpersonal experience. The smell of food and the smile of a local person were more memorable than the event's formal structure. For this participant, the festival was remembered not as a tourist attraction, but as a moment

of human connection. Other participants described memory formation through sound and atmosphere. Traditional music, ritual chanting, drums, and public announcements were frequently mentioned as elements that remained in memory after the trip. These sounds helped participants recall the festival's emotional atmosphere. “When I hear similar music now, I think about that evening in Tra Vinh. I remember the crowd, the lights, and the feeling of being surrounded by people celebrating together.” (P02, *United States, Ok Om Bok Festival, Tra Vinh*).

This account shows that memory continued beyond the festival itself. A later sound experience triggered recollection of the festival atmosphere, indicating that travel memories can be reactivated after the trip. The memory was not limited to visual images; it was connected to sound, crowd movement, and emotional atmosphere. At the Nghinh Ong Festival in Ganh Hao, several participants recalled symbolic aspects of the ceremony, especially the respect local fishermen show the sea and whale worship traditions. These memories were often described in reflective language. Tourists did not simply remember what they saw; they interpreted the ritual as an expression of dependence on nature, gratitude, and community identity. “The ceremony made me think about how people live with the sea. It was not only a festival. It was about belief, danger, respect, and hope.” (P15, *Netherlands, Nghinh Ong Festival, Ganh Hao, Bac Lieu*). This quotation reflects the symbolic dimension of memory. The participant connected the observed ritual with broader meanings related to livelihood and belief. In this case, the festival became memorable because it allowed tourists to

understand something about the relationship between local people and their environment. The data also show that post-trip memory was strengthened through retelling and sharing. Several participants said they talked about the festival with friends, posted photos, or kept small souvenirs. These practices helped them reconstruct the experience after the trip. “I showed my friends the photos, but I realized that the photos could not fully explain the feeling. So I kept telling the story behind them.” (P06, Spain, Southern Folk Cake Festival, Can Tho). This response suggests that memory is not only stored but also narrated. Tourists used stories to give meaning to photos and to communicate emotions that visual images alone could not express. In this way, storytelling became part of the memory-making process.

Overall, the findings indicate that memorable festival experiences were formed through three main types of memory anchors: sensory anchors, such as sound, smell, taste, and visual atmosphere; symbolic anchors, such as ritual meanings, sacred objects, and cultural symbols; and interpersonal anchors, such as smiles, invitations, explanations, and moments of hospitality. These anchors helped transform temporary festival participation into longer-lasting travel memories.

4.3. Destination attachment as a post-trip emotional outcome

The third theme concerns how emotional experiences and memories contribute to destination attachment. Participants did not always describe attachment in formal terms such as “loyalty” or “place attachment.” Instead, they used relational and emotional language, such as “I felt connected,” “I want to return,” “I still think

about the people,” or “I would like others to experience it.” This suggests that destination attachment in festival tourism may emerge from remembered emotions rather than from repeated visitation alone. For many participants, attachment was directed not only to the physical destination but also to the local people, the festival atmosphere, and the cultural meanings encountered during the event. “I did not like the place. I felt connected to the people. I still think about them when I hear Vietnamese music.” (P02, United States, Nghinh Ong Festival, Ganh Hao, Bac Lieu). This quotation shows that attachment was mediated by emotional memory. The participant’s later exposure to Vietnamese music reactivated the feeling of connection with local people. The destination was therefore remembered not only as a geographic place but as a human and emotional experience.

Some participants expressed attachment through revisit intention. However, their intention to return was not always motivated by the desire to see new attractions. Instead, they wanted to re-experience a particular atmosphere or emotional moment. “I would go back, not because I missed a tourist attraction, but because I want to feel that atmosphere again. It was peaceful and lively at the same time.” (P08, Japan, Ok Om Bok Festival, Tra Vinh). This finding is important because it shows that revisit intention can be driven by affective memory rather than only by satisfaction with tourism services. Tourists may wish to return to relive the emotional atmosphere they associate with the destination.

Recommendation behavior was another expression of attachment. Several participants said they would recommend

the festivals to friends who were interested in culture, food, photography, or local life. However, they often emphasized that future visitors should approach the festivals respectfully rather than treat them solely as entertainment. “I told my friends they should go, but they should not go just to take pictures. They should listen, ask questions, and respect what local people are doing.” (P14, *United Kingdom, Nghinh Ong Festival, Ganh Hao, Bac Lieu*) This response indicates that attachment can also involve ethical concern. The participant’s recommendation was accompanied by a desire to preserve the festival’s cultural meaning. In this sense, attachment was not merely a behavioral intention but also a form of cultural appreciation. A smaller group of participants expressed a desire to contribute more actively to the community or to support local cultural preservation. This was especially evident among participants with longer stays in Vietnam or a stronger interest in cultural learning. “I felt that I received something from the community. If I come back, I would like to spend more time there and maybe support local cultural activities.” (P17, *Germany, Southern Folk Cake Festival, Can Tho*). Such responses suggest that festival experiences can create a sense of reciprocity. Tourists who felt welcomed and emotionally moved sometimes developed a desire to give something back. This expands the meaning of destination attachment beyond revisit intention and word-of-mouth to include an emerging sense of responsibility toward the host community.

The data therefore show three main expressions of destination attachment: intention to revisit, willingness to recommend, and desire to maintain or extend a relationship with the destination and local

community. These forms of attachment were strongly connected to emotional memory and interpersonal experience.

4.4. Connecting the themes: From emotional encounter to remembered attachment

The three themes reveal a connected process through which festival tourism experiences become meaningful to international tourists. First, tourists encounter unfamiliar cultural practices that stimulate emotional responses. These emotions may include awe, curiosity, confusion, joy, warmth, respect, or a sense of belonging. Second, some emotional moments become memory anchors. Tourists selectively remember specific sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal details, such as music, ritual gestures, food, smiles, explanations, or collective atmosphere. Third, these memories contribute to attachment, expressed through revisit intention, recommendation, and a desire to reconnect with the destination or local community.

The findings indicate that cultural festivals are powerful tourism settings because they offer tourists a symbolic, multisensory in which to participate. International tourists do not simply observe local culture from a distance; they enter a space where rituals, sounds, smells, tastes, gestures, and human interactions work together to produce emotional meaning. As a result, the festival experience can continue to influence tourists after the trip through memory, storytelling, and affective connection. Importantly, the data also show that the emotional impact of festivals differs across contexts. The Ok Om Bok Festival generated strong responses related to ethnic culture, ritual atmosphere, and collective

celebration. The Southern Folk Cake Festival created memories through food, hospitality, and informal interaction. The Nghinh Ong Festival in Ganh Hao produced emotional reflection through maritime belief, community identity, and respect for coastal livelihoods. These differences demonstrate that Southern Vietnamese festivals should not be treated as a single homogeneous tourism product. Each festival creates distinct emotional and memory-based experiences.

Overall, the analysis answers the three research questions of the study. First, international tourists emotionally experienced Southern Vietnamese festivals through a combination of curiosity, awe, warmth, respect, and cultural connection. Second, memorable experiences were shaped by sensory impressions, symbolic rituals, local food, traditional music, community interaction, and specific emotionally charged moments. Third, these emotional memories contributed to destination attachment by encouraging tourists to revisit, recommend, and maintain an affective connection with the destination and local community.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Discussion of findings

This study explored how international tourists emotionally experienced, remembered, and developed attachment to cultural festivals in Southern Vietnam. The findings show that festival experiences became meaningful through three connected processes: emotional encounters with unfamiliar cultural practices, memory formation through sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments, and destination attachment as a post-trip emotional outcome. These findings are broadly consistent with

recent international tourism scholarship, but they also extend it by offering qualitative evidence from the Vietnamese cultural festival context. First, the finding that tourists' emotional responses were shaped by rituals, music, food, local hospitality, and symbolic atmosphere is consistent with recent festival tourism research. Ko et al. (2022) showed that storytelling in local festivals can strengthen tourists' positive emotions, perceived authenticity, affective commitment, and revisit intention. Similarly, Zhang and Deng (2022) found that innovation, authenticity, experience quality, and perceived festival value contribute to tourists' subjective well-being in festival tourism. These studies support the present finding that festivals are not merely entertainment events but emotionally charged cultural spaces in which tourists interpret local identity, community values, and symbolic meaning. However, the present study adds qualitative depth by showing that international tourists' emotional engagement did not always depend on full cultural understanding. Participants could still experience awe, respect, curiosity, warmth, or cultural connection even when they did not fully understand ritual language or symbolic details. This suggests that festival emotions may emerge through embodied, atmospheric, and interpersonal participation, rather than solely through cognitive interpretation.

Second, the findings extend recent research on memorable tourism experiences by showing that tourists recalled festivals through selected micro-moments rather than the festival program. This is consistent with Lu et al. (2022), who found that memorable travel experiences influence revisit intention through nostalgia and destination attachment, and with Tiwari et al. (2023), who

emphasized the role of human emotions in shaping memorable tourism experiences and revisit intention. The present study supports these arguments but further specifies how memory was formed in cultural festival settings. Participants remembered smells, sounds, ritual gestures, shared food, smiles, brief conversations, and explanations from local people. These sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal details served as memory anchors, keeping the festival experience emotionally active after the trip. Thus, this study contributes to the MTE literature by showing that memorability in festival tourism is often produced through small, meaningful, and affectively intense moments rather than through large-scale performances alone.

Third, the finding that emotional memories contributed to destination attachment is consistent with recent studies on authenticity, place attachment, and behavioral intention. Zhou et al. (2022) found that authenticity in heritage tourism influences revisit intention through memorable tourism experiences and place attachment. Lu et al. (2022) similarly confirmed that destination attachment mediates the relationship between memorability and revisit intention. In the present study, attachment was expressed through tourists' desire to revisit, recommend the festivals, reconnect with local people, and, in some cases, support local cultural activities. However, the findings also suggest that attachment in festival tourism is not directed only toward the physical destination. It is also directed toward people, atmosphere, cultural meanings, and remembered interactions. This supports a more relational understanding of destination attachment, where the destination is experienced as a network of emotional, social, and symbolic connections.

The findings also align with recent Vietnam-based tourism studies. Nguyen-Viet and Nguyen (2023), in a study of Vietnamese religious tourism, found that authentic experience, tourist satisfaction, place attachment, word of mouth, and revisit intention are closely connected. Their study is particularly relevant because it was conducted in Southern Vietnam and focused on a culturally and religiously meaningful destination. Similarly, Chen et al. (2021), found that memorable tourism experiences are associated with satisfaction, word of mouth, and revisit intention in the context of coffee tourism in Vietnam. Huong (2022) also found that dimensions of memorable tourism experience influence domestic tourists' revisit intention in Da Nang. More recently, Tam et al. (2025) examined international tourists in Ho Chi Minh City and emphasized the role of memorable tourism experiences and post-trip emotional experiences in revisit intention. These Vietnam-based studies support the relevance of memory, emotion, attachment, and behavioral intention in Vietnamese tourism research.

Nevertheless, the present study differs from most existing Vietnamese studies in two important ways. First, many Vietnam-based studies use quantitative survey designs to test relationships among constructs such as authentic experience, satisfaction, place attachment, word of mouth, and revisit intention. By contrast, this study uses qualitative interview data to examine how tourists narrate and interpret their emotional and memorable festival experiences. Second, previous Vietnamese studies have often focused on religious tourism, coffee tourism, urban tourism, ecotourism, or general destination experience. Less attention has been given to international tourists'

experiences of Southern Vietnamese cultural festivals. By focusing on the Southern Folk Cake Festival, the Ok Om Bok Festival, and the Nghinh Ong Festival, this study extends domestic tourism scholarship to festival settings shaped by food heritage, Khmer ritual traditions, maritime beliefs, folk music, and community-based cultural practices.

Overall, the findings suggest that cultural festival tourism should be understood as an emotional and memory-based process rather than merely as event participation. International tourists first encounter unfamiliar cultural practices, then transform selected sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments into lasting memories, and finally develop attachment to the destination through remembered emotions. This process helps explain why some festival experiences remain meaningful after the trip and why they may encourage revisit intention, recommendation behavior, and ethical appreciation of local culture. Taken together, these findings suggest that cultural festival tourism should be understood as an emotional and memory-based process rather than merely as event participation. International tourists first encounter unfamiliar cultural practices, then transform selected sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments into lasting memories, and finally develop attachment to the destination through remembered emotions. Based on this interpretation, the following subsections discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

5.2. Theoretical implications

This study offers three theoretical implications. First, it contributes to festival tourism research by showing that emotional experience is produced

through the interaction of cultural unfamiliarity, perceived authenticity, symbolic atmosphere, and local hospitality. While recent festival tourism studies have emphasized authenticity, storytelling, experience quality, and subjective well-being, this study adds qualitative evidence on how international tourists personally describe these emotional processes.

Second, the study extends the literature on memorable tourism by identifying sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal memory anchors in cultural festival contexts. Rather than treating memorable tourism experiences solely as measurable dimensions, the findings show how memory is narratively reconstructed through specific moments such as taste, sound, ritual gestures, local explanations, and post-trip storytelling. This provides a more process-oriented understanding of how festival experiences become memorable.

Third, the study contributes to destination attachment research by showing that attachment in festival tourism may be relational and culturally mediated. Tourists did not only express attachment to a destination as a physical place; they also expressed attachment to local people, cultural practices, ritual atmosphere, and remembered emotional encounters. This suggests that destination attachment in cultural festival settings should be conceptualized as a bond with both place and community.

5.3. Practical implications

The findings also provide practical implications for festival organizers, destination managers, local communities, and tourism businesses. First, festival organizers should design festival experiences

around emotionally meaningful touchpoints rather than focusing only on event scale or visual spectacle. Ritual interpretation, music, food, storytelling, guided participation, and opportunities for respectful host–guest interaction can help tourists understand and remember the festival’s cultural meaning.

Second, destination managers should develop communication strategies that highlight the emotional and cultural meanings of festivals. Promotional materials should not only advertise dates, locations, and activities, but also explain the stories, beliefs, local identities, and community values behind the festivals. This is particularly important for international tourists who may be emotionally moved by the festival atmosphere but still need cultural interpretation to deepen their understanding.

Third, local communities should be recognized as co-creators of memorable tourism experiences. The findings show that small interpersonal moments, such as smiles, invitations, explanations, and shared food, often become powerful memory anchors. Therefore, community-based training in storytelling, cultural interpretation, and visitor communication can strengthen the quality of tourist experience while preserving local cultural ownership. Fourth, tourism businesses should develop products that connect pre-festival orientation, festival participation, and post-festival reflection. For example, tour operators and hospitality providers may offer short cultural briefings before the festival, facilitate respectful participation during the event, and encourage tourists to share reflective stories after the trip. Such practices can extend the emotional value of the festival and support positive word of mouth.

Finally, sustainable festival tourism development should balance visitor engagement with cultural preservation. Since several participants associated attachment with respect for local culture, festival tourism should avoid excessive commercialization that turns rituals into staged performances. Instead, stakeholders should protect the symbolic integrity of festivals while making them accessible and meaningful for international visitors.

6. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined how international tourists emotionally experienced, remembered, and developed attachment to cultural festivals in Southern Vietnam. Using semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, the study identified three interconnected themes: emotional encounters with unfamiliar cultural practices, memory formation through sensory, symbolic, and interpersonal moments; and destination attachment as a post-trip emotional outcome. The findings show that cultural festivals are not remembered only as organized events, but as emotionally meaningful experiences shaped by rituals, food, music, community interaction, symbolic atmosphere, and post-trip storytelling.

The study contributes to festival tourism research by showing how emotions, memories, and attachment interact in culturally embedded festival contexts. It also extends research on memorable tourism experiences by highlighting the role of small but meaningful memory anchors, such as smells, sounds, gestures, shared food, local explanations, and interpersonal encounters. In addition, the study contributes to Vietnamese tourism scholarship by

providing qualitative evidence from Southern Vietnamese cultural festivals, a context that remains underrepresented in studies of international tourists' emotional and memorable experiences.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on 18 international tourists who attended three selected festivals in Southern Vietnam; therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all festival tourists or all Vietnamese cultural festivals. Second, the study relies on retrospective interviews, which may be affected by selective recall and post-trip reinterpretation. Third, although the study captures rich qualitative accounts, it does not measure the strength of relationships among emotion, memory, attachment, and revisit intention.

Future research could extend this study by using longitudinal designs to examine how festival memories change over time. Comparative studies across different regions of Vietnam would also be useful for identifying how different types of festivals generate different emotional and attachment outcomes. In addition, mixed-methods research could test the relationships suggested by this qualitative study, particularly those among emotional experience, sensory and symbolic memory, destination attachment, revisit intention, and recommendation behavior.

From an empirical perspective, the study demonstrates that emotional responses experienced during cultural festivals extend beyond immediate affective reactions and are continuously reconstructed through post-trip reflection, storytelling, and social interaction. These emotionally charged experiences are selectively encoded into memory through

symbolic, sensory-rich micro-moments rather than through large-scale, highly staged festival activities. As a result, memories are not formed as holistic representations of the event but as condensed fragments of meaning that carry strong emotional and relational significance. Furthermore, these memories play a crucial role in shaping destination attachment, which emerges not only as an individual psychological state but also as a socially mediated phenomenon reflected in tourists' intentions to revisit, recommend, and reproduce their experiences for others.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the tourism literature in several important ways. First, it extends the Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs) framework by shifting the analytical focus from event intensity and novelty toward the role of symbolic, interpersonal, and sensory interactions in shaping memorability. Second, it advances understanding of tourist emotions by conceptualizing them as temporally extended and reconstructive processes, rather than static, moment-based responses. Third, it introduces the concept of "emotional extension" as a novel mechanism through which personal travel experiences are transformed into socially shared narratives, thereby contributing to destination attachment and indirect destination promotion. These contributions collectively address the identified research gap concerning the limited use of qualitative, emotion-centered approaches in the study of festival tourism, particularly within the Southeast Asian context.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a relatively small sample of 18 participants, which, although sufficient for

achieving thematic saturation, may limit the generalizability of the findings across different cultural or geographical contexts. In addition, the reliance on retrospective narratives may introduce recall bias, as participants' memories are subject to reinterpretation over time. Future research could adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to further examine the temporal dynamics of emotional experiences and memory reconstruction, as well as explore cross-cultural variations in festival tourism experiences.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the importance of understanding festival tourism as a complex experiential system in which emotions, memories, and attachments continuously interact and reinforce one another. By emphasizing the depth,

subjectivity, and symbolic nature of tourist experiences, this study underscores the value of qualitative approaches in capturing aspects of tourism behavior that cannot be fully addressed through quantitative measurement, thereby providing a more comprehensive foundation for both theoretical development and practical application in cultural tourism research. Although this study explores tourists' lived and remembered experiences, it does not claim to provide a strict phenomenological account. The analysis focuses on cross-participant thematic patterns rather than idiographic phenomenological interpretation. Future studies could adopt interpretative reflexive thematic analysis or longitudinal narrative inquiry to examine the temporal reconstruction of festival memories in greater depth.

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